

Supporting Well-Being in a Year 2/3 Classroom

By Dr Elspeth McInnes AM, Dr Victoria Whittington &
Ms Alexandra Diamond

University of South Australia

Children Communities Connections Nov 2012.

elspeth.mcinnnes@unisa.edu.au

victoria.whittington@unisa.edu.au

alexandra.diamond@unisa.edu.au

Overview

- About the project and its community
- Schools building resilience
- Trauma, stress and learning
- Finding ways to develop and support student well-being in the early years of school.

Project background

Salisbury Communities for Children (SC4C)

- began in 2005 with
- funded by FaHCSIA
- support families with children aged birth- 5 years
- eastern suburbs of Salisbury, South Australia.

2009 onward SC4C extends support into the primary school years.

- Consultations → Children and Families Support Coordinator:
 - works with counsellors, chaplains, Aboriginal liaison and other school staff
 - creates networks between agencies to support children and their families,
 - provides holistic support in complex cases.
 - currently working with a year 2/3 class teacher on building aspects of children's wellbeing.

The context of the study

ABS (2006):

- SEIFA scores: 908 to 937
- high school/ TAFE educated
- Office workers / trade skilled / labourers / retail / small business



Children in eastern Salisbury suburbs

AEDI 2006:

- about half of the 5-year-olds developing well,
- 29% vulnerable in 1 or more developmental domains.
- 13% not doing well on measures of emotional maturity
 - had trouble concentrating, managing their negative emotions, not ready to help others.

AEDI 2009-10: higher % of children entered school with difficulties in 1 or more developmental domains than Australia overall.

The role of schools

- Resilience is the ability to adapt effectively in the face of adversity or stress (Naglieri & LeBuffe 2005).
- High-quality schools can help develop children's emotional resilience by fostering children's and families' physical, social, emotional, and intellectual well-being (O'Dougherty Wright & Masten 2005).
- Trauma affected children “can affect the experience of the whole class group and change the shape of the school day” (Australian Childhood Foundation 2010).

The role of schools

- The *World Health Organisation* (2010) recommends 'mental health promotional activities in schools'.
- *Australian National Mental Health Plan* (2009): working 'with schools...to deliver programs to improve mental health literacy and enhance resilience' = key action.

Learning social relationships

- Primary schools are the main extra-familial social context for children to learn about themselves and their peers
- Peer acceptance in the primary-school years leads to related to later healthy psychological adjustment (eg. Pederson et al. 2007).
- Self-management of emotions and impulses is a key component of successful social interaction (Cillessen & Bellmore 2004).

Chronic stress / trauma & learning

- Repeated exposure to traumatic stressors leads to poor school achievement and relationship difficulties (Australian Childhood Foundation 2010; Ko et al. 2008)
- Stress sources: illness, neglect, poverty, racism, family/neighbourhood violence, social isolation.
- Repeated trauma / chronic high stress leads to:
 - damage to hippocampus
 - brain pathways attuned to detecting and responding to alarm stimuli (Gerhardt 2004; Monk & Nelson 2002) .

Chronic stress / trauma & learning

- Traumatic stressors can lead to memory problems, including intrusive thoughts.
- Response to perceived threat is prioritised over language and cognition:
 - heightened arousal disrupts the “collaboration between the emotional and cognitive parts of the brain – the limbic system and the neo-cortexoften lead[ing] children to develop an emotion-based coping style aimed at managing overwhelming feelings rather than thoughtfully tackling the challenges at hand” (van der Kolk 1997 cited in Stien & Kendall 2004, p.75).

Chronic stress / trauma & learning

- ‘Chronic childhood trauma interferes with the capacity to integrate sensory, emotional and cognitive information into a cohesive whole and sets the stage for unfocused and irrelevant responses to subsequent stress’
(Streeck-Fischer & Van der Kolk 2000, p. 903).

Safety is necessary to learning

- Traumatized /chronically stressed children may experience new activities as threatening,
 - difficult to feel safe enough to be open to new
 - information (eg. new words),
 - social experiences and cultural contexts, leading to gaps in their social education

Overcoming trauma

- Traumatized and chronically stressed children need to learn how to learn successfully, and to develop new, adaptive responses.
- Assisting children to become aware of their emotional and physical states and to learn strategies to self-regulate when they are feeling stressed or reacting to past traumas provides a pathway to enable improved social and emotional well-being and enable effective learning (McCaskill 2007; Perry 2007).

The research project's aim:

to identify whether a teacher-led focus on actively supporting children's well-being can improve:

- children's ability to identify their own and other's feelings
- their social relationships at school, and,
- their subjective wellbeing.

Improved student learning is also expected to occur if the above outcomes are achieved.

About the class

- Combined Year 2/3 class of 27 children.
- 9 children from ESL background and 1 ATSI child
- 1 child with a disability and 8 with chronic medical conditions, such as asthma.
- 11 children eligible for school card
- All children participated in class activities, but consent given for data collection on 15 children – 6 x Year 2 and 9 x Year 3.

Major resources used

- Australian Childhood Foundation 2010, *Making space for learning; trauma informed practice in schools*, www.childhood.org.au
- Kimochi <http://www.kimochis.com.au/> “Toys with feelings inside” a Japanese-developed resource to focus on feelings.
- *Play is the Way* by Wilson McCaskill
<https://www.thegamefactory.com.au//about/index>

Play is the Way

Aims:

- to engage children's emotions and call for mastery and control of those emotions to achieve success, and,
- promote peer support, trust, respect and understanding.

‘results in significantly improved pro-social behaviour in the school environment’ (Street et al. 2004, p. 97).



Photos courtesy of Rachele Soar & Laura Proctor.

A final year pre-service educator's reflections on implementation of *Play is the Way*

With the teacher's support, a 4th year student ran *Play is the Way* on Tuesday and Thursday mornings for 5 weeks.

Requirements for success:

- be familiar with the language: *"a vital aspect to teaching [Play is the Way] but...difficult to remember every week."*
- be ready to use the children's names (children wore badges)
- whole of school support: *"The school staff were so helpful and supportive; this definitely helped."*

"Children's behaviour became easier to control and they seemed to be connecting my instructions with the effectiveness of the game and the choices they were making. By the end of week 5, I was able to see a dramatic change in the children. Some children that would not participate in the beginning at all, went from being involved for 10 minutes, to participating in the whole session. It was quite a feeling of accomplishment as this is something the teacher and counsellor thought would not be possible for some of the children in the class."



KIMOCHI Toys with Feelings Inside

Bug Makes a Splash!

Bug is afraid to try new things. When his friends invite him for a swim, he would much rather stay at home and read a good book. When Lovey Dove® reminds Bug that it's okay to be afraid, Bug finds the courage to overcome his scared feelings and dives right into the fun surprising everyone!

Measures

- Interviews with the class teacher in which he reflects on changes for children in the class during the school year.
- Children's school attendance and literacy achievements.
- Reported frequency of teacher intervention to manage the behaviour of individual children.
- Children's reported use of 'feelings words' before and after using Kimochis.
- Sociograms in terms 2, 3 & 4 measuring children's peer friendships at school.

Current Position

The project is nearly at the end of implementation in the four term school year.

- Term 1 – no intervention
- Term 2 – introduce Play is the Way
- Term 3 – introduce Kimochis & continue Play is the Way
- Term 4 – continue Kimochis & Play is the Way and Collate data for report

Themes in teacher's reported approach to supporting children's well-being

1. Teacher actively builds positive, caring relationships with children, and between children, including relationship repair

'I have gone to students and ... sat them down one-on-one and ...asked them why, but if you don't have a ...relationship at the start where they trust, they're not going to say it, yeah, so it is about getting to know the students individually.

So I ... tend to think while I can't sit down and talk to a student like I would as a counsellor one-on-one, that's where like I do try and take in more of what they say, like in those little incidental conversations and stuff, to try and learn as much as I can about them in the time I've got and with what I've got, so yeah, I often sit with the kids like when they're eating their lunch and ...talk to a few of them. When I do have to discipline I'm really mindful of repairing the relationship as well afterwards'.

Themes in teacher's reported approach to supporting children's well-being (cont.)

2. Teacher interprets behaviour as communication about the child's state and not as child's innate nature or similar

'I know I've definitely shifted my thinking as a teacher, instead of sort of handing out consequences for poor behaviour, I ask them a lot more now about their choices and making good and bad choices, and understanding that a child who has or is experiencing trauma doesn't have the ability to ... always line up the consequences about behaviour, like ... the consequence really is meaningless and pointless, it just builds up, I guess, angst'.

Themes in teacher's reported approach to supporting children's well-being (cont.)

3. Teacher takes a holistic approach to children, is concerned about aspects of their development and learning, and includes families. Much broader than curriculum 'delivery'.

'Definitely those who are experiencing difficulty in learning my big thing is instilling confidence in them that they can do it because, yeah, I'm a strong believer in your positive thinking will affect your ability to learn any confidence in something ... positive thoughts often lead to positive results; negative thoughts, negative results, and ... I believe it carries over into other areas of your life as well, so definitely if the child can believe they can do it, more than likely they'll try. If they can't at the moment they're giving up, but yeah, really trying to push them in a direction that If it is hard, well what can you do to get through it, and that comes down to that 'Be brave, give it a go, don't be scared if it's too hard'.

Themes in teacher's reported approach to supporting children's well-being (cont.)

4. Teacher sees the class as a community, and the role of the teacher as to lead the creation of that community, and be a positive role model

'The thing that this group is good at is tolerance and understanding. They're very empathetic towards others if you explain to them what the problem is, and I guess that's where the teaching side of it comes, like if they don't know what the problem is, they don't understand it, therefore they're not empathetic, but if I can voice what some people are feeling and understanding, they're very good at coming up with solutions on how we can help other people. When I have challenged them to work with different people they've been fantastic every time. I guess it is just about teaching them those parts of society that makes us like get along and work together.'

'I've had to become more of a role model of the behaviour, like good and bad, like being able to be honest enough with this stuff, to acknowledge your mistakes. I guess it comes down to being brave yourself, putting yourself out there.'

Themes in teacher's reported approach to supporting children's well-being (cont.)

5. School adopts a whole of school approach so that children see a consistent approach with a shared language expressing shared understandings as they progress through the school

'...it would work individually, but it's definitely better with the whole school. I've noticed out in the yard, particularly with a lot of the younger students, I can ask them Do you know the golden rule? and because like they've seen the posters around the school and they say Oh yeah, yeah, what is it? and if they don't know it, somebody else does, so it helps with that language to solve problems out in the yard, and things like that. That is a pretty big bonus to having a whole-school approach to it'.

Themes in teacher's reported approach to supporting children's well-being (cont.)

6. Teacher has a social and emotional development learning program, teaching empathy, tolerance, perspective taking.

'...it's got to be something that's taught, yeah, it's a big thing, and I guess as I've matured as a teacher as well I do understand that it is something that needs to be taught. I remember when I first started I just expected that kids would know that, it was like the students will follow because I expect it, but now I've sort of learned the way no, you do have to teach it and model it and you can't assume that every child comes from a background where it will be taught'.

Themes in teacher's reported approach to supporting children's well-being (cont.)

7. Teacher has knowledge base about stress and trauma and their effect on children

'I did a Minds and Matters one where they did talk a lot about trauma and how that affects people's ability to concentrate and function, and therefore learn.

And then in [School Y], ... we did a whole professional development day particularly on trauma. I can't remember word for word the actual meaning of it, but I know it's that sustained, prolonged effect, I guess, of something where the mind sort of can't switch off from that, they're still in that heightened state. So like without knowing all the jargon and everything behind it, I do believe I've got a pretty good basic understanding of what it is and how it affects people, which then does help me like day to day'.

References

- Australian Childhood Foundation. (2010). *Making space for learning; trauma informed practice in schools*, www.childhood.org.au
- Australian Early Development Index. (2006). *AEDI Community profile; Eastern suburbs of Salisbury SA*, Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health.
- Australian Early Development Index. (2010). *Salisbury – ABS: SEIFA Index of relative socio-economic disadvantage*, <http://maps.aedi.org.au/IA/2011/region/42/atlas.html>
- Cillessen, A.H.N. & Bellmore, A.D. (2004). 'Social skills and interpersonal perception in early and middle childhood', in *Blackwood handbook of childhood social development*, eds. P.K. Smith & C.H. Hart, Malden: Blackwell, pp. 355-374.
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2009). *Fourth national mental health plan: an agenda for collaborative government action in mental health 2009-2014*, Australian Government Department of Health and Aging, [http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/360EB322114EC906CA2576700014A817/\\$File/pla2.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/360EB322114EC906CA2576700014A817/$File/pla2.pdf)
- Gerhardt, S. (2004). *Why love matters: How affection shapes a baby's brain*. Hove, UK: Bruner Routledge.
- Ko, S.J. et al. (2008). 'Creating trauma-informed systems: Child-welfare, education, first responders, health care, juvenile justice', *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 39(4), 396-404.
- McCaskill, W. (2007). *Play is the Way*, Greenwood WA, The Game Factory.
- Monk, C. & Nelson, C. (2002) 'The effects of hydrocortisone on cognitive and neural function', *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 26(4), 505-519.
- Naglieri, J. & LeBuffe, P. (2005). Measuring resilience in children, in *Handbook of resilience in children*, eds. S. Goldstein, & R. Brooks, USA: Springer, pp. 107-124.
- O'Dougherty Wright, M. & Masten, A. (2005). Resilience processes in development, in *Handbook of resilience in children*, eds. S. Goldstein & R. Brooks, USA: Springer, pp. 17-37.
- Pederson, S., Vitaro, F., Barker, E.D. & Anne, I.H. (2007). 'The timing of middle childhood peer rejection and friendship: Linking early behavior to early adolescent adjustment', *Child Development*, 78, 1037-1051.
- Stien, P & Kendall, J. (2004). *Psychological trauma and the developing brain: neurologically based interventions for troubled children*, Binghamton: Haworth Press.
- Streeck-Fischer, Andrew., and Van der Kolk, Bessel. (2000). Down will come baby, cradle and all: Diagnostic and Therapeutic Implications of trauma on child development. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 34 (6): 903-18
- Street, H, Hoppey, D, Kingsbury, D & Ma, T (2004). 'The Game Factory: Using Cooperative Games to Promote Pro-social Behaviour Among Children', *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology*, 4, 97-109.
- World Health Organisation. (2010). *Mental health: strengthening our response*, Fact sheet N°220, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs220/en/>

- Comments and questions?