



ANXIETY ON THE RISE

By Wilson McCaskill

The topic of anxiety is about to become the flavour of the moment. As it is something we have all experienced and on many occasions dealt with poorly, it is a topic that will stir up considerable interest. Education, hence educators, will be carefully scrutinised to determine how they unnecessarily create it, how they ignore it, how many young lives they damage because of it and how stressed and anxious educators make stressed and anxious students worse.

Not to mention duty of care issues around correctly identifying anxiety, assisting in its management or mitigation and supplying the means and resources for children to cope with anxiety both in and out of school. And, as anxiety can be blamed for being the root cause of so many health and wellbeing issues from inflammation to insomnia, this train has only just started to roll in mass media.

My bet is the public discourse will centre on how to reduce it or remove it, which can only lead to pointing the finger at those who create or amplify it. I'm hoping that educators, above all others, see that stress and anxiety is here to stay. It will be an ever present part of the living experience in our constantly connected, highly comparative, success (in all senses of the word), immediate gratification, feel good, look good, follow me, follow you, at the tipping point of this or that disaster, assessment and outcome, data driven world.

So, the big question is how can teachers help children to survive stress and anxiety?

Accepting that we cannot make it go away, we need to expose children to stress and anxiety in carefully controlled doses, suited to their age and experience. This will slowly build up their resilience to its damaging affects and improve their ability to placate it effectively. (Note: I'm sure some will disagree with this approach.) For this to happen, teachers, will need a device that can be used to adjust the intensity of the anxiety being experienced, quickly and easily. Games serve this purpose well and can be used to stretch coping skills without straining them to the point of helplessness - provided of course the teacher is a good games facilitator.

To help keep their emotions in the control of reason we will need to give children a language and means by which they can talk to themselves and others. The self-reflective language and the skills to self-soothe will be invaluable here. The more effectively children can manage stress and anxiety the calmer and more centred they will be. Modeling in this area is vital.

We will need a to give them a way to assess their behaviour and a rudder to guide their decisions when anxiety tempts them towards behaviour that is harmful to



themselves, others or the planet. The Life Raft concepts will keep them afloat here and the more entrenched these concepts are the more immediately they will spring to the rescue. There must be no hypocrisy here. What the student is asked to use the teacher must in turn use.

How soundly PITW is used determines its effectiveness and the ensuing public conversation about anxiety will I hope spur educational leaders to audit their staff's understanding and delivery of PITW to ensure fidelity of implementation...especially in the area of soothing thoughts (self-regulation.)

Let me be the first to say that if there is a better way than PITW to prepare our children for a world that by either deliberate or inadvertent design, stokes the fires of anxiety, then please use it because the cause of developing emotional and social skills is of greater importance than PITW's presence in education.

However, if you think PITW is a tool that can get the job done, then how well it is used within the context of your school will be the crucial factor.

"No program - no matter how sound it is - can have impact if its essential elements are not used."

Yap, K., Aldersebaes, I., Railsback, J., Shaughnessy, J., & Speth, T. (2000)

Our children have never needed us more and irrespective of the often-misguided public conversation about education, no one is in a position, nor has the training and inclination to do it better than teachers.

Time to take a deep breath, calm ourselves and put our collective shoulder to the personal and social capabilities wheel.