

Discovery Project - Portsmouth Schools

Benefits of Peak Performance Presentation and Coaching

Background

Most schools have been undergoing a period of change for some years with staff under extreme pressure to reach government imposed attainment targets and efficiencies. Children too have to undergo regular testing at all levels throughout their school life (SATS) in literacy, numeracy and science. These tests start at the end of their second year, at 7 years of age and continue at 11, and 14 alongside the GCSE, AS level and A levels exams. All these assessments are based on course work and examination results with internal and external assessors and regular inspections.

The Discovery Project is being funded by Portsmouth City Council and is an attempt to improve, by various means, the Paulsgrove area of the city. Paulsgrove is a large estate with many social problems, which have significant knock-on effects in the local schools. It has one of the highest rates of truancy in the country. As part of the project the Peak Performance workshop was offered to all staff, including teaching and ancillary, at six primary and one secondary, comprehensive school in the area.

In February 2002 additional funding was secured to buy laptops and Freeze Framers for each school so that people could practice the HeartMath techniques during the day. It was also proposed that we should coach the GCSE year of 15/16-year-olds at King Richard's Comprehensive school. It was not possible to allot a full day's workshop to the students and, at short notice, three presentations of 1.5 hours to each class within the year group were organised. These groups were across the range in ability and a significant proportion of the students came from disadvantaged backgrounds. After the presentations, smaller groups were to have 20 minute coaching sessions on the Freeze Framer technology and were to be given the opportunity of practicing during the day by having the laptops set up in one of the science labs.

Similarly, two primary schools asked for coaching leading into the SATS testing for 10/11 year-olds. Three full-day sessions were arranged for Freeze Frame coaching only.

All the coaching sessions for all the schools involved showing the students how to use the laptop, how to access the Freeze Frame programme as well as coaching for entrainment. This approximated to 5 minutes per child.

Presentations at King Richard's School - March 2002

These took the format of a slide presentation showing the link between heart and brain activity and how feeling angry, depressed and upset would impair their ability to perform academically. It was also pointed out that adolescence was a very difficult time emotionally because of the surges of hormones during this time and that by practicing the HeartMath techniques, the students would increase their personal ability to control their reactions to other people and prevent them being "victims" of circumstance. It was designed to be interactive with the students dividing into groups to make lists of emotions, deciding whether or not these were positive or negative and asking what effects they thought this might have on their heart rates. The slides were interspersed and volunteers were called out for live cardio demonstrations to exhibit chaos - amid heckling from classmates and coherence after listening to the HeartZones music.

Not all the students were able to attend the personal coaching due to other school commitments, but a total of 75 attended the sessions and completed a feedback questionnaire on their opinions of the presentation (See Figure 1). The majority found that the live cardio-demonstrations were very impressive in making them think about the link between external events and the effect on their physiology. They also found it very persuasive in showing them how the techniques work

and all were motivated to practise leading up to the exam period in May and June. Many reported feeling worried, anxious or depressed.

Figure 1 (Sample size 75)



It was noticeable that many students were doubtful of their ability to achieve coherence on the Freeze Framer, with several staying beyond their allotted time to use the equipment. With no exceptions every student achieved some level of coherence during the coaching sessions and were noticeably cheered at having "got into the green", comparing their scores with friends at the end of the sessions. It was very noticeable how their demeanour altered after "achieving" something positive.

Feedback from the Science staff at the school, who had promoted the presentations, was that the students had enjoyed the sessions, particularly the coaching and were well motivated to practise after the Easter Holiday in the lead up to the exams.

Coaching at Westfield Junior School and Portsdown Primary School - May 2002

Due to time constraints it was felt that there was insufficient time to make presentations, which may have been too technical, to the junior children and so coaching sessions only were arranged for these schools, which followed the same format as those at King Richard's. However, all the children were given a talk prior to our arrival about the effects of uncontrolled emotions and of being positive.

Many of these children were able to repeat what they had been told and admitted to being worried and anxious about the exams and about reactions to poor results. However, they had a poor understanding of what the implications of "controlling emotions" actually meant.

An analogy of an untidy bedroom was suggested. All the children were familiar with the concept of not being able to find anything in an untidy room! By using the Freeze Framer and concentrating on the area around their hearts and achieving a measure of coherence, they were, by analogy "tidying up" the room and giving themselves the opportunity of performing better. It is much easier to find things in an organised and tidy space than in total chaos.

Some members of staff also came in for coaching during the break times. After the coaching sessions, the coordinator set up an after-school club for regular practice. All the children achieved coherence, except for two Special Needs children who had difficulties with concentration. However, they too were keen to be included in the training.

Results

The Discovery Co-ordinator at Westfield Junior School, who helped with the logistics of the coaching sessions reported back after the exam period:

- All staff felt that the coaching was a worthwhile exercise and that the children gained a lot from it.
- The HeartMath techniques were very clear for the children to understand.
- The sessions were well set-up and staff did not feel that they could have been improved on.
- Some of the children had been initially embarrassed but after overcoming this they had thoroughly enjoyed the training and were keen to practice.
- A lot of children reported feeling much calmer.
- Staff noticed differences in the behaviour of the children who had been trained, both generally and in the exam period.
- The staff rated the coaching as excellent and were keen to repeat it with the new Year 6 children.

At Portsdown Primary School there were two classes of Year 6 children, some of whom had already been introduced to the techniques by their teachers, both of whom were committed to the HeartMath methods. After the day's coaching one teacher planned to start a Breakfast Club for the children to encourage them to come early to school, have breakfast and practise with Freeze Framer before starting lessons in the period leading up to the SATS tests.

The same coaching analogy was used with all children achieving coherence except one who had extremely cold and small fingers.

All the children were keen and well motivated and many wanted to stay longer on the Freeze Framer and were very pleased to know that the laptops would be available for them to use during the school day. Some of them had older brothers or sisters from King Richard's and one reported that both she and her brother were trying to help their mother to use the techniques as she was always "up tight".

The Deputy Head also came in for coaching, as she had been unable to achieve coherence during the workshop she had attended. She was particularly pleased to achieve a 60+ % in coherence whilst surrounded by a group of children.

Anecdotal feedback after the exam period, from the Discovery Co-ordinator at the school reported:

- An atmosphere of calm in the school
- 100% attendance of the children taking SATS, which was previously unknown
- No children leaving the exam room during the time period

Implications

The study was undertaken with little forward planning due to the fact that there were extreme time constraints both in the shortness of the period leading up the exams and in the amount of time available with the school day itself.

An audit has been carried out by Discovery and we await copy of this.

As the examination results will not be available until mid to late August we have no proof that the techniques have improved academic performance in any of the schools. However, anecdotal evidence in all three schools has reported:

- Motivation of students/children to use the techniques
- Better atmosphere within the classes

- Improved behaviour of those using the techniques noted by staff
- Less obvious stress observed during the exam period

Future Activity

Both primary schools have indicated that they would like to repeat and extend the coaching sessions in the next academic year.

The Discovery Project has been granted additional funding to buy equipment to support coaching in the community to mothers and to the unemployed in the area.

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