

# Case study 1: Adapting Life Education to fit with whole-school needs at Pounamu School

## Introducing Pounamu School

Pounamu School is a decile 1 contributing school located in a large urban area. The roll includes approximately 400 students: about half identify as Māori, one-fifth Pacific, one-fifth NZ European, and one-tenth Asian or from another ethnicity.

The school's priorities are developing students' literacy and numeracy skills. Underpinning this is a focus on student health and wellbeing, and addressing barriers to learning such as poor attendance. The school serves a community that doesn't have a lot of financial resources and therefore is committed to providing extra support through initiatives such as a health clinic, Books in Homes, Fruit in Schools, and connections with the Kids Can Trust.

## History and value of school involvement with Life Education

The Life Education mobile classroom had been visiting Pounamu School for more than 10 years, and all staff viewed Life Education as a valuable and integral part of their school programme:

Our relationship with Life Ed is very positive—it's a team... Life Ed is not an add-on—it's a critical part of what we do.

School staff noted that Life Education enhanced their school programme by “reinforcing important health messages”. To embed learning it was important that students got these messages more than once and in different formats. Staff valued the specialised knowledge of the educators and considered this complemented their generalist knowledge. They noted that students found the visits motivating because of the high quality of Life Education teaching practices and resources. School staff commented it would be difficult for teachers to have the same level of content knowledge or replicate the resources or high energy delivery of the educators.

## The fit between Life Education and school practice

### The fit between Life Education and schoolwide practices

School leaders considered that Life Education modules and their underpinning philosophies aligned well with school priorities, beliefs about learning, and approaches to curriculum planning. The student and parent community of Pounamu School came from a range of cultural backgrounds which included recent refugees. Therefore, the school had a focus on fostering understanding of difference and celebrating different cultures. School leaders considered Life

Education's strengths-based approach and focus on acknowledging the uniqueness of students fitted well with this focus.

The strategies Life Education advocated also aligned well with a schoolwide focus on positive and negative decision making and consequences. As part of this focus, staff were encouraged to model and reinforce strategies such as the use of "put ups, not put downs", and strategies students could use to address bullying such as use of "I" statements. Staff described other ways their approach and Life Education were aligned. For example, school leaders noted that educators presented students with information and discussed ideas in a way that did not criticise home practices. This approach was also a focus at the school.

### **The fit between Life Education and the curriculum**

At Pounamu School the curriculum plan included a two-yearly rotation of health topics and each class covered about two main health topics a year. The Life Education visit was incorporated into the curriculum plan at the start of each year and was timed to coincide with a health topic. In the past the school had focused on the food and nutrition strand in one year, and self-esteem or social relationships in the next. The health team used the Life Education learning intentions ("We are learning to..." (WALT) statements) to assist in planning units and to put together a selection of resources for teachers to use.

During the last couple of years, school leaders had been developing a more flexible approach to planning topics that enabled them to respond to student or community needs. Over the course of 2007, school staff observed that there had been an increase in bullying and racial taunting in the playground. A community consultation had also highlighted that the parent/whānau community were concerned about children's anger management skills. School leaders raised these concerns with the educator when she visited the school to discuss the 2007 programme. They then worked together to tailor the Life Education visit to support the school to address these areas. For the Years 5/6 students who were targeted in this case study, a programme that consisted of two sessions was developed that focused on questions such as "What is a good friend?", and "What is bullying?" This programme combined aspects of the Life Education modules: *Friends* and *It's great to be me*. The educator and school staff also developed a student booklet that was tailored to fit school needs. The booklet included some of the resources from the Life Education student booklets, school resources, and other resources from the educator about cultural differences.

The 2007 health topic which coincided with the Life Education visit fitted with this focus. This topic was entitled "I am me and you are you, and we are both special" and was about valuing yourself and others. A social studies unit on celebrating cultures was also connected to this topic. In 2006, the school had used a similar approach to develop a tailored Life Education programme to fit with their whole-school focus on healthy eating.

Alongside the curriculum plan, the school also had small daily health topics that change weekly and were timed to suit current events. These were woven into daily classroom practice. Examples included: firework safety; sun protection; and managing friendships.

## **Integration of Life Education with classroom practice**

The two Years 5/6 teachers we talked to described a number of connections between their school and Life Education's approach. Teachers considered it important that students' different cultural and home backgrounds were acknowledged in their classroom programme. They had an ongoing focus on exploring similarities and differences between student groups, and positive ways students could interact and work co-operatively. Teachers also considered their schoolwide focus on decision making and consequences aligned well with the Life Education focus, and commented that Life Education reinforced a number of the strategies that were part of school practice. Both teachers focused their discussions about positively managing social interactions around these sorts of strategies. During the year they referred back to Life Education as it was an "anchor" for students.

As well as these ongoing activities both teachers used Life Education as a "starter" activity for an in-depth focus on the health topic related to the Life Education visits. In 2007, both teachers worked through the adapted student booklets. Teachers were very appreciative of the way this tailored booklet supported the school focus on bullying and gave them activities to follow up in the classroom. As one said, "You can go for ages on the book... It's like giving children their Christmas present!" In between the two Life Education sessions one class analysed the poem in the booklet about similarities and differences between people. The teacher was impressed by how students looked beyond simple physical differences to discuss differences in values and emotions. Post-visit activities also included discussions about bullying and the meaning of a number of quotes from the educator and Harold which students wrote in their books such as, "Be honest, but not hurtful", and "Every action has a consequence". Teachers also used some of the activities in the student booklet for homework tasks and sent home students' work for parents to view. A visit from a community policewoman, which covered similar areas, was also timed to coincide with the health topic.

## **The impact of Life Education on student and staff learning**

### **Teachers' views on the impact of Life Education on students' learning**

Staff commented it could be difficult to untangle the impact of Life Education visits because they were so intertwined with school practice. But, given this, they had a clear sense that students remembered Life Education messages and content, and observed that, as students got older, these messages built in complexity. Teachers considered that this supported students to develop their knowledge and vocabulary around key areas.

School staff described a number of occasions they had observed changes in students' knowledge or behaviours they considered were partially attributable to Life Education. School staff tended to ascribe different types of impacts to the different Life Education modules. They connected gains in students' content knowledge to modules about body systems, nutrition, and healthy eating. For example, teachers noted that as a result of Life Education students gained "a reasonable

knowledge about internal body parts and organs” and the impact of different foods and substances on these organs. Teachers noted that, during the 2006 Life Education visit, students had become interested in the information they gained about the effect on the brain of the fat content in food. Overall, as a result of the school focus on healthy eating which was supported by Life Education, teachers noticed changes in students’ knowledge about healthy food options and students talking about, and taking onboard, messages about healthy choices.

Different types of learning were mentioned in relation to the 2007 module, which spanned the self-esteem and social relationships strands. Teachers reported that this module had supported students to think more deeply about different personality qualities and why people bullied, and had enhanced students’ existing strategies for avoiding bullying and peer pressure. One teacher noted students found the visit empowering and now had a clearer sense that “It’s alright to get out of trouble...it’s ok to say you’re being bullied.” The other described how students had used strategies promoted during Life Education to effectively manage a difficult classmate.

In general, in 2007 as a result of the school focus on positive behaviour, and the Life Education visit, staff considered the number of incidences of problem behaviour had decreased. This view was supported by data from the playground incident book which showed a decrease. The only new instances were from students who were new to the school. Overall, all the school staff interviewed considered the specially tailored Life Education module had been particularly successful in meeting the needs of the school.

### **Teachers’ views on the impact of Life Education on their practice**

As well as having an impact on students’ knowledge or skills, all the teachers interviewed reported that Life Education had impacted positively on their knowledge or practice. Some noted that Life Education contributed to their content knowledge: “They teach us as well!” All considered observing Life Education sessions supported them to keep up to date or reflect on their practice. Teachers noted that being part of a session contributed to their knowledge about: positive behaviour management strategies; the range of strategies that could be used instead of whole-class teaching; how to sequence teaching; or how to reinforce key messages. In general, all school staff considered the teaching practice of educators and the Life Education resources to be of a high standard.

### **Possible improvements to Life Education practice**

Staff noted that in the past Life Education had been very responsive to feedback and hoped they would continue with their programme of updating resources. In general, staff found it hard to suggest ways Life Education practice could be improved. As one teacher said: “Their practice couldn’t be improved, and their resources are the same.” One teacher noted that the focus of the revised curriculum on community consultation and school-based curriculum development posed some challenges for Life Education. Whilst acknowledging that it would be a lot of work, this teacher suggested that Life Education could aim towards “pitching at communities rather than just

curriculum”. To do this, Life Education would need to research the characteristics of the range of NZ student groups such as Māori, Samoan and other Pacific cultures, and refugee communities. Life Education could then incorporate more discussion about healthy food from these cultures, and focus on their different social practices. In this way educators would be able to make stronger links to different school communities and highlight some of the positives of each culture within these communities.

Another teacher considered that making the modules more flexible would better meet school needs, for example, she suggested some of the topics in the Years 7–8 modules were appropriate for Years 5–6. Examples included peer pressure or pressure from siblings in relation to drugs.

## Students’ perspectives

### *Students’ perspectives on prior Life Education visits*

During our visit to Pounamu School we talked to a total of nine students from two Years 5/6 classes. Both student groups had a clear recollection of the Life Education visits from previous years. In general, students seem to find it easier to recall Life Education visits than classroom activities. In regard to the 2006 school and Life Education focus on healthy eating, both groups talked about what they had learnt about healthy food. Some students described how, during the Life Education visit, they had read the labels on food packets (for energy, sugar, and fat) and played a game to categorise food in the food pyramid groups:

...the good stuff’s at the bottom...(that’s vegetables, fruit) and the bad stuff’s at the top—you only eat a little a day...(that’s sugar, ice-cream, burgers, coke, lollies...)

Students also learnt about: how much food you are supposed to eat to fuel your body; how your muscles and body organs work better if you eat healthy food; the strongest muscle called “gluteus maximus”; what happens to your body when you run around; and that you need oxygen. One group talked about the follow-up activities that occurred in class with the Life Education booklets and other similar resources such as a “Healthy lunches” book promoted by Tana Umaga.

As a result of the 2006 Life Education visit the students in one group described how they had started to do food packet reading at home. Students in the other group reported they were eating more vegetables as a result of their school’s and Life Education’s focus on healthy eating.

Students also commented on the cumulative impact of Life Education visits in that they went every year and got similar messages. An example given was Harold’s message that we are all unique and “we all have different personalities”. Students noted that it would be boring if we were all the same.

### *Students’ perspectives on learning prior to the 2007 Life Education visit*

Prior to the 2007 Life Education visit, when asked about the current whole-school focus on bullying, students in both groups noted that there had been “heaps of times” that students had

teased other students about “how they look or what colour they are”. The two groups talked about messages teachers gave them such as: “Don’t tease other children that are darker than you”, and “Respect others a bit more”. Both groups of students could clearly describe the strategies suggested by staff for dealing with bullying and noted that they were reinforced by “all the teachers”. The strategies students named were those in the WITS framework:

- walking away
- ignoring bullies or not talking back
- the use of “I” statements such as “I don’t like it when you....”
- getting the duty teacher.

Students could also describe some of the activities they undertook at school that supported them to gain more understanding of each other and learn about positive behaviour. One group had learnt a lot about their classmates’ cultures and countries from a recent social studies unit on celebrating cultures. Students had been shocked to hear from classmates about how they had lived in war zones where violence and guns were the norm, and from other classmates who had lived in places where they did not have hot water, electricity, or birthday parties. Students noted this unit had given them more understanding about each other’s cultures and a greater appreciation of their current situation in New Zealand.

The other group described how their class had a number of systems which supported them to interact positively with each other. One was a buddy system to welcome newcomers and the other was a “friendship circle” during which either students or the teacher could bring up incidences that concerned them. Students noted the friendship circle gave them a vehicle to voice their concerns and taught them strategies to deal with situations; for example, they had learnt how to use “I” statements and how to apologise to each other. As well as these more formal classroom activities, students also noted they talked to each other about the sorts of behaviours they expected from a good friend. As an example, one group stated that a good friend is someone who stands up for you, and if you get bullied, they help you. A friend is not just nice to you because they want to eat your lunch.

Most students noted they had tried to use school strategies, such as “I” statements, either with their classmates or siblings. In general, they had mixed success. Some had more success at school, others with their siblings: “When my brother is mean, I say: ‘I’m not listening’.” A couple noted that they were doing less bullying as a result of the school focus.

When asked if they got information about dealing with bullying and how to make friends from other places, some students noted they did not talk about these things at home. Others said if they got bullied they told their parents who talked to their teacher or the principal. Some noted their parents gave them generic advice such as: “If your friends are not nice, just make new ones” or “Mum told me it’s a good idea to have both girl and boy friends—to get on with both.” No student mentioned their parents suggested different strategies for managing social relationships.

### *Students' perspectives on the 2007 Life Education visit*

In regard to the 2007 Life Education visit, again students had a clear recollection of the various activities they undertook and the messages that were being promoted. Overall, students were very enthusiastic about the sessions. Students in the two groups described how they had: watched a video about bullying and discussed different ways of dealing with bullying; discussed peer pressure and “what could you say if someone asked you to smoke”; talked about their similarities and differences with a buddy; learnt how it was important not to make assumptions about people’s backgrounds; stuck cards on the wall that had supported them to think about the characteristics of friends that were important; talked about different body parts; and played games.

Students found it easier to describe the activities they undertook during Life Education than to talk about the strategies that were promoted, and some students noted that already knew about some of the strategies or information: “most of us know about friendships...and friends’ likes and dislikes”. But, overall, students talked about how they had come to a greater realisation of the *range* of strategies they could use to deal with peer pressure and bullies. As one said: “[I learnt that] if someone says your mum’s fat...there’s *heaps* of ways to deal with that.” Students also noted they had learnt more about the reasons why people bully: “Sometimes they pretend to be strong...some bullies are soft inside.”

The messages students took on board from this Life Education visit were: be kind, respect each other’s feelings, and try not to bully; be honest and trustworthy and don’t lie; try not to judge people by their looks as this does not always give you accurate information about their background; we are all special; and it is good to keep fit and eat healthy food rather than junk food or salt.

### *Synergies between Life Education and the classroom*

Students said the Life Education strategies and messages had been reinforced in the class work they did near to the two Life Education visits. Both groups recounted that their teachers had talked about bullying in class. In one class the teacher told a story about bullying and students analysed a poem about being the same or different from other people. Both classes also had a visit from a policewoman who talked about similar themes including bullying and keeping yourself safe. Both groups were very positive about the student booklet that they had worked through in class. They talked about how they had to write different strategies for dealing with peer pressure about smoking and stealing and fill in pages about their likes and dislikes.

Students had a range of views on the similarities and differences between the classroom and Life Education. Both groups thought the environment in the mobile classroom was different from their school classroom, and more exciting. They enjoyed talking to Harold and liked the lights and smells and physical activities: “I liked the fitness we did—like you had to stick things on the walls.” Some wanted to do more of these activities in class, specifically watching and discussing videos. One group of students noted that “in class we write all the time” and described the Life Education visit as:

It's way different...you learn new stuff...it's different 'cause you can have fun while you learn...it's more verbal.

The other group commented on some of the similarities between Life Education and the classroom. In this class, similar to Life Education, the teacher set up a lot of opportunities for students to share ideas with each other.

As well as identifying similarities and differences in the *ways* they learnt, students also identified similarities and differences between school and Life Education focuses or messages. Students noted that their school and Life Education had similar approaches to addressing bullying, but placed weight on different messages. One group noted that school messages were more about doing good work (achievement) and classroom behaviour. In contrast, Life Education focused more on feelings, getting on with friends, and eating healthily. Both groups thought that, overall, the Life Education approach:

really helped us to learn...I liked how we talked about bullying and how to get out of it, and how we are different cultures and things like that!

### *Transferring what was learnt during Life Education*

Students noted that the recent Life Education visit had supported them to continue trying new strategies to manage relationships with their classmates. As an example, both groups described what had happened to a new student who picked fights. One group reported that during the Life Education sessions, they had learnt “lots of things to say to him” and trying out these ideas had resulted in improvements in his behaviour. The other group noted a similar change: “He’s going well now! He’s behaving appropriately!” Like their teachers, students considered there had been a recent decrease in bullying. Some had also tried using the strategies, or ways to avoid peer pressure, with siblings. One student, who had been offered a cigarette by her sister, recounted: “My sister asked me if I wanted a puff, and I said no!”

## **Summary**

At Pounamu School, all the school staff and students we talked to were extremely enthusiastic about past and recent Life Education visits. In particular, staff were appreciative of the fit between Life Education and school philosophies and practices, and how the educator adapted the modules to meet their current needs. As a result, all considered Life Education had been highly successful in supporting and reinforcing school focuses. In general, staff valued the high quality of the Life Education teaching practice and resources:

There's lots of things that are really good [about Life Education practice]—that's why the children really love it... I take my hat off to them... I just really appreciate the style [of teaching]. It's really about using the kids as much as possible.

Although very impressed by Life Education, and how it motivated students, school leaders cautioned that the strategies promoted by Life Education were only likely to have an impact if

they were reinforced by teachers. Interviews with students supported this view, and suggested that the closeness of the fit between Life Education and school practices supported students to learn content knowledge as well as strategies to improve their health and wellbeing.

In the future, staff at this school were planning to continue their approach of tailoring Life Education to fit with current needs. Senior staff noted that in 2008 they would probably revisit their 2006 focus on healthy eating choices as this was a continuing issue in their community. But, if a different need became apparent, they would adapt their programme as they had done in 2007.