

# Case study 3: A fit between health topics and Life Education at Plains School

## Introducing Plains School

Plains School is a decile 7 full primary school situated in a rural area near a city. The roll includes approximately 130 students, most of whom identify as NZ European. About one-tenth identify as Māori, and a smaller proportion as Pacific. The school is a focal point in the local community, and has a stable student and staff population. The school also has a strong physical activity focus, with students taking part in a range of activities such as interschool sports competitions and Jump Rope for Heart. In 2007, Plains School had three PD priorities: literacy in the junior school; numeracy; and the use of inquiry models which incorporate higher order thinking and ICT.

## History and value of school involvement with Life Education

The Life Education mobile classroom had been visiting Plains School for as long as the Trust had been operating in the local region (that is, more than 10 years). School leaders considered Life Education added substantial value to the school health curriculum and described Life Education as “one of the most exciting health activities” at the school. Staff valued Life Education’s specialised approach to the health curriculum; the way the modules were tailored to specific age groups; and the use of up to date and engaging resources. Staff also had high regard for the local educator’s content knowledge, inclusive and varied teaching style, communication skills, and skills in building on students’ prior learning. Staff also appreciated the way Life Education functioned as a learning experience outside the classroom:

Because we are a rural school, visitors are important... [Increasingly] bussing kids into a central place is becoming out of the question.

## The fit between Life Education and school practice

### The fit between Life Education and schoolwide practices

School leaders considered Life Education to be well-aligned with a number of whole-school health focuses. One was an emphasis on students learning to moderate their behaviour and make healthy choices in regard to: healthy eating; safety around roads, water, and in the sun; and sexuality, alcohol, and drugs. To ensure students had opportunities to learn about these areas, the school took part in a number of health initiatives. One was a session about puberty. This was held every second year and attended by parents and Years 7/8 students. In the years this session was held, Life Education modules were selected to fit with this focus. Other health initiatives included

a focus on sunsmart behaviours and participation in local beach safety days, and a competition for students to design local road signs for the Traffic Safety Authority. The school's health initiatives were supported by local professionals and agencies such as: public health nurses and doctors; the Family Planning Association; DARE educators; the Heart Foundation; and a surf life saving club.

School leaders also considered that Life Education contributed to a schoolwide focus on developing a culture of caring. Consistent expectations about caring for others were reinforced from the junior school, and the school had a focus on students developing empathy through activities such as buddy and house systems, and fundraising for charities.

## The fit between Life Education and the curriculum

At Plains School most health topics were set by individual teachers. Teachers also covered topics as they arose (for example, topical media issues) and at relevant times of the year (for example, positive ways of interacting were covered at the start of each year, and sun and water safety in summer). In addition, the school also had one schoolwide "big idea" a term, such as "Boredom busters". Most of these topics were associated with one main curriculum area.

When planning Life Education visits, in discussion with the educator, individual teachers selected Life Education modules to complement their health programme. To ensure they did not repeat content, teachers reviewed the Life Education modules previously covered by their students. Once a module had been decided, teachers used the *Teacher's Resource Folder* and school resources to develop a set of activities that would occur before, during, and after the Life Education visit. Some teachers also used resources from the USA "Skills for growing" and "Skills for adolescence" programme that had been adapted for New Zealand.<sup>1</sup> This resource offered lesson plans about areas such as decision making and drug education. Staff noted this resource aligned well with Life Education.

The teachers and students from a Years 6/7 and 7/8 class were a focus for this case study. For the Years 6/7 students, the health topic related to the Life Education visit was the impact of different activities on the body system, and the associated Life Education module was *The brainy bunch*. The Years 7/8 topic was about body systems and making decisions, and the associated module was *Making choices*. We also talked to the lead health teacher, who taught a junior class. In 2006 and 2007 she focused on healthy eating. In 2007 her topic was connected with the module: *Food for energy*.

## Integration of Life Education into classroom practice

The teachers at Plains School valued Life Education in that it helped them to "keep health on the agenda", and provided an opportunity to reinforce key knowledge and messages about health. To gain maximum benefit from Life Education, teachers considered it important that students had

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lions-quest.org.nz/programmes.html>

some prior knowledge of the topics focused on during Life Education. To this end, each teacher designed a range of activities for students to start prior to the Life Education visit.

Prior to the 2007 Life Education visit, the lead health teacher introduced students to the food pyramid. After the Life Education visit, the class continued activities about healthy eating and the impact of different sorts of food on the body. Different healthy foods were used as a focus for poetry writing, and the teacher discussed healthy options with students at break and lunch time. The teacher made use of the rhymes and chants the educator used to encourage students to remember key concepts. The class also worked through activities in the Life Education student booklet. To consolidate this unit, students used the knowledge they gained in class and during Life Education to develop a menu and prepare food for a healthy class party.

Prior to the Life Education visit, the Years 6/7 teacher developed a range of individual and discussion activities designed to assist students to explore the structure and functions of the body system. During and after the Life Education visit, the class continued these activities and worked through the Life Education student booklet. At the end of this topic, students' knowledge about body systems was tested.

Prior to the Life Education visit, the Years 7/8 class started research projects on different aspects of the body system. They also started to discuss decision making, actions, and consequences. During and after the Life Education visit, the class completed their projects and worked through some of the activities in the student booklet. They also discussed aspects of the Life Education content that had sparked students' interest such as how to recognise and deal with peer pressure.

As well as a focus on health topics, each teacher had an ongoing approach to supporting students' self-esteem and skills in managing relationships that they considered aligned with the messages promoted by Life Education. For example, at the start of each year one teacher focused on encouraging students to listen to each other, make positive contributions, and give constructive feedback. Another teacher had a focus on modelling positive interactions and supporting students to develop strategies, such as use of "I" statements, to manage their interactions.

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

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

Teachers reported that students were very engaged by the teaching style of the educator, and the activities, resources, and student booklets. As evidence of learning relating to past or current Life Education visits, each teacher outlined some of the information or messages students had retained. The lead health teacher found the sessions had been an effective way of reinforcing key concepts about healthy eating. This teacher attributed recent positive changes to students' lunch box choices to the combined classroom and Life Education focus on healthy food. She noted that students frequently referred to Harold and his views on healthy food when they were learning about the food pyramid, or as they planned what food to eat at their class celebration:

Often Harold would come into the discussion... The kids would say things like ‘Harold would like that [because it’s healthy]....’

The Years 6/7 and 7/8 teachers described some of the content knowledge students had retained from Life Education sessions such as information about how the body system works and the impact of different activities and substances on the body. They noted that students displayed a high level of recall in end-of-topic assessments.

During the recent Life Education visit, the Years 7/8 students attended four Life Education sessions. Along with information on the body system, these sessions covered making informed decisions, as well as strategies for resisting peer pressure and dealing with emotions. As a result of this focus the teacher commented on students’: heightened awareness about the need to make informed decisions and take responsibility for looking after their body; increased ability to recognise peer pressure; and increased awareness of possible inaccuracies and bias in information they received from their peers and from the media.

Overall, teachers held different views about what students learnt during Life Education. Some saw Life Education mostly as a vehicle for “disseminating information” and facts about the body and healthy lifestyles. Others, whilst commenting on the content knowledge that students acquired, also considered Life Education supported students to build self-esteem and learn strategies for managing their emotions, social interactions, or peer pressure. These teachers noted it was harder to unpack whether Life Education had any actual impact on students’ use of these strategies. For some, this was because promotion of these strategies, such as the use of “I” statements, was also an embedded part of their practice. For others, this was due to these strategies being a minor classroom focus.

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

As well as having an impact on students’ learning, all the teachers interviewed considered Life Education impacted positively on their knowledge or practice. Teachers took different things from Life Education. Most noted Life Education contributed to their knowledge about how to: present information in an engaging way; support students to understand and retain health-related information; and cater for a range of learning styles. Some also saw Life Education as an opportunity to review their coverage of different aspects of the health curriculum, or to gain up to date information for later discussions with students. One noted that Life Education gave them new ideas about how to manage interactions:

...it’s inspiring...I love watching someone else do it so well. They handle tricky situations in a very positive way!

All the teachers also used Life Education sessions, and completion of tasks in the student workbooks, as a way of gauging students’ level of understanding of the concepts recently covered in their topic.

Some staff commented on aspects of Life Education practice they considered could be further developed at their school. They noted that teachers' approaches varied from student-centred to authoritarian. Paralleling this, teachers had different approaches to student behaviour and conflict management. These staff considered students would benefit from all staff adopting approaches that encouraged students to take ownership over their learning and behaviour. Senior staff also noted that they were trying to align schoolwide approaches to healthy eating with the sorts of messages promoted by Life Education. For example, the school was phasing out the sale of unhealthy food at school events or for fundraising.

## Possible improvements to Life Education practice

In general, staff found it hard to suggest ways Life Education practice could be improved. One suggested that the educator could incorporate more local knowledge and events into the sessions. Examples included referring to: recent local drug or "P" raids; and the importance of driving safely and not binge drinking, given the school was located on a main road. Another noted that Life Education resources could be enhanced by each module and related student booklet having an associated teacher resource book which summarised the key content covered in that module.

## Students' perspectives

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

During our visit to the school we talked to nine Year 6–8 students in two groups. Their position as seniors enabled these students to reflect on the Life Education sessions they had attended over their time at Plains School. Both groups had a clear recollection and enjoyment of past Life Education sessions. Some of the past activities students recalled included:

- doing "simple activities about eating healthy food" and the food pyramid
- taking a "train" ride through the body system and looking at a model's body organs
- doing activities and watching videos about the impact of smoking and other substances
- watching videos about friendships and discussing these with buddies
- learning about peer pressure, goal setting, and messages such as "It's cool to be different."

Students observed that, in each Life Education session, some of the information was a repeat and some was new: "Some things you hear over again, but I learn quite a bit each year." They noted that, as they got older, the focus of Life Education had changed from body systems and healthy eating to drugs, making decisions, and living moderately. Students also commented that over time the information and activities got more complex, and considered Life Education to be appropriately pitched for different age groups. Students were also very positive about the Life Education student booklet and noted that in previous years they had worked through them as a class and kept them in their portfolios:

I've got about five of them in my old portfolios!... I still look at them sometimes... My dad doesn't know anything about the body so we teach him...[using the booklets].

The learning they recalled from past visits centred around facts about the body system and healthy choices, and some of the messages about self-esteem and getting on with friends.

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

Prior to the 2007 Life Education visit, when asked about the current classroom topics connected to the upcoming visit, both groups described how they had just started this work. The Years 6/7 group was learning about different parts of the body, such as muscles, joints, the brain, lungs, and the nervous and digestive system. They were doing activities such as “drawing a diagram of how the food gets processed”, and had learnt facts such as “which is the strongest muscle, smallest or largest bone...”. From this work students noted they had learnt some things that made them think differently about their body and how they could damage it if they were not careful: “I learnt the body is more fragile than I thought.” All were enjoying this focus and were keen to learn more about areas such as the brain, how the nervous system sends messages, and reflexes.

The Years 7/8 group noted that they had just started some group research on body systems which they would then be presenting to the class. These students were using resources such as Wikipedia and other Internet sites, and encyclopaedias and library books, to find out information about the heart, lungs, and digestion. Students noted that they were learning facts such as how arteries can get clogged up and the impact of eating saturated fats. This group had also started a focus on decision making. They had been introduced to the Thinking Hats and how they could look at situations in different ways. They had also been doing activities about actions and consequences, and had been introduced to a resource about the steps to successful decision making.

These students also got information about healthy living and making choices from home. The Years 6/7 group noted their parents talked about ways to look after your body such as healthy eating, and avoiding smoking and injuries. The Years 7/8 students described how their parents talked to them “all the time” about the sorts of decisions they would face as young people in regards to smoking, drugs, sexuality, and alcohol.

### ***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 enthusiastic about the sessions. Students in the Years 6/7 group described how they had: played games that involved naming body parts; watched a video about what happens to different parts of the body as you wake up and eat breakfast; found out what impact substances such as apples and alcohol have on the body; discussed with buddies and as a group how to help a drunk person and what to do if you felt depressed or stressed; discussed the three ways you could react to peer pressure or pressure to smoke (passive, assertive, aggressive); and played various games.

The Years 6/7 group considered that these activities had helped them learn new information about how the body works and the rationale underpinning common health messages. For example, they noted they got lot of messages about how they should eat more fruit, but by showing them what

happened to the body as fruit was digested, Life Education had shown them exactly *why* this was a good idea. Students also commented that the Life Education session had supported them to learn more about: lessening the effects of alcohol; dealing with peer pressure; feeling good about yourself; understanding others; and dealing with emotions such as depression. They considered these topics were very relevant for their age group as they would soon be at high school: “We are getting older and we have to learn to deal with this [peer pressure].”

Students in the Years 7/8 group described how they had: looked at a model of a body system and explored the impact of different foods on the body; learnt what the brain looks like; discussed biased information and how you need information to make good decisions; completed activities about smoking facts and the common ingredients in cigarettes; watched and discussed a video about peer pressure; discussed decision making; and talked about how people behaved when they were having an emotional reaction or “WHAM” attack and how to deal with this: “When you are getting stressed go away and cool down!” Students noted that some of this information they had already covered or was a repeat from past Life Education sessions. Other information was new, such as some of the facts about the body and ingredients in cigarettes. Students retained a number of messages from these sessions such as “Delay your decisions till you have information” and “Don’t get pushed into things by your friends.” Some commented that they considered the content of last year’s module, *From the shadows*, to be more relevant to their interests.

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

Students described how, during and after the Life Education sessions, they had continued with related class work. Both groups had completed their work on the body system, and had worked through parts of the Life Education student booklet in class. Most of the class work students recalled concerned the facts they had learnt about the body. Both groups also noted that, in class, they had discussed or did related activities about “a little bit of everything” that was covered in the Life Education sessions.

When asked whether their teachers encouraged them to use the strategies promoted during Life Education, for managing peer pressure and social relationships, students replied, “It depends on the teacher.” They noted that some teachers talked about good decision making or encouraged them to develop ways to resolve disputes, whilst others did not.

Students had a range of views on the similarities and differences between the classroom and Life Education. They noted that the work they did in class was more in-depth, and teachers used a smaller range of teaching strategies than the educator: “[In class] we normally just write...we have to be quiet.” Students considered the way the educator approached learning was different and more fun, and could clearly describe the teaching strategies used by the educator which they found engaging. In particular, they liked the way the educator had “a positive way of talking”, explained things well, and let them answer questions. They also valued the fact that Life Education was: fast-paced; involved interactive tasks; had good-quality visual resources, body models, and DVDs; and incorporated more buddy work than their usual classroom interactions:

“We were usually with buddies—buddies were a good thing.” Students also enjoyed the environment of the mobile classroom, and Harold’s sense of humour:

Harold’s always a good laugh... The guy that does it [Harold] is really good at explaining things. He does it in a funny way.

As well as identifying similarities and differences in the *ways* they learnt, students also identified similarities and differences between school and Life Education focuses. Students noted that teachers tended to give them messages about working hard, doing well, and not “getting into trouble”. Students noted that the school motto, “Look forward to success”, summarised one key message. In contrast, Life Education focused more on feeling good about yourself and peer pressure. Students reported that both school and Life Education gave similar messages about keeping fit, healthy eating, and thinking about the consequences of their behaviour.

Overall, students noted they found Life Education very valuable and some wanted more opportunity to follow up on topics they considered relevant to their age group. Students’ views on what was relevant differed. Most liked the focus on peer pressure and dealing with stress. Others wanted to learn more facts about puberty and how alcohol, drugs, and “bad foods” impacted on the body.

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

Students in both groups were able to describe specific behaviour changes they had made as a result of prior or current Life Education sessions. They noted that, over the years, Life Education had contributed to them having healthier lifestyles (by providing information about healthy eating and physical activity). For example, in regard to the recent Life Education sessions, one noted:

I’m eating more vegetables and fruit. ‘Cause you find out *why* you have to do it, you’re not just told to do it!

Most also noted they had strengthened their resolve not to succumb to peer pressure about smoking, drugs, or binge drinking. Students also described how Life Education had supported them to build their confidence, make good choices, and improve their relationships with their friends. These changes were also influenced by other factors, such as becoming more mature, but both groups agreed that Life Education was a contributing factor:

I think I’ve learnt a lot from Life Education...it gives you a head start about life.

When asked for examples of changes, one group described how they had been ignoring a boy at school. After discussing a Life Education video about being inclusive, they started to include him, and all ended up being good friends. Another example given was a student who had fallen out with her best friend. She had used the strategies suggested in Life Education to patch up their fight.

## **Summary**

At Plains School, all the school staff and students we talked to were enthusiastic about past and recent Life Education visits. School staff were particularly impressed by the high quality of the educator's teaching practice and resources. Teachers noted that their system of connecting the Life Education modules with prior classroom learning around a health topic supported students to retain key messages about health.

Due to their seniority in the school, the students we talked to were able to comment on the cumulative impact of Life Education visits. Like their teachers, students attributed the fact that they retained Life Education content and messages to the quality of the educator's practice and resources, and the perceived relevance of these messages. Over time, Life Education visits had clearly assisted students to learn content knowledge, and had also positively impacted on students' self-confidence and development of strategies for maintaining healthy lifestyles and relationships. It is likely that these outcomes would be further enhanced through the development of a schoolwide approach to positive behaviour that enables students to develop and own strategies.