**PILOT EVALUATION REPORT FROM SWEDEN - RESCUR**

**Introduction**

Building on strengths is a strategic element in promoting favourable mental-health outcomes. For example, it was used as part of the Mental Health Promotion Strategy of New Zealand’s Ministry of Health in order to promote health and contribute to a reduction in inequalities by enhancing the mental health and well-being of people of low socio-economic status or vulnerability due to social isolation. In particular, there was an emphasis on “strengthening individuals by increasing resiliency through programmes that promote coping skills” ([Ministry of Health, 2002, p. 1](#_ENREF_3)).

Further, in Western society, vulnerability and the need for resilience have become far more pronounced, particularly in certain social groups, so much so that it has been described by Beck as the “risk society” ([see Furlong & Cartmel, 2007](#_ENREF_1)). And, according to Giddens ([1991](#_ENREF_2)), young people now have constantly to create their identities in relation to new situations, values and norms. Old structures no longer give support, meaning that life and identity have become parts of an interactive project.

In the context of schools and the curriculum, we focus on two aspects of building on strengths in relation to resilience and the rather narrower concept of coping: positive self-conceptanduse of strength in academic and social engagement. As pointed out in the Maltese contribution to this rationale for the curriculum (entitled “Developing a Positive Mindset”), mindfulness, which is one of the central thematic elements in the curriculum, has been shown to be effective at enhancing optimism, social-competence behaviours, and positive self-concepts in primary school children ([see Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010](#_ENREF_4)). Therefore, it is suggested that all activities start with a mindfulness component.

Mindfulness can be described as a way of learning to pay attention to whatever is happening in our lives, helping us to have a greater sense of connection to our lives. “Mindfulness is also a *practice,* a systematic method aimed at cultivating clarity, insight, and understanding. In the context of health, mindfulness is a way to experientially learn to take better care of ourselves by exploring and understanding the interplay of mind and body and mobilizing our inner resources for learning, growing and healing” (Santorelli &Kabat-Zin, 2009). Today, there is growing evidence that increased levels of mindfulness are associated with an improvement in psychological functioning (Baer, 2003; Feldman et al., 2007; Grossman et al., 2004; Shapiro et al.,2006). Most of the evidence concerns adults but a growing number of studies of the effects on children are being performed: “Mindfulness is a strategy that is being used with increased frequency and receiving mainstream acceptance around the world as a means to enhance both students´ and teachers’ wellbeing” (Albrecht et al., 2012).

Children, especially those at risk, need tools to help them reduce stress and to regulate their emotions. Mindfulness is intended to be a toolof this kind, together with other RESCUR tools.

Within the RESCUR curriculum, mindfulness is practiced in order to foster well-being and reduce stress. The teachers have been trained to either use a set of mindfulness activities, which they have in their manuals, or to use recordings of mindfulness that can either be bought or found on the internet. The teachers are encouraged to start each activity in all themes with mindfulness. For children, these mindfulness activities are very simple; for example, pupils practice to relax and concentrate on their breathing, or are guided to concentrate on parts of their bodies while they are breathing.

The theme “Building on strengths” taps into all the other themes in the curriculum since building on strengths automatically involves communication, a positive mind-set, and so on. In a way, building on strengths can be looked upon as a way of reinforcing skills that are important in the other themes. In resilience work, it is important not only to use strategies that reduce risks or stressors but also to adopt those that enhance assets (see Masten, 2001). Such a strategic approach certainly applies in the case of “Building on Strengths”.

**Methodology**

In total, 8 schools took part in a pilot study of ”Building on Strengths” in Sweden. 16 teachers were initially involved; three dropped out, so there were 13 teachers at the end. In each of the schools’ classes there were between 8 and 20 students, with the lowest numbers in two groups in the age range 3-5 years. In total, 180 children took part in the study. In accordance with class divisions in the Swedish school system, the following age groups were represented: 3-5 years (preschool), 6 years (preschool class, but within the primary school organisation), and 7-9 years (primary school).

The 180 children broke down as follows:

* 3-5 years of age: 5 groups (50 pupils, 4 teachers).
* 6 years of age: 3 groups (50 pupils, 4 teachers).
* 7-9 years of age: 4 groups (80 pupils, 5 teachers).

All the teachers were trained for two full days.

**Data collection**

Primary data were collected by getting the teachers to fill in the previously developed RESCUR pilot evaluation tools at group level. Focus groups of children were not used because there was no ethical approval from an ethics committee. Three teachers dropped out, two because of illness and one for other reasons.

Data were also collected by getting the teachers to discuss their experiences.

Two teachers wrote a diary after their lessons.

All teachers were observed and supervised at least twice by the RESCUR trainer in Sweden.

**Presentation of findings**

Here, we present teacher assessments of students’ classroom behaviours. The figures below represent age group (within brackets) and number of responses for each subtheme within Theme 3 of the RESCUR project, namely ”Building on strengths”.

**Subtheme 1: Positive self-concept and self-esteem**

Have you noticed any improvements in the pupil’s behaviours over the past 6 weeks in the following areas?

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Not at all | Undecided | Somewhat | Very much | Comments or examples |
| Know things about themselves in order to enhance a positive self-image. | (3-5): 1  (6): 0  (7-9): 0 | (3-5): 2  (6): 2  (7-9): 0 | (3-5): 1  (6): 1  (7-9): 4 | (3-5): 0  (6): 1  (7-9): 1 | They tell each other what they are good at. (7-9) |
| Have found out things about themselves in order to enhance self-esteem. | (3-5): 0  (6): 1  (7-9): 0 | (3-5): 2  (6): 0  (7-9): 0 | (3-5): 2  (6): 3  (7-9): 5 | (3-5): 0  (6): 0  (7-9): 0 | Through conversations with their parents (7-9). |
| Understand that their strengths are a part of who they are and also of who they may become. | (3-5): 0  (6): 0  (7-9): 0 | (3-5): 1  (6): 1  (7-9): 0 | (3-5): 3  (6): 2  (7-9): 5 | (3-5): 0  (6): 1  (7-9): 0 | We talk a lot about feelings (6 years). I see a difference in some that they are more secure within themselves (6 years) |

Total 2 8 26 3

**Other comments**

Too short a time to see any general changes, but I do see some changes in some pupils (6 years).

Mindfulness has made the climate in the classroom a lot more secure. The students have explicitly said they like the mindfulness exercises (7-9).

**Subtheme 2: Use of strengths in academic and social engagement**

Have you noticed any improvement in the pupils’ behaviours over the past 6 weeks in the following areas?

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Not at all | Undecided | Somewhat | Very much | Comments or examples |
| Use their strengths when feeling uneasy and are able to give comfort to themselves and others. | (3-5): 0  (6): 0  (7-9): 0 | (3-5): 0  (6): 2  (7-9): 1 | (3-5): 4  (6): 1  (7-9): 3 | (3-5): 0  (6): 1  (7-9): 1 |  |
| Have developed social skills and are participating more socially. | (3-5): 0  (6): 0  (7-9): 0 | (3-5): 2  (6): 0  (7-9): 0 | (3-5): 2  (6): 3  (7-9): 5 | (3-5): 0  (6): 1  (7-9): 0 |  |
| Value themselves and others. | (3-5): 0  (6): 0  (7-9): 0 | (3-5): 3  (6): 0  (7-9): 1 | (3-5): 1  (6): 2  (7-9): 4 | (3-5): 0  (6): 2  (7-9): 0 | 6 years: We talk a lot about feelings. |

Total 0 9 25 5

**Comments**: All have improved, but some more than others (7-9). Mindfulness has facilitated the improvements. The children are better at talking about themselves and showing empathy (7-9).

Looking at the tables, it seems that there had been some improvements, but more among the school children than among the 3-5 year-olds. All in all, the results are encouraging, but it is difficult to say what exactly caused the improvements since the teachers themselves chose the activities.

**Open question for individual interviews /focus groups/questionnaires with teachers**

There follows a summary of what the teachers wrote:

1. **What was it like to implement the activities?**

(3-5): OK, One found the manual difficult to follow, but another thought it was great to have a manual.

(6): Good. Interesting lessons. Great. Good.

(7-9): As soon as I had made it ”my own” it worked. Often, the lessons went down very well. Fun and exciting. Interesting to see how the pupils ”grew”. Exciting and interesting.

1. **What do you think about the teaching strategies (stories, games, role play) proposed in this theme?**

(3-5): It is good to have games and stories. Sometimes difficult to get all the little ones to follow the structure.

(6): It varies. They were good. Ok. They were good but a bit repetitive

(7-9): Good strategies. I sometimes had to adjust them a bit. I liked the stories. I had to adjust them to the group.

1. **What do you think about the engagement of the students during lessons?**

(3-5): They get used to this way of working. They like to talk about themselves. It differs from child to child. The children liked it.

(6): Great engagement and interest. Fine. Members of this age group love talking about themselves. They took part and were engaged.

(7-9): Most of them were active. Very active and engaged. They liked the lessons. Great interest in talking about themselves. Most of them were active, and it got better as we went along.

1. **What difficulties did you encounter in implementing the lessons?**

(3-5): Most comments are about the group, but two comments are about the user-friendliness of the manual (it can be made better).

(6): It was a bit too abstract sometimes. None. The room.

(7-9): I needed a bit of time to get started. Some things were a bit unclear. That not all the teachers were involved in this project.

1. **What were the strengths of the theme?**

(3-5): The children get aware of their strengths. To strengthen self-esteem. To strengthen their beliefs in themselves and to give them the possibility to see their strengths and possibilities. Easy to follow and to adapt to the group. I saw that the pupils were interested in learning these skills. A manual so rich and well thought through.

(6): The child perspective. Very good foundation in values. Children need this kind of education.

(7-9): To be able to set goals and to get them to come true. Enhancement of self-esteem.

1. **What were the weaknesses of the theme?**

(3-5): It is sometimes difficult to talk about feelings, but it is important. That the parents were not informed. Immigrant children who do not speak the language do not get as much feedback as the other children,

(6): Some things were too similar.

(7-9): Not enough time to plan, do repetitions.

1. **What do you think about the idea that the curriculum should be implemented across the full academic year? What barriers and facilitators would there be?**

(3-5): Important. It needs mores stories. I would like one session a week,

(6): Since there are so many things we have to do, it may be difficult to find the time. I would like to work with this once a week.

(7-9): It should work, it is nice with a manual. It is possible. It would be good to have it as a continuous activity.

**Mindfulness**

(3-5): Splendid, works for most of them but not all. The children got better and better at doing it.

(6): -

(7-9): Mindfulness is so useful. It works better and better each time.

**Group discussions with teachers**

Quite a lot of time during the group discussions was not spent on discussing the manual but on discussing general work conditions for teachers. They were concerned about the size of the groups (too big) and how to integrate refugee children into the classes. When they were shown how the manual would turn out, they became more positive. One problem they foresaw was that it would be expensive to use many photocopies (handouts). On the other hand, they found it very important to get the parents involved, and therefore they thought the handouts were essential. They did express their surprise at the effect of the mindfulness activities. They said they did not expect mindfulness to have any impact. Some were rather sceptical before they started, but they were now all in favour of working with mindfulness.

**The diaries**

Two of the teachers wrote diaries, one who worked with 3-5 year-olds, the other who worked with 7 year-olds. They wrote mainly about the lessons and what they did during the lessons. Not a lot can be said about these diaries since they only described what the teachers did. If there had been more from the same age groups, comparisons could have been made.

**Observations**

All teachers were observed twice during the implementation. The observer kept a diary. Five things stand out when looking back at what happened.

* Almost all teachers were very engaged and involved.
* Teachers of the older children (6-9) seemed more at ease with the manual and used it very creatively. They used the smartboard and had pictures of squirrels and hedgehogs at the same time as they played the RESCUR music.
* There was a difference between the first and second observation in the sense that the groups had developed a lot. They functioned better (fewer disturbing incidents) and they were also more relaxed about the activities. When the teachers were asked about this, they thought that this was partly due to the RESCUR program and in particular to the mindfulness activities.
* Some teachers were really surprised that the parents were so engaged. They said it was the first time that all the children brought back their home-activities sheets to school.
* All teachers liked to get feedback from the observer and to discuss their lessons, they expressed how pleased they were to be “seen”.

**Discussion and recommendations**

Overall, the results are encouraging, but it is difficult to draw too much from the pilot evaluation since it is not yet clear what has been done. The teachers were asked to try out activities on a particular sub theme and they did, but it is not clear which ones they tried. So when one teacher says that she did not see any development compared with another teacher we do not know whether they have tried the same activities. Or when one teacher says she sees that there has been a lot of improvement, maybe she did certain activities and not others. In other words, it is as yet very difficult to know if the theme as a whole or a certain activity within it is more or less effective in producing change. It may well be that some activities were not tried at all. All teachers used mindfulness. There has been some research on mindfulness and children, it could well be that the mindfulness activities are the ones that create the changes. At least it is worth looking into.

Most teachers thought that the time interval was a bit too short. They think more time is needed to see any change. This is in line with most research in the field (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011)

It is encouraging that the teachers seemed to like to work with the manual but discouraging that some of them do not think they get enough time to plan the lessons. There must be a way of using the enthusiasm of the teachers to create a good learning environment. It also seems that teachers working with really small children found it a bit difficult. It was difficult for the small children to keep a focus on the activity. The older the children, the better it seemed to work. This may be due to differences in the teachers´ education but also to different cultures in the different settings (school and preschool). Not all teachers for the age group 3-5 found RESCUR difficult to work with. This may well be due to their level of training. Some of the teaching staff working with the age group 3-5 are not trained preschool teachers.

The goals were the same for all age groups and therefore it could have been difficult to see whether certain goals were reached, in particular for the preschool children (3-5). The manual had not been split into three when the teachers started working with it, which made it difficult for the teachers to see where they could find the activities for their age group. The activities would also have benefitted from more age appropriate goal-setting.

Some activities were perceived as repetitive and rightly so. Some need changing but, on the other hand, some teachers did the same activities one after the other (basic, intermediate and advanced) which was not the intention. Then, of course, similar activities were repeated for three weeks.

The teachers wanted mores stories because they found the stories easy to use as an introduction to an activity.

It is striking what emphasis the teachers put on mindfulness. Maybe there is a case for providing more mindfulness activities, or at least providing a list of mindfulness activities that can be found either on the internet or on CD.

Recommendations:

* Split the manual into three and use age-appropriate goals (has been done).
* Maybe, not include the 3 year-olds or have a special section for them.
* State, in detail, how the manual shall be used in the manual’s introduction.
* Make sure that each activity has a story, at least for the younger ones (has been done).
* Make sure teachers are trained and given time to plan the activities. Preferably train teachers for each age group separately.
* Provide material to be used on a smartboard. Illustrations and music.
* Make a mindfulness recording for the teachers to use.
* Provide material for an introduction at a parents´ meeting.

**References**

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