

Case study 2: A fit between school and Life Education practice at Valley School

Introducing Valley School

Valley School is a decile 7 contributing school in a small town. This town serves a rural area, and many students are bused to school. The roll includes approximately 315 students. Most identify as NZ European, with about one-tenth identifying as Māori or from another ethnicity. Student turnover is high, but the school has strong community involvement, and long-serving staff.

Valley School's priorities are literacy and numeracy. Alongside this, over the last few years, the school has also been developing a set of initiatives designed to enhance student wellbeing. These include: the promotion of schoolwide behavioural expectations; the employment of a part-time school counsellor to work with students on home or school concerns; a series of parent coffee mornings with guest speakers to discuss topical concerns such as healthy eating or bullying; and participation in project WAVE, a district health board initiative which supports schools to access professionals working in the areas of physical or mental health and wellbeing.

History and value of school involvement with Life Education

At Valley School, Life Education was funded by a local trust and was part of the package of initiatives which supported student wellbeing. The Life Education mobile classroom had been visiting the school for more than 15 years, and the local educator had a longstanding relationship with the school (and many other local schools). Staff viewed the educator as “part of our school community”.

All staff viewed Life Education as a valuable aspect of their health programme, as it reinforced key messages that were a focus at school. Staff considered the Life Education modules to be clearly related to their long-term health curriculum plan and student needs. One example was a Life Education video about starting a new school. Staff considered this to be particularly relevant for their highly mobile student population. Staff also reported that students found Life Education highly motivating:

They deliver a programme that is punchy and topical... We wouldn't use it if it wasn't enjoyed by the children... They must be doing something right to keep that interest up!

Teachers particularly appreciated the specialised knowledge of the educator and the way Life Education gave them a starting point to initiate activities about “scary topics” such as the effects of tobacco and drugs. They did not always feel confident initiating discussions about these topics, and valued the support that an outside agency, such as the Life Education Trust, could give them.

The fit between Life Education and school practice

The fit between Life Education and schoolwide practices

School leaders considered the messages Life Education promoted were well aligned with their schoolwide focus on positive behaviour. As part of this focus, staff were encouraged to model and reinforce the strategies students could use to: express their feelings; manage their interactions with each other; address bullying; and make good choices. School staff noted that school leaders, teachers, and the educator all promoted the same set of strategies such as the WITS framework.

The fit between Life Education and the curriculum

At Valley School, the curriculum plan included a two-yearly rotation of health topics, with about one topic a term. The Life Education visit was planned at the start of each year and was timed to coincide with a health topic. Life Education visits tended to be organised so that students would do a food and nutrition topic in one year, and a self-esteem or social relationships topic in the next year.

For the Years 5/6 students targeted in this case study, the 2007 health topic was: “Making decisions”. This topic focused on: developing the knowledge, understanding, and skills to handle bullies; building personal identity and self-worth; and coping with peer pressure, friendships, smoking, and alcohol. Each year the educator contacted the school to discuss the programme. The Life Education module that was selected to fit with the senior students’ health topic was: *It’s great to be me*.

As well as having a long-term plan with set topics, the school also organised activities in response to occurrences in the local community. One recent example was a focus on keeping yourself safe, which was developed due to a number of incidents in the town.

Integration of Life Education with classroom practice

The two Years 5/6 teachers we talked to described how they had two main ways of approaching health which were both connected to Life Education. The first was an ongoing focus on developing students’ skills in managing social relationships and decision making. To encourage students to self-manage classroom and playground incidents, teachers promoted the common set of schoolwide strategies. Teachers also supported students to learn self-management strategies through facilitating role plays or whole-class discussions. In one class, students posted concerns in a suggestion box. The class then developed three strategies to address each concern. During these discussions, the teacher advocated the use of the same strategies as Life Education, such as the use of “I” statements and “put ups, not put downs”.

Health topics were also part of the curriculum. In 2007, both teachers used Life Education as a “starter” activity for an in-depth focus on the related health topic. After the Life Education visit, both teachers used an activity from the Life Education *Teacher’s Resource Folder*. In this

activity, students developed a “quilt” of the people in their classroom, and what made them similar or unique to each other. To collect information to develop their “patch”, each student interviewed five classmates. Teachers also used the Life Education student booklets to spark whole-class discussions, as work in silent reading time, or as homework. One teacher read a book about friendships, provided by the educator, to her class. The class then analysed this text for a character writing exercise. In general, teachers were very appreciative of different resources the educator provided.

Teachers described how Life Education sessions usually sparked students’ interest in a range of areas which they then followed up. After the 2007 visit, one teacher had discussions with students about: smoking; strategies to use if you found yourself being a passive smoker; and behaviour at parties. In this class, students were interested in the chemicals in cigarettes, so the teacher supported them to use their maths skills to calculate the amount of chemicals a person would ingest if they smoked a packet a day. The other teacher used an activity students started during Life Education to have an in-depth discussion about the consequences of decisions. This activity was a discussion about the question: “If you could change one thing in the world what would it be?”

The impact of Life Education on student and staff learning

Teachers’ views on the impact of Life Education on students’ learning

When asked about the impact of Life Education on students’ learning, teachers were clear that students remembered Life Education messages and content. Although teachers sometimes considered these messages to be repetitive, they noted that students did not, as the content and way it was delivered built in complexity as students got older.

Teachers noted that Life Education focused on aspects of health they considered important, but did not seem to have prominence in the curriculum. One area was the impact of different substances on the body. Through attending Life Education, teachers considered students gained information that would support them to make good decisions, such as knowledge about how the body works and the effects of smoking and other substances. They considered this to be “invaluable background”.

Teachers also valued Life Education’s focus on uniqueness and self-esteem and the way they celebrated students’ differences. They reported that students responded well to the message that they were unique, and that this supported students to build self-esteem:

...it makes children feel they are not alone...they are unique, but others also go through the same changes.

Teachers also considered the quality of the Life Education delivery assisted students’ learning. They commented on the educator’s: positive and inclusive manner; excellent behaviour

management skills; high-quality resources; use of activities that catered for a range of learning styles; and use of different student-centred teaching strategies such as peer sharing. Teachers valued the way messages were presented in ways that connected with students, tapped into their interests, or sparked new ones. From the recent visit, one teacher gave an example:

[The educator] gave the chemicals [in cigarettes] names the kids could relate to, like paint stripper... The children were blown away by the amount of chemicals in a cigarette.

Overall, teachers considered the factors described above, combined with the special environment of the Life Education mobile classroom, resulted in a very positive learning experience for students, during which they retained information:

It's a real experience and journey—that's the magic of it—it's the magic that makes it stick with the children so much more.

Teachers suggested that students' interest in the topics covered by Life Education, and their desire to do follow-up activities, showed they had taken on board key messages. For example, after the recent Life Education visit some students had gone home and talked about smoking with their parents. As a result one parent had visited the teacher to tell her this had prompted her to give up smoking.

When asked if students took on board the strategies advocated by Life Education, teachers noted that Life Education reinforced the idea that students "can do something to rectify a situation". They considered that, given the synergy between the strategies advocated by their school and Life Education, it was difficult to pinpoint the exact contribution of Life Education. But, overall, the fact that the same set of strategies was reinforced during Life Education, as well as in assemblies, the playground, and the classroom, all supported students to take them on board.

Teachers' views on the impact of Life Education on their practice

As well as having an impact on students' self-esteem, content knowledge, and development of strategies, all the teachers considered Life Education had a positive impact on their practice. Some noted that Life Education contributed to their health content knowledge by providing up to date information about areas they were unfamiliar with, such as drugs, as well as those they were more familiar with, such as body systems:

It's good to see the strategies and information you are trying to deliver, being delivered by someone else!

Being part of a Life Education session also provided an opportunity for teachers to pick up new techniques. They commented that Life Education practice was more interactive and involved more peer sharing than their usual classroom practice. Thus they gained ideas about new and fun student-centred teaching strategies and activities they could use. Examples given included different questioning techniques, jigsaw activities, and activities that stretched the imagination. Teachers also noted Life Education sessions contributed to their knowledge about ways to

positively promote messages and positive behaviour management strategies. Teachers also found it useful to observe their students' behaviour, verbal skills, and levels of content knowledge.

Possible improvements to Life Education practice

Teachers appreciated the way Life Education was linked to the curriculum and made efforts to continually update their resources. They found it hard to suggest ways Life Education practice could be improved, mostly because they were unsure of possible alternatives. One suggested Life Education needed a teacher pack with each module to "cut out the searching time for teachers". This could contain a teacher booklet, other resources such as videos with similar themes to those shown during Life Education, or suggestions about how to access videos. A few changes to existing modules or ideas for new modules were also suggested. A junior teacher considered some topics in the food and nutrition strand included too much revision and not enough new material. A teacher of Years 5/6 students suggested that the modules targeted at Years 7/8 students, such as *Quest*, contained topics that were relevant to her class. One topic was soft illegal drugs such as marijuana. She noted that some families were using drugs, and to support teachers to talk about the effects of drugs, it would be helpful if Life Education had a module for younger students. This teacher also considered that, given its relevance for so many students, a module could be developed about grief in relation to separation and blended families. This could include activities such as how to be a friend to someone whose father had left home. Physical safety (that is, around cars, bikes, in water, at school, or at home) was another potential new module.

Students' perspectives

Students' perspectives on prior Life Education visits

During our visit to Valley School we talked to a total of nine students from two Years 5/6 classes. Both student groups had a clear recollection of prior Life Education visits, and could describe the activities they did, what they had learnt, and the changes they had made as a result. Overall, students noted that Life Education was about making healthy choices and "keeping yourself healthy". One group commented that the educator was very knowledgeable:

...it's like they know everything!... This is a compliment to the Life Education centre...Harold's a great giraffe!

In regard to the 2006 Life Education visit, during which they did a food and nutrition module, both groups described some of the activities they had done to learn about healthy food. For example, one group described a game they had played to categorise food into the food pyramid groups, and how they had watched a video about Harold going to a birthday party where "they were all eating rubbishy food". Both groups talked about what they had learnt about healthy food, for example, what was "good" and "bad" food and about 5+A Day. Some described how they had been shocked to learn about the fat, sugar, or salt content of some foods like KFC, McDonalds, or fizzy drinks. As a result, some reported making changes to their behaviour:

I've changed the way I eat. I used to come home and eat a muesli bar...now I eat carrots.... I don't drink coke.

Both groups also described some of the other information Life Education covered, such as how your body digests food and what the brain likes to keep it healthy. In the past they had also learnt about smoking and substances, and how cigarettes have tar in them. Students retained a number of messages from these sessions including:

You've got to learn about self-control 'cause your friends might offer you something like a cigarette.

In relation to past Life Education modules about self-esteem and social relationships, students described how they had watched videos about how to deal with problems with friends. They found this very helpful as it showed both sides of the situation. Students retained a number of messages from these sessions, such as: they were special; they needed to make their own choices; it is good not to keep your emotions "all bottled up"; and it is a good idea to choose trustworthy people as friends.

Students' perspectives on learning prior to the 2007 Life Education visit

Prior to the 2007 Life Education visit, when asked about the school's approach to areas such as relating well to each other, and identity and self-esteem, students initially found it difficult to describe activities and learning connected to these areas. Nevertheless, they were still able to describe the different ways their school focused on some of these areas. Students talked about how they were encouraged to relate positively to each other. They described how teachers set up activities, such as whole-class discussions or role plays, which aimed to support them how to work well in groups or how to be a good buddy.

One group talked about their weekly class meetings, which were run by students. They wrote problems or concerns on a piece of paper and put these in a box. Common problems such as bullying, were then discussed. Students noted that the purpose of these meetings was to support them to develop strategies to deal with situations.

Both groups talked about the consistent messages given by all school staff about behaviour and dealing with playground incidents. They described how the school used the WITS framework to provide a set of schoolwide strategies for dealing with bullying: walk away or ignore them; use "I" statements, such as, "I don't like that..."; and, if you can't sort out the situation, get the duty teacher.

As older students, they were given the responsibility to sort out any problems they, or younger students, had in the playground: "The older kids fix problems for the little kids." They also regularly acted as buddies for younger students. Students enjoyed these opportunities, and saw this as a way they were able to develop their skills in relating to others. Students considered that topics such as identity or self-esteem had not been a recent focus in formal classroom learning.

Most students noted that the activities described above had assisted them to learn about relating well to other students and adults. As a result, most had tried to make changes to their behaviour. Some reported they were doing less bullying; others had become more tolerant of students they did not like, or made more effort to involve new people in games. One common change was increasing their use of “I” statements. Both groups noted they had mixed success with this:

...sometimes ‘I’ statements don’t work...it’s easier to walk away as it gives the signal you’ve had enough.

Some found “I” statements seemed to be more effective with their peers than with their siblings: “It’s hard when you are the youngest in the family.” But overall, students considered using “I” statements had encouraged them to be more empathetic and understand that “it’s really easy to hurt people’s feelings”.

When asked if they got information about social relationships from other places, both groups noted they did not talk much about this area at home. One group described how their parents gave them generic advice such as: “Stand up to your enemies” or “You shouldn’t change who you are just to be cool.” The other group talked about how their families had rules about behaviour. Neither group talked about different strategies promoted by their parents. Most students also noted their families gave them messages about the importance of self-esteem and believing in yourself. For example, some described how family members frequently encouraged them to try new experiences.

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. Activities included: a jigsaw activity about individuality and what makes you special; a “visit” to the planet Conformitron where everyone was the same; a quiz on body parts; an overview of the digestive system; and discussions about decision making and the impact of smoking on your body.

As a result of these activities, students noted they had learnt facts about the digestive system and organs such as the oesophagus and intestines. Students also recalled a number of facts they had learnt about smoking. These included: how smoking is bad for you; what passive smoking was and its effects; how cigarettes contain many different chemicals that were similar to common substances (such as tar, paint stripper, rocket fuel, or toilet cleaner); and the amount of money that could be wasted on cigarettes. Students reported that they already knew some of this, but they had also gained new knowledge. For example, they already knew it was bad to smoke, but now knew a lot more about exactly why this was the case. Students also enjoyed the focus on making decisions, and were intrigued by the idea that they had already made about 400 choices that day.

When asked if they had learnt any new strategies for managing their relationships, one group observed that, during Life Education, they had discussed similar strategies to those discussed in their class meetings: “We use put ups, not put downs.” They also described how they had learnt strategies to deal with peer pressure around smoking:

I learnt it's ok to say no...like if someone dares you to have a smoke...[You can say things like] 'It's my choice...if you want to do it you can, but I don't want to.'

The other group discussed the Life Education focus on individuality. Students talked about how they had learnt about being different from each other, that it was important to respect your friends and others' individuality, and not laugh at younger students if they could not do something:

I learnt that it is ok to like different things from your friends...it doesn't mean you can't be friends.

Overall, students were very enthusiastic about how the Life Education sessions. They considered Life Education had assisted them to develop more understanding about themselves and others, and had supported their learning of content knowledge and strategies. They were engaged by the teaching strategies and resources used by the educator, and the way messages were presented.

Synergies between Life Education and the classroom

Like their teachers, students talked about how the Life Education strategies and messages had been reinforced in the classroom. Both groups talked about how they had enjoyed interviewing each other about their similarities and differences for the quilt they had made. Students also mentioned that their class had followed up on some of the discussions started during the Life Education visit, and they had worked through the Life Education student booklets in class.

Students noted that some Life Education messages, content, and approaches were similar to school, and some were different. Students considered Life Education and school had consistent messages and strategies about behaviour such as using "put ups, not put downs" and "I" statements. In contrast, they noted that some of the information they gained during Life Education, particularly about smoking, was not covered at school.

Students also considered some of the teaching approaches Life Education used were different from the sorts of tasks they did at school. Students noted they sometimes got bored in class, and would like classroom activities to be more like Life Education. They also would like to do more follow up:

We would like to do more 'after' things... I think they should make us some more activities...it's the best programme we do in school... I would like to learn more about smoking 'cause I found that [the information about chemicals] quite interesting.

Transferring what was learnt during Life Education

As a result of the new knowledge students had acquired during the recent Life Education visit, most had strengthened their resolve: not to smoke; to engage in healthier behaviours; and not to buy into other people's ideas about what is "cool". One commented: "I don't go to the skate park as much 'cause there's lots of people who smoke there." Others were trying to replace unhealthy activities such as watching TV, playing computer games, or eating junk food with healthier activities. Most had also gone home and talked to their parents about smoking or passive smoking. One noted: "My mum gave up smoking—it's her 17th day!" For those whose parents smoked,

talking about smoking could cause difficulties, but students seemed to have an understanding of the complexities surrounding smoking behaviour:

I said to mum, 'Would you mind not smoking in the car around me?' [So she hangs out the window]...but she gets really angry, as it makes her feel bad.

Students also reported that Life Education had given them a wider range of strategies and ideas about how to manage conflicts, which they had started to use during class meetings.

Summary

At Valley School, the staff and students placed a high value on the contribution Life Education made to their school programme. School staff considered the Life Education modules fitted well with the needs of students and saw the educator as a highly skilled member of their team. Over time, school and Life Education practice had blended together, with both groups reinforcing the same messages and strategies. Interviews with students showed they were aware of this synergy. Students had clear recollections of the learning that occurred during Life Education visits and how it connected to learning at school. In regard to the recent visit, the interviews with students suggested that Life Education had enhanced: their knowledge about healthy lifestyles, and in particular, the impact of smoking; their understanding of each other; and their knowledge and use of strategies for managing social relationships and peer pressure.

In the future, staff were planning to maintain the strong connection between Life Education and classroom health topics, and with their whole-school approach to behaviour and student decision making. In 2008, staff were planning to develop a schoolwide approach to inquiry learning, and incorporate Life Education within this.