

Premier’s TAFE NSW Scholarship

Building resilience in the classroom

Keeping youth engaged and on track in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector through positive mental wellbeing.

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# Introduction

In 2018 I was fortunate enough to receive the Premier’s TAFE NSW Scholarship. I applied for this scholarship to broaden my knowledge as a teacher in the field of resilience. Resilience has been defined as the set of characteristics, abilities, and resources that enable the achievement of positive outcomes despite exposure to stress or adversity. Training in resilience can enable youth to overcome adversity, cope with stress and setbacks so that they can achieve their goals.

There is a need for the youth cohort to become engaged and on a ‘pathway to success’ through TAFE NSW. The cohort in the Foundation Skills faculty at Lithgow TAFE includes students who are often at risk of disengagement from their studies. Foundation Skills courses prepare students with skills required for participation in the workplace, the community and in adult education and training. Strategies employed in the classroom to build resilience will support students to become engaged and achieve successful employment outcomes.

This scholarship presented me with an opportunity to develop skills to teach and help students develop resilience within the classroom.

With the knowledge obtained from my study tour, I initially plan to implement my findings within my own teaching practice. From here, I will present at the TAFE West Region Community of Practice to empower and educate teachers regarding resilience and how this can be incorporated into the classroom by the teacher. I will also implement practical wellbeing initiatives at Lithgow TAFE gained on my study tour for all students at the college. Following this, I would also present these wellbeing initiatives to other colleges at an institute level and at a state level within TAFE NSW.

# Focus of Study

The study tour focussed on the aspect of building resilience in youth within the classroom environment. It explored how a teacher can model and implement resilience strategies that can be integrated into regular learning experiences. To expand my knowledge and experience within resilience, I attended training and workshops, visited a number of colleges, met with mental health coordinators, and observed best practices within these settings. I was looking for hands-on and practical methods of practising resilience in a classroom environment.

This study has the potential to have a positive impact on youth at risk of depression through building resilience in a classroom environment. The topic of resilience has relevance to quality teaching and learning. A study on Youth Mental Health found that young people with mental health problems cost more to education, are more likely to be not in education, employment and training in their early 20s, and are more likely to need additional welfare support (Department of Health, 2015).

I will be able to incorporate effective resilience training into the classroom to help in the prevention of depression and the promotion of positive mental health in young people. As a result, the goal is that students will have increased retention in study, further career pathways and positive employment outcomes.

# Significant Learning

## Penn Resilience Program

The Penn Resilience Program was a week long training course facilitated by Emma Judge, in Amersham, England. Emma is a co-founder of How To Thrive, which teaches the skills of emotional resilience to young people and those who educate and care for them. The Penn Resilience Program Training involved learning the science behind resilience, applying core resilience concepts and skills, and how to deliver the resilience program with young people. This program has been demonstrated to reduce and prevent depression, anxiety, pessimism, and behavioural problems in young people.

The aim of the Penn Resilience Program for students is to comprise a set of skills that enable the students to:

* see themselves and the world with healthy optimism
* think flexibly and accurately about problems
* focus their energy on aspects of a situation they can change
* cope effectively with what they cannot change
* use effective problem solving strategies
* communicate effectively with others.

The program suggested that there are seven skills that are critical for resilient thinking. The training taught us to teach the students how to use these skills. These skills are practical methods that can be taught by a teacher, in the classroom and applied to relevant scenarios. Within the Foundation Skills courses these skills can be incorporated as interactive activities at the beginning of a lesson.

The skills included:

* The ABC Model – highlights the link between thoughts and feelings/actions. You use the ABC model to identify the activating event (A), in the moment belief (B) and emotional and behavioural consequences (C).
	+ Within the classroom an activity would be for students to think of a recent ‘activating’ event and what they said to themselves in this moment.
* Avoid thinking traps – common errors in thinking that people make when under stress and how to avoid the traps.
	+ Making students aware that there are many thought processes that happen under stress and how to act on this. This could be delivered through scenario-based learning.
* Detect icebergs – detecting icebergs is used to identify deep beliefs and core values that fuel out-of-proportion emotion and evaluate the accuracy and usefulness of these beliefs.
	+ Assist students in identifying their deep beliefs and core values, and how this can drive a reaction to a certain event.
* Calm and focused – relaxation, meditation and focusing strategies build emotional regulation, increase positive emotions and mental fitness.
	+ In class, calming/focusing activities can be used at the introduction of a lesson to prepare students for the lesson ahead.
* Challenge beliefs – increase flexibility and accuracy in thinking about the causes of problems to improve problem solving.
	+ In class students would be given a ‘murder mystery’ scenario and need to examine all evidence – not jump to conclusions too quickly in the face of a problem
* Put it in perspective – the skill is used to stop catastrophizing, decrease anxiety, and increase your ability to deal with the most likely outcomes of a situation.
	+ An activity would be for students to be given a situation and as a group evaluate the least likely and most likely outcome of the problematic situation. Students can then practise using situations in their own lives.
* Real-time resilience – shut down counter-productive thinking to enable greater concentration and focus on the task at hand.
	+ Real-time resilience involves students identifying a situation and listing their 5 beliefs about the situation. They then counter-act their beliefs by saying, “That’s not completely true” and offering a more practical reason.

As a participant in the course I was able to learn and practise specific resilience skills to develop and enhance the core abilities mentioned above. The course provided very useful, hands on and practical skills that could be taught to teachers and implemented in the classroom without being a qualified mental health practitioner.

Implementing these skills has the potential for positive impact on students and TAFE NSW. For students, teaching these skills within the classroom can increase their ability to handle day-to-day problems with strategies for problem solving, coping with difficult situations and emotions which often impacts on their study. For teachers of TAFE NSW the aim would be improved attendance, increased completion in courses, students entering further vocational study and/or positive employment pathways.

## Building young people's resilience in a digital world

This workshop was facilitated by Garry Hibbins, a youth and community worker from Abingdon Bridge, as part of Oxfordshire Youth in Bicester, England. The workshop discussed the impact of social media on young people’s wellbeing and resilience.

Firstly, we discussed the rise of social media and the pressure young people face by having an online presence. Garry suggested that young people who seek validation and reassurance online may not have a solid family base. The meaning of digital resilience was discussed. Digital resilience incorporates the social and emotional literacy and digital competency to positively respond to and deal with any risks that young people might be exposed to when they are using social media or going online. We looked at how as educators we can support young people to build their own digital skills and resilience so they can navigate the online world for themselves.

As a teacher, this highlighted the importance of educating our young students in regards to digital literacy. This could be implemented within the TAFE NSW Foundation Skills courses and incorporated into lessons throughout the term. The first step is to outline digital expectations within the classroom and encourage conversation. Such conversation includes: what do you like about social media, what don’t you like about social media, sharing experiences of their own using social media and online.

The workshop highlighted the statistics that surround social media and wellbeing. The exposure to messages, images and peer discussions can reinforce negative beliefs that children and young people hold about themselves, their lives and their futures (YoungMinds, 2016). Excessive use of social media is associated with depression, and continuous checking of messages, likes, and refreshing content streams. The emergence of picture-sharing media such as Instagram and Snapchat can also play a role in heightening underlying anxieties and lowering self-esteem.

Increasing the students’ knowledge and awareness about the digital world could be incorporated into literacy lessons within the TAFE Foundation Skills classes. The digital world/ social media is a personally relevant and engaging topic for youth. Students could undertake research assignments about social media and young people. At the end of the topic, students could present their findings in the classroom, and to younger students.

Hibbins also talked about positives surrounding young people and the digital world. He suggested that young people in rural towns have easier access to services in a digital space. At Lithgow TAFE I am collaborating with the counsellor to design a resource of online services available for youth. The workshop highlighted for me way social media shapes society, and especially in young people.

## New City College, Hackney

During my study tour I spent time at New City College. New City College is east London’s largest college. New City College provides education and training to young people aged from 14-18 years and to adult learners. Similar to TAFE NSW, New City College has many courses to suit different ages and abilities. For youth, these courses aim to improve literacy, numeracy and personal development for further study or positive career pathways.

As part of my visit I met with John McClean who is New City College, Hackney’s Mental Health Coordinator. We discussed his role within the college and successful ideas and initiatives to promote youth resilience. These included:

* 10 tips to build resilience posters – hung up around the campus, in every classroom. Within TAFE colleges this would be a visual reminder on the importance of healthy mental wellbeing, and how a student can implement this into their life
* 5 to thrive – classes design/develop five things that make them thrive. This would be done a practical activity, and initiate conversation in the classroom. Students would design their own posters and have them hung in the classroom
* public living room – lounges in a public area within the college which is a comfortable place where anyone can come to be around people and make connections. At Lithgow TAFE this will be integrated into the Student Hub, and an area has been identified
* peer led mentoring programs – run by other students, developing a supportive college community. This is an opportunity within Lithgow TAFE for the youth cohort to gain experience in leadership and influence their younger, disengaged peers
* workshops for wellbeing – managing stress, dealing with change, facing adversity. This would be run with the TAFE Counsellor at lunchtime for staff and students. A casual and practical session that encourages conversation and mental health
* mental health awareness training for all staff on campus. This has successfully been delivered at Lithgow TAFE, and I feel if supported by TAFE NSW, it should be mandatory for all teachers.

John and I discussed the importance of education on young people’s mental health and how an inclusive learning environment is essential to students’ social and emotional wellbeing. Being on a learning path gives the students’ meaning and purpose in their lives. By regularly implementing wellbeing initiatives throughout a TAFE college it brings together different faculties and opens up opportunities for discussion and networking. Since returning from my study tour I have been collaborating with the Lithgow TAFE counsellor to provide regular wellbeing events for the whole college throughout the term. One upcoming event is Thriving@TAFE which is part of Mental Health Month 2018. A guest speaker, local services, mindfulness activities and a free BBQ will be available for all students.

## The Kaleidoscope Centre, London Borough of Lewisham

The Lewisham Centre for Children and Young People provides a range of services under one roof including: Behaviour and Education Support, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Educational Psychology, and Healthy Schools Program.

During my visit, I spent time with Enomwoyi Damali who is a senior psychologist within the team. She explained many initiatives and programs that schools in the Lewisham Council follow. Schools within the London Borough of Lewisham follow the Resilience Framework. The Resilience Framework (adapted from Hart, Blincow and Thomas, 2007) summarises a set of ideas and practices that promote resilience. It is based on a body of research and practice development called Resilient Therapy (RT).

This framework is an essential tool that teachers at TAFE NSW could use. It outlines the ways of helping young people to deal with tough times. It highlights the ordinary things that can be done to promote resilience for young people and that can be used in their daily lives. This framework highlights how important attending TAFE can be for a student and the feeling of purpose that can follow.

If a teacher can see that a student is not coping – the framework offers specific approaches which can encourage a positive mindset. This could be printed for classrooms and staffrooms. I would introduce this into the TAFE West Region Community of Practice to show teachers how small changes can make a big difference to a students mental health.



Framework from: Hart, A. Blincow, D. with Thomas, H. (2007) The Resilience Framework identifies five areas of a young person’s life that need to be addressed in order to build resilience.

## Resilience with mindfulness techniques

This course was run by Katie Snow, who is a consultant with Anti-Bullying Works. Katie started off by discussing ‘What helps to build resilience?’ and this included such points as comfort, nurture and joy, strong connections and attachments, positive view of self, learning and developing new skills and self-care (emotional, physical and psychological).

Katie is a qualified Mindfulness practitioner and has developed a Mindfulness based Resilience program to be used with young people. She discussed how resilience and mindfulness are linked. Some key points included:

* through mindfulness, we become more aware of our emotional and physical needs and if they are being neglected. Therefore, our ability to identify self-care needs is naturally improved
* developing the ability to calm down helps us to manage times of stress
* developing kindness to yourself can help build resilience
* creating acceptance of ourselves
* knowing your strengths and your inner and outer resources helps to know what to do when things don’t go to plan.

Enomwoyi, who works for Lewisham Council recommended a mindfulness toolkit called The Box That Boings. The tools within The Box That Boings were developed based on The Resilience Framework (adapted from Hart, Blincow and Thomas, 2007). One resource within this box is a Keep Calm Kit. It is a physical box that includes different ideas to make youth feel better when angry, frustrated, stressed, sad or nervous. These include; breathing, being creative, counting, being active, balancing poses, escaping the moment, muscle clenching and relaxation sequences.

A similar kit to this will be utilised at TAFE Lithgow Student Hub in a private space. The kit provides practical and hands on approaches for positive wellbeing. The Student Hub is space that provides support services for students in one place. The first step will be to educate teachers about this kit, where it is and its purpose for students. This kit would be supported by the counsellor as well. This is an initiative that could be adopted across TAFE NSW colleges.

Katie also spoke about how to introduce mindfulness to young people

* Always give a choice
* Keep it short
* Use the right language
* Have fun with it
* Keep it relevant to youth i.e. use apps
* Be aware it is not for everyone.

This was an important reminder that mindfulness is different for everyone. It should be offered as a choice. As a result, rather than being implemented into lessons for all students, it will be an optional choice in the Student Hub at Lithgow TAFE. All students will be made aware of how mindfulness can be useful, and shown how to use it.

## Emotional literacy and boys

This course was also run by Katie Snow, who is a consultant with Anti-Bullying Works. As a group we begun by discussing what masculinity means, the barriers boys face when expressing feelings, the messages boys can receive and internalise around showing their emotions, the impact this is having and ways we can make emotional literacy easier for boys.

Masculinity was described as the possession of the qualities traditionally associated with men, the social definition of maleness. We also brainstormed words about what it means to be a man. Words such as strong, provider, confident, independent, aggressive, protective, successful, leader and powerful were some examples.

We discussed the issue of ‘being a man’ - There is nothing wrong with a boy wanting to be strong, liking maths or being into sport. Problems come when the definitions of what it is to be a boy or a man do not reflect the individual’s self-identity. Issues also arise when feelings are suppressed and a person has no way of expressing their emotions.

Katie put forward some questions for the group about messages boys hear about expressing emotions. These included:

* what messages do boys receive about expressing their emotions
* what names might they be called if they cry or show emotions in other ways
* who and where do these messages come from
* what happens when these are internalised?

To finalise there was a discussion around how we can re-frame what it is to be a man in 2018. As a teacher, it is important to be aware of these points so we can support youth within our classes. This is a topic I would present during the TAFE West Region Community of Practice.

The following points were raised to help young men navigate through adulthood:

* help boys to understand and feel safe enough to talk about how they feel
* challenge gendered ideas
* role model it is ok to talk about feelings
* show empathy
* promote self-care
* write down thoughts and feelings
* physical outlet.

# Conclusion

Implementing resilience in young people can support better outcomes for them whatever challenges they face. From my perspective as a teacher, I am excited to engage with this newly formed knowledge towards gearing young people to provide a more inclusive, more rewarding and safer environment that they are able to grow and learn. As stated by Masten et al ‘The transition to adulthood is a window of opportunity for changing the life course.’ (2004)

In more practical terms, I plan on creating and implementing new initiatives within Lithgow TAFE in regards to resilience. To begin one initiative I am looking at implementing is a student wellness corner resembling a Public Living Room as I saw in New City College (Hackney) in the Student Hub at Lithgow TAFE which would incorporate mindfulness activities, sensory engagement, games, and details of support networks. It would provide a safe, relaxing space where students can sit and talk. I would also like to follow the ‘5 to Thrive’ initiative where students come up with 5 things that make them thrive, and the posters are printed and published around the TAFE. This gives the students a feeling of pride and meaning. I am working on a presentation to empower and educate all staff regarding resilience and how this can be incorporated into the classroom by the teacher. After this presentation I aim to meet with staff again to review the impact that the resilience training has had on their students.

In conclusion, the study tour I conducted in the United Kingdom has been of great service to both my personal abilities related to teaching and in its ability to give perspective when dealing with youth. It was an invaluable learning experience for my professional development as a teacher and I am excited to implement my learning at Lithgow TAFE and then the wider TAFE community so that students are able to have increased retention in study, further career pathways and positive employment outcomes through positive wellbeing and resilience.

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* Lambeth College, The Careers College, UK.
* Peter Dolor, Senior SEN Case Officer, Lewisham Council, Lewisham, UK.

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