

# Social and Emotional Wellbeing in Teacher Education: Reflections by Early Career Teachers

Noelene Weatherby-Fell (Southern Cross University) and Karen Vincent (Hunter Institute of Mental Health)

Any correspondence should be addressed to Noelene Weatherby-Fell at: [nweather@scu.edu.au](mailto:nweather@scu.edu.au)

## Abstract

In recent years the area of mental health has grown in importance in education, and is recognised as a major health issue. Youth suicide, depression and rises in the use of the psychiatric diagnoses have had a significant impact on social and emotional wellbeing in the classrooms and schools.

This paper reviews the implementation of a mental health and well-being resource in a teacher education course for all beginning teachers and tracking a sample of graduates into their second year of teaching. In beginning teacher education programs the emphasis to date for dealing with the issues and programs for mental health in the school system has focused within a single curriculum area.

Increasingly the focus of teachers is not only on the attainment of curriculum knowledge, but on the individual – their personal development and how it relates to socialisation, learning outcomes and academic achievements. Pre-service teachers believe their profession has a role in mental health promotion and suicide prevention, and it is important to learn during the course of their training, rather than only at post graduation. Social and emotional well-being, and resilience are all also important for our early teachers – the teacher's responsibility can be daunting and is one that requires support and preparation for the role.

## Introduction

In recent years the issue of mental health problems in the school setting, and the broader concept of promoting resilience for all students, has grown in importance in education. Unresolved mental health problems including depression can have devastating effects in adolescence and increase the risk of school failure, violence or suicidal behaviour (Lewinsohn, Rohde, Klein & Seeley, 1999). Conversely, teaching in ways that promote resilience may help to prevent mental health difficulties and also improve behaviour and learning outcomes (Zins *et al*, 2004).

Sawyer, Arney, Baghurst, Clark, Graetz *et al*. (2001) reported in the Child and Adolescent Component of the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing that fourteen percent of children and adolescents (aged 4 to 17) were identified as having mental health problems. This was the first epidemiological study delineating the prevalence of mental health problems in children and adolescents at a national level in Australia. Many of those with mental health problems also had significant difficulties in other areas of living and as a group they were considered to be at increased risk of suicidal behaviour. Only 25% of these children had received any professional intervention in the six months prior to the survey (Sawyer *et al*, 2001). Other studies also suggest that the majority of young people who have mental health problems do not seek professional help (Donald *et al*, 2000).

Teachers have an important role in recognising and referring young people at risk of mental health problems. This role may be particularly important in disadvantaged or remote communities where young people have limited access to other sources of support. Sawyer *et al* (2001) alert us to correlations between mental health problems and certain socioeconomic characteristics, such as low income, single or step parents, unemployment and children whose parents left school at an early age. Many beginning teachers may find that their first teaching appointment will be in an area where the demographic characteristics indicate a higher risk for mental health problems. There is added complexity in rural areas where Fuller, Edwards, Proctor and Moss (2000) report that GP's, community nurses, police, teachers and clergy are providing the frontline intervention in dealing with mental health issues.

Increased sensitivity to and knowledge of mental health and wellbeing, as well as mental health problems, will greatly improve the level and type of support educators are able to offer their students. There is also increasing acceptance of a systematic, whole-school model in which all teachers have a contribution to mental health and wellbeing, as exemplified by school-based programs such as MindMatters and the Gatehouse project. This raises the question of how well teacher education programs prepare teachers for these aspects of their roles. Until recently, any explicit coverage of mental health in teacher education programs was frequently relegated to the health and personal development curriculum area, with the result that many teachers may not have received explicit instruction about these issues.

In recent years, a national government-funded program called Response Ability has provided resources and support for teacher educators and has advocated for the inclusion of relevant topics in units that will be taken by all pre-service teachers, not only those with an interest in health or welfare. This paper reports on feedback obtained from a small number of early career teachers, approximately twelve months after they completed their university training. The majority of the sample is drawn from former students of Southern Cross University (Lismore) where the Response Ability resources and other materials have been used to explicitly address mental health in conjunction with the final year professional experience unit. The purpose of this study was to examine whether early career teachers could recall having addressed the relevant topics and whether they valued mental health or social and emotional wellbeing as an important part of the teacher's role.

## **Methodology**

A questionnaire was administered to a small group of early career secondary teachers who graduated from Southern Cross University, Lismore, in 2003. Both Graduate Diploma and combined degree students in 2003 covered a considerable amount of mental health related content in their final Professional Experience Unit, through a series of seminars. This material was delivered by the Professional Experience Coordinator (Secondary Programs) who used Response Ability, MindMatters and other relevant material to explore the social and emotional wellbeing, relating the topics specifically to the teacher's role.

In March 2005, the Professional Experience Coordinator contacted a number of former students via e-mail to seek their feedback on aspects of their pre-service training. Eight former Southern Cross University (SCU) students responded. The Coordinator was also able to obtain five responses from early career teachers not trained at SCU. The questionnaire asked about early teachers' recollection of the coverage of social and emotional wellbeing in their training, as well as their perceptions about relevance of this topic to pre-service education. A broad definition of social and emotional wellbeing was offered on the questionnaire, but particular resources were not named. Where respondents did report the inclusion of explicit mental health topics, they were asked to indicate whether this had impacted upon their confidence in dealing with certain issues in a school setting. Feedback was sought about the value of studying social and emotional wellbeing at a pre-service level.

## **Results**

### **Respondents**

All 13 respondents were working as teachers in a secondary school setting, either in permanent full-time, permanent part-time or casual employment. They taught in a range of learning areas, including mathematics, science, personal development, health and physical education (PDHPE), human society and its environment (HSIE), visual arts, design and technology.

### **Recall**

Eleven respondents reported that their teacher education program had specifically addressed some element(s) of social and emotional wellbeing. The two who could not recall explicit content in this area were not trained at Southern Cross University. In response to an open-ended question about the topics covered, respondents nominated the following: resilience, depression, bullying, peer relationships, child abuse, disorders relevant to teaching, mental health, eating disorders, suicide awareness and prevention. Some from SCU recalled details of an assessment item that required them to incorporate relevant issues into lesson planning. Non-SCU graduates recalled such content within broader areas such as child psychology, sociology and inclusive classrooms.

Graduates from SCU, most of whom had little or no contact with the Coordinator of the program since beginning teaching, could recall several resources that had been used in their program: particularly the play 'The Black Dog' within the Response Ability resource, the use of role-plays (some from Response Ability) and also MindMatters, Beyond Blue and Kids Help Line. Non-SCU graduates did not nominate any particular resources that they could recall.

### **Impact on beliefs and practice**

Respondents were asked whether learning about these issues at university had impacted on their beliefs about the roles of schools and teachers, or on their teaching practice. Several SCU graduates responded:

*Covering issues about social and emotional wellbeing [at uni] made me more aware of what might be happening in students' lives ... and highlighted the need for me to be sensitive to these things as a teacher*

*It was a great help in understanding how to deal with events and what I would expect*

*Highlighted to me the importance of recognising the symptoms of different problems ... and deciding on appropriate responses and appropriate referral.*

*Learning about these issues in an academic setting certainly increased my body of knowledge on the subject and in many ways allowed me to make sense of some of my life experiences.*

In response to this question, a non-SCU graduate who reported having had little explicit content on these issues at university reported:

*...very little focus on the relationship between teacher and student ... I have come to see this is one of the most important parts of teaching ...*

### **Broad value of learning about social and emotional wellbeing**

Respondents were also invited to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with several statements, by circling a number on a scale of 1 to 10, with ten indicating very strong agreement. Seven of the SCU graduates and three of the non-SCU graduates completed this question. Unfortunately the small sample size precluded a statistical analysis of any significance in difference between the two groups.

In regard to a statement about the inclusion of relevant topics in their teacher education programs helping them to become 'a better teacher', the SCU graduates ranged in scores from 5 to 9, (mean 6.71). Three seemed neutral (scores of 5 to 6) while four were more positive (scores of 7-9). One non-SCU graduate disagreed with the statement, while the other two showed fairly strong support with a score of 8.

The second statement was that learning about wellbeing at university had helped the early teachers to be more resilient themselves, with a particular focus on the workplace. Three students disagreed (score of 2), two were uncertain (scores of 5-6) while two agreed (scores of 8-9). As the SCU graduates were known to the Coordinator, it was possible to note a pattern in these responses: the three who disagreed were considered by the Coordinator to have high levels of resilience and confidence before covering this material, so they may not have noted any change in this regard. Non-SCU respondents had a wide range of responses, from 3 to 9.

### **Impact on confidence in specific situations**

A further statement invited respondents to consider whether the inclusion of wellbeing / mental health in their program had helped them to feel more confident about *identifying* young people in need of support. The responses from SCU graduates ranged from 6 to 9, indicating a moderate to high level of support for this statement (mean 7.43). A related statement about *responding to* young people in need of support drew more diverse responses, including a score of 3 and a score of 5; the other scores ranged from 6 to 9, suggesting that most but not all respondents were supportive (mean 6.57).

Both of these statements drew a wide range of responses from non-SCU graduates. In general, graduates of SCU evidently felt somewhat confident about identifying young people at risk but slightly less confident about actually responding appropriately. This is in keeping with feedback received from the pre-service teachers shortly after covering relevant material in their programs and may reflect a natural anxiety about actually responding in difficult situations, despite some theoretical discussion of such issues at university.

### **Importance of issues in pre-service teacher education**

Respondents were asked whether it is helpful for early teachers to have received some training in their teacher education program about students 'at risk of depression, suicide, etc' to which there was a strong positive range of responses, from 7 to 10 (mean 8.71) for the graduates from SCU. Non-SCU graduates also rated this highly, with scores of 8, 9 and 10. This shows broad agreement for the proposition that such topics should be addressed at pre-service level.

The next statement related to whether it is helpful for early teachers to have received training in the more nebulous area of 'students' resilience and wellbeing.' Both SCU graduates and others also rated this highly, with scores ranging from 8 to 10 for most respondents. One SCU graduate returned a score of 6, perhaps indicating some uncertainty about the value of this area in pre-service education.

## **Teachers, schools and school success**

Respondents were challenged with the statement that teachers have an important role in creating supportive school environments and building resilience. Both SCU and non-SCU graduates agreed strongly, with all scores ranging from 8 to 10. They were also asked whether resilience and student wellbeing should be recognised as an important priority for schools in terms of their culture, policy and practice. Again, all respondents strongly agreed, with scores of 9 and 10. This indicates strong support from early teachers that their role goes beyond teaching content, and perhaps identifying those at risk, to broader issues of the environment and resilience. The latter principles are consistent with whole-school approaches to wellbeing and are increasingly reflected in departmental policies for schools (Griffiths & Cooper, 2005).

Early career teachers were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement that young people's social and emotional wellbeing, or resilience, can impact on school performance, behaviour or learning outcomes. There was also strong agreement with this proposition, with all respondents returning scores of 9 or 10. This indicates either an intuitive or an academic understanding of the interactions between wellbeing and more traditional educational outcomes.

## **Other needs and comments**

In two final open-ended questions, respondents were invited to add other comments and to reflect on topics they may have liked to cover in greater depth at a pre-service level.

Comments among those who had received some pre-service training revolved around further practical concerns such as: working with parents on these issues; working with students with behavioural problems; exploring the 'boundaries' between teachers and students when discussing emotional issues; further training in social and emotional wellbeing after approximately 6 months in the role; and issues around teachers' own resilience, wellbeing and collegiality.

Non-SCU graduates who had reported little or no explicit content on these issues in their pre-service training indicated that the following topics would have been helpful: identification of symptoms of mental health problems; how to follow up possible mental health problems; dealing with bullying; responding to students at risk; the need to build resilience and wellbeing in schools.

## **Discussion**

While this is a preliminary investigation with a small number of early career teachers, it strongly suggests that graduates do recall explicit coverage of social and emotional wellbeing received in their programs, a little more than one year after graduation, and do value this content as being relevant to the roles of teachers. Several were also able to recall specific resources they had used while covering these topics. While recall may have been aided by being approached by the Coordinator who taught this specific element, most of the graduates had little or no contact with the Coordinator in the intervening months.

When asked whether covering such material made them 'a better teacher' several respondents were neutral, perhaps indicating uncertainty over interpretation of the phrase. The response to the proposition that it had made them more resilient themselves was mixed, but may reflect baseline levels of resilience and confidence. Anecdotally, several teacher educators have indicated a perception that covering this material does make their pre-service teachers more resilient, but repetition with a larger and more diverse sample would be required to substantiate this.

Most respondents who had covered material explicitly did feel that it had made them more confident in identifying young people in need of support, although there were slightly lower levels of confidence about their ability to respond appropriately in a practical situation. This issue of confidence was also tested with this particular cohort while still at SCU, using a baseline and follow-up survey in association with a four-week focus on mental health and wellbeing (Weatherby-Fell & Kean, 2004). There was a significant increase in self-reported confidence in responding to a troubled young person, immediately after completing this section of the unit. The findings with the early career teachers suggest that such increased confidence may be maintained to at least some degree into the period of practice after graduation. Again, a larger study could confirm this.

There was a strong level of agreement among early career teachers that resilience and student wellbeing – as reflected in school environments, policy and practice – is an important priority for schools and for teachers. This is highly encouraging, given the developments in education department policy and the provision of whole-school mental health programs, and suggests the development of a very positive culture in schools. Early career teachers see the relevance of this approach, relating it to other issues such as learning outcomes and behaviour management. If, as this data suggests, new graduates can retain their enthusiasm and commitment in this regard, such movements are more likely to be sustained in school culture, with benefits for the wellbeing of all in the school community.

The collection of such data is helpful at a local level for creating strong relationships between schools and universities and also for providing useful feedback on graduates' impressions of their pre-service training. This can be used to adjust pre-service programs to better equip graduates for the school setting. However, as previously mentioned, this particular inquiry is limited by a small sample size. A useful follow-up study would be to repeat similar questions with early career teachers from a number of schools, likely to have drawn their graduates from a range of universities, and to look for any statistically significant differences between those who could recall explicit content and those who could not. While short-term follow-up data analysed by the Response Ability team strongly suggests the advantages of explicit coverage, a larger study could be used to assess whether increases in knowledge and confidence penetrate into post-graduation practice.

## References:

- Donald, M., Dower, J., Lucke, J. and Raphael, B. (2000). *The Queensland Young People's Mental Health Survey*. Brisbane: University of Queensland.
- Fuller, J., Edwards, J., Proctor, N., & Moss, J. (2000). How definition of mental health problems can influence help seeking in rural and remote communities. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 8, 148-153.
- Griffiths, T. & Cooper, S. (2005). Social and Emotional Wellbeing in Schools: A review of systems' policies. *Education Connect*, Issue One, pp. 5-11.
- Lewinsohn, P.M., Rohde, P., Klein, D.N., & Seeley, J.R. (1999). Natural course of adolescent depressive disorder: Continuity into young adulthood. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 38(1), 56-63.
- Sawyer, M.G., Arney, F.M., Baghurst, P.A., Clark, J.J., Graetz, B.W., Kosky, R.J., Nurcombe, B., Patton, G.C., Prior, M.R., Raphael, B., Rey, J.M., Whaites, L.C. & Zubrick, S.R.. (2001). The mental health of young people in Australia: key findings from the child and adolescent component of the national survey of mental health and wellbeing. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 35(6), 806- 814
- Weatherby-Fell, N. & Kean, B. (2004) Mental health and teacher education – Preparing beginning teachers who are resilient for themselves and others. ATEA Annual Conference, Conference Proceedings, Bathurst.
- Zins, J.E., Bloodworth, M.R., Weissberg, R.P. & Walberg, H. (2004). The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success. In J.E. Zins, R.P. Weissberg, M.C. Wang & H.J. Walberg. *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* (pp. 3-22). New York: Teachers College Press.