Leadership report: Christchurch school drives intervention home

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Abstract
Christchurch schools had the opportunity to participate in disseminating a low-intensity intervention for children in Years 1-4 aimed at helping children to better manage anxiety and stress following the long term environmental disturbances related to earthquakes. A story book constructed as an intervention tool for use in classrooms and another for homes were both distributed. The intervention is reviewed, a focused description of one school's use of the intervention is given, and qualitative feedback from this school's staff is reported. Additional information regarding other area schools' experience is also given.

Keywords: *Low-intensity intervention; post-disaster intervention; bibliotherapy; qualitative feedback*

Introduction

Low intensity community interventions are becoming an increasingly common mode of initial response to events that result in negative change (Papworth, Marrinan & Martin, 2013; Rycik, 2006). The expected anxiety and emotional upheavals that accompany community-wide disasters frequently leave portions of the population with negative sequelae, and support for resiliency and recovery is often useful and needed (Webster & Harris, 2009). Teachers can positively impact the culture of children and parents for maintaining resiliency and attaining healing, when they are prepared to authentically commit to modelling and promoting helpful interventions in school classrooms alongside parents in homes (McCulliss & Chamberlain, 2013).

The intervention and its background

Stories have been utilised as learning tools in both education and treatment modes for some time (e.g., Lu, 2008; McCulliss & Chamberlain, 2013; Montgomery & Maunders, 2015). Social learning theory underlies the notion that vicarious learning through observation or cognitive processing is effective (Bandura, 1977; Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002). Thus, the shared concerns of a teacher and a psychologist in Christchurch regarding their observations of the changes in children's behaviour and in home and school life for children following the earthquakes, led to collaboration in creating stories that might be useful under the changed circumstances related to those earthquakes. The use of such resources following disasters has been growing over the past several years, and the literature base supporting this is currently accruing (e.g., Heath, Sheen, Young & Money, 2005; Rapee, Abbott & Lyneham, 2006; Webster & Harris, 2009).

During early school years, associated learning that occurs in both school and home is commonly acknowledged as being more influential for children than that which occurs only in one or the other (Bandura, 1977; Hubbard & Hands, 2011). The intervention story book authors were assiduous in their desire to create tools that might be usable in each setting so as to bring the greatest positive impact to children coping with the post-earthquake environment. They therefore created the Worry Bug project and authored a story specifically for classroom use (Dickson, 2015), and another specifically for home use (Burgess-Manning, 2015).

Material that is coherent with one's cultural perspectives, understandings, language, and images, generally offers the greatest support for learning (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002). The two story books used words and phrases common to New Zealand, and story illustrations were derived from images local to the Christchurch area.

The stories featured children struggling with worry and stress, and demonstrating various reactions and responses to this. A monstrous bug embodied worry and stress, with the graphic demonstrating more manageable proportions as various coping strategies were used by characters in the stories. Adults were helpful to the children throughout the stories in suggesting and facilitating coping strategies. However, they were not unaffected by the worries, and joined the children in application of strategies for managing them.

The books contained materials in an appendix for potential use by adults with children, relating further thinking and strategies appropriate to development of coping skills and resiliency in the face of adversity. Cognitive behavioural theory provided the underlying structure of these suggestions in the style of low intensity intervention currently being advocated for community use (e.g., Papworth, Marrinan & Martin, 2013). Adaptation to circumstances and environments in which the material might be used was encouraged.

Demonstration of effective school use

Schools were offered the Worry Bug story books free of charge for use in the school and dissemination to the children's homes. This was made possible through community grants and other funding. Most of the schools in the area accepted this offer. However, schools were varied in their subsequent choices for use of the resource, with the range of choices including a full spectrum from team strategies for repeat use all the way to putting it aside altogether. This report will focus on one school that brought added value to the Worry Bug intervention, and will also include a variety of selected ideas offered from other schools.

In the course of data collection regarding outcomes of the Worry Bug intervention, focus groups were arranged for participants to give qualitative feedback regarding their experience of the intervention. Heathcote Valley School was one of the participating schools, and the teaching team contributed a group discussion regarding their perspectives.

Heathcote Valley School received the Worry Bug story books along with all other Christchurch area schools. In preparation for the intervention and based upon the information publicized about it in Christchurch media, alongside information taken from the Worry Bug website, the Principal and Deputy Principal encouraged the teaching team to consider how the resource might best be used. They also encouraged and assisted the team to identify a lead teacher for the project, aided in distribution of the resource to the teaching team and children's families, promoted the project and its implementation through the school newsletter, and carried through with discussions about responses to the project with both teachers and children.

The Heathcote Valley School teachers agreed that access to the Worry Bug story book generated helpful discussions with children and parents regarding worry and managing this. They also discussed ways in which the story and related activities brought helpful thought processes to them as adults coping with post-earthquake circumstances, in addition to assisting them in discussions with the students. Some of the key points that teachers made regarding success in using the resource included:

- It was helpful to plan as a teacher group, for a coordinated simultaneous school-wide implementation of the project and use of the Worry Bug story;
- Using the project as an integrated learning activity for reading, writing, discussion, and activities, was helpful to the creation of embedded impact that was lasting through the year;
- Consideration of the suggestions given in the story book appendix for adults was a good start-point for planning follow-up learning activity, and often provided all that was needed for planning processes;
- It was important that there was a lead teacher who was devoted to driving teacher engagement in the project, and whom the teaching team, Deputy Principal, and Principal supported in that role;
- Lead-in planning and discussion amongst the team was useful to full engagement in the project as an intervention for helping with worry and stress;

- Commitment to follow-through was an outcome of the teacher group discussions;
- Continued positive effects were experienced, with the importance of resilience having been discussed resulting in engagement with additional projects relating to well-being;
- Introduction of language relative to successful coping strategies had allowed a common group approach to produce a culture change, with commonly understood phrases being strategically used by both teachers and students to good effect;
- Review of the story book and repeat use of key phrases, both as teachers and with students, was useful in maintaining growth of the culture nurturing open discussion and coping with worry and emotional concerns;
- Sharing the project with parents had brought opportunities to also share support with them on behalf of some of the children.

The teachers also identified challenges that arose for them in the process of engagement with learning that related to emotion and coping. Some of these had to do with unexpected responses from children with regard to their worries. Managing the surprise and replying helpfully and with authenticity was important, and discussion with the teaching team helped to both prepare for, and to debrief from these moments.

Space for discussion regarding concerns led a few children to make disclosures that might not otherwise have been made regarding family issues, fears about death, or other difficult subjects. Teachers having connections with resources for additional assistance to children outside of the school setting was retrospectively identified as being a useful part of preparation for engaging in an intervention such as Worry Bug. Gaining team consultation for managing response to such disclosures, and thus gaining confidence for revisiting and continuing conversations with the children, was another strategy for remaining engaged in the intervention process.

Teachers using the story book with Year 1 students found a graduated approach to be best, with shorter reading times and discussions. Year 2 and older students were noted to enjoy the story as a whole, and to often give thoughtful responses to the story and descriptions of their reactions to it. Reference to the illustrations throughout the reading of the story was found to enrich the conversation, and the story characters' portrayed expressions were a point of conversation. Some phrases that the characters used were adopted by the children in cueing strategic behaviours described in the story.

While some children expressed that worries did not concern them, hearing of other children's worries allowed them to develop some understanding and empathy for those with differing perspectives or experiences. Finding and using responses other than dismissal for others' worries seemed useful to both adults and children, and was an outcome noted for many of the participants.

In addition to preparation for emerging discussion with children, teachers found that preparation for discussion with parents regarding the intervention project could be useful. Although parents were informed of the Worry Bug project, some made comments regarding the story and discussions bringing anxiety to their children that had not previously been present. This was in contrast to the teachers' experience, which indicated that the story and discussion simply normalised and allowed expression for the stress, worry and anxiety that had been present for the children.

Other parents responded to the school and home stories by letting the teachers know that they appreciated the openings that were created for family sharing, discussion, and problem solving. Although managing day-to-day changes and stresses related to post-earthquake living, previously unexpressed worry and anxiety was sometimes allowed to surface for conversation with engagement in the intervention stories. Some parents indicated that the story book would be kept around for use when the need arose, indicating that the strategies presented were useful for review when stressors arose.

Other schools' activities contributory to the intervention

A number of schools in the Christchurch area utilised the Worry Bug story book, with many teachers and teaching teams thoughtfully incorporating the resource and its concepts in ways that suited their particular schools. Some of those described were:

- Initially used in school assembly on screen with a reading, with continuing follow-up in classrooms;
- Used in reading group;
- Used in circle time discussion;
- Used in classroom story time as follow-up to disaster drills;
- Used in writing poetry;
- Used in art class;
- Used in social science/health class;
- Posted photocopies of illustrations in classrooms as part of continuing awareness;
- Brief display of classroom poster with children's worries on classroom wall;
- Planned repeat use in coming year;
- Sent home story book with youngest rather than eldest of a family's children;
- Set up a letter box for posting worries as an ongoing follow-up for children to receive school support following school story book use;
- Placed Worry Bug updates in the school newsletter;
- Placed both school and home stories in school library for ready access to children;
- Discussion with parents who viewed Worry Bug art productions by their children.

Discussion

Principles of social learning support the implementation of interventions such as the Worry Bug project, and schools are in a good position to drive such generally applicable approaches. When environmental circumstances are experienced across a population base, discussion and incorporation of the effects of the circumstances becomes a useful part of coping culture and management of the inherent stressors.

When children are learning appropriate responses to environmental stimuli, they gather and incorporate information for those responses from parents, teachers, peers, and the environment itself. When the stimuli are new to any of the components of the children's resource group, the development of thoughtful and methodical approaches is useful and prudent to ensure best supported outcome.

Children who are exposed to unexplained and unprocessed stress are affected in a variety of ways, some of which can leave lasting negative results. The stress becomes more pronounced when also being experienced by adults and peers who are similarly being negatively affected. These effects become embedded for both children and adults who are not demonstrating and sharing the process of developing understanding of the changes caused by the environmental circumstances.

Use of interventions that may be understood at a variety of levels and utilized in a variety of individual ways may pave the way for general discussion, continuing interaction, and shared language as the culture changes around the environmental shaping that has been imposed. Such generally useful and low-intensity interventions become vehicles for positive coping that may then become acceptable discussion points in daily interactions.

An outcome of using the Worry Bug project for the Heathcote Valley School was deepening the understanding and commitment of the teacher group for explicit development of resilient culture with the students. Shared language and shared approaches to incidents that might have been either ignored or garnered some variety of quashing, led instead to opportunities for developing responses with intention of nurturing resiliency. This response pattern became more robust as the teacher group discussed with one another the

opportunities that had arisen for them in their classrooms, and began noticing the ways in which they also benefited from expressing the sentiments of resiliency to the students and to one another.

Intentional, planned, embedded use of the Worry Bug project in the Heathcote Valley School, brought a multi-faceted experience to teachers and students. Students were exposed to the story and the discussion that this brought in the classroom peer group. They were also allowed to process the story's meaning for themselves through artistic expression. Individual identification with the story's characters and their experience, or alternatively with peers or their own particular perspectives, was encouraged and discussed. Continued reference to the coping strategies presented in the story was part of the ongoing learning that followed engagement in the process. Months following the project introduction, the children recalled the storylines and identified with the strategies learned, and teachers were able to utilise this to good effect for encouraging generalised resilient responses to difficulties arising in daily activities.

Teachers discovered that their planning for the project implementation brought unanticipated opportunities to them in relating to the children. This sometimes resulted in expanding capacity for finding appropriate responses to areas of thought that the children might not otherwise have introduced, such as death, injury, and other distressing events. The outcomes of such interactions were often positive and encouraging of shared perspective development that brought greater ease for individuals and understanding between people.

Teachers also discovered that authenticity in the process of nurturing resilient living and outlooks, required of them their own commitment to resilient perspectives. The Heathcote Valley School teacher group identified that having leadership in ensuring continued focus with the children, and supportive interaction with one another over time was integral to developing and maintaining commitment to the process. As time deepened the collective experience of nurturing resiliency and overt coping with identified stressors relating to the environment dictated by the earthquake disasters, other ways in which resilient outlooks might be supported began to emerge. More energy and focus became available for further relevant health and well-being activity, as well as support for one another in resiliency development.

While the interface between implementation of the Worry Bug project at school and in the students' homes did not become an identified area of focus, Heathcote Valley School teachers did note that the shared implementation was useful. Conversations arose that might not otherwise have occurred between teachers and parents on behalf of the children, especially as parents noticed children's responses to activities generated by the Worry Bug project.

Conclusions

This report demonstrates the use of a number of strategies identified as contributing to success in implementation of school-led intervention for environmental stress and the ongoing effects that this can have for children, their families, and for school staff. Implementation was inclusive of staff planning, processing, and evaluative follow-up components. Implementation was also amplified in the inclusion of the children's parents in the intervention, although at much less complete levels. Children, nevertheless, were seen as responding well, with enduring positive results being noted by teachers. Teachers and parents both commented upon the increased opportunities created by the intervention to openly discuss and problem solve difficulties, stresses, and worries with the children.

Acknowledgements

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