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Student Voice: Insights into the social-emotional and learning climate in a secondary school

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Abstract

Whilst there is general consensus that Trauma-Informed Practice is needed in Australian schools, an agreed framework providing a clear strategy on how to best support trauma-impacted students has not been established. This paper suggests that individual schools are best placed to identify and enact targeted strategies and appropriate support measures for trauma-impacted students. As such, the response is subsequently contextualised to the needs of the school and students. A starting point for such an approach, and the focus of this project, must inherently include seeking student voice upon matters relevant to social-emotional and learning climate. In this study, a student survey was administered to a randomised set of students from a NSW High School (TSHS). The data analysis revealed a strong relationship between school belonging and positive emotion. Additionally, it suggested that supportive actions teachers could incorporate in their teaching practice includes *be nice, caring, connecting* and *not getting angry*. Further evidence provided in the study suggests the inclusion of a structured connection to community enrichment programs for all students. Moreover, it appears implementation of these measures by TSHS and individual teachers could benefit all students and not be isolated to those impacted by trauma. It follows, broader benefits for TSHS would include increased student engagement and improvement in the social-emotional and learning environment.

> *individual schools are best placed to identify and enact targeted strategies and appropriate support measures for trauma-impacted students*

Introduction

The intent of this study is to identify student perceptions of emotions, sense of belonging and viewpoints about what actions teachers could take to improve the rate of student success at TSHS. The project also investigated literature findings about students who have experienced trauma.

There is limited research about the application of suitable structural models for trauma- informed practice in Australian schools. Howard suggests that although there has been a growth in the willingness to adopt trauma-informed practice by Australian schools, it appears there remains a lack of implementation in regard to a whole organisational approach (2019, 545). In the absence of such a framework, there may be some fundamental questions schools should ask of their students when seeking to embed contextualised, targeted trauma-informed practices in their local setting. In this way, student feedback underpins the foundation of a localised framework and clearly informs teacher practice. The benefits of this project were:

1. The data informed TSHS staff of potential pedagogical and social-emotional supports that are valued or preferred by students, whilst highlighting student perception of ineffective measures or actions employed by teachers.
2. Student responses provided insight into what particular teacher actions may encourage a sense of belonging and improve student engagement at TSHS.

Literature review

To better inform the direction of the study, a literature review of factors that influence a positive social-

emotional and learning environment within the school setting, and that are likely to benefit students impacted by trauma, was performed. A key survey of relevance to be consulted, the ***2022 Queensland Engagement and Wellbeing Survey***: *Report for Tullawong State High School* (QEW), specifically accounts for student voice regarding belonging and community and general wellbeing. The QEW report informs schools regarding:

- student perspective of wellbeing and engagement
- student identified strengths and how these can be encouraged
- any issues or challenges students are facing that may require additional development and support

The QEW report highlighted potential student concerns regarding a disconnection in the TSHS community. This led to further research into trauma-impacted persons and disconnection from others. Given the inconsistent teacher-peer relationships reported and observed at TSHS, searches for studies involving the school community and belonging were also undertaken. In a meta-analysis of 51 independent studies of individual and social level factors that influence ***school belonging***, Allen et. al., (2016) found that teacher support and positive personal characteristics were the strongest predictors of school belonging.

Terms searched included student voice, student belonging, complex trauma, student disengagement, emotional dysregulation, emotional regulation, trauma, trauma-exposed students, trauma-informed practice, school connectedness, school attachment, school connection, and school acceptance. These terms were predominantly derived from equivalent terminology within peer reviewed researched journal articles that relate to the effects of student trauma in schools.

The impacts of trauma experienced by youth are a significant contributor to disengagement in our schools. Courtois (2020) considers a broad though workable definition of trauma to be "… any event or experience that is physical and/or psychologically overwhelming for the individual". Such events may include major accidents, physical or sexual abuse, domestic and community violence or other less easily identified incidents that involve rejection, humiliation, neglect, bullying and emotional abuse. Trauma can be a one-time incident or occur repeatedly over time. In building capacity for an organisational approach towards Trauma Informed Practice for Education (TIPE) at TSHS, it is prudent to consider the definition of a trauma-informed system offered by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). SAMHSA states:

> "a trauma-informed system is one that: (A) understands the widespread impact of trauma and potential paths to recovery; (B) recognizes signs and symptoms of trauma from a systems perspective; and (C) integrates trauma knowledge into policies, procedures, and practices in an effort to create a supportive environment that is intent on not re-traumatizing its me mbers." (2014, 9).

In understanding the impacts of trauma, we must first acknowledge the stress response unique to the individual. Broadly, the stress response in individuals who have experienced trauma calls for prioritisation by the brain to suppress feelings or be alert to potential threats. This coping mechanism underpins the resultant emotional instability and disengagement that challenge teachers pedagogically when supporting learners. These youth are highly focused on the need to confirm their safety, whilst any 'growth promoting interests' that secure children find stimulating seem almost, if not, completely immaterial (Bath, 2008, 18). For trauma-impacted students, "their constant state of tension and arousal can leave them unable to concentrate, pay attention, retain and recall new information" (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2020, Centre for Trauma Aware and Responsive Education section. para 2). Brunzell et. al., (2019, 601) identify three key steps that educators should follow when supporting students who display the effects of trauma. They contend that there is a need to first develop self-regulatory capabilities, followed by increasing relational capacities and finally providing psychological resources for student wellbeing with adequate opportunities for their application.

> *"The impacts of trauma experienced by youth are a significant contributor to dis-engagement in our schools"*

In making adaptations to improve the social-emotional and learning environment to appropriately meet the needs of trauma victims, an educator within the school setting can heed important advice drawn from clinical practices of prudent social work, that is to "start where the client is" (Danzer, 2011). Danzer argues this principle means the social worker (which we might also substitute for the teacher/educator) must flexibly respond to the needs of the client (or, as it follows, the student). Danzer continues with a second equally relevant message to suggest that doing so "will help to build a therapeutic relationship. A strong relationship can help a client to heal from trauma and oppression…" (2011, p.175). Each of Danzer's suggestions could be equally relevant in educational literature, and parallels here certainly exist with the educational practices of catering for diversity and inclusion. If educators don't meet students where they are at, and teachers do not seek to develop a deeper connection in a pursuit

to understand the students' unique background and challenges, we should expect the outcome not to merely be teacher and student frustration, but more seriously, diminished social-emotional, psychological, and academic growth.

The significance of a healthy and caring connection between teacher and student is instrumental in building a relational capacity that promotes healing from the impacts of trauma. Secondary benefits fostered by such a relationship address the reparation of prior attachment deficits often caused by trauma. In his paper "Teacher Beliefs and Practices that Impart Self System and Positive Psychology Attributes" (Brzycki, 2009). Brzycki also supports the value of relationship development as a precursor to preparing students impacted by trauma for engagement. Overwhelmingly, teachers' most utilised strategy to empower their students in this study involved forming personal relationships with students. Brzycki posits that "When they are able to know their students, this impacted their students' emotional well-being in all areas of life as well as academic readiness, by freeing up working memory and space for cognitive processing…" (Brzycki, 2009, p. 79). Students who have experienced trauma and develop a pervasive mistrust towards adults they encounter (Bath, 2008, p. 19), through the development of this relationship with teachers, can begin to feel valued irrespective of their behaviour, and the likelihood of the development of a sense of acceptance and trust follows. In turn, concerns for safety fade and relational capacity is increased. At this juncture, intervention begins a progressive transition from healing to growth and prior lack of capacity to experience new learning is now strengthened. Therefore, somewhat unsurprisingly, the third developmental domain proposed by Brunzell et. al., to inform teacher practice, focuses on the increase of 'psychological resources for student wellbeing' whereby students experience opportunities to 'learn and integrate new cognitively based strategies that cultivate increased engagement and belonging (2019, p. 601).

> *"teachers' most utilised strategy to empower their students in this study involved forming personal relationships with students"*

School belonging has most consistently been defined as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, pp. 60-61). In relation to psychosocial outcomes, school belonging has been associated with higher levels of happiness, psychological functioning, adjustment, self-esteem and self-identity (Jose et. al., 2012; Law et. al., 2013; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009; O'Rourke & Cooper, 2010), and is inversely related to incidents of fighting, bullying and vandalism, disruptive behaviour and emotional distress, risk-taking behaviours such as substance and tobacco use, and early sexualisation (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Catalano et. al., 2004; Samdal et. al., 1998).

Research methodology

The key research questions pursued in this study were:

1. What do student responses indicate about the type of social-emotional, and learning climate presented?
2. Too what extent does the current social-emotional, and learning climate support students?
3. What practices should teachers employ to effectively support students at TSHS?

A mixed-methods research methodology was applied to this study. The qualitative portion is of most relevance due to the requirements to maximise the consideration of student voice and seek clarification on their feelings, perceptions, attitudes and experiences. It also accounts for the individual's perceptions of social interactions and personal experience within the group as a whole. Furthermore, qualitative data allow the exposure of a more individualised and detailed reality through opportunities for students to offer subjective perceptions, contextually based on a complex web of personal experiences resulting from an interaction between various internal and external factors. In essence, this neatly aligns with trauma theory in acknowledgment that the extent of trauma stress response varies among individuals.

Educational models that comprise a teacher as a learning facilitator and student as learner are inherently relationship-based. For meaningful relationships to prosper, an empathetic understanding and consideration of students' needs and concerns regarding relevant issues is required. In the school setting, it is clear, therefore, that the starting point for this study must consist of opportunities to seek authentic ***student voice*** regarding the schooling experience. Student voice has been successfully utilised to make improvements in teacher–student relationships, teaching practice and pedagogical approaches, curriculum change and improvement (Griebler & Nowak, 2012; Mitra, 2008; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004).

Furthermore, involving pupils in discussion about teaching is seen as a key to improving teaching and learning (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004), as cited in (Griebler & Nowak, 2012, p. 127).

Fundamentally, to be truly representative and accurate, student voice must reflect a cross-section of the school population and not be limited to a

particular group. Certainly, one criticism of student representative councils centres upon exclusion of participation by some students due to lack of popularity or vocal assertiveness. It is for the reasons mentioned above, coupled with notions of fairness and equity, that an anonymous survey applied to a randomly generated portion of the school population that invites responses of student perception regarding school experience, is the key instrument selected for gathering student voice in this study.

Students were asked a series of closed and open questions, enabling the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. Two quantitative questions sought to simply identify students' emotional dispositions and sense of belonging to the TSHS community. Then, five qualitative questions were probed to enable comparison of student impressions of school environment and culture. Additional suggestions were invited from two questions that further investigated a sense of belonging to TSHS and elicited student perceptions of what actions or behaviours teachers could bring to encourage a deeper student connection to the TSHS community and improve the social-emotional learning environment.

Teachers administered the survey and advised students that the results would be anonymous and feedback would be analysed to inform TSHS of student emotional and wellbeing issues with the

Figure 1

Responses from total students as to whether they feel negative or positive emotions as the main emotion at school.

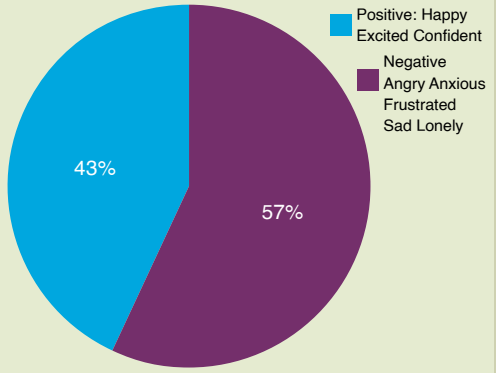


Figure 2

Responses from students who reported a negative emotion as the main emotion felt at school (67/118) regarding whether they feel a part of the community at TSHS?

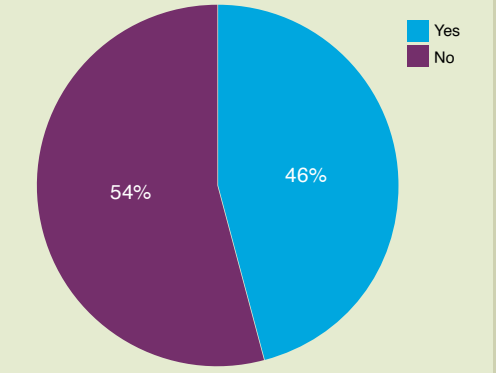


Figure 3

Responses from students who reported positive emotions as the main emotion felt at school (51/118) regarding whether they feel a part of the community at TSHS.

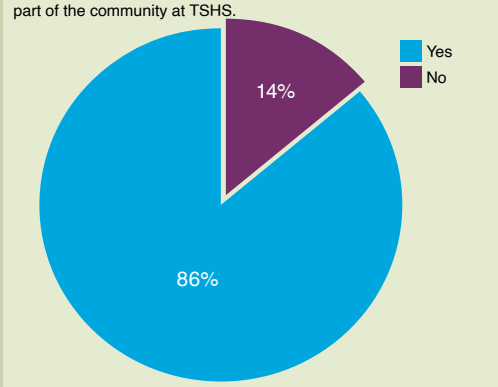
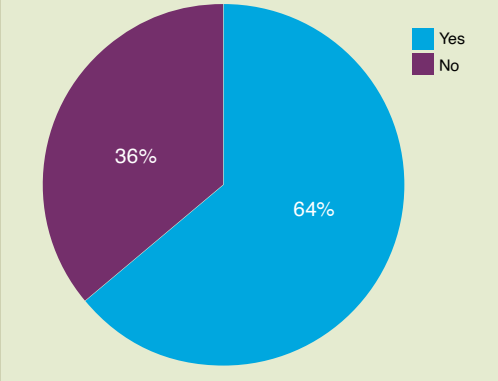


Figure 4

Responses from total students surveyed regarding whether they feel a part of the community at TSHS?



> *one criticism of student representative councils centres upon exclusion of participation by some students due to lack of popularity or vocal assertiveness*

> *it is likely that there are a number of students experiencing the psychological effects of trauma who have not yet been identified*

Figure 5

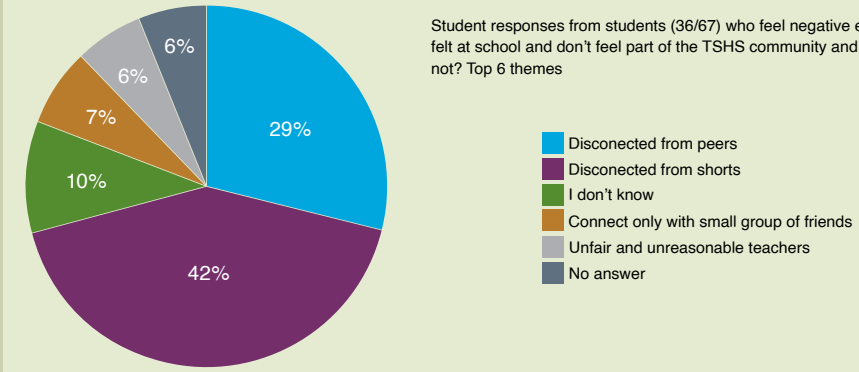
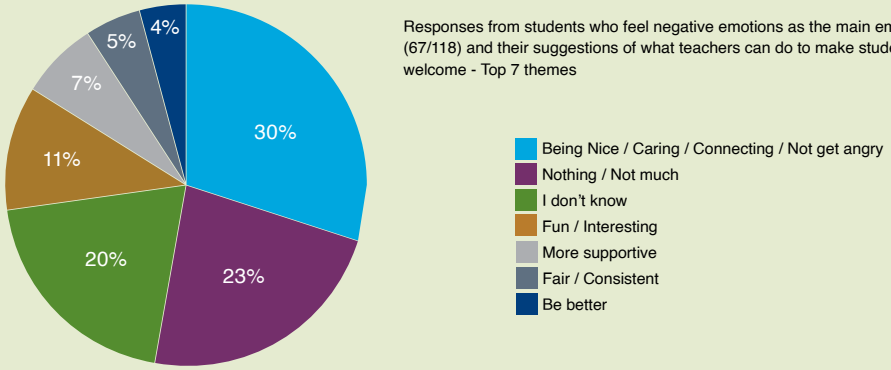


Figure 6



view to develop and/or modify strategies to more effectively support students. Students were given a choice to participate in the survey, and therefore, their involvement implied consent.

Approximately 25% of the school population was invited to complete the survey, with two classes selected from each grade between years 7 to 12. A total of 118 students completed the survey. Whilst a high incidence of trauma-impacted students who attend TSHS, the precise number is unknown. Furthermore, it is likely that there are a number of students experiencing the psychological effects of trauma who have not yet been identified. In part, this may be due to the reluctance of individuals and/or parent/carer to disclose personal past trauma, but also the lack of resourcing to identify these students. It is fair to expect, therefore, that survey responses will include students who have experienced trauma – identified and not identified – as well as those who have not experienced trauma.

Permission to administer the survey was sought and approved from school administration, and risk was assessed as negligible. Potential benefits of the survey's findings were seen to justify any negligible risks involved in the research.

Data analysis method

An Excel spreadsheet was used to organise data. Quantitative data were filtered for emotional categories selected to deconstruct identifiable themes and compare frequencies and patterns within and between individual student responses across remaining questions. Pie graphs have been used to communicate findings.

Data analysis

A total of 118 student surveys were collected from students in grades 7 to 12. The following graphs have been created from an analysis of this data to identify relevant themes and trends that may provide

answers to the research questions proposed.

The six graphs above highlight some significant findings identified within the TSHS survey data. From the 118 students surveyed, Figure 1 indicates that 67 (57%) reported a negative emotion as the main feeling (angry, sad, lonely, anxious) experienced at school. Figure 2 reveals that of these 67 students, 36 (54%) reported not feeling part of the TSHS community. This is in contrast with students who reported a positive emotion as the main feeling experienced at school, where only 14% reported not feeling part of the TSHS community (see Figure 3). In terms of total students surveyed, 43 (36%) reported not feeling part of the TSHS community. These data are supported by the 2022 QEW report for TSHS, which found that 31% of all students surveyed reported a "Low" Sense of Belonging, 43% reported a "Medium" Sense of Belonging, and 26% reported a "High Sense of Belonging".

To further identify factors associated with not feeling a part of the TSHS community, Figure 5 indicates that for those students who reported a negative emotion as the main emotion felt at school and do not feel a part of the TSHS community, 29% cite disconnection from peers, and 42% cite disconnection from school. Arguably, such disconnection from others inherently fosters a sense of isolation and can be a precursor to withdrawal and/or lack of belonging. Community connection and sense of belonging can provide validation of personal value, affirmation, and acceptance, all whilst encouraging a cohesive culture that fosters respect for self and others.

The lack of belonging and sense of community felt by a significant number of students at TSHS highlights further challenges within the current social-emotional climate. For trauma-impacted individuals, the individual's perception of support is integral to the healing process. Furthermore, the ability to increase one's distress tolerance and resilience to the emotional impact of future adverse events is enhanced by the support offered by the community. Students who find it challenging to relate to peers and adults and are regularly involved in conflict may find themselves further disconnected from their communities, which may ignite or fuel feelings of anxiety and disengagement from social interactions and/or learning.

The inverse relationship between Figures 2 and 3 indicates that whilst a majority (54%) who reported negative emotions do not feel part of the community at TSHS, a majority of the 14% who reported a positive emotion as the main feeling felt at school do feel part of the community at TSHS. These data suggest a clear relationship between the sense of belonging to the TSHS community and the emotions felt at school. Whilst this study is not conclusive in identifying to what extent positive emotions felt at school contribute to a sense of community and belonging, or to what extent a sense of community and belonging contributes to positive student emotions felt at school, they likely contribute to each other. A further study would be required to examine this relationship in more detail.

Figure 6 indicates that, according to the 67 students who report a negative emotion as the main emotion felt at school, the most significant actions reported regarding what teachers can do to make students feel more welcome (30%) is ***Be nice/caring/connecting/not get angry***. Certainly, this suggestion is consistent with Maslow's needs hierarchy within his publication of "Theory of Human Motivation" and is associated with the safety needs (Tier 2) and belongingness and love (Tier 3). Therefore, it would appear student requests for teachers to ***Be nice/caring/connecting/not get angry*** should not be regarded as novel or unreasonable by any means. Particularly when a relatively small investment practice that teachers could employ without any foreseeable obstruction has the potential to significantly improve the social-emotional, and learning climate and subsequently improve engagement and belonging throughout the school.

From the qualitative items on the survey, student suggestions about how teachers can make students feel more welcome included the following responses:

1. "Give us respect when we walk into the room that's why most people disrespect their teachers because they are already disrespecting us."
2. "Don't make me feel anxious and embarrassed in class"
3. "Not treat you like robots"
4. "To make you feel more welcome, teachers could make their classrooms a safe environment for their students by being patient and calm"
5. "Don't be rude and understand where we are coming from and hear us out"

These suggestions emphasise the challenges faced in the social-emotional and learning climate at TSHS and indicate that there is significant scope for development around teacher-student relationships. These responses also highlight the request that teachers be more understanding and empathetic. It follows that teacher application of such suggestions in their daily practice, both inside and outside the classroom, would enhance the opportunity for the building of relationships, belonging and a stronger sense of community.

"These responses also highlight the request that teachers be more understanding and empathetic"

> *As educators, we are duty-bound to care for our students, to hold out a hand and guide them through life's challenging obstacles*

As a springboard for comparison and reflection with data collected via the survey instrument, a randomised selection of two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students was subsequently interviewed to ascertain their connection with community. From each of the students interviewed, responses indicated a strong sense of belonging and affinity with the TSHS community. These same students commented that they are happy and enjoy coming to school. They also commented that they did not have any suggestions for how teachers might make them feel more welcome, as this was not an issue for them. At first instance, this perception of community and belonging appears contradictory to the broader sentiment of the student cohort surveyed. However, upon reflection, the difference and opinion may well be attributed to the specialised programs of support TSHS offers this group of students.

It is relevant to emphasise that there is an active program at TSHS that provides additional staff and community development support for ATSI students. Additional resourcing for staffing, activities and contextualised programs that bring this cohort together may be the additional ingredients that foster a deeper sense of connection and belonging. Such an observation appears to suggest that the inclusion of structured connections to community enrichment programs for all students, such as those offered to ATSI students, may well increase a sense of belonging and connection for all TSHS students.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted a concern that 57% of the cohort surveyed felt a negative emotion as the main feeling experienced at school, with 54% of this subset of those students not feeling a sense of belonging. In contrast, for those students who reported a positive emotion as the main feeling experienced at school, only 14% reported not feeling part of the TSHS community. Although this study has not isolated the extent to which main emotions felt at school influence a sense of belonging or vice versa, data suggest that a clear relationship exists. Indeed, when students feel a sense of belonging to community, positive emotion is more likely to be experienced, and therefore, the priority to enhance school climate with a focus on community connection must be sought. A significant proportion of students surveyed have indicated that a healthy relational connection to teachers who are kind, caring, patient and calm is important for their engagement and wellbeing. Whilst these student suggestions are in line with approaches to trauma-informed strategies outlined in the literature, there is clearly an engagement benefit to all students. Certainly, such actions could be offered by teachers at the individual level. However, implicit evidence from this study indicates that broader school response to improve a sense of belonging and community may also be a valid measure.

Interviews with ATSI students indicate programs that develop community at TSHS have been successful, and it is likely that further expansion of similarly suitable programs that target the entire TSHS population may be advantageous. Further discussion may need to be sought from both teachers and students as to the makeup of such community-building programs to meet the needs of all TSHS students. As educators, we are duty-bound to care for our students, to hold out a hand and guide them through life's challenging obstacles, to provide them with the tools to heal, flourish and inspire a vision of hope. We have been placed before our students for a purpose that transcends curriculum. However, as improvements are made in the social-emotional and learning climates at TSHS, so too is the prospect that our students' academic readiness is improved. TEACH

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