

Pathways to Positive Education at Geelong Grammar School

Integrating Positive Psychology and Appreciative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Since 2005 Geelong Grammar School has been developing and implementing Positive Education – Positive Psychology applied to all aspects of school life. Appreciative Inquiry is one important way through which the school is developing this at an organisational level to ensure that Positive Education becomes an embedded organisational capability.

Geelong Grammar School (GGS) is Australia's largest Anglican coeducational boarding and day school. Founded in 1855 and coeducational since 1976, we have been educating young people for over 150 years. Located across four campuses in Victoria, the school offers an exceptional Australian education from three year-old early learning to Year 12. Our students are boarders and day pupils; they come to us from city and country communities, from interstate and overseas.

Positive education

For a long time at Geelong Grammar, we have understood for many years that parents want schools to teach more than academic achievement. In 2003, this led the school to undertake work in the development of an expanded concept of student health, moving beyond the traditional boundaries to one based on an empirically-driven student wellbeing program incorporating emotional and physical health. In 2005 Geelong Grammar School (GGS) was made aware of Prof. Martin Seligman's groundbreaking work in Positive Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Since that time we have continued our work on wellbeing for students as well as teaching and non-teaching staff through a collaborative project with him. This project has been recognised as one of the pioneering pillars of what has come to be defined as Positive Education – a theoretical framework that unifies the core principles from the science of Positive Psychology with the practices of education in its broadest sense.

Positive Education brings together GGS's considerable experience of pastoral care for young people and expanded concept of wellbeing with the science of Positive Psychology. The overarching aim of Positive Education at GGS is for individuals to flourish. 'Individuals' in this context includes students, teaching staff and non-teaching staff and ultimately the school's alumni and parent community. 'Flourishing' is defined as elevated emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing (Keyes, 2005).

We measure it through the Individual Flourishing Questionnaire developed by Prof. Felicia Huppert at Cambridge University's Wellbeing Institute. The questionnaire measures: positive emotions; engagement and interest; meaning and purpose; positive relationships; resilience; competence; optimism; vitality; calmness; confidence/self-esteem.

Positive Psychology in action

In 2008, there was an intense period of training and support for the implementation of Positive Psychology. This included a nine-day training course for GGS staff in January. Prof. Seligman, his family and a number of key members of his team were in residence at the school from January to June. There was a varied and extensive programme of visiting scholars throughout that year. We hosted and learned from some of the leading academics in the field, including Prof. Christopher Peterson, Prof. Barbara Fredrickson, George Vaillant MD, Dr Roy Baumeister, Prof. Ray Fowler and Dr Frank Mosca. Initial work towards curriculum development was also undertaken and key positions and structures were put in place to support the implementation, including the role of head of Positive Education. By the end of 2008, the Positive Education department was established and comprised teachers from over six

departments. The start of the 2009 academic year saw the first timetabled, explicitly taught, Positive Education classes at GGS in Year 7, Year 9 and Year 10 (students aged 13–16).

Since 2008, more than 250 Geelong Grammar staff – teaching and non-teaching – have taken part in intensive residential training courses with Professor Martin Seligman and his team of experts – through which they have learned and practiced Positive Psychology principles and skills. Teachers are able to use the science of Positive Psychology in their own lives and implicitly in their approach to classes, activities and pastoral care. It is in this way that Positive Education influences every student – in the classroom, on the sports field and in their boarding House – at each of our campuses, every day.

Results manifest in many ways, from observations from staff at improvements in conflict resolution between students, and the powerful impact of having a common strengths-based language shared by students and staff, to one of the school gardeners of 15 years commenting how many students take the time to really stop and have a meaningful conversation since the implementation of Positive Education. In 2010, for the first time, all students from Year 7 upwards took the Individual Flourishing Questionnaire, the results of which are very positive when compared to European norms for an equivalent age-group.

From individuals to institution

A review of the school's implementation of Positive Psychology was undertaken in 2009, through which it became clear that the desired outcomes for the original project – to implement Positive Psychology through all aspects of the school's operation – had expanded beyond the scope of one project. In parallel with the review, feedback from staff indicated that incongruence was developing between the values underpinning Positive Education in the student context and aspects of the organisational setting. It became clear that understanding how embedding Positive Psychology principles in an organisational context would support staff and be beneficial, particularly given their important role in modeling attitudes, skills and behaviours to our students. In doing so, we would also ensure that the desired outcomes for the individual through Positive Education – mental models, processes and behaviours – were further embedded and supported by organisational culture, norms and practices.

As a result, with the over-arching aim of 'Geelong Grammar School as a flourishing institution', two projects were agreed: The Positive Education Project, which focuses on the individual, and The Positive Institution Project, which focuses on the organisation.

AI and Positive Institution

From our work with positive psychology, there was a clear understanding of the benefits of taking a strengths-based approach with individuals. The question was how this principle could best be applied to an organisation.

Important foundational questions needed to be explored:

- What does it mean to be a Positive Institution (PI)?
- What does a flourishing institution look like?

- How would GGS be different if it were flourishing?

At the time that the PI project was agreed, the school did not have an answer to these questions but recognised it was essential if the influence of Positive Education was to become a lasting institutional and cultural influence at the school, rather than something that only happened at an individual level.

Fortuitously, soon after raising these questions, a small team from the school attended an Appreciative Inquiry workshop held in Melbourne by David Cooperrider from Case Western Reserve University and 'discovered' AI. Here was a strengths-based approach that worked at a system level and made so many connections with the work we had already undertaken with positive psychology. It was an exciting and energising experience as the pathways and possibilities for holistic, inclusive and generative organisational change opened before us!

Introducing AI to GGS

2010 was a year of research, introduction and early implementation of some of the core principles and capabilities used in AI.

Here are two key initiatives and their outcomes:

Diversity Committee: AI Day, April 2010

The Diversity Committee Strategy Day was proposed as a pilot AI exercise. Feedback from this day would give the school's executive team a basis on which to decide how GGS could move forward with Appreciative Inquiry in a broader organisational context.

After a brief introduction to the underpinning concepts of AI and the process itself, a series of AI activities exploring high-point experiences at GGS, and of diversity generally, comprised the rest of the day. or design. In Discovery we looked at the diversity-driven affirmative topics of work-life balance, diversity in the workplace and men and women working together and we began our Dreaming by articulating our 'three diversity wishes for Geelong Grammar School'.

Whilst not moving into a Design phase for the Diversity Strategy for the school, the group was able to identify clear outcomes and next steps from the day's discussions. These have directly informed the community consultation plan that was implemented throughout 2010 and the diversity strategy that was approved by the executive team in December 2010.

A few comments from the participants in the day:

'The simplicity of the AI process surprised me, and the fact that I walked away feeling closer to all those people that participated in the session. When we build relationships we are able to speak honestly with our peers without hesitation because of the mutual trust/care factor, it makes it easier to discuss work practices that require improvement in a non-threatening manner.'

'I enjoyed the workshop component of the day the most – discussing our roles, our history, our aspirations and how our work-life could be improved at GGS was amazing. It clarified not only my issues but also gave me an insight into other people's work-lives and their issues.'

'With the AI process we seemed to get more done than just chatting about the issues of women and men in leadership positions. The process allowed people to have an opinion about issues that can sometimes suggest an 'us and them' attitude. AI was a far more productive process.'

'We achieved a number of clear outcomes, including developing an understanding of the Appreciative Inquiry approach amongst the group, and identifying the positive core by engaging the group in appreciative thinking about GGS.'

Principal's Advisory Committee Retreat: AI Workshop, July 2010

With the positive feedback from the Diversity Day, we were able to secure time for a two-hour AI workshop experience at the annual two-day retreat of the school's leadership group – the Principal's Advisory Committee (PAC). The purpose of this was to develop understanding and support for AI with this larger group of decision makers. We wanted them to perceive AI as both a philosophy and change process; to experience AI in action; and to explore and understand how it could support GGS as a flourishing institution moving forward.

After a brief introduction to AI, we asked the group to reflect and share 'moments when you have flourished at work' and in particular, 'what did the organisation that you worked for "do" to contribute to or enable you to flourish?'

Their collective experience of flourishing at work is shown in the frequency diagram above. It was these words that provided the basis for the dialogue about ways in which GGS could become a flourishing institution.

Recognising that the group may not be ready to move to a 'whole-system summit' for now, we chose to take them through the philosophy of AI and ways in which we could begin embedding this into the school, knowing it would resonate with their experience and highlights of positive psychology thus far.

A number of underpinning skills and practices to develop included:

- The development of a dialogue mindset and practice;
- Story-sharing as a means of personal and professional development;
- Implementing strengths-based processes where appropriate – such as appreciative review processes – in day-to-day business.

Through the appreciative nature of the dialogue at the PAC retreat, members were able to move beyond their usual thinking and operating paradigms, to one of possibility and capacity. It moved their field of vision upwards and outwards, enabling them to take a 'helicopter view' of ways in which GGS could develop as a flourishing organisation. By reflecting on and sharing personal experiences, they developed a common understanding of why and how that would benefit the organisation and the people within it.

The group could see the value of AI to the school, and we were given approval to develop a programme of initiatives to encourage 'appreciative skills and mindsets', with the possibility of holding a full summit in 2012.

Permission to proceed

In the second half of 2010 we were able to put our appreciative skills and mindsets development plan into action. Story-sharing has become a regular part of staff training sessions and staff meetings; we shared information about dialogue, discussion and debate; we encouraged and reminded people to access their dialogue mindset and skills through our regular Positive Education Newsletters; and we also facilitated an appreciative review process with a diverse group of staff undertaking a review of the school's activities programme.

It's 2011 and there is much to do!

The school began its journey with Positive Psychology from a student-centered perspective – focusing on the individual and teaching them positive psychology skills, so that they might flourish and enjoy purposeful lives. We are now asking others to become involved – non-teaching staff and members of the school community – and asking our teachers to broaden and develop their thinking and application of Positive Psychology to their work relationships, practices and mindsets. We are also intentionally looking at ways in which current organisational practices, processes and cultural norms help or hinder our progress and ways in which applying positive psychology concepts and skills can help us to continue to develop.

It is early in Term 1, 2011, and our work is already in full swing! We are currently in the process of implementing Appreciative Advising (Bloom, 2008) as the basis for our student tutorial system, with the intention of encouraging staff to develop the skills and practices of working with a strengths-based and appreciative framework. I am undertaking Ph.D. research to understand and identify the positive pathways that organisations – and GGS in particular – can take to operate as a flourishing institution. Development of a pre-intervention battery of questions is currently underway and testing will be undertaken in May, 2011, with the development and implementation of specific positive pathways in the second half of the year. I am confident that AI will be an underpinning influence in many of those and look forward to sharing our further progress and developments with the AI community.

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