Building social competency

(W@S research brief: March 2012)

Why focus on building students' social and emotional competencies?

The introduction to the Health and Physical Education learning area in *The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC)* (Ministry of Education, 2007) states that a core focus of this learning area is the "wellbeing of students themselves". In this learning area, health education is positioned as a vehicle that supports students to: build resilience, a positive identity, a sense of self-worth and empathy; learn how to co-operate and negotiate; learn processes for responsible decision making; and develop other competencies such as those needed for mental wellness and safety management. As a result students should be able to use their knowledge, skills and understandings, now and in the future, to take action to promote individual, interpersonal and societal wellbeing.

To realise this vision we need to consider the different ways schools can support young people's wellbeing through equipping them with the range of social and emotional competencies listed above. International research suggests that approaches which explicitly aim to build students' social and emotional skills and competencies are associated with a range of benefits for young people and schools (CASEL, 2008a; Green, Howes, Waters, Maher, & Oberklaid, 2005; Payton et al., 2008; Weare & Gray, 2003; Wells, Barlow, & Stewart-Brown, 2003). This is a compelling reason for increasing our focus on the social and affective dimensions of learning. The benefits cited in international overview studies tend to fall into three categories, which are improved:

- **attitudes:** a stronger sense of community at school (for staff and students) or perceptions that the school learning environment is caring and supportive
- **behaviour:** increases in students' social skills, prosocial behaviour or ability to resolve conflicts along with decreases in behaviours such as aggression
- **performance:** enhanced academic achievement.

What are social and emotional competencies?

In the USA the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is engaged in ongoing research and development about social and emotional competencies and the learning which supports them. From their work, the members of this collaborative suggest there are five core competencies that young people need (shown in Figure 1). These integrate cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects of learning. Other terms that are closely related, or used, to describe these skills and

competencies include "emotional intelligence", "emotional literacy" or "mental wellbeing" (CASEL, 2008b; Weare & Gray, 2003).

Figure 1 **Social and emotional core competencies***
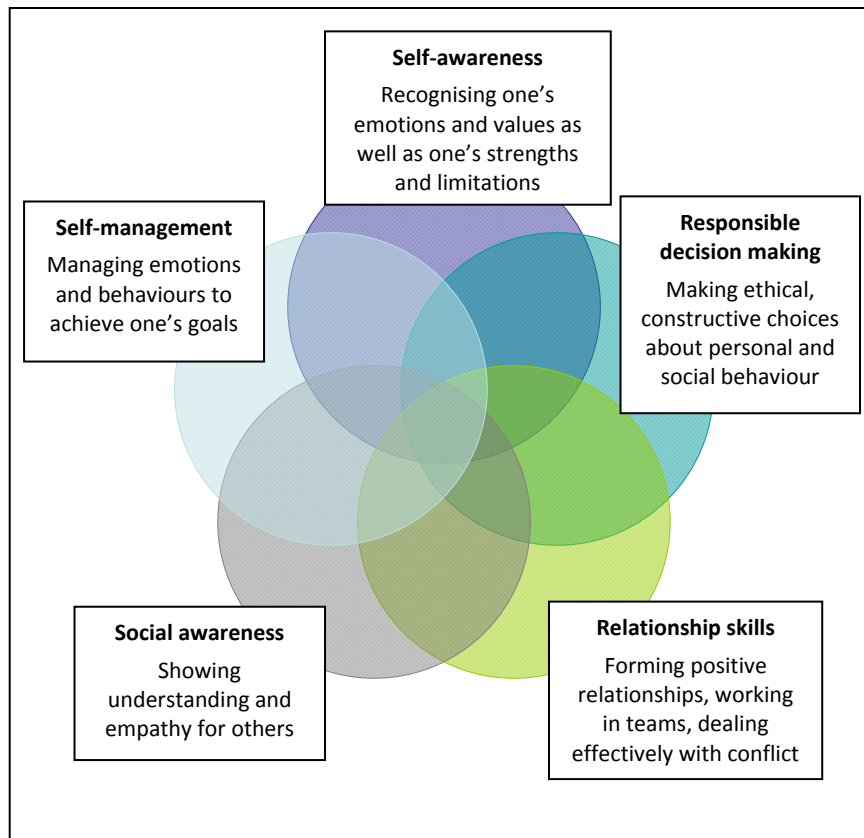
The core competencies in Figure 1 are integral components of the key competencies outlined in *NZC* (Ministry of Education, 2007). They weave together aspects of *managing self*, *relating to others* and *participating and contributing*. *NZC* provides an avenue for building these competencies across a range of learning areas.

Embedding a focus on competencies within a whole-school approach

Schools already have many different ways of building students' social and emotional competencies. However, **explicitly planning how students' social and emotional competencies will be enhanced through the classroom programme**, in a way that both supports, and is supported by, the wider actions of the school, is a **key part of any whole-school approach** which aims to build a safe and caring climate (see the **W@S research brief: A whole-school approach to change using the Wellbeing@School tools**).

The W@S research brief, Addressing conflicts in ways that build social competence, discusses how schools can use social problem-solving approaches to

address individual incidents of conflict in ways that build students' skills and competencies. However, this is essentially a **reactive** approach. This current research brief focuses on building skills and competencies in a way that is **proactive and preventative.** The overall aim of these approaches is to enhance wellbeing by building students' resilience, sense of self-worth and ability to make effective decisions and choices in a range of situations.

Reactive and **proactive** ways of working are not mutually exclusive. For example, if a school is aiming to embed the use of restorative practices throughout school life or further build students' skills in managing relationships, then research suggests that students need planned opportunities to learn about any new approaches, work together to develop strategies and practise these strategies as part of the classroom programme.

This research brief summarises recent research evidence about how social and emotional competencies can be explicitly taught in the classroom and strategically woven into school-wide practice.

Building social and emotional competencies within the curriculum programme

Writing from a Canadian perspective, Bickmore (2010) suggests that, although forms of problem solving are basic to all learning areas, curriculum approaches are an underutilised resource in schools in terms of developing students' ability to interact peacefully. She suggests schools consider further ways to cultivate experiences of caring, community and belonging, or engage with questions of cultural diversity within the curriculum programme. One way this can be achieved is by embedding study of concepts such as diversity or equity within classroom learning experiences.

NZC provides ample space for educators to explore concepts and values such as equity, diversity, discrimination and conflict in a way that supports students' social and emotional development. *NZC* suggests that educators focus on future-focused issues such as citizenship*:* "exploring what it means to be a citizen and to contribute to the development and wellbeing of society" *(*Ministry of Education, 2007, p.38). *NZC* suggests citizenship can be explored in a way that makes connections between the learning areas, values (such as diversity, equity, integrity and community and participation) and key competencies in *NZC*.

The Health and Physical Education and Social Science learning areas both have an explicit focus on concepts such as discrimination, conflict and equity. These learning areas offer teaching resources such as the: *Curriculum in Action* series which includes ideas about how Health and Physical Education learning activities can be used to build a sense of community at school (Ministry of Education, 2002, 2004); and *Building Conceptual Understandings in the Social Sciences* series (Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b).

Effective teaching approaches that build social and emotional competence

When planning how to build student social and emotional competencies it is important to consider that research suggests these competencies can be enhanced if they are **explicitly "taught" rather than assuming they will be "caught"**.

Payton et al. (2008) reviewed a wide range of international school programmes and initiatives that aimed to enhance at least one of the competencies noted in Figure 1. Their focus was on exploring approaches that were offered to **all students** rather than a targeted group who were identified as needing extra support.

Payton et al. reviewed initiatives with widely varying aims which included: building students' social, coping, stress management or conflict resolution skills; or preventing violence, bullying or substance abuse.

They found that the initiatives that showed positive outcomes included some key similar teaching practices which can be described using the acronym "SAFE". The most effective approaches and programmes wove these SAFE practices together.

> **SAFE stands for:**
>
> • Use a *Sequenced* set of activities to develop social and emotional skills in a step-by-step fashion;
> • Use *Active* forms of learning, such as role-plays and behavioural rehearsal that provide students with opportunities to practise social and emotional skills;
> • *Focus* attention on social and emotional learning, with at least eight sessions devoted to social and emotional skill development; and
> • *Explicitly* target particular social and emotional skills for development, with skills identified in lessons' learning objectives. (CASEL, 2008a, pp.2-3)

In NZC the Health and Physical Education learning area provides a space to explicitly use SAFE practices to focus on building particular skills and competencies through the strands Relationships with Other People and Personal Health and Physical Development. The related key learning area is Mental Health. These strands include a focus on "big picture" concepts such as discrimination, conflict and wellbeing. Learning experiences relating to these concepts can be used as a wider framework within which social and emotional competencies can be focused on. See **Connections between W@S and educational directions in New Zealand** or a summary of some of the achievement objectives that are connected to the development of social and emotional competency.

Developing social and emotional competence and addressing bullying behaviours

One real-life context for building students' skills and competencies is through approaches that enhance the range of skills and strategies students have to address bullying behaviour. Building on findings that show that bullying behaviours stop faster if peers intervene, Pepler, Craig and O'Connell (2010) state that:

> Children need a range of explicit educational experiences to develop the skills and attitudes required to recognize the peer dynamics in bullying and to take action to address this … (p. 474)

Pepler et al. note that, to promote prosocial behaviours (i.e., caring, helping, empathic and social problem-solving behaviours), young people first need to be aware of their own emotions and reactions. This type of self-awareness is a foundation for understanding others' emotions and developing empathy. In turn this understanding is needed to help students to develop an awareness of how to respond to the dynamics within bullying. Building on the finding that young people find it uncomfortable to watch bullying, assisting them to talk about their feelings and recognise the feelings of others can be an initial stage of this process. Pepler et al. also consider that self-awareness is not enough—young people also need to be provided with the language, social and assertiveness skills and sense of self-efficacy to address situations and support their peers. They caution that these skills are not spontaneously developed, and students may need to be provided with scripts about what to say and do.

Some research (e.g., Farrington & Ttofi, 2009) also identifies teaching approaches that are likely to support students to develop and practise strategies for managing social interactions and build their ability to resolve conflicts such as bullying behaviour. Particular classroom approaches that can assist students to build healthy relationship strategies include:

- use of visual resources such as DVDs to prompt discussion about healthy relationships and co-construction of strategies to address social conflict
- use of strategies such as role plays in ways that enable students to develop as well as practise strategies for managing conflict situations
- use of co-operative learning strategies in ways that support students to relate well to each other.

Building competencies through democratic participation in school life

The focus suggested above aims to explicitly build students' skills and competencies within the classroom programme. It is important that this is not done in a way that emphasises individual "skills training" or is divorced from real-life experience. Writing from a USA perspective, Hoffman (2009) notes that the social and emotional learning movement has assisted in raising awareness about the need to attend to the emotional dimension of schooling and the link between achievement and a positive school climate. However, Hoffman criticises some approaches to social and emotional learning for becoming overly focused on individual competencies and emotional and behavioural control (and remediation of individual deficits). She considers there needs to be more focus on cultivating experiences of caring, community and belonging in schools.

One way this can be achieved has been discussed above in the section *Building social and emotional competencies within the curriculum programme.* Another way of encouraging students to actively build a sense of community and belonging at school is through offering students opportunities to strengthen their social and emotional competencies in real-life settings. The research team that developed the SAFE acronym

noted that quality approaches to social and emotional learning also provide students with wider opportunities to show leadership and citizenship capabilities as they contribute to class, school and community activities or community-building initiatives (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Other research also suggests that students' social and emotional competencies can be enhanced by offering a range of opportunities for young people to democratically participate in school life. Examples of democratic participation include being members of student councils or health and wellbeing teams, organising school events and taking part in the development of school policies and rules or classroom decision making. As well as improved social competencies, these opportunities are associated with other positive outcomes for students and schools which include improved: personal wellbeing; sense of connection to school; peer and teacher relationships; and school social environment (Boyd, 2009; Griebler & Nowak, 2012; Róiste, Kelly, Molcho, Gavin, & Gabhainn, 2012).

The social problem-solving approaches discussed in **the W@S research brief, Addressing conflicts in ways that build social competence**, aim to build students' social and emotional competencies. They are also one way of supporting young people to democratically participate in school decision-making processes.

Using external providers to support competency development

A number of external providers offer educational programmes that aim to support schools to build aspects of students' social and emotional competencies. One international study study compared the outcomes from teacher-led and external provider approaches (Durlak, et al., 2011). They found that teacher-led approaches were more effective, but both teacher-led and external provider approaches **could be** effective. Other research suggests that external provider programmes are more likely to be effective if they meet certain criteria (Buckley & White, 2007). Some of these criteria are that external provider programmes:

• have evidence of effectiveness
• reflect students' needs and the school's vision, goals and ways of working
• promote integration with the classroom programme rather than use in a stand-alone fashion
• use research-based teaching practices such as interactive strategies
• are developmentally and culturally appropriate
• are implemented fully in the way they were intended
• are long term rather than one-off
• can be adapted to meet the needs of students if necessary.

Some approaches and programmes which are used in New Zealand and which have evidence that they can be effective in building aspects of social and emotional competence are summarised below.

Approaches aimed at *all* students

Name (country of origin and New Zealand provider)	Description	School sector	Evidence base
Lions Quest (Developed in Canada and managed by the Lions Clubs International in New Zealand) • Skills for growing (New entrant– Year 6) • Skills for adolescence (Years 7–9) See: http://www.lions-quest.org.nz	Lions Quest is a positive youth development and prevention curricula designed for teachers. It aims to promote social and emotional learning, civic values and service learning and substance and violence prevention. Modules focus on topics such as building friendships and relationships, and strategies such as conflict resolution. Optional lessons for addressing bullying are available.	Primary, intermediate and junior secondary	Evaluation studies report positive impacts on students' life skills and conflict resolution skills. See: http://www.lions-quest.org/evalreports.php
Friends for Life (Developed in Australia and managed by the Life Paths Trust in New Zealand) • Fun friends (ages 3–7) • Friends for children (ages 7–12) • Friends for youth (ages 13–16) See: http://www.lifepaths.org.nz	Friends is a curriculum programme designed for classroom teachers. Friends aims to support young people to develop resilience and increase their ability to cope with anxiety, depression, stress or worry.	Primary, intermediate and secondary	Evaluation studies report evidence of effectiveness in reducing anxiety. See: http://www.friendsinfo.net/researchevaluation.html
Roots of Empathy (Developed in Canada and managed by a New Zealand branch) See: http://www.rootsofempathy.org/en/where-we-are/new-zealand.html	Roots of Empathy aims to "build caring, peaceful, and civil societies through the development of empathy". The programme involves classroom visits by a baby and parent. Through guided observations of this relationship, children learn to identify and reflect on their feelings and those of others.	Primary	Evaluation studies offer evidence that suggests this initiative is associated with increased prosocial, and decreased aggressive, behaviour. See: http://www.rootsofempathy.org A New Zealand evaluation of Roots of Empathy is currently underway.
Kaupapa Māori approaches (Developed by a range of researchers and providers. Some approaches are for all students, others for targeted groups.) See: http://youthjustice.co.nz/sites/default/files/conduct-problems-8-12.pdf	These programmes are developed from a Māori world view and aim to address health and wellbeing in a holistic way. They support young people to develop a range of skills and competencies that vary depending on the nature of the programme.	Primary and intermediate	See "Part 4: Te ao Māori perspective on understanding conduct problems" (Advisory Group on Conduct Problems, 2011, pp. 39-68). Debates about assessing the effectiveness of these approaches are also included.
Life Education (Developed in New Zealand, and managed by the Life Education Trust) See: http://www.lifeeducation.org.nz	Life Education is provided by visiting educators. Preschool to Year 8 students attend one to two sessions a year and complete classroom work based on a selected module that provides students with knowledge, skills and strategies to manage different aspects of wellbeing. Module topics include social relationships.	Primary and intermediate	An evaluation found some modules supported students to increase their knowledge, and use, of a range of strategies to improve their health and wellbeing (Boyd, Fisher, & Brooking, 2008). Effectiveness was increased if this use was embedded within a school-wide and classroom programme.

Approaches aimed at *targeted groups* of students			
Name (origin country)	**Description**	**School sector**	**Evidence base**
Travellers (Developed in New Zealand, and managed by Skylight) See: http://www.travellers.org.nz	Travellers is run by school facilitators (often a guidance counsellor) who work with small groups of Year 9 students identified from a screening survey. Travellers aims to promote self-worth and provides students with strategies to cope with life changes and avoid risk situations.	Junior secondary	An evaluation of Travellers found that the programme supported young people to develop a range of skills and competencies that enabled them to better manage their wellbeing (Robertson, Boyd, Dingle, & Taupo, 2012).

Final comment

The research literature suggests that a focus on explicitly building students' social and emotional competencies is one important component of a whole-school approach that aims to build a safe and caring school climate. It appears there many potential benefits for schools in ensuring students' learning experiences give them opportunities to explore concepts such as conflict, discrimination and diversity. These experiences can also be framed in a way that supports students to develop and practise the sorts of skills and competencies they need to better manage their own wellbeing as well as contribute to the wellbeing of others. Similarly, schools are likely to benefit from a planned approach that gives students opportunities to practise and build social and emotional competence through democratic participation in school and community life.

Further information

For more information, see the Wellbeing@School literature overview:

Link to W@S Overview paper

Link to W@S summary booklet.

For more information about social and emotional learning, see:

http://casel.org/why-it-matters/what-is-sel/

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