

LITERACY AND THE SOUP OF SUCCESS

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Have you ever been out to dinner and tasted something that was great and wondered exactly what was in it? As researchers on the Australian Research Council Linkage Grant Project between Griffith University and BoysTown we are searching for the elusive ingredients of the BoysTown Soup of Success. BoysTown has an enviable record of assisting those who are not normally regarded as the potential leaders of society to make a transition into the workplace either from school or from aberrant and self harming behaviour. Three years ago the ABS noted that 15% of young people were not making the transition effectively and were part of a growing problem in terms of unemployment costs, social dislocation and in the more extreme cases internment costs. The future could be very bleak for these young people and for Australia.

It is refreshing to be researching the success factors of interventions as most research focuses on studying the problems. However, troubled young people in transition usually present with a linked series of problems. These often include the primary lack of employment or the failure to hold a job for any period and this is probably linked to a history of failure. Failure, like poverty can take many forms. These can be failure in, or poverty in, meaningful relationships, in reading, writing, speaking or listening skills and often a reduced capacity in practical numeracy skills so essential for life and work. This is often linked to an inability to express emotions in a socially-acceptable manner and can lead to the downward spiral of self-esteem and anti-social behaviour. Coupled with limited financial resources, it is easy to lose problem-solving skills and descend to drugs and alcohol to block out the problems. This is specially so if abuse has been part of the whole syndrome and bred distrust and disassociation from traditional sources of help within the family. It also leads to a certain cynicism when confronted with welfare organisations.

The success factors are demonstrated by outcomes that feature young people willing and ready to search for work using an awareness of themselves and others in a sociable fashion. At this point, those “successful” amongst BoysTown’s clients have belief that they can achieve and plan a future using their improved vocational skills. Their problem-solving is not alcohol or drug-based. Willingness is the key behavioural trait on show as they strive to improve skills of all types, secure in a knowledge that someone cares and really believes that they can and will do it.

Of course the participants recognise success in themselves and become willing to share their experiences. They value their improved skills and the power they give in the workplace – and in the day-to-day social encounters where they are able to speak or show what they can now do. Their belief that someone cares and is there to assist them to move forward is very significant. Most are very pleased to talk of their strategies for stepping up and handling trouble while trouble is still a small thing. To recognise their own triggers for appropriate (and inappropriate) responses and the triggers for others, so that positive action can be taken, gives an immense lift to self-confidence about managing life.

However, so often we see the failures of the past still dragging at people’s heels . Our goal is find the recipe for creating the “third space” (Guttierrez, 2000) which is an oasis where the failures of the past need not intrude any more. Hence, historic impediments preventing someone from moving forward and reaching for new goals are confined to history and isolated from constructions for the present and future. The new reality accessible in this third space is one where the future is more important than the past, and where one’s sense of the worthwhile is a driving force in making

positive changes to lifestyle and behaviour. It also has to be space that allows *relapse*, encouraging the more positively reflective individual to use it as opportunity to review and learn for next time.

Our goal has been to view and decode stages of the journey that BoysTown's clients make and the significant milestones as they saw them. Our data thus far indicate that these typically have come together where a client has developed a conscious and verbalised sense of structure and some causal connections between decisions, behaviour and outcomes. Growth in comprehending the connections enabled clients to identify some of the ingredients of the *soup of success* for us. It is not surprising that they identified a depth of caring that was often compared to the detriment of other so called caring providers whose interest was in dollars and numbers. Many of these people came to BoysTown from courts and as a last chance. They had tried it all.

Above all, clients were attracted to people who cared. The *happiness* of staff is mentioned commonly in every data-gathering exercise. They also value the "*other-supported chance*." This is represented by the intermediate labour markets - the social enterprises owned and operated by BoysTown where employees are paid for their work. The "enterprises" have great face validity. Participating in them is *working*. It is *learning*, and earning. It is a transition to the open workforce. While BoysTown keeps in touch after people go into open employment, when there is failure, there is an option to return to the controlled environment of the enterprise until confidence and competence are regained or extended to allow another foray into the open employment field.

BoysTown's Soup of Success has some basic ingredients, but it is a recipe that is varied according to individual's needs. It is interactive and individual and relies heavily on improved abilities to control one's environment by being able to respond appropriately to the demands of living and working with others. Small successes are recognised and reviewed. The spiral is upwards and the more that individuals practise the positive ways of behaving, the more they perfect those behaviours. Belief in self is comes from success. In turn, it generates more success.

Practical literacy and numeracy interventions have demonstrated major improvement in this critical skill set. However, once an individual's appreciation of that improvement merges with that for dollars earned and delivered and the independence these beget, the sense of a third-space's new reality prevails. The third space is their reality. Individuals recognise the responsibility they bear for bad choices, the help they have received and the need to pass that help on to another. The pride of earned independence is palpable in what they have told us. Coordinated and individualised caring at every level with language and literacy at the core makes for articulate young people who are driving their own transition. This is the brief summation of the results of the data gathering and analysis undertaken in the fascinating project. The sky is truly the limit for them, but Goethe said it all in his wonderful quote:

"The limits of my language are the limits of my world."

References

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