

CASE STUDY 20: A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO ENHANCE WELLBEING

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Bangkok Patana is a leading British international school in Asia; truly a thriving educational establishment always open to new ways to facilitate students in reaching their full potential. Throughout the last four years, Patana has been exploring the application of positive psychology with the support of Organisational Coach Clive Leach. This work was initiated with the school leadership, business team, faculty leaders and parent community; building an understanding of what it really means to flourish and reach your full potential and the implications for well-being. This has included workshops and coaching activities comprising the use of the Realise2 and VIA character strengths assessments, experiential learning about 'coaching conversations' using the GROW model and some access to 1:1 individual executive coaching.

In 2013 a strategic approach to the enhance well-being through the development of Character Strengths was implemented to an entire Year 8 community; comprising of 170 students (12–13 years of age), their tutors and parents, with a specific focus on the VIA Character Survey and GROW Coaching Conversations. Initial sessions for Year 8 parents and tutors shared details of the activities planned, introduced the VIA Survey and enrolled their support for the program. All Year 8 students then attended a series of introductory facilitated workshops within which the constructs of 'flourishing' and character strengths were introduced through a range of experiential activities designed to familiarise students with the vocabulary of the VIA, the value of strengths-based approaches and some initial strengths spotting.

As the first workshop started, it was immediately evident that the majority of students did not know what a character strength was. Students could relate confidently to being 'skilled' in something (e.g. I'm good at gymnastics/football/writing/swimming). However in the beginning they really struggled to connect with themselves, consider their personal qualities and characteristics and what they looked like in the real world. For many students this was

the first time they really thought about the concepts of character and being at their best. Students were excited to acquire new language and meaning – such as the power of ‘flourishing’, self regulation, prudence and appreciation of beauty and excellence.

Following an inspiring workshop students were supported at school and at home to complete the VIA Survey feeling genuinely excited by this process, especially trying to guess ‘Top 5’ signature strengths of their peers and teachers. Each Tutor Group created a display to celebrate the range and depth of strengths within their class. Students began to relate to these powerful new learning concepts; aided by creating posters and summarising the meaning of Character Strengths in *their* own words. These were displayed on the Year Group notice board, in classrooms and shared with parents during a Coffee Morning. Parents were further encouraged to support their child’s learning and personal development by having dedicated conversations with their child about their strengths and what they had discovered.

With these foundations in place, the Year 8 team were able to use ‘strengths’ as a powerful reflection/thinking tool with students; both in small groups and in one-to-one discussions. Reflecting on the GROW coaching model, staff were able to guide students towards considering how they could make *greater* use of character strengths to be a more positive member of our school community. For example following an instance of conflict resolution, these conversations facilitated students to reflect upon their actions, which may have been less desirable and find constructive ways forward. Coaching conversations were also helpful when students encountered personal struggles, were low in confidence or when they were very successful and have been able to strip back their achievements to the strengths they engaged which led to their success.

Equally as important, students were able to recognise which of their strengths they may sometimes overplay and those lesser strengths which could be applied to improve an aspect of their life and the world around them. A powerful coaching question students were asked was ‘how will you know if you have been successful in applying this strength?’ In follow up conversations this question has often been revisited and students have felt a genuine sense of fulfilment in *how* their new behaviours have turned an initial challenging situation with barriers in front of them, into a personal success story; they have felt proud of themselves for making a difference. Use of Character Strengths and structured coaching conversations has become a powerful aspect of school life.

This work on strengths featured during the Year 8 Residential trip, which was a perfect opportunity to bring learning to real life. Character Strengths ran as a ‘theme’ for the trip with students creating posters on display around the resort. Staff and students took part in strengths spotting; goal setting; reviewing and evaluating daily challenges and achievements; and celebrating success by recognising excellence in character. It was a hugely positive experience and there was a definite buzz as students flourished!

Coaching conversations and character strengths had a wider impact at Patana and now feature in other programs of activity. For example a Key Stage 3 Careers Unit named ‘Healthy Happy Futures’ which helps students to explore future adult life and possible decisions they may make. The flow continued right throughout the school year, which was concluded with

an awards assembly where Tutors awarded students in their Tutor Group for 'Demonstrating Excellent Character Strength in...'. Students really appreciated their personal character strengths being positively recognised.

Another powerful outcome was the opportunity for Year 8 students to apply to become a 'Junior Delegate'; a new and prestigious leadership role within the school. The essence of this role was centred around five character strengths (Fairness, Kindness, Leadership, Team Work and Social Intelligence) and students were able to make some exceptional applications. It was evident that they innately valued their character strengths and wanted to make a conscious effort to develop them further to benefit themselves and others within the school community. A pinnacle of this strengths and coaching project was when the now Year 9 Junior Delegates shared their learning and application of character strengths with head teachers attending the 2014 Federation of British International Schools in Asia (FOBISIA) Leadership Conference.

The Year tutor teams believe the focus on coaching conversations and strengths has really enhanced the pastoral program at Patana. Students have noticeably gained confidence, relationships between students are stronger in many cases as are the relationships between teachers and students. Students have invested time learning about themselves and how they can set personal targets to equip themselves with characteristics to be a better global citizen.

Bangkok Patana School is building upon this work in this new academic year, extending the work in Year 8 to include peer-coaching conversations to facilitate peer support and continuing the focus through Year 9. The most inspiring learning is that it has uncovered new potential pathways to enhance well-being, personal development and achievement as the students progress through the school.