LITERATURE REVIEWS

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

"FRIENDSHIP MULTIPLIES JOY AND DIVIDES GRIEF."
Swedish Proverb

Social relationships are integral to happiness and flourishing. A core aim of the model of positive education is to help students develop social and emotional skills in order to create and promote strong and nourishing relationships with self and others. A focus on relationships recognises that child and adolescent development does not occur in isolation and that social context has a powerful impact on adaptive and healthy growth (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).The purpose of this summary is to overview research on positive relationships and flourishing and to explore how effective relationships can be cultivated and maintained. The following strategies for nurturing relationships will be explored: (a) emotional and social intelligence; (b) active-constructive responding; (c) strengths of gratitude and forgiveness; and (d) self-compassion and forgiveness.

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND FLOURISHING

Relationships with parents, carers, family members, peers, teachers, coaches, and other members of the school community play integral roles in students' lives. There is an abundance of evidence that suggests social support is integral to wellbeing and mental health. Social isolation is a risk factor for depression, substance abuse, suicide, and other symptoms of mental ill-health (Hassed, 2008). Family and school connectedness is protective against adolescents' emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, and violent behaviours (Resnick et al., 1997). Similarly, social support has been found to provide a buffer in times of stressful and adverse life events (i.e., the buffering hypothesis) thus contributing to coping and resilience (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Supportive school relationships have been linked with child and adolescent wellbeing and resilience whereas critical and turbulent school environments have been linked with adverse mental health outcomes (Stewart, Sun, Patterson, Lemerle, & Hardie, 2004). Social relationships have also been found to be important predictors of subjective wellbeing (Myers, 2000) and meaning in life (Hicks & King, 2009; Lambert et al., 2010). For example, Diener and Seligman (2002) divided a sample of participants (N = 222) into high, average, and low groups based on self and peer reports of subjective wellbeing. Individuals in the high wellbeing group most commonly reported highly satisfying social relationships.

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In addition to benefits for mental health and wellbeing there is substantial evidence that social support is good for physical health. Uchino, Cacioppo, and Kiecolt-Glaser (1996) conducted a meta-analytic review of 81 studies and found that social support was consistently linked with cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune functioning. Similarly, social isolation is associated with a range of physical health problems including heart disease, infectious disease, and unhealthy lifestyle choices (Hassed, 2008). Relationships are believed to foster good health by increasing the desire to care for oneself, encouraging health behaviours such as good diet and exercise, and increasing positive emotions that have a beneficial impact on bodily systems (Cohen, 2004). Overall, feeling connected to others is believed to play a key role in good physical and mental health throughout the lifespan.

One reason that relationships are so consistently linked with mental and physical health is that humans are believed to have a fundamental biological and psychological need for social interactions and connectedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For example, along with competence and autonomy, relatedness is proposed to be one of the three core human needs in the self-determination theory of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). More specifically, Ryan and Deci (2000) propose that individuals have a deep need to feel secure in their connections to others and to deem oneself worthy of care, compassion, love and respect (see the positive engagement summary for a more comprehensive discussion of the self-determination theory). The importance of belonging is also emphasised in attachment theory where, from infancy, humans experience a strong need to feel secure and safe in their physical and emotional attachments to their caregivers and others (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). Given humans' intrinsic need for connectedness and belonging, a priority is to create school environments that foster inclusion and mutual respect (Osterman, 2000).

RELATIONSHIPS AND ACCOMPLISHMENT

In addition to benefits for physical and mental wellbeing, research suggests that relationships have benefits for student accomplishment. Children and adolescents with strong and supportive peer relations have been found to perform better academically than those without such support (Wentzel, 1991; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Similarly, peer, teacher, and parent support has been found to predict motivation (Wentzel, 1998) and school engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). For example, Van Ryzin, Gravely, and Roseth (2009) conducted a study with US secondary school students (N = 283) and found that teacher and peer related support were significant predictors of students' school engagement and hope. Helping students develop strong social skills

also equips them for success in later life as the ability to communicate well is integral to effectiveness in a wide variety of occupations (Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004). Overall, there is a strong case for a focus on enhancing positive relationships within the model of positive education. Skills that are believed to help students nurture positive relationships include: emotional and social intelligence, active-constructive responding, the strengths of gratitude and forgiveness, and self compassion.

EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

A powerful strategy for promoting positive relationships is developing emotional and social intelligence. Mayer and colleagues (2001) propose that emotional intelligence consists of four parts or branches: (1) the ability to perceive emotions in self and others; (2) an understanding of how emotions influence thinking and decision making; (3) understanding the emotions of self and others; and (4) managing and regulating emotions (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001). Emotional intelligence has been empirically linked with wellbeing (Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008); academic performance (Parker & Creque, 2004); and students' successful transition to tertiary education (Downey, Mountstephen, Lloyd, Hansen, & Stough, 2008; Parker et al., 2004).

Social intelligence is one of the 24 signature strengths included in the Values In Action framework and is defined as awareness of the motivations of self and others and the ability to flourish in social situations (Park & Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Assisting students to develop social intelligence involves helping them to communicate effectively with others, manage their behaviour in social situations, and deal effectively with conflict (Elbertson, Brackett, & Weissberg, 2009; Greenberg et al., 2003). In addition to benefits to the self, such strategies reduce the likelihood of problematic interactions including bullying and aggression (Elbertson et al., 2009; Greenberg et al., 2003).

Schools can nurture social and emotional intelligence by cultivating a school environment that fosters inclusion, tolerance, and mutual respect (Osterman, 2000). Moreover, skills that foster emotional and social competencies can be taught explicitly. For example, the Collaborative on Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2003) recommends teaching social and emotional skills in five areas: (1) self-awareness and understanding one's emotions, values, and strengths; (2) self-management, or the ability to control strong emotions and impulses and express emotions appropriately; (3) social awareness, empathy, and the ability to see things from others' points of view; (4) effective communication, listening, and conflict resolution skills; and (5) responsible decision making and considering the consequences of one's actions.

ACTIVE-CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONDING

Recent advancement in the understanding of communication and relationships has come from research on active-constructive responding. Gable, Gonzaga, and Strachman (2006) suggest that sharing good news contributes to wellbeing beyond the impact of the good event itself. Gable et al. call this effect capitalising and explain that as people tell their story they relieve and savour the experience thereby enhancing the positive emotions drawn from it. In an observational study of 79 couples, partners' responses to good news was found to be more predictive of relationship satisfaction and commitment over a two month period than partners' responses to negative events (Gable et al., 2006).

According to Gable et al. (2004) reactions to good news generally consists of one of four types: (1) active-constructive or supportive, communicative, and enthusiastic; (2) passive-constructive or supportive but quiet and uncommunicative; (3) active-destructive or vocally and obviously unsupportive and critical; and (4) passive-destructive or destructive and critical but quiet and uncommunicative. In four separate studies of adult participants, responding to news in a way that was active and constructive was found to be the most beneficial to wellbeing and relationship satisfaction (Gable et al., 2006; Gable et al., 2004). This research supports the importance of encouraging students to take the time to be genuinely and sincerely supportive of the accomplishments of their family members and peers (Gable et al., 2004).

USING STRENGTHS: GRATITUDE FORGIVENESS

Strengths such as gratitude and forgiveness help to nourish relationships. In addition to important benefits for wellbeing (see the positive emotions domain) gratitude has been found to be positively related to relationship satisfaction (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010); friendship formation and development (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008); empathy (Breen, Kashdan, Lenser, & Fincham, 2010); and trust and prosocial, helping behaviour (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). According to Bono and McCullough (2006) forgiveness involves a reduction in negative or revenge related thoughts and an increase in benevolent or warm and compassionate thoughts. Forgiveness has been found to be associated with increased happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008; Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2005; McCullough, 2000). In terms of relationships, forgiveness is related to increased commitment, satisfaction, and closeness (Bono et al., 2008; Maltby et al., 2005; McCullough, 2000). Forgiveness is also related to connectedness to

others and prosocial behaviours such as volunteering (Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005). In order to enhance forgiveness, students can be encouraged to develop empathy and the ability to see things from others' perspectives and to develop realistic awareness of their own potential to make mistakes (Exline, Baumeister, Zell, Kraft, & Witvliet, 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

SELF COMPASSION AND FORGIVENESS

A relationship that is often overlooked is the relationship with the self. Indeed, people are often substantially more critical of their own actions, appearance, choices, and failures than they are of others' (Shapira & Mongrain, 2010). Neff (2003) espouses the value of the self-compassion as a form of social intelligence towards the self. Self compassion involves kindness towards oneself, the avoidance of overly harsh self-criticism, and an understanding that painful experiences such as rejection, failure, or shame are normal parts of life. A similar construct, self forgiveness, involves a decrease in self-resentment and blame and an increase in empathy and compassion towards the self (Hall & Fincham, 2005).

TWO IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to being protective against dysfunction and distress, research suggests that relationships are essential for flourishing. Therefore, a focus on helping students to develop social and emotional skills in schools justified. When considering student relationships there are some important factors to consider. First, it is important to acknowledge that relationships can sometimes have detrimental effects. For example, relationships can be critical, abusive, or ostracising (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Slee, 1995) or may be associated with peer pressure or risk taking behaviours (Maxwell, 2002). Similarly, the need to feel connected to others can manifest in unhealthy ways such as belonging to groups that may have adverse consequences (e.g., gangs) or maintaining a hurtful relationship as opposed to experiencing isolation (Myers, 2000). Relationships high in stress or conflict may actually have a detrimental impact on health (Cohen, 2004). Furthermore, research suggests that friends' disruptive behaviours can substantially impact students' engagement with school and learning (Berndt & Keefe, 1995). Therefore, an important component of the model of positive education is helping students explore the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships.

A second important consideration is the influence of technology on students' interactions. Children and adolescents have one of the largest rates of technology usage in Australia, with 79% of children aged 5 to 14 having access to the internet, and 76% of 12 to 14 year olds owning mobile phones (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Rapid advances in technologies such as email, social media, mobile phones, and instant messaging, are having a profound impact on students' social interactions and connectedness and evidence suggests young people view technology as essential to their relationships (McGrath, 2009). While technology offers important opportunities, it also poses significant challenges and risks. Dangers of technology identified by McLean (2009) include exposure to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and harassment. The internet poses particular risks as dissemination of information is quick, global, and often permanent. Initiatives to help students develop emotional and social competencies should be extended to consider online and mobile interactions. Furthermore, skills specific to the use of technology should be encouraged so that students know what is and isn't appropriate when communicating online (McGrath, 2009).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Research suggests that humans have a deep intrinsic need to feel connected to others and that relationships have positive consequences for physical and psychological health and accomplishment in important life domains. Students' need to belong has special relevance to schools and a priority is to develop school communities that facilitate mutual trust, emotional connectedness, and loyalty (Osterman, 2000). A focus on effective relationships in schools is believed to lead to increased student wellbeing, engagement, and accomplishment (Greenberg et al., 2003).

The aim of the positive relationships domain of the model of positive education is to help students create and promote strong and nourishing relationships with self and others by encouraging social and emotional skills. Objectives of the model of positive education include helping students to develop emotional and social intelligence and the ability to communicate effectively with others. Active-constructive responding is viewed as a powerful strategy of supporting others in good times thereby enhancing relationships. Gratitude and forgiveness are proposed as strengths that help create flourishing individuals and communities. Finally, self-compassion, kindness, and forgiveness ensure the relationship with the self is not overlooked. Within the model of positive education, helping students develop strong and nourishing relationships is viewed as a priority in helping students thrive and flourish.

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