



Focus Group Outcomes of the Happy Kids Program

Karen Anderson, Neil Ferguson,
Gary Partington[†] and Matt Byrne

Edith Cowan University

In this article, the outcomes of The Happy Kids project, a strategy to improve the social and emotional well-being of primary school students, were examined. Results indicated that the Happy Kids program had demonstrated positive social and emotional outcomes for students in all schools, in particular, a positive impact upon students' confidence, social skills and well being. In addition, the program has demonstrated positive improvement in students' attendance. Given its positive impact in schools in both metropolitan and regional areas of WA, it has demonstrated transferability and adaptability to local contexts. It can only be hoped that its impact can be felt in later years as the students involved continue with secondary education.

Introduction

While the main business of schools is to improve learning outcomes, there are an increasing number of students who present to the classroom with a diversity of personal and background factors that impact upon their learning. A significant proportion of adolescents are considered to be 'at risk' of not achieving positive academic, social or behavioural outcomes at school and this is likely to have a significant impact on their later employment and life opportunities.

[†]Address for correspondence: Gary Partington, School of Education
Faculty of Education and Arts, Edith Cowan University, 2 Bradford St
Mt Lawley 6050. Email: g.partington@ecu.edu.au.

The period of 12-13 years of age is particularly significant for many 'at risk' students because that is a time of physical and emotional change that is generally coupled with the transition to a new school. Students who do not successfully navigate the transition to secondary school are potentially in danger of dropping out of the school system.

Many schools throughout the world have implemented a range of programs to meet the various needs of students. Many of these programs specifically aim to address social, emotional and behavioural competencies as a means of helping to support their educational outcomes.

In this article, the outcomes of a strategy to improve the social and emotional well-being of primary school students are examined. The Happy Kids project, a multifaceted intervention designed that focused on Aboriginal students and their peers in upper primary school to prepare them for the transition to secondary school, had been operating in several metropolitan schools when the research project was commenced. Schools in a regional centre were added to the project to determine the extent to which the strategy could be extended to new sites. The research, funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council as a part of the Healthy Start to Life initiative, focused particularly on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal students in the participating schools.

The study was carried out in five metropolitan schools and four schools in the regional centre. The initiative for the study came from strong local pressure in the metropolitan schools to determine the effectiveness of a range of strategies within the initiative to prepare students for high school and to equip them with the emotional resilience to cope with the stresses they were likely to encounter there and to provide the social skills to succeed.

Literature Review

In the 21st century, primary and secondary schools are increasingly being called upon to meet the needs of students who experience mental health problems, lack social and emotional competencies, and engage in behaviours which are damaging to their health. These issues impact on their own learning and, invariably, impact on the learning of others (Greenberg et. al., 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004).

In Australia, the National Survey of Mental Health and Well Being (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007) identified that approximately one in seven children of primary school age has a mental health problem, with the most common being anxiety, depression, hyperactivity and aggression (Graetz et. al., 2008; Sawyer et. al., 2001). These issues impact on children's educational and social outcomes through reducing their capacity to engage with classroom learning and to form and maintain positive peer relationships (Graetz et. al., 2008). Such difficulties often lead to negative consequences such as absenteeism and a lack of engagement with learning. This, in turn, has the potential to lead to students dropping out of the educational system through poor academic performance and having future implications for students' later employment and adult lives (Australian Law Reform Commission, 1997; Needham et. al, 2004).

The greater the number of risk factors present in a child's life, the lower are the chances of a positive outcome, unless various protective factors are present to counter balance them (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008; Mathews, 2005). These risk factors are generally considered to be associated within the child, the family and/or the environment. Child risk factors include such elements as: poor academic performance; low self-esteem; temperament; and communication problems. Parent risk factors include: abuse; drug or alcohol dependency; hostility; and conflict. Environmental risk factors include such things as: poverty; housing problems; and racism (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). At a school level some risk

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factors cannot be overcome, however the school can work to develop some protective factors which, hopefully, can help to promote resilience in students. Among the things that schools can do are things such as: develop students' social skills and emotional well being; help students develop friendship groups; provide positive school experiences; and nurture positive relationships between students and mentors (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). These protective factors are able to buffer the impacts of adversity and help lead to positive outcomes in many children from high risk backgrounds (Benard, 2004; Richman, Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1998).

The period of adolescence between the ages of 10 and 14 years sees young people experience many physical and social and emotional changes at the same time that they are experiencing moves to new schools. Schools play a significant role in the lives of children and, as such, they are ideally placed to implement strategies and programs to promote well being and build resilience in children considered to be socially, behaviourally and academically at risk (Campbell, 2004). Such programs have the potential to have a positive impact on a diversity of children's social and academic outcomes and the potential to support them during a period of transition from primary to secondary school (Greenberg et. al., 2003; Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 2000; Sawyer et. al., 2001). While most children make a successful transition to secondary school, there are many for whom it is an anxiety-filled process. Successful transition to secondary school may be a function of children having resilience and capacity to deal with change or having support from external networks and transition programs (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008).

Among the ways in which students' emotional and social competence can be effectively developed are through programs in which schools adopt an approach that focuses on the whole school combined with an additional selective focus upon those students considered to be most at risk emotionally and behaviourally (Weare & Gray, 2003). Many programs that have been

implemented overseas and in Australia have had demonstrated success in improving students social and emotional outcomes as well as their personal and academic outcomes (Kilian & Kilian, 2011; Payton et. al., 2008). Various programs have also been shown to have had success with reducing nonattendance and dropout, substance abuse and behavioural problems (Durlak et. al., 2011; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004; Yampolskaya et. al., 2006). Programs such as the Caring School Community (CSC) program and the Skills, Opportunities and Recognition (SOAR) program, both of which target American K-Year 6 students, have been found to develop social skills, relationship building, problem solving, prosocial behaviours and positive healthy behaviours (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004).

A number of programs have been implemented in Australian primary schools in recent years to promote children's social, emotional and behavioural outcomes. Many, though, have been short-term and narrow in their focus and have targeted single issues such as bullying, rather than being more comprehensive and including whole-school and targeted approaches. Programs such as the Gatehouse Project, MindMatters and Kids Matter have had widespread implementation in schools across Australia and all have demonstrated positive outcomes for students with regard to mental health. MindMatters addresses issues at a whole class level as well as using targeted interventions for students needing additional support while Kids Matter and the Gatehouse Project adopt a more universal approach according to school and community need and involve no small-group or individual intervention. Each of these programs provides schools with a platform of resources for selected use by teachers (Campbell, 2004; Graetz et. al., 2008; Mathews, 2005).

Most primary and secondary schools have a variety of transition programs in place to support students in their move to a secondary school environment. Programs vary in length from brief familiarisation contacts to more extensive programs that take place over many months. The successful Victorian School Transition

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and Resilience Training (START) program is notable because of its approach in promoting social and emotional factors as well as aiming to develop students' resilience at a time of transition. This program has contributed to similar national and international programs addressing social and emotional factors at times of primary to secondary school transition (Campbell, 2004).

Contextual Background

The Happy Kids initiative was progressively implemented in five Western Australian (WA) metropolitan schools during the early 2000s, funded by the WA Department of Health under the joint Commonwealth-State Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth (IHSHY) Program, with in-kind support from WA's Department of Education and Training. In 2006, the initiative was implemented in a further three primary schools in a large regional centre, with a fourth school commencing implementation in 2007. This study commenced in 2006 with the simultaneous implementation of the initiative in the regional centre. The regional initiative and the research project itself were supported by an NHMRC grant.

The initiative was a low-cost holistic preventative program targeted at upper primary school students who were at risk of poor social, emotional, cognitive and health outcomes. It used an inclusive approach so that students from a range of social and cultural backgrounds were included, thus avoiding the marginalisation of some students, in particular Indigenous Australian students. The initiative aimed to: build students' capacity to cope with life's challenges; promote resilience at a time of transition; build students' self-esteem; and develop the ability to control at least one aspect of their lives. Ultimately, the program sought to support each student's transition to secondary school with the aim that they continue their education.

Happy Kids entailed three components: a focus group program designed specifically for the students at risk; a whole school

Health Expo that operated for an entire day once a year; and a middle-upper primary clubs program that operated for one afternoon per week for a school term. The focus group program operated according to a common framework, but variations occurred from school to school depending upon the needs of the students in each group. Schools were provided with funding to cover the costs of the program. These costs included the coordinator's time for one day per week to engage in program planning and delivery, and activity costs for excursions and resources.

The focus group consisted of approximately 15 students who were considered to be at risk. Students selected to be in the focus group generally had one or several of the following: poor self-esteem; emotional concerns; social problems; behavioural issues, poor school attendance; and home/background factors that impacted upon their schooling. Some schools included the head boy and head girl in the group to act as role models for other students and to overcome any marginalisation of student sub-groups, and this was a key feature of the program in successful schools. Focus groups in all schools included in the research consisted of Indigenous Australian students and non-Indigenous Australian students. Where possible, schools aimed to have at least half of the focus group consist of Indigenous Australian students.

The focus group met with a coordinator for one afternoon each week to engage in a range of activities in a safe and supported environment that with the aimed to ultimately nurture of nurturing their social and emotional development and contribute towards developing their resilience in preparation for the transition to secondary school. Many of the activities were related to individual goals set by students and others related to group goals. The activities were, at various times, designed to be enjoyable, instructive, take students out of their comfort zones, and provide them with a variety of experiences and social skills. In schools where the program had operated previously, the program it was

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held in high esteem by all students and participation in the program was a desired goal by many.

The coordinator was selected from teachers within the school as a person who was supportive of the aims of the program and who would be able to develop a positive relationship with all the focus group students.

This paper focuses on the outcomes of students, both social and emotional and educational, as a consequence of their participation in the focus group program.

Methodology

Participants

A total of nine WA schools were involved in the research between 2006 and 2008: five in a metropolitan area; and four in a regional centre. The five metropolitan schools were located in close proximity to each other in a low socio-economic area, and had been conducting the Happy Kids program for several years prior to the commencement of the research study. The four schools in the regional centre were also in close proximity and began implementing the program at the commencement of the three-year research period. In each school, the focus group comprised approximately 15 students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, aged 11 to 12 years. The expectation was that focus groups would consist of at least 50% Indigenous Australian students although this proportion varied from school to school based on student enrolments and the considered suitability of students for inclusion in the program. In the metropolitan schools, the group of students comprising the focus group was different in each of the three years of the research period. In the regional schools, the focus group remained the same for the first two years of the study and was different in the third year.

Procedure

The research employed a mixed methods approach to the collection and analysis of data in order to determine the impact of the program on students' social and emotional outcomes over a three year period. In particular, the research aimed to identify improvements or stability of outcomes of students during the period in which they were members of the focus group. The research adopted a case study approach (Merriam, 1998) to the analysis of data, followed by a cross-case analysis to identify key themes across all cases and key themes pertinent to the metropolitan and regional areas.

In examining students' social and emotional outcomes, the research used two principal measures: The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997), a behavioural and emotional screening questionnaire and the Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters (MESSY), a widely used, highly reliable and normed instrument that measured social skills. Both the SDQ and MESSY instruments included a student self-assessment component and a component in which teachers assessed students' behavioural, social and emotional well-being, and both instruments were administered to the 2007 and 2008 focus groups in each school. The assessments determined by the SDQ and MESSY instruments were undertaken at two points during the focus group year, towards the beginning and again at the end thus enabling a comparison of results.

In addition to these two quantitative instruments, the researchers had access to qualitative data through interviews conducted with coordinators, school administrators, teachers, students and parents, as well as some student case study information. These data supported the quantitative findings and provided further insights into the behavioural, social and emotional well-being of the focus group students.

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With respect to examining students' educational outcomes, the research examined quantitative data relating to: attendance; behaviour; reading, via the GRTII Reading Test; and literacy and numeracy, via the Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA), a state-based standardised assessment which students undertook generally every two years. The GRTII instrument was administered to the 2007 and 2008 focus groups at two points during the focus group years to provide a comparison of results. The WALNA instrument was used to compare the results of the 2007 focus group students with their 2005 results. It could not be used for the 2008 focus group as in 2008 there was a change from schools' use of WALNA to the National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). In addition to this quantitative data, the research also utilised interview data, school-based records and case study information which provided qualitative evidence about students' educational outcomes.

Research related to educational and social outcomes of students at risk has identified that performance has shown a decline as primary school students grow older. In particular, evidence indicated that the performance of WA Indigenous students on the WALNA instruments declined from Year 3 onwards, especially in reading and numeracy (Zubrick, 2006; Gorman 2006; Watson et. al. 2006). Other research has shown that there is a decline in social-emotional wellbeing with age (Washburn et. al. 2011; Carlo, et. al. 2006; Kokko et. al. 2007). In a comprehensive study of Aboriginal children's health in WA, Zubrick et. al. (2006) reported that 24% of children aged 4–17 years were “at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties” (p. 25). While they reported a varied trajectory for the sample, there was a marked increase in risk from age 11 to 12 onwards.

As a consequence of small sample sizes in focus groups at each school, a mechanism of comparing pre-test data with post-test data was devised. In the light of the research outlined above regarding the decline in educational and social outcomes for students at risk in this age group, the number of students showing improved

results was combined with the number of students whose results were maintained or stabilised during the year. In short, the research examined instances where there was no decline in performance.

In order to make judgements about the extent to which each focus group improved or remained stable, an ‘improvement percent index’ was calculated. The ‘improvement percent index’ was derived by comparing the number of students who improved or maintained the level of their results with the total number in the group and representing this proportion as a percentage. Indices greater than 50 meant that more students improved or maintained their results than those whose results declined. The calculation of ‘improvement percent indices’ enabled comparisons of focus group performances within schools and across schools.

All qualitative data was coded using NVivo 9 to aid in the identification of themes.

Findings

There were positive social and emotional outcomes and positive educational outcomes for focus group students in every school. Metropolitan schools tended to be more successful at improving and maintaining outcomes than the regional schools.

Social outcomes

Quantitative and qualitative data indicated that the Happy Kids program had a positive impact in every school in the study. Tables 1 and 2 show the ‘improvement percent indices’ for the student and teacher components of the SDQ and MESSY instruments, respectively, conducted for two separate years with two different focus groups. As mentioned above, the Index represents the proportion, as a percentage, of students in each group that improved or maintained their levels of performance during each year from pre-test to post-test.

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Table 1: SDQ Student and Teacher ‘improve percent indices’ for each school for 2007 and 2008.

School	2007				2008			
	Student Index	N	Teacher Index	N	Student Index	N	Teacher Index	N
A	73	11	92	12	67	15	80	15
B	100	9	100	9	86	14	92	13
C	92	12	77	13	67	9	100	10
D	100	11	92	12	82	11	70	10
E	73	11	80	10	91	11	85	13
F	87	15	No data	No data	75	4	50	4
G	No data	No data	No data	No data	70	10	100	14
H	75	12	80	10	58	12	85	13
J	85	13	58	12	42	12	92	12

Table 2: MESSY Student and Teacher ‘improve percent indices’ for each school for 2007 and 2008.

School	2007				2008			
	Student Index	N	Teacher Index	N	Student Index	N	Teacher Index	N
A	90	10	71	14	75	16	56	16
B	100	15	93	15	79	14	93	14
C	92	13	73	15	29	7	75	12
D	67	12	75	12	75	12	45	11
E	75	12	75	12	67	12	85	13
F	73	15	73	15	40	10	91	11
G	No data	No data	No data	No data	64	11	85	13
H	75	12	70	10	64	14	57	14
J	67	9	92	13	58	12	83	12

As can be seen from Table 1, the majority of students in all focus groups in all schools judged their behavioural and emotional well being to have improved or remained stable during each year, and this judgement was supported by their teachers. From Table 2, in five of the schools, the majority of students and their teachers judged their social skills to have improved or steadied during the year they were members of the focus group. In 2008 in schools C and F, the focus group students judged their social skills to have declined, however their teacher's judgement was in opposition to that. In 2008 in school D, the teacher judged that most students' social skills had declined, although the students believed that their skills had improved.

Qualitative data collected during the research period supported the quantitative findings and indicated that, in almost all schools, students' levels of confidence and their social skills and well being improved as a consequence of their participation in the program.

Confidence

The improved levels of confidence of the focus group children were observed in every school by teachers and noted by the students. The confidence that the students developed enabled them to participate more in class, speak with other students and adults, and participate in some school wide activities. Much of the development in students' confidence can be attributed to the activities that each coordinator included in their program. Coordinators often included activities that encouraged students to take risks and move them out of their comfort zones, but carried out within the safe and protected environment of the focus group. Coordinators also used goal setting as a primary component of programs and students often worked towards goals being supported and encouraged by the coordinator and other focus group students.

Increased classroom participation occurred for many students. One girl exemplified this by her comments that she 'was scared to

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put my hand up before and answer questions, but now I can do that. I'm more confident.' The teacher of some of the focus group students in one school mentioned 'I can see the development of them in the classroom just in being more confident and more responsible.' In particular, one boy made the connection between his growing confidence and his academic work. He thought the program had 'helped me with my confidence and it's helped me improve my school work a fair bit. I'm not so shy now. It has made a fair bit of a difference.'

Being able to speak with other people was identified as a positive outcome of the program by many students. As an example, one boy noted 'I didn't really talk in front of many groups of people because I was pretty shy but during the year I progressed and talked to many other different people. I spoke more and put my hand up more regularly in class. I've improved a lot.'

Teachers were aware of the importance of goal setting and achievement of goals, especially with regard to speaking publicly in school wide activities. A coordinator observed the following situation:

'One little boy forgot what he had to say at assembly. Twelve months ago, that little boy would have shrunk and just wanted to die but he actually made a joke of it, stopped, thought, and then gave the message that he was supposed to give. That was just so rewarding because he knew that this is what he had been working towards.'

Social skills and well being

Many of the social skills developed by the students related to them overcoming their shyness, developing more control over their behaviours, and developing more positive behaviours. This was a consequence of many of the activities that coordinators conducted with focus groups related to socialisation and teamwork.

Many of the children said they were not 'shy any more' and had 'learnt to make a lot of friends.' They felt the program had

provided them with social skills they had not been aware of previously.

One coordinator noted that ‘a number of participants had developed increased resilience and are more able to cope in an appropriate manner than when things don’t go their way. Classroom teachers have reported some increased perseverance with challenging tasks that students would previously have given up on.’ The ability to cope with situations was noticed in one boy who had a ‘marked improvement in his ability to control his emotions and his compulsions to erupt or get angry with other children and teachers.’

Many parents had observed changes in their children in the home environment as a result of their participation in the program. Some parents thought their children were ‘more helpful’, ‘more focused’ and ‘more accepting of themselves.’ One girl was ‘kinder to her sister’, another had become a ‘more responsible kid’, and another boy was ‘a lot calmer when he gets home’.

Significantly, some of the students identified the impact that the program had had on them. One girl thought it had ‘made a huge difference to me. It’s made me a lot kinder to people and respect people. I used to yell a lot and I don’t as much now. I do a little bit but it’s not as much as what I used to and I have a lot more friends than what I did because I’ve gained respect for people.’ Finally, one boy in a regional school summarised his experience in the program by saying ‘it has changed my life.’

In most schools, there was a small number of students for whom scores on SDQ and MESSY indicated that their social and emotional outcomes declined during the research period. Despite this, qualitative data from some of those students indicated that they still perceived the program to be beneficial to them. For example, one student said that being in the focus group had definitely made a difference to him and another felt that the program had helped him develop more self-confidence. Increased

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confidence had made it easier for this student to speak in front of other people and had helped him deal with bullies. Other students reported feeling less frustrated, able to manage their anger better, having more self-control, and feeling happier. Despite quantitative evidence indicating that the program had no positive impact upon some students, qualitative data indicates that the students perceived that the program did impact positively upon them, in at least one aspect of their social and emotional well being.

Educational outcomes

Analysis of GRTII and WALNA data for each school indicated generally improved or stable results for all focus groups. There were difficulties, however, isolating the precise impact of the program on those results as many other factors in each school environment had an influence upon students' educational outcomes. Data did indicate, though, that students' outcomes were improved in relation to attendance and behaviour.

Attendance

Comparisons were made of student attendance prior to the focus group year with attendance during the focus group year. Table 3 shows the percentage of each focus group that improved their attendance in the focus group year compared to the previous year or had attendance higher than the state average. From Table 3, it is evident that the attendance of more than half of each focus group in every school during the research period improved their attendance during the focus group year or demonstrated attendance above the state average.

Comparisons were also made of students' attendance in the school term at the beginning of the focus group year with the term at the end of the year. Table 4 shows the percentage of each focus group that had improved attendance or attendance at the end of the focus group year above the state average compared to the first school term.

Table 3: Percentage of focus group with improved attendance or attendance higher than the state average for each school for 2007 and 2008.

School	2007	2008
A	71	75
B	87	100
C	67	67
D	93	50
E	60	71
F	50	64
G	73	69
H	58	53
J	57	60

Table 4: Percentage of focus group with improved attendance in final school term or attendance higher than the state average for each school for 2007 and 2008.

School	2007	2008
A	70	65
B	87	73
C	47	56
D	73	47
E	57	60
F	69	67
G	54	59
H	47	56
J	64	67

From Table 4, it is evident that, with three exceptions, the attendance of more than half of each focus group in every school improved their attendance from the beginning of the focus group year to the end of the year or completed the year with an attendance rate higher than the state average.

An analysis of students' attendance together with their social and emotional outcomes revealed a positive link between improved

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attendance and improved social and emotional outcomes. There was no data to support any link between declining attendance and declining social and emotional outcomes.

Behaviour

The Happy Kids program had a positive impact upon the behaviour of some individual students, groups of students, as well as the broader student body. A school coordinator measured one boy's 'remarkable return to acceptable behaviour' during his year in the focus group through his 'entries in the time out book which were reduced by 80%'. One of the boys acknowledged that the program had 'helped me with my behaviour because it teaches you what to do' thereby indicating that the program had provided the student with strategies to help him address his behaviour. Indeed, when referring to a group of students, a school principal

'acknowledged that the program had given the students strategies to assist them when confronted with particular events. In the past they would have become defensive and/or aggressive and inflamed the situation. They are now more willing to ignore or discuss the matter to a better resolution.'

Staff in most of the schools identified that the program had a positive impact upon the immediate focus group students, which then had a rippling effect within the school on the behaviour of others. A classroom teacher's view during the research period was that 'we have no fighting in the playgrounds ... [and] there's very little bullying that goes on ... It's definitely having a positive effect.'

In addition, a principal noted that the school had had 'no suspensions in two or three years. If the kids in the focus group didn't have that hands on, meeting with someone on a daily basis, setting goals, ... talking about making your life something ... there would be suspensions left, right and centre.'

Discussion

In terms of meeting the aims of the program, data indicated that the program across all schools was successful. It is clear that the Happy Kids program had an impact on the outcomes of students in every school in the study, most significantly related to improved attendance, behaviour, and improved social and emotional outcomes.

The first significant outcome for students as a consequence of their involvement in the program was that of social and emotional improvement or stability. Also significant was the fact that improved social and emotional outcomes were noted in students in every school in the study, therefore indicating that the program's ideals are transferable. Of particular importance was the observation that even students whose outcomes were considered to have declined according to testing instruments believed that some aspect of their lives had improved as a consequence of being involved in the program. Although the program was designed to build children's capacity to cope with life's challenges and promote resilience, these are outcomes measurable in the longer term (Kitano & Lewis, 2010). The shorter term outcomes of improved confidence, improved social skills and well being are potentially longer term contributors to the resilience of the focus group students and their capacity to cope with challenge especially during the transition to secondary school and the years that follow (Edwards, Mumford & Serra-Roldan, 2007; Kitano & Lewis, 2010).

The findings of improved confidence for many students and improved social skills and well being may have occurred in tandem. It is possible that improved confidence was a product of improved social skills and that increased well being was a further product of those outcomes. The corollary may also have been the case; : improved confidence through the participation in a range of goal setting activities designed to take students out of their comfort zones may have had an impact upon their general well

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being and confidence to participate in social situations, especially those that involved interaction with others.

There is no doubt that participation in the program had a profound impact on many of the students. There is a developing evidence base (Durlak et. al., 2011; Zins & Elias, 2007) indicating that programs targeting the social and emotional outcomes of students, not only those considered to be at risk, are developing in momentum and level of success. There are indications, also, that specific and targeted interventions to meet the needs of at risk students are more effective for those students than programs aimed at universal, whole-school, intervention (Kilian & Kilian, 2011).

Other studies have indicated the importance of having a supportive learning environment and a trusted adult supervisor when implementing programs addressing the social and emotional needs of at risk students (Apsler et. al., 2006; Zins et. al., 2007). In the case of Happy Kids, the program coordinator was able to work with students on activities that supported the development of social skills and emotional well being in a context isolated from other students and the confines of the everyday classroom. Given that inclusion in the program was seen as desirable by all students, that context was also a desirable support for the development of social and emotional aspects. The strategy employed to promote student wellbeing in the participating schools is consistent with teacher strategies that lead to improved student social-emotional wellbeing in schools generally. The ASG student social and emotional wellbeing report (2007) recommended similar strategies to those employed in the Happy Kids program for all students, and particularly those from at risk backgrounds.

Early intervention and prevention have been shown to have success in a number of programs involving at risk and potentially at risk students (Iizuka et. al., 2014; Killian & Killian, 2011; Lehr, Sinclair & Christenson, 2009). While the students involved in this study were considered to have various background risk factors that contributed to their inclusion in the focus group, it was their

inclusion in the program that was aimed at preventing further risk at secondary school through potentially dropping out of the school system. Intervention providing increased social and emotional well being supported the development of students' resilience and their capacity to cope with transition to a secondary environment.

The second significant outcome for students was that of improved attendance, both from previous year to focus group year and within-the-focus group year. As a means of developing resilience, improved attendance at school is a step towards improved engagement in the classroom and building capacity for continued attendance at school, in this case a secondary environment.

Various other programs targeting students' social and emotional well being have also been found to have demonstrated positive impact on attendance and behaviour (Durlak et. al., 2011; Payton et. al., 2008; Yampolskaya et. al., 2006). In the case of Happy Kids, it could not be ascertained whether the improved attendance led to improved social and emotional outcomes or vice versa, however the link was positive. The improvement in the behaviour of some students and the effect that had on the broader school environment was also significant. Improvements in students' academic performance have been noted in other studies (Durlak et. al., 2011; Kilian & Kilian, 2011). The identification of widespread improvements in academic outcomes was limited in this study and it would be anticipated that improved outcomes would not be fully realised until the focus group students' early years of secondary school.

Given that the majority of the students selected to participate in the program were considered to be at risk, such positive impacts on social and emotional outcomes could have had the potential to be pivotal to them at this time of transition to adolescence and have a positive influence in their future lives. While this study was limited to the examination of student outcomes in the immediate primary school environment, its impact would be

heightened if follow up examination of secondary school outcomes were positive.

Conclusion

There is an increasing need for schools to address student issues apart from those that are purely academic and an increasing number of students in the school system with background factors having an impact upon their academic progress. Such students are considered to be at risk of future failure to achieve positive educational outcomes. In recent times, many schools have implemented programs to address students' social and emotional needs as a means of having a positive influence on their well being as well as on their educational outcomes.

The Happy Kids program has demonstrated positive social and emotional outcomes for students in all schools, in particular, a positive impact upon students' confidence, social skills and well being. In addition, the program has demonstrated positive improvement in students' attendance. Given its positive impact in schools in both metropolitan and regional areas of WA, it has demonstrated transferability and adaptability to local contexts. It can only be hoped that its impact can be felt in later years as the students involved continue with secondary education.

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