

The world's first 'outstandingly happy school'



Putting happiness on the curriculum

As concern about young people's mental health continues to grow, **Andy Cope** offers a solution that spreads happiness throughout the school and beyond

It's a crisp March morning in 2017 and I have come to the headteacher's office of Billingham South Community Primary School, Stockton-on-Tees, to make a podcast with four pupils who were introduced to Brilliant Schools by my two colleagues six months ago. So what can they remember?

'The happiness pig!' declares eight-year-old Belle instantly. 'Tell me more,' I respond, and she's off.

'The happiness pig was just an ordinary pig,' she says, 'who became even more ordinary by being happy, because happiness should just be an ordinary thing inside of you. Then he had so much happiness, he couldn't keep it all inside of him, so he decided to share his happiness so he could see more happy faces.'

'And what happened next?' I enquire.

'First it came to all of the pigs,' she rattles on. 'Then it came to the sheep. Then it came to the chickens. And then it

came to the entire world!'

Six months may have passed, but Belle and her classmates can remember it all vividly, from the 2%ers – the tiny proportion of people who are really positive almost all of the time – to mood-hoovers whose constant whingeing rubs off on others, and the sausage machine whose end product is only as good as the ingredients you put into it.

Better still, their 10-point action plan to spread happiness throughout their school and out into the community has borne fruit and they are our first 'outstandingly happy school.'

Brilliant Schools

Brilliant Schools is the latest programme from Art of Brilliance, which provides training for businesses and schools based on research I conducted into the habits and mindset of 2%ers for my PhD in positive psychology. Tailored to the needs of the group, who range in

age from Key Stage 2 through to sixth form, it creates and embeds a culture of wellbeing by putting the children firmly in charge.

It starts with three half-days of training, where the children are introduced to six key principles through fun, interactive activities.

- Choosing to be positive.
- Understanding your impact on those around you.
- Taking personal responsibility.
- Resilience – what we call bounce-back-ability.
- HUGGs – huge unbelievably great goals.
- Strengths – finding your strengths and playing to them.

On day three, we challenge the children to take what they have learned and design a 10-point action plan to make their school the most brilliant in the country, mapped against three areas.

- What can you do to improve your own learning?
- What can you do to improve the happiness of everyone else in your school?
- What can you do to improve the wellbeing of your family and the wider community?

A teacher is appointed to oversee the project and we leave them to it, keeping in touch through email and Skype, returning five or six months later for the inspection, when the children present evidence of the progress they have made and explain where they might go from here. Finally, we compile a full report in child-friendly language and present them with a huge banner to display to the world: 'We are officially an outstandingly happy school.'

Spreading happiness and wellbeing

Because the project is driven by the children themselves, no two plans are the same. However, here is a selection of activities from a cross-section of schools.

- Random acts of kindness (more of them, or devoting a special day to them).
- Singing to residents in a retirement home.
- Packing bags for customers in the local supermarket.
- Children design and deliver a mini 'happiness curriculum'.
- Children run happiness assemblies.
- 'Kindness police' issue a ticket to anyone caught exhibiting a positive behaviour, which the recipient must take to the headteacher, whose cupboard is well stocked with prizes.
- Children wash their teachers' cars (without telling them first).
- Children design 'golden tickets' for a special parents' evening, where they explain 'being brilliant' to their mums and dads.

Impact

It requires buy-in from staff, which is why we run twilight training sessions or a half-day Inset if the school can manage it. Where schools have put their hearts into it, the impact has been profound. But they can explain that better than I can. Time to hand over to two pioneers, starting with the headteacher of the world's first outstandingly happy school.

FIND OUT MORE:

- **Art of Brilliance training for schools:** <http://bit.ly/sc241-18>
- **Billingham South Primary School pupils' podcast:** <http://bit.ly/sc241-17>

Andy Cope is a happiness expert, author of the best-selling children's Spy Dog series and of The Little Book of Emotional Intelligence: How to Flourish in a Crazy World. www.artofbrilliance.co.uk

Pupils prepare to inspect the quality of the school's happiness and growth mindset displays



A joined-up approach

Headteacher **Edwin Squire** explains how becoming an 'outstandingly happy school' has been part of a wider initiative to embed a positive mindset across the school

My deputy headteacher Kathryn Hendy and I first came across Andy Cope at a headteachers' conference in 2015 soon after we were promoted to lead the school.

What he was saying resonated with our own views on education and, indeed, on life as a whole. We put him temporarily out of our minds, however, while we focused on our first priority: resilience.

Resilience and growth mindset

Billingham South Community Primary School serves an area of significant economic and social disadvantage and a lot of our children found it difficult to try hard. This was confirmed by our first pupil voice session. We had gathered 12 pupils in my office, and when we asked them: 'What do you do if you find a task difficult in class?' nine out of the 12 said they gave up or opted out in some way. Yet they weren't lacking in initiative. One boy's strategy for keeping out of trouble was to 'make sure somebody notices that the person next to me is doing worse than I am!'

In contrast, the pupils in our support base for children with cognition and learning difficulties were amongst the most resilient in the school; you could see from their happy smiling faces that they positively relished coming to school. Staff in the base were working

hard to encourage a 'can do' mentality – it resembled growth mindset in some respects, although we didn't give it that name. How could we harness that elsewhere?

We discussed this at length, attended a conference led by Carol Dweck, read up about it and were thoroughly convinced. So growth mindset has been one of the drivers transforming the culture of the school.

Vision and values

Another major influence has been our values. The school has always provided a values-based education, but in the past these changed year on year through a democratic vote. We already knew what kind of school we wanted to be, so the first thing we did was to draw up four sentences to capture our school vision.

- Everybody prepared and inspired to be the best they can be.
- Excellent classrooms.
- Excellent relationships.
- Hearts in Billingham and eyes on the world.

In consultation with staff, we then decided on five core values that we felt would support our children to be successful in life: quality, trust, happiness, resilience and courage.

Calling in the inspectors

Now that we knew the direction we were taking, in the autumn of 2016 we turned to Brilliant Schools as the third plank of our approach.

In the interests of sustainability, we chose years 3 to 5 as they would still be with us the following year. Two Art of Brilliance trainers worked with each year group in turn – 180 pupils in all, accompanied by their classroom staff.

We have amazingly positive staff. They had already willingly stayed behind on a bleak, snowy evening for a training session and were eager to get started. It's all too easy for projects like this to be viewed with an element of cynicism, so it's vital to have your staff fully on board.

The children spent the next three days working on their huge unbelievably great goals, the idea being that they would conceive of small steps to get where they wanted to be. As part of that, they were introduced to the idea of resilience and happiness – turning up at school ready to embrace it, have fun, enjoy their learning and have a go at things.

On day three, they started developing their plans. One of their ideas for the classroom was to rename all the classes with positive, dynamic names. Their ideas for around school included having playground buddies and approaching anyone who looked unhappy to see if they could cheer them up. They also came up with ways of incorporating our values and helping out and about in the community – something we were already doing, since we have our 'hearts in Billingham and eyes on the world'.

Which brings me back to our vision and values.



A pupil stands by a values display proudly wearing her rainbow badge

Rainbows and badges

At the start of that same autumn term, we had called a staff meeting to discuss how we could embed our values into the daily life of the school. Out of this came the idea of having a rainbow display in every classroom and giving the children a coloured sticker every time they displayed a value. They would get a sticker for showing happiness, and another if they proved trustworthy in carrying out a job. They would get a sticker for trying hard at something difficult or embarking on a project they didn't really want to do. When they had collected all five, they would be awarded a rainbow badge.

18 months down the line, these badges are massively prized. To keep the children going, every time they demonstrate the five values again, they get a certificate, which is also their

licence to keep the badge (to give the system added worth, we had decided that lost badges would have to be re-earned). Eventually, if a child retains the badge five times, they get a sew-on badge for their uniform. That is a considerable feat and nobody has made it yet, although one child is very, very close.

Pulling it all together

Meanwhile, Mrs Hendy and I were so enthused by growth mindset that over the year we put on five staff training sessions. Today, you will see growth mindset being promoted in every classroom, not just on the walls, but by the language and the approach of the teachers. At the same time, you will see our values displayed everywhere, with the children's rewards beneath. And you will see children wearing badges.

Even the glass roofs above our two quads have been refitted to feature rainbow motifs, so that when the children walk round school there are reminders of the values wherever they go.

Moving forwards, this year we introduced mindfulness sessions in years 3 and 4. We also invested in having Mrs Hendy trained in attachment disorder. We know you can't wave a magic wand and expect children who have experienced huge trauma to suddenly become happy, and we already provide counselling. However, if we can change some classroom practice, we hope they will gradually become better able to embrace some of the values of school and have a more positive outlook.

In addition, we have been working closely with a local counselling service to provide a transition club for children who might find the move to secondary exceptionally difficult and help them carry our values with them. So it is very much a joined-up approach.

And finally

Returning to the theme of resilience, when we did a repeat pupil voice session at the end of last year, the transformation was fantastic, not just inside school but outside too. One child told us: 'I am the captain of my cricket team and I make sure that we all try hard and encourage each other.' Other children made similar comments about their house or their football team. Out of the 12, not a single person suggested giving up as an option when presented with something difficult. They all talked in some way about trying harder, working harder, going away to think about it and coming back to try again.

Meanwhile, our PSHE coordinator,



Pupils, staff and parents dance together at a 'Glastonbilly' summer community event

who steers our Brilliant Schools project, has introduced some lovely things for staff, including a shout-out notice board in the staffroom where people can anonymously write positive things about each other. Like our rainbow displays,

that board is full to brimming.

It is no coincidence that Brilliant Schools fitted so well with our values and vision. When we took over, we already had a certain positivity about how we wanted to approach our work. Meeting

Andy Cope at that conference encouraged us to believe in that approach and want to further it. Then when one of the values we came up with as a staff was happiness, we went back to him to help us drive it forwards.



The Art of Brilliance group prepare resources for the feeder school conference

Students take the lead

Martin Burder describes the impact of Art of Brilliance in a secondary school where it has been embedded for several years

Like most schools, King Edward VII Science and Sport College in Coalville, Leicestershire, puts on induction days to welcome next year's new students – in our case Year 10, as we are a 14-19 school.

But that's not the only thing that sets us apart. At King Edward VII, the Art of Brilliance Year 11 group is in charge, supervised by the Year 13 group who ran their own programme two years previously.

Hitting the ground running

The purpose of the day is to introduce the new intake to the ethos of our school before they come to us, so they can hit the ground running. Over the course of five hours, over 300 Year 9 students from different feeder schools come together to be instructed in the six Art of Brilliance principles (see page 16) by our Year 11 experts. Tutors and pastoral staff also attend, giving them a valuable

opportunity to build relationships with their new tutees and enjoy some refresher training themselves.

It is a major undertaking, and the Art of Brilliance group spends the whole year gearing up for it. This is their conference, so how they allocate the themes and strike a balance between theory and practice is entirely up to them. My role, along with the pastoral and progress leader, is to organise the logistics, such as venues and catering, and ensure that it all goes smoothly, but the rest is their responsibility. They will come to us for advice, checking the availability of staff or resources or asking if we think one of their planned activities is likely to work. We often encourage them to run little pilots to find out, so they feel confident on the day.

Last year one of the tasks they designed for bounce-back-ability required Year 9 to work in teams to build a tower out of paper and straws, only to have it knocked

down again just as it was reaching completion. 'You've ruined it!' the students would exclaim, to which their 'teachers' would respond: 'Yes. Life's like that sometimes. What are you going to do now?' Having already been introduced to the principle of bounce-back-ability at the start of the session, Year 9 took it in their stride and set to work again, working more efficiently this time by collaborating better in their teams.

The day concludes with a celebration assembly with certificates and prizes for the people who have exhibited positive behaviours most consistently throughout the day. It is also a great chance to recruit new members to the Art of Brilliance group. 'Did you enjoy today? Would you like to take our place in two years' time? Come to our lunchtime meetings next year and you can become a happiness expert too!'

Reciprocal learning with business leaders

The other big project we have involves Year 10 and, like the conference, is supervised by students who have done it before, this time Year 12.

Working at six-monthly intervals, two groups go into CEVA Logistics, one

of the largest logistics companies in the world, to run a little programme for its leadership group. These are aspiring leaders following a five-day management training course who have no idea what lies in store on their final day, as previous participants have been sworn to secrecy. When the day comes, they are met by our 'positive psychology consultants', who explain our philosophy and then set them challenging tasks. Later, the business leaders return the favour by coming into school to deliver a lesson on work-related topics, such as interview technique and dealing with difficult workplace situations.

Both parties find the prospect terrifying. Our students look at these people who are at the top of their game in a massive international company and wonder how they will cope, but when the logistics people discover they will have to lead a lesson with 14-year-olds, they are equally phased. It takes everyone completely out of their comfort zone. When they follow some of the behaviour patterns of 2%ers, it all works out in the end and rich learning takes place.

2%ers

Andy Cope's research analysed the behaviour, mindset and habits of the top 2% of the population who are really positive most of the time and lead successful lives as a result. Does that mean it can impact on grades? To find out, we are currently doing our own research through a competition we run at the end of each term.

We remind the students of how 2%ers behave, how they come into class prepared to grasp opportunities, what they do when the going gets tough and how they support those around them by being upbeat and encouraging. Then for two weeks staff make a note of the most consistent 2%ers and log the top two in each class in our data system. We also do a termly grade sweep, and I put the two figures together to see if there is a correlation.



Year 10 devise and deliver training for aspiring leaders at CEVA Logistics



Two students deliver a workshop on 2%ers and mood-hoovers

The evidence to date shows that the students who like being at school are performing the best. It sounds obvious, but it raises the question: what are we teaching our students? Are we just focusing relentlessly on grades, which is fine because grades will go up? But would a simpler and more fulfilling way of achieving the same objective be to make sure they are enjoying school?

Persuading the reluctant few

There will always be some students who resist – 'I've just spent a day learning about positive psychology. What is the point of that?', a classic mood-hoover response – but they are few and far between. Meanwhile the impact on the self-confidence and self-belief of the others is phenomenal.

A shining example is a girl from a very poor background in the Art of Brilliance group. She is extremely bright and very conscientious, but she's not the coolest kid – she can't afford to be – and she used to keep her head down. When she talks to people now, her confidence has just blossomed; it has transformed what she thinks she is capable of. Other students see that and think: 'If she can do it, why can't we do it?' Once they have bought into the idea that they can be as positive as anyone else, then it really works.

The important thing is putting it on the agenda and making clear to the reluctant few that relationships go two ways. 'If half of why you are fed up with school and not progressing is your fault, can you do anything with that half? You have a choice of how you enter a lesson. You have a choice of how well you do your homework. You have a choice to say nice things to people and celebrate their achievements. Making it as hard-hitting as that sows a seed: 'What if I just try this for one day, for an hour, for just the first part of the lesson as I walk through the door?'

Additional support

Some students are still going to find life hard, and this year eight members of staff have been relieved of normal tutor group duties to become wellbeing tutors instead. We all have different specialities and mine is mindfulness. In half-termly blocks, I spend an hour a week with students who have self-selected or been encouraged to try it, showing them how mindfulness and meditation can help them control stress and banish negative thoughts.

I also spend 10 minutes a week mentoring two vulnerable students; a boy who is falling well below his target grades and a girl who has issues outside school that are causing her distress. It's like a brief counselling session, a chance for them to offload their concerns and feel they are being supported. In the girl's case, I give her little Art of Brilliance homeworks, such as writing down for a week the best thing that has happened each day, which really helps to boost her morale. When you look for positive things in the world, your brain gets better at seeing them, and the more you see, the more positive you become. When she tells me all about it the following week, that doubles the impact because she is reliving these moments.

Initiatives like these cost money and time, and I feel privileged to work with a headteacher who really appreciates the importance of a focus on wellbeing and mental health. Should we be diverting these resources to extra English or maths? Given the pressures young people are under today, I think we are on the right path. If we can get students feeling they are in a good place, especially the most vulnerable, success will come in time.

Martin Burder is head of psychology at King Edward Science and Sport College and part-time positive psychology speaker