

The Big Picture of Positive Peer Relationships: *What They Are, Why They Work and How Schools Can Develop Them.*

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Note: More information about many of the programs, components and initiatives mentioned in this paper can be found in *Making Australian Schools Safer: A Summary Report of the Outcomes from the National Safe Schools Framework Best Practice Grants Programme* (and Appendices) which can be downloaded from the NCAB Website at www.ncab.org.au.

A Safe, Positive, Caring, Respectful and Pro-social School Culture

Bullying is less likely to thrive and student wellbeing is more likely to develop in a safe, positive, caring, respectful and pro-social school culture (Galloway & Roland 2004; Schaps & Lewis, 1999; McGrath & Noble, 2003). Schaps (2003) has argued that a positive school culture of this type predisposes students to:

- adopt the goals and values of the school
- show more compassion and concern for others and more altruistic behaviour
- be more prepared to resolve conflicts fairly
- more altruistic behaviour
- engage in higher levels of pro-social behaviour in class and in the playground
- adopt an inclusive rather than exclusive attitude toward others

Connectedness is also a strong feature of a safe, positive, caring, respectful and pro-social school culture. Peer connectedness can be defined as the degree of intimacy, closeness and warmth experienced in relationships between individual students or students within a group.

Positive Relationships are a Significant Component of Such a Culture

The systematic promotion and facilitation of positive relationships at school have been identified by many researchers as the key to improving school culture, preventing school violence and bullying, successfully engaging students' intrinsic motivation to learn and improving student academic outcomes (Benard, 2004;

Battisch, 2001; Battisch et al., 1995; Resnick et al., 1997). Students' sense of interconnectedness with other students and their teachers appears to be critical to their acceptance of their responsibility for the wellbeing of others (Noble, 2006).

The Links Between Safe Schools and Positive Relationships

How do positive peer relationships contribute to safer and more pro-social school cultures? Many different links have been suggested.

1. Criss et al.(2002) have demonstrated that peer acceptance and peer friendships can moderate aggressive and acting-out behaviour in young children with family backgrounds characterised by family adversity such as economic/ecological disadvantage, violent marital conflict and harsh family discipline. Therefore:
some students with a tendency towards anti-social behaviour will be less likely to become involved in bullying as they feel accepted
other students with this tendency will be less likely to behave in ways that trigger bullying behaviour from other students which they feel incorrectly 'justified' in doing.
2. Feeling accepted and having positive peer interactions can increase the self esteem of vulnerable students and this makes it more likely that they will behave in ways that further encourage positive interactions with others
3. Friendships provide students with social support, opportunities to practise and refine their social skills and opportunities to discuss moral dilemmas. Upper primary and secondary students are more likely to talk to a friend if they are being bullied.
4. Students are less likely to mistreat a classmate who is 'known' as a person and not just perceived as a stereotype. The more students get to know each other the more likely they are to identify and focus on similarities between themselves and other students and become more accepting of differences.
5. Group membership (eg small groups, teams, bands, committees) can provide protection from being bullied for some vulnerable students. When students feel 'connected' to others through working towards a common goal, sharing success and sharing good times they are more likely to feel some responsibility for the wellbeing of other group members.
6. Students who have a positive and valued relationship with their teacher(s) are more likely to not want to disappoint them by engaging in bullying. They are also more likely to be influenced by modelling by those teachers of pro-social values such as acceptance of differences and respect.

Positive Teacher-Student Relationships



Positive teacher-student relationships can contribute significantly, not only to students' wellbeing and pro-social behaviour but also to their learning outcomes. Many students feel they 'owe' something in return to a teacher who shows genuine interest in and care for them (Davidson, 1999; Stipek 2006) and are less likely to disappoint them by failing to complete assignments or engaging in anti-social behaviour such as bullying. The way in which a teacher responds to a vulnerable student can 'set the tone' for how peers respond to that student.

Many different research studies are remarkably consistent in their conclusions about students' ideas about the qualities of a 'good teacher'. These qualities include listening, noticing when they are absent and being interested in them. In other words students tend to focus most on the interpersonal quality of their relationship with their teachers (Rowe, 2004, Trent, 2001; Werner, 2000; Dornbusch, 1999; Ruddick et al., 1997). Fullan (2001) has written of the powerful positive effect on students of having three such good teachers in three successive years.

Marzano et al (2003) argue that relationships with students cannot just be left to chance and that it is a teacher's professional responsibility to ensure that they establish a positive relationship with each student. Some of the strategies/approaches that have been identified as contributing to a positive teacher-student relationship are briefly outlined below:

Getting to know students is a key direction. This involves teachers greeting students by name and taking a *personal interest* in each of them, endeavouring to know and understand them as individuals with a life outside school as well as students at the school (Trent, 2001). It also involves a degree of self-disclosure on the part of teachers so that they are also 'known' to students to some degree as well. In this way both teachers and students can identify common interests and common experiences.

Using *effective classroom management*. Marzano et al. (2003) identified from a meta-analysis of research studies that the most effective form of classroom management includes remaining emotionally objective and maintaining an appropriate balance between teacher 'dominance' and teacher 'cooperation'.

Dominance is characterised by assertiveness (ie standing up for one's rights as a teacher in a way that respects the rights of the student) and establishing clear behavioural expectations

Cooperation is characterized by a concern for the needs and opinions of students and a focus on students and the teacher functioning as a team. Listening to what students have to say and speaking to them with respect is part of this picture.

Teachers who use behaviour management based on dominance and submission (eg using putdown remarks, being sarcastic, ridiculing, regularly threatening punishments or forcing a student into a submissive response) model inappropriate and disrespectful behaviour and students who are already prone to bullying classmates may feel that not only are they justified in their own bullying behaviour but that these behaviours are tacitly sanctioned by the teacher.

Having fun with students eg through the use of humour and games and providing students with *opportunities for some autonomy and decision making* eg through providing choices in assignments and discussions about the way they would like their classroom to be.

Focusing on student strengths and developing flexible learning paths and goals for each student.

Teachers acting in *mentoring and advocacy* roles and staying in these roles with those students over time

Students having *more contact over time with fewer teachers*. Multi-age grouping can assist teachers to develop sustained relationships with students, as can 'looping' in which one teacher or a set of teachers moves up with a group of students for two or more years. In secondary schools, block scheduling (classes of at least 90 minutes long) can offer teachers more opportunity to interact with students for sustained periods of time. Since the classes are less rushed, informal interactions as well as academic interactions are more likely to occur (Stipek, 2006).

Teachers being available in their classroom for some time before class starts (eg before school) can facilitate one-on-one student access to teachers and can help build strong student-teacher relationships (Stipek, 2006).

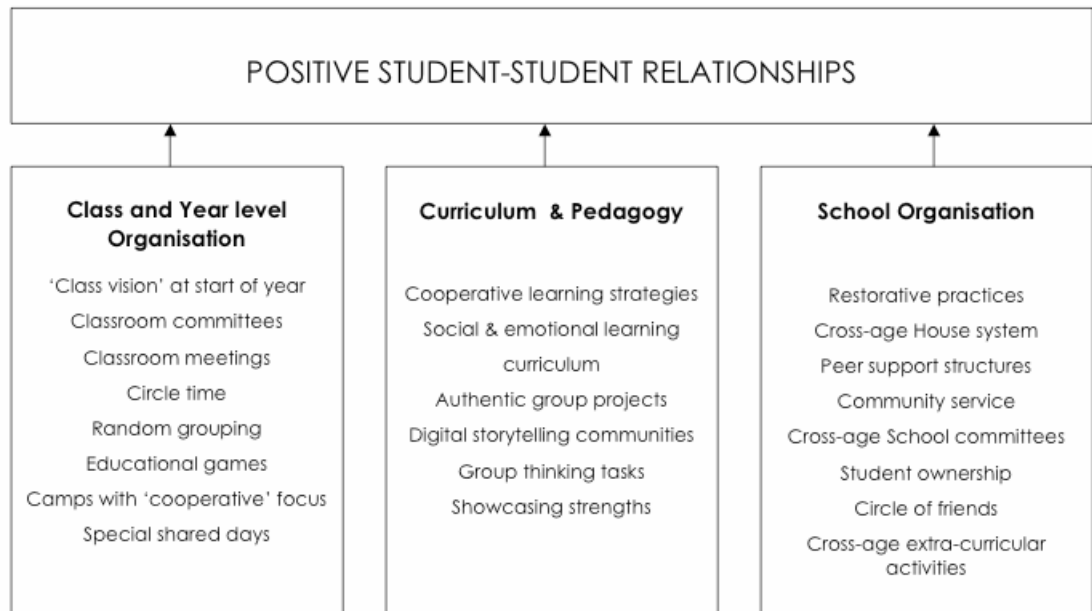
Teachers making *special efforts to develop a positive relationship with the students who they find most difficult to teach*.

In addition, Stipek (2006) has identified the following teacher behaviours as those that have been shown in research studies to promote positive relationships with *younger students*:

Showing affection, fairness and nurturance (eg greeting them by name and with a smile when they come into the room; remembering what they talked to the teacher about the day before; making sure each child gets a turn)
 Responding to misbehaviour gently and with explanations rather than sharply and with punishment
 Showing positive emotions (eg smiling, being playful).

Positive Peer Relationships

The development of positive relationships between same-age and cross-age students can take place through school organisation, classroom or year level organisation or through improvements to curriculum and pedagogy



Classroom and Year level Organisation

A '*class vision*' can be collaboratively developed by teacher and students at the start of the year in primary classrooms and in some secondary contexts. This is a vision as to how the classroom can be and how students will behave in order to be consistent with that vision

Classroom committees (eg the classroom newsletter committee or the classroom 'birthdays' committee) can provide students with an opportunity to work collaboratively with a shared goal and responsibility

Classroom meetings are effective settings for the practising of social skills such as active listening, negotiation and respectful disagreeing.

'*Circle Time*' encourages students to work as a class to discuss curriculum topics, solve class-based problems or discuss shared issues or concerns

Random grouping, in which all students work in a group or as a pair with all other students throughout the year makes it more likely that students get to know each other and have positive experiences together

Participation in *educational games and shared special days* (eg Thinkfests, Italian Day etc) allows students to get to know each other, have fun and share success

Camps with a 'cooperative focus' are those in which camp activities are based around getting to know other students and taking part in a range of cooperative tasks with a different small group each time

Curriculum and Pedagogy

The implementation of a *social and emotional learning curriculum* can contribute to the development of positive relationships by teaching students pro-social values, social skills, and resilience skills. Effective social and emotional curriculum use drama and literature as their base. *Values* are the basis of any school culture, and they articulate the essence of the school's philosophy, its goals and how it goes about achieving them. Many researchers have included the teaching of pro-social values as part of their overall - anti-bullying, anti-violence or student wellbeing interventions (eg Battistich et al., 2001; Cowie & Olafsson, 2000; Cross et al., 2004a; Flannery et al., 2003; Frey et al., 2000).

The extensive classroom use of *cooperative learning strategies* contributes to positive peer relationships both directly and indirectly. Over a thousand research studies have documented the many benefits of cooperative learning (Benard, 2004; Marzano, 2001) which include: improvements in academic outcomes, positive peer relationships, social skills, empathy, motivation, acceptance of diversity (ethnic, racial, physical), conflict resolution, self-esteem, self-control, positive attitudes to school, and critical thinking (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2001; Slavin, 1995). Cooperative learning and cooperative group work have also been associated with lower levels of bullying, an increased ability to tolerate different perspectives on the same issue and increased levels of assertive problem-solving skills (Johnson & Johnson & Stanne, 2001; Ortega & Lera, 2000).

When students participate in *authentic group projects* they have an opportunity to bond, work towards a common goal and share the satisfaction of achieving their group goal with a degree of autonomy and self-direction. One example of such tasks are SOLAR tasks (McGrath & Noble, 2007) (**S**tudent **O**wned **R**esearch and **L**earning **T**asks) which incorporate the following features:

The task is authentic in that the group's product, solution, outcome or recommendation really matters to the school community. An example would be asking each group of four students to make recommendations as to how the school could reduce its ecological footprint. One group might focus on water, another on gas and electricity, a third on reusable items and so on.

The process is characterised by student ownership and student-direction plus teacher facilitation. For example students would decide on which resources to use and whether their final product was in the form of a presentation, booklet or a poster.

Students need to use research and skills and skills and knowledge from several discipline areas (eg writing, costing, collecting statistics) to complete the task

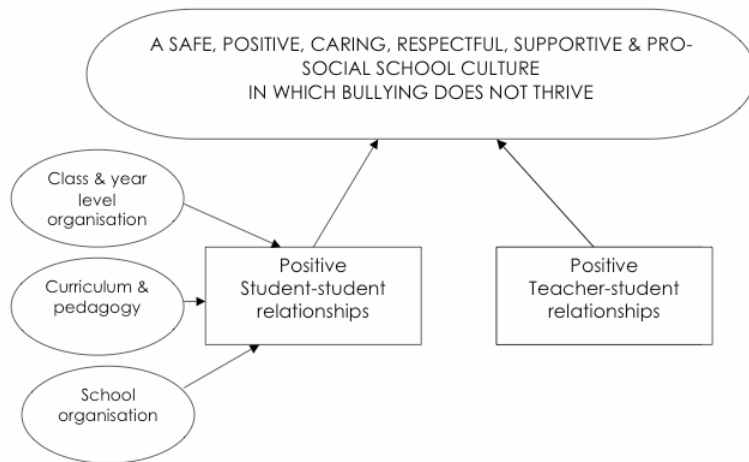
The assessment and feedback on the product/outcome/solution is provided by people with relevant expertise (eg members of a local conservation group) or the power to make decisions (eg school council)

Social skills are intentionally practised and reflected on (eg by using a teamwork rubric)

When students create their own personal digital stories about aspects of their life or interests they share themselves with other students. By sharing their stories within the story circle, both during the making of their digital story and during its presentation, students can establish connections and new relationships. They get to know each other at a deeper level and also receive helpful feedback to enable self-reflection. They become part of *a digital storytelling community* (Gee, 1990).

Group thinking tools such as group concept maps and the Ten Thinking Tracks (McGrath & Noble, 2003; 2005) enable students to get to know each other, work successfully together and develop higher-order thinking skills at the same time

Students' strengths and skills can be showcased through the use of a *Skills Matrix or Classroom Yellow Pages activity* (McGrath & Noble 1993; 2005). Highlighting students' strengths and skills can generate respect and identify common areas of interests and skills that can lead to positive associations.



School Level Organisation

The most effective approach to the promotion of positive relationships throughout the school community is one in which school leaders work collaboratively with teachers, students and parents to develop a long-term vision for developing positive relationships. A 'vision' is a picture of what the school could look like and it provides direction and energy for making changes. A shared vision also helps to identify what is current components in the school are working well and should be further strengthened and protected. Some possible approaches include:

The adoption of *'restorative practices'* an approach that can help students to develop empathy and social responsibility

A *cross-age 'House' system* in which students from many different year levels have regular, meaningful and cooperative interactions

The establishment of *pro-social peer support structures* such as

- o Peer counselling
- o Peer mediation
- o Peer mentoring/buddy systems
- o Peer tutoring
- o PALs: Peer Activity Leaders (in which older students organise and facilitate cross-age games at lunchtimes)

The organization of opportunities for students to take part in a range of *community service activities* or other form of service learning

Encouraging students to take some ownership of planning and implementation in the area of enhancing peer relationships

Whole-school cross-age committees

'Circle of Friends' which is a network of students who offer support and inclusion for an isolated student (Newton & Wilson, n.d)

Opportunities for all students to participate in *cross-age extracurricular activities* such as band, choir, sporting activities, lunchtime clubs and drama performances

Minimisation of 'threats' to the development of positive relationships eg by avoiding year level repetition which has a negative impact on the social connections of most repeated students (McGrath, 2006)

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