Positive youth development at Reach

Michelle McQuaid

Reach's vision is that 'every young person should have the support and self-belief they need to fulfil their potential and dare to dream'. We aim to fill a gap between organisations that provide purely recreational activities and those that provide clinical and crisis care. Our work falls within the emerging discipline of positive youth development (hereafter 'PYD'), which aims to build the strengths and 'assets' that enable youth to survive and thrive in life.

Preliminary reports from a meta-analysis conducted by Weissberg and Durlak suggest that PYD yields significant effects in the short and long term and that a broad array of outcomes are positively influenced (Wilson-Simmons, 2007). This article outlines Reach's current programmes and design future initiatives, explaining some of the synergies with PYD evaluations and research around the world.

Positive youth development principles

Hamilton and colleagues (2004) identify three critical PYD principles: '… an emphasis on a positive approach and universality, or the goal of all youth thriving; the importance of healthy relationships and challenging activities that endure and change over time; and engaging young people as participants, not merely recipients' (Hamilton, Hamilton and Pittman, 2004).

From the outset, Reach has been targeted at young people from all walks of life (both 'at risk' and 'not at risk'). In addition, Reach seeks to achieve its positive mission of flourishing by using the Rogerian idea of a transformational process[1] (adopting the language of the 'Hero's Journey') to identify and clear negative emotions that hold us back (i.e. fears and pressures within our ordinary world). Researchers in favour of this dual approach – of enabling growth and proactively reducing risk – include (Gillham, Reivich and Shatté, 2002; Durlak and Weisberg, 2005).

The principles of PYD are most effectively applied in programmes and settings that feature:

- appropriate structure;
- physical and psychological safety;
- meaningful experiences;
- a flexible range of activities and opportunities to build skill;
- a sustained effort over time; and
- supportive relationships with adults (Wilson-Simmons, 2007).

Reach prioritises a trusting and cohesive atmosphere in which a leader (a young person) helps participants discuss their feelings and perceptions about themselves, others or situations, and assist each other to gain insight and plan constructive action.

The most effective PYD programmes intervene for at least nine months or longer (Catalano et al., 2002; see also Seligman et al., 2005). Reach achieves this with team training, but as noted above, our strengths, and the majority of our resources, have been invested in short-term interventions. This is now being addressed with Reach working more closely with teachers, parents and communities.

In 2012, Reach re-launched its refreshed and expanded programme for teachers, designed to take the 'Hero's Journey' into the classroom. The initiative was a partnership between Reach and Australia's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). The new programme is based on 18 years of Reach experience working in schools and effectively engaging groups of students, and is underpinned by the internationally renowned positive psychology framework that is being fast adopted by schools across Australia.

In addition, Reach has been involved with a number of place-based communities to integrate Reach activities with other PYD initiatives.
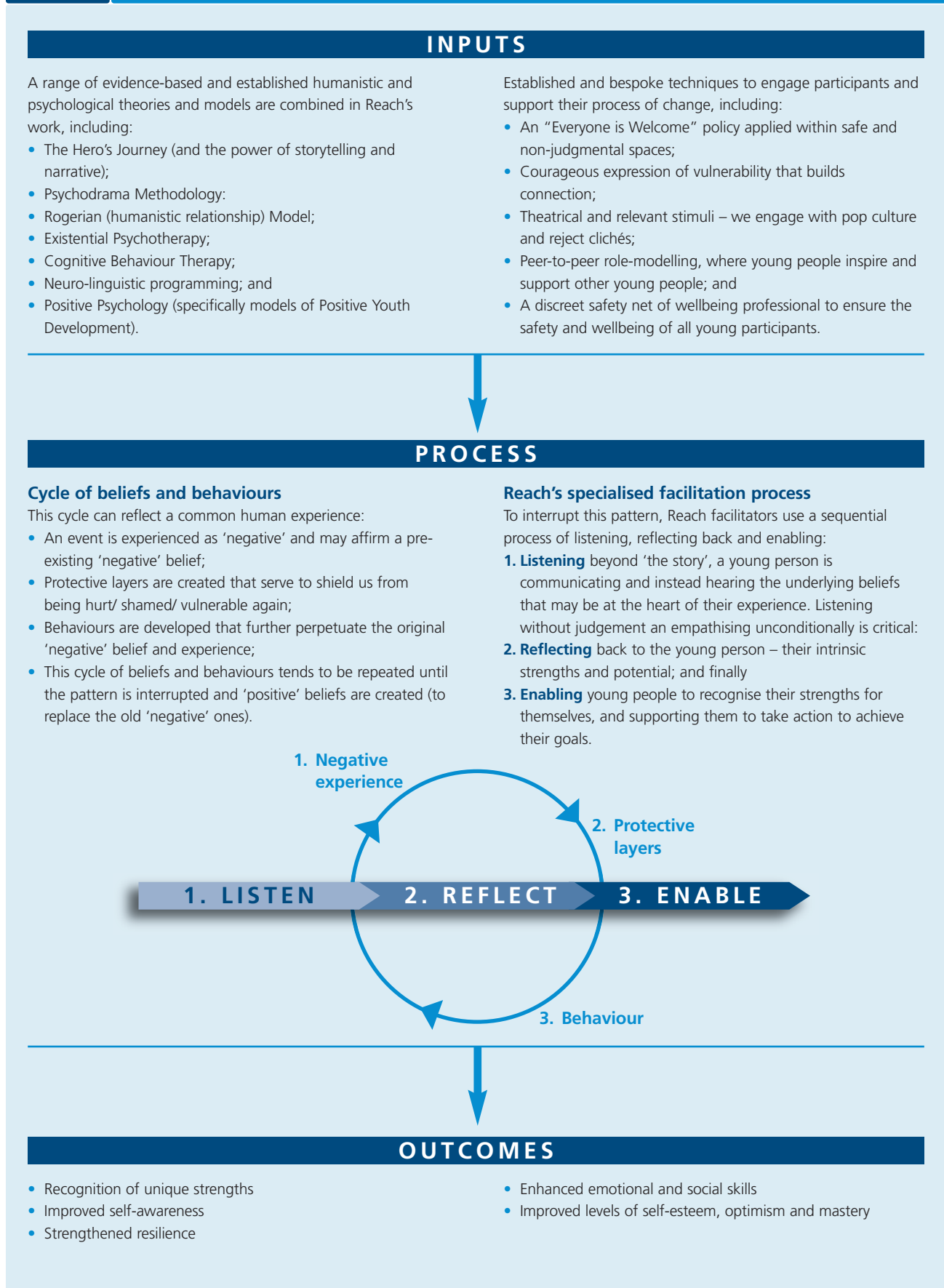
Positive youth development outcomes

By improving perception of our locus of control, the goals we could attain, the effort we are capable of, and our ability to persevere in the face of obstacles or solve problems, self-efficacy has been found to positively influence self-regulation, depression, anxiety, addictions and eating disorders, and improve social and physical outcomes (Maddux, 2002). The methodology of Reach's programmes creates social support that provides participants with a sense of competence ('I can do this'), relatedness ('this matters') and autonomy ('I have a choice').

Self-discovery in education

Professor Gad Yair of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem describes a key learning experience as '... short and intense instructional episodes that students remember to have had a decisive effect on their lives'. Inspired by Abraham Maslow's ideas about peak experiences, Yair's research has found that key learning experiences facilitate a process of self-discovery where students find out about inner strengths, hidden abilities, interests and previously unacknowledged passions resulting in a sense of self-efficacy and autonomy that allowed for personal growth and identity transformations. Yair notes three main contexts for self-discovery in education: actively challenging circumstances with high degrees of uncertainty; moral principles provided as sage advice (especially if it follows immediately after the challenge); and second-chance opportunities to rehabilitate stigmatised students' sense of self (Yair, 2008).

Figure 1 | The Reach process, roots and results

INPUTS

A range of evidence-based and established humanistic and psychological theories and models are combined in Reach's work, including:

- The Hero's Journey (and the power of storytelling and narrative);
- Psychodrama Methodology:
- Rogerian (humanistic relationship) Model;
- Existential Psychotherapy;
- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy;
- Neuro-linguistic programming; and
- Positive Psychology (specifically models of Positive Youth Development).

Established and bespoke techniques to engage participants and support their process of change, including:

- An "Everyone is Welcome" policy applied within safe and non-judgmental spaces;
- Courageous expression of vulnerability that builds connection;
- Theatrical and relevant stimuli – we engage with pop culture and reject clichés;
- Peer-to-peer role-modelling, where young people inspire and support other young people; and
- A discreet safety net of wellbeing professional to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all young participants.

PROCESS

Cycle of beliefs and behaviours

This cycle can reflect a common human experience:

- An event is experienced as 'negative' and may affirm a pre-existing 'negative' belief;
- Protective layers are created that serve to shield us from being hurt/ shamed/ vulnerable again;
- Behaviours are developed that further perpetuate the original 'negative' belief and experience;
- This cycle of beliefs and behaviours tends to be repeated until the pattern is interrupted and 'positive' beliefs are created (to replace the old 'negative' ones).

Reach's specialised facilitation process

To interrupt this pattern, Reach facilitators use a sequential process of listening, reflecting back and enabling:

1. **Listening** beyond 'the story', a young person is communicating and instead hearing the underlying beliefs that may be at the heart of their experience. Listening without judgement an empathising unconditionally is critical:
2. **Reflecting** back to the young person – their intrinsic strengths and potential; and finally
3. **Enabling** young people to recognise their strengths for themselves, and supporting them to take action to achieve their goals.

OUTCOMES

- Recognition of unique strengths
- Improved self-awareness
- Strengthened resilience

- Enhanced emotional and social skills
- Improved levels of self-esteem, optimism and mastery

Young indigenous Australians. Respect for cultural identity is part of public health – and a recovery approach to health care

Reach uses the techniques of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to teach emotion awareness, realistic optimism and flexible thinking in many of its programmes to help students gain perspective, challenge their self-limiting beliefs (for example, the 'negative automatic thoughts' experienced in depression) and generate alternatives.

Research suggests that formal strategies to engage the cognitive components of goals (SMART goals to set a destination), agency (willpower to motivate and fortify us for the journey) and pathways (alternative routes to achieving our goals) can accentuate the hope that people possess (Lopez et al., 2004).

Reach's programmes explicitly address building spiritual capacity (i.e. passion, integrity, character and service to others). To a lesser extent, they also address building mental capacity (i.e. realistic optimism, creativity, focus and time management) and emotional capacity (i.e. self-confidence, self-regulation, interpersonal effectiveness and empathy). We don't address the physical side (i.e. sleep, exercise, diet and meditation), though these also have their place.

Reach's programmes are all group activities and interventions that occur within a 'safe space' that enables teens to develop trust and openness, express their concerns, discuss their aspirations and recognise that they're not alone. The resulting social network of 'like-minded' young people that Reach creates is one of the outcomes participants tell us they most value.

Evaluation and next steps

Existing research suggests that participation in organised youth activities is related to general indicators of positive development, but it provides little evidence on how development occurs. 'Most studies provide little or no assessment of what goes on inside programmes: what youth experience, how development occurs, or what effective youth practitioners do to support development' (Larson, Jarret, Hansen, Pearse, Sullivan, Walker, Watkins and Wood, 2004).

In 2002–04, Reach embarked on the 'Well-Being in Young People' study. This quantitative, quasi-experimental, longitudinal study without a control group measured variance in self-esteem, optimism, control of internal states and mastery. Various well-known paper-and-pencil self-report scales operationalising these constructs were administered to 182 young people immediately before and after participation in a Reach workshop. Reach conducted follow-up assessments with 112 participants 6 months later and 77 participants 12 months later.

Participants showed statistically significant improvement in all constructs measured, and were able to maintain this improvement throughout the 12-month assessment period (Pallant, 2005).

In 2012, independent research by the Department of Psychology at Monash University began examining the effects of participating in Reach school-based workshops, workshop series and day events,

encouraging young people to discover more about. Once complete, the study's results will demonstrate to what extent and how Reach programmes are effective in producing desirable well-being outcomes, as well as provide in-depth and practical recommendations. The use of experience sampling methodology (ESM) – a data-collection technique to capture people's behaviours, thoughts, or feelings – in addition to questionnaire data will provide information about how programme content is being transferred into real life practice and whether participants can connect with and benefit from the programmes being evaluated;

Reach will continue to research, develop and implement the initiatives and enhancements described in this paper, and will keep our community updated and informed of progress. We continue to be focused exclusively on delivering our mission to inspire all young people, no matter what their circumstances, to believe they can achieve.

Endnote

1 Carl Rogers's person-centred therapy approach to promote self-actualisation and personal growth.

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