

Sometimes happiness is a blessing – but generally it's a conquest.

*"Sometimes happiness is a blessing, but generally it is a conquest.
Each day's magic moment helps" - Paolo Coelho*

My head is swimming. The year is but two weeks old and I have met with, phoned or received extensive letters from no less than seven groups of parents. I'm teaching Year 6 this year, after two years with Year 1 and I naively thought that these parents would be so much less maintenance than previously; that Year 1 parents had every reason to be that way and that Year 6 would pale by comparison. How wrong am I? In addition to this, I had not realised the significant emotional needs of a Year 6 co-educational class. Previously I have taught only boys at this level and the challenge of both sexes is presenting a whole new range of issues.

It started with Greta's parents. Did I know that she had an auditory processing difficulty? That she struggled to remember instructions? That she needed them written down? That her results were less than that of which she is capable? That she was in Year 6 and **time was running out to get the results she needed**? Yes, yes, yes, yes and yes. But these things weren't my greatest concerns. Her bubbly beaming smile usually masked my greatest worry. "I'm hopeless at some things," she says. "What things?" "Writing, Reading, Projects. I can't do Maths!" What was left? Greta thinks she is terrible at all areas of her classwork. She must be, her reports had told her so.

Then there's Claire, who tells me that she thinks nobody likes her. When I ask her why she thinks that, she states that it is because of history. She has some understanding that her systematic bullying of other students has led her down this path, but her behaviour, even in these two short weeks would indicate that she is unaware when she slips up, she just can't help herself. She cannot see the impact of her actions on others and is currently ill equipped and powerless to stop herself on this path to self- destruction. Is her self worth so low that she behaves this way so she can be noticed? Admired? Her parents blame everyone except Claire. Somehow it is the fault of the school, the staff, other parents, punishment she endured - all before it is because of her.

And then there's Tom, whose relationship with his mother, for a range of reasons is so completely broken down that he will head to court to avoid spending time with her. He has been a pretty messed up person until now and is often melancholy.

Susan's mother thinks she is being bullied and that her daughter has lost her cheerfulness and confidence. She reported an incident where some

classmates commented on her breast development in a derogatory manner. Then I was asked to meet with both parents about another student publically calling her a "retard". She does not want to come to school.

This meeting is followed by another, then another and another. The endless stream of parents busting to have their time with me is consuming. Faith ranks her days out of ten. Mum can't remember many 10's and most days are about a 6. Belinda's parents seem to want to push her to be all the things that she is not. She lacks confidence and exudes it through every action she does. Her eyes dip, her voice is low, her shoulders slump, yet Mum claims her teachers have never noticed before. We all know they have. Sally struggles with everything, yet her Mum would merely like to know that she is offered some easier reading and that she is being supported along the way with her learning. Sally seems perpetually cheerful. Connor has a borderline intellectual disability. He has poor muscle tone too, and yet comes to school with a smile on his face each and every day. Is he happy because he is simply unaware of how difficult life will be for him? His Mum just wants him to be happy. Has she perpetuated this through the language she has used with him? I wish I had more Mum's like Connors!

There are other issues amongst the students and I'm sure that others will surface throughout my time with them. All I know is that I did not expect the year to start like this. It's going to be a long year.

So my priorities this year seem to have shifted. New questions are being raised in my head. How can I strategically set about altering the mindset of these students? What can I do to assist my class of 'tweens' and best equip them to become resilient and positive people? What must I deliberately alter in the way I communicate and interact with these students in order to break down this negative thinking? What behaviours will I see changed in these students when they leave me at the end of the year? Can Claire stop herself? Will Tom be happy? Can I help to change the way Greta sees herself?

There are several tools I am going to use to assist me in focusing and driving this project.

- The Positive Psychology movement
- The Herrman Brain Dominance Instrument
- The work of Carol Dweck on Mindset and
- The 8 Cultural Forces as described by Ron Ritchhart, Mark Church and Karin Morrison

Positive psychology

Our year starts with several professional development sessions. There is always so much included in these frantic days, that I find I can only take away so much. This year, what stays with me is the session on Positive Psychology and it is this concept I would like to use to measure the development of my students this year. The movement of positive psychology was explained to us quite simply. There is a scale ranging from -5 to +5. People who undertake psychological counselling are usually in the negative range and traditionally, a psychologist's goal was to bring those people to 0. Positive Psychology is based on the notion that this is not enough; that psychologists need to bring patients to a plus figure in order to make a long lasting impact on their behaviour and wellbeing. I have always believed that if a child is happy to come to school they will learn. This notion now has evidence attached to it. Happy people remember things better than those who are not.

The *Action for Happiness* website was introduced to staff at the commencement of 2011. The school's focus for that year was, and continues to be, wellbeing. To assist staff with this, we have regular professional and personal development seminars and courses. According to this site, happiness is attributed to several factors.

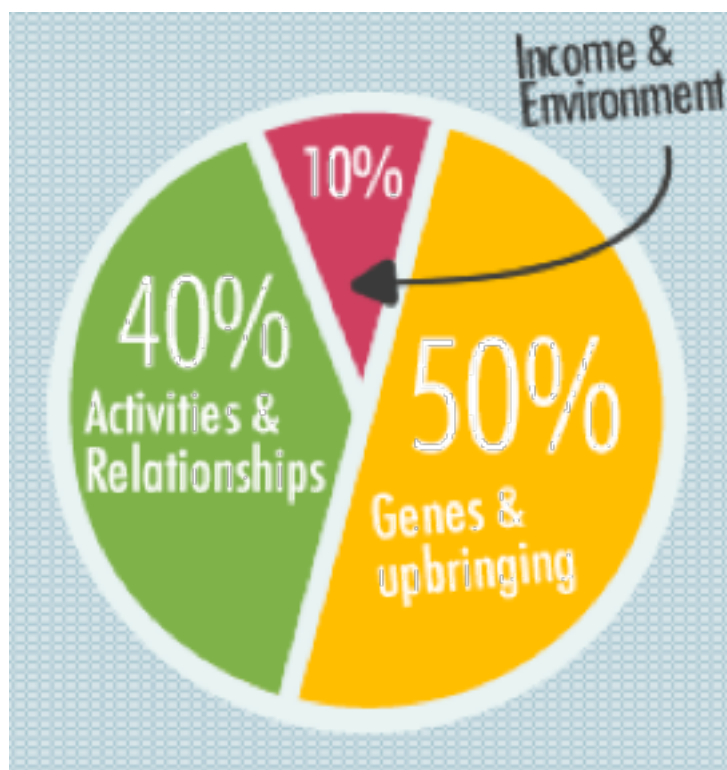


Figure 1: Facts about happiness

I believe I can have some influence on each of these areas and that they are all interrelated. I am part of the students' environment, upbringing and relationships; so naturally, the activities I provide for them can influence how they see themselves and the world. I have decided that I needed to consider all of these, with a focus on happiness underpinning them.

The students complete two surveys on their own happiness. The first is relatively simple and involves placing themselves on the +5, -5 scale for a series of four questions. Their parents also answered a similar survey about their child.

1. In general I consider myself to be: very happy +5 – not happy at all -5
2. Compared to most of my peers, I am: very happy +5 – not happy at all -5
3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterisation describe you? A great deal +5 – not at all -5
4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterisation describe you? Not at all +5 – a great deal -5

	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4
Greta	+3	+2	-3	0
Claire	-2	-2	-3	-4
Faith	+1	0	+1	+3
Tom	-3	-3	-2	-3
Susan	0	+1	-1	-1

FIGURE 2 – Happiness Survey Results 1

The results of this initial round of self-assessment confirm many things. Claire is miserable. She scored herself at -3 to -5 on each of the statements. This is concerning. Greta needs to develop coping strategies, Susan has a little way to move forward, Faith is in quite good shape and Tom is struggling to be happy. Across the class, 19 negative numbers are recorded. 3 students have ranked themselves as 0 or below in all 4 questions.

They then complete a more in-depth happiness audit adapted from the Authentic Happiness website. This will allow them to retake the test at various intervals throughout the year to see if their happiness is improving. They rank themselves according to 24 ideas. These cover:

- How they feel about themselves
- Mood
- Ability to pay attention
- Sorrow/joy
- Boredom
- Connectedness
- Enthusiasm
- Attitude to work
- Optimism
- Accomplishments

This produces more in-depth information about each child. The results are ranked from 1 to 5, where a 1 is poor, 3 neutral and 5 good. Claire's results ring alarm bells. She considers herself to be a failure, is usually in a bad mood and feels as though her life has no purpose or meaning. She has sorrow in her life, feels cut off from her peers and feels ashamed of herself. Her highest score is a 3 and most are 1 or 2. Tom considers his life to be a bad one, he thinks he does poorly, has sorrow in his life and also feels like a failure. He ranked himself at either 1 or 2 in 18 categories. Greta was a little more optimistic, with 7 one's, 5 two's, 8 three's and 4 four's. In fact, out of 26 students, 15 either think they are failures or do not feel like winners.

Herrman brain dominance instrument

Sitting alongside the concept of Positive Psychology is the Herrman Brain Dominance Instrument and the self-awareness that can be fostered in the students through their understanding of this. Basically, Herrman divides the brain into four colours or quadrants, with each quadrant indicating character traits of the individual. During two days of leadership training, each student selects from a series of 40 behaviours, those that they see mostly in themselves. This leaves most students with a dominant colour and an indicator of the strength of that colour over others. Interestingly, 75% of our students are red-yellow. That is emotional, feelings based, intuitive and impulsive. So for me, more questions are raised. How can the students learn to interpret this information to their own benefit, both academically and emotionally? How can I use the profiling of these students to contribute to their happiness?

OUR FOUR DIFFERENT SELVES

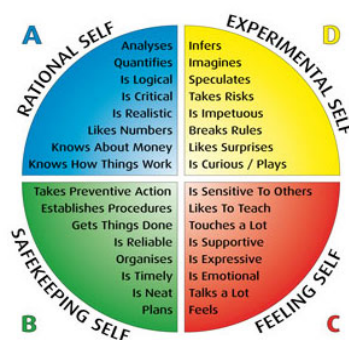


Figure 3: Herrmann Whole Brain Model



Figure 4: My Class Profile

The 8 cultural forces

I intend on focusing heavily on the 8 Cultural Forces as described in *Making Thinking Visible*. (Ritchhart, Church, Morrison, 2011) In particular, I have decided to concentrate, initially, on the language used in the classroom by the students and me, the environment, modelling, expectations and interactions with a focus on using these to guide the development of happiness in the students.

I think that modelling is going to become the strongest first focus in the room. Modelling, to me, encompasses several of the other Cultural Forces,

(Ritchhart, Church, Morrison, 2011) such as routines and procedures, language, expectations and the environment.

Environment

I am thinking carefully about the class environment. I have determined that this is paramount to the positive culture of the class. I am immersing them in positivity, surrounding them with empowerment; quotes about making mistakes and self-belief, posters about great leaders and music that inspires them to be happy. By this, I don't mean some of those wordy inspirational posters, containing photos of elite athletes succeeding at something unachievable by mere mortals, but child friendly messages that create a positive mindset. Fortunately, our unit on leadership lends itself to this and we begin the year with the students finding quotes on leadership, dissecting them and rewording them so that they make more sense to them. They are good.

"Leadership is about helping others. Anyone can be a leader."

"Leadership is about how many people in the world I can help."

"Leadership is all about showing that you can stand up for what is right and knowing what you need to do."

I then set about arranging the furniture to facilitate the relationships that I would like to promote. It is important that there are spaces for a variety of learning situations and that there is somewhere to conference, be in silence and relax. I want our room to be inviting and homely and to be a place where they are comfortable enough to share, but focused enough to think. I also want it to be ours, not mine and so over the first few days, they plan and rearranged the room to suit them. This gives me the opportunity to listen to them interact, encourage respect and acceptance of the ideas of others and hear their thinking. Our relationships are beginning to form. Further to this, throughout the year, my plan is to allow the students time to plan and execute displays. I want them to choose the work, based on how the author has challenged himself or herself to improve. After my first attempt at this, I realise that they are more than capable and they have a sense of ownership and satisfaction with the result.





Figures 5 a b c d e, Class Photos

Another aspect of the class environment is to address music. I have regularly used music in my classroom for a variety of purposes. The theme from Mission Impossible makes for great pack up music in Year 1! I compile a range of music, at 60 beats per minute, to play while the students are thinking and I am careful to read them some research on this. Classical music has been shown to have positive effects on the limbic system, increase molecular energy, decrease blood pressure, slow brain waves and relax muscles (Paget, 2006). They don't particularly like the music, but when it is on, the focus levels increase and the noise decreases.

I also have some beautiful Kelly Rae Roberts prints and am placing them around the room. Surprisingly, it is the boys that notice and read them first. "What do you think that means?" I ask Tom when he lays eyes on the one that reads 'Let it go.' "I think it's talking about when some things aren't worth worrying about." This becomes the topic for our first *Circle Time* for the year. This Circle Time produces responses that are more insightful than I had imagined: "Work out what is worth worrying about and don't worry about the

other stuff.” “When something is finished with, like when you've had a fight with someone, don't keep thinking about it all the time.” “If you don't do so well on a test, don't think that it's the end of the world.” We complete a Chalk Talk Thinking routine around some of these prints and whilst they seem particularly 'girly' to look at, the comments on the words in these posters are the focus for early discussions on positivity.



Figure 6, Kelly Rae Roberts Prints

Language and mindset

Circle Time is one component of Restorative Practices and is used throughout the school. The purpose is to share in a non-threatening way on a regular basis. It is used in class topic discussions, but also to work through issues and share successes. I plan to use it to develop gratitude on a regular basis as well. Whilst it would be ideal to have this each and every morning, life often gets in the way. We try to have at least 4 circle times each week, often at the end of a day. This can take from 5 to 25 minutes or so, but provides valuable insight into the thoughts of the students and assists with the building of positive relationships. Early topics for discussion are: what I love about school, what I don't enjoy in school, what worries me, what makes me happy. I learn that they love the usual suspects, Art, PE, recess and that they dislike many other subjects, commonly French, Maths and Reading. When I ask the student why they don't enjoy these things, the most shared response is something along the lines of, "Because I can't do it." There are a lot of these. I use Circle Time to reflect on the events of each day when we can. This is when we can really focus on gratitude, a vital aspect of happiness. "A daily gratitude intervention (self-guided exercises) with young adults resulted in higher reported levels of the positive states of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness and energy."¹ The students are regularly asked to think about 3 good things that happened to them each day and why they were good.

Sometimes we complete this as a thinking routine, sometimes we share orally and sometimes we just think about them and share the most significant.

We use traffic light cards, red (disagree), yellow (neutral) and green (agree), to respond to situations in a non-threatening way. This gives me an idea of who are the stressed ones, who is relaxed and who I need to keep an eye on for a variety of reasons. I use statements such as, *Year 6 will be hard; Maths is difficult; I am good at listening; I make friends easily* and a variety of other telling proclamations. I have my eye on the right students, but a couple of others are alerted to me at this time. They, like Greta, think they were hopeless at everything.

The dialogue I want in the class involves several elements. Whilst I aim to imbue the language of thinking into the class, for the purpose of increasing happiness, the language of a growth mindset is the focus. We need to work on the language of defeat that permeates many conversations in the room, "The single most empowering life skill is a positive mindset. Along with making you whole healthy and happy, a positive, free and active state of mind has been shown to promote brain cell growth, protect from stress and cancer, improve your memory and help you live longer!"²

For this, I am using the work of Carol Dweck on positive mindset. I begin by reading sections of her book to the students. We discuss what Dweck means by her terminology, such as growth mindset and fixed mindset. We discuss her passage about self-belief, "The view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life." (Dweck 2006) We discuss this quote and I ask the students to use the thinking routine Connect, Extend, Challenge to think about it. Tom responded with this:

CONNECT: "I connected to the idea of a growth mind-set because my Dad says attitude is everything."

EXTEND: "I was extended by this, because I never thought about it with school work (attitude is everything). I thought it was just about sport."

CHALLENGE: The challenge is to put this into my school work and change how I think about myself in Maths and English."

The students then respond to the text using the thinking routine *Chalk Talk*, followed by "*I used to think but now I think*".

The students then discuss the types of things that people say, both to each other and in self-talk and how it impacts on their self-belief within the classroom. They finish by writing their own growth mindset quotes that they print for display in the classroom as well as a set for their diaries, lockers and anywhere else that they look regularly.

Over the coming weeks, the students begin to change the way they speak about themselves. Greta, in particular, is beginning to pin point areas for development and growth. "I can't do Maths," has been replaced by more specific, targeted language. "When I am multiplying two large numbers, I am getting the top line right, but I am making a mistake sometime after that." There are more *can do* statements across the class and less *can't do*. Already, I can see that this shift in mindset is taking shape as well as having an impact and I am very aware that this needs to continue throughout the year.

Interactions

The next activity we embark on is a reading of *Have You Filled a Bucket Today: A Guide to Daily Happiness for Kids* by Carol McCloud. This book encourages positive behaviour such kindness, appreciation, and love. Bucket filling and dipping are used as metaphors for understanding the effects of our actions and words on the wellbeing of others and us. When we fill someone's bucket, we contribute positively to his or her overall sense of self, but when we dip into it, we take some of this away. Although this is rather a simple text, my students engage with it in a positive manner and we discuss the types of things that other students say when they are bucket dipping. The first response is *moron*, followed by *idiot*, *loser* and a variety of other put-downs. We talk about each one and discuss how it felt when others use these words. The students then make a bucket and place it on their backs. Without speaking, each child is to write something that is *bucket filling* on the backs of the other students. At the end of the task, the students read their bucket and share one thing they already knew about themselves. They then choose the one thing they found the most surprising.

I feel the need to mention this activity as I was unaware of the true power of this task until several parents mentioned it at the information sharing evening scheduled during week three. It became apparent to me that this had impacted greatly on some of the students in a most positive way. Faith's mother reported that on that day, she had bounded into the car and announced her day was a 10. She proceeded to chatter about her bucket and all of the things that the other students had written about her. In particular, several other students thought this studious and seemingly serious

achieve. We talk about our class as family and throughout term 1, I notice that they are consistently boosting each other. Of course, they can banter and bicker like siblings at times, but the general feel of the room is one of respect and encouragement.

Another vital aspect of improving student interactions is the community service component of the Year 6 Leadership Program. The *Making Australia Happy* website states, "There is now a significant and growing body of scientific research showing how altruism (ie, "the unselfish concern for the welfare of others") is associated with good health, wellbeing and longevity."³ Throughout term 3, the students are engaged in a range of sustained and regular community projects. They range from helping a neighbour to organising a talent show for fundraising, making bears to give to refugee groups, teaching indigenous students in outback communities and teaching English at local churches. The students not only enjoy these activities, but the feedback from them is very positive.

"I thought it was really good. Paris and I want to keep going back because it was a lot of fun and it felt good to help. The people were very different and their lives are a bit different. It's good to be different."

Modelling

This year, I am consciously focusing on modelling and being aware of the impact of that modelling on each student, in particular to their wellbeing. Throughout my time in teaching, I have developed a strong belief that I need to be honest with my students. By this I mean not only about their abilities, but also about me. Carol Dweck states, "If... you believe you can develop yourself, then you're open to accurate information about your current abilities, even if it is unflattering." Early on, I sit with each student to discuss their abilities and examine their goals. I am, at times, brutally honest about what I see in each of them. Self-awareness is vital for progress. I am encouraged by how well the students engage in these conversations and how many of them already seem to possess a growth mindset.

This year, teaching Year 6, it has become more apparent to me that sharing who I am, my joys and successes, but also my worries and sorrows (although to a lesser degree) is a way of modelling so many things.

Part of this is to share my personal professional development with them. I am honest about what I learn and how I find the PD. At times, I am critical of presenters or content or I evaluate what I gained from the learning. It is my

hope that modelling my own opinions of learning will assist with them in voicing opinions of their own learning.

I have collected mid-year feedback from the students about the changes they have seen in themselves and their feelings about being in the class. This included goals for the remainder of the term as well as long-term goals for their learning and other elements of their growth. Many of the goals are about new challenges, interactions with people in the class, organisation skills and pushing their own limits.

Evidence of progress

Towards the end of Term 2, a parent drops in to see me one Friday afternoon. She proceeds to tell me about some of the changes she is seeing in her son. Known to be quite an angry boy, she is seeing a sense of calm in him. She reports a conversation that they had where he was discussing some of the issues in his life. When his mother made a suggestion to him of a possible way to handle some things, he was quick to point out to her that her solution was one of a fixed mindset and that if he was to truly solve the problem, he needed to develop a solution with a growth mindset and asked for her assistance in doing so. She was quite shocked at this and took the time to share the positive growth of her son with me.

Susan's mother also has seen positive changes in her daughter. Whilst the social issues still tend to be present in her life, Susan's ability to handle these and to bounce back is improving. When I ask Susan's mother if she thinks her daughter is happier, the response is a definite, "Yes."

The same can be said for Claire, who's parents are most vocal about their daughter's well being. They have seen many positive changes and report in their feedback that, "She has never been happier... all of the children... are comfortable in the classroom."

	Question 1 February	Question 1 October	Question 2 February	Question 2 October	Question 3 February	Question 3 October	Question 4 February	Question 4 October
Greta	+3	+4	0	+1	-3	+2	0	+3
Claire	-2	+3	-2	0	-3	+3	-4	+3
Faith	+1	+3.5	-1	0	+1	+3.5	+3	+3
Tom	-3	+2	-3	+1	-2	+1	-3	+4
Susan	0	+5	+1	+3	-1	+4	-1	+4

FIGURE 9 Final survey results

In the shorter, 4 question survey, in most areas, each student experienced elevated levels of happiness. Significantly, every child was at least neutral in every area, and across the class, there were only three negative recordings, two at -1 and one at -2. Previously, 19 negative numbers were recorded across the class.

Similarly, on the more extensive survey, many students' opinions are elevated. Claire's score improved in all but one question, where she remained the same. Tom improved on 15 out of 24 areas, Greta on 13, Faith on 7 and Susan on 9. Not one of these students now scores 1 in any area. All of them now feel success, school is ranked either 'very good' or 'great' and all 5 now see themselves as either very happy with themselves, or could not be happier.

Buckets

The students recently refilled each other's buckets. Without prompting, many of the comments pertain to effort as well as the relationships that have formed between the students.

"You try really hard."

"You work hard and are really good at Maths. " (on Greta's sheet)

"You keep improving at everything."

"You are great at taking care of people and you always smile."

There is still a long way to go with these students, but I feel that the stage has been set for resilience and meaningful relationships that contribute to making them happier people. Whilst I have never taught secondary students, I have always known that my role of *teacher* in a primary classroom is much more than imparting knowledge and understanding. I am responsible for the development of people who will hopefully grow to be balanced and happy individuals, students who set challenges for themselves and rise up to meet them, who respect themselves and each other, who know how to make a difference. Besides, as Margaret Mead once said:

'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'

Quotes:

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