1 – Applying positive psychology to youth work

Ms Jolanta Burke
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Positive Psychology is a science of what is good about life (Peterson, 2006). Whilst traditional psychology focuses on identifying problems and solving them, positive psychology attempts to look at what’s working well, and strengthening this behaviour. During the presentation, the concept of positive psychology is introduced and suggestions made as to the application of its findings to the youth workers in order to enhance their results. The Longitudinal Harvard Study shows that children from disadvantaged background are capable of radically changing their attitudes and behaviours as a result of meeting someone significant who shows them an alternative way to live their lives (Vaillant, 2002). Youth workers often serve such purpose. Therefore, during the presentation practical techniques are given on how to give the youth feedback in order to encourage their growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and enhance their motivation (Gable et al, 2004). The research into self-regulation is discussed as a medium for reinforcing youth discipline (Baumeister, 2006), which is necessary in order to form useful behaviours. Character strengths are one of the pillars of positive psychology and extensive research into applying them in schools has shown great benefits of introducing them to the youth (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003). During the presentation a list of activities is given demonstrating their application by the youth workers. Three groups of evidence-based positive psychology interventions are presented. They help the youth deal with their negative emotions more effectively, enhance their positive emotions and improve their resilience to life adversities. There is strong evidence showing that resilience building can be developed as a skill and subsequently reduce the likelihood of the youth to experience depression in the future as well as prevent them from suicide (Seligman, 2006). Finally, suggestions are made on how positive psychology can be further integrated into youth work.
The interaction of body tattoos with the dynamic self-concept in youth prone to deviant behaviours

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The tattoo’s persistence as a mark-making act towards human expression and identity, as illustrated by its prevalence across historical and cultural domains, renders it unique as a social self-practice. While there appears to be a shift in attitude towards a practice that held association with deviancy and criminality this is not reflected in empirical research with continued correlation between the act of tattooing the skin in youth with other deviant and risk taking behaviours. Likewise research consistently aligns multiple deviant behaviours with Early School Leavers who are classified as ‘at risk’. Qualitative data was gathered from a sample group of seven tattooed ESLs, with a view to exploring the relevance of this act to the construction of the self and subsequent impact on the self-concepts’ quest for stability.

Key findings presented relate to the tattoos’ interaction with the dynamic self-concept, showing an ability to go beyond the surface and hold functionality through motivations, meanings and assigned self-narrative, in particular when relating to times of transition. In addition the tattoo is shown to perform a self-regulatory role through a process of feedback, with a capacity to initiate control, in part due to an ability to function as a commodity that fulfills all criteria to become an extension of the self. Findings also indicate body tattoos act as visual cues for the self in relation to self-concept clarity. Subsequently the potential for tattoos utilisation as visual clues by others is discussed with reference to the alignment of inward and outward marks with the public and private self.

1100 – 1120: COFFEE BREAK

1120 – 1240: MORNING PAPERS (SESSION TWO)

Beyond the curtain: one man’s experience of the Irish industrial school system

Mr Jerry Lynch
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This paper first describes the history of the industrial and reformatory school system in Ireland at a general level, and then subsequently focuses on the personal, lived experience of one man from a rural Irish town who found himself in St. Joseph’s Industrial School, Letterfrack, Co. Galway at the age of thirteen years. The man’s experiences of physical, sexual and emotional abuse at St. Joseph’s are described, as well as the effects of his experiences of this institution on his life thereafter.
Ms Paula Flynn  
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This presentation discusses the findings and analysis generated from a small-scale pupil voice research project conducted in the Republic of Ireland, involving thirty five pupil participants in four mainstream schools. The pertinent issues with respect to mainstream Irish education which provided the impetus for this study include the policy of inclusion; challenging behaviour; ‘pupil voice’; and SEBD in children and adolescents. The objective of this study was to determine the impact on the pupils and their school community when participants were given the opportunity to become ‘active agents’ in positively transforming their experience of school.

An ethnographic approach was taken to this research project and the methods of data collection included interviews, observations, focus groups, creative workshops and reflective journaling. The potential for transformation of the pupils’ experiences of school as well as the sustainability of positive outcomes are considered in light of the data, while the implications of ‘authentic listening’ as well as ‘power’ and ‘positive relations’ are also interrogated within the context of this research. The most significant themes which were identified through the contextual lenses of this study include ‘Empowerment and Voice’, ‘Caring Relations and Attachment’ and ‘Leadership for behaviour, engagement and learning’. These themes will be discussed in the context of implications and recommendations from this research.

1240 – 1400:  
LUNCH-TIME:  
SANDWICHES, TEA AND COFFEE AND TRADITIONAL IRISH MUSIC (ULTAN O’ BRIEN (FIDDLE) AND EILÍS LAVELLE (HARP))
5 – Disablist bullying: student teachers’ knowledge and confidence

Dr Conor McGuckin
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Through their Initial Teacher Education (ITE), student teachers gain knowledge, either explicitly through their curricula studies or implicitly through reading or conversing with fellow students, about the areas of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and bully/victim problems. However, what is not known is how student teachers understand the nexus of these areas: disablist bullying. This presentation reports upon a study that explored the knowledge and confidence of student teachers in relation to disablist bullying. Two centres for Initial Teacher Education on the island of Ireland, one in each jurisdiction, were selected for recruitment of participants. Stranmillis University College provided the sample of both primary and post-primary student teachers from Northern Ireland. The School of Education at Trinity College, Dublin and the University’s three Associated Colleges of Education (Marino Institute of Education, Froebel College of Education, and the Church of Ireland College of Education) provided the sample for the Republic of Ireland. Adopting a mixed methods approach of four focus groups and a paper questionnaire (n = 257), data were collected and analysed relating first to students’ knowledge and confidence in the discrete areas of SEN and bullying, and then in relation to disablist bullying. The study highlights the high importance attributed to SEN and bullying by student teachers but also the sporadic provision and low confidence in meeting the needs of children with SEN. The study also reveals that none of the participants in either jurisdiction have received any guidance at all in relation to disablist bullying as part of their ITE. The study concludes with recommendations to address this shortcoming, including the urgent need for practical, solution-focused and evidence-based courses at ITE and CPD level in both jurisdictions.
Teachers regularly encounter students who have experienced a significant human loss through bereavement. It is estimated that bereavement affects between 36,000 and 60,000 Irish school children annually. Research indicates that young people who experience bereavement are at an increased risk of impaired educational attainment as well as physical, psychological, social, and behavioural issues. Common responses following bereavement include; acting rebellious, substance abuse, psychosomatic complaints, changes in behaviour, performance decline, eating disorders, specific fears triggered by reminders of the trauma, overwhelming emotions, and a foreshortened future.

This research documents the approach and response of primary and post-primary schools in Ireland regarding the policy and provision available to support students who have experienced bereavement. In doing so, a Bereavement Audit Survey of primary and post-primary schools (N=1,500) explored the response regarding policy, educational attainment, physical and psychological well-being, guidance, programmes, and confidence and competence among staff when supporting students who have experienced bereavement.

Current results indicate that the response of schools is positive and supportive whilst also indicating the desire for further support in terms of policy and practice direction, staff support, and Continual Professional Development programmes. Considering the unexpected and rapid change in the provision of guidance and counselling within Irish schools. This research highlights the need for further attention to education interventions that promote understandings, attitudes, and skills which could enable students to develop innate capacities and supportive relationships to assist them with the social and emotional challenges that bereavement presents.
The concept of sub-culture has two main theoretical origins - one is from urban sociology, and is connected to marginalisation processes and deviance amongst youth; the other deals with aesthetic differentiation, meaning-making and style. As part of an ongoing strategy of developing a coherent psychosocial approach to the study of sub-cultures, data from the empirical investigation of two exemplar sub-cultures are presented here: (i) those who practice body suspension, and (ii) ‘old school’ goths (that is to say, those who were actively involved in the goth sub-culture for at least a part of the 1980s). Eight Norwegians who practice body suspension were recruited for two in-depth interviews via invitations made in preliminary fieldwork, and eight British current or former ‘old school’ goths were recruited via a ‘snowballing’ strategy, and completed a study-specific questionnaire. The qualitative material derived from both sets of participants responses’ was explored via structured thematic analysis, and yielded information on participants’ (i) entrance into, (ii) shared aesthetics and values of, and (iii) the ‘magic’ of the sub-culture; (iv) the ‘counter-magic’, or contrasts of the sub-culture with the mainstream culture; (v) participants’ experiences of prejudice and aggression directed towards the sub-culture from the mainstream culture; and, (vi) retention within, and exits from, the sub-culture. The study is the first from an interdisciplinary research group involving Norwegian and Irish universities (‘Munch-gruppen’), whose members seek to understand youth sub-cultures in the context of common human meaning-making, and why some young people are misunderstood; and to disseminate such knowledge to teacher and youth work practitioners to foster inclusion, the development of more effective interventions, and better practitioner-youth links.