

Case study 5: Aligning Life Education, the curriculum, and whole-school practice at Bay School

Introducing Bay School

Bay School is a decile 10 contributing Catholic school situated in a suburb close to a city. Although high decile, the school has an enrolment from two parishes, and serves students from a diverse range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The roll includes approximately 200 students; two-thirds are boys, and one-third, girls. Most students identify as NZ European, and a small number as Asian or Māori. School leaders noted that the parent community is very interested in the children's education and supportive of the school. Recently, the school has implemented several schoolwide health-related initiatives including Quality Circle Time and brain-based learning.

History and value of school involvement with Life Education

The principal considered that Bay School was privileged to have an annual Life Education visit, and staff identified that Life Education models, animations, videos, and Harold enhanced their health programme. Several teachers reported that students "loved" the Life Education experience, which they considered motivated students to learn. Harold was recognised as a strong drawcard for young children, as was the "power of the technology and the delivery". Staff commented that the skills of the educator, who was described as "very, very positive with the children", were pivotal to the success of Life Education. In particular, staff noted that the educator: met children at their level; catered for different learning styles; used of a range of teaching approaches; and offered up to date content knowledge. Teachers also appreciated the support the educator provided before and after Life Education visits, as well as the additional resources they offered to support classroom programmes.

The fit between Life Education and school practice

The fit between Life Education and schoolwide practices

The principal and lead health teacher at Bay School commented that the Life Education philosophy fitted well with their underlying philosophies about education, in particular, the idea that children are valued, unique, and special. School leaders and teachers also considered that Life Education aligned extremely well with a range of schoolwide health focuses. For example, the Life Education emphasis on student empowerment, and providing students with information so

that they could make informed choices, complemented Bay School's schoolwide approach to health.

The school has recently allocated PD time to several schoolwide initiatives. These included Jenny Mosley's Quality Circle Time (QCT)¹ which is a whole-school approach to creating a positive culture. QCT involves an ongoing process of circle meetings amongst staff or within a class. Meeting guidelines include "listening systems" and "golden rules". Underlying QCT is the belief that the use of a democratic system to discuss concerns will promote improved relationships, self-esteem, and self-confidence. Staff considered that Life Education teaching approaches fitted well with QCT. They also described how the educator adapted her approach to fit with QCT by referring to the golden rules during sessions.

Brain-based learning was another schoolwide focus that staff considered was connected to Life Education. The school's approach had its origins in Guy Claxton's concept of "building learning power"² through understanding how the brain works and how children learn to be resilient, resourceful, and reflective learners. Across the whole school, time was put aside every day for brain food, water, and physical activity. Teachers noted that this daily replenishment reinforced a range of healthy living messages from past and current Life Education modules.

The fit between Life Education and the curriculum

At Bay School, the principal and lead health teacher noted that Life Education aligned well with both the Religious Education curriculum and the Health and PE curriculum. Bay School's programme includes the module *Myself and others*, from the Catholic Religious Education Curriculum. This module incorporates a focus on self-esteem, how every person is special and unique, and valuing others. Staff noted that this module reinforces similar concepts to Life Education, and is also closely tied to the NZ Health curriculum strands: *Personal health and physical development* and *Relationships with other people*.

The main focus of the health curriculum at Bay School is eight schoolwide "big health ideas" (e.g., Leisure, Humour, Communication, Identity, Energy) that are covered over a two-year cycle (one per term). The planning for these units is done across the whole school. The big idea during our visit was Leisure. Prior to the Life Education visit, the educator met with classroom teachers to select modules that would support their Leisure unit, and discuss how these could be adapted to fit with specific classroom focuses. The Life Education module selected for the two Years 5 and 6 classes in this study was *The brainy bunch*. This module covers the idea of how the brain interacts with other parts of the body, and how stress may affect it, reinforcing the need for leisure and healthy living.

¹ <http://www.circle-time.co.uk>

² <http://www.guyclaxton.com/blp.htm>

Teachers of the Years 5 and 6 classes in this case study noted that they used *The brainy bunch* as a “springboard” to start their units on Leisure. Life Education was described as a “short, concise burst of delivery”, and after the Life Education visit, teachers revisited key learning and messages. Teachers also designed a number of related learning activities during which children explored their experiences with stress, food, and leisure. These included a brainstorm, use of a home diary to parents, activities from a Newspapers in Education unit about healthy habits, and completion of some of the activities in the Life Education student booklets.

The impact of Life Education on student and staff learning

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

The teachers we interviewed considered that Life Education had a powerful and positive impact on students’ knowledge and understandings about health. The close alignment between Life Education and schoolwide initiatives meant they had difficulty crediting any changes in knowledge, understandings, or behaviour to the Life Education experience alone. As one teacher stated, “It’s the whole way we do things here, anyway.”

Given this, teachers noted that students displayed clear recall of the activities, information, and messages presented during Life Education. Teachers considered this recall was supported by some of the features of Life Education including the: recapping of previous knowledge and understandings; emphasis on student involvement; and tightly focused sessions. Overall, teachers described Life Education as “a huge hook for the children”, which excited them about learning. All three teachers commented that children shared Life Education messages and experiences at home.

Additionally, teachers identified that students’ learning was enhanced by the synergy between Life Education, whole school practices, and classroom focuses. For example, teachers attributed students’ comprehensive recall of information about how the brain can be affected by stress to the alignment between Life Education and the school focus on brain-based learning. Teachers also noted that students’ recall of messages and information about nutrition was assisted by a past connection between Life Education and classroom units on this topic.

Most of the teachers’ descriptions of student learning relating to Life Education centred around students’ increased motivation and recall of information. Teachers also provided a few examples of students taking on board self-esteem messages or making healthy lifestyle choices.

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

When asked about the impact on their own practice, staff commented that teaching approaches at Bay School were similar to those of the educator, although several added, “without the resources”. Staff recognised that the educator’s way of interacting and engaging with students tied closely to the positive encouragement they also advocated.

Additionally, the teachers considered that the high quality of the educator's teaching practice positively influenced their practice. During Life Education sessions teachers acquired new ideas or were reminded of a range of approaches they could use in the classroom. In particular, teachers gained tips about the different ways they could explain ideas or ask students questions.

Teachers also commented that during Life Education visits they learnt new content knowledge. One valued the chance Life Education offered her to observe her class interacting with somebody else, and ascertain students' level of understanding of concepts: "You can take more in about their responses than if you are asking the questions."

Possible improvements to Life Education practice

Staff found it difficult to suggest ways to improve Life Education. School leaders commented that Life Education has always been responsive to feedback, and that the educators already reflected on their practice. Teachers suggested that each classroom teacher could get a copy of the resource folder to assist them with organisation and planning of units.

Students' perspectives

Students' perspectives on prior Life Education visits

During our visit to Bay School we interviewed 10 Years 5/6 students from two classes. When asked about prior Life Education visits, both groups could recall a number of activities, information, and key messages. Like their teachers, students tended to remember more detail about the facts they had learnt than strategies or key messages.

Some of the main activities students recollected were: a video about a student's first day at school; activities about making friendship choices; and a body carpet where you match body parts by placing velcroed parts on the wall.

In terms of content learning, both groups talked about the activities they had done relating to body systems, and what they had learnt as a result. The content knowledge they recalled included names of body parts, facts about the intestines and brain, and details about the digestive system.

In terms of messages, a number of students recalled pretending to be on a spaceship and arriving at a planet where everyone was the same. Students stated that, "It would be boring if everyone was the same." From this activity, students recalled the message "It's OK to be different" and ideas about accepting others' differences.

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

Before the current Life Education visit, students were asked about the learning that had occurred at school in relation to body systems. All students focused on what they had learnt as a result of the schoolwide focus on brain-based learning. They recalled a considerable amount of factual information about the brain and described how they had learnt about the importance of snacks and

exercise. All students stated that they had made changes to their behaviour as a result of this ongoing emphasis at school. One example of this was the reduction in sugar drinks and increased intake of water.

The Year 5 students also recalled information they had gained during units of work on prior big health ideas such as Communication and Energy. They also commented that they had seen a range of health-related videos.

The Year 6 students remembered a number of health messages that came from a range of sources, such as “Fat clogs up (hardens) your arteries”, “Second hand smoke is worse”, and “You are what you eat”. A number of students indicated that they understood the importance of learning about health issues early in order to help them make informed choices in the future. One student commented:

kids pick up habits when they’re young...so learn about your body when you’re younger (because) when you’re older you need to make right choices.

Students could also recall health information and messages gained from a variety of external providers. Students noted that the school had arranged Life Education and several other experts to come in and talk about the brain and healthy foods. Most also identified a range of other sources of health information including their parents, the library, the Internet (e.g., Google), and TV programmes such as *Down size me* and *Turn back your body clock*.

Students’ perspectives on the 2007 Life Education visit

About one month after the Life Education visit we asked students what they did during this visit and what they learnt. Students from both groups could recall a significant number of learning activities, facts about the body and brain, as well as key messages. Some students also described the strategies they had learnt for dealing with peer pressure.

One activity that the Year 5 students recalled was a “video about a kid waking up in the morning” which showed his changing energy levels and the body parts—brain, heart, lungs, muscles, and stomach—and how stress on the body affected these parts. Both groups of students recalled naming body parts, and identifying their function. The Year 6 students recalled how Tam³ talked to them about the body and the brain, and how the body parts lit up.

Compared to what they could remember from previous Life Education visits, students found it easier to recall recent information they had learnt about: body parts under pressure; energy drinks; how body systems work; and facts about the intestines, veins, liver, and nerves. The Year 5 students described going around the room identifying what their body needs from a big list of possible needs, such as water, oxygen, alcohol, sleep, caffeine, or drugs. They noted that: water, oxygen, sleep, and food were the healthy things the body needs; drugs (illegal) were “not needed”; and for alcohol and caffeine “not much” was needed. The Year 5 students also described

³ The plastic body was called Tam in some schools or Pat in other schools.

learning about alcohol and nicotine and how they affect the brain. Some facts they recalled included: “The liver has a lot of jobs—breaking up food and cleansing the blood (or is that the kidneys?)”; “The small intestine is as thick as your thumb and is about 4, 5, or 6 metres long”; and “There are holes in the big intestine so the liquid squirts in and out.” Students also explained that energy drinks such as V, Lift, Red Bull, E2, and Coke have caffeine and sugar in them, and “make you stay up”.

Both groups of students also talked about learning about peer pressure. The Year 5 students described how they had done role plays about smoking and peer pressure. Some of the Year 6 students recalled exploring different ways of responding to peer pressure. They named three ways of handling this pressure (passive, assertive, and aggressive) and could describe each, and its possible outcomes. Although some stated they “kind of already knew” things from a video about bullying and peer pressure, they noted that the focus on peer pressure had enabled them to reflect on new ways to do things. As one noted:

Don’t hesitate... Just say no and walk away, if you hesitate the person will keep nagging, if you get aggressive it could end up going to the teacher.

Students from both groups could also clearly recall a number of messages from the Life Education visit including: “Stay positive about yourself—even if you’ve done something bad”; “Stay healthy”; “Don’t give in to peer pressure”; and “It’s good to exercise.”

Generally, all the students interviewed thought sessions on the Life Education mobile classroom helped them learn about their health, and encouraged them to feel good about themselves. Overall, the Year 5 students expressed more enthusiasm than the Year 6 group about their learning experiences, and found it easier to recall activities and information. A number of students in the Year 6 group stated that they would have liked more time in the mobile classroom.

Some students identified that the content had changed, but the overall focus of *The brainy bunch* module was similar to previous Life Education experiences. One Year 6 student explained that they learnt about all the things the body needs (such as food, energy, and shelter) in Life Education every year, but that most of the content was new each time.

Synergies between Life Education and the classroom

When asked about the connections between classroom learning and Life Education, students identified a number of similarities as well as some differences. The similarities were mostly concerned with the connections between Life Education and school content. Students noted that what they learnt during Life Education and in class fitted together. They described how the learning experiences in the mobile classroom were followed up in class during activities that were part of the Leisure unit. One of these activities involved completing, at school and at home, sections of the Life Education student booklets.

Students commented that, compared to class work, **how** they learnt during Life Education was different. In explaining these differences, the Year 5 group focused more on the physical

environment, and the Year 6 group on teaching approaches. The Year 5 students identified a number of positive features of the Life Education environment including: a comfortable carpeted floor; singing songs; Harold; movies; and that there were more things to see than in the classroom. Students made a number of comments about the association between learning and fun. They stated that, although “school *can* be fun, Life Ed *is* fun”. One described Life Education as “interesting learning in a fun way—not just learning”. Another noted: “You don’t do any work” during Life Education, suggesting that they don’t always see a connection between fun and learning.

When talking about the differences between Life Education and school, the Year 6 group identified that Life Education offered them a range of options and suggestions about “how to pick the one [option] that suits you”. They also indicated that Life Education offered more visual resources than classroom teaching:

...you get it shown to you [visually], in class you just get it explained [verbally]...[Life Education] is a different, fun way to learn it.

The two groups had different views about the amount or type of co-operative group work that occurred at school compared with Life Education, which were likely to reflect different classroom practices. The Year 6 group indicated that whole-class discussion was common in both Life Education and the classroom, but that pair sharing was used during Life Education but not in class. The Year 5 group stated that they did more pair sharing and group work in class than in Life Education.

Students identified that some messages from Life Education and school were similar and some were different. The messages that were the same were about healthy eating and self-esteem, such as “Stay healthy” and “Stay positive”. A number of Year 5 students described the messages from Life Education and school as different because at school they talked about nicotine and “bad things”, and in Life Education they talked about healthy things. These views appeared to be contradictory to students’ earlier descriptions of discussions during Life Education about the harmful effects of drugs, and positive statements about school discussions on brain snacks. This may reflect educators’ focus on talking about unhealthy practices in nonjudgmental and positive ways.

Transferring what was learnt during Life Education

When asked if they had made any changes to their behaviour that they connected to Life Education, most students were able to identify one change, and some identified a number. There were two main areas of change. One was in managing friendships. For example, one student described how a new student came from Australia and the other children made sure she was looked after. This was also recognised as “not just Life Education, but a part of our school culture”.

Students also described how they had made healthy lifestyle changes in terms of their approaches to nutrition and physical activity. Most students described how they were eating healthier food or

decreasing their intake of energy drinks. Again, this was attributed to a combined Life Education and school focus. For example, students noted they “don’t really drink energy drinks any more (or rarely)”, and were drinking water rather than sports drinks. One Year 6 student talked about recognising that eating too much bad food had resulted in them losing concentration and feeling tired.

Summary

At Bay School, staff were passionate about Life Education, and outlined a number of key reasons for their enthusiasm. One was the skills of the educator, with staff commenting on the high quality of the educator’s teaching practice, and their expertise, enthusiasm, and flexibility. Staff could see multiple points of alignment between Life Education and school approaches. Four key points of connection were between Life Education and the school’s: Religious Education curriculum; Health curriculum; and schoolwide approaches to brain-based learning and QCT. Another key reason was students’ enjoyment of Life Education, with staff noting it provided “a little bit of magic and wonder”.

Similarly, students were very enthusiastic about the Life Education experience. From both past and recent Life Education visits they could recall a considerable amount of detail about the learning experiences they took part in, the learning that resulted, and the messages promoted during the sessions. In general, students considered Life Education to be a “fun way to learn”. Students also recognised the links between Life Education, classroom learning, and schoolwide focuses, and could describe behaviour changes that related to this combined focus.