Emotional literacy and the ecology of school wellbeing

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Abstract

School connectedness is increasingly identified as significant for enhancing young people's resilience, pro-social behaviour and learning outcomes (Benard, 2001; Libbey, 2004; Cunningham, 2007). Connectedness encompasses how students feel at school, their participation and engagement with learning, and the quality of the relationships they experience (Bond et al., 2001; Whitlock, 2006). Emotional literacy is defined here as relational values and competencies at individual and whole school levels, and as such is the basis of relational quality and social capital.

This paper is based on a qualitative research project exploring processes and practices in six Australian schools. These schools, across ages and sectors, were promoting values of respect, acceptance and care, and actively working to develop emotionally literate learning environments.

An eco-systemic analysis of the data illustrates how elements of school systems interact with others over time to create school wellbeing. This highlights what is both useful and challenging in promoting and sustaining good practice in developing a caring school ethos. The findings include the centrality of the vision, skills and resilience of school leaders, a focus on valuing each member of the school community, the development of a positive discourse and high relational expectations. Positive changes in school culture are maintained by shared relational values, a belief in inclusive practices and by maximum ownership by the whole school community in the change process. Sustainability is threatened by negativity from members of staff who may perceive the leader's vision for students as counter to their own wellbeing.

Relational quality and outcomes

Research studies in mental health (Raphael, 2000; Rowling, 2005), anti-bullying initiatives (McGrath and Noble, 2006), and school effectiveness and wellbeing (Zins *et al.*, 2004), together with projects on Values for Australian Schools (Cahill *et al.*, 2006) and Health Promoting Schools in Scotland (SHPSU, 2004) have made links between the quality of relationships in schools, pro-social behaviour, resilience and academic outcomes.

Relational quality also generates social capital, which has been defined as shared values, purpose and commitment to the wellbeing of the community beyond individual interests (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 1999). Social capital is generated by the myriad of interactions that occur everyday in a school to engender trust, foster mutual respect and promote mutual support and collaboration. It is referred to in the school effectiveness literature (Hargreaves, 2001) and school leadership research (Leith & Reihl, 2003), and is increasingly linked to mental health (McKenzie *et al.*, 2002). Social capital is strongly associated with school connectedness and positive outcomes for students (Putnam, 2001). The opposite is also true. There is evidence that a focus on safety alone, such in the 'zero tolerance' policies towards school violence in the United States, is not only ineffective and leads to a 'school to prison pipeline' for miscreants, but also impacts negatively on academic and behavioural outcomes for other students (Skiba *et al.*, 2006).

If relational quality in schools impacts so extensively on multiple parameters of wellbeing, then we need to know how this might be developed and sustained.

Emotional literacy

Emotional intelligence has been defined as *'…the ability to perceive accurately, appraise and*

express emotion, the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought, the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth' (Salovey & Sluyter, 1997, p.10). Although this is helpful in terms of the individual it says little about community wellbeing. The definition of emotional literacy used in this paper is a values-based concept that promotes the knowledge, understanding and skills that underpin relational wellbeing for both individuals and whole school communities. This involves self–awareness and personal skills in managing strong emotion but also includes having empathy, empowering and valuing others, effective communication and conflict management skills, having a positive and constructive approach, building emotional resources and celebrating student and teacher success at all levels (Nemec & Roffey, 2005). In a school community everyone is affected by issues of connectedness and trust and the quality of relationships at every level.

Many schools have introduced projects aimed at improving relationships between students such as peer mediation or social skills programmes. There are indications, however, that add-on, short-term projects need to be integrated into a supportive and congruent culture to be successful. Without this the effects can be short-lived (Elias et al., 2001; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). Although the evidence for working across the whole school to address social and emotional issues is clear (Catalano et al., 2002; Weare & Gray, 2002), the primary focus is often on students rather than the wellbeing inherent in positive relationship building with all members of the school. Notable exceptions are Baker and Manfreddi-Pettit (2004), who focused on building 'a web of loving relationships' to model effective interactions and optimise parental, child and staff wellbeing within an early years setting, and Haddon et al. (2005) who investigated the emotional climate of two schools using the School Emotional Environment Learning Survey (SEELS). From this they developed their CORE matrix

focusing on Communication, Organisation, Relationships and Emotions. They see emotional literacy as a potential that is not only about individual capacity but dependent also on the social context in which the individual is located.

Eco-systemic theory

Outcomes in the real world of human behaviour are rarely a simple matter of cause and effect. There is a multiplicity of interactive, circular and accumulative factors that result in what occurs at any given time. This is often referred to as the eco-systemic or person-process-context view of change and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An eco-systemic view of emotional literacy recognises that the variables and outcomes of emotional literacy interrelate and are dynamic. This view is held by Groundwater-Smith (2005, p.2) when she says that *'the intelligent school is a living organism, it is a dynamic system that is more than just the sum of its parts'.* An eco-systemic approach is also advocated by de Jong (2005, p.357), writing about best practice in managing behaviour: *'This (eco-systemic) principle emphasizes the complex interconnected, interdependent and recursive nature of relationships between a range of environmental, interpersonal and intra-personal factors that influence the daily lives of schools as organisations, teachers and students'.*

The Gatehouse project in Australia (Bond et al., 2001, p.381) concluded that capacity building across the school was at the heart of health promotion: *'Student welfare and support would be enhanced not simply by looking at health and welfare programmes differently but by looking at different ways of doing the core business of education. This has led schools to focus on student engagement and connectedness to school as the way to promote both emotional wellbeing and learning outcomes'.* Three priority areas for action were identified for students: building a sense of security and trust, enhancing skills and opportunities for good communication and building a sense of positive regard through valued participation in school life.

The same focus on systemic change can be found in other school improvement literature. 'Off the peg' solutions run the risk of disappearing into the 'black hole' of school culture (Stoll, 1999). This is often bound up with relational issues at the staff level, not only at the student level. Reynolds (1996, p.154) writing about working with two 'ineffective schools' found that barriers to improvement included: *'The presence of numerous personality clashes, feuds, personal agendas and fractured interpersonal relationships within the staff group, which operated to make rational decision making a very difficult process'*.

This study looks at what might be learned from a small cohort of Australian schools who were identified as actively developing an emotionally literate culture and explores the interactive nature of person, process and context in this development.

Method

The focus of this qualitative study was in the processes, perceptions and practices involved in responses to open-ended questions which explored what individuals felt about their schools and how the school ethos contributed to their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others, how peoples' feelings were taken into account, what helped people to get along well with each other, how had their school culture changed and in which ways; who were the change-agents and what did they do. What made the difference and what did this mean for the stakeholders? Interviews also explored the challenges of such an initiative and how might these challenges be addressed?

The research took place in six schools. Five were identified by the researcher or by school counsellors as actively developing positive relationships across the school and one further school was identified via the New South Wales Department of Education website as focusing on emotional literacy.

Two Catholic schools and four public schools participated; two high schools and four primary schools, one in Victoria and five in New South Wales; all but one were mixed gender. Two of the schools were in areas of social disadvantage and one served a primarily affluent population. The high schools had a school population of approximately 1000 pupils and the primary schools had between 400 and 700 students with the exception of one small school of 150. One primary school was located in the inner city, one rural and the others in outer suburbs. Of the high schools, one was in the outer suburbs of a major city and the other in the inner suburbs. One school had a high number of indigenous students. All others had various levels of cultural diversity, with students from Asian and European backgrounds although Muslim students only attended the public schools. Three of the schools were identified by their principals as beginning from a low base of emotional literacy, one was a new school and the others were developing from a long established focus on student welfare. Further details are not given to protect confidentiality.

In four schools teachers, students, school counsellors and principals participated in semi-structured interviews. Student groups were usually those on student representative councils and were therefore cross age. Teachers were invited to participate in the focus groups. In one high school the school welfare team was interviewed. In one school, two groups of teachers volunteered to take part. These groups were between five and nine participants. Student counsellors and principals were interviewed individually, apart from a small group of counsellors in one school. Interviews took between 45 and 75 minutes and were recorded on tape and in written notes. In two further schools the principal only was interviewed, one over the telephone, as distance made a face-to-face interview impractical.

Data was transcribed and entered into HyperResearch software to facilitate analysis. A number of themes emerged such as the centrality of school leadership and some of these themes have been discussed in greater depth elsewhere (Roffey, 2005, 2007).

The data indicated strong interconnections between different levels of the school system and this paper is therefore based on an eco-systemic analysis. Figure (i) is developed from Bronfennbrenner's ecological model in which he asserts that the most powerful influence on child development is at the micro-level, ie the individuals who care for the child, but that other levels at increasing distance from the child's immediate environment also impact on his or her development. Findings here identify factors that influence the development of a school's emotional literacy at different levels of the school system. Valuing the individual is at the micro-level, the focus on interactions between individuals and groups across the school is at the meso level, formal school policies and practices are at the exo level and the school culture at the macro level. Although political and societal issues are not the remit of this study they nevertheless need to be acknowledged as impacting on school culture. There are bidirectional influences between each level. There is also a chronology as practices become embedded over time and the dominant discourses on relational values strengthen and are disseminated within the school community.

Findings

The quotes below are used to illustrate the themes covered. There were differing issues in each school and some were functioning in
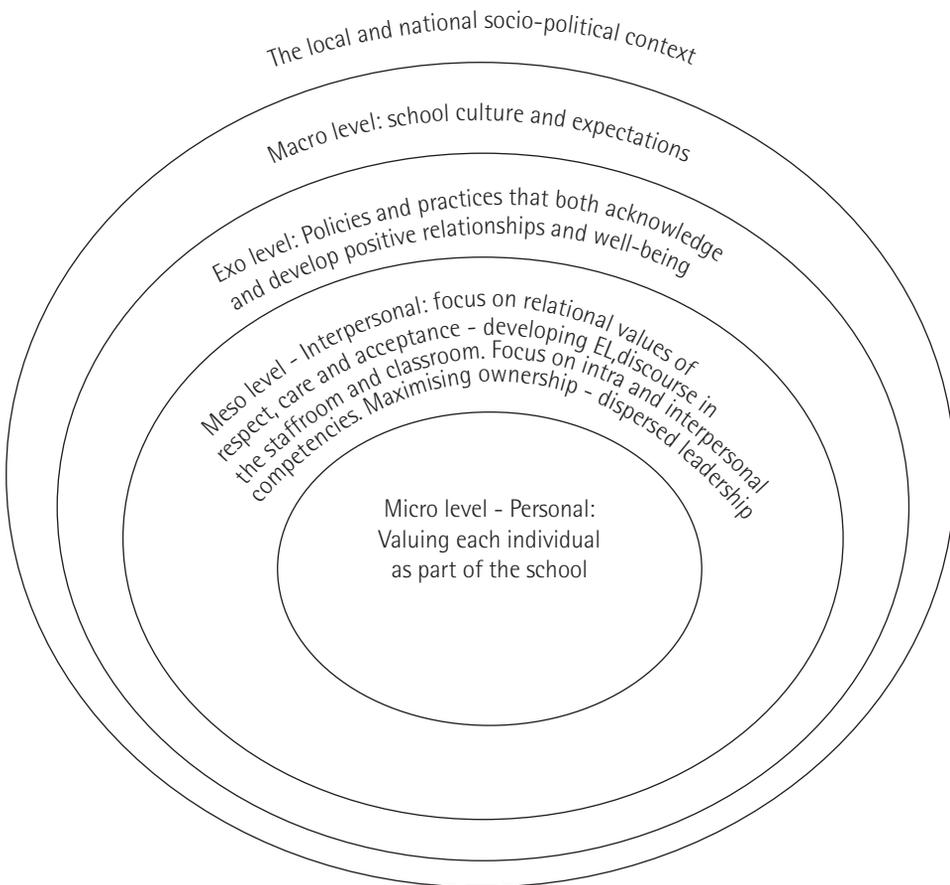

Figure (i): An eco-systemic analysis of emotional literacy in the school context

an emotionally literate way more smoothly than others. The aim here is to identify what was working well and some of the challenges that schools faced in their development of emotional literacy.

Where multiple quotes are given to illustrate a specific theme these are from different schools unless otherwise indicated.

Micro-level: At the micro-level are individuals and their immediate everyday experiences. In Bronfenbrenner's model this is where the greatest influence on development takes place. The driving force in all schools was the principal's vision of their school as honouring the importance and potential of each individual child.

> *The school was the kids, everything was centred on the children … [the principal] always brought it back to the children, what's the best for this child?* (counsellor)

A strong focus on the value and wellbeing of individual teachers was also evident. The overwhelming, though not unanimous, view of teachers was that they felt acknowledged, valued and supported.

> *You feel appreciated within the school.* (teacher)
> *As a new person starting at the school this year, I found the school really really welcoming when I walked in.* (teacher)

The dynamic symbiosis between teacher and student wellbeing was mentioned frequently.

> *If you have a happy staff, then I think that leads to you being happy in your own classroom, and leads to happy relationships with the children, and the children with each other.* (teacher)
> *Every week on the staff meeting agenda, there was always student welfare and staff welfare - and I think that's absolutely vital, because the two go hand in hand.* (teacher)

Meso-level: At the meso-level are the informal interactions between various stakeholders in the school. All principals focused on relational values and practices as a central platform of their vision for their school. Conversations in the staffroom made a difference - the discourse that creates the reality of 'how we do things around here' and

what is considered important. To different degrees principals were aware of the power of strategic conversations in developing their vision.

> *We have a lot of professional dialogue, in terms of what makes our school a healthy place, and what makes our school a learning community. And you can't have a sense of any sort of community … unless you're looking at how the people relate, and relationships.* (principal)

There was a general acknowledgement by the principals but also by many staff of the need to model emotionally literate behaviour.

> *If we expect the children to treat us with respect, we have to model that behaviour for them.* (principal)

In these schools most staff voiced respect for their principal, their values and how they operated. These school leaders had credibility, even though at times, they experienced opposition.

> *The school ethos comes from [the principal], he's definitely a positive person, he's very key to the school, he's emotionally literate.* (teacher)

Relationships between school leaders and teachers were less positive where staff were rooted in beliefs and practices that were not congruent with the leadership's child-centred vision. There were examples of a few staff members taking this position in most schools and this presented a significant challenge to the school executives.

> *We have four or five of the most difficult students here – they are still here … at great personal cost to the Principal – [some teachers say] how dare you do this to me. You don't support us; you are here for the kids.* (principal)

Relationships between teachers in the project schools were notably warm and collaborative. The absence of strong 'cliques' amongst staff was conducive to a more open and relaxed working environment.

> *There are no cliques in the school, no groupings who are more favoured or seen as better than others, everybody respects everybody, right down to seating positions in the staff room … everybody sits with everybody, everybody interacts, the staff room is a very happy place.* (counsellor)

There was a level of awareness that the way teachers interact with each other demonstrates relational expectations for students.

> It's a role model situation. When [students] see staff interact, it's always polite, it's positive … they don't hear any negativity, bawling out of somebody, or shouting, or anything like that, and I think that gives them the example of how to interact with another person. (teacher)

Conflict between staff was, however, an issue in some schools. Nipping potential conflict in the bud or dealing with it promptly when it did arise was seen by some as helpful to the development of an emotionally literate culture.

> We stop it straight away, and people's feelings aren't hurt, because once people's feelings are hurt, it's hard to get that person to lift back up, and continue on the culture and the morals and the values that we want in our school. (teacher)

A focus on the positive and a sense of humour helped. What happens in the staff room is often mirrored by what happens in the classroom. The quotes below are from the same school.

> There's also a good sense of humour within our staff. (teacher)
>
> If you're having a very hard day at work, [the teacher] comes out with some jokes just randomly and it makes you feel better about it, like then you're not so stressed. (student)

Relationships between teachers and students were predominantly positive in all the schools. As other studies have shown (Corcoran, 2005; Riley et al., 2006), the more relational values and skills are demonstrated by teachers the more cooperation they receive from students.

> If they like me, I like them. (student)
>
> Teachers saying 'hi' makes a difference. My teacher doesn't try to put herself above you but when its time to work you worked. (student)
>
> If he felt disappointed in you, you didn't want that. (student)

Where teacher-student relationships were problematic schools often attempted to address this in a constructive way so that both the student and the teacher felt supported.

> … maybe (there are) problems with the way just one teacher is interacting with that child, maybe there's something that could assist them in helping them have a better relationship with the student. (member of welfare team)

Relationships between students appeared to have improved over time.

> There are wonderful relationships between year levels. There was bullying but it has been defused. (teacher)
>
> We still have behaviour notifications but none that speak of outright cruelty or outright disrespect for each other. (principal)

There was also evidence of empathy in students for peers experiencing difficulty.

> Some people were saying, 'it's not fair that a child is treated differently, that they're allowed to do certain things and the others see that'. But when I spoke to the children in those classrooms, they had a wonderful understanding, they didn't feel the child was being given extra things, they had empathy and were able to see that child needed to be treated differently. (principal)

Although parents were not interviewed for this study, schools were also working on emotionally literate engagement with families.

> Parents come to ask for help because they trust the school. (principal)
>
> You listen to the parents in the community talk, they absolutely love having their kids at this school. (counsellor)

Exo-level: This level of school functioning is concerned with more formal school policies, programmes and practices. Theoretically we might further categorise these into pro-active support for all stakeholders, relationship sensitive responses to difficulties and what is in place for social and emotional learning. In practice these elements were rarely discrete.

School Policies: The importance of relational values and skills was particularly evident in welfare and behaviour policies, which aimed to provide clear consequences for unacceptable behaviour enmeshed with care for the student and their wellbeing.

> We have a very strong welfare programme at this school which does its very best for emotional literacy to be part of things. (counsellor)

It is about developing due process - a very practical way of dealing with issues, simple and straightforward, what happens when and how. (counsellor)

Thought was often given to how policies were developed, communicated and monitored so that the whole school community felt they were part of decision making processes and that the welfare and behaviour policies were alive and meaningful.

First and foremost, it has to be collaborative. You can't have someone from the top saying: 'this is what we're going to do'. You need to give everyone the opportunity to have ownership of it and to put their thoughts to it. (teacher)

The students [have a] code of conduct that students have a say in developing. We try and make it positive, not negative. We encourage kids to think through respect for the feelings of others, respect for the property of others, keep the respect of the school. (principal)

If [policies] are not assessed and reviewed, fairly regularly, I think there's a chance that's where the system falls apart … they become outdated, and people don't see it as a matter of priority. (teacher)

Programmes and practices: Although the focus on social and emotional learning for students was not structured within the curriculum as strongly as it now is in the UK, all schools had systems of peer support and ways of encouraging friendship as an antidote to bullying. Some programmes were at a proactive universal level and some were targeted at students considered vulnerable.

School camps and transitions gets people out of their comfort zone, and splits them up into groups that they wouldn't necessarily normally form on their own … it makes it a lot easier to get to know people. (student)

They have a lot of structures in place to support kids playing …. (counsellor)

Last year, one of my friends had to do peer mediation, because she was having some problems with someone in our class, and they don't have those problems any more. (student)

We are also looking at identified boys who find it hard to express their feelings, who are often acting out because they can't resolve issues and we are now working towards providing support for them … part

of that will be helping them to express their views and their feelings in a positive way. (counsellor)

Numerous other practices were also relevant to the development of an emotionally literate school culture. These practices included ways of acknowledging staff and student efforts, social activities for staff and students, 'no put down' zones and other strategies to combat bullying, cross-age interactions and positive/inclusive communication practices. Over time principals appointed staff who shared their vision for an inclusive and caring school community.

Macro-level: This refers to the broader context in which developments occur. School culture can be summed up as 'how things are done around here'.

The tone in their classroom is one that encourages teamwork, cooperation, where people feel supported, where they're able to take risks and they're supported, at every step along the way, take risks with their learning, but also take risks with their relationships. (principal)

An emotionally literate school culture is both developed and maintained by expectations and conversation around values and relationships.

Believe in what you say. What you say has to be based on sound educational practice and if you say it loud enough, it will become reality. (principal)

Negativity about the kids is rare. When teachers do sometime say something negative others will give a different view. It is not seen as a cool thing to do. (counsellor)

The macro level is also about the community in which schools are situated and the wider socio-political context. Noddings (2005) writes that society has lost the primary focus of educating the whole child in the emphasis on curricular goals and standardized test scores and that this needs to be redressed. Many participants in this study shared her view.

We were building up that sense of all being there, not just for learning the curriculum, but to learn about ourselves and each other and how to support each other. (principal)

The schools in this study were doing well on the usual parameters of attendance, academic

outcomes and behavioural issues, issues that are of concern at both local and national levels. The focus on whole-school wellbeing was clearly a successful strategy. The discourse of emotionally literate school communities is often overshadowed by the focus on measuring academic attainment. The relevance of relational quality throughout schools as a powerful contribution to good educational practice is not always acknowledged. There is therefore a potential tension at the macro level for these schools, although there are indications that the discourse on the need for connection is gathering momentum. (Bond et al., 2001; Horsch et al., 2001)

Chronology: Change does not happen overnight but this study demonstrated what was possible from a very low base of emotional literacy over time.

> *When I first walked into the school it was the most unhappy school I'd ever been in. There was a lot of violence in the playground, there were children often in tears, in the classroom children yelling… bullying going on, and I thought, oh my god, what have I walked into?* (principal)

The culture of all the established schools had changed, some quite dramatically over time.

> *The whole culture has changed. Kids now know how you speak to each other with respect, peers or teachers or ancillaries or cleaners. Once it's there it becomes the way things are.* (principal)

The majority of schools in this study were, however, still in the process of development to further embed emotionally literate practices to facilitate whole school wellbeing.

> *The school is not perfect but it's learning. We are trying to reinvent ourselves every year.* (principal)

There was always a risk, however, that the negative voices - from those staff members whose beliefs about education and their role within it did not include a focus on healthy relationships - would again become dominant. Sustainability is an issue.

> *People can become complacent, and people will forget what it was like at the start.* (principal)

Only sustained interventions have sustained effects (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The vision and values of principals are not enough to embed emotional literacy (Roffey, 2007). Long-term meaningful outcomes require efforts to be integrated into every level of the school system. This includes a focus on what is said as well as what is done to maintain awareness of effective relationship practice. Fullan (1997) talks about the need for leaders to think through the feelings of teachers in any change process and to legitimise discussion and dissent. McGrath and Noble (2003) suggest that realistic implementation of change takes time and requires a whole community approach which provides regular positive feedback about the change process to all stakeholders.

Discussion

An eco-systemic model of analysis in this study proved useful in illustrating ways in which various elements within schools built on each other to create positive change. Conversations in the staffroom had an impact on teacher-student relationships in the classroom; school management practices affected teachers' feelings of ownership; and teachers who felt they were genuinely consulted about policy and had supportive colleagues were happier at work and had more resources to manage challenges well. Students who felt respected and who experienced a positive approach in the classroom were more co-operative. The quote below illustrates how this all fits together and the ways in which change occurs over time.

> *The teachers here really feel supported, cared about, looked after and valued, and that translates over into the classroom … I'm just blown away by how kind the teachers are to students here … that's just a follow-on of the whole culture … everyone on the same side - the staff are supportive of each other, and that carries across into the classroom … I used to hate doing yard duty, because … there would really be open antipathy … So this year – when I'm out there I smile, well, usually, you never got a smile back, always now, I get a smile back.* (a teacher returning to the same school after an absence of several years).

From ego-system to eco-system

Crocker and her colleagues (2005) talk about the need to shift the paradigm in inter-group processes from an 'ego-system' motivation which is concerned with personal rights, self preservation and individual gain to one which explores what is supportive for everyone and is focused on the 'eco-system'. An ego-system generates emotions concerned with threat from others such as anxiety, fear, anger, resentment and revenge with associated behaviours designed to protect the self such as blame, greed, denial and aggression. Battles for power, punishment and exclusion are natural consequences of such a paradigm. In contrast, a focus on the eco-system is concerned with collaboration and wellbeing for all, and evokes feelings such as warmth, empathy and belonging that promote connection with others. Actions within an eco-systemic paradigm are designed to foster collaboration, strengthen community wellbeing and promote connectedness, inclusion and restoration. This view is not a lone voice. Commentators are increasingly making the connection between the lack of community wellbeing and social dysfunction and the impact on children (Benard, 2001; Stanley et al., 2005). Emotional literacy, relational quality and social capital build healthy communities and these provide for individual wellbeing.

Conclusion

Ecological analysis of the research data identified aspects of school development that are relevant in this study. The focus on valuing each individual – the whole person especially the whole child – led to the development and demonstration of relational values for students and staff alike. In each school in this study there was a strong sense of a community in which people cared for each other – evidence that the paradigm shift from ego to eco system was occurring (Crocker et al., 2005). Values such as kindness and respect were overt and discussed. This led to adapta-

tions in policies and practices that in turn impacted on school culture over time. In Bronfenbrenner's model there is a bi-directional causality so that practices impact as much on ethos and expectations as the other way round. There is a symbiosis between the wellbeing of teachers and the wellbeing of students.

Schools are different and this research can only provide insight and guidance to those schools who wish to develop a more emotionally literate climate. It shows what other schools have found valuable in moving forward and indicates issues that need to be taken into account. The findings also suggest that the endeavour is worthwhile on many fronts.

Good practice does not come about by chance but is actively developed by voicing values and expectations and building a relational discourse that structures specific perspectives on reality. Western society often demonstrates a discourse of negativity, blame, competition and conflict with a parallel focus on 'winning' and being 'in control'. The focus on emotional literacy and relational values therefore may challenge many givens and assumed subjective 'realities'. It may, however, also be seen as 'common sense'. An emotional literacy discourse does appear to tune into what people want in their own lives – acknowledgement and feeling valued, empowerment, agency and a sense of positive connection with others.

Emotional literacy underpins the relational quality that promotes school connectedness and resilience. Educational psychologists and school counsellors have the professional knowledge and skills to support schools in the culture change and capacity building that goes beyond programmes for social and emotional learning to build both individual and whole school wellbeing.

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