Smith’s positive approach contagious

WITH instructions from the headmaster to explore ways to improve student wellbeing at his school, Matt Smith was given the green light to implement a Positive Education program for the students.

The coordinator of student wellbeing programs at Brisbane Grammar School drew on the work of Dr Suzy Green, a clinical and coaching psychologist at the University of Sydney and founder of the Positivity Institute, to do so.

“I found Suzy Green and she helped to launch that with the school, because obviously such an initiative is only going to work effectively when all the staff are on board and they’re cognitive to all the changes that are taking place,” Smith tells Australian Teacher Magazine.

The program kicked off in July 2013, with Year 9 students targeted initially. The boys involved would use their designated personal development time on a Monday morning to complete various lessons in the program.

The Queensland school uses four sub-strands of Positive Education that include: character strengths, mindset theory, emotional intelligence and neuroscience.

Smith explains that there are 24 different character strengths that are pre-existing qualities that all humans possess. To determine their own personal strengths, students in his class complete a survey that allows them to gain their own unique list of 24 strengths in order, with their top five being their signature strengths.

“Our program helps the boys unpack these strengths and understand them and understand how to use them for greater resilience,” Smith says. “With emotional intelligence and neuroscience combined ... we look at helping boys understand the spectrum and emotions that they experience, the positive emotions, and also the negative or the difficult emotions.

“We believe that it is important for boys to acquire what we call an EQ, a measure of emotional intelligence. So not just IQ, but EQ is also important for success and happiness in life. The emotional intelligence program is particularly relevant to our strategic direction because we talk about creating boys with emotional wellbeing.”

This year, Smith says that more students will be involved in the program and more staff will be trained in the process.

“Our aim this year is to implement positive education from Year 5 to 10. So that means every boy in Year 5 to 10 will experience some type of signature positive education program; that’s our aim at the end of this year,” he shares.

While Smith acknowledges there are other schools around the country who have adopted an approach to Positive Education, his school has its own style and has “grammified” the program to suit the needs of its students.

“We believe in branding it and introducing it in the course in our own tradition and structures and frameworks,” he says.

Brisbane Grammar School students complete a ‘strengths spotting’ activity.