New times, new teachers: Valuing social and emotional wellbeing in teacher education

Karen Vincent and Trevor Hazell (Hunter Institute of Mental Health)
Jennifer Allen and Tom Griffiths (University of Newcastle)

Any correspondence should be addressed to Karen.Vincent@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au

> *Today's tutorial focused on mental health. I was pleased to cover this topic, as I believe I need more knowledge on this topic. I was unaware that there was a major distinction between mental health, mental health problem and mental illness. ... I found it helpful to know some of the protective factors to promote resilience so as a teacher I can help on building these qualities within my students.* - Pre-service teacher, Victoria, 2002

Abstract

Schools and education authorities increasingly support a student-centred approach that recognises the relationship between young people's social and emotional wellbeing and their behaviour and learning outcomes. This support is reflected in federal, state and territory policies and frameworks and a variety of school-based programs designed to build resilience or assist students at risk. Such initiatives advocate a whole-school approach in which student wellbeing – and the creation of a supportive environment – are not only the province of health or welfare staff but are central to the entire school ethos. Quality teachers have always been aware of the social and emotional dimensions of teaching and learning, but schools are now taking a more formal and systematic approach to social and emotional wellbeing. Can our teacher education programs pro-actively prepare graduates for this challenging school context? This paper will explore the inclusion of social and emotional wellbeing in teacher education programs, with a focus on the Response Ability project, a collaborative undertaking between teacher educators and health professionals. The project provides free multi-media resources and support for teacher educators throughout Australia. The presentation will provide an overview of the resources, with qualitative and quantitative feedback from lecturers and pre-service teachers who have used the material.

Introduction

Australian and international research is uncovering evidence for strong links between young people's social and emotional wellbeing and their success at school, as well as their health and social outcomes. Aspects of this evidence come from various research domains and are expressed in diverse terms, such as resilience, mental health, supportive learning environments, motivational research and studies of effective teaching practice.

Fuller *et al* (2002) have described resilience as 'the happy knack of being able to bungy jump through the pitfalls of life.' This was initially a health-related construct grounded in a risk model, whereby young people who achieved positive health outcomes in spite of an adverse risk factor profile came to be known as resilient. Researchers developed an interest in the features associated with resilience, to identify protective factors against substance abuse and mental health problems.

Subsequent work has translated the concept of resilience from a health-risk construct to an educational context, by drawing on educational theory, research and practice. Benard in particular has written extensively about school systems and teaching practices that help to build resilience, through caring and connectedness, high but achievable expectations and opportunities for genuine contribution (Benard, 1991; Benard 1997). There are clear connections between these concepts and the principles of a supportive learning environment, as reflected in Australian policies, curriculum frameworks and pedagogical models (Griffiths and Cooper, 2005).

A number of useful tools and review publications are available on the connections between social and emotional wellbeing and school success, through the web site of the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at the University of Illinois (www.casel.org). The organisation has also developed tools for educators and identified itself as an advocate for school change in this area. A similar movement can be noted in the Australian context, for example through the development of whole-school mental health promotion programs such as MindMatters, the Gatehouse project and other initiatives (Rowling *et al,* 2002).

New Times: A Change in School Context

The stronger and more systematic focus on mental health, or social and emotional wellbeing, is creating a new school context for early career teachers. This is reflected in patterns of teachers' professional learning, with 79% of schools in Australia with secondary enrolments having sent staff to professional development courses offered by the national MindMatters program (Zilm, 2005, personal communication). Teachers that attend come from the full range of school faculties, indicating support for wellbeing as a whole-school concern.

A further indicator of the importance given to social and emotional wellbeing was noted by Griffiths and Cooper's (2005) review of on-line policies and initiatives in state and territory education departments, with support from the Response Ability project. The review showed that concern for young people's social and emotional wellbeing is firmly established in the policies of all states and territories. The review categorised the identified policies and initiatives according to the nature of their reference to elements of social and emotional wellbeing, as follows:

(1) Policies promoting students' social and emotional wellbeing through: developing specific aspects of wellbeing; minimising the risks of social and emotional harm; and meeting the social and emotional needs of students at risk.

(2) Policies linking students' social and emotional wellbeing to other core educational policy outcomes. Links were identified between social and emotional wellbeing and: student achievement in and beyond school; learning outcomes for specific groups; and students' preparation for life.

Such policies support the argument that school systems and education authorities recognise the importance of wellbeing as a mediator of behaviour and learning outcomes and are attempting to create a systematic approach to the integration of this issue into teaching practice and school culture. However, as Griffiths and Cooper point out, the existence of policies is no guarantee of their widespread use and influence in practice. This requires the commitment of practitioners in schools and could be augmented by reinforcing underlying principles through both pre-service teacher education and professional development.
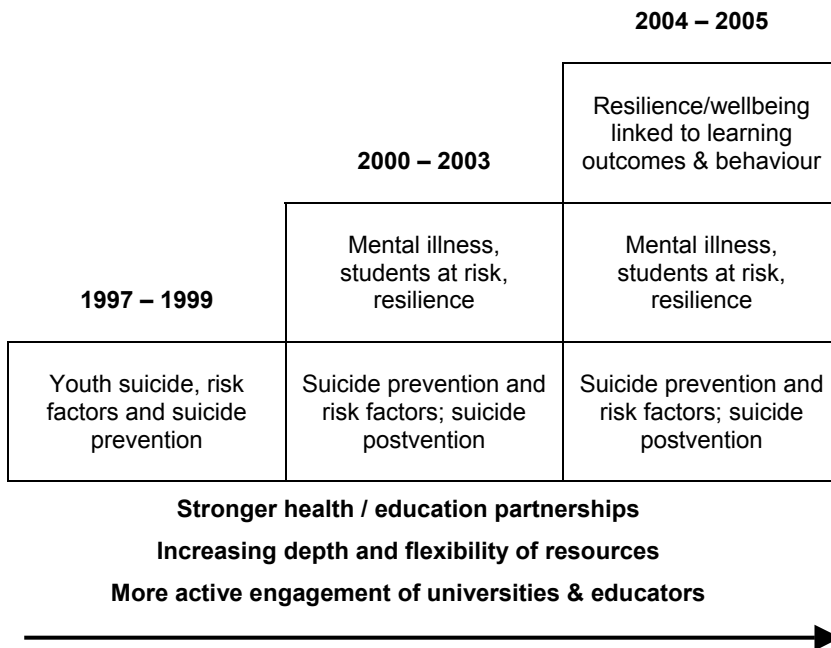
Whole-school approaches (such as those espoused by MindMatters and Gatehouse) and supportive learning environments (as reflected in selected policies and pedagogical frameworks) necessitate the participation and commitment of all school staff, not only those who perceive themselves to have a particular role in students' health or welfare. All teachers have a duty of care to recognise and refer young people who are at particular risk of mental health problems, disorders or self-harm. Further, in line with the approach of broad frameworks like NSW's *Quality Teaching (*2003) or Victoria's *Principles of Learning and Teaching* (2004), teachers in all specialisations need to be aware of the impact of social and emotional wellbeing on their students' learning.

Arguably, primary school structures and teaching practices are more conducive to holistic student-centred approaches than are secondary schools. Secondary teachers' specialisation in specific subjects provides relatively fewer opportunities for teachers to develop a relationship with their students. Teacher education for the secondary setting frequently reflects this distinction, with a strong focus on mastering subject discipline content and teaching practice in a particular learning area. Issues such as social and emotional wellbeing or mental health can easily be relegated to health pedagogy units alone and not explicitly or comprehensively addressed with other pre-service teachers.

Addressing social and emotional wellbeing more explicitly in pre-service training, particularly in secondary education, may help early career teachers to feel more confident about creating supportive environments, participating in whole-school programs and responding to troubled young people. It may also aid teacher retention by ensuring that these aspects of their role are not unexpected and unduly stressful. There are specific skills that can be explored in the pre-service setting, particularly by using practical and interactive instruction such as case studies, role-plays and discussion groups. The national Response Ability program provides one set of resources designed to support such an approach.

The Response Ability Program

Response Ability is an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, with the objective of supporting the inclusion of mental health issues in secondary teacher education programs. It commenced in the late 1990s when the national strategy focus was on the prevention of youth suicide, but has evolved considerably during that time, as reflected in Figure One. This shift reflects developments in resilience research, suicide prevention approaches and the growing evidence of links between wellbeing and school success. The program is implemented by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health, a mental health promotion and education organisation, in collaboration with the University of Newcastle. Using strategies based on extensive consultation, the project team provides free resources and support for teacher educators, as well as advocating for the more systematic inclusion of wellbeing in teacher education. The project team also works with a group of academic advisors drawn from five other Australian universities.

2004 – 2005

		Resilience/wellbeing linked to learning outcomes & behaviour
	2000 – 2003	
	Mental illness, students at risk, resilience	Mental illness, students at risk, resilience
1997 – 1999		
Youth suicide, risk factors and suicide prevention	Suicide prevention and risk factors; suicide postvention	Suicide prevention and risk factors; suicide postvention

Stronger health / education partnerships

Increasing depth and flexibility of resources

More active engagement of universities & educators

⟶

Figure One:
Shifts in focus in the Response Ability Program.

The Response Ability Multi-Media Resources

The Response Ability team has developed and distributed free multi-media resources for use in pre-service teacher education programs. A resource package was distributed in 2002 and a supplementary CD-ROM and video were disseminated in February 2005. The material is based on a series of case studies, with the provision of optional discussion questions and activities for use with pre-service teachers. The case studies and activities were developed collaboratively by teacher educators and health professionals. The resources also present a drama piece by secondary school students and a focus group discussion with young people. The flexible content can be readily linked with existing units and modules of teacher education programs and allows teacher educators to integrate a focus on social and emotional wellbeing, while minimising preparation time.

The broad contents of the resources include:

- Outline and PowerPoint presentation to support an introductory lecture about key terms and concepts, suggesting additional resources and handouts; the presentation can be saved and adapted

- Case Study One – video scenario and activities exploring mental health and the school setting, with a focus on a troubled male student who has reflected his emotions through artwork and poetry

- Case Study Two – video scenario and activities relating to a withdrawn female school student; explores the issues of supporting the quiet student and offers an opportunity to discuss bullying among girls

- Case Study Three – video scenario and activities about a disruptive male student, that also provides opportunities to discuss substance use and bullying among boys

- Case Study Four – video scenario and activities relating to a student's return to school following a suicide attempt, provides opportunities to explore suicide prevention and postvention

- Supplementary Case Study – video scenario and activities relating to a girl who has made the transition from primary to high school, which explores the middle years, resilience and supportive environments

- The Black Dog – a short drama piece written and performed by secondary school students about depression, stigma and suicidal behaviour, explored in their own language with the use of comedy and music

- Young Lives (Supplementary) – a short film showing focus group discussion with first-year high school students, including a girls' group, a boys' group and a mixed group

The resources are complemented by further information about young people's mental health on a web site at www.responseability.org. Web delivery of this component was suggested by teacher educators to avoid an information-

dense and overly-detailed resource package. The site provides additional information for those who are interested and can be readily updated with new statistics or research findings, or additional content.

Feedback from Teacher Educators and Pre-Service Teachers

The multi-media resources and the support offered by the project team have been welcomed by many teacher educators throughout Australia. At the time of writing this paper, 24 campuses utilise the resources in a foundation unit while a further 18 campuses use them in the context of health pedagogy or an elective unit.

Throughout the project, formal and informal feedback has been collected from teacher educators using the material, yielding considerable positive feedback regarding the content, presentation and flexibility of the resources. In a survey of 28 teacher educators using the resource, conducted at the end of 2003, 96% indicated that the material was easy to use. Ninety-six percent of the sample considered that their students were receptive to the material. Eighty-two percent felt that the availability of the materials had increased their level of confidence in teaching about mental health issues, while 79% reported that the project had led to an increase in the coverage of mental health related issues in their university's teacher education program.

Several teacher educators have collected qualitative and quantitative feedback from their pre-service teachers, which has been passed on to the project team for analysis. The quantitative data strongly suggest that the majority of pre-service teachers find the material interesting and useful and feel more confident about relevant issues after sessions using the Response Ability material. Approximately 180 feedback questionnaires have been collected from pre-service teachers following short sessions, while over 250 baseline and follow-up questionnaires (unmatched) have been collected after more detailed treatments of the topic. Results from the latter are summarised in Table Two.

Table Two
Mean level of agreement among pre-service teachers, before and after use of the Response Ability resources

STATEMENT	MEAN LEVEL OF AGREEMENT: BASELINE & FOLLOW-UP Shading indicates that change is statistically significant									
	Regional NSW 2003		Sydney 2003		Sydney 2003 (1)		Regional VIC 2003		Sydney 2004 (2)	
	Pre N 112	Post N 96	Pre N 19	Post N 18	Pre N 42	Post N 41	Pre N 53	Post N 30	Pre N 80	Post N 77
Schools and teachers can have a positive effect on the mental health of young people and help to prevent suicide.	8.06	8.29	8.42	9.11	8.38	8.97	7.85	8.77	7.91	9.05
It is important for student teachers to learn about mental health promotion and suicide prevention at university or college.	9.26	9.10	8.63	9.67	9.41	9.37	8.85	9.33	8.90	9.40
I am interested in learning more about mental health promotion and suicide prevention in Australian schools.	8.69	8.23	8.26	8.94	8.36	8.12	8.58	8.50	8.46	8.61
I have a reasonably good understanding of mental health problems and mental illnesses in adolescence, such as depression, eating disorders, anxiety and schizophrenia.	7.14	7.49	7.68	7.94	7.05	8.22	6.46	7.13	7.03	7.77
I have a reasonably good understanding of how schools approach the issues of suicide prevention and responding to youth suicide.	5.17	6.89	5.84	7.72	5.74	7.68	4.83	6.37	6.06	7.64
I am confident about responding to and working with a young person with a mental health problem, such as depression or an eating disorder.	6.23	7.18	6.42	7.50	6.50	7.54	5.75	6.13	6.29	7.40
I am confident that I would know how best to respond to a young person who is thinking about suicide.	5.56	6.63	5.37	7.06	5.68	7.25	4.48	5.90	5.63	7.23

Qualitative feedback from pre-service teachers also provides support for their level of engagement with the material and the value they place on topics relating to young people's mental health:

> *This week we watched a video titled 'Response Ability.' ... It was an interesting video that painted the picture of a school setting quite well. The activities were quite helpful for prospective teachers and the fact that the video question about 'what happened to Vince?' was left unanswered was good ...* - Pre-service teacher, Victoria, 2002

> *By discussing mental health issues in teacher training it will help me to become a better teacher, because I will be more in tune to my students' needs ... This course gives me more confidence in recognising this behaviour, because this course uses case studies and real life situations to explain mental health.* - Pre-service teacher, NSW, 2003

Opportunities and Future Directions

While the program has been successful in augmenting the inclusion of social and emotional wellbeing in teacher education programs, there are a number of issues for further consideration. It should be noted that the aim of the project team is to support the inclusion of relevant topics, rather than to champion the use of the Response Ability resources themselves. The Response Ability materials provide a useful tool, but the team also supports teacher educators wishing to utilise other resources and approaches to integrate wellbeing into their units.

In some universities using the resources, the issue is explicitly taught only in relation to health curriculum and pedagogy, or in elective units. The result is that pre-service teachers preparing to teach in other disciplines, or those who do not have a particular interest in this area, may not be exposed in any systematic or comprehensive way to the relevant principles. This does not indicate that they have no appreciation of social and emotional wellbeing in learning, either intuitively or though some reference to the issues in a foundation unit. However, they may be less thoroughly prepared or confident than some of their peers in promoting resilience or responding to troubled young people.

While in-depth exploration of this material may be particularly suited to specific curriculum or elective units, it would be helpful for all students to have some introduction to the key concepts. Ideally, social and emotional wellbeing should be integrated broadly across teacher education programs, being explored from different perspectives in a number of units, so that its fundamental contribution to learning can be reinforced. The content should include not only recognising and supporting young people at risk, but also using the principles of resilience and supportive environments to promote learning.

> *It will help me be a better teacher because Response Ability makes you aware of issues and problems that may affect students' mental health. It also gives me ideas on how to identify problems and how to get help for students. All teachers should use this course because it provides information that may help teachers improve learning and it may help to save a life.*
> - Pre service teacher, completing an elective unit, NSW, 2003

The size and complexity of many faculties and schools of education is a barrier to the ideal pattern of cross-disciplinary integration, but not an insurmountable one. Difficulties do arise from the pressures of a crowded university curriculum and from the increasing number of sessional staff, who may not feel empowered to influence broader program-planning decisions. In practice, the inclusion of the issue of social and emotional wellbeing (whether in health units or foundation subjects) is often dependent upon the commitment of one or two staff members who value it or have a research interest in the area.

However, the strength of the Response Ability resources is that they are sufficiently flexible to combine a consideration of wellbeing with other traditional content areas, such as bullying or adolescent development. They have been used in diverse unit contexts, including special education, educational psychology and sociology. Some universities are now moving toward a more systematic approach that will allow social and emotional wellbeing to be formally written into emerging program plans. To support this process, members of the project team who have experience as teacher educators could provide information and suggestions for program-planning committees, if desired. Perhaps the key to fostering this movement is to more widely publicise the growing evidence for a link between wellbeing and educational outcomes and to highlight how this is increasingly reflected in schools and policy.

In March 2005, the Response Ability project team launched an occasional papers series entitled *Education Connect*, designed to stimulate engagement with the issues of social and emotional wellbeing in education. Distributed to universities, it is designed primarily to elucidate the centrality of social and emotional wellbeing and its connections with educational theory and practice, as well as health and social research. It is hoped that the publication will build

connections between educators who see this as an important area of practice and inquiry. Contributions will be welcomed from educators who would like to comment on relevant issues.

Although Response Ability began as a health initiative, it has been characterised by increasingly stronger partnerships with educators and a shift from an almost exclusive focus on health outcomes to a mutual focus on the positive development of young people – including educational, health and social outcomes. The concept of social and emotional wellbeing bridges the artificial divisions between these social service domains. The question is no longer *whether* we should actively address social and emotional wellbeing, but rather *how* we can best apply these principles in our schools, services and communities. A challenge for the project team is to transfer ownership of this issue more fully to the community of teacher educators in Australia, without conceptualising it as belonging to any particular domain, such as health or sociology or special education.

Much, although not all, of the research in this area comes from overseas, particularly the United States. Furthermore, a great deal of the research is rooted in the domains of psychology or health, rather than educational theory, educational practice or social inquiry. There are opportunities to explore social and emotional wellbeing more fully in the Australian context and consciousness, particularly with a focus on Indigenous and culturally diverse communities and on Australian school structures. Educators may wish to recommend this as a potential area of inquiry for higher degree students under their supervision. The topic also provides possibilities for partnerships with other faculties and services in universities and beyond, an approach which is now favoured in many tertiary settings.

A further strategy for integrating social and emotional wellbeing more explicitly into teacher education could be advocacy by key stakeholders regarding more formal mechanisms, such as teacher competencies and program accreditation. This is perhaps a timely if controversial proposition, given developments in recent years relating to teacher competencies or standards in various states and territories, and the more recent formation of the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL).

Concluding Comments

There is a growing weight of evidence that a focus on social and emotional wellbeing in school settings can contribute to improved learning outcomes, behaviour and social development. In recent years, Australia has seen the development of a number of school-based mental health promotion programs and a shift toward a greater focus on whole-school approaches and the acknowledgement of elements of a supportive learning environment.

Given this shifting context in international and Australian schools, early career teachers will benefit from an appreciation of social and emotional wellbeing as a key element of their role. This can be achieved, at least in part, by the explicit inclusion of relevant topics in teacher education programs. Data collected by teacher educators and members of the Response Ability team suggest that pre-service teachers value mental health and related topics as an area of learning in their program. Data also show that the provision of resources and support can be helpful to teacher educators and universities.

To progress the issue further and ensure sustainability of these topics in teacher education, it will be helpful to promote debate and discussion about these issues and to more widely publicise the research that links wellbeing to core educational outcomes. Academics and higher degree students in education, as well as teachers themselves, could also be encouraged to consider social and emotional wellbeing in the Australian context as a useful area of research.

References

Benard, B. (1991). Fostering resilience in kids: Factors in the family, school and community. San Francisco: WestEd.

Benard, B. (1997) Turning it around for all youth: From risk to resilience. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 412309).

Fuller, A., McGraw, K. & Goodyear, M. (2002). Bungy jumping through life: A developmental framework for the promotion of resilience. In

Griffiths, T. & Cooper, S. (2005). Social and Emotional Wellbeing in Schools: A review of systems' policies. *Education Connect,* Issue One, pp. 5-11.

Rowling, L., Martin, G. and Walker, L. (2002). *Mental Health Promotion and Young People: Concepts and Practice.*