The Gatehouse Project: what do students’ perceptions of school tell us about our methods of reform?

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Recent decades have seen the development of a range of initiatives aimed at improving standards of teaching and learning in schools and responding to the changing demands of the world in which we live. At the same time, concerns about the health and well-being of young people have challenged schools to develop strategies for health promotion and intervention. Research and program development in both education and public health has increasingly focussed on the schooling experiences of early adolescence as crucial in promoting engagement with learning and enhancing physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being. It is within this context that the Centre for Adolescent Health drew together professionals with backgrounds in psychiatry, psychology, public health, education, health promotion and student welfare to develop the Gatehouse Project, a school-based project which aims to promote the emotional well-being of young people.

In this paper, we focus on what young people involved in the Gatehouse Project have told us about their perceptions of their schooling experiences and consider the implications for approaches to change in schools. We begin by describing the development of the Gatehouse Project, and its partnership with twenty-six secondary colleges in Victoria. We then draw on Year 8 baseline data from the Gatehouse Project survey and consider how this suggests ways to enhance emotional well-being and engagement with school. We finish with some reflections on student responses to the curriculum element of the intervention in Year 8 and some implications for classroom practice.

**What is the Gatehouse Project?**

*A brief history*

In 1995, the Queen’s Trust for Young Australians approached Professor Glenn Bowes and Associate Professor George Patton at the Centre for Adolescent Health to discuss their concern about suicides and suicide attempts by young people, what could be done in the way of prevention and how schools might play a part in this. The Gatehouse Project was developed as a result of these discussions. Rather than focussing specifically on identifying and intervening with those “at risk” of suicide, the focus of the Gatehouse Project has been on enhancing well-being for all young
people. It is a multi-component school-based intervention which provides schools with a framework for changing the school environment.

In 1996, the Centre for Adolescent Health worked intensively with three secondary schools to develop strategies for promoting emotional well-being in schools. In 1997, work began with twenty-six randomly selected schools who had accepted invitations to participate in the Gatehouse Project. This provided a representative sample of secondary school students from government, independent, and Catholic schools, metropolitan and regional schools, and single sex and co-educational schools. All schools have participated in the computer-administered survey of students, beginning with Year 8 in 1997 and continuing with Year 9 in 1998 and Year 10 in 1999. Twelve of the schools have also been involved in the intervention, consisting of trialling and evaluation of a curriculum element and whole school strategy. These schools were asked to establish a contact person and a team representing the whole school community to co-ordinate activities within their school. Each of these schools also received continuing support from a member of the Gatehouse Project team based at the Centre for Adolescent Health. Cluster-based and school-based professional development was provided to support the development and implementation of the curriculum element and whole school strategies. Data from the survey was fed back to schools to inform whole school planning and action. Schools were encouraged to make links between this work and other school policies, charters and mission statements. Links have also been encouraged with community agencies and with other initiatives, such as the Turning the Tide drug strategy and the Health Promoting Schools program. With the support of the Centre for Adolescent Health liaison person as a “critical friend”, schools have been involved in ongoing planning and evaluation.

**Conceptual framework**

The Gatehouse Project intervention has been built on research about known antecedents of suicide, and in particular, depression. Depression consistently emerges as the largest single risk factor for suicide and suicidal behaviour and is the most frequently reported mental health problem in adolescence (Shaffer, Gould, Fisher, Trautman, Moreau, Kleinman & Flory 1996; Patton, Harris, Carlin, Hibbert, Coffey, Schwarz, & Bowes 1997). A focus on promoting mental health and emotional well-being is likely to have benefits beyond suicide prevention, however. Links have been
established, for example, between emotional difficulties and other health outcomes such as major depression, substance use and self-harming behaviours (Patton et al 1997). Associations have also been identified between emotional well-being and academic performance, absenteeism, suspension, and truancy (Zubrick, Gurrin, Teoh, Sheperd, Carlton, & Lawrence 1997). Many young people will experience emotional or mental health problems which fall short of criteria for mental “disorders” but which will cause considerable distress and impact adversely on their everyday enjoyment of life (Patton 1997).

Current understandings of the role of risk and protective factors in the promotion of mental health and emotional well-being suggest a complex interaction between factors which protect young people from or place them at risk of depression and other adverse health and life outcomes (Withers & Russell 1998). Such factors may operate within the individual, or derive from their family, school, peer or community environments. While the notion of risk and protection has sometimes resulted in the unfortunate “pathologising” or “problematising” of young people (Cormack 1998; White & Wyn 1997), a universal or population-based approach to enhancing protective factors and minimizing risk factors is likely to bring benefits to all young people, not just those “at risk” (Glover, Burns, Butler & Patton 1998).

While it is important to acknowledge that adolescence is not clearly definable in terms of beginning and ending and that adolescents are not a homogeneous group, there are experiences and challenges common to the period of development between childhood and adulthood. These include common concerns around relationships, appearance, sexuality, money, conflict with family, teachers and friends, managing school work and/or demands of part time employment. While many of these are concerns for adults as well, the “first time” nature of many of these experiences in adolescence, together with less life experience and the sometimes competing expectations of self and others at home and at school, can create challenges for young people. Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) remind us of the “triple transitions” experienced by adolescents – change in themselves, change in the wider society and change in the nature of schools as a result of educational reform.
It is important that young people are able to recognise that they are not alone in experiencing these challenges and the range of emotions which might arise in response to them. There is potential for families, schools and communities to assist young people to build their capacity to negotiate the challenges of everyday life and much has been written about “resilience” (Benard 1991; Withers & Russell 1998). No matter how resilient the individual, however, the nature of the environments in which they find themselves will greatly affect their ability to “bounce back” from the challenges of everyday life. The Gatehouse Project has therefore pursued both an individual-focused approach, using curriculum strategies to enhance understanding and skills for dealing with difficult situations and emotions and an environment-focused approach, using whole school strategies to address risk and protective factors in the school environment (Glover, Bond, Butler & Patton 1999).

The conceptual framework of the Gatehouse Project is founded on previous research on attachment and social bonding, and particularly, on the importance of a sense of connectedness for emotional well-being (see Figure 1). Connectedness to family and to school have been shown to be central to emotional well-being (Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman, Harris, Jones, Tabor, Beuhring, Sieving, Shew, Ireland, Bearinger, & Udry, 1997; Hawkins & Catalano 1993). Resnick and his colleagues (1997) have demonstrated the important influence on student health and well-being of a school environment where students felt they were treated fairly, felt close to others and felt part of the school. Three strands emerge in studies of the relationships between social bonds and emotional well-being in young people:

- A sense of security and trust in others
- A sense of connectedness, effective communication and perceptions of adult caring
- A sense of active engagement and valued participation

The conceptual framework proposes that addressing these three areas can promote a sense of connectedness to school and others within the school and thereby enhance emotional well-being and learning outcomes.
The Gatehouse Project adopts a whole school approach to the promotion of emotional well-being, based on the following principles:

- A sense of connectedness is a central element of adolescent emotional well-being
- School communities have a major role and capacity to promote a sense of connectedness
- A shared understanding of the risk and protective factors in social and learning environments is essential as a basis for collaborative action
- Promotion of security, communication and positive regard is best achieved by integrating practices and strategies with current school programs, policies and structures
- Systematic collection of data provides a framework for planning and action

Education for adolescence
A focus on connectedness to school has also been central to the work undertaken in Australia and abroad to address problems of alienation and disengagement from school of young people, particularly during early adolescence and the transitions from primary to secondary school (Hargreaves et al 1996; Stoll & Fink 1996; Hill &
Russell 1999). The themes which form the focus of the Gatehouse Project also underpin many of the following principles identified as important for schooling in the middle years (Barratt 1998, pp.29-30):

**Identity**
Exploring how individual and group identities are shaped by social and cultural groups.

**Relationships**
Developing productive and affirming relationships with adults and peers in an environment that respects difference and diversity.

**Purpose**
Having opportunities to negotiate what is useful now, as well as in the future

**Empowerment**
Viewing the world critically and acting independently, cooperatively and responsibly.

**Success**
Having multiple opportunities to learn valued knowledge and skills as well as the opportunity to use talents and expertise that students bring to the learning environment.

**Rigour**
Taking on realistic learning challenges in an environment characterised by high expectations and constructive and honest feedback.

**Safety**
Learning in a safe, caring and stimulating environment that addresses issues of discrimination and harassment (eg racism).

**The Gatehouse Project Adolescent Health Survey**

The Gatehouse Project Adolescent Health survey was designed to help us better understand students’ perceptions of the social and learning environments of school and how these affect emotional well-being. At the outset of the Gatehouse Project in 1997, data were collected, using a computerised questionnaire, from 2678 Year 8 students in the 26 participating secondary schools. The following examples drawn
from this baseline data illustrate the association between students’ sense of security, social connectedness and positive regard and emotional well-being.

Sense of security
Victimisation is common. Fifty-two per cent of young people reported that they had recently been victimised in some form at school with 16% reporting that they were experiencing this daily. Forty-four percent of all students reported being teased, 21% reported having rumours spread about them, 14.5% had been deliberately left out, and 12.5% of students had experienced physical threats or actual harm. Young people who report being victimised are three times more likely to experience depressive symptoms than those not reporting such experiences.

Communication and social connectedness
Students were asked about the availability of close and confiding relationships and their levels of satisfaction with these. Nearly a quarter of young people surveyed reported that they had no-one to talk to if upset, no one to trust and no-one to depend on. Students who reported little availability of such close and confiding relationships were between two and three times more likely to experience depressive symptoms. These results highlight the importance of a sense of social connectedness in the promotion of emotional well-being.

Positive regard and valued participation in school
A sense of being valued is related to a young person’s perceptions of the opportunities they have to make a contribution to the day-to-day activities of the school and how they feel they are treated at school. Over 90 per cent of young people reported that they were treated in a friendly way at school, however, 30 per cent felt that their teachers were not fair. Nearly 80 per cent of young people perceived they had opportunities to help plan and decide things like school activities, events and policies. However, 28 per cent of young people reported ‘no’ to the question ‘teachers notice when I do a good job and let me know about it.’ Students reporting many experiences of disincentives at school (such as being bored at school, being treated in an unfriendly or unfair way) had higher rates of depressive symptoms than those who did not.
While the data do not describe clear cause and effect relationships, they do suggest that the quality of relationships in the school and classroom impact on students’ sense of belonging to school, engagement in learning and emotional well-being. Whatever methods we use and whatever the focus of our efforts for school improvement, it will be important to pay attention to the quality of relationships in the school environment.

**Whole school environment**

The Centre for Adolescent Health provided intervention schools in the Gatehouse Project with a profile of their students’ perceptions around security, connectedness and positive regard. Schools have used these to determine priorities for action in order to enhance the quality of the social and learning environments in the school. While many strategies have been shared, each school has been able to choose their own starting points and tailor the intervention to their own setting, context and culture.

Members of the Gatehouse Project team have worked with schools to develop processes for reviewing current practice and developing or refining policies, programs and practices in the whole school environment. The aim has been to enhance protective factors, such as a sense of security, opportunities and skills for communication, involvement in school and community activities, attachment to significant adults, and recognition of contributions and achievements, and to reduce risk factors, such as victimization and bullying, isolation, disengagement and low academic achievement.

**Student Responses to the Gatehouse Project Curriculum**

**Classroom environment**

The importance of a positive social and learning environment can again be seen when we look at the responses of students to the curriculum component. In 1997, the Gatehouse Project team worked with teachers to introduce year 8 students to important understandings and skills through the curriculum. The principal focus of this element is on how everyday situations can evoke common emotions and how students can learn to manage these. While the classroom program is individual-focused in that it aims to help individuals to develop understandings, strategies and skills with which to negotiate life’s ups and downs, it is important to stress that the
individual approach works in conjunction with the whole school approach. Themes of the curriculum element included trust, negotiating life’s “ups and downs”, expectations of self and others, and dealing with anxiety. Teachers participated in both cluster-based and school-based professional development, exploring the materials, teaching strategies and the development of positive classroom climates.

The curriculum element was designed to be integrated into the regular program and schools chose subject areas such as English, Health, Physical Education, Personal Development and Religious Education. This approach allows the discussion of the themes and the undertaking of the activities which promote the relevant skills within teaching areas with which teachers are comfortable. In English, for example, teachers used texts to examine differing perspectives and responses to different situations. In other learning areas, teachers were able to integrate the themes in units on sexuality, drug education, sport education or personal development.

Student responses
In Term Three, 1997, the Gatehouse Project intervention schools asked the Year 8 students who had participated to fill out a short questionnaire about their experience of the classes in which Gatehouse Project materials had been used. A total of 617 students from 8 schools were surveyed. The responses to the various components of the program were varied but quite positive overall. It is of interest here, however, to look at some of the responses to the two open-ended questions presented at the end of the questionnaire. These asked “The thing I like best about these classes was...” and The thing I didn’t like about these classes was...

The following content analysis provides an overview of the major issues arising from the data. Several themes emerged from the students’ responses to the questions. The comments were then coded for these themes and the percentage of responses pertaining to each theme was calculated. These figures are presented in tables 1 and 2. Some sample quotes are also provided. Comments could be coded for more than one theme. For example, one student wrote that they liked “group discussion, listening to other people’s songs, working in my scrapbook”. This was coded for 1) class discussions, 2) journal, and 3) videos/songs/books. Not all comments were able to be assigned to the main codes.
**What I liked best about these classes was:** (n=578 comments)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>% of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class discussions</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal/scrapbook</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing emotions / personal reflection</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with others</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos / songs / books</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was easy</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role plays</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1**

Some specific positive comments included:
- “Not just writing but discussing things and everyone heard and felt closer in a weird kind of way”
- “The way I felt I could give an opinion without being embarrassed”
- “Finding out other people felt the same as me.”
- “I got to mix with people who I don’t really hang around with during recess or lunch.”
- “That the teacher understood about the difficulties that the children go through”

**What I didn’t like about these classes was:** (n=569 comments)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>% of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other people/classroom climate</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on emotions/too personal</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetitive/went on too long</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much writing</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrealistic/irrelevant</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**
Some specific negative comments included:

- “People laughed at some people’s songs that they brought”
- “Feeling that I have to share things when I don’t want to”
- “People laughed at me, even my teacher.”
- “That it got a bit boring. 1 or 2 people put you down. Others dominate.”
- “Sometimes the teacher didn’t see your point of view.”
- “When learning something interesting and had to stop.”

While conclusions possible from these responses can only be tentative, they again suggest the need to pay attention to classroom climate and the quality of relationships between students, and students and teachers. Many students valued interactive sessions and the opportunity to hear and be heard in class discussions. At the same time, students identified the importance of an atmosphere of respect and safety. When we consider the numbers of students in the survey who reported being teased, and the associations with depressive symptoms, a positive classroom climate is clearly of great importance. The responses also reflect the diversity of individual experiences with the same aspects of the program being seen negatively by some and positively by others.

The responses highlight the challenge for us to provide opportunities and skills to allow challenging discussion in classrooms but at the same time provide safe and supportive environments. Boostrom (1998) argues that ‘…we need to hear other voices in order to grow…we also need to be able to be able to respond to those voices, to criticise them, to challenge them, to sharpen our own perspectives through the friction of dialogue’ (p.407). He concludes that if ‘critical thinking, imagination and individuality are to flourish in classrooms, teachers need to manage conflict, not prohibit it’ (p.407). In other words, how can we encourage healthy and constructive discussion without the implied power and value judgements that exist within groups and between groups and between the students and the teacher? This clearly has implications for professional development of teachers.
Schools in the Gatehouse Project have been addressing this challenge in various ways, based around the three main themes. Consideration of security has prompted strategies for establishing clear and agreed class rules or agreements and protocols to protect privacy and confidentiality. Strategies to promote communication and connectedness have included student and teacher teaming, more interactive teaching and learning activities, changing the physical layout of the classroom and creating opportunities for each student to communicate with the teacher. Positive regard has been promoted through creating more opportunities for valued participation and acknowledgement of contributions and achievements, and presentation of student work in authentic settings.

*Where to from here?*

So what can we learn from what students are telling us? Perhaps the most important lesson is not new at all – it is not just what you teach but how you teach it and the context within which you teach it. Nowhere is this more important than in the area of emotional well-being. Through the curriculum, we can give information about emotional well-being and we can help young people to develop skills that will make them better equipped to handle the difficult life events which might affect their well-being. These things will be more effective, however, if they are pursued in a school environment which itself supports emotional well-being. Moreover, we need to hear what students are saying about their experiences. As Cormack has suggested, we need to see schooling ‘though students’ eyes’ (Cormack 1998).

In reassessing the nature of schooling, particularly in the early years of adolescence, the convergence of learnings from the health and education sectors shows us that school effectiveness will be limited if we focus narrowly on the content of teaching and learning. In planning programs and organisational structures, schools must take into consideration the particular needs of the diverse range of their adolescent students. It is not a question of either focussing on excellence in learning outcomes or focussing on care and support. The challenge for all of us, and not only in the middle years, is to create the kind of learning communities described by Stoll and Fink (1996):
They have high expectations of all their members; they build on and recognize individual strengths while providing mutual support; they compensate and help individual weaknesses; and they behave in ways based on mutual trust, respect, optimism and intentionality. Learning communities are caring families (p. 192)

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