

The ASG Student Social and Emotional Health Report: A Summary of What We Need to Know to Make a Difference

Michael E. Bernard, Ph.D.
Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne
Founder, You Can Do It! Education
(Email: michaelebernard@gmail.com)

There is little question that while education today is being held increasingly accountable for ensuring a more academically competent student population, another issue is emerging from the bottom up that is screaming out for concerted action; the issue is the “social-emotional competence and well-being (SEWB)” of all students.

Historically, the responsibility for addressing mental health needs of students rested with those at school in areas of student welfare and behavior management. While special student welfare programs were “bolted on” to the academic curriculum to serve the needs of “at risk” students with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties, it has only been recently that schools have begun taking on the responsibility for supporting the SEWB of *ALL* students, not just those with problems.

Indeed, some schools today are crossing a line in the sand between an exclusive focus of their school mission on academic achievement and a mission that encompasses both academic and social-emotional competence.

The *ASG Student Social and Emotional Health Report* which I have authored in conjunction with Andrew Stephanou and Daniel Urbach from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) *unveils* groundbreaking findings into the social and emotional well-being of more than 10,000 Australian students from Prep through to Year 12, as perceived by both students and their teachers. **These findings enable us to formulate policies and practices to support social-emotional well-being outcomes for all students which are based on research findings and an accompanying theoretical framework of student SEWB.**

The findings show that the SEWB of young people can be represented by an “ecological” framework that shows that it is a product of:

- (1) internal social and emotional capabilities of young people covering resilience (rational ways of thinking and coping skills for managing emotions and behavior), learning capabilities (work confidence, persistence, organisation and work cooperation skills needed for engage in schoolwork) and social skills and values;
- (2) external influences of school, home and the community (e.g. positive adult-student relationships; communication of high expectations for achievement and behavior; involving young people in decision-making; conversations with young people about their feelings and how to manage stress; involvement/interest in their education; providing multiple opportunities for success in school).

The findings contained in the ASG Report show for the first time that a student of any age may be at one of six levels of SEWB: Highest, Very High, High, Low, Very Low, Lowest. Students with high levels of SEWB have increasingly higher levels of social and emotional capabilities and experience many positive connections with adults, peers and youth-oriented programs in their schools, homes and communities. On the other hand, students with low levels of SEWB, display decreasing levels of social-emotional capabilities and

experience increasingly fewer positive connections in their schools, homes and communities.

Other Key Findings

- A large percentage of students are experiencing social and emotional difficulties:
- Four in 10 students worry too much.
- Three in 10 students are very nervous/stressed.
- Two in 10 students have felt very hopeless and depressed for a week and have stopped regular activities.
- A third of students lose their temper a lot and are sometimes quite mean to others (bully).
- Two-thirds of students are not doing as well in their schoolwork as they could.
- Four in 10 students have difficulty calming down (poor resilience).
- Students who bully tend to have difficulty in thinking before they act when angry.
- Different childhood problems such as bullying, getting into trouble, stress, feeling down and underachievement are displayed across all levels of student well-being – not just at lower levels.
- The lower the SEWB of students, the greater the likelihood that students will display emotional, social and behavioural difficulties such as feeling lonely, losing their temper and drinking to excess
- Both students and teacher surveys have shown that the higher the level of student social and emotional well-being, the percentage of students who experience problems in their lives decreases.
- Of significant interest and concern is that the percentage of students with higher levels of social and emotional well-being does not increase with age/years of schooling.
- When students perceive the relative absence of positive parenting actions, students are likely to display lower levels of social and emotional well-being. Talking about children's feelings and how to cope with them is the parental action that contributes most to children's well-being.
- Teachers' behaviour has a direct correlation to student social and emotional well-being. Students with lower levels of well-being feel their teachers don't demonstrate many of the positive actions that the research shows contribute to student success and well-being.
- Consistent differences are found in the ways that students view their social and emotional well-being in comparison with the ways in which teachers perceive them. Teachers may be unaware of the extent of the emotional difficulties of students such as stress and anger.
- Girls display significantly higher levels of social and emotional well-being than boys. For example boys rated higher in getting into trouble a lot and not being able to follow rules while girls rated higher in helping classmates who seem unhappy and finding someone to talk with to calm down.
- Students from the highest 10% socio-economic level rated significantly higher in their level of social and emotional well-being than students from the lowest 25% socio-economic level.
- The interaction of children within their community can positively impact on social and emotional well-being.

Considerations for Governments, Parents, Schools and Communities

- Almost 50% of students reported they are not learning about their feelings and how to manage stress, while 40% say they are not learning about how to make friends or how to solve interpersonal problems. For many schools, academic achievement still remains at the core of school mission statements with social and emotional learning and well-being relegated to student welfare and pastoral care.

- High levels of student social and emotional well-being are associated with parents who are not only actively involved in their children's lives but who spend time discussing the skills they need to both understand and manage emotions, including coping with stress, how to make friends and manage conflicts. At federal, state and local levels there should be an increased investment in parents with a particular focus on strengthening school-home links, so that parents can have ongoing access to effective parenting practices.
- It is also clear that teachers are important contributors to student social and emotional well-being and there is now a collection of good teaching practices that support student well-being. Student social and emotional learning and well-being should become an integral part of initial teacher training and ongoing teacher professional learning and development programs.
- Intervention programs for individual students with low levels of social and emotional well-being should identify ways that they can be better connected to positive adults in the community, develop stronger connection with their family as well as strengthen their connection with teachers and programs at school. Increasingly, student support programs feature a team consisting of personnel responsible for student welfare, teachers, specialist staff, parents and, when necessary, members of community organisations and agencies.
- Schools with high percentages of students with lower levels of social and emotional well-being need to work in close partnership with community members, organisations and agencies to help strengthen the links between 'at risk' students and their families and support services, positive programs and adults outside of the home and school.
- Boys' achievement (and behavioural problems) can partly be explained by the lower levels of social and emotional well-being of boys relative to girls. To close the gender gap in achievement and provide full equity and access for boys, a broad-based approach is advocated that includes strengthening community, school and home practices that meet the unique learning style, sex-role identity and social emotional needs of boys.
- While state governments are employing questionnaires that survey student attitudes, they generally do not comprehensively measure the internal and external social and emotional characteristics that comprise overall student social and emotional well-being. It is recommended that on an annual basis, data is collected on the various domains of student social and emotional well-being and the results are used to guide government as well as school planning and decision making.

Recommendations

As a result of the research, nine key recommendations have been identified to help support parents, teachers, schools and the community.

The recommendations flow from two major findings. First, in planning for the positive SEWB of all students, we need to consider multiple levels of influence including strengthening student social and emotional capabilities as well as strengthening the connections of students to positive programs and actions of adults and peers in their schools, homes and communities. Second, the educational experience of students with low levels of SEWB will need to be significantly different in scope that will the educational experience for students who already possess high levels of SEWB.

1. Make social and emotional well-being as important to the mission of education as academic achievement.

Some schools are beginning the journey while others are well-travelled. There is increasing support for this proposition with the Office of Catholic Education and other denominational educational authorities. Some states such as South Australia and Victoria are moving the agenda forward.

2. Introduce preventative social and emotional learning curricula at all levels of schooling for all students.

We now know from the “best practices” literature of the past 10 years both here and overseas that students need a mental health prevention curriculum that is reinforced in the classroom, in school culture and practices and at home. For students with high levels of SEWB, a social-emotional literacy program that centers of not only the ABCs of emotional literacy but also one that includes ways students can extend their experience of positive emotions (e.g. curiosity) should be considered.

3. Schools need support to develop the capacity to deliver social and emotional learning.

There are a group of school practices that help embed social-emotional learning and well-being through the school-home community including: use of developmentally appropriate social-emotional learning curricula, classroom practices, school-wide practices, early identification and intervention, behavior management, professional development of staff, parent education.

4. Ongoing professional learning for teachers that support students with social and emotional well-being difficulties.

Teachers are well-prepared to teach the academic curriculum while being less prepared teaching the social and emotional health and learning curriculum

5. Ongoing assessment of student social and emotional learning and well-being.

The ACER Social-Emotional Well Being Surveys can be employed to provide baseline and on-going data on student SEWB.

6. The staffing and design of student welfare services should cater for the level of student social and emotional well-being in the school.

Schools with large percentages of student with lower levels of SEWB should be provided with additional funding for student welfare/well-being services.

7. Parent education in children’s social and emotional well-being.

There is little question we need to do a better job in providing parents with universal information of parenting practices that support the SEWB (including achievement) of their achievement.

8. Focus on social and emotional learning for boys.

As the ASG data shows that boys are delayed in the social and emotional competences that support their SEWB, more intensive teaching of these competences across the curriculum should be included as well as in programs of behavior management for boys.

9. School-community partnerships to support student social and emotional well-being.

We need to be proactive in involving the community (mentors; community agencies; after-school programs) in the challenge of raising SEWB of students.

The Future

The often-quoted view that “It takes a village to raise a child” reminds all of us that no one teacher or program can raise the social and emotional well-being of all students. The negative effects of young people growing up without positive parental interest and support, without school success, without positive peer pressure and without strong social and emotional capacity are difficult to eliminate. However, the authors of this survey are optimistic that if we listen to what young people are telling us we can collectively make a big difference.