



WORKING WITH DISENGAGED YOUNG PEOPLE

Underpinning Theories

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Introduction

Growing2gether is a new experiential learning programme for schools in Scotland that supports disengaged young people to develop confidence and self-belief by mentoring small children, nurturing their potential and developing trust in their community.

Growing2gether addresses many of the challenges experienced by young people through transformative psychology in order to support the young people to become successful learners, responsible citizens and effective contributors, whilst earning a nationally recognised qualification by mentoring a small child. Young people become mentors to small children, supporting their development, which provides the young people with work experience, a responsible job to do and a respected role in their community.



With Growing2gether, young people have an opportunity to build self-confidence and self-belief through intensive group work not provided as part of Curriculum of Excellence. This helps them to re-engage with their community and their education in a positive way. There is increasing evidence that positive psychology interventions enhance wellbeing and this is being recognised by The Scottish Government. This has further created many initiatives to address the significant challenges that children and young people in Scotland are facing today: Closing the Attainment Gap, Getting it Right for Every Child, the Curriculum for Excellence, and Developing Scotland's Young Work Force. Growing2gether aims to address these issues by working with disengaged young people and children who are in need of additional support.

Theoretical Concepts Underpinning Growing2gether

1 Growing2gether and Positive Psychology

Growing2gether is underpinned by transpersonal psychology, which provides a holistic psychological approach focusing on enabling individuals to access more of their potential; on developing self-awareness and personal responsibility and on recognising the importance of meaning as requirements for wellbeing and positive engagement with society. Combined, we find a congruent pedagogy with transpersonal psychology and positive psychology, a branch of mainstream psychology, which was founded 1998 by Seligman (Seligman 1998).



Positive psychology has added scientific rigour and has become more established over the past decade. More recently, a systematic review of 36 papers concluded that interventions using Positive Psychology lead to reductions in anxio-depressive symptoms, as well as increases in wellbeing (Sitbon, Shankland, & Krumm, 2018). These interventions are extremely useful and popular, considering their large-scale development and low cost. Growing2gether focus on bringing out the unique potential of young people, rather than seeing them as a 'problem', empowering them with life skills, work experience and a deeper understanding of who they are.

2 Growing2gether from a Developmental Perspective

In developmental psychology, learning is based on experience, which helps us to understand the impact that Growing2gether has on not only the teenage participants, but the children too. The theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky have probably had the most influence on our ideas about how young children learn. More specifically, it was Vygotsky who looked more closely at the way children acquire knowledge through interaction with more experienced people, and at the role language plays in the process. We often forget to acknowledge the benefits that the child gains from the Growing2gether programmes as much of the focus is on the young people. A publication using our programme found that children receiving mentoring from a teenager showed greater (significant) increase in 4 areas of development compared the control group (Humphrey and Olivier, 2014).



Experiential learning is at the heart of Growing2gether, where both child and adolescent learn and develop through interaction, modelling, and positive reinforcement. This perspective is referred to as Constructivism. Constructivists view knowledge as something that individuals construct out of their own experience and reflection, rather than something that is passively absorbed. During the programme, both the teenagers and children are constructing their own social reality and learning from this experience. Key messages are reinforced by the facilitators, who discuss and support this journey to self-discovery. Learning through experience is thought to create an opportunity for participants to more fully integrate their learning and increase the likelihood of a lasting effect. Throughout this process participants build aspirations, life skills, and confidence which ultimately increases the likelihood of educational attainment, self belief to achieve their potential and enhanced emotional wellbeing. This process is often (but not always) made more impactful by carefully matching child and adolescent on the basis of their behaviours and personality. For instance, a shy and withdrawn teenager would ideally be matched with a shy and withdrawn child. The facilitator would be able to discuss certain aspects of the child's behaviour during the classroom session, allowing the young person to draw comparisons with themselves. This is a less threatening method of encouraging self-reflection in order to raise self awareness.

3 Growing2gether and Connectedness

Connectedness plays a role in the programme's efficacy. Connectedness, or bonding, refers to the emotional attachment and commitment a child/adolescent makes to social relationships in the family, peer group, school, community, or culture (Visser, 2017). Research places great importance of connectedness in relation to positive youth development programmes and claims to protect young people from sexual risk taking as well as performance in school (Visser, 2017). Growing2gether understand that many of these young people on the programme come from unstable and ever changing environments. It is important to understand the mechanisms by which teenagers make sense of their world as well as the relationships they have with significant others within the social context. Adolescents make special bonds with their assigned child, their facilitator as well as others in the group. The experience encourages the young people to feel more connected with their community and realise the consequences of their actions and how they can help others. Our evaluations reveal that the young people enjoy volunteering in the nursery and are inspired to become involved in the community, which prompted Growing2gether to extend the programme (Growing2gether in the Community).

4 Growing2gether and Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1961) combines cognitive learning theory (learning that is influenced by psychological factors) and behavioural learning theory (learning is based on responses to the environment). Four requirements to learning were identified; observation, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Bandura conducted experiments on how children learn and concluded that children learn social behaviours through observation learning, or watching the behaviours of others who model that behaviour. These studies revealed how influential models can be.

Modelling and observational learning is of particular interest when understanding Growing2gether programmes. Young people on Growing2ghether programmes are empowered by being a role model to the younger children. Throughout social psychology, it is known that modelling is a very important aspect of social behaviour and how we learn. In society, children and adolescents are surrounded by many influential models, such as parents, teachers, peers, and even television. These models provide examples of how we should behave. If a child imitates a model's behaviour and the consequences are rewarding, the child is likely to continue performing the positive behaviour. So, if a young person praises the child for good behaviour, they will continue to behave this way, meanwhile reinforcing the importance of being a good role model to the child, hence raising the young person's self-esteem. Similarly, when the facilitator praises the young person, they too feel good about themselves and will continue to behave in a positive way.

Growing2gether and Mental Health

A National Statistics publication for Scotland, “Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Scotland 2018” reported that 10% of children and young people have a clinically diagnosable mental health problem and 20% of adolescents may experience a mental health problem in any given year. This number is increasing. For instance, 4,664 children and young people started treatment at Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in Scotland, which is an increase from the previous quarter, (3,995) hence demonstrating the need for mental health interventions. Interventions, like Growing2gether, which include components of mental health and promote wellbeing, may encourage young people to seek help from professionals, or even teach young people coping mechanisms while they are waiting to be seen by CAMHS. Such interventions are perceived by the young people as being important. A recent consultation paper (Humphrey, 2018) using Growing2gether graduates, (recruited pre-programme) revealed that many young people were concerned about mental health problems, which includes depression and anxiety. Furthermore 70% wanted a programme that could provide emotional support and 88% wanted a programme that could build on their confidence, hence, reiterating the need for programmes that can enhance wellbeing.



Unfortunately, more adolescents are experiencing the debilitating effects of anxiety and depression, particularly those who experience life events at such an early age (Heubner et al, 2018). Due to the fact that anxiety and depression are easily concealed, teachers and parents are often unable to detect the adolescents as having emotional/behavioural problems until the symptoms cause significant interference in academic and social functioning (Muris & Meesters, 2002). More recently, however, the ability to detect depression and anxiety is further exacerbated by some adolescents spending less contact time with people, and spending more time on electrical devices (Twenge et al 2018). More specifically, higher suicide and depression rates were found in adolescents who spent more time on new media compared to adolescents who spent more time on non-screen activities (Twenge et al, 2018).

Poor mental health during childhood impacts on school as demonstrated in a paper, which revealed that poor mental health is correlated negatively with educational attainment (Brännlund, Strandh & Nilsson, 2017). Given the strong link between educational success and adult life, more resources are required to support children with mental health problems. A study on teenagers, found evidence to suggest that interventions that promote emotional

wellbeing amongst targeted groups of individuals can have an impact on the way young people perceive problems (Humphrey, 2016). Findings suggest that Negative Problem Orientation (NPO; the extent to which people do not believe they can effectively cope with problems) can be reduced through an 18-week intervention that teaches social-emotional learning through an experiential learning model. This reinforces the impact of socio-emotional learning and experiential learning has on minimising NPO and subsequently to enhance mental wellbeing. This has long-term implications as interventions such as these, have been shown to have the largest impact on student's academic, behavioural, social-emotional and motivational outcomes and produce benefits to pupils' health and wellbeing (Korpershoek et al., 2016).

Growing2gether and Emotional Wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing is fundamental in children and young people's mental, psychological and cognitive development as well as their general health. The period of adolescence is increasingly recognized as a key formative period for positive assets that underpin wellbeing where good emotional and mental health is important in helping to strengthen the capacity for relationships, improve educational attainment, promote social inclusion, expand opportunities and improve general health and wellbeing (Patton et al 2017). Positive Affect (PA) describes feelings that reflect a level of emotional wellbeing and happiness with the environment, such as excitement, happiness, enthusiasm, and contentment. Positive affect reduces the health harming effects of psychological stress (Oakley et al 2017). Higher PA has been associated with better health practices such as improved sleep quality more exercise, as with lower levels of the stress hormones (Oakley et al, 2017). Growing2gether teaches young people how to manage their emotions and self-regulate, which contributes to feelings of Positive Affect, such as satisfaction, happiness and wellbeing as young people are more equipped in dealing with stresses and managing relationships through developing a positive sense of self. To become emotionally and socially skilled as well as mentally healthy, young people need positive reinforcement and support. Facilitators are trained to support the young people in a positive and reflexive way so that these individuals become better at self-management and self-awareness, which lead to better mental health. This extends to physical health, as young people are encouraged to take their health seriously and discouraged from taking unhealthy risks, such as taking drugs, having unprotected sex and drinking alcohol. Furthermore, young people are encouraged to become open and self-aware so that they are able to ask for help from professionals if they (or others) recognise they may have a problem, hence seeking treatment before it becomes more difficult to manage.

Self-esteem is commonly regarded as the most significant measure of psychological wellbeing and mental adjustment. High self-esteem is related to greater motivation, academic achievement, personal and social responsibility as well as coping behaviours, whereas lower self-esteem is related to poor mental health and depression (Gardner et al 2019). One

study explored the association between self-esteem/affectivity and General Well-Being (GWB) in Scottish adolescents. Results revealed that self-esteem was found the strongest predictor of mood/affect and wellbeing (Karatzias et al 2006). It is hypothesised that positive appraisal received (by toddler and facilitator) within a supportive environment enhances the individual's self-esteem. Anecdotal evidence from teachers and the young people themselves reveal that the programme is effective in raising self-esteem. Evaluations from pilot studies on this programme, using Rosenberg Self-esteem scale, reveal significant increases in self-esteem when comparing pre and post test scores.



Growing2gether and Growth of Mindset

An individual's attitude or mental state is referred to as their mindset, which may be perceived as fixed, or growing (growth of mindset). In a fixed mindset, people believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits that you are born with. Conversely, individuals who believe their mindset can be developed and grown (growth of mindset) believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. This attitude creates a desire to learn and resilience, leading to successful and well-accomplished individuals.

Dweck (1986) maintains that teaching a growth creates motivation and productivity, particularly in relation to education. For example, individuals who believe intelligence is malleable (a growth mindset) are better able to bounce back from failures than those who believe intelligence is fixed, (Dweck, 1986). With regards to the latter, these people tend to feel helpless after encountering failures and this can have profound effect on learning achievement, skill acquisition, personal relationships, professional success, and many other dimensions of life (Dweck, 1986). Not only does mindset have implications for educational outcomes but recent research suggests that stressful life events depression, substance use, and motivations for non-suicidal self-injury were weaker among those with more of a growth mindset relative to those with more of a fixed mindset (Schroder et al, 2017). These findings suggest that anxiety mindsets function in a similar way for mental health resilience as how mindsets of intelligence function for academic outcomes (Schroder et al, 2017). Throughout the curriculum, Growing2gether refers back to growth of mindset and encourages young people to perceive this as being malleable, hence realising their own potential to achieve goals.