Supporting positive pupil relationships: Research to practice

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Positive peer relationships at school are linked to many positive and desirable pupil outcomes such as sound levels of academic performance, optimal levels of well-being and adult mental health. On the other hand social isolation or rejection at school are linked to a range of negative pupil outcomes such as lack of engagement, disconnection to school, absenteeism, being bullied, behavioural difficulties, drug usage, depression and anxiety and social difficulties as an adult. This paper provides an overview of the research literature about the importance of peer relationships for pupil well-being and reports on research conducted in 11 Australian Government schools with low incidences of bullying. In these 11 schools the four common factors that contributed to the development of a safe, caring and inclusive school culture were: (i) making pupil well-being a high priority; (ii) planning for a 'relationship culture' that focuses on the development of positive peer relationships; (iii) having an effective school leadership team that focused on whole school wellbeing and the personal growth of pupils; and (iv) incorporating an effective whole school behaviour management programme. This paper also provides a comprehensive discussion of a range of practical evidence-based whole-school approaches, classroom practices and individual support strategies that can facilitate the work of educational psychologists in helping school communities to build positive relationships.

The importance of positive peer relationships

PUPILS who experience predominantly positive and high quality peer relationships at school are more likely to experience a range of positive outcomes. These outcomes include positive mental and physical health, improved academic performance and successful adult relationships (Engels, Finkenauer et al., 2001; Rhodes et al., 2000; Young & Bradley, 1998; Rhodes et al., 1994 and Franz et al., 1991). Positive peer relationships are also linked to higher levels of school attendance and pupil engagement with learning and a reduction in the likelihood of dropping out in secondary school. The link between pupil engagement, achievement and well-being appears to is bi-directional, i.e. the more pupils are actively engaged and achieving in learning, the greater their sense of well-being and vice versa.

Conversely research over the last three decades has shown convincingly that the ongoing experience of being regularly or chronically socially isolated or rejected at school has a significant and negative impact on a pupil's engagement with school, their attendance, their learning outcomes, their behaviour, their overall adjustment, and their sense of well-being (e.g. Ladd, 2003; Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Marks, 2000; Ladd, 1999; Ladd et al., 1997; Boivin et al., 1995; Hatzichristou & Hopf, 1996; Ollendick et al., 1992). Pupils who are chronically socially isolated or rejected are also more likely to have less satisfactory, less independent, less successful lives and experience possible longer-term negative outcomes such as depression, unsatisfactory employment experiences, criminality, and poor relationship success (McDougall et al., 2001; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Gresham, 1986). Young people who have poor relationships with peers are also more likely to use drugs and engage in socially disruptive behaviours, report anxiety/depressive symptoms, and fail to complete secondary school (Bond et al., 2007; Doll & Hess, 2001; Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001; Barclay & Doll, 2001; Resnick et al., 1993; Catalano et al.,1996).

Rejection predicts bullying

Early peer rejection in the first years of schooling has been strongly linked with ongoing social exclusion and peer abuse (Buhs et al., 2006; Buhs 2005; Buhs & Ladd 2001; Coie 1990). Children who enter school and display either socially aggressive or withdrawn behaviour start to be rejected in these early years by their peers. These children are then at greater risk for becoming chronically socially excluded and bullied over the next few years. This chronic stress leads to their disengagement from classroom activities. As their opportunities to participate become more limited, they become fearful of further peer abuse and their perceptions of their own self-competence deteriorates (Buhs, 2005; Buhs & Ladd, 2001). By Year 5 (9- to 10-year-olds) these children show lower levels of school achievement and higher levels of school avoidance. They are also more likely to experience being bullied through sustained acts of social exclusion (Buhs et al., 2006). Being bullied by social exclusion may appear less visibly harmful than verbal or physical forms of bullying but may be more detrimental to children's participation in learning activities and have more impact on their academic outcomes.

Rejection, social isolation and BESDs

Being teased, rejected or socially excluded by other pupils on an ongoing basis has been identified as the single most common characteristic of children who are at high risk for developing emotional and behavioural disorders (Gresham et al., 1996). Additionally, pupils who enter school with early indicators of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESDs) are also particularly at risk of being rejected by their peers and becoming socially isolated. In many cases their social difficulties adversely impact on their development of friendships. These pupils may make friends initially, but often lack the social skills to maintain their friendships (Miller-Johnson et al., 1999; Poulin & Boivin, 1999; Xie, Cairns & Cairns, 1999). Gresham et al. (1997) found that only about 20 per cent of children in Grade 3 who were designated as 'at risk' for BESD had one or more friends in a typical classroom, compared to 50 per cent in a matched control group.

In one study parents of 95 children with ADHD reported that 40 per cent of their children had difficulty making friends, 53 per cent had problems keeping friends, 53 per cent were bossy or aggressive with peers, 47 per cent had difficulties with resolving conflict with peers, and 33 per cent were stressed and unhappy with the state of their peer relationships (Guevremont & Dumas, 1994). Pupils with ADHD are also more likely to be rejected because their difficulties are external and on display. They tend to be perceived as 'bad kids' (Hoza et al., 2005) and their emotional volatility and behaviour often create frequent conflicts and confrontations with their peers.

It is possible that as pupils are discouraged in their attempts to become friends with more well-accepted peers, they will gravitate toward anyone willing to accept them (Hoza et al., 2005). Several studies have demonstrated that pupils (especially girls) who are socially anxious (i.e. displaying behaviour that is socially avoidant which reflects their fear of negative evaluation) are also more likely to be bullied (Grills & Ollendick, 2002; Nansel et al., 2001; Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004; Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Their social avoidance and the resultant negative feedback from others may also limit their exposure to positive peer interactions and friendships. Lack of access to ongoing friendship behaviours may also limit opportunities for these pupils for socio-moral development as 'safe disagreeing' is more likely to occur within friendships and enables perspective-taking and debate over moral dilemmas (Schonert-Reichl, 1993; Thoma & Ladewig, 1993).

This paper now addresses some practical evidence-based strategies for developing positive peer relationships that educational psychologists can implement with school leadership teams or use with individual pupils.

A safe caring and inclusive school culture

The intentional development of a safe, caring and inclusive school culture is the starting point for the effective development of positive peer relationships as well as pupil engagement in learning (Battisch et al., 2001; Battisch et al., 1995; Benard, 2004; Resnick et al., 1997). Elias and Weissberg (2000, p.264) explain:

> *Social and emotional development and the recognition of the relational nature of learning and change are the fundamentals of human learning, work and accomplishment. Until this is given proper emphasis, we cannot expect to see progress in making schools safer, drug-free, with fewer students who don't care and want to drop-out, or with better tolerance of people who are different.*

Eleven Australian Government schools were identified by the Victorian Education Department as schools with very low levels of bullying compared to other schools. The first author (McGrath, 2007) conducted further research in these six primary and five secondary schools to further investigate the school factors that contributed to these schools low incidence of bullying. Data were collected through one-to-one interviews with school leaders, observations, focus group interviews with pupils, teachers and parents and an analysis of school policy and school curriculum documents. Through a thematic analysis of the data, four factors emerged in both these primary and secondary schools as having the strongest influence in keeping levels of bullying low. These four factors were:

● Having an effective school leadership team who empowered and worked effectively with key teachers and the whole staff to develop (or continue) a whole school vision based around the safety, well-being and personal growth of pupils;
● Having an effective whole-school behaviour management programme in place that was working well (even though no two schools had exactly the same behaviour management approach);

● Planning for a 'relationship culture' that focused on the intentional development of positive peer relationships through the adoption of strategies such as co-operative learning, teaching social skills and pro-social values, cross-age sporting and drama activities and lunchtime clubs;
● Making pupil well-being a high priority in the school.

These four factors offer direction for educational psychologists in working with schools. A clear message from this research is that a whole school focus on pupil well-being and the development of positive relationships, especially positive peer relationships strongly impacts on establishing a safe, caring and inclusive school culture. The pupils who are likely to benefit most are those who are most at risk of being bullied, excluded and socially rejected by their peers.

Peer support

Other whole-school approaches that have been found to contribute to the development of positive peer relationships include the use of Restorative Practices (e.g. Armstrong & Thorsburne, 2006), and peer support structures such as peer counselling, peer mediation, peer mentoring/buddy systems and peer tutoring (Stanley & McGrath, 2006). The Peer Activity Leaders Programme (Mathieson, 2008) is another peer support approach which offers older primary pupils an opportunity to be pupil leaders. These pupil leaders run playground games for younger pupils at lunchtime. This approach can contribute to the development of social skills in the older pupils, develop cross-age peer relationships and generate opportunities that enable younger pupils to avoid social isolation in the playground.

Teaching pro-social values

Positive peer relationships and pro-social behaviour are both underpinned by pro-social values. Pro-social values are relatively stable, pervasive and enduring holistic beliefs that people hold about what is right and wrong and how to treat others. Pro-social

values focus on creating harmony. Values form a 'moral map' that guide social behaviour and choices. Several studies link the direct teaching of pro-social values with improved academic and social outcomes in schools (e.g. Lovat & Toomey 2007; Zins et al., 2004; Benninga et al., 2003; Battistich et al., 2001). The following values are the ones most likely to be included in school-based values programmes: *Compassion, Co-operation, Acceptance of difference, Respect, Friendliness/ Inclusion, Honesty, Fairness and Responsibility* (McGrath & Noble 2003).

Interventions designed to decrease social exclusion typically focus on changing the behaviour of the specific child rather than addressing the excluding behaviour and values of their classmates (Harrist & Bradley, 2003). However, one research study conducted by Harrist & Bradley (2003) investigated the effectiveness of altering the social climate and attitudes of six classes of children in their first year of primary schooling over one school year period. The researchers drew on the work of Vivien Paley (1992) who, noting that rejection can easily become a habit, developed a strategy called *You Can't Say You Can't Play*. This strategy promotes the value of social inclusion through a non-exclusion classroom rule that children cannot exclude or reject each other in social situations. Compared to the children in the four control classes, the children who were in the intervention group reported more liking for each other and more enjoyment from playing with each other at the end of the year. However, the intervention did not increase the frequency with which children played with each other (as observed by teachers) and the intervention group also expressed more social dissatisfaction. The researchers concluded that the intervention had been successful in changing the children's values and cognitions but not their actual behaviour.

Other researchers working in different contexts and with older pupils (e.g. Adler & Adler, 1998; Merton, 1996) have suggested that friendships and group cliques may, in part, be developed and maintained by the process of exclusion, i.e. the pupils involved feel closer and more secure by keeping others out (Thienpont & Cliquet, 1999). Harrist & Bradley (2003) suggest that the non-exclusion rule could be introduced for the first few weeks of the school year when other classroom rules are introduced. This 'rule' could become a 'norm' during a whole-class discussion about our 'classroom vision' (e.g. how the teacher and pupils would like their classroom to be and how they want to be treated). Drama and Circle Time (e.g. Roffey, 2006) could also be utilised during the school year to promote the value of 'including others' and be a forum for perspective-taking (i.e. *How would you feel if you had no-one to play with?*), for understanding non-verbal forms of exclusion (e.g. ignoring) and for the expression of children's concerns that not being able to choose who you play with isn't fair and won't be as much fun (Harrist & Bradley, 2003).

Teacher practices
Rejection is ultimately a social phenomenon with the peer group playing an important role in maintaining a child's rejected status (Donohue, Perry & Weinstein, 2003). Social reputation is also a factor in this process with rejected children experiencing more negative expectations and interpretations of their actions than other children do (e.g. Harris et al., 1998; Hymel et al., 1990). Hymel (1986) found that children are more likely to attribute any negative behaviour of rejected children to stable ongoing factors but attribute similar behaviour in other children to temporary causes. Wentzel and Asher (1995) have suggested that children who are rejected by their peers may also be less accepted by their teachers. Hughes et al. (2001) found that the level of peer acceptance of rejected pupils was influenced by their teachers' perception of those pupils and the way they interacted with them. They argue that these teacher-pupil interactions influence the view their classmates have of a pupil and that interventions that focus

directly on enhancing the positivity, warmth and affection of teacher-pupil interactions may also be an effective approach to assisting many rejected pupils.

The use of literature

Teachers can use books to teach pro-social values, and social-emotional skills at the same time as achieving their literacy outcomes. A research study by Phillips (2008) documents the use of stories to teach young 5- to 6-year-old children about relationships and issues of social justice and values. She explains that 'a well told story invites listeners to enter the world of the story, identify with the characters and accompany them on the journey of experience, then emerge with new insight and understandings' (Phillips, 2008, p.2). Bhavnagri and Samuels (1996a, 1996b) studied the effects of young children's exposure to children's literature (with relationship themes) on their social development. The 44 pre-school children (aged 3 to 5 years) in their study who were read stories (over one year) with themes of how to get along well with others (supported by other types of curriculum activities) had significantly higher scores on tests of social knowledge and social cognitions than similar children who did not have these experiences. The measure used was the SKI (The Social Knowledge Interview) for kindergarten children (Asher & Renshaw, 1981; Asher et al., 1980) that includes two sets of 10 pictures that depict nine different problematic peer-related situations. The focus of the SKI is on relationship-enhancing behaviours, described by Asher and Renshaw (1981) as those that are likely to maintain or enhance a positive relationship between two children or between the child and the group. These social skills include sharing, taking turns, being assertive, working out how the other person is feeling and being kind and ignoring provocation.

Guidelines for using children's literature to enhance pupils' social knowledge as a starting point for changes in social behaviour include:

- Developing integrated thematic units on peer relationships. These include: being a good friend, managing disagreement, and pro-social values, i.e. those that lead to harmony and fairness such as honesty, kindness, co-operation, friendliness;
- Start as early as possible, using developmentally appropriate approaches;
- Select high-quality children's literature by respected authors in which the characters engage in positive social behaviour (Bhavnagri & Samuels, 1996a) or behave in ways that can provoke discussion by children about how they could have handled a social situation better;
- Make a note of those pupils who offer ineffective or inappropriate social responses in the discussion stage and follow-up in either a one-to-one discussion with the teacher or an informal counselling session with the educational psychologist (DeVries & Zan, 1994).

Using co-operative learning and co-operative classroom games tournaments

Co-operative learning creates opportunities for teachers to actively engage pupils in the curriculum at the same time as providing naturalistic situations for them to practise social skills and gain peer support for their learning. Co-operative learning incorporates co-operative goal structures that promote positive interactions based around mutual assistance, encouragement and the sharing of information and resources that are needed to achieve mutual goals. The achievement of mutual goals results in a more positive view of the actions of those who contributed to group success (Roseth, Johnson & Johnson, 2008). This process also creates a sense of belongingness that helps to facilitate pupil engagement and other adaptive school behaviours (Juvonen, 2006).

In their meta-analytical review of 148 studies that looked at the relative effects of co-operative, competitive, and individualistic learning activities on young adolescents,

Roseth, Johnson and Johnson (2008) found that higher academic achievement and more positive peer relationships were associated with co-operative rather than competitive or individualistic goal structures. These results were consistent with previous work linking peer learning methods to social development outcomes (e.g. Ginsburg-Block, Rohrbeck & Fantuzzo, 2006). In addition, the results indicate that the more positive the relationships were among early adolescents, the higher they achieved academically. A further finding from the meta-analysis was that the strongest effects occurred in studies in which the co-operative learning activities were methodologically sound. Roseth, Johnson and Johnson (2008) suggest that this finding provides strong evidence that more attention should be paid to how well co-operative learning is used in order to maximise its effectiveness.

These positive outcomes can be extrapolated to co-operative games which Sapon-Shevin (1994) notes are particularly useful ways of fostering co-operative relationships. Games represent activities with high appeal for children, and they structure the environment with specific social rules. Hill (1989) points out that structured co-operative games and tasks provide a reason for more popular children to interact with low status peers who they may choose to avoid in other situations. Through games these more popular children often discover new reasons for liking the more poorly accepted children, and become more likely to integrate them into other peer group activities. Tryon and Keane (1991) found that rejected pupils were less successful in 'joining' classmates in competitive games, suggesting that competitive situations may exacerbate the social difficulties faced by socially rejected children.

Many of the studies into the effects of classroom co-operative games have been carried out with young children but there is no reason to assume that they cannot be used as effectively with older pupils. Bay-Hintiz, Peterson and Quilitch (1994) investigated the effects of competitive and co-operative games on the frequency of aggressive and co-operative behaviours of 70 children (aged 4 to 5 years) in four classrooms across three pre-schools. They found that in three of the four classrooms, playing competitive games led to an increase in aggressive behaviours whereas playing co-operative games led to an increase in children's co-operative behaviours.

The focus of research by Finlinson, Austin and Pfister (2000) was also on young children in a pre-school setting. They studied 39 children during co-operative and competitive games over a six-week period and observed that more positive behaviours (e.g. hugging, co-operating, offering assistance and giving positive verbal feedback) were observed during co-operative games than competitive games and more negative behaviours (e.g. pushing, taking equipment and negative comments) were observed during competitive games (although this latter effect faded after a week).

Many traditional educational games, (such as *Hangman* and *Mastermind*), can be turned into co-operative game activities by organising pupils to play in pairs against another pair. A Co-operative Classroom Games Tournament (CCGT) can also be organised whereby each classroom pair plays against another pair. In this format, pupils work in pairs to play the same educational game with every other pair in the class over a week or so (see McGrath & Noble, 2010). Pupils can complete a self-assessment rubric after the tournament has been completed, rating themselves on how well they (as a pair) used good thinking, set improvement goals, used social skills such as listening to each other, managed conflict well, respectful disagreeing, winning and losing well, negotiation and respecting the effort of all players. The teacher can conduct a Briefing and Debriefing session after the tournament to revise and reinforce these social skills.

Co-operative games can also provide a useful setting for an educational psycholo-

gist to conduct a social skills assessment on specific pupils to inform planning for more intensive teaching of specific social skills in either small groups or one-on-one counselling. The earlier this is carried out the better, especially with those pupils whose behaviour suggests that may be at risk of becoming socially isolated or rejected. A simple Social Observation Rubric which can be used to record observations of pupil social behaviour in both co-operative game situations and in general contexts can be downloaded from www.bounceback.com.au or is available from the authors. The rubric focuses on micro-skills and social behaviours such as: making eye contact, smiling, body contact, greeting, good manners, showing kindness, positivity, approaching others, social persistence, positive and negative assertion, co-operation, expressing feelings, flexibility, listening, managing anger, respecting the rights of others to work, playing fairly, handling losing, managing conflict and apologising.

Positive peer reporting

Positive peer reporting (PPR) is a whole-class peer-assisted approach to changing social behaviour and teaching social skills that has been shown to have some success in improving pupils' social behaviour (e.g. Skinner et al., 2000; Moroz & Jones, 2002; Morrison & Jones, 2007). It is one of the Behaviour Supports recommended as part of the School-wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) approach (see Luiselli et al., 2005). The strategy involves all children having a turn (through the draw of a card) to both receive and give praise to their classmates for engaging in pro-social behaviour (Moraz & Jones, 2002).

In a variation of this strategy pupils are asked to do this randomly with any classmate they observe engaging in social interactions and/or behaving in positive ways that help them to get along with others (Skinner et al., 2002). This version has been described as 'tootling' (a merge of the word 'tattling' and the phrase 'tooting' your own trumpet') with

pupils giving each other 'tootles'. Children are taught four steps for giving such feedback for appropriate social behaviour. These are: Look at the other person, smile, describe what they did or said, and add a praising comment such as 'that was great'. This is commonly done in the period just before the lunch break. The teacher gives feedback to the pupils on the effectiveness with which they provide the reinforcement. PPR appears to work best when pupils are given positive teacher feedback for their 'tootling' backed up by class rewards (Cashwell et al., 2001). Skinner, Cashwell and Skinner (2000) and Morrison and Jones (2007) have suggested that when teachers adopt this approach their own behaviour towards specific pupils is altered as it increases teacher awareness of day-to-day pro-social behaviours.

The PPR strategy also assumes that pupils spend a lot of time noticing and inadvertently reinforcing the inappropriate social behaviour or anti-social behaviour of some classmate and overlook their more positive social behaviours (Skinner et al., 2002). Peers appear to play a significant role in the development of anti-social behaviour in similar ways. The conclusion from a review of studies by Dodge et al. (2006) is that some programmes that involve connecting young people who tend to be anti-social with each other, although well-intentioned, can make things worse rather then better by inadvertently offering opportunities for 'deviancy training'. This is a process whereby young people behave in anti-social ways (or talk about what they have done or plan to do) and peers positively reinforce this by smiling/laughing or communicating verbal approval and high status. This norm is observed and then tacitly adopted by other young people in the setting who then copy the pattern by also engaging in similar talk or behaviour. Soon more and more of the young people in the setting are drawn into a peer culture that becomes more and more anti-social. This process also appears to occur during periods when pupils are suspended from school (Hemphill et al., 2006).

Teaching social skills in small groups or in individual counselling sessions

The social skills that underpin social competency and, therefore, positive peer relationships can be categorised as either social skills for friendship and 'getting along' *or* learning-related social skills; although there is inevitably some degree of overlap. Examples of *learning-related social skills* include active listening, respectful disagreeing, expressing an opinion in a non-polarising way, suggesting and persuading, negotiating, positive tracking and sharing of resources, workload, responsibility and discussion space (McGrath & Noble, 2010). Examples of *friendship social skills* include empathic responding and showing thoughtfulness and loyalty and examples of *'getting along' social skills* include playing fairly, conflict management skills, taking turns and being a good winner and loser (McGrath & Francey, 1991).

Some pupils with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties (BESDs) have particular social skills or social cognitions that need to be addressed. For example, many pupils with ADHD need support to learn about the importance of being positive, co-operative and fair in games, have interesting conversations (in which they don't interrupt or change the topic) and to manage conflict well (Carlson et al., 1987; Grenell et al., 1987). They also need to develop more positive intention detection skills, especially in ambiguous social situations (Milich & Dodge, 1984). Additional individualised or small group opportunities may be more suitable for supporting these more complex social needs.

Social skills taught in isolation or in decontextualised conditions are less likely to generalise to natural settings (DuPaul & Eckert, 1994) and are also unlikely to have much impact on the development of positive peer relationships (Kavale et al., 1997). Therefore, structured and embedded opportunities for pupils to learn and practise social skills are more likely to be effective. Several researchers have identified that the most effective approach to teaching social skills is through an explicit (or direct) teaching approach (e.g. Ladd & Asher 1985; McGrath, 2005, 1998, 1996). In this approach the selected social skill is directly taught by a process that usually involves an initial discussion of the skill such as why it is a useful skill to have, then the verbal rehearsal of the steps of the skill (including the social cognitions that accompany it), followed by structured opportunities to practise the newly-learned skill (usually through role plays) and then corrective feedback and reinforcement for their correct usage of the skill. Lastly pupils are given opportunities to practise social skills in a naturally occurring context (McGrath & Francey, 1991).

A classroom-based social skills programme offers a greater likelihood of producing generalisation and maintenance of program effects through the provision of naturalistic opportunities to practise and receive naturalistic reinforcement from real-life peers and a wide range of teachers. However, it may be more effective for some pupils to start with a small group or an individualised programme where they may have more opportunity to learn and practise social skills. A small group or individual programme (with a focus on games) can also be offered as an additional support (after a class programme) for building positive pupil relationships.

Conclusion

Educational psychologists can play an important role in both supporting individual pupils who are at risk for social isolation or rejection and in working with leaders and teachers to implement strategies that can contribute to the development of positive pupil relationships. These strategies can range from the implementation of a broad plan for a positive, safe, caring and inclusive school culture based on pro-social values and positive relationships through to classroom strategies that use 'positive peer reporting' to encourage and reinforce appropriate social skills and build positive relationships. Small group social skills and individual coun-

selling sessions can also provide additional support for some pupils, especially if backed up by observations of the pupil's social behaviour. Early identification and intervention makes it more likely that approaches to enhancing pupils' social skills and building positive pupil relationships will be successful.

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