Premier’s Anika Foundation Youth Depression Awareness Teacher Scholarship

Building Resilience Early to Prevent Youth Depression: Examining Best Practice in Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs

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Youth depression continues to have a significant impact on Australian society, with one in 16 young Australians aged 16 to 24 years currently experiencing a depressive disorder (ABS, 2008). In addition, other children and adolescents may also be experiencing undiagnosed significant depressive symptoms. Depression in youth can lead to detrimental effects on their social, emotional and physical wellbeing, including social withdrawal, school avoidance, risk taking behaviour, non-suicidal self injury, and suicide. Suicide is the predominant cause of deaths in young people, with the subgroups of males and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at even higher risk (ABS, 2014).

Early intervention is imperative to address the devastating effects youth depression has on young people and their families. Schools are the ideal environment to engage students in developing more than just academic skills. Social and emotional skills are important for any individual to develop protective factors such as resiliency, healthy relationships and emotion regulation to minimise the risk of depression. Social and emotional learning (SEL, which is similar to emotional intelligence) involves processes that allow individuals to acquire and apply appropriate knowledge and attitudes, as well as effective skills to understand and manage their own emotions, achieve positive goals, show empathy for others, establish and maintain good relationships and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2014). Meta-analyses (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2001; Payton, Weissberg, Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger & Pachen, 2008) have provided evidence that SEL programs conducted within schools have positive outcomes, including:

* + increased pro-social behaviours
  + reduced conduct problems
  + reduced internalising problems (depression and anxiety)
  + improved attitudes towards school
  + improved academic performance (up to 11 point increases in standardised tests).

SEL can build a strong foundation for children and adolescents to deal with psychological, emotional and social issues throughout their lifetimes. The resiliency developed will not hinder them from experiencing negative emotion, but will provide them with skills to deal effectively with internal and external conflict in the future (CASEL, 2014).

In my role as a school counsellor and district guidance officer, I have had the opportunity to work in many schools in rural and remote New South Wales. Youth depression is the primary issue for many of the students I see and is manifested in a variety of forms.

A proactive approach is vital to build the resilience of all students, including those who are at risk of developing depression. Teaching these skills to all students from a young age is ideal. I have observed programs implemented in schools that focus on building resilience and elements of SEL; however, I am yet to come across a SEL initiative that truly encompasses the whole school and is engrained in all aspects of everyday classroom activity. The programs listed are often compromised due to poor implementation, budgeting issues, competing school activities or being superseded by another program to be implemented.

Focus of My Study

My study tour focused on preventing youth depression by building resilience through school-based SEL initiatives. The aim of the study was to learn from best practice SEL models and provide this information to NSW schools for the successful implementation of SEL programs.

Significant Learning

*Orlando, Florida, USA*

The first destination on my study tour was the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Annual Convention titled Student Success, Mental Health Matters, held in Orlando. The convention was held over four days, enrolled 4619 attendees and provided 1200 educational sessions to choose from. I focused my session attendance on SEL topics, but I also benefited from attending other sessions when SEL sessions were not scheduled. The sessions I attended included mindfulness, perfectionism, executive function, mental health laws, rural school psychology, self injury, assessments and memory impairments.

The learning experiences from these sessions were diverse and insightful. The presenters included professors, researchers and university students, teachers, psychologists, school psychologists and medical practitioners from across the United States. The key SEL findings from the convention sessions included planning and monitoring systems, pre- and post-test data collection, whole school mental health screening, teacher buy-in, best practice evidence-based programs, successful implementation strategies, family and community SEL and improved social, emotional, behavioural and academic outcomes for students.

*Austin, Texas, USA*

In Austin, Texas, I had the opportunity to work with the Austin Independent School District (AISD) SEL team. The AISD is involved in the Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL is the USA’s leading organisation advancing the development of academic, social and emotional competence for all students. Their mission is to help make evidence-based SEL an integral part of education from preschool through high school. Through research, practice and policy, CASEL collaborates to ensure all students become knowledgeable, responsible, caring and contributing members of society (CASEL, 2015).

The CDI is an initiative launched by CASEL in 2011 aimed at supporting school districts’ capacities to promote SEL for all students. The initiative recognises that positive student outcomes depend on improving SEL learning experiences in classrooms and schools, which in turn depends on improving district-wide capacities and conditions (CASEL, 2015). Across the USA eight school districts are currently registered with the CDI. To register the district superintendent must commit to planning for and implementing SEL programs for a period of time in all schools within their district. Most districts receive additional funding from private organisations.

The AISD SEL team focuses on three key areas: explicit instruction in SEL program implementation, integrating SEL into classroom practice, and fostering positive school climate and culture. The team comprises of a SEL director and a number of SEL specialists who support schools in SEL teacher education, program implementation, policies and procedures, and program evaluation. Schools in the AISD implement the SEL program Second Step with students in Preschool to Year 8, and School-Connect with students in Year 9-12 (Committee for Children, 2015). Students complete Second Step via explicit weekly SEL lessons, although they are exposed to SEL concepts in the classroom every day. I observed School-Connect at Austin High School, where the SEL program is operated as an elective subject called Methods for Academic and Personal Success. I had the opportunity to speak with students currently engaged in both programs. It was intriguing and inspiring to hear their personal stories of growth; they reported improvements in self-esteem, organisational skills, motivation to achieve, relationships with parents, problem solving in the school yard (including dealing with bullying behaviour) and their concepts of the opposite sex.

*Chicago, Illinois, USA*

Chicago, Illinois, is the home of CASEL headquarters. Here, I had the opportunity to interview and visit a high school with Pamela Randall-Garner, CASEL Senior Staff Advisor-CDI. Pamela provides support to SEL district teams involved in the CDI. During our visit with a CDI Chicago school Pamela was evaluating a pilot program developed by the Mathematics Assessment Resource Service. The pilot promotes integrating SEL into mathematics lessons. The lesson I observed used the SEL concepts of problem solving, perseverance and team work. Discussions about these concepts took place while students were completing mathematics problems. After the lesson Pamela interviewed the mathematics teachers. The teachers reported that at first they were apprehensive about teaching SEL in their lessons. They admitted they initially thought SEL only belonged in certain subjects, such as PD/Health/PE, and certainly not mathematics. They reported they initially did not feel professionally equipped to teach SEL; however, after professional development training sessions and participation in the pilot program they feel confident in integrating SEL into their mathematics lessons and can see an improvement in their students’ participation and confidence towards the subject.

*Oakland, California, USA*

In Oakland, California, I visited the Oakland Unified School District SEL team. This team comprises of a director of SEL and leadership development, a coordinator of SEL and leadership and several communications partners. When this team was established in 2012, a strategic plan was developed into an eight-year SEL journey map. This map is visually represented across one wall in the district’s SEL office. The journey map includes:

* + current reality
  + SEL definition
  + stages of the journey
  + our vision 2020: we’ve transformed into a thriving district

A key feature from the SEL journey was the initial planning for gradual SEL education. The SEL team decided they needed take time to engage in SEL themselves, to gain a greater understanding of the key concepts on a personal level and to build a solid foundation for the SEL journey. The SEL team then worked with teachers, school staff, district office staff, parents and the community to develop adult SEL skills. And lastly, SEL was brought into the classrooms, where students became engaged in SEL programs taught by teachers and supported by parents who had experienced SEL themselves.

*Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, Australia*

In Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, I attended the Black Dog Institute courseBumps in the Road: Recognising and Diagnosing Mood Disorders in Young People. This course explored aspects of depression, including the development of depression, warning signs and diagnosing depression using the unitary model and Black Dog Institute Model. I found the Black Dog Institute Model for diagnosing depression particularly interesting, as it focuses on ten depressive types based on personality and how they can manifest as depression. Each type requires a different therapeutic approach. I look forward to using this therapeutic structure within my own work, as each student will receive a tailored intervention program that will meet their specific needs.

Recommendations for SEL Programs in Schools

Findings from my study tour have allowed me to reflect on the best practice of SEL programs in schools. A set of recommendations follow for schools that wish to effectively implement SEL programs and promote positive outcomes for their students.

*Planning*

Planning is an important part of preparing for successfully implementing a SEL program. A school should develop a team designated to monitoring the implementation of the SEL program. This team could be an already established team, such as the Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) team or Learning and Support Team (LST). PBL can be incorporated into SEL programs, as the two initiatives complement each other and increase positive outcomes throughout the school. Sometimes schools believe they must affiliate with one or the other; however, this is not the case. If SEL is monitored through an already existing team, it is recommended that SEL maintain a regular place on the agenda to discuss important elements of SEL implementation.

Goal setting is another important aspect of the planning process. The Oakland Unified School District SEL team demonstrated this process effectively by establishing their goals in a sequential manner over an eight-year period. The long-term success of the program is greater when aiming for goals that have been designed to be achieved in a sequence because the foundation is stronger and effective processes have been firmly established and ingrained in everyday school life. School staff are more likely to participate in teaching the programs, which will ultimately lead to better outcomes for their students in the long term.

*Programs*

For students to achieve the impressive outcomes outlined in the meta-analyses (Durlak, et al., 2001; Payton, et al., 2008) – increased pro-social behaviours, reduced conduct problems, reduced depression and anxiety symptoms, and improved academic performance – it is imperative that schools use evidence-based SEL programs. CASEL provides research into evaluating SEL programs and has released the latest version of The CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs (CASEL, 2015). This guide provides information about whether SEL programs meet the requirements to be classified as evidenced-based programs. Each program must be well-designed, high quality, and evidenced-based. When programs meet all three criteria then they can be classified as evidenced-based and are added to the CASEL SELect list. Some SELect programs include Al’s Pals, Positive Action, Second Step and RULER. These are all American programs; CASEL does not evaluate Australian programs. Effective SEL programs have been developed in Australia, such as the FRIENDS series (Barrett, 2012).

*Implementation*

Implementing SEL programs in schools can be an expensive exercise; however, if the program is correctly implemented the positive outcomes will be seen as compensation. Less time will be spent on behaviour management, and there will be a more positive school atmosphere, increased academic success, improved mental health (fewer school counsellor referrals) and improved relationships (less bullying and playground incidents).

Successful implementation of a SEL program begins with teacher buy-in. The more a teacher believes in a program the better chance there is they will follow through with implementing it correctly and completely. Teacher buy-in begins with identifying their needs, which can be done by completing a survey. From those results goals should to be created to develop clear objectives with staff. The next step is educating school staff, including administration and district office staff, on the elements of SEL. As demonstrated by the Oakland Unified School District, by providing SEL training to staff on a personal level fosters a greater understanding and respect for the SEL elements. By taking this time for teacher buy-in, successful implementation is more likely. Only after this is it time for teachers to implement the SEL program in the classroom.

Another important factor to consider when implementing a SEL program in a school is the scheduling of the program. Sometimes in-schools initiatives are seen as additional to the curriculum, or just another thing to do in an already busy timetable. When implementing SEL programs it is important to schedule in SEL lessons; some schools all complete SEL lessons at the same time each week. This decreases the chance of a teacher missing a lesson here and there when they could not find the time.

Implementing a SEL program can raise some anxiety in teachers who may not be comfortable leading lessons about social and emotional concepts; however, as demonstrated in the Chicago CDI high school, mathematics teachers were pleasantly surprised when working out of their comfort zone teaching SEL once they had attempted the lessons and their confidence was raised. It is also important not to schedule SEL lessons on a Friday afternoon, or in the last few days before school holidays. SEL lessons should be taught explicitly throughout the year, with SEL concepts used in the classroom in everyday activities and in the playground. Whole school involvement in SEL means this learning can continue out of the classroom, in the front office, at home and in the community.

In viewing a number of SEL programs, I recommend Second Step, a program created by the Committee for Children (2015). This program is evidence based and appears to be easy to use; it is contained in one box with accompanying resources and is sequenced in an effective format. Schools are not required to buy a box for each class (although this promotes a greater commitment to regular implementation) and they do not need to buy workbooks for every student, every year. This aspect is very appealing to schools because the ongoing financial costs are limited. Second Step only provides SEL programs for Preschool–Year 8. A complimentary program has been developed called School-Connect for Years 9–12. This program is currently in its second edition.

*Evaluating*

Evaluating SEL programs is a key part of successful implementation, as schools can use this information to guide future directions in their students’ social and emotional education. Evaluation can be conducted in a variety of ways.

The Oakland Unified School District SEL team and schools have developed a section on their student report card evaluating the student’s progress in social and emotional learning skills. The outcomes assessed fall under the CASEL SEL elements:

* + self-awareness
  + self-management
  + social awareness
  + relationship skills
  + responsible decision making.

Each year group’s reporting outcomes vary depending on their developmental level. This form of evaluation is useful, as SEL programs are thoroughly entrenched in Oakland Unified School District schools and teachers and parents are able to see track a student’s SEL progress.

Pre- and post-testing is another popular format for evaluating SEL programs. Students and/or teachers complete a survey before and after implementing a SEL program. Many different surveys are used, with a main focus on emotion regulation and monitoring, relationships, social awareness, self-concept and self-esteem (internalising behaviour; depression and anxiety), conduct (externalising behaviour) and school engagement. Comprehensive surveys may be available via the school counsellor; however, that can be an expensive exercise. Alternatively, an additional form of evaluating SEL programs is the new movement towards whole school mental health screening. A popular whole school survey within New South Wales is Tell Them From Me (CESE DEC, 2015). This is a free computer-based survey for students, teachers and parents and can be administered once or twice a year. The survey provides schools with insight into student engagement, wellbeing and effective teaching practices at their school.

Regular whole school mental health screening exists nearby and on an international level. The Department of Education in Victoria currently administers the School Entrant Health Questionnaire (Department of Education Victoria, 2015) to parents of Prep children which includes the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Youth in Mind, 2005). The SDQ is available for free use via a paper version only and can be accessed and printed from the world wide web. California, in the USA, is also successfully implementing whole school mental health screening that is administered on a more regular basis throughout a student’s schooling, providing current information on a student’s wellbeing to their teachers and parents. Surveys used in California include the Social Emotional Health Survey System (Furlong, 2015) and the California Healthy Kids Survey (California Department of Education, 2015).

When a school is deciding how to evaluate a SEL program it is important that the evaluation tool chosen is meaningful and meets the intended objectives, and that data is used to guide future school directions.

Conclusion

For schools to address youth depression, it is imperative that a focus be taken on prevention, establishing resiliency early for students, and building their social and emotional skills throughout their schooling. My study tour focused on exploring best practice school-based SEL initiatives. Aspects of the initiatives explored include research, policies, planning, SEL adult education, program types, program implementation, specific subject SEL integration, SEL classroom instruction and evaluation. Successful student outcomes from SEL programs rely heavily on implementing these aspects in a meaningful manner with a purpose. The NSW Department of Education has recently established clear goals for education through The Wellbeing Framework for Schools, in which SEL is a key feature for students to be able to connect, succeed and thrive at school. It is anticipated more schools will engage in implementing SEL initiatives in the near future as educating the whole child continues to be recognised as the most effective method in developing health, happiness and success across an individual’s lifetime.

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