Occasional Papers about Social and Emotional Wellbeing in Education

ISSUE SIXTEEN

EDUCATION CONNECT

• Stress & Exams
• Research in Practice
• Emotional Intelligence
• Circle Solutions
Spring is upon us, the longer days and warmer weather has awakened nature with flora and fauna bursting into life. The beginning of spring is a significant milestone on most university calendars, with the semester entering into the second half and staff beginning to think forward into 2011.

This period signifies the beginnings of change for the Response Ability team. Technology will be at the forefront with plans to diversify our support to incorporate interactive methods such as teleconferencing. The website (www.responseability.org) is being redeveloped and has already received a new look, with extra components to support our new VET resource coming soon.

This season brings new energy into life, work and relationships and presents an opportune time to impart an issue focusing on developments and research in social and emotional wellbeing in the education sector.

In issue sixteen of Education Connect Janet Currie and Danielle Hagarty, from UTS, discuss student stress and final year exams. This article explores factors that contribute to student stress and how students can enhance their coping strategies and care for their wellbeing during this time.

A related article by Sara Twohill examines the impact and causes of stress and how teachers can help students prevent or reduce the impact of stress.

Karen Hansen, from Swinburne University of Technology, investigates the importance of Emotional Intelligence in educational settings. New research is uncovering the links between Emotional Intelligence and factors such as connectedness to school, effort in class and levels of depression and anxiety.

We explore Circle Time with Sue Roffey from the University of Western Sydney. Sue examines the aims of Circle Time and reports on the results of a study, in which undergraduate students facilitated Circle Time in primary schools.

The link between student wellbeing and academic performance is further explored by a research team at the University of Melbourne. An intervention that involved teachers working in teams to enhance teacher - student relationships was undertaken. A range of strategies were employed with encouraging results.

A summary of the current issue of the Journal of Student Wellbeing then reviews some recent research in student’s social and emotional wellbeing and mental health. It examines issues such as popularity in teenage girls and the trial of a health and wellbeing subject for pre-service teachers.

Finally see page 24 for information about the updated Teacher’s Guide, now available from the Response Ability team.

We hope that this issue stimulates some thoughts on new developments and research. Keep an eye out for news on the new support services that Response Ability will be offering in 2010.
The stress of final year exams: 
A critical time for addressing social and emotional wellbeing

Completion of senior year school exams, such as the HSC, VCE, SEP or other forms of Year 12 Leaving Certificates by Australian students represents more than the culmination of twelve years of education. Research demonstrates that unfortunately during this period, 40-50% of Year 11-12 students experience clinical levels of psychological distress, and that this level increases as the senior year exam gets closer (Hodge, McCormick, & Elliott, 1997; Smith & Sinclair, 1998). Fortunately, teachers can play a significant role in supporting their students at this important stage of life.

Senior year exams form a critical juncture with students experiencing increased workload, deadlines, expectations from parents, teachers/schools and themselves, beliefs about the future and perceptions of the ‘life-long’ significance of the final senior year exam. This is consistent with a recent study conducted in the UK which found that anxiety and stress experienced by secondary school students is heightened by the degree of importance that assessments and examinations have on career aspirations and future life trajectory (Putwain, 2009).

Stress and anxiety experienced during the lead up to senior year examinations is often attributed to the fear of failure and can have lasting negative impacts on the self esteem of the student. Examination anxiety has been reported to produce debilitating cognitive effects including difficulties with memory and recalling information. This can then affect student performance inducing further stress and feelings of self doubt and inadequacy (Putwain, 2009).

Other factors to consider

Aside from the stress of senior year exams, young people are also experiencing a range of other developmental and social stressors that can impact on their social and emotional wellbeing at this time. These broadly centre on learning to master the skills of life, such as relating to their peers and increasing their self-discipline; coming to know who they are as they gain self-certainty and first experiences with intimacy (Child Development Institute, 2010).

In addition to these general developmental tasks, young people are also often exposed to other negative risk factors that can have significant impacts on their social and emotional wellbeing. These can include violence, poverty, social exclusion, peer rejection and a lack of family support (World Health Organisation, 2008). For this reason, adolescent mental health experts point to this period as being a high risk time for the onset of many psychological problems and disorders such as depression, anxiety, psychosis, drug and alcohol dependence and sleep disorders (Robinson, Alexander, & Gradisar, 2008).
As an example, a risk factor for heightened stress levels during senior year exams, identified by McGraw et al. (2008), is a lack of connectedness. Students who have lower perceived levels of family, peer and or school connectedness are more likely to display higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety. During this time students may also experience negatively affected friendships, poor self-esteem and feelings of sickness. They often describe as though they are ‘missing out’ on age-appropriate activities and become overly sedentary.

Supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of senior students

Work in the field of mental health has revealed the importance and benefits of mental health promotion and mental illness prevention activities. Briefly, mental health promotion is focused on enhancing positive mental health and quality of life (Parham & Patterson, 2008). Mental illness prevention, however, is focused on reducing the risk factors associated with mental illness and enhancing the protective factors associated with good mental health (Parham & Patterson, 2008).

Research has found the school setting to provide a valuable opportunity and environment for mental health promotion and mental illness prevention activities (Jane-Llopis & Barry, 2005). For example, research indicates that mental health promotion activities can assist with establishing protective factors (connectedness, friendships and social networks), while resulting in improvements to student health, experiences, learning prospects and academic achievement (Jane-Llopis & Barry, 2005). On the other hand, mental illness prevention activities in schools can be effective in preventing and delaying the commencement of drug use (Midford, Snow & Lenton, 2006 as cited in Access Economics, 2009) and in improving self-esteem, body image perception and eating behaviours among young people (Raphael, 2000). There is now a growing source of mental promotion and mental illness prevention initiatives available to schools and their teachers, some of which include the Response Ability, beyondblue, and Mind Matters programs.

What interventions exist to help students to manage exam stress?

While psychological intervention and counselling is often recommended as the means of treating senior year examination stress (Gaston, 2008), there is also a lack of practical support and research available into helping students develop ‘lifelong’, self-help approaches to preventatively coping with stress now, and into the future. So perhaps it’s time to think outside of the square and consider alternative methods. Research
conducted in India demonstrates that the incorporation of relaxation techniques such as yoga and meditation have been shown to significantly reduce academic stress and improve wellbeing among high school students (Venkataramana et al., 2008). Growing evidence may render this a possible option for Australian schools.

The “Taking Charge - Management of Stress, Anxiety and Depression” program run by the Health Psychology Unit at UTS is an Australian example of a program that aims to teach students practical strategies to take control over upsetting emotions and challenging life experiences. The program is based on cognitive-behavioural therapy principles and includes information on anxiety, depression and stress, problem-solving, thought monitoring, education reality testing of unhelpful thoughts/beliefs, pleasant events scheduling, controlled breathing, assertiveness and communication training, identification and challenging of core beliefs and self-esteem boosting. Further information about this program can be accessed at http://www.science.uts.edu.au/centres/psych/research.html.

What can you do to help students to manage stress and exams?

As in-service and pre-service teachers, you can play an active role in supporting students to cope with the stress of senior year exams and other developmental and social changes impacting on their lives at this time.

For example, Personal Development Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) teachers can educate about healthy lifestyle skills and methods available to help combat exam stress. Recent research reveals that taking part in exercise classes may offer a simple and effective strategy in assisting HSC students to cope more effectively with exam stress. Students have revealed the main reasons for attending include gaining mental and physical fitness benefits. Students often mentioned feeling more focused and able to study following participation in a class (Currie, 2010). We are currently undertaking further investigation into the acceptability of this concept.

In addition, schools can take a whole-of-school approach to mental health promotion and mental illness prevention to build lasting positive impacts on the students’ perceived quality of learning outcomes, stress levels and student-family linkage during the senior year. McGraw et al. (2008) recommend a proactive and multifaceted approach to enhance belonging and connectedness. This should include programs to promote and develop suitable coping strategies, educating students about the importance of positive relationships and maintaining a supportive school environment. Keeping this in mind will help to provide the greatest support to senior year high school students.

References
The impact

• Sara Twohill – Hunter Institute of Mental Health

Stress is a complex physiological and psychological phenomenon. It can be a motivating experience that helps us to get things done and stay focused. However, too much stress can be unhelpful and at times problematic. As Currie and Hagarty (2010) have observed, end of year exams are often a time when stress levels are high among students.

Fortunately, teachers can help students to manage their stress by understanding the phenomenon of stress, its causes, impacts and what can be done to reduce or eliminate its effects. The following article explains some of the issues and ideas raised by Currie and Hagarty (2010) and provides a range of coping strategies that can be applied to students, in a variety of educational settings.

What is stress?

Stress is a natural physical and mental response to an emotional strain or suspense. The human body responds to events that provide stress (stressors) by activating the nervous system and specific hormones in the body. The hypothalamus, within the brain, signals the adrenal glands to produce the hormones adrenalin and cortisol, and to release these into the bloodstream. These hormones speed up a person’s heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure and metabolism. The physical changes following the onset of a stressor prepare a person to react quickly and effectively to handle the pressure being experienced. This is known as the stress response.

When working effectively, the body’s stress response improves a person’s ability to perform well under pressure (Reach Out Australia, http://au.reachout.com/find/articles/stress#). When stress is a constant experience these chemicals build up and can have adverse effect on the body.

What causes stress and how does it impact on the body?

Stress can be caused by a range of factors and can impact people differently. For example, stress can be caused by problems at home, relationship difficulties, situations at work, a traumatic event or experiences at school.

Stress affects both the body and mind. Physical manifestations of stress can include feeling sick, having stomach aches or headaches, sweating a lot, feeling dizzy, eating too much or too little, or using drugs (Youth beyondblue Fact sheet 7, Youth beyondblue, www.youthbeyondblue.com).

Common mental health symptoms of stress include feeling angry, feeling anxious, being moody and easily frustrated, regularly feeling like crying, having low self esteem, feeling restless all of the time or having trouble sleeping (Youth beyondblue Fact sheet 7, Youth beyondblue, www.youthbeyondblue.com). Research indicates that individuals who react in an explicitly emotional way to stressors are more likely to develop symptoms of depression compared to those people who employ a constructive approach to problem-solving in difficult situations (Spence et al., 2005).

What can be done to prevent or reduce the impact of stress?

Stress is common and everyone will experience it at some point in their lives. For students who are experiencing stress as a result of upcoming exams, there are range practical things that can be done to elevate its effects. Teachers can help their students who are experiencing stress as a result of exams by encouraging them to:
of stress and exams

- look after themselves physically and emotionally (eating healthily and getting plenty of sleep),
- get organised for their exams (prioritise their time and develop a plan for what needs to be done and when),
- take regular breaks from their study and do things that they enjoy,
- be positive and set realistic expectations,
- spend time with friends and family,
- ask for help if they need it (this might be speaking to a medical practitioner, counsellor, psychologist or other person that they trust), and
- limit the use of alcohol and other drugs (e.g. caffeine) (Reach Out Australia, 2010 and Curtin Student Guild, 2010).

While stress is a common and natural experience, it can have negative implications. Fortunately, teachers can positively help their students to manage the stress associated with exams by understanding it causes and encouraging actions to reduce its impact.

For more information about what teachers can do to support students please visit the Response Ability: Teacher Education and Early Childhood page of the Hunter Institute of Mental Health’s website at http://www.himh.org.au/site/index.cfm.

Tips for Wellbeing

Mental health problems and difficult life events can affect anyone. It is important to maintain wellbeing in order to work effectively and cope with stressful times, such as final year exams.

Here are some tips to help maintain wellbeing:

- Look after yourself physically with a healthy diet, exercise and adequate sleep.
- Foster and maintain close personal relationships.
- Make time for fun positive activities.
- Learn to manage your stress in positive ways.
- Reach out for help when you need it.

(Adapted from A Teacher’s Guide. For more information see page 23)

References

Dr Karen Hansen, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Brain Sciences Institute, Swinburne University of Technology, explains how emotional intelligence research is helping students and teachers in Australian schools.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a set of skills that represent how effectively we deal with emotions and emotion-related information. These skills include being able to recognize and describe emotion; understand the emotions of others; incorporate emotions into decision-making; and manage and control emotions.

Swinburne has been involved in research on EI in Australia for more than a decade. Our early research focused on gaining a better understanding of how EI could be measured within an Australian workplace context. This research led to the development of the Swinburne University Emotional intelligence Test (SUEIT; Palmer & Stough, 2001) which has been used in numerous organisational settings to demonstrate links between EI and important workplace criteria.

While EI has been a popular and very useful construct in the workplace for a number of years, there is also accumulating evidence that EI is related to important educational outcomes.

Many educators have intuitively believed that enhancing the social and emotional competencies of students will result in desirable outcomes not just for the student but also the school community. Recent research in the area of EI now provides empirical support for this notion. Research has found links between EI and connectedness to school; effort and initiative in class; reduced aggressive and rule-breaking behaviours; lower levels of depression and anxiety; fewer social and attention problems; fewer unauthorized absences and suspensions; better coping strategies; and improved academic achievement.

Measuring EI in adolescents

Over five years ago, Swinburne University began development of an adolescent measure of EI and since that time has collaborated with a number of schools to examine how EI relates to important educational criteria.

The Adolescent Swinburne University Emotional Intelligence Test (A-SUEIT; Luebbers, Downey & Stough, 2007) is a modification of the original SUEIT. The A-SUEIT is a self-report questionnaire comprising 57 items that correspond to four subscales: Emotional Recognition and Expression, Understanding Others’ Emotions, Emotions Direct Cognition and Emotional Management and Control (see Table 1). Adolescents use a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 for ‘very seldom’ to 5 being ‘very often’, to indicate how frequently they demonstrate a range of emotionally intelligent behaviours.

Our reliability studies indicate that the dimensions are highly reliable in both Australian (N=950) and Irish (N=900) school samples while our validity data has indicated that adolescent EI is related to a number of important educational and life criteria (Luebbers, Downey & Stough, 2007).

Adolescent EI research

Collaborative research between Swinburne University and a number of schools from around Australia has used the A-SUEIT to show that adolescent EI is related to a range of important educational variables including scholastic success; problem behaviours (externalised and internalised); coping strategies; Year 12 achievement; and school participation (effort and initiative).

Our research indicates that adolescents who report low EI are more likely to engage in aggressive and rule-breaking behaviour; are more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety, depression, withdrawal, attention and social problems; are less likely to reach their academic...
potential; and are more likely to engage in maladaptive coping strategies. Conversely, students who report high EI report a greater sense of personal belonging to their school; will put in more effort and demonstrate greater initiative in class; are more likely to engage in adaptive coping strategies; demonstrate pro-social behaviour; and are more likely to achieve their academic potential.

Swinburne’s research is consistent with research from other Australian and international research centres linking adolescent EI to academic performance (Lam & Kirby, 2002); social support and satisfaction with social support (Ciarrochi et al., 2001); student retention (Parker et al., 2004); depression; anxiety; unauthorised school absences; and school suspensions (Petrides, 2004).

### How we use EI in schools

Swinburne’s EI assessment and development tools are being applied in various ways in a range of schools across Australia and internationally. Currently we are using our EI tools with schools: to promote resilience and minimise stress in teachers, to enhance teacher leadership effectiveness, to identify students ‘at-risk’ for academic underachievement (as well as poor psychological health); to personalise curriculum and help students understand their own learning journey; to provide students with EI reports alongside their traditional academic achievement reports; to develop Social and Emotional Learning curriculum and to longitudinally track the EI development of students.

#### Identifying at-risk adolescents

As a result of research showing that low EI is predictive of academic underachievement, one of our partner schools is currently using the adolescent SUEIT to collect EI data to assist with the identification of students who may be at-risk for academic underachievement. All students in Years 7 to 12 at the school complete the A-SUEIT every two years and this data is available alongside the student’s standardised test scores (ACER) and their school based achievement scores. The EI data has been a useful tool in assisting teachers, students and parents to better understand why the school based achievement of some students is not commensurate with their cognitive ability. In most cases students who are underachieving report having difficulty identifying and describing their own emotions and understanding the emotions of others. Additionally, many underachieving students also report finding it difficult to manage and control their emotions. The school is also using this EI data to track

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### Table 1. A-SUEIT subscales.

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<tr>
<th>Definition and example item for each of the four subscales in the Adolescent Swinburne University Emotional Intelligence Test</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional Recognition and Expression</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The ability to identify one’s own feelings and emotional states and the ability to express those inner feelings to others</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘I can tell others how I feel about things’</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Understanding Emotions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The ability to identify and understand the emotions of others</td>
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<td>‘I can tell how others are feeling’</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotions Direct Cognition</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The extent to which emotions and emotional knowledge are incorporated in decision making and/or problem solving</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘When I try to solve problems I keep my feelings out of it’</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional Management and Control</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ability to manage positive and negative emotions both within oneself and others and control strong emotional states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I find it hard to calm people down when they are worried or stressed’</td>
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the development of emotional competencies in their students and this is reported to parents alongside academic achievement results.

**Personalised Learning**

Another of our partner schools is using EI data alongside personality and learning style data to support teachers and students in creating a personalised learning environment. Each year in Semester 2, Year 9 students at the school complete assessments measuring EI, personality, learning style, general intelligence and school connectedness. Prior to commencing subject selection in Year 10, students are provided with their individual profiles to assist with subject and course selection and to increase the quality of the dialogue between teacher, student and parent in support of the personalised learning of the student.

**Stress minimisation**

One of the more common applications of our EI research in schools is in the area of teacher stress and resilience. Swinburne has developed a structured EI development program (Hansen, Gardner & Stough, 2007) specifically aimed at reducing occupational stress and building resilience in teachers. It has been used successfully by a number of our partner schools and is also currently being trialled in schools in Canada. The program consists of five sessions (90 minutes each) which cover an introduction to understanding occupational stress, understanding individual EI profiles, developing emotional self-awareness, emotional expression, and emotional awareness of others, developing emotional management and control and developing a plan for moving forward. Each participant also completes an EI self-assessment and is provided with a personalised feedback report. This personalised EI profile provides the foundation for developing an individual plan for enhancing a specific area of EI which in turn facilitates the development of effective stress management strategies.

**Leadership**

One of the most replicated findings in EI research is the link between EI skills and leadership effectiveness. The attributes of effective leaders – authentic communication, instilling trust in others, building teams, effective mentoring, developing quality relationships, motivating others, managing stress, conflict resolution, fostering positive attitudes and creative and lateral decision making – rely on the demonstration of emotionally intelligent behaviours. Swinburne has worked with numerous schools using EI development as a tool for enhancing leadership effectiveness in classroom teachers, leading teachers and principals. Our leadership development programs typically involve a 360-degree EI assessment (involving self-ratings as well as observer ratings), individual EI feedback sessions, individual coaching and/or group workshops.
New research directions

Swinburne has developed relationships with many schools across Australia in the area of teacher and adolescent EI assessment and development and is always interested in exploring new ways of applying our research in educational settings. We are currently developing an EI development program specifically for adolescents and would be interested in working with a range of schools during the evaluation phase.

Swinburne has also developed a new primary school measure of EI. Clearly emotional intelligence is learnt over time and relies on parent and teachers being able to model emotionally intelligent behaviours for children at early stages of their lives. There is currently very little research on EI and primary-aged children and we are seeking schools wishing to work with us with on our new measure.

Swinburne is also extending its research interests to the post-secondary education sector investigating the link between EI and achievement in University students and the relationship between EI and employability skills in the TAFE sector.

It is the aim of Swinburne to provide educational settings with all of the tools necessary to maximise the social and emotional functioning of teachers and students to ensure the best possible outcomes for everyone involved in the school community.

Organisations interested in working with Swinburne University in their EI research can contact Dr Hansen at khansen@swin.edu.au.

References


There is now wide acceptance that social and emotional learning is a foundation for resilience and mental health, connectedness to school, healthy relationships and positive academic outcomes. The evidence is overwhelming (Payton et al., 2008; Wells et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004).

The bigger question concerns an appropriate context, including pedagogy, for teaching students how ‘to be’ and how to ‘live together’ (Delors, 1996; Roffey, 2010). Didactic approaches are not highly engaging at the best of times and certainly not helpful in social and emotional learning. Students come with their own understanding of who they are, what relationships are about and how the world works. They need an active pedagogy that offers positive experiences and encourages reflection and interaction with others.

In the United Kingdom, Circle Time has become a favoured methodology for the SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) programme. This is a framework for group interaction based on the principles of respect, democracy, inclusion and safety. It is applicable for all ages, from young children to adults. Basic guidelines are:

- Everyone sits in a circle to promote equality and provide a central space for activities.
- Participants are regularly mixed up to interact outside their usual social groups.
- The teacher is a participant facilitator, joining in with all activities and modelling desired practice.
- Activities are paired, small group and full circle, often presented as non-competitive games (Hromek & Roffey, 2009).
- Responses to difficulties are in line with the basic principles of respect, safety and inclusion.
- The following simple guidelines are repeated at the beginning of all circles:
  - Everyone gets a turn in all activities.
  - When it is your turn to speak, everyone will listen to you: you therefore need to listen to others.
  - There are no put-downs, no naming, shaming or blaming.
  - You do not have to say anything at any time, you may simply ‘pass’.

The activities are intended to improve communication skills, identify individual and class strengths, explore what individuals have in common, celebrate differences, provide skills in emotional understanding, expression and regulation, generate a sense of belonging, deconstruct the meaning of values such as trust and respect and have fun together. Solutions to class issues are generated over time from one circle to the next. Each Circle session takes between 20 and 40 minutes depending on the age of the students. These need to happen regularly, a minimum of once a week, to have a cumulative and sustainable effect. Once every so often is fun but outcomes do not last.

In Australia there is some confusion between Circle Time and problem-solving circles or restorative
conferences. There is also a fear that Circles may become group therapy in the hands of unskilled facilitators, causing more harm than good (Craig, 2007).

Over the last few years the author has responded to these difficulties and developed a version of Circle Time entitled Circle Solutions. The basic principles are the same but there is a stronger emphasis on the positive, on identifying and building student and class strengths and giving students agency to construct a class ethos that benefits everyone. It also favours an indirect, third person approach so that students do not talk about specific problems directly but about issues, addressing these from a solution focus. Instead of an emphasis on bullying for instance, conversations and activities emphasise friendliness, friendship and inclusion, with students exploring what they have in common, the feelings they want to have in the class and making connections that encourage understanding and empathy (Roffey, 2006).

The main aims of Circle Solutions are to develop a caring classroom ethos and the social and emotional skills that underpin this. The quality of facilitation towards these aims is a crucial element to achieving them. This includes the active involvement of the teacher/facilitator as a full participant within the Circle, the modelling of the basic principles in all interactions and the passing of responsibility to the students for how they behave within Circles, emphasising inclusion within the class group and how everyone wants to be treated. Individuals are not singled out publicly in a negative way.

A typical Circle session would begin with a statement of the guidelines and then a greeting activity – such as a name game or ‘pass the smile’. This may be followed by a ‘mix-up’ game. An example of this is giving everyone the name of an emotion such as happy, sad, excited, scared. The teacher/facilitator calls out the emotion and each person with that feeling changes place, moving according to the feeling. When everyone is seated they may be asked to complete a pair share with the person now sitting next to them, finding something specific they have in common – such as pets they have had or what makes them feel happy in school. This practices communication skills and breaks down barriers between individuals. After each pair has briefly reported back to the whole Circle the teacher points out how much is shared. A whole group game could be ‘Star of the Circle’, an activity that happens regularly until everyone has had a turn over time. A student leaves the room and the teacher invites positive comments from others about this person. Over time students learn to do this well, even for less popular peers. When the student returns the teacher reads out what people have said. The aim is for each person to begin to see themselves with strengths and positive qualities and have something specific to live up to. Small group games are particularly valuable in developing collaboration, deconstructing abstract values and taking responsibility for each other.
One such activity might be Desert Islands where participants imagine they are stranded, what skills and abilities they already have and what they would need from each other to help them survive. Another activity may be thinking how it feels to be left out compared to what it feels like to belong - and what this class might do to promote positive feelings. Each Circle ends with a calming, closing activity such as a relaxation exercise, visualisation, affirmation or reflection – all aiming to provide resources in emotional regulation or resilience. Activities need to be appropriate to the age and developmental level of the class but the framework is effective for all ages, from very young children right up to adults.

Circle Time / Solutions are now taking place in schools all over Australia and appear to be impacting positively on social and emotional learning outcomes. Although anecdotal evidence is strong there has been a need for some independent Australian research. The following small study, reported here in brief, is a start.

In 2008, eighteen undergraduate students, most of them studying education or early years degrees, took part in the Circle Time project in a unit entitled Learning through Community Service. This involved one hundred hours in primary schools and a further hundred of reading, research, and writing reflections on their experiences, culminating in a final portfolio. These students were all trained as facilitators in Circle Time Solutions and supported schools in Greater Western Sydney by running Circles, developing materials and other relevant activities. The NSW Department of Education provided some funding for their portfolios to be analysed after marking was completed. All student facilitators gave their permission and an independent senior researcher was employed to carry out the thematic analysis. This explored the impact on university students, changes in school students and the school factors that made a difference to the sustainability of positive outcomes. Most of the following is taken from the final report for the NSW Department of Education (McCarthy, 2009).

**Context issues**

University facilitators found that some schools did not take account of the social and emotional needs or learning of their students and saw this as a pressing need.

- “Nothing was put in place that helped address social and emotional learning prior to us entering the school.” (undergraduate facilitator)
- “Children knew little about their feelings and how to regulate emotions… There were deficiencies in communication and little awareness of or relationships with others. Children lacked skills in relating to others.” (undergraduate facilitator)

In other schools, a high value was placed on relationships and it was these schools that provided a context for Circle learning to have real impact.

**A pedagogy for engagement**

Regardless of school support, or the participation of classroom teachers school students loved participating in Circles. They thought it was fun yet beneficial. This is a pedagogy that clearly motivates and engages students. This finding reflects an earlier evaluation in a post-graduate research project and also in anecdotal evidence of teachers, school counsellors and behaviour support staff who regularly run Circles across the age range.

- “I love Circle Time because I learn more and I trust more.” (school student)
- “I like Circle Time because its fun and the teachers are kind and nice. Circle Time is best.” (school student)

**Changes in school students**

Among the changes noticed were improvements in classroom behaviour. Children were more courteous, paid better attention to their teachers and showed increased caring and concern for their classmates. In many cases, classrooms appeared to be happier, friendlier places. Teachers reported that students on the playground tended to include other students in their games; there was less name-calling and put downs, and fewer displays of aggressive behaviour.
Student behaviour towards others improved, in that they were more willing to work together, and there was more mixing across friendship and gender groups. In Circle sessions, rather than use put-downs in response to a classmate’s comments, students began to listen more carefully and give positive feedback such as “that’s a good idea”. While this first occurred mainly within the context of circles, over the course of the three months in which sessions were held, these behaviours increasingly carried over into the general classroom environment. Most students were inexperienced in working with children and all only had a window of three months to note any differences. The fact that, in many cases, they did so, is credit to their ability to run Circles effectively and in the power of this pedagogy to initiate change.

“It was remarkable to see the children that I had been working with since March working together as a team and creating friendships and bonds … No longer were they being disruptive and not talking to one another …” (undergraduate facilitator)

Provisos

In schools where Circles were well supported, they appeared very effective and the outcomes were maintained. Teacher support was, however, an essential ingredient. In schools where teachers were uninterested and/or didn’t participate in Circles, the progress made in the social and emotional learning of children appeared less. In the two classrooms where the teachers didn’t participate, changes in students didn’t last beyond a few days, while students in the other classes learned ways of getting on that shifted the general well being of the classroom in seemingly more permanent ways. Anecdotal evidence, supported by research, shows that both disininterest in social and emotional learning together with too much teacher control of students is counter productive in the learning of relationship skills or the development of a safe and supportive learning environment.

Recommendations

Amongst the recommendations in the report are the following:

- Every effort should be made to encourage schools to invest in Circle training for teachers. A whole school approach should be promoted and the activities of Circles embedded into the routine of the school.
- Circle training should be encouraged in student preparation courses as a way of fostering a ‘whole-student’ approach to teaching.
- Efforts to document the effectiveness of this pedagogy in schools should be continued as a way of gathering systematic data about the utility of this pedagogy.

Resources and further information

There are many Circle Time resources from Footprint Books and Inyahead Press.

Further information from s.roffey@uws.edu.au

References


There is a clear association between student wellbeing and improved academic performance (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Positive teacher-student relationships have been shown to increase positive attitudes towards learning, interest in subject matter, sense of academic self-efficacy, and academic achievement (Fraser & Walberg, 1991; Slade, 2002; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). Studies from many parts of the world show this. While student wellbeing can be enhanced by many factors – a safe environment, engaging curriculum and effective connections between home and school – the most critical is the relationship between teachers and students.

In 2006 and 2007, with the support of an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant and the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM), a collaborative team from the University of Melbourne and CEOM undertook research to explore teacher-student relationships in the Relationships, Wellbeing and Learning (RWL) project.

The Relationships, Wellbeing and Learning (RWL) Project investigated the effects of a strategic professional learning team intervention to enhance teacher-student relationships in the middle years. The novel aspect of this project was its focus on working with teams of English teachers because this subject provided access to the largest number and widest range of students. The teachers in the intervention schools participated in five to six PLT (Professional Learning Team) sessions, facilitated by one of the researchers, over five to seven months. During these sessions, the facilitator provided information about effective strategies, and fostered collaboration and reflection among teachers about their approach to teacher-student relationships. A self-audit checklist was developed for use by teachers in their classrooms to encourage implementation and monitoring of their relationship building strategies. As the meetings progressed, the teachers discussed their experiences of the effects of the strategies on students in the classroom.

The relationship-building strategies that comprised the RWL framework were identified from a review of the literature on teaching and learning, and from research on students’ views of what teacher behaviour contributed to positive relationships in the classroom (For example: Cahill, Shaw, Wyn, & Smith, 2004; Chang, 2003; Dweck, 1999; Mendes, 2003; Slade, 2001). These strategies consisted of straightforward behaviours such as smiling at students and recognising them by name, to more complex responses such as encouraging help-seeking, initiating offers of help and giving effective feedback. Table 1 summarises the strategies.

Data on the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the intervention was collected from records of the PLT meetings, focus groups, and teacher interviews.

### Teacher-student relationship outcomes

Teachers generally reported that their relationships with their students improved as a result of focusing on the systematic implementation of relationship building strategies that had been discussed in the PLTs. They found that by purposefully investing time on individual students, they were better able to engage their students in their learning.

> I have been sitting down one on one and doing some drafting. I think if you can get a one on one situation they are going to open up to you a little bit more.

They also found that the strategies helped them connect more effectively with challenging students.
I have been connecting with him (a really challenging student) from the middle of term 2. Now if I look at him he knows he is doing the wrong thing and he stops. There is a connection. So [the intervention] has been good that way. It has made me more alert and more aware of spending valuable time with a student even if it be only 1 minute or 20 minutes.

The intervention also encouraged teachers to think more creatively about how to engage their students, and keep them engaged. For some, this meant varying the usual routine or showing an interest in what the students were doing, even if it was not the task in hand.

I do think that the more interest you take in them, they respond better, even if they are not doing precisely what I have asked them to do. Rather than go, “You’re not supposed to be doing that, you are supposed to be doing ....” I say, “That’s a nice drawing”. They know they are doing the wrong thing. They are taken aback. “Who’s that of?” “Oh that is of so and so.” I say, “Cool! Now let’s get back to the English.” They say “Okay!” And then I think, “Okay, now I know they like to draw.”

Then in my Art class I say, “Hey the other day in English you did a really good sketch. Could you do one for me of such and such? So instead of sitting in class and not doing what I want them to do suddenly they think, “Okay I will do that.”

The teachers reported that they had been able to connect with their students on a more personal level that enhanced their work on curriculum. As a result, their students appeared to be more interested in their learning.

It was definitely in the back of my mind all the time implementing the strategies of what we had talked about in the previous weeks and I was remembering “Oh, I should talk to that student, not about school work if I see him in the yard, but about how was his weekend ...”

Even if for 50 minutes of the time I was teaching those boys English, I wanted them to know that I was a real person too and they wanted, I suppose, us to know that they are real people as well.

In a more general way, teachers said that their participation in the
The strategies led teachers towards power balancing, seizing opportunities when students were disengaged, and investing time on individual students. In addition, implementation of the strategies appeared to have extended to classes other than the Year 8 intervention classes.

**Learning outcomes**

Teachers reported that increased student engagement, which they attributed to the intervention, appeared to be associated with improved learning outcomes. Some teachers commented that while all students were engaging in deeper learning, the positive outcomes for lower achieving students were particularly noteworthy. The latter group were seen to be producing more sophisticated work than expected during the course of the intervention.

A number of the teachers also brought into the PLT work samples to illustrate what they perceived to be the deeper levels of engagement and understanding with particular topics in the English curriculum. Altogether, the data from the PLT meetings, focus group, and teacher interviews provided evidence of changes in teacher understanding and practice, particularly in ways of conceptualising student behaviour and relating to students. Some of these teacher changes included:

- increased reflection on, and consciousness of, their own practice in relating to students;
- increased efforts to adapt the curriculum to suit individual students’ needs and personalise learning;
- can actually question each other. The questions they are asking are fantastic.

As a result of implementing the RWL framework, introduced in the PLT, teachers reported that they were better able to engage their students in their learning.
greater focus on student wellbeing and how it might be affecting student learning; in other words, increased awareness of life circumstances that were affecting students;

• increased awareness of those students who might be overlooked;

• willingness to invest more time to engage with challenging students, and

• using the curriculum to achieve both academic and social emotional outcomes.

Teachers also reported that their participation in the PLT engendered a greater sense of team membership with colleagues.

I think we (the professional learning team) are more prepared to work together. Maybe it’s not noticeable, but an example: last week we had a public speaking competition at the college with the best speakers in each of the year levels and I think we were the only year level where all the English teachers turned up.

In conclusion, this study demonstrated that the PLT intervention is an effective process to promote deep teacher reflection on classroom practice. It increased teachers’ focus on building better teacher-student relationships, a factor that has been shown to influence student learning. The PLT provided a means to improve teaching practice by encouraging teachers to develop greater knowledge and understanding of their students’ so that they were in a more informed position to personalise learning to meet the needs of individual students. It appeared to positively influence students’ levels of engagement and enhanced students’ learning outcomes.

References


1. The research reported here formed part of a larger ARC Linkage study ‘Enhancing Wellbeing and Learning in Middle Years Classrooms’. 
The Journal of Student Wellbeing is a free peer reviewed e-journal featuring applied and theoretical papers on students’ social, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. It focuses on the promotion of child and adolescent wellbeing in educational settings. The journal caters for a wide audience including:

• teachers and school leaders;
• social workers and psychologists;
• curriculum developers, consultants and advisors;
• those who train and educate the above groups, such as university lecturers; and
• academics undertaking research on student wellbeing.

The journal contains reports of quantitative and qualitative research, evaluations of interventions, accounts of the development and application of practical programs, review articles and ‘opinion pieces’. In addition, the journal contains book reviews, information about conferences and other items of interest.

The current edition of the Journal of Student Wellbeing looks at topics such as popularity in teenage girls, teaching undergraduate education students about health and wellbeing and listening to children’s voices in research. Following is a summary of several of the articles.

Developing wellbeing in first year pre-service teachers: A trial of a personal approach to professional education.

The faculty of Education at La Trobe University identified that schools are increasingly becoming responsible for delivering health promotion to young people. Although there has been a growth in the expectations for schools to educate young people about healthy lifestyles this has not been accompanied by an increase in the training provided to teachers to help them fulfil this role. In order to prepare future teachers for this role La Trobe University created a first year undergraduate subject for all Bachelor of Education students called ‘Concepts of Wellbeing’.

‘Concepts of Wellbeing’ was designed to help prepare students to deliver health promotion in schools and to assist them with their personal health. Subjects were based on health and lifestyle issues that were considered relevant to first year university students. These included:

• physical health problems,

“There is nothing like looking, if you want to find something. You certainly usually find something, if you look, but it is not always quite the something you were after.”

J.R.R. Tolkien
- excessive alcohol consumption,
- smoking tobacco,
- illicit drug use,
- sexual health; and
- psychological issues such as stress, anxiety, low self esteem, dieting and eating disorders.

Information about the topic was given to the students and then a behaviour change approach was adapted to improve the students’ attitudes and behaviours around each topic. To assess the success of the topic a reflective approach was adopted. The university utilised student evaluation questionnaires and other student feedback to gain insight into the students’ experiences, opinions and suggestions for future improvements.

Following are some of the findings from the surveys:

- Of the 79% of students that responded 68.1% reported that they were satisfied with the quality of the subject.
- Overall 45% of students felt that the subject had enhanced their personal wellbeing.
- Half of the students felt that the concepts and issues were relevant to them personally.

- Under half of the students thought that the overall subject was relevant to them. There were some indications that they felt subjects directly related to teaching may hold more relevance.
- The students sometimes failed to make the connections between how the information learnt in this course could be applied to their teaching.

Overall the trial of ‘Concepts of Wellbeing’ showed that it was an effective addition to the pre-service teacher training program.

Listening to children’s voices in qualitative health research.

There is a great deal of concern about the health of children today, particularly the levels of physical activity and nutritional behaviours. However, when making decisions around these areas the voices of children are often absent and solutions to the problem generally originate from adults. Researchers from Flinders University and the University of South Australia decided to undergo two separate qualitative research projects to gain children’s perspectives by gathering descriptive narratives from children aged 5 to 12.

Children’s ideas about what good nutrition and good nutritional practice are differ depending upon their personal experiences. While there is a vast body of research that has been undertaken on children there is very little data on children’s viewpoints. However objective, empirical evidence suggests that when children are engaged appropriately in research, their contribution can be significant.

Children were interviewed in groups of 4-6 with peers from the same age group. All of the children had an opinion about health, with food and health being synonymous for those in early childhood. Children identified fruit and vegetables as being healthy and related these foods to ‘getting stronger’.

When the children were questioned further about healthy foods they responded that their favourite foods were those such as apples, bananas and meat. However when asked what they would like to eat for lunch they identified foods like chips and chicken nuggets. This shows that while children are able to identify healthy foods and their benefits, what they want to eat is often contrasting.

The children were able to identify the links between physical activity, water and good health. Many of
the schools involved in the study allowed children to have a water bottle alongside their desk, thereby reinforcing and normalising the correlation between water and health.

The researchers were interested in the children’s television habits as television is known to inform children’s notions of health. It was found that some of the children aged five had television sets in their rooms. Many of the children identified that shows like the Biggest Loser informed them about health.

The researchers identified that the children in the study have a valid voice and irrespective of age they should be considered when making decisions. By considering children’s opinions on health and assessing how they obtain the information researchers can gain an insight into child health.

“They might not like you but everyone knows you”: Popularity among teenage girls.

There is a wealth of research on popularity and teenage girls, most of which has been undertaken in the United States. To analyse the perceptions of Australian teenage girls on popularity researchers undertook semi-structured focus groups in two Adelaide high schools from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. A total of 40 girls participated in the study with ages ranging from 14-16 years old, with the girls divided into groups of 3-5. The girls who participated were identified by school staff as being self-confident, articulate and socially skilled students. They were seen as being ‘middle of the road’ and not victims of bullying.

The researchers found that girls who were popular were seen to be publicly visible, prominent and prestigious, but were not necessarily well liked. They were considered physically attractive, fashionable, wealthy and liked by boys. The popular girls were thought to engage in more antisocial and anti-school behaviours and be rule breakers participating in activities like smoking, drinking and drug taking. The groups reported that popular girls were powerful and used their power to intimidate others and could be aggressive including verbally harassing their peers, spreading mean rumours and manipulating others. It was thought that popular girls deliberately underachieved at school in order to maintain their reputations as party goers.

Follow up feedback sessions were held approximately four weeks after the initial focus group interviews. These were used to ensure that data was interpreted appropriately and to give the girls a chance to further explain any information that may have been misinterpreted.

In general there was very little discussion that reported the popular girls as being well liked. Rather the popular girls were outspoken, rebellious, powerful, attractive and fashionable. Overall the girls in the focus groups appeared envious of popular girls and disliked them. The two schools were similar, however, the anti-social behaviours appeared to have a harder edge in the lower socioeconomic school. The findings in this study correlate with those done overseas.

For further information on these and other articles visit: http://www.ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/JSW

References


In 2007 Response Ability developed a high quality, six page brochure called *Children's and Young People's Wellbeing, An Educators Guide*. The guide has been provided, on request, to educators to distribute to pre-service teachers. To date over 39,000 copies of *An Educator’s Guide* have been distributed.

Due to its popularity the Response Ability team have recently overhauled *An Educator’s Guide* rebranding it and updating the information. *An Educator’s Guide* was renamed and is now known as: *Social and Emotional Wellbeing, A Teacher’s Guide*. The new look guide contains the new generic Response Ability banner, which represents the initiative as a whole, the Response Ability website has also been redeveloped with this banner.

*A Teacher’s Guide* contains information about social and emotional wellbeing (SEW), its importance and ways in which teacher’s can influence the SEW of children and young people. It provides pre-service teachers with an overview of the CHILD framework and explains the different elements, with practical ideas for the school environment. A *Teacher’s Guide* can be given to all pre-service teachers as it contains information about early childhood, primary and middle school, adolescence, family and community contexts.

The guide aims to support teachers by providing information about how they can assist student’s who may need additional support. One practical tool that has been developed is the GRIP framework, this problem solving framework is explained in detail in *A Teacher’s Guide*.

An important element of promoting mental health and wellbeing in schools and early childhood services is ensuring that teacher’s look after themselves and their colleagues. *A Teacher’s Guide* contains tips for teachers to maintain their own wellbeing. This information can also be useful for undergraduate education students while they are undergoing a practicum or dealing with their study load.

Importantly the guide contains information about where to find further assistance with help lines and web links for various age groups listed on the back page.

We encourage universities to use this resource with their education students, providing it as a lasting resource that will assist them in their teaching careers. We encourage universities to find a place in their curriculum where the guide can be distributed and explored, this is often best done in a core subject so that all students receive a copy of the guide. It is particularly relevant to final year students who may be about to embark on a practicum or enter the profession.

It is hoped that pre-service teachers will keep this resource and use it in their teaching careers to promote mental health and wellbeing in the school or early childhood environment.

*A Teacher’s Guide* is a free resource as part of the Response Ability initiative; it is provided on request or can be downloaded from the website. For more information or to order copies of *A Teacher’s Guide* please contact the Response Ability team by:

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(02) 4924 6900

**Response Ability website:**
www.responseability.org

**Hunter Institute of Mental Health website:**
www.himh.org.au
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**Contributions to Education Connect are welcomed and will be subject to editorial approval and editing for space and clarity.**

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This publication is intended primarily for teacher educators in Australian higher education settings, but will also be of interest to other educators, administrators and tertiary students. It is available as a PDF document on the *Response Ability* website.

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