Content and context for learning relationships: A cohesive framework for individual and whole school development

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There is a growing body of research in the field of emotional and social literacy, together with much debate about what this means and what it includes. There is now widespread agreement about the importance of connectedness and the benefits of actively developing intra- and inter-personal skills for healthy relationships and well-being. There are, however, diverse views about the detailed content of programmes, together with a concern about pedagogy, process and the ethos in which programmes are embedded. This has implications for the sustainability of positive change. This theoretical paper, based on a review of the literature, related research studies and reflections on experience, offers a framework for the interaction of content and context across 11 dimensions of social and emotional literacy.

D URING the latter part of the 20th century, relational quality in education became a casualty of tightly defined and delivered curriculum targets, a competitive focus on academic outcomes and time-consuming testing. This is slowly changing as issues of connectedness and the importance of relationships begin to permeate the educational agenda for the 21st century. Concerns about mental and physical health, social exclusion, community and family violence have extended the educational landscape. Many countries now incorporate values and citizenship education and/or social and emotional learning (SEL) to address a broad range of relational issues.

There is increasing evidence that social and emotional issues are not additional but integral to the effectiveness of the learning environment (Zins et al., 2004). Hattie's recent meta-analysis of 800 meta-analyses of effective education (2009) has highlighted the centrality of relationships, specifically features of teacher-pupil interaction.

There are two main strands to the developing focus on relationships in schools. One concerns school culture and climate and the other a social and emotional curriculum for students, such as the SEAL programmeme (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) in the UK. Most of the literature addresses one or the other and educators do not always make the connections in practice between the two. This paper attempts to bring these two aspects into a congruent perspective and make the links more explicit. By doing so it addresses some of the critiques of emotional literacy in education; specifically a concern that the learning environment will become a (potentially negative) therapeutic environment and that teachers without the appropriate skills may be delivering an inflexible social and emotional curriculum package not related to their particular context. (Craig, 2007; Ecclestone, 2004).

Context issues for SEL programmes

There has been increasing concern about the influence of the school setting in how programmes in social and emotional learning are adopted, implemented and sustained. Elias et al. (2003) talk about the features of educational settings that do not 'scale up' their interventions. These include a narrow focus on *decontextualised programmes and packages, poor management of time and other resources, and inadequate attention to characteristics of the adults who must carry out planned reforms'* (p.303). The difficulty posed by adults in schools who have poor self-aware-

ness and few constructive relational skills can be a major hurdle.

> *'The teachers in both classes were thought to be generally 'uninterested' in Circle Time and did not participate in the sessions. They made little effort to 'encourage the principles of Circle Time in other areas of the classroom.' It is not surprising then, that these facilitators did not see much change in their classrooms, and only minimal changes in their students. While some changes were noticed during Circle Time such as in belonging, friendship, co-operation and connection; these behaviours only lasted a few days and then the students reverted back to their old behaviour.'* (McCarthy, 2009)

Zins and Elias (2006) assert that success is more likely if SEL concepts are applied to schools' everyday practices and prevention programmes are understood as part of a multilevel educational system. Sustained change will only occur if programmes fit in with the structure of the school, work well with people in that particular context and help them gain ownership (Elias et al., 2003).

There are multiple references to a whole school approach in the literature on well-being. The World Health Organisation's Health Promoting Schools Framework, for instance, acknowledges the interactions between the curriculum, learning and teaching, the school organisation, ethos and environment and community partnerships (WHO, 1996). The Australian MindMatters initiative states: *'Every person who is part of a school community is a teacher for mental health and well-being … A whole school approach … ensures that social and emotional learning and mental health are part of every classroom teaching and learning programme'* (MindMatters, 2009). The Scottish Health Promoting Schools Unit gives a similar message: *'These values and aims are neither understood nor acted upon separately but are regarded as contributing jointly towards the basis for planning the life and work of the school'* (SHPSU, 2004, p.10).

A British study exploring the qualities that underpin well-being in schools (Haddon et al., 2005) found that both students and teachers need to feel capable, listened to, accepted, safe and included. This mirrors research in Australia on staff and student voice (Nemec, 2009).

The individual and the community

Limited acknowledgement is given to the incongruence of educational policies. On the one hand schools are being urged to raise educational standards that are measured in individual, competitive test scores whilst on the other hand they are encouraged to develop values and skills that promote collaboration and pro-social behaviour. This can lead to tension between individual success and community well-being. It is not surprising that schools opt for one rather than aiming for both, sometimes maintaining 'standards' and league table positions by high levels of exclusion. There does however, seem to be increasing evidence that developing inclusive communities focused on relational quality and well-being enhances positive outcomes, including academic attainments, for more individuals rather than the other way round. (Prilleltensky, 2006 , Skiba et al 2006, Stanley et al., 2005).

In order to address both elements this paper suggests a framework which identifies SEL content across 11 dimensions together with aligned aspects of context. It is for each individual school to address specific components of each dimension in ways that are meaningful for them, in order to optimise the implementation of SEL curricula and enhance well-being across the learning environment.

The evidence for the framework.

The framework in Table 1 is based on research studies in the fields of SEL, positive psychology, neuropsychology, school effectiveness, the development of relationships and pro-social behaviour and resilience. The evidence also includes three qualitative projects in which I have been directly involved, plus two scoping studies for the Australian Government on student well-being and social and emotional learning. The develop-

ment of the framework has been further influenced by reflections on experience and in discussions with colleagues.

The three studies have been published elsewhere and it is not the purpose of this paper to report on these, but to link some findings with the development of the framework. The first explored the experiences and constructs of parents/carers whose children had behaviour difficulties in schools (Roffey, 2002, 2004). The second investigated the processes by which four primary and two high schools were developing emotional literacy and relational quality (Roffey, 2007, 2008). In the third study 18 undergraduate students each spent 100 hours over 10 weeks supporting the introduction of Circle Time in eight primary schools. (McCarthy 2009) Their reflections on these experiences were thematically analysed.

Components of social and emotional curricula have been suggested by, amongst others, Gardner (1983, 1999), Goleman (1996), Elias and colleagues (2003), Cohen (2006), the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2009) and the SEAL programme in the UK. (DES 2005). There is broad agreement on the inclusion of self-awareness, emotional management, goal setting and relationship skills, but diverse views about the definition and detail of these and what else might be included or omitted.

Researchers working in a positive psychology paradigm have contributed significantly to the growing data on well-being. Seligman's research (2002) identifies three pillars of 'authentic happiness'. The 'meaningful life' which values what is outside the self: relationships, spirituality and service; the 'pleasant life', incorporating positive feelings and experiences and the 'engaged life', where you achieve fulfilment by being absorbed in a task, referred to by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as 'flow'. Noble and McGrath (2008) have summarised the research in positive psychology to suggest ways in which this evidence might be put into practice in education.

Research on resilience (Benard, 1991, 2004; Werner & Smith, 1992) finds that both personal and environmental factors are protective in the face of multiple adversities. The personal factors that might be addressed in SEL curricula include having a positive outlook, a sense of humour, pro-social orientation, persistence, confidence, self-esteem, problem-solving abilities, and the willingness and ability to talk about personal issues.

Protective environmental factors provide clues to factors to be addressed in the school context, especially for more vulnerable pupils. Being connected and having a sense of belonging is increasingly acknowledged as a critical factor in both mental health and school success (Blum & Libbey, 2004). Having someone believe in you and maintaining high expectations are the two other main protective factors (Benard 2004). Within the learning environment, this means schools communicating the value and acceptance of all students, together with support to reach their personal best.

Some findings from couple and family research (e.g. Gottman, 1999) are relevant to the framework; such as the value of aiming for a ratio of five positive statements to one negative or critical one and being open to repair overtures in a conflict situation.

The rationale for the framework

Why were these 11 dimensions chosen and what does each mean for the development of individual knowledge and skills and associated elements within the school system? The following section expands on Table 1 to initiate a comprehensive and congruent proposal for the content, context and processes of developing relational quality.

Self-awareness

This identifies the starting point and direction of development for individuals and for schools.

Table 1: Content and context for learning about relationships.

SEL Dimension	Content	Context
Self-awareness. ● Being and becoming.	Identification of values, beliefs, strengths and goals.	Clarity of school values, vision, priorities and direction. A focus on the well-being of the whole child.
Emotional awareness and knowledge. ● Aetiology. ● Triggers. ● Embodiment. ● Social construction.	Understanding the range of emotions and how they are experienced within the body Awareness of personal, social and cultural influences on feelings.	Emotional 'tone' of the school, how this is demonstrated and the influences on development.
Emotional skills. ● Regulation. ● Expression. ● Resilience.	Dealing with and regulating negative emotion. Acceptable expression of feelings within context. Knowing what sustains emotional well-being and promotes resilience.	Awareness of how staff model emotional literacy. Communication of expectations. Staff well-being and resilience.
Conceptualising the 'other'. ● How do we position others in our world?	Appreciating uniqueness for self and others. Valuing diversity. Seeking what is shared.	Celebration of diversity. Actively addressing racism, sexism and homophobia. Inclusive policies for students with special needs. A sense of belonging and connectedness for all.
Interpersonal skills. ● Skills needed to establish and maintain positive relationships.	Exploring the meaning and practice of relational values, for example, kindness, care, helpfulness, warmth, respect, trust, support. Communication skills. Collaboration and co-operation.	Facilitative teacher-student relationships. Student and staff voice. Staff collegiality. Collaborative pedagogies. Positive communication practices. Support systems.
Situational skills. ● Tuning into the emotional context.	Empathy. Reading, interpreting and tuning into emotions in situations. Not pre-judging. Awareness of timing.	Taking account of emotions in situations of challenge, change, and loss. Flexibility and appropriate responsiveness in highly charged situations.

Table 1: Content and context for learning about relationships *(continued)*.

SEL Dimension	Content	Context
Leadership.	Goal setting. Initiative. Responsibility. Confidence. Dealing with peer pressure. Opportunities to contribute.	Communication of vision. Acknowledging and trusting others; genuine consultation. Staff ownership of initiatives. 'Walking the talk'. Avoiding a blame discourse.
Promoting the positive. ● Strengths and solutions approach.	Optimism. Perspective. Gratitude. Humour.	Identifying and building strengths and solutions. Positive behaviour policies. Pedagogies for fun, meaning and engagement.
Conflict and confrontation. ● Dealing well with relational difficulties.	Negotiation. Compromise. Appropriate assertiveness. Problem-solving.	Pre-empting potential conflict. Appropriate use of authority. De-escalating confrontation. Addressing conflict actively. Anti-bullying policies.
Repair and restoration. ● Mending damage in relationships and restoring community.	Acknowledging hurt. Acknowledging a range of responses in any given situation. Responding to repair overtures. Action to repair harm.	Restorative approaches to behaviour. Mistakes as part of learning. Policies of re-integration for excluded students.
Ethics and integrity. ● Moral/human rights dimensions of SEL.	Honesty. Trustworthiness. Consistency. Ethical decision making. Focus on human rights. A philosophy for life.	Core values in social justice. Congruence between values, policies and practices. Authenticity.

Students identify their values and strengths to both promote a positive self concept and explore the person they want to become. The change literature in positive psychology says it is easier to build on what is working well than to address deficits, to have a goal rather than deconstruct problems (Passmore & Hain, 2005).

Clarifying values, beliefs and goals are also pre-requisites to developing a congruent context. The values and vision of school leaders, for instance, underpin the development of emotional literacy in schools, and emotional skills facilitate this (Roffey, 2007).

Self-awareness for schools defines what a school stands for, what people think they are doing there (Deakin-Crick et al., 2007). These questions give rise to whether short-term goals fit with longer-term aims. A feature of an emotionally literate school is the value placed on the whole child and their well-being in all aspects of development (SHPSU, 2004; Roffey, 2008). How is this demonstrated?

Beliefs are included to raise awareness of the powerful influence of one's worldview and acknowledge diverse ways of conceptualising reality. Teachers, for instance, who

believe that their role is to control children are less likely to model positive relationship skills or actively promote the internalisation of pro-social attitudes. (McCarthy, 2009).

> *'You have to control us, because we can't control ourselves.'* (Year 5 pupil in an initial Circle Time session)

Emotional awareness and knowledge

Exploring cultural and biological aspects of emotions brings an impersonal dimension that facilitates safety in talking about feelings. Much of this is built on the burgeoning knowledge in neuropsychology (e.g. Borod, 2000; Gerhardt, 2003). Encouraging reflection on these issues supports the development of emotional skills. You may be more able to regulate negative emotions if you understand how your body is biologically attuned to respond to a stimulus, such as a perceived threat. Knowing that additional information changes your thinking and therefore alters the stimulus can be a tool for changing behaviour (Robinson et al., 1999). It is also useful to know that mirroring neurons make emotions contagious (Iacoboni et al., 2005). Awareness of the embodiment of emotions raises questions of self-control – and from emotions determining reactions.

Many emotions are dependent on social contexts. It is helpful for students to be aware of how feelings can be infectious, mirrored and sometimes manipulated.

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) have identified what emotionally literate teachers do to support the development of positive behaviour. This includes setting the 'emotional tone' of the classroom. Schools might consider what this means and ways in which it is demonstrated. What actions might be taken to promote an emotional tone which is calm, purposeful and friendly?

Emotional skills

The nub of emotional intelligence, emotional management, self-control and the appropriate expression of feelings, appear in some format in all SEL frameworks.

Emotional resilience includes not only coping with difficult emotions and returning to a positive sense of self following adversity but limiting stress by keeping emotional resources high. Low emotional resources lead to unthinking reactions and feeling overwhelmed.

Students consider what helps cheer them up when they are down. How can they express negative feelings safely?

Watching and copying significant adult role models is a powerful learning tool for SEL. This is not only about how teachers relate to pupils but how they relate to each other (Baker & Manfredi-Petitz, 2004). What expectations are there in the school for modelling emotional literacy?

> *'It is not acceptable at this school to speak to kids as second class citizens.'* (High School Principal)

A stressed, demoralised, disaffected educator is unlikely to deliver effective SEL curricula. Schools need to consider structures and practice that might be put in place to support teacher well-being and resilience.

Conceptualising the 'Other'

Unless they are underpinned by a positive perspective on the other person, interpersonal skills may be shallow and self-serving. By positioning others we also position ourselves in relation to them; this determines our perceptions and actions (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999). In Roffey (2002) where parents were positioned by teachers as partners in meeting a child's needs, positive outcomes followed. The problems did not necessarily disappear but everyone felt better about dealing with them. Where families were conceptualised as uncaring, ineffectual and blamed for difficulties, relationships and outcomes deteriorated. Stereotyping blinds people to the qualities of individuals and leads to prejudice; 'They just see me as a single parent and blame everything on that.'

This suggests a double-sided approach of valuing difference whilst seeking what is shared. Maximising an inclusive ethic involves the way conversations position

others. People feel connected to their communities when they are valued for who they are and acknowledged for their contribution. This raises questions of what schools are doing to promote that sense of belonging that is proving to be so vital for well-being (Blum & Libbey, 2004)?

Teachers who socialise regularly in informal staff gatherings often find that the barriers between individuals break down as they get to know each other. This leads to increased collegiality and collaboration. (Roffey, 2008). This also happens for students when Circle Time is run effectively. (McCarthy, 2009)

Interpersonal skills

There are now many programmes, resources and materials to help teachers address interpersonal skills with students. They include understanding and practicing relational values, communication and co-operation skills that establish a threshold for collaboration and friendship. These skills need to be taught universally and developmentally and be embedded within the school (Zins & Elias, 2007).

Although teachers often consider it their role to control students research is unequivocal that effective teacher-student relationships are authoritative (or facilitative) rather than authoritarian (Spratt et al., 2006). Taking account of student perspective is part of a facilitative approach.

The voice and agency of all stakeholders is, therefore, relevant to a congruent context (Nemec, 2009). In which ways are students given the opportunity to participate, have a say in what happens, work with and learn from each other? In which ways are teachers consulted? What support systems are in place?

Communication practices, both verbal and non-verbal are central to a positive climate. Schools may consider what a respectful approach means for both the content and process of communications. (Roffey, 2005).

Situational skills

It takes a particular facility to weigh up the emotional content of a situation and act accordingly (Goleman, 2006). Reading and responding to others, timing and 'tuning in' are all part of this.

'I will always be grateful to the colleague who came and offered to take my class on her free afternoon because she realised how fragile I was at that time. It made all the difference to my determination to carry on.' (Personal communication, 2009)

Empathy is the ability to sympathise with situations others are in and respond appropriately.

'Central to the SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) initiatives is empathy, or the ability to recognise and respond to other people's emotions. Being able to see the world through the eyes of another, recognising the pressures they face and how their behaviour is affected also allows you to consider your own behaviour and responses.' (Stott, 2008)

The skills within an SEL curriculum might include awareness of what others might be feeling in a given situation. This includes not jumping to conclusions about what is happening and being mindful of what to say so someone does not feel worse than they need to.

Situational skills for schools involves being pro-active about beginnings, endings, transitions and major initiatives as emotions are often volatile in situations of change. It also includes making judgments on evidence rather than appearances and being flexible when this is more likely to lead to the resolution of a difficult situation. Timing is all important in situational emotional literacy, ie what you say when. When someone is, for instance, expressing a high level of emotion, trying to problem solve with them may be futile.

Leadership

Emotional competency in leadership has received attention in the literature (e.g. Fullan, 2003; Scott, 2003) but less so in school curricula for SEL. This dimension encompasses the skills and strengths that are

linked to effective leadership: vision, responsibility, confidence, courage, initiative taking, trusting and empowering others, staying calm, focused and keeping things in perspective to attain goals (Chatterjee, 2006; Nemec, 2006). This includes dealing with peer pressure and being able to act in accordance with your own values rather than being led by others. These skills are relevant to both staff and students.

> *'The girls here are mostly well-behaved but many lack confidence.'* (Personal communication with the Principal of a High School)

The role of a school leader is critical. Leaders able to transform their schools into caring, emotionally literate learning environments not only have high relational expectations of others but also model these behaviours in their leadership style. They win respect by 'walking the talk' as well as 'walking with' their staff (Roffey, 2007). Emotionally literate leadership promotes every teacher as a teacher for well-being and every student as worthy of taking responsibility. Unless staff feel they have ownership initiatives will not flourish and become embedded in school culture (Spratt et al., 2006)

Being positive

Positive psychology research has given a fresh perspective on SEL and the multiple ways in which school and student well-being might be addressed (Noble & McGrath, 2008; Gilman et al., 2009). A positive outlook is a protective factor in individual resilience as is humour and the ability to keep things in perspective (Bernard, 2004). This is not intended to undermine the need to acknowledge sadness or anger.

A positive approach is known to have an impact on the effectiveness of organisations (Cameron et al., 2003). Although a strengths and solution focus has had purchase for a while, other skills such as gratitude (Fredrickson, 2004), the promotion of hope (Lopez et al., 2009), and fostering creativity (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009) also enhance

well-being and efficacy. Having fun together both relieves stress and promotes a sense of belonging. This has implications for pedagogy (Hromek & Roffey, 2009), peer interaction and teacher-student relationships in the classroom.

Positive communications make a difference to the relational context and emotional climate across the school; this includes how letters home are constructed, the way behaviour policies are written and a five-to-one ratio of positive to negative statements in personal communication.

> *'We don't really have bullying at this school, because we've got this 'no put downs' rule.'* (Year 5 student)

Managing conflict and confrontation

Many people are excellent at establishing positive relationships but do not know how to deal well with conflict and confrontation. It is, therefore, given a separate category from interpersonal skills.

Conflict taxes teachers both in the playground and in the staffroom. Too confronting an approach exacerbates difficulties while ignoring conflict ensures it flourishes in insidious ways, undermining collaboration and well-being. Schools that are pro-active in pre-empting potential conflict spend less time dealing with the fall out of incidents.

Within curricula content are skills of appropriate assertiveness, negotiation and mediation. Being able to disagree with someone and still remain friends is a learnt skill.

In a congruent context interactions minimise conflict, authority is used appropriately and bullying behaviours are not allowed to flourish. Adults need to know how to de-escalate confrontation.

Repair and restoration

Restorative approaches in schools are having increasing influence and this dimension reflects this. They present an alternative to the emphasis on managing and controlling behaviour (Hopkins, 2004).

Repairing harm goes beyond sanctions to the core of community well-being – confirming that all involved in a damaging incident need to restore healthy relationships for the benefit of everyone and to maintain a sense of belonging.

Research (e.g. Hattie, 2009) confirms that acknowledging and learning from mistakes is necessary to an effective learning environment and that this needs to be threaded throughout all levels of a school and modelled by staff.

The way students are welcomed back into the school after a period of absence, especially exclusion for behaviour, determines how well they will be re-integrated. This will make a difference to their motivation and learning (Lown, 2007).

Ethics and integrity

Cohen (2006) argues for ethical competencies to be added to social and emotional learning as a logical step that follows on from a consideration of values and treating others with respect.

For the purposes of this paper ethical behaviour is defined as taking the rights of others into account. This includes being responsible, honest, trustworthy, consistent, authentic, reliable and respecting confidentiality. Integrity means acting in accordance with aligned moral values, not saying one thing and doing another.

Noddings talks about the 'ethical ideal' in schools where *'teachers not only have to create caring relations in which they are carers, but that they also have a responsibility to help their students develop the capacity to care.'* Noddings claims that the ideal interaction occurs when *'the best self of the educator connects with the best self of the student'* (Noddings, 1992, p.18).

There is a continuing debate about spiritual intelligence as a facet of emotional intelligence. This is concerned with questions of meaning and purpose and the principles by which we live (Sisk & Torrance, 2001) It was a significant theme in interviews with principals in schools developing emotional literacy.

'I would start with beliefs, what you believe about educating children. Values are important, we need a common purpose.' (Primary School Principal)

Perhaps the more advanced levels of SEL involve students in developing a philosophy for life – integrating all the other dimensions in this framework.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to bring together an expanded curriculum for SEL along with the features of a school that would support and sustain learning about relationships. This contributes to a much wider debate on relational quality in schools and ways in which relational values are put into operation to maximise well-being and the quality of the learning environment.

'You can't develop emotional literacy in a school which doesn't have values that are congruent with it, and I think that that's becoming more and more central to my understanding.' (High School Principal)

Teachers sometimes claim they have limited time to focus on anything but getting through the curriculum, but both relationships and emotions exist all day in schools, either enhancing connection, engagement and effective learning or inhibiting it. Hattie's meta-analysis of effective educational practices (Hattie, 2009) identifies the interaction between teacher and student as highly significant to effective education. It is not a question of time so much as heightened awareness of the quality of the many interactions that over time develop either a positive or negative learning environment. Social capital is the term used to describe the extent of trust between people and whether they have a shared understanding of how they should behave towards and care for one another (CEOM, 2006). The level of social capital determines the emotional climate. A positive emotional climate and respectful relationships, together with congruent polices and practices, provides the context within which social and emotional learning makes sense and can flourish.

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