

“Learning ground is very much about building the person from inside so they've got the confidence to shine outside.”

Learning Ground in School (LGiS): Final Report of the 2020-2022 Implementation

Dr Roberto H Parada

Dr Brenda Dobia

Kate Eastman

Virginia O'Rourke

Julie Regalado

Western Sydney University

School of Education

July 2023



Acknowledgements



We acknowledge the spiritual and cultural custodians of Darug, Dharawal, Lenapehoking, and Wurrundjeri, on whose land our offices reside, as well as the traditional custodians of all the lands throughout Australia, and the Indigenous peoples beyond our shores. We pay our respects to the Elders past, present, and emerging, recognise and respect the wisdom and strength of the Ancestors and Elders, their ways of knowing, being, and doing, and their continued relationship with their land. We also recognise the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, who are our future. Finally, we acknowledge and respect the non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who share our vision for building a brighter future together for a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

The research outlined in this report was funded by the Chain Reaction Foundation through a grant from the Neilson Foundation. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Neilson Foundation, Margaret Bell AM, Rumbi Mabambe, mentors, group facilitators, volunteers and participants of Mt Druitt Learning Ground and Learning Ground in School. Thank you also to Megan Atkins for her thoughtful and diligent support whilst at WSU and later as a member of Learning Ground.

We also wish to express our gratitude to each of the participating schools, their executives, teachers, students, and parents/caregivers without whose cooperation this research would not have been possible.

ISBN: 9781741085570

DOI: 10.26183/87kw-ew29

URL: <https://doi.org/10.26183/87kw-ew29>

© 2023 Authors. This work is copyrighted. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process without prior written permission of Western Sydney University.

About the Authors

Dr Roberto H Parada PhD, is a child and adolescent psychologist and Senior Lecturer in Adolescent Development Behaviour and Wellbeing at the School of Education, Western Sydney University, Australia. Roberto's research interest focuses on student wellbeing, bullying intervention, social-emotional learning, and mental health in schools. Roberto has worked in government and non-government organisations implementing and evaluating various individual and population-level interventions to promote young people's wellbeing.

Dr Brenda Dobia PhD, is a psychologist, educator, researcher, and Adjunct Fellow in the School of Education at Western Sydney University. Brenda has a keen interest in issues of wellbeing and social justice that affect young people, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. Brenda has led several research and educational initiatives focused on improving student wellbeing in schools. These include developing educational resources for the KidsMatter primary schools' mental health initiative; reviewing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' mental health and wellbeing needs; evaluating and designing community-based educational programs to build respect and prevent violence.

Kate Eastman is a researcher, teacher and sessional academic. A primary school teacher by background, Kate has taught for several years in classrooms, learning support and executive roles. Kate has worked in child welfare as an educational consultant and teacher with children involved in child protection agencies, their carers, families, and teachers. Her ongoing research focuses on the mental health and trauma literacy and practices of teachers.

Virginia O'Rourke, of the Dharawal nation, is an academic and community development practitioner. As an Educational and Developmental Psychologist, Virginia is an Indigenous Australian Psychological Association member. Virginia's research focuses on the public education system, with a particular emphasis on culturally responsive practices considering aspects related to students, teachers, and their wider school communities. Virginia has experience working with, and engaging with, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the fields of health and education with an emphasis on making a genuine difference in the lives of children and their families.

Julie Regalado is currently Education Program Director at the Watershed Management Group in Tucson Arizona, USA. With over 30 years of teaching experience in a variety of formal and non-formal settings, Julie is particularly interested in fostering meaningful, experiential learning opportunities throughout life. Julie has three Master degrees, in Dance, Social Ecology and Research. From 2019-2022 Julie provided very able and engaged research support to the Learning Ground in School project.

Contents

Acknowledgements	i
About the Authors.....	ii
Contents	1
Index of Tables	3
Index of Figures.....	3
Executive Summary	4
Section One: Background to the Evaluation of Learning Ground in School.....	13
Introduction to Learning Ground.....	13
Background to the Research	14
Section Two: Research Aims and Scope	18
Introduction	18
Research Approach	18
Learning Ground Team	20
Participating Schools.....	20
Participating Staff.....	21
Participating Students.....	22
Survey Administration	23
Qualitative Tools and Analysis	23
COVID-19 Statement	24
Section Three: Indicators of Overall Emotional, Behavioural Functioning and School Belonging	26
Introduction	26
Profile of Students Who Participated in the LGiS Evaluation.....	27
Post Learning Ground in School (LGiS) Analysis	30
Full Information Comparison	32
Pre and Post Intervention Results on Measured Outcomes	32
Clinically Significant Change in Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties	35
Perceptions of School Belonging	37
Integration and Conclusion of the Survey Results	37
Section Four: What Did Students Say About LGiS?	41
Introduction	41
Part 1: Student Views of the LGiS Program.....	41
Student Understanding of What LGiS is About	44
Students' Views of LGiS Activities	46
Part 1. Summary.....	47
Part 2. Student Reflections on What They Learned from LGiS	48
What Students Learned from LGiS	48
Students' Perceptions of Changes Due to LGiS	49
Student Preferences to Continue Participating in LGiS	51

Improvements to LGiS Suggested by Students	52
Part 2. Summary.....	54
Student Reflections on LGiS: Conclusion.....	54
Section Five: School Staff Reflections on LGiS	55
Introduction	55
Part 1: Staff Observations of the LGiS Program in Practice	55
School Staff Reflections on LGiS Content and Programming	61
Part 2: Implementation of LGiS by Schools.....	65
COVID 19 Destabilisation	65
Student Selection.....	66
Timetabling	68
Staffing	69
Professional Learning.....	71
Implementation Support.....	72
Sustainability.....	74
Section Six: A Cultural Evaluation of Learning Ground in School	78
Introduction	78
Key Consideration from Research Literature	78
Learning Ground in School and Aboriginal Knowledge	78
Colonisation, Trauma and Student Behaviour.....	79
Trauma Informed Practice.....	80
Cultural Competence & Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	82
Pilot Manual and Handbooks Cultural Evaluation	83
Consideration of the Historical Context within LGiS	84
Consultation with Aboriginal Peoples within LGiS	85
Participation of Aboriginal Peoples within LGiS.....	85
Elevating Aboriginal Voices within LGiS.....	86
Recognising Cultural Diversity	87
Intellectual Property Rights within LGiS	88
Recommendations of the Cultural Evaluation.....	89
Section Seven: Conclusions and Recommendations.....	93
Question 1: Benefits for Wellbeing and Resilience.....	93
Question 2: Re-Engaging Students at Risk of School Failure	94
Question 3: Implementation Factors	95
Key Recommendations.....	97
References.....	101
Appendix A: Scales Used in this Evaluation.....	106
Appendix B: Overview of Statistical Results	108
Appendix C: Interview Protocols	114
Appendix D: Excerpts from Program Manuals	117

Appendix E: 2020 Implementation Interim Report	124
Appendix F: 2021 Implementation Interim Report	144

Index of Tables

Table 1. School Demographics of Participating Schools	21
Table 2. Distribution of Students by School	27
Table 3. Data Available for Participants in LGiS.....	31
Table 4. Distribution of Students by School	32
Table 5. Paired Samples Statistics Strengths and Difficulties	34
Table 6. Paired Samples Statistics School Belonging	34
Table 7. SDQ Clinical Classifications Pre-Test and Post-Test.....	36
Table 8. Overview of the Student Selection Explanation Clusters	42
Table 9. What Students Understood LGiS to be About.....	44
Table 10. Why Students Perceived LGiS as a Distinctive Program	45
Table 11. Activities that Resonated Most for Students	46
Table 12. What Students Felt They Learned from LGiS.....	48
Table 13. Students' Perceptions of Change.....	50
Table 14. Students' Responses to Missing Classes	51
Table 15. Reasons for Students' Desire to Continue in LGiS	52
Table 16. Student Suggestions for LGiS Improvement.....	53
Table 17. Application of the 7-7-7 Principle to Student Selection	67
Table 18. Timetabling Issues as Seen from LG and from Schools' Perspectives	68
Table 19. Reflections on Staffing	70
Table 20. Professional Learning Benefits	71
Table 21. LG Mentor and School Staff Comments Relating to Implementation Support	73
Table 22. School Staff Suggestions for Improving Ease and Sustainability of LGiS Implementation	77
Table 23. Assessment of Factors Influencing Successful School-Based Interventions.....	96

Index of Figures

Figure 1. LGiS 7-7-7 Student Selection Criteria Provided to Schools.....	22
Figure 2. SDQ Difficulties Student Classification	28
Figure 3. SDQ Pro-Social Skills Classification.....	29
Figure 4. SBS Student Agreements.....	30
Figure 5. SDQ Total Difficulties Classification T1 vs T2.....	36
Figure 6. SBS Agreement Pre and Post LGiS	37
Figure 7. Care Continuum (NSW Education, 2023)	75
Figure 8. Tiered System of School-Based Behavioural Support.....	76
Figure 9. Recommended Options for LG Engagement with Schools	98

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a 3-year pilot of the Learning Ground in School (LGiS) program. The LGiS pilot was conceived and undertaken by Learning Ground, Mt Druitt, to assist schools in working more effectively and proactively with students at risk of school disengagement and failure. It is based on the successful behavioural support and reconnection program developed and delivered to young people at Learning Ground's Mt Druitt centre over the last 18 years.

In planning its piloting of the newly developed Learning Ground in School (LGiS) program, Chain Reaction Foundation commissioned Western Sydney University to undertake an independent research evaluation of the initiative. With the pilot now complete, this report presents the concluding findings of the 2020-2022 pilot evaluation of LGiS.

The purpose of this final report is to provide an analysis of collected data and information from the pilot implementation of the Learning Ground in School Program over 2020-22. It follows on from the two previous interim reports (see Appendices E and F), utilising data from all schools involved over the period of the project and emphasising student experience and outcomes, as well as implementation effectiveness for staff and schools.

Research Aims

The main goal of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Learning Ground in School program. It aimed to investigate a) how the LG program could be effectively translated into school settings, b) what challenges may be encountered, and c) what benefits may be gained.

The key research questions addressed were:

1. How might the LG program benefit students' general wellbeing and resilience?
2. How can the LG program be taken up in school settings to re-engage students at risk of school failure?
3. Does the implementation of the LG program improve the disciplinary culture of schools by promoting teachers' use of positive, culturally sensitive behaviour management?

LGiS Pilot Approach

The pilot implementation of LGiS was conducted in 2020-2022 in seven Western and Southwestern Sydney secondary schools. These seven schools cater to many students for whom complex intersecting inequities are a dominant feature of their lives. Their mean ICSEA level of 900 is below the state average of 1000. Four of the schools have student attendance rates of less than 80%; in three schools Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students constitute more than 20% of the school population. One of the unique features of the original Learning Ground model is that it has been able to work effectively with marginalised youth from highly disadvantaged backgrounds.

Over the period of the pilot, several modifications were made to the model of training and delivery, reflecting the evolving relationships between Learning Ground and the participating schools. These modifications have been shaped by the need to respond to the realities of environmental and resource constraints within schools, including the disruptive effects on school communities of the COVID-19 pandemic and its continuing sequelae.

LGiS was developed with the expectation that school staff would be trained as primary facilitators and would be supported by an experienced Learning Ground (LG) mentor. A 3-day training package was developed by LG to introduce staff to the program, and weekly lesson plans were prepared based on the Learning Ground curriculum.

The LG Director led school recruitment and training. Program resources included a training manual for professionals and facilitator handbooks that outlined the teaching content for the school program. Eight Learning Ground Mentors participated in facilitating the program and in the research evaluation. The LG mentors modelled the approach to working with students and provided coaching support to the school-based facilitators and classroom mentors.

Professional learning for school staff was conducted on-site at Learning Ground, Mt Druitt, on several occasions as schools came on board. In June 2020 the initial trainings were conducted for staff from the first 2 schools in a 3-day block. A one-day refresher training was held in April 2022 for staff who were new to LGiS. In total, 39 school staff received professional learning and went on to be involved in LGiS across the three years of the study.

Evaluation Methods

The evaluation design used a mixed-method approach incorporating quantitative evaluation of student outcomes and qualitative investigation of student and staff experience and school-based implementation. This report includes information obtained from participants across all seven schools. Of these participants, information was available for 75 students, who had an average age of 13.6 years ($SD = .99$). Of these students 47% identified as males and 53% as females; 23% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Evaluation tools included the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) which measured changes in students' emotional, behavioural, and social functioning and the School Belonging Scale (SBS) which measured changes in students' sense of connectedness and belonging at school. Interviews and focus groups gathered qualitative data regarding students' situated perspectives on their involvement in the program and what they believed they gained from it. Interviews and focus groups were also used to gather data from school and LG staff. In-depth qualitative data gathering occurred at least twice for each participant group over the course of the pilot. A cultural evaluation of the LGiS materials was conducted to assess the quality and appropriateness of the utilisation of Aboriginal knowledge and values in the LGiS pilot materials.

Student Wellbeing and Resilience

An outstanding feature of the LGiS initiative was found to be its relational pedagogy, which cultivated an enabling sense of safety and support among the students who attended the program, and improved relationships between staff and students. Although the generalisation of these changes to other settings within the school varied, staff reported improvements in several students' behaviour and increased engagement in learning both in the LGiS sessions and other settings in the schools. Staff additionally reported that students responded to them with a growing sense of ease and appreciation. It was noted that several students made a point of attending school without fail on LGiS days.

Pre- and post-evaluation provided an assessment of outcomes for the student participants showing that students improved in two vital areas of wellbeing that are related to long-term resilience. These include being able to control internal emotional arousal states and effectively managing peer relationships. After attending LGiS, students reported that they did not lose their temper as easily, engaged less in activities such as taking things that did not belong to them and did not fight as frequently. Importantly, clinically significant changes were also found post-LGiS attendance. A clinically significant change is a change that has taken a student from reporting symptoms typical of a clinical population which requires treatment (e.g., in a clinic) to a score typical of the average population. In the period before participation in LGiS, 57% of students self-reported emotional and behavioural difficulties in a clinical range that would only be expected in less than 10% of the general population. Following LGiS, only 33% of students still met this criterion. These results indicate that LGiS promoted strong gains in emotional and behavioural regulation by students which should support their everyday functioning and long-term success in the classroom and society.

The SBS results indicate that participants' overall sense of school belonging decreased during the period under evaluation, indicating that participation in LGiS did not affect students' perceptions of school belonging. It is possible that these findings in part reflect a reaction to the disruptive effects of COVID-19 on students and schools during this period.

Overall, results of the SDQ demonstrate that students on average reported benefits to their emotional, and behavioural health. The results are in line with the goals espoused by LGiS as a social and emotional learning intervention. The most prominent changes were a better understanding of the need to have limits and values for behaviour. Students also reported improved peer relations and reduced overall emotional difficulties, particularly those classified as internalising problems.

Student Perspectives

The student interviews showed that participating students perceived LGiS as a distinctive program that provides a warm and pro-social climate, creating a safe learning environment. The sense of safety that this climate cultivated allowed the participants to engage with the content in meaningful ways. For many, this enabled improvements in emotion regulation and prosocial behaviour. Students valued the opportunity to engage in activities that not only brought enjoyment but also allowed them to develop and practise social and emotional skills.

For some students, a lack of clarity about why they were recruited to the program led to a sense of confusion, ambivalence and/or disengagement. These findings demonstrate the need for clear and authentic communication in the process of recruiting students to LGiS. Providing greater information and choice about attending the program will improve students' sense of agency and motivation to engage. However, most students understood the purpose of LGiS in supporting and developing social and emotional wellbeing. Students who understood the purpose of the program and content were more likely to report that they benefited from participating in LGiS. Students acknowledged the program's benefits for –

- providing a safe space to learn about themselves
- tuning in and managing feelings
- building communication skills
- understanding one another
- learning how to deal with problems.

What Students Learned from LGiS

When asked, many students were able to thoughtfully articulate that they had learned something of value from LGiS. They highlighted social and emotional skills and prosocial values in their responses.

- The relational focus of the LGiS approach was especially prominent.
- Students felt supported by the attention to respecting and caring for others, and they valued the opportunity for experiential learning about what it was like to feel respected and to respect others.
- Learning how to work towards minimising distractibility and managing strong emotions such as anxiety, were acknowledged as having a variety of positive impacts.
- Reduced impulsivity and increased exposure to school staff within LGiS made it easier for more reserved or anxious students to participate in lessons and interact with their teachers.
- Some students noted a greater appreciation of differences and a heightened sense of respect.
- Several students reported that they are more knowledgeable about when they need to seek support and aware of the available options for seeking and gaining support.

Changes Due to LGiS

Students reported several levels of change in themselves, and their understanding of others varying between substantial change, uncertain change, and little to no change in a smaller number of students. Most students noticed changes in themselves during the program, with some drop-off occurring in the post-LGiS interviews. Students who reported that they had changed spoke directly about the type of change they had witnessed in themselves and could articulate how what they had learned in LGiS contributed to and supported that change. Changes reported included –

- positive mental wellbeing
- increased confidence
- better regulation of emotions
- improved communication skills
- planning and problem solving
- increased understanding and respect for others.

The majority of participating students, when asked, indicated that they would like to continue attending LGiS. Many of these students were keen to keep engaging with the safe space they had found LGiS to be.

School Staff Perspectives

The role of school staff in enabling and facilitating the LGiS program is key to its effective implementation. Focus groups with key staff who had undertaken LGiS training and led the program in their schools invited them to reflect on their experiences of undertaking and facilitating LGiS activities. The main themes derived from these data included –

- Connection: the emphasis on getting to know and engage with students on a personal level supported the development of strong and affirming connections.
- Safe Space: the sense of care and safety associated with the LGiS sessions was highlighted by many staff as one of its most beneficial features, and valued more highly than the program content.
- Real Relationships and Rapport: the quality of staff-student relationships developed through LGiS went beyond the program itself, leading to sustained changes in the ways that students interacted with LGiS staff elsewhere in the school.
- Respect: school staff centred on the importance of respect in their dealings with student participants and backed up their understanding with the core LGiS practices of descriptive praise and emotion coaching.
- Changes Observed: School staff were overall very positive in relation to changes in student behaviour that were observed within the program, noting that they were most

likely to be seen in peer relationships and in reduced internalising symptoms such as anxiety.

- Student Engagement: school staff reported that although some students started out cautious as to why they were there, after experiencing the program many students found it very beneficial and looked forward to attending.

Whereas school staff strongly endorsed the value of LGiS relational pedagogy, it was frequently difficult to match the structure and content of LGiS with the systems governing curriculum content and programming in their schools. The report elaborates staff's reflections on the elements of content and programming that worked well in their contexts and those that were more difficult.

Implementation of LGiS

Implementation factors have direct impacts on the effectiveness and sustainability of any school-based intervention.

- The implementation issues of most concerns for schools in the pilot include staffing, timetabling, and the contextual fit of LGiS for the in-school setting.
- Unanticipated disruptions occasioned by the pandemic challenged schools and affected LGiS implementation.
- LG responded to these difficulties by adjusting requirements for implementation and offering additional supports. While these adaptations allowed the program to proceed in most schools, inevitable challenges remained.
- Understanding and accommodating the needs of schools has been a significant and evolving process requiring ongoing communications between LG and the participating schools.

Sustainability

Resourcing issues for the LGiS program remained significant throughout the pilot and contributed to the withdrawal of two of the seven schools. Comments from one school that felt unable to continue with LGiS due to financial and resourcing constraints nonetheless reflected positively on the program.

"I believe it's a good strong program, but it's the, how do you adapt it into a comprehensive high school, which has got a complex set of complex constraints. The only way you can do that is if you've got the budget, which will enable to do that."

During the research consultations, several senior school staff made suggestions as to how to create a more workable fit for delivery of LGiS in their schools. Their recommendations, aligned with the continuum of care model, are elucidated in the report. These suggestions offer strategic

opportunities that could support the sustainability of Learning Ground in School by meeting the needs that schools have identified within their operational frameworks and capacities.

The original Learning Ground program provides a highly specialised and individualised approach for high-risk students. In seeking to extend its reach into schools LGiS has undergone many significant changes in relation to student and staff ratios, frequency, and intensity of delivery. It is not yet clear what the effects of broadening its target group will be. LG needs to consider the most effective ways for LGiS to maintain a high level of support for the disadvantaged young people at the heart of its approach.

Cultural Evaluation of Aboriginal Content and Approach

The cultural review affirmed that a core highlight of the LGiS program is the recognition that Aboriginal knowledge is of educational benefit to all participants. By making Aboriginal knowledge central within LGiS, the program is encouraging positive relationships to be built as the participants learn and grow together. Ultimately, these positive relationships highlight a pathway towards reconciliation at a grassroots level. The cultural review comments on key themes from the relevant literature and frames its analysis based on a consideration of the collaborative development of the original LG program, ongoing consultation and participation of Aboriginal peoples within LGiS, the need to elevate Aboriginal voices within LGiS and recognise the cultural diversity in Aboriginal communities, the importance of clearly acknowledging Aboriginal people's intellectual property rights. Its conclusions include –

- LGiS content has been derived from the Learning Ground program which was originally conceived and designed almost 20 years ago in partnership with respected Aboriginal Elders and leaders.
- While it is evident that Learning Ground has continued to cultivate and maintain relationships with traditional custodians, Elders, and of course its community over this time, the cultural review provided recommendations for ensuring that these contributions are visible and appropriately acknowledged in the program materials.
- Formalising an Aboriginal Advisory Body would further extend the respect offered by Learning Ground to Aboriginal people, provide an avenue for ongoing review, and encourage Learning Ground to learn about and incorporate advances in Aboriginal education that would support and enhance the program.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Findings from the present study into LGiS implementation reinforce previous evidence of the effectiveness of Learning Ground's relational pedagogy for supporting young people's sense of wellbeing and growing their self-awareness and communication skills.

The schools who adopted the LGiS initiative appreciated the benefits of its relational pedagogy for cultivating an enabling sense of safety and support among the students who attended. This appreciation for the intent of the program was encapsulated in the idea expressed by a senior school staff member that Learning Ground is about *"building the person from inside so they've got the confidence to shine outside."*

Notwithstanding these substantial benefits, implementation factors emerged as noteworthy concerns, raising questions about what might constitute the most effective and appropriate form for Learning Ground to engage with schools to make a sustained difference for the young people it seeks to serve.

The report concludes with recommendations and strategic opportunities that would substantially improve the viability of long-term engagement of Learning Ground in School. These are summarised as follows:

Recommendations

1. Review the program logic for LGiS to ensure that aims, scope and implementation processes are well targeted and well matched to school structures, needs and available resources.

As part of this work the researchers recommend that Learning Ground review its existing program logic to:

- i) Benchmark the LGiS program against the current field of similar programs.
- ii) Ensure that program planning is continually informed by current policy and practice in relation to trauma responsive practice and continuum of care in schools.
- iii) Review the suggestions put forward by schools for ways that LGiS could best be accommodated in their settings.

2. Further enhance the cultural safety of the program through continuing engagement with Aboriginal knowledge holders.

- i) Include a statement of rationale regarding the significance and value of Aboriginal content within LGiS.
- ii) Establish an Aboriginal Advisory Working Group for LGiS.
- iii) Aboriginal knowledge, and how it is used and described within LGiS should continue to be a core focus of ongoing review and revision.

- iv) Facilitate the Invitation of Elders and other Aboriginal community leaders and/or educators to participate in each LGiS implementation.
- v) Include a pathway for LGiS participants to connect with their culture and connect them with opportunities to engage with their local community if they so wish.

3. Based on the above recommendations continue to refine LGiS content to ensure that it is effectively targeted and has appropriate scaffolding and support for both staff and students.

- i) Review and refine purpose and rationale considering current human rights-based movements' emphasis on reconciliation and Aboriginal Voices.
- ii) Consider how to ensure fidelity of relational pedagogy by providing appropriately spaced and sequenced professional learning opportunities.
- iii) Dosage of student and staff program components should be carefully considered and monitored for quality and outcomes.
- iv) Enhance program content with active learning strategies and check for currency in relation to curriculum and professional and research literature in education.
- v) Particular attention should be paid to student selection processes to avoid stigmatisation and misconceptions.

4. The pilot reported in this report can be considered a proof-of-concept in relation to LGiS, as such, continued evaluation is needed

It is recommended that further research is conducted to continue to evaluate LGiS with a big enough sample size to generate a well-powered assessment of its effects. Further research would allow stronger conclusions as to whether LGiS can achieve its aims and sustain them over an extended period. Such evaluation would benefit from the recommendations listed herein and ideally, evaluate fidelity and adaptation, include a control group, and have at least a six-month post-program follow-up. Larger studies with appropriate control groups, evaluation of fidelity and adaptation, and longer follow-up will assist in determining whether the intervention results are due to specific components of LGiS, whether positive results obtained can be improved even further, and whether the intervention can be trimmed. Importantly, it will allow an investigation of who benefits most from LGiS and under what conditions.

For detailed recommendations please refer to sections 6 and 7 of the report.

Section One: Background to the Evaluation of Learning Ground in School

Introduction to Learning Ground

Chain Reaction Foundation acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the First Nations of Australia and the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on. We pay respect to their Elders past, present and future. We acknowledge and recognise the ongoing grief and loss from dislocation, from the removal of their children and from the loss of life and freedom. We recognise their strength and resilience and support their efforts to preserve Aboriginal Culture, the oldest living culture in the world.

Chain Reaction Foundation (Chain Reaction) was established in 2002; a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee to encourage the development of social cohesion and inclusion both locally and nationally. Chain Reaction works with families, particularly in low socio-economic environments and engages with schools, business, and government to create a bridge of understanding.

Chain Reaction exists to enhance the lives of disadvantaged young adolescents by addressing the challenges of increased disconnection, emerging behavioural and mental health concerns, and the need to create a sense of belonging within schools and communities. Learning Ground in Mount Druitt was established as an innovative, welcoming and safe space for young adolescents and their families. Learning Ground programs call on Aboriginal values both traditional and contemporary in seeking deep connection with family and others and in growing an understanding of our place in society. The adolescent program has been tried, tested and refined over 18 years and has been found to be highly effective in promoting self-efficacy, behavioural change and connection for young people.

The Learning Ground in School (LGiS) program is the ‘in school’ implementation of the Learning Ground program that has been developed, delivered, and refined in a single centre in Mt Druitt over 18 years. Weekly programs at the centre continue three days a week.

Given the success rate of students re-engaging in their education following participation in Mt Druitt Learning Ground and the recognition from schools of the significant value of the program, Chain Reaction Foundation saw the need to scale up, to create a delivery model which gives more young adolescents access to the program. Rather than assume the program was transferable, Chain

Reaction engaged in a three-year pilot in Western and Southwestern Sydney schools. Senior Western Sydney University researchers have led the evaluation of LGiS implementation in schools.

Background to the Research

Disengagement from schooling has short-term impacts on students' learning, social relationships, and wellbeing. It has long-term impacts on overall academic achievement, future work prospects, and a host of social and mental health outcomes. Recent international data shows that Australian school students' engagement in learning and educational achievement has fallen by comparison with that of comparable countries and that this is related to growing inequities in the schooling system. The link between disengagement and disruptive behaviour was also highlighted in a recent OECD report that found Australian classrooms tend to be more disruptive than those of other countries, with detrimental effects on student learning and teacher retention (OECD, 2023).

When schools lack well-resourced alternatives, punitive and counterproductive disciplinary measures such as suspension remain a common response to students' challenging behaviours (Dobia et al., 2014; Anyon et al., 2014). However, excluding students from school compounds academic difficulties, increases antisocial behaviour, impacts negatively on students' wellbeing, and is strongly implicated in the school-to-prison pipeline (Hemphill et al., 2010; Noltemeyer, et al., 2015). The social exclusion impacts of school suspension are particularly evident for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In Semester 1 of 2022, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students made up 24% of all long suspensions in NSW with the average length of long suspensions being 13.2 days (NSW DOE, 2022).

Based on a relational and humanistic model, and incorporating the key tenet of 'each one, teach one,' signalling the importance of mutuality and reciprocity, Learning Ground's Young Adolescent Program commenced in 2006. This program incorporated both Western practices and knowledge in relation to human development and selected interpretations of Aboriginal principles and practices about the self and connection to each other. The Learning Ground program was not a targeted program for Aboriginal students alone, it was intended for young people of all backgrounds.

This mix made the program unique. Being able to deliver programs that are culturally responsive for Aboriginal people is important in terms of working effectively with communities to meet their unique strengths, opportunities, and challenges. Culturally responsive programs are vital for respecting the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and avoiding cultural misrepresentations or tokenisation (Walker et al., 2014; Milner, 2017; Maxwell et al., 2018).

A research evaluation conducted by researchers from Western Sydney University in 2016 concluded that the Learning Ground (LG) program was an example of a successful social and emotional learning intervention that could work effectively with the most difficult young people. It

was found to be successful in helping severely marginalised youth to address personal risks, repair relationships and re-engage with education.

The evaluation found that the combination of deep respect, emotion coaching and descriptive praise allowed young people who may have seldom experienced respectful care of this kind to feel valued. Participants in the 2016 evaluation identified that the Learning Ground program supported them to learn from each other about their values and goals in life, how to understand their emotions, the choices they make, about respect and how to work things out with others. Similarly, the adult mentors involved in co-facilitating the program with the young people described the benefits of their learning as well as the pleasure they derived from the authentic two-way relationships the program encouraged them to form. On this basis, the program was recognised as an example of an effective Tier 3 intervention, able to provide schools with an avenue of support for their most challenging students (Parada et al., 2016).

Parada et al. (2016) also observed that, at the time, Learning Ground was experiencing difficulties in gaining education department recognition of the significant work they were doing. Accordingly, the authors made several recommendations for Learning Ground to develop its educational partnerships with the school system. These included undertaking closer liaison with local schools and education officials to promote understanding of the Learning Ground program, building more effective links to facilitate referral and support students transitioning between Learning Ground and schools, investigating ways that the successful approaches used at Learning Ground could be offered as professional learning to school staff, and working with Aboriginal educational and cultural advisors to strengthen the Aboriginal content of the program in light of recent developments in the field.

Following the 2016 evaluation, Learning Ground, motivated by its founding principles of working as a catalyst for change, saw the opportunity to further develop its links with schools by promoting its approach to re-engaging students through a home-grown program named Learning Ground in School (LGiS). Despite the recognised importance of social and emotional education in school settings (Dobia et al., 2020), there is a dearth of Australian developed school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs (Frydenberg et al., 2017). In secondary settings, there is a particular need to provide the kind of program that engages students in exploring their own life experiences in meaningful ways. This approach must go beyond a ‘chalk and talk’ teaching to social and emotional learning and provide awareness of the role of teacher–student relationships in effectively supporting learning and engagement (Endedijk et al., 2021). A central emphasis on supportive relationships was fundamental to the original Learning Ground program.

LGiS is an adaptation of Learning Ground, specifically developed for secondary schools and was launched with the aim of supporting schools to work more effectively and proactively with at-

risk young people. The adapted program consists of a teacher training/support component and a student component. The teacher training component has two main goals. First, it introduces, explains, and instructs teachers on the LGiS program, its rationale, structure, and use of resources. Secondly, it provides teachers with additional skills in student social/emotional development, behavioural management, and communication strategies. These skills are framed around a ‘mentorship’ model. That is, teachers are encouraged to see their roles as trusted advisers to their students and to frame their responses to student misbehaviour from this perspective.

As part of LGiS, students participate in a group program intended for no more than 21 participants. It was originally structured so that groups ran for 80 minutes twice a week for 8 weeks each term, over 3 school terms. The recommendation for twice weekly sessions was based on prevailing evidence of effectiveness for social and emotional learning programs (Dobia et al., 2020). However, in practice, this scheduling was not feasible for schools, and the model was adjusted to one session per week for eight weeks over two terms. The program seeks to promote students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural change through a series of pre-developed activities and educational opportunities.

Each of the group sessions is structured around themes with manualised associated activities. These themes include ‘the five mes’ – learning which centres on the exploration of the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of the self. Additional topics focus on developing respect, safety, and responsibility, and investigate alternatives to violent behaviour, including choosing non-violence, managing anger management, and understanding that knowledge is power. Bullying is addressed, as is the use of social media and electronic devices. The focus on Aboriginal values is prominent in the use of holistic principles associated with connectedness, particularly involving place and kinship, and through the respectful incorporation of Dreaming stories and animal guides to convey key elements of the program. LGiS focuses on developing trust and connection between fellow student participants and between the teacher (facilitator) and participating students, with the mentoring relationship between adult guides and young people understood as the primary motivator for change (see Appendix D, for program outline).

LGiS was developed with the expectation that school staff would be trained as primary facilitators and would be supported by an experienced Learning Ground (LG) mentor. The role of the LG mentors was to model the approach to working with students and provide coaching support as needed to the school-based facilitators and mentors. A 3-day training package was developed by LG to introduce staff to the program, and weekly lesson plans were prepared based on the Learning Ground curriculum.

An increasing emphasis on utilising evidence-based interventions in schools underlines the importance of incorporating robust evaluation methods alongside the process of program

development (NSW Department of Education, 2021). In planning its piloting of the newly developed Learning Ground in School (LGiS) program, Chain Reaction Foundation commissioned Western Sydney University to undertake an independent research evaluation of the initiative. With the pilot complete, this report presents the concluding findings of the 2020-2022 evaluation of LGiS.

This report offers a comprehensive analysis, incorporating both outcome and process evaluation, to consider impacts on students and schools. The section below proceeds to outline the research aims and scope, which is followed by a detailed account of the methods, participants, measures, and procedures used in the research. The findings from a thoroughgoing quantitative analysis of students' emotional and behavioural functioning and school belonging are presented next. Pre- and post-evaluation provide an assessment of outcomes for the student participants.

Having examined the results from aggregated information obtained via surveys, the qualitative findings are presented. These are based on a combination of one-on-one interviews and focus groups with students and staff. Students' views directly address the question: What did students themselves have to say about LGiS? The qualitative findings from the staff who implemented the program in schools provide considerable insights into their perspectives on program implementation and outcomes. An evaluation of implementation factors that affected the project considers reflections from both the LG mentors and school staff. A specially commissioned cultural evaluation of LGiS content was also undertaken by Ms Virginia O'Rourke. She provides a detailed analysis of the Aboriginal cultural dimensions of the LGiS materials and offers comprehensive recommendations for further developing the LGiS cultural content and for supporting culturally responsive implementation in schools. In the final sections the research team offers overall conclusions and detailed recommendations.

Section Two: Research Aims and Scope

Introduction

The purpose of this final report is to provide an analysis of collected data and information from the pilot implementation of the Learning Ground in School Program over 2020-22. It follows on from the two previous interim reports, utilising data from all schools involved over the period of the project and emphasising student experience and outcomes, as well as implementation effectiveness for staff and schools.

The main goal of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Learning Ground in School program. It aimed to investigate a) how the LG program could be effectively translated into school settings, b) what challenges may be encountered, and c) what benefits may be gained.

The key research questions for the evaluation which form the basis of this report were:

- How might the LG program benefit students' general wellbeing and resilience?
- How can the LG program be taken up in school settings to re-engage students at risk of school failure?
- Does the implementation of the LG program improve the disciplinary culture of schools by promoting teachers' use of positive, culturally sensitive behaviour management?

Research Approach

This research employed a mixed-method approach that enabled both quantitative evaluation of student outcomes and qualitative investigation of a range of implementation factors. In alignment with the main objectives of the LGiS program, the quantitative component sought to measure changes in students' emotional, behavioural, and social functioning, as well as changes in school connectedness and belonging. The qualitative component sought to gather situated perspectives of students on their experience of the program and what they felt they got out of it. Interviews and focus groups with school and LG staff allowed the research team to track the process and progress of the intervention and identify implementation factors that benefited or challenged program uptake and delivery.

Full research ethics approval was obtained from Western Sydney University's Human Ethics Committee (Approval No. H13699) and the NSW State Education Research Applications Process (SERAP, Approval No. 2020099). Both parental/guardian and student informed consent was sought for each student to participate in the evaluation of LGiS once the school had nominated them to be

part of the program. Additionally, student consent was requested by the research team member each time that data was gathered. If the student did not consent to being interviewed and or completing the questionnaire, they were informed that they did not have to.

Interviews and focus groups were undertaken by the research team with Learning Ground staff members, students, teachers implementing the programs, and school executive members. Students participated in interviews, initially when they joined the program and again once the program had been completed. Due to the difficulty of engaging school staff in the research in 2020, teacher-facilitators were invited to participate in brief written reflections via email. From 2021, the school staff involved in implementing the program were invited to participate in focus groups which were held early in the implementation phase, around the midpoint, and at the end. LG Staff participated in initial and final focus groups.

Surveys consisting of validated measures of wellbeing and school connectedness were used to collect discrete data on the behavioural functioning of the students participating in the program. It was intended to undertake surveys with the students (self-report), parents and teachers to assess potential wellbeing improvements resulting from the program. While numerous attempts were made to enlist parent participation, no surveys were completed. Due to gaps and delays in teacher participation in the surveys, there was insufficient pre-post data to allow meaningful analysis.

The provision of two interim reports (see Appendices) informed Learning Ground about issues with engagement and implementation, some of which they sought to modify because of the feedback. There was therefore an element of developmental evaluation embedded in the research process. In addition, the LGiS program documentation and implementation manuals underwent a rigorous cultural evaluation, the results of which are included as a key part of this report.

The *Training Manual for Professionals* and the *Facilitator and Mentor Handbooks* were reviewed for quality and appropriateness of the use of Aboriginal knowledge and values. The purpose was to evaluate the LGiS pilot materials in terms of how effectively Learning Ground has articulated the depth of knowledge they have regarding Aboriginal people's knowledges and perspectives. The concepts used to evaluate the pilot materials were drawn from relevant research literature and include consideration of the historical context; consultation; participation; elevating Aboriginal voices; recognising cultural diversity and intellectual property rights.

The approach taken to the cultural evaluation component included meetings with Learning Ground staff to understand their engagement with the local Aboriginal community. These meetings explored the historical foundation and future direction of Learning Ground, emphasising its commitment to engaging with Aboriginal peoples since its inception. A review of Learning Ground's materials and publicly available reports was conducted. The LGiS pilot materials, including the *Training Manual for Professionals* and the *Facilitator and Mentor Handbooks*, were evaluated using

a methodical thematic analysis approach based on six core themes identified in the relevant research literature: Consideration of the Historical Context, Consultation with Aboriginal peoples, Participation of Aboriginal peoples, Elevating Aboriginal Voices, Recognising Cultural Diversity, and Intellectual Property Rights.

Learning Ground Team

The Learning Ground senior executive team, led by its Director, developed the LGiS program and undertook school recruitment and training. Learning Ground developed program resources which included a training manual for professionals and the facilitator handbooks which provided the teaching content for the program delivered in schools. In addition, Learning Ground undertook to provide one, and occasionally two, experienced mentors from Mt Druitt Learning Ground whose role was to assist in teaching preparation and support and to attend every second week during the first year of the program delivery to support the school-based Facilitator and Mentors appointed by each school. A total of eight Learning Ground Mentors participated in facilitating the program and in the research evaluation.

Participating Schools

In 2020, LGiS commenced in two schools. In 2021 one of the initial schools declined to continue the program, and three new schools were recruited. In 2022 a further two schools joined the program. Hence, across the period researched, LGiS was implemented in seven NSW high schools. Recruitment of schools to LGiS began with an initial phone call between the LG Director and the school principal. The phone call included a brief on LGiS and its expected outcomes. Following the phone call, a face-to-face meeting with school executives and the wellbeing team was conducted at the school. This meeting discussed resourcing, student selection and implementation. Similar meetings were held in term 3 of each school year to discuss the following year's implementation.

The seven NSW metropolitan high schools involved in the Learning Ground in School (LGiS) project cater to many students for whom complex intersecting inequities are a dominant feature of their lives. These schools had a mean ICSEA level of 900, below the state average of 1000. The ICSEA measure is an assessment of parental education and qualifications, alongside school-level factors of geographical location and the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending (ACARA, 2015). The results from the Australian National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) highlight the well below average Reading and Numeracy results of Year 7 students at these high schools (MySchool, 2022). Across these schools, student attendance is low, with a mean of 81.7% attendance for students. Further, 42% of students have a language background other than English, and 17% are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (MySchool, 2022).

Table 1. School Demographics of Participating Schools

School	ICSEA*	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (%)	Language Background other than English (%)	Student Attendance (%)
1	Median	11	40	78
2	Low	28	32	79
3	Median	8	40	85
4	Median	11	51	88
5	Median	5	56	91
6	Low	36	27	72
7	Low	21	47	79

Note: *Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). (ACARA, 2015)
Qualitative descriptors were used to protect schools' identities.

Participating Staff

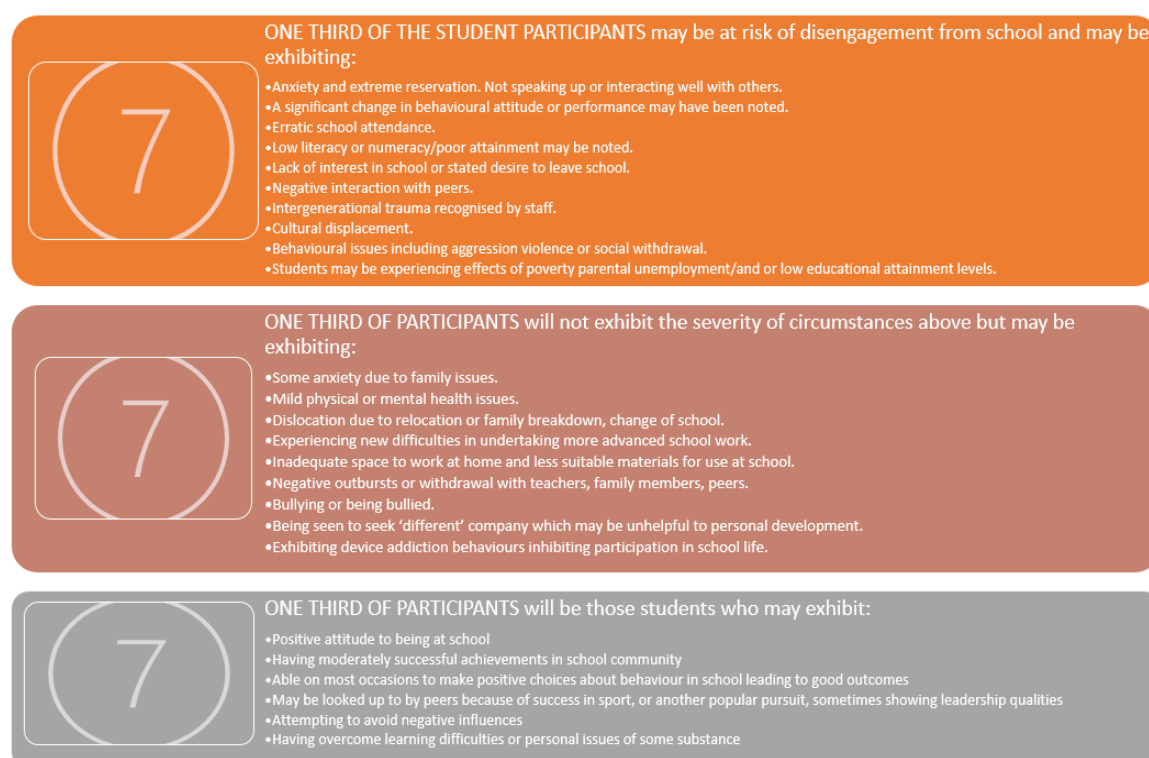
Professional learning for school staff was conducted on-site at Learning Ground, Mt Druitt on several occasions as schools came on board. In June 2020 the initial trainings were conducted for staff from the first 2 schools in a 3-day block. This format was repeated in July 2020 for a third school, and in July 2021 for staff from two newly joining schools and as a refresher for others. In March 2022 a 3-day training was held for staff from the final two schools to join the program. A one-day refresher training was held in April 2022 for staff who were new to LGiS. All school executives and mentors also attended a separate induction led by the research team to orientate the schools to the research methods and procedures.

In total, 39 school staff received professional learning and went on to be involved in LGiS across the three years of the study. The staff involved included teachers and student support officers. Several teachers from the school's student learning units were involved; there were also teachers from a variety of KLAs including Science, Maths, English, HSIE, and PDHPE. Following the initial phase, which identified issues with staff skills and buy-in, a stronger focus on student wellbeing was highlighted in LG recruitment materials, which resulted in the inclusion of more wellbeing staff such as Student Learning Support Officers and Social Work-trained Student Support Officers. In some schools, there was also increased involvement of Heads of Wellbeing in recruitment, oversight, and delivery.

Participating Students

Student recruitment was undertaken by the schools in response to criteria supplied by Learning Ground. After the 2020 pilot, when it was found that student engagement was impacted by their sense of having been targeted for poor behaviour, LG changed their recruitment criteria in 2021 to highlight a focus on student wellbeing and a selection strategy they referred to as ‘7-7-7’. This was intended to encourage the recruitment of a more diverse cohort with selection based on 7 students at very high risk, 7 at medium and 7 at low to very low risk, to be recruited for the groups. They further informed the schools that students should be drawn from years 8 and 9. The application of these principles to the student selection process was left to the individual schools, who interpreted it according to their contexts. In practice, some schools recruited students in years 8 and 9, some in year 8 only and some in year 7.

Figure 1. LGiS 7-7-7 Student Selection Criteria Provided to Schools



The LG Director explained that the model was offered as a way to articulate the ratio of participants that would allow for modelling and mutual learning for all students in LGiS. Schools had the option of withdrawing participants or implementing them in a classroom setting as part of a PDHPE class. Two schools in 2021 implemented the program as a whole class approach and two schools as a withdrawal class. In 2022, one school continued with the whole class approach and the other five opted to implement LGiS as a withdrawal program.

Survey Administration

An online survey was used to collect basic demographic information (e.g., name, gender, and school attended) as well as measures of school connectedness and behavioural/emotional functioning. Student identifying information (name) was collected to match student surveys with their subsequent survey post-intervention. All identifiers were later removed once data collection was finalised. Students completed the surveys electronically via Qualtrics software running through encrypted servers under Western Sydney University use. The information was entered by the students themselves. Students were provided with access to a digital device by the school, Western Sydney University research staff, or could use their own by scanning a QR code that would take them to the survey. Surveys were collected at different time points between the years 2020 and 2022. It was originally intended to survey key stakeholders at the start of the program, middle and as follow-up at the completion of the program, but due to COVID-19 disruption (see below) only pre- and post-program surveys were carried out.

Questionnaires

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 2001) and the School Belonging Scale (SBS, Parada, 2019) formed the main part of the student survey. The SDQ is a brief emotional and behavioural screening questionnaire for children and young people. The SDQ is one of the most widely and internationally used measures of child mental health and has been translated into more than 80 languages. The tool can capture the perspective of children and young people (CYP), their parents and teachers. The SDQ can be completed by children and young people aged 11-17 years old. Clinical experience indicates that the SDQ may be appropriate to use with CYP with mild learning difficulties, but not with more severe learning difficulties (Law & Wolpert, 2014). The 25 items in the SDQ comprise 5 scales of 5 items each. The scales include an Emotional symptoms subscale, a Conduct problems subscale, a Hyperactivity/inattention subscale, a Peer relationships problem subscale, and a Prosocial behaviour subscale. A student's sense of belonging to the school (organisation) as opposed to individuals within a school (peers) plays a significant part in pupils' behaviour and wellbeing (Shochet et al., 2006; Roffey & Boyle, 2018). The SBS was developed to assess three theoretically derived aspects of school belonging. These include attachment or bonding to school, acceptance of school rules and perceived school support (see Appendix A for scale items).

Qualitative Tools and Analysis

In addition to the quantitative surveys, school students were invited to participate in structured open-ended interviews at the beginning and end of the research phase. In some instances, students preferred to be interviewed in pairs or small groups. They were asked about their experience of school, their experience of LGiS, and whether they have any suggestions for improving it. The

focus of the interviews was to learn what difference the program makes for young people. (See Appendix C for interview protocols.)

Semi-structured focus group discussions for school staff asked about their experiences with implementing LGiS, and what difference it made for them, their students, and their school. They were also asked for suggestions (if any) as to how it could be improved. The LGiS mentor focus groups were conducted as open-ended explorations that asked about their experiences with LGiS, what they learnt from being part of the implementation team, and how much difference they felt it made for the students, the teachers, and individual schools. LG mentors were also asked for their suggestions (if any) as to how it could be improved.

All interviews and focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed for research purposes. The data was coded using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2020) reflexive thematic analysis approach for the students and separately for the school staff and LG mentors with the aid of NVivo software. All available transcripts were included in the coding and codes were independently reviewed by multiple members of the research team. As detailed thematic analyses have already been provided in the previous interim reports, the focus of the qualitative analysis in this final report is on data gathered since May 2021.

COVID-19 Statement

It is important to note that the Learning Ground in School (LGiS) pilot took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. This period, with its numerous challenges, many of which specifically affected schools, forms a complex backdrop to the implementation and evaluation of LGiS. Before the pandemic emergency measures were implemented, Learning Ground had funding to commence in 2020 to work with a small number of schools in Western and Southwestern Sydney. Initial schools had already been recruited and were ready to commence trialling a program of professional learning by late 2019 to early 2020.

In 2020, as a response to COVID, schools around the world introduced various forms of learning from home. On several occasions, between 2020 and 2022 students in NSW schools spent a number of weeks learning from home, as schools were closed to students except for the children of essential workers. Additionally, students were not permitted to attend schools if they showed signs of or tested positive for COVID. When students did return, they returned to schools with significant disruptions to their routines caused by social distancing and hygiene measures. These essential measures brought about a substantial additional burden for all school staff and in particular school administrators and teachers who experienced unsustainable increased workloads and expectations, which negatively affected mental health and family life (Van Bergen & Daniel, 2022). For students, this included increased anxiety, increased loneliness, lower wellbeing, and increased exacerbation of mental illness (Li et al., 2022). Further, the challenges presented when returning to school have

included poorer social interactions, difficulties with re-engagement, poor attendance, and an increase in unacceptable behaviour (Fray et al., 2022).

In a comprehensive report prepared for the NSW Department of Education, Gore and colleagues (2020) sampled students and teachers from 51 schools, finding that by the end of 2020 teachers and students reported substantial negative effects on wellbeing, including heightened stress, anxiety, fatigue, and behavioural issues. This included declines in teacher morale, increased fatigue, and an increased number of teachers contemplating, and eventually leaving the teaching profession.

The impacts of COVID-19 in relation to this project were numerous in terms of initial delays and interruptions to program continuity and student support. Some major delays and restrictions curtailed the conduct of the research by limiting onsite data collection at crucial points in the process and reducing the availability of critical staff to be interviewed or assist with data collection. Research protocols had to respond to these challenges in a flexible manner and were required to shift significantly over the 3 years of the project. For example, due to measures such as social distancing and regulations preventing researchers from entering schools, most focus groups and individual interviews were conducted online. Online focus groups and individual interviews increased accessibility and have been shown to allow sound rapport with participants (Keen et al., 2022), but they were not envisaged in initial preparation for the evaluation.

Section Three: Indicators of Overall Emotional, Behavioural Functioning and School Belonging

Introduction

In this section, we present the results of the analysis of students' surveys. As stated earlier, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 2001) and the School Belonging Scale (SBS, Parada, 2019) were used to obtain self-reported estimates of overall wellbeing and school connectedness. The 25 items in the SDQ are used to measure emotional symptoms (e.g., I worry a lot, I am often unhappy), conduct problems (e.g., I get very angry, I fight a lot), hyperactivity/inattention difficulties (e.g., I am constantly fidgeting, I am easily distracted), peer relationships problems (e.g., Other children or young people pick on me, I am usually on my own), and prosocial behaviour (I try to be nice to other people, I often volunteer to help others. See Appendix A for all scale items). Additionally, when used in general populations, these scores can be combined into three scales 'internalising problems' characterised by depressive and anxiety-like difficulties, and 'externalising problems' representing problematic behaviour related to poor impulse control, including rule-breaking, aggression, impulsivity, and inattention. The original prosocial scale makes up the third scale (Goodman et al., 2010).

The School Belonging Scale (SBS) assesses three aspects of school belonging. These include attachment or bonding to school (e.g., I feel good about being in my school, I feel the best when I am at my school), acceptance of rules (e.g., I accept the rules and procedures set by my school) and perceived school support (e.g., I can get good support from my school, I am confident that I am well supported by my school). By combining all the scales, a total school belonging score can be derived. (See Appendix A for reliabilities of the instruments with the current sample of students).

The surveys were administered electronically via Qualtrics and completed individually by students under the supervision of a research team member. During COVID lockdowns a small number of students completed the survey at home at their own pace. As no tracking information was collected it is not possible to determine how many of these surveys were completed out of school premises. At no time were surveys completed under the supervision of an LGiS team member. Although School and Parent SDQ surveys were also requested, there was insufficient data collected for a meaningful analysis. Consequently, only results from the students for whom SDQ scores were available are reported here.

Profile of Students Who Participated in the LGiS Evaluation

Table 2 shows the distribution of students by school for whom pre-LGiS surveys were collected. It is important to note that due to ethical and privacy protocols, data on the total number of students participating at each school was not available to the evaluation team. Information was only made available about students who consented to participate in the evaluation of the program. From Table 2, students retained in this report represented all the schools participating in the pilot program for LGiS.

Table 2. Distribution of Students by School

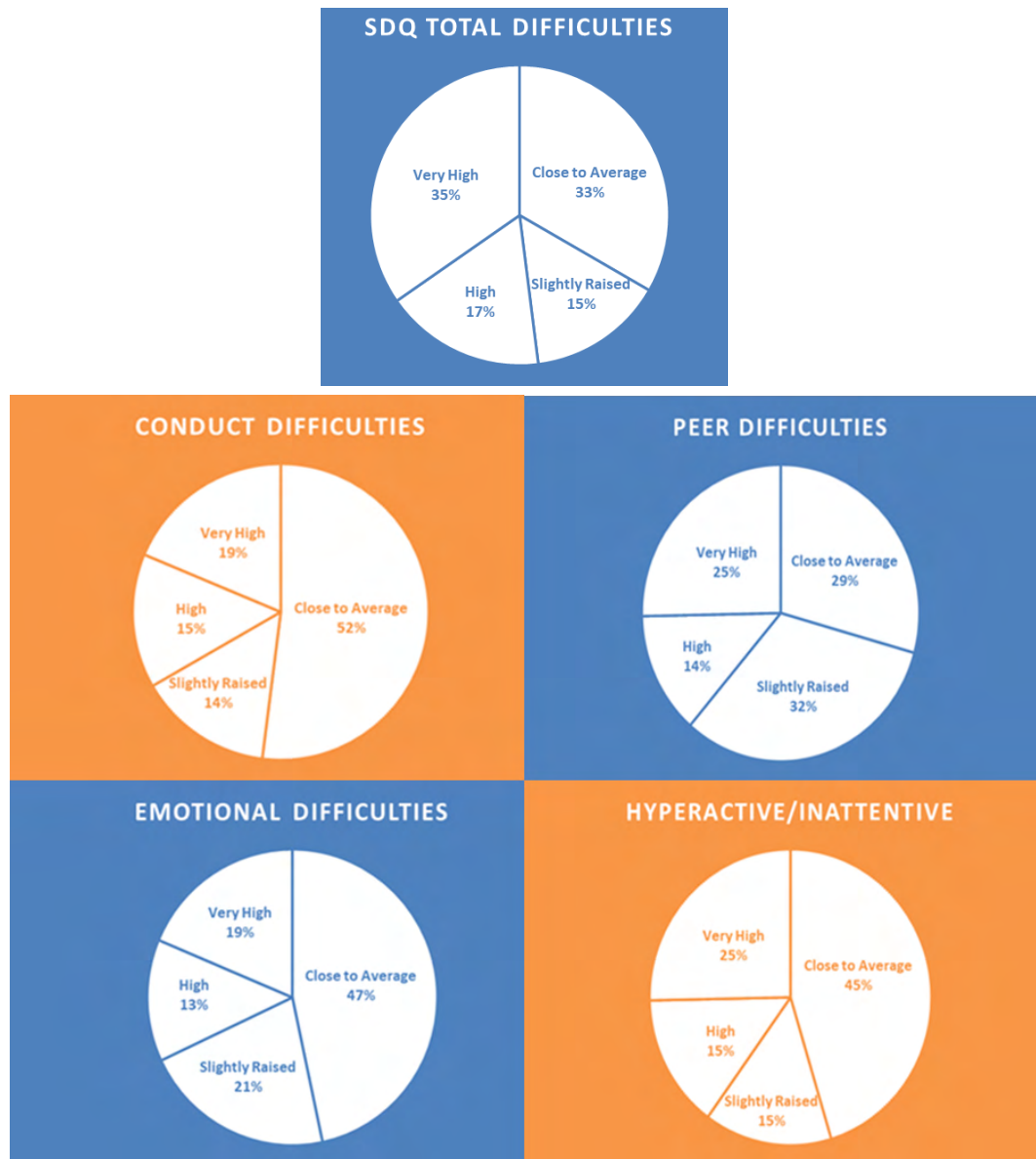
School	<i>N</i>	Percent	Gender
1	6	8.00%	4
2	17	22.70%	11
3	12	16.00%	6
4	9	12.00%	6
5	11	14.70%	3
6	10	13.30%	5
7	10	13.30%	5
Total	75	100%	40

Note: *N* = Number of students. Gender = number of students who identified as female. The balance of students all identified as male.

Using scores on the five individual scales of the SDQ and recommended cut-off scores, individual student's scores can be classified according to their expected frequency in the general population (Goodman, 2001). Figure 2 below shows results for students participating across all seven school sites (*N* = 75), 47% of whom identified as male and 53% as female; 23% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, with an average age of 13.6 years (*SD* = .99).

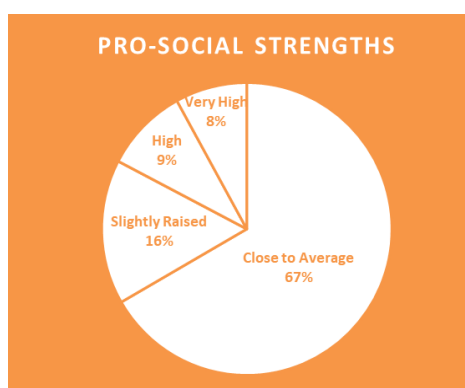
Based on the Total Score – a combination of all the SDQ problem scales – results from the student's self-report show that 35% of students rated themselves in the Very High level of total behavioural and emotional problems. 17% at the High level, 15% at the Slightly Raised and 33% rated themselves at the Average level (see Figure 2). In the general population, only 10% of the total population would be expected to score at either the High or Very High level. The students' self-report shows that 52% of the participants in the LGiS groups reported scores elevated enough to be classified as requiring clinical attention (Very High and High Levels). Results for each of the remaining scales are presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. SDQ Difficulties Student Classification



Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of students who met the criterion to be classified as Very High = top 5% of the general population, High = top 10% of the general population; Raised/Average = Still within Average for the population. SDQ = Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire

Figure 3. SDQ Pro-Social Skills Classification



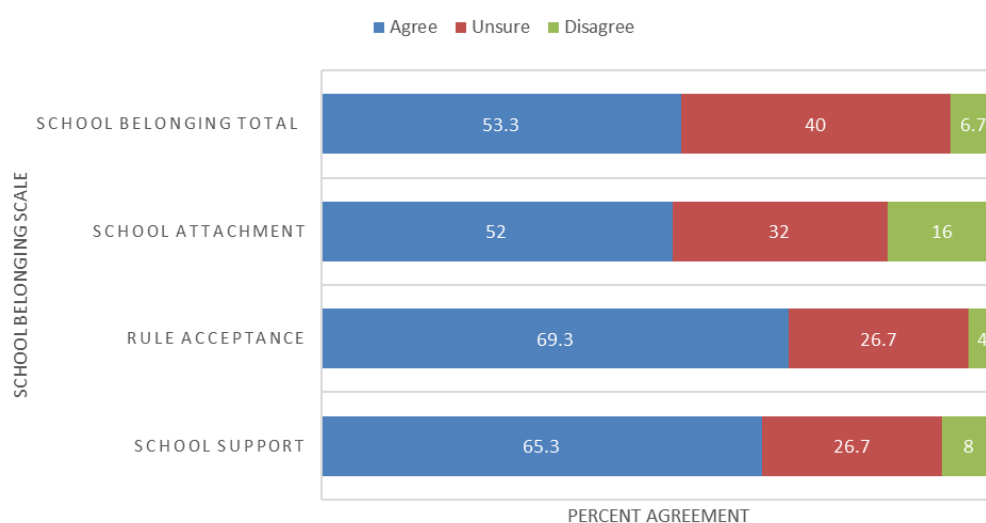
Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of students who met the criterion to be classified as Very High = top 5% of the general population, High = top 10% of the general population; Raised/Average = still within Average for the population. Higher scores are desirable for the pro-social strengths scale. SDQ = Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire

From Figures 2 and 3, students' self-reports indicate that many of them were experiencing significant emotional and behavioural difficulties. For example, significant conduct difficulties (E.g., endorsing items such as: 'I get very angry', 'I fight a lot', 'I take things that are not mine') were present in 34% of the students who were selected to a degree that would be considered substantially outside the general population expectations (e.g., expected in less than 10% of the general population). Presenting with a similar pattern of elevated difficulties were 40% of the participants who self-reported difficulties of a hyperactive/inattentive type (e.g., 'I am restless', 'I am easily distracted'); 32% reporting emotional difficulties (E.g., 'I worry a lot', 'I am often unhappy', 'I have many fears'); 39% reporting peer problems (E.g., 'I am usually on my own', 'Other children or young people pick on me'). Therefore, a substantial number of participants selected for LGiS by their schools had difficulties comparable to young people being treated in a clinical setting. The SDQ also has a Prosocial scale (E.g., 'I try to be nice to other people', 'I usually share with others', 'I am helpful if someone is hurt'). Most students (67%) self-reported pro-social skills in the Average range with 17% meeting the criteria for impaired pro-social functioning.

Measures of school belonging were also collected via the School Belonging Scale (SBS). Each item is on a 7-point Likert scale, this scale ranges from 'Agree (1)' to 'Completely Disagree (7)', with the midpoint (4) being 'Neither Agree nor Disagree' for each statement (see Appendix A). This allows for creating a classification of 'agree', 'unsure', and 'disagree' for each student by collapsing the scores (e.g., a score of 12 and below is agree) for each of the scales. Figure 4 represents the percentage of students who agreed, were unsure, or disagreed that their school supported them, had fair rules, and that they felt a sense of attachment to their school ($N=75$). It also shows a combined school belonging score (school belonging total) made up of the combination of

the three individual scales. This last score represents the students' overall sense of belonging to their schools.

Figure 4. SBS Student Agreements



Note: Bars represent the percent student agreement for each of the scales and the total score for the School Belonging Scale (SBS). $N=75$.

From Figure 4, over 65% of students agreed that they received good support and that their school rules were fair or made sense to them. 52% of students agreed that they felt best when they were at their school, with 32% not being sure and 16% disagreed. The total school belonging score showed that most of the students (53.3%) selected for LGiS had a strong sense of belonging to their respective schools.

In summary, the students chosen to participate were experiencing a variety of significant psychological and behavioural challenges. Chief of these were conduct problems and difficulties with self-regulation (hyperactivity/concentration). Many of the students also reported simultaneously experiencing peer and emotional difficulties which were elevated enough to warrant concern and intervention. These students were mostly connected to their school, felt supported and mostly agreed that their respective school rules made sense to them.

Post Learning Ground in School (LGiS) Analysis

The LGiS pilot took place over three years 2020 – 2022. This included the period during COVID restrictions which led to shutting down of schools and restricting access to schools by non-school personnel. This period presented many challenges to both the LGiS teams at school and out of school, the evaluation team, and of course, students. The difficult circumstances led to data for the evaluation being collected at different times for some cohorts and significant participant attrition in

follow-up data collection. Students both left and joined the LGiS without having pre-data collected or had post-LGiS data collected without having pre-data available.

Table 3 below shows that from the original 75 students for whom pre-LGiS survey data was available, post-LGiS matching data (e.g., survey data for the same student pre- and post-LGiS) was available for only 30 students. For 45 students only pre-survey data was available (e.g., there was no post-survey) and for 30, only post data was available (e.g., there was no pre-survey).

Table 3. Data Available for Participants in LGiS

Cohort of Students	Number (N)
Total students' data collected at the start of LGiS	75
Total student post-LGiS data collected	60
Total students only pre-survey	45
Total students only post survey	30
Total students with matching pre and post surveys	30

The challenges experienced with data collection are not unusual for what is generally described in the literature as ‘real-world research’ (Leatherdale, 2019). However, it is very likely that the COVID period, being a modern unprecedented event, influenced the attrition rates. In order not to bias the results, a one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to assess whether the students in each of the groups, that is those for whom both pre- and post-data were available, those for whom only pre-data was available, and those for whom only post-data was available, were very much different from each other.

Two key measures relevant to this evaluation were used as the dependent variable: Total Emotional Difficulties from the SDQ and Total School Belonging Score from the SBS. In other words, we assessed whether the students from each of these groups had significantly different levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties and school disconnectedness, particularly in comparison to the group for whom full information was available. This is important as it may be that those students who were more-or-less disordered left or stayed in LGiS. This would place the results from the complete data group at risk of being unrepresentative of all the students for whom initial information was available. Using adjustments for non-equal group numbers, the results obtained were non-significant both for the SDQ total score ($F(2,102) = .78, p = .46$) and the SBS Total score ($F(2,102) = .375, p = .69$, see Appendix B for full results). This meant that the students in each of the groups (e.g., for those who have pre and posts and those for whom there are only pre or posts) were not substantially different from each other about these key variables.

Full Information Comparison

In this section, we present the results for students for whom there were surveys available before and after their participation in LGiS. This group represented 40% ($N = 30$) of the initial number of students surveyed, 50% being male with an average age of 13.3 years ($SD = 1.18$). Being female was significantly more related to total SDQ difficulties ($r = .37, p = .04$), particularly emotional difficulties ($r = .48, p = .01$), however, there were no other gender related differences for other SDQ scales or SBS scales, indicating that for other than emotional difficulties the two groups were similar. (See Appendix B). From the seven schools for whom surveys were available, only six had at least one student with both pre-and post-surveys. Therefore, only six schools are included in this analysis. Although all six schools had at least one representative in this group, as evident from the information provided in Table 4, the distribution of students per school was not uniform, with most of the sample coming from schools 2 ($N = 13$) and 5 ($N = 9$). with only 1 student from schools 1 and 4, 3 from schools 3 and 6. For this reason, no school-based comparisons were possible.

Table 4. Distribution of Students by School

School	Number of Students	Per cent
1	1	3.3
2	13	43.3
3	3	10.0
4	1	3.3
5	9	30.0
6	3	10.0
Total	30	100.0

Pre and Post Intervention Results on Measured Outcomes

An examination of the mean scores for the students following LGiS (see Table 5) showed small differences which were mostly in the expected direction. This indicated that students reported emotional and behavioural difficulties, as well as school belonging scores, had changed in the period following completion of LGiS. A series of paired one-tail samples t -tests were conducted¹. Both statistical significance and effect sizes, using Cohen's d , were calculated.

Statistical significance and effect size are different ways of evaluating an intervention's results and both are important. Statistical significance states whether a difference post LGiS may

¹ One of the difficulties with the small overall sample of students for whom complete data was available is the low statistical power to conduct means differences tests. Statistical power, or sensitivity, is the likelihood of a statistical significance test detecting an effect when there is one. Low power means that the test only has a small chance of detecting a true effect (even if they are there). Calculations indicated that to detect a small effect (Cohen's $d = .01$) using a one-tail t -test, a sample size of 100 students was needed. This needs to be kept in mind when interpreting the results provided. It is likely that with a larger sample more post-intervention significant differences would have been detected if they were present.

have been due to chance. If a result is statistically significant, then we can be confident that that difference was not by chance. Statistical significance however offers no information on the size or importance of that result and is affected by sample size. Larger samples are more likely to detect differences even if none are there, meaning that something can be statistically significant but have little to no effect. The reverse is also true. For this reason, the calculation of both statistical significance and effect size is recommended in looking at the results of interventions.

Effect sizes (such as Cohen's *d*) assess whether the intervention had an effect greater than zero, that is, it answers the question: did it work at all? An effect size is also a standard metric that is widely used to compare results from this program to other similar programs irrespective of what measures were used in the other programs' evaluation (Lakens, 2013). Effect size calculations are also not affected by sample size (Schäfer & Schwarz, 2019). Given that LGiS is a pilot program still in its early development the availability of such information is important.

Unlike statistical significance tests, there is no single universally agreed threshold for determining a 'good' effect size. However, some guidance includes that a 'zero' effect size means that the program had no effect. A negative or positive (e.g., -.01 or +.01) means that the variables of interest went up or down in the period after the intervention. Another way to evaluate effect sizes is using a common convention which uses the size of the difference between the two groups. This commonly used convention states that an effect size of .10 is small, .30 is medium, and .50 and above is large. Effect sizes below .10 are considered negligible, even if statistically significant and are interpreted as there is no change (Faul et al., 2007; Lakens, 2013). Because effect sizes tend to be upwardly biased when based on small sample sizes, in this analysis they were corrected for bias using Hedges' *g* correction and are presented in the tables below (Corrected Cohen's *d*).

Reading from Table 5, the results indicate that post LGiS, students reported lower scores in emotional, conduct, peer, and overall internalising difficulties with effect sizes (ES) being in the small to medium range. Students particularly reported fewer peer difficulties following participation in LGiS with the program having a medium effect (ES = .341). From the results, we can conclude that there were no changes to their prosocial behaviour or overall externalising symptoms. Interestingly, students reported an increase in their hyperactivity/inattentive symptoms at the time of follow-up (ES = -.322). Importantly, however, students' overall difficulties had decreased by follow-up based on their SDQ Total score indicating a small effect for the intervention (ES = .195). Yet, focusing on their internalising difficulties the program had a medium effect (ES = .333) in reducing their anxiety and worrying difficulties. These findings indicate that LGiS had effects in assisting young people in managing their peer relations difficulties and overall internalising (anxious, depressed) difficulties.

Table 5. Paired Samples Statistics Strengths and Difficulties

Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)	Mean	<i>N</i>	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig 1 tail <i>t</i> -test	Corrected Cohen's <i>d</i> *
Pre-Emotional Difficulties	9.53	30	2.389	.436		
Post Emotional Difficulties	9.10	30	2.040	.372		.233
Pre-Conduct Difficulties	8.53	30	2.432	.444		
Post Conduct Difficulties	8.20	30	2.369	.433		.190
Pre Peer-Difficulties	8.23	30	1.357	.248		
Post Peer Difficulties	7.60	30	1.734	.317	Yes	.341
Pre-Prosocial Strengths	11.70	30	2.292	.418		
Post Prosocial Strengths	11.80	30	2.235	.408		-.049
Pre-Hyperactivity/Inattention	11.13	30	2.047	.374		
Post Hyperactivity/Inattention	11.67	30	1.900	.347	Yes	-.322
Pre-Internalising Difficulties	17.77	30	3.213	.587		
Post Internalising Difficulties	16.70	30	2.830	.517	Yes	.333
Pre-Externalising Difficulties	19.67	30	3.800	.694		
Post Externalising Difficulties	19.87	30	3.683	.673		-.077
Pre-Total SDQ Difficulties	37.43	30	5.557	1.014		
Post Total SDQ Difficulties	36.57	30	4.946	.903		.195

Note: *Cohen's *d* was corrected using Hedges' *g* correction to avoid small sample bias. Full statistical results including confidence intervals are available in the appendix. *N* = number of students. Sig. = statistically significant. A negative effect size indicates that the variable of interest was higher post-intervention. Pre = pre-test, Post = post-test.

Table 6. Paired Samples Statistics School Belonging

School Belonging Scale (SBS)	Mean		Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig 1 tail <i>t</i> -test	Corrected Cohen's <i>d</i> *
Pre SBS-Support	10.77	30	5.022	.917		
Post SBS-Support	12.90	30	5.561	1.015	Yes	-.383
Pre SBS-Rules Acceptance	9.80	30	4.230	.772		
Post SBS-Rules Acceptance	11.50	30	4.622	.844	Yes	-.426
Pre SBS-School Attachment	12.93	30	6.280	1.147		
Post SBS-School Attachment	13.63	30	6.105	1.115		-.134
Pre SBS-Total	33.50	30	13.564	2.476		
Post SBS-Total	38.03	30	14.550	2.656	Yes	-.360

Note: *Cohen's *d* was corrected using Hedges' *g* correction to avoid small sample bias. Full statistical results including confidence intervals are available in the appendix. *N* = number of students. Sig. = statistically significant. A negative effect size indicates that the variable of interest was higher post-intervention. Pre = pre-test, Post = post-test. Higher SBS scores indicate higher disagreement.

Results about students' sense of school belonging (see Table 6) indicate that in the period post-LGiS students reported a much less favourable sense of belonging to school with an overall medium effect (ES = -.360) for the SBS total score when compared to the period before starting

LGiS. Similarly, students' sense of attachment to the school was also lower ($ES = -.134$), as were students' beliefs of feeling supported by their school ($ES = -.383$) and feeling that the school rules were fair, with an $ES = -.426$ indicating a close to large effect. Overall, these results indicate that the students felt a lower sense of connection to the school in the period after having attended LGiS.

Clinically Significant Change in Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

As stated earlier, SDQ scores can be used to assign students to bands indicating their functioning relative to the rest of the Australian population for this age group. The bands in which students can be classified are average, raised, high and very high scores for each of the students. This classification allows an examination of whether participating in LGiS produced what is referred to as a *clinically significant change* in the students, rather than a statistical change. A clinically significant change is a change that has taken the person from a score typical of a problematic, dysfunctional, group to a score typical of the "average" population. This method regards a movement of students to a lower impact category as a positive outcome. So, for example, a student moving from the 'very high' which places them in the top 5% of the population to the high 10% of the population, can indicate that although they still have difficulties, these are not as marked. This method also allows an assessment of iatrogenic effects – inadvertent increase in the problem – if more students are moving towards the very high ranges, which also offers valuable information. It must be noted that this method is not able to rule out if the changes reported by the students occurred due to other factors not measured (e.g., attending other programs or therapy elsewhere). This is a common issue with research without a control group, however, it does not invalidate the approach if caution is used in making attributions about the change purely to the effectiveness of the intervention.

The results for the SDQ Total Problems Scale (see Figure 5) show that initially nine of the 30 students were in the 'very high' and eight were in the 'high' range of total problems in the SDQ (Top 10% of the population). Data collected post-LGiS indicated a reduction in number, with six students remaining in the 'very high' and four in the 'high' category. These results show that the movement in categories was positive. A total of 13 (43%) students were in the average range (average or raised) in the time before LGiS whereas 20 (67%) of the 30 students were in the average range during the time after LGiS.

Figure 5. SDQ Total Difficulties Classification T1 vs T2



Note: SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. T1 = Pre LGiS. T2 = Post LGiS. Very High = top 5% of the general population, High = top 10% of the general population; Else (Raised & Average) is regarded as Average for the population. Numbers indicate the total number of students in each category.

Table 7. SDQ Clinical Classifications Pre-Test and Post-Test

SDQ Scale										
Time	<u>Emotional</u>		<u>Conduct</u>		<u>Hyp/Inn</u>		<u>Peer</u>		<u>Pro-Social</u>	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>
Category										
Average	14	17	16	18	11	10	8	14	18	19
Raised	7	6	3	5	6	3	10	5	4	4
High	4	4	4	2	3	6	6	8	5	3
Very High	5	3	7	5	10	11	6	3	3	4

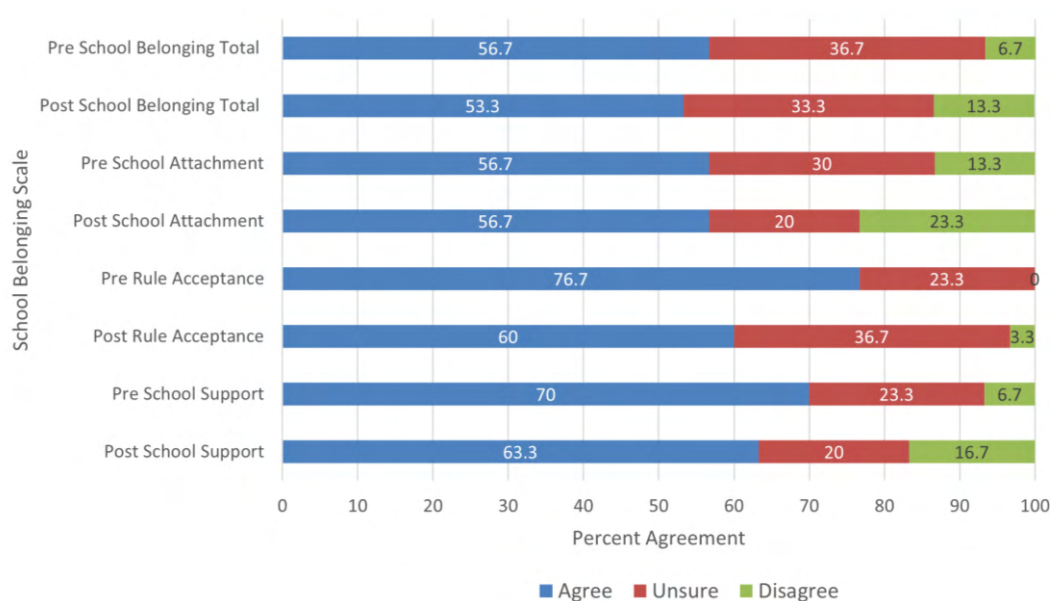
Note: Very High = top 5% of the general population, High = top 10% of the general population; Else (Raised & Average) is regarded as Average for the population. Hyp/Inn = Hyperactive and Inattentive Difficulties. Numbers indicate the total number of students in each category. *N* = 30. Totals may not equal 30 due to missing data. SDQ = Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire. Pre = pre-test, Post = post-test. High scores in pro-social are desirable.

The same analysis was performed with the individual scales of the SDQ, the results are presented in Table 7. Other than for hyperactivity/inattention all other scales showed a similar pattern in that students tended to score closer to the general population expectation in the period after completing LGiS. So, for example, in relation to overall emotional difficulties nine students were in the ‘Very High’ and ‘High’ range before the LGiS program, whereas post the program seven were. For conduct, results show that students’ self-reports of difficulties with emotion and behaviour were less in the period following attending LGiS.

Perceptions of School Belonging

As stated above, the School Belonging Scale (SBS) was used to measure school connectedness. Following the methodology described earlier the proportion of agreement with each scale was calculated for all students for the period before LGiS and after they completed the program. Figure 6 displays the results of this analysis in a stacked bar graph. Results show that there were no gains in agreement in relation to students' perceptions of their attachment to school (e.g., endorsing items like 'I feel best when I am at school') with results being steady between the two periods. However, more students moved from unsure to the disagree range in relation to school attachment. The same pattern is present for other scales, all of which show a general decline in agreement and an increase in disagreement. This indicates that on average, even though both pre- and post-LGiS over 50% of students generally agreed with statements that they were supported by the school, felt attached to the school, or understood its rules and values, these sentiments were lower in the period following LGiS.

Figure 6. SBS Agreement Pre and Post LGiS



Note: Bars represent the per cent student agreement for each of the scales and the total score for the School Belonging Scale (SBS). Pre = pre-test, Post = post-test. $N=30$.

Integration and Conclusion of the Survey Results

Analysis of the surveys indicates that the students who participated in LGiS experienced various changes in each of the domains measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and the School Belonging Scale (SBS). This change was not uniform across all domains.

There were areas of improvement, no improvement, and deterioration in self-reported scores observed in this sample of students. When examining emotional and behavioural functioning students reported an overall improvement in their emotional and behavioural health as demonstrated by a reduction in their total SDQ scores. This improvement amounted to close to 20% of a standard deviation ($ES = .195$) in scores. So, although a small effect, it was not trivial as demonstrated by the clinically significant change analysis. In the period before participation in LGiS, 17 students self-reported emotional and behavioural difficulties only expected in less than 10% of the population (requiring clinical intervention) whereas in the period after LGiS, only 10 students still met this criterion. Overall, post-LGiS, 20 of the students were experiencing average levels of difficulties compared to 13 before the program.

Looking at specific factors of emotional and behavioural functioning, students reported little change in prosocial skills ($ES = -.049$, less than 5% of a standard deviation increase) and externalising difficulties representing problematic behaviour related to poor impulse control, including rule-breaking, aggression, impulsivity, and inattention ($ES = -.077$). This may have been due to a ceiling effect in relation to the students' prosocial skills as more than 67% of them scored in the average range or higher in this domain. The externalising scale is a combination of both the hyperactive/inattentive scale and the conduct difficulties scale. Results indicate that in the period after LGiS students reported an increase of over 30% of a standard deviation in difficulties measured by the hyperactive/inattentive (ADHD) scale such as being restless, not being able to stay still for long, being easily distracted, and constantly fidgeting ($ES = -.322$). Whereas they reported a *decrease* of almost 20% of a standard deviation in getting angry, fighting a lot, and stealing ($ES = .190$). This paradoxical finding may explain the seeming lack of effect on total externalising problems, as the gains in better conduct were overshadowed by the hyperactive/inattentive difficulties. It is important to note that there is nothing within the LGiS program that is reported as targeting inattention. LGiS can be regarded as a social and emotional learning intervention (SEL, Parada et al., 2016). Hyperactive/inattentive difficulties have a complex origin and developmental course requiring in most instances very specific targeted treatment (Thapar et al., 2012). As such, little change to these kinds of difficulties can be expected. The finding that these difficulties increased quite sharply during this period is not without precedent given the historical period in which LGiS took place. Inattentive and impulsive behaviours have been observed to increase as a response to unpredictable environmental situations (Frankenhuis et al., 2016). A recently published study examining longitudinal and retrospective data from 10 countries concluded that there was a substantial increase in reported symptoms of hyperactivity and inattention during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rogers & MacLean, 2023). The increase in inattentive/hyperactive difficulties observed here may be part of this global phenomenon (see also Fray et al., 2022).

As noted above, students experienced a decrease in their conduct difficulties. They also experienced a decrease of 23% of a standard deviation ($ES = .233$) in difficulties with anxiety, somatic (e.g., headaches, stomach aches) complaints, nervousness, and depression in the period post-LGiS. The total number of students classified in the top 5% of the population (having high enough difficulties warranting clinical intervention) changed from 5 to 3 and there was an observed increase to 17 students in the average range, up from 14 before LGiS. The biggest effects found, however, were in relation to a decrease of 34% of a standard deviation ($ES = .341$) in peer difficulties such as being picked on or bullied, having few friends and being lonely. These difficulties are generally described as internalising difficulties and in combination, students experienced a reduction in internalising difficulties post LGiS equivalent to a reduction of 33% of a standard deviation. The number of students in the very high range of difficulties for peer problems (top 5% of the population) went from 6 to 3, and 14 students were in the average range up from 8 before LGiS.

In the period post LGiS students reported a decrease in their sense of school belonging. Overall, there was a medium effect decrease of 36% of a standard deviation ($SE = -.360$). Though close to 60% of the students agreed with statements such as that they felt that they could count on support from their school, felt the rules were fair, and experienced positive feelings when at school, these agreements were overall down from the period before LGiS. There was a close to a large effect ($ES = -.426$) on students' lack of acceptance and understanding of school rules. There were small effects ($ES = -.134$) on students' sense of school attachment (feeling best when at school, feeling a sense of connection to their school) which lowered in the period post-LGiS. Agreement rates for attachment remained unchanged overall for students (57%), however several of the students went from being unsure to disagreeing with items in this scale. A greater number of students disagreed or were unsure that the school rules made sense to them, they were less willing to accept school procedures or agree that there were suitable standards and values set by their school agreement rates lowering from 77% to 60%, unsure rates rising to 37% from 23% and disagreement rates going from zero to 3%. Students also felt less supported, with a decrease of 38% of a standard deviation ($ES = -.383$). Fewer students agreed with statements such as 'I can get good support from my school' and 'I can get back as much support as I give from my school' dropping from 70% agreement to 63 %, with fewer students being unsure (from 23% to 20%) and more disagreeing (rising to 17% from 7%).

The SBS results indicate that participants' overall sense of school belonging decreased during the period under evaluation. This decrease was across all scales. This would imply that from the perspective of the participants, LGiS effects do not generalise to their perceptions of the school. As the items were specifically about school, not about LGiS, and the fact that LGiS is not a whole of school program, we can conclude that participation in LGiS did not positively affect students' perceptions of school belonging. As with other areas which LGiS does not target (e.g.,

hyperactivity/inattentiveness, see above) it may be possible that these findings reflect a reaction to the numerous changes which schools found necessary to adopt during this COVID and post-COVID period. Even if this is the case, LGiS participation was not sufficient to prevent students' negative reactions to these changes in the form of feeling less connected to their school.

Overall, results of the SDQ demonstrate that students on average reported benefits to their emotional, and behavioural health. The results are in line with the goals espoused by LGiS as a social and emotional learning intervention. The most prominent changes were a better understanding of the need to have limits and values for behaviour, as indicated by the fact that although some students did not necessarily agree with the school rules, they reported less fighting, stealing and fewer conduct difficulties. Students also reported improved peer relations and reduced overall emotional difficulties, particularly those classified as internalising problems.

Section Four:

What Did Students Say About LGiS?

Introduction

The qualitative findings from student interviews provide a range of important perspectives and considerations as voiced by students who participated in LGiS. These will be reported in two sections. Firstly, student views on the LGiS program and, secondly, student reflections on their experience of LGiS along with their suggested program improvements will be presented.

Part 1: Student Views of the LGiS Program

Student perceptions about the LGiS program provided insights into their experiences of participating in LGiS. Participating students were asked initially why they thought they had been invited to participate in LGiS, what they thought the LGiS program was about and how they were responding to the activities so far. The responses to these questions are presented and discussed in part 1.

Student Comments Regarding the Selection Process

Student views as to why they had been nominated for LGiS clustered around three core categories they used to explain their invitations to the program. These consisted of positive known explanations, clearly unknown explanations and uncertain explanations.

Positive Known Explanations for Recruitment

“Improving my wellbeing” was clearly expressed by students who commented that they were selected because the school staff were aware of the wellbeing needs of the student and that LGiS represented a program that may assist the student in meeting these wellbeing needs. 58% of students’ comments indicated this view. Students who felt the invitation would help them to learn more about themselves, shared that they saw the opportunity to deepen their awareness of themselves along with skill building in terms of social and/or emotional literacy to assist them to become more self-aware and skilful when facing challenges. Overall, these explanations were considered positive as the students clearly understood why they were invited and importantly, they also shared that they felt *“happy, excited”* and *“privileged”* to have been invited. Further, these students added that being able to participate in LGiS *“could be helpful”* or *“would provide the help that I need.”*

Table 8. Overview of the Student Selection Explanation Clusters

Explanation Clusters	Definition	Example Student Responses	%
Positive, Known Explanations	Students understand & can explain why they were selected to participate in LGiS	<i>"to improve my wellbeing"</i> <i>"learn more about myself"</i> <i>"to see who I really am."</i> <i>"My year adviser thought it would help me go through what I'm going through. She said she thinks it's better for me."</i>	58%
	Feel staff recognise and support student wellbeing needs	<i>"I was told it was to be a mentor."</i>	
	Tend to be happy to participate	<i>"I think it was interesting and I wanted to be a part of it."</i> <i>"I was excited because I like doing different programs to get to know other people that aren't in my friend group."</i> <i>"I felt really privileged."</i>	
Unknown Explanations	Students unaware why they were selected to participate in LGiS	<i>"I thought it was at random."</i> <i>"I don't know, because this is my second time being here."</i> <i>"It's out of the blue."</i>	34%
	Feel confused about what LGiS is and why they were selected for it	<i>"They obviously chose people but I don't know why. I don't know who they chose for what reason. But yeah they chose people".</i>	
	Tend to feel nervous or anxious about participating	<i>"I'm not sure. I was in my classroom once and I got this green slip and it told me to go to Room 10, our Learning Ground room, and that's basically it."</i>	
Uncertain Explanations	Students uncertain why they were selected to participate in LGiS	<i>"I don't know...maybe because my friend isn't outgoing, I'm here with her."</i>	8%
	Feel they lack skills such as social or emotional regulation skills	<i>"I don't know...I feel like it's because it's they can see that I have confidence. It's just that I don't know how to show it."</i>	
	Tend to be ambivalent about participating		

Note: A total of 53 responses were made by the subset of interview students who responded to this question. (%) The percent indicates the percentage of responses that were coded to this theme.

Student Questions Regarding School Recruitment Strategies

Confusion about their recruitment to the program was prevalent amongst the 34% of student comments coded as unknown. Students recalled that the teaching staff had stated:

"I really think you guys have leadership skills...That is the way it was presented to me, and the teacher shared their experience of a similar program and how LGiS will do the same for us."

While this may sound encouraging, some students felt they were being sold something that was not true: *“I don’t see that- I’m confused.”* Some students who were directly told they were selected for their leadership skills, were also baffled, as indicated in the example below.

“I don’t see that, I really don’t. I look out for others, but not in a way where I try to lead them. I have no idea why I was put in the program. I was so confused.”

Another student became less certain about their nomination for LGiS once they saw the group composition. They expressed surprise about who had managed to be included in the program if it was about leadership.

“I truly don’t know why I was selected because when I walked into the class, and I saw a few other kids I thought oh, that makes sense why they’re here, and other kids, like, really? I’m surprised they got into LGiS.”

The prevalence of these responses indicates that the recommended strategy of encouraging the participation of students within the low to very low risk group of the 7-7-7 model by telling them that they were selected for their leadership potential was not consistent with many of these students’ self-perceptions.

Uncertain Recruitment Explanations

A number of students had no idea why they had been asked to participate or indeed what the purpose of the program was. These students frequently questioned why they had been selected to participate in LGiS and most expressed that they would like to know the reason for their selection. Therefore, it is unsurprising that several of these students felt *“nervous, scared, annoyed or fearful,”* and *“wanted to go back to class”* instead of remaining in LGiS. Students who were uncertain about their selection shared their theories about why they had been invited in a tentative and sometimes embarrassed manner, with their hypothesised reasons including that their friends were shy and perhaps that reflected on them. Being uncertain about why they were selected often corresponded with being unsure what to make of the program.

Implications for Future Student Participation

The substantive conclusion from these findings is that there is a need for clear and authentic communication regarding why students were selected for LGiS. This has important implications for attendance, engagement and potential outcomes for students participating in LGiS. Where there was a lack of clarity about their selection, students’ engagement with the program was likely to be limited. When students understood why they had been selected, and therefore felt participating was a *“good”* opportunity and a *“privilege,”* they were more likely to attend regularly and participate in

activities. Compared to both the unknown and uncertain groups the students who were sure about the reasons for their selection were more able to identify the benefits they had experienced from participating in LGiS.

Student Understanding of What LGiS is About

Asking students what they thought the LGiS program was about provided insights into the quality of their engagement and learning. Students who understood the purpose of the program and content were more likely to report that they benefited from participating in LGiS.

Table 9. What Students Understood LGiS to be About

Themes	Sample Responses	%
Social & Emotional Wellbeing	<i>"I think it's about trying to be in tune with your feelings. Trying to recognise them."</i>	63%
	<i>"Helping people, I guess. Helping them communicate, and behave, maybe."</i>	
	<i>"Just helping, respecting each other and for us, Learning Ground is a safe space for us, we've been reminded each lesson. They - our mentors – they respect us and we respect them. Yeah, just really good for our wellbeing."</i>	
	<i>"Helping with problems and trying to fix them and stuff, I think."</i>	
	<i>"Helping our emotions and all that."</i>	
	<i>"The extra support and how to get along with others and how to work together."</i>	
	<i>"So we can share what we need to be shared, like what needs to be shared. Like anxiety and stuff."</i>	
	<i>"Probably getting to know - probably getting to trust teachers and probably getting to learn new things and talk to other people."</i>	
	<i>"I think it was giving the people don't really speak in class – or go to class, stuff like that – the opportunity to tell us like what make them worry, or what makes them not want to go to class, stuff like that. To help them."</i>	
	<i>"I think it's about gaining your strength, and help getting more get to know other people in school. Then, having fun. Getting us standing up, sharing our feelings with people, all in one class talking and stuff. Learning. Helping us learn more."</i>	
Learn About Myself	<i>"You are focusing on yourself more than everything else around you."</i>	35%
	<i>"I don't know...I feel like it's because they can see that I have confidence. It's just that I don't know how to show it."</i>	
	<i>"Learning about yourself, being proud of who you are"</i>	
	<i>"What we can do with our emotional, physical, spiritual and emotional selves."</i>	
	<i>"Yeah, because that's what we've done a lot so far, working on ourselves and how we see each other and ourselves and little stuff like that."</i>	
	<i>"I think it's about growing as a person and looking at everything that makes you a person, like every aspect of being a person. We were talking about how everyone is different, like personalities and whatnot."</i>	
Leadership	<i>"I think it's to help improve people's speaking skills and make them more confident with themselves, leadership skills and all that sort of stuff"</i>	2%
	<i>"To help us learn how to speak out more and not be quiet and help us for when we're older to find jobs."</i>	

Note: A total of 46 responses was made by the subset of interview students who responded to this question. (%) Percent indicates the percentage of responses that were coded to this theme.

Most students understood LGiS as a comprehensive program focusing on social and emotional wellbeing with 63% of comments by students indicating this. They acknowledged the program's ability to enhance their skills and foster compassion towards their peers. The research interviews also revealed that LGiS promotes a holistic perspective, helping students develop problem-solving skills and encouraging a broader understanding of themselves and others. Another common theme among students was that LGiS is about learning about oneself. This self-awareness extends to understanding others and emphasises taking pride in personal identity. One student noted that the program helps students prioritise their inner world and choices over external influences. This prioritisation can lead to reduced peer conflict, increased social cohesion, and the development of peer friendships, ultimately contributing to self-esteem, wellbeing, and a stronger connection to their schools.

Distinctive Features of LGiS

Table 10. Why Students Perceived LGiS as a Distinctive Program

Themes	Sample Responses	%
Warm Pro-Social & Emotionally Supportive Climate	<i>"How welcoming they are and how trusting, like everyone, or like all the people were."</i>	81%
	<i>"I just remember just sitting in the classes and I just liked being there. It's just very calming... It's not like everyone was screaming around. Everyone was pretty chill. It was just a nice atmosphere. You get to be yourself a bit more, be a bit more relaxed."</i>	
	<i>"Being able to feel comfortable and having people I can actually talk to."</i>	
	<i>"They were kind people."</i>	
	<i>"Emotional support."</i>	
	<i>"Just how the class and teachers how it bring us together. Just supporting each other in different ways. [Being] kind and respectful to everyone."</i>	
Safe Place for Students	<i>"The dimensions of health, how they're all different. They're deeper than you think they are, the actual dimensions of it, like mental health and social health and stuff like that. It actually goes deeper into everything that you need to know."</i>	19%
	<i>"It's a safe place. You could share anything there. You should be more confident to share stuff to other people."</i>	
	<i>"It's a very open place. It's like a counsellor's office, I guess. They always say whatever happens or gets said in LGiS stays in LGiS, which is very fair for us kids who don't really like to get our informational problems out to the whole world, they stay in a little, I call it a little jar of LGiS. Whatever we say in LGiS gets put into the little jar and stays [there]. Then every time we get to LGiS we reopen it, and put everything we say into the lesson we're having now in LGiS, we put it into that jar, and then at the end of it we close the jar."</i>	

Note: A total of 36 responses was made by the subset of interview students who responded to this question.
(%) Percent indicates the percentage of responses that were coded to this theme

As can be seen in Table 10, a majority of students' comments (81%) reported on how important and valuable the warm pro-social and emotionally supportive climate of LGiS was for them. They felt strongly that this climate found within the implementation of LGiS afforded them an atypical opportunity at their school. They felt that this aspect was unique and different from their regular classes, allowing them to feel more comfortable to be themselves during the sessions. The egalitarian style of collaboration between students and teachers, fostered trust, support, and respect. These elements combined to create a distinctive and highly regarded program at their school.

Having a safe space where students can process challenges, learn ways of managing the stressors they face and go on to develop lifelong skills and strategies that they want in their lives is crucial when students face multiple challenges within their homes, communities, and schools. Given the high rates of psychological distress reported within the quantitative questionnaire data by participating LGiS students, this ability to create a safe space takes on greater importance in terms of supporting student wellbeing.

Students' Views of LGiS Activities

Table 11. Activities that Resonated Most for Students

Themes	Sample Responses	%
Oranges	<i>"So we have these oranges and we had to look at the colours, the shapes, the texture of the skin and stuff, and we're just discussing how that results to everyday people. Not everyone is the same, not everyone looks the same, not everyone feels the same"</i>	60%
	<i>"We peeled an orange. I forgot what the reason was, but we had to peel an orange and then I ate it, all of it."</i>	
	<i>"The activity where there was the orange and we got to peel the orange, we were talking about how each orange is different to everyone else's, how the parts are different and everyone has a place themselves, that nobody is the same. Everyone has different experiences. Everyone was raised in a different environment."</i>	
Bears	<i>"I like the bears where people picked up the pictures of the bears that expressed how they felt themselves, and then they explained the expression that the bear was doing, how it relates to themselves. I liked that activity."</i> <i>"We talk about emotions, and we pick a bear out as you say which emotion you are today."</i>	24%
Outside	<i>[My favourite activities are] "the outside ones where you actually go outside the classroom."</i>	16%

Note: A total of 45 responses were made by the subset of interview students who responded to this question. (%) Percent indicates the percentage of responses that were coded to this theme

Table 11 shows that most students' comments (60%) reflected enjoyment in the LGiS activities, with the orange peeling activity being the most frequently mentioned. Additionally, many students expressed their appreciation for the Bear Cards activity, which involved identifying and discussing emotions without the pressure of naming them explicitly. This activity helped students enhance their emotional literacy without causing anxiety for those with less developed emotional skills. Group discussions were also seen as beneficial for learning social skills, particularly in terms of sharing and responding to differing opinions and experiences. Some students preferred the active tasks conducted outdoors. A number of students linked these favourite activities to deeper lessons and skills they gained from these activities. For example, one student gained a fresh perspective on empathy:

"We just had a discussion. We answered a few questions like why we think it's important to not judge someone and really understand the whole concept of it. I'm like, oh wow., it was like I just realised that some people have a lot going on and you don't even know."

While not all students could explain the purpose of the activities they liked, it was evident that they felt they had benefited. Some students showed significant insight into the purpose and the benefits of particular activities, reinforcing the deep learning that they evidently gained through participating in LGiS activities.

Part 1. Summary

In summary, the student interviews showed that participating students perceived LGiS as a distinctive program that provides a warm and pro-social climate, creating a safe learning environment. The sense of safety that this climate cultivated allowed the participants to engage with the content in meaningful ways, for many, enabling improvements in emotional regulation and prosocial behaviour. The students valued the opportunity to engage in activities that not only bring enjoyment but also allow them to develop and practise social and emotional skills.

The findings also demonstrate the need to provide accurate information and clear recruitment strategies for the LGiS program to ensure that students do not feel stigmatised, disadvantaged, or confused about why they were chosen for the program. It is crucial for students to understand why they have been recruited and for schools to have consistent approaches in selecting suitable participants.

Part 2. Student Reflections on What They Learned from LGiS

In follow up interviews, students were asked to reflect on their experiences of undertaking LGiS activities. The analysis of these data yielded several recurrent and telling themes about what students had learnt, how LGiS had helped them, and how they may have changed, along with their peers.

What Students Learned from LGiS

Table 12. What Students Felt They Learned from LGiS

Themes	Sample Responses	%
Improved Social & Emotional Literacy	<i>"I've learnt that everybody can cope with things in different ways. Everybody's story's not the same, like what's happened to them, and some people like keeping their secrets but some people like venting to other people about it."</i>	71%
	<i>"Just learning how some feelings are good, some aren't bad, but some - most of it's the actions that come with it and how to cope with it and stuff like that."</i>	
	<i>"Like how to react, calm yourself down and stuff."</i>	
	<i>"Well, before I did LGiS I didn't feel comfortable with anyone... I didn't care about anyone's emotions or feelings, it was like I was always in an I don't care mood, always disrespectful. Then I got confident around the people in the room and then that's my safe place, like...safe people in there."</i>	
	<i>"I think that I trust a lot more people, because I've opened up in my group a lot."</i>	
	<i>"So I show respect and be the best I can. They taught me that school will get me somewhere. I started going to class more, I started trying to do better. So that's what's I learnt, respect."</i>	
In Class Benefit	<i>"When they would teach us more ways to not have fights with people."</i>	14%
	<i>"In my class, I get very distracted easily and sometimes my anxiety goes really high, but with LGiS I've learned techniques and understandings of how to cope and stop and think before I act, and help me stand up for something, or someone".</i>	
Improved Emotional Self-Regulation	<i>"My emotions have been not as haywire and all over the place, and my behaviour has gotten better from it, because I learned how to react, calm myself down, my behaviour, it's nothing now. I'm not angry, I'm calm. There's no fights, nothing."</i>	6%
Reaching out for Support	<i>"I learnt that I have people around me that can help me and that I can come to people to talk about my feelings."</i>	6%
Learned about Teachers	<i>"LGiS showed me that with teachers pushing you and shoving you and all that, it's a sign of them believing in you. I think LGiS showed me the teacher's view on us kids."</i>	3%

Note: A total of 66 responses was made by the subset of interview students who responded to this question. (%) Percent indicates the percentage of responses that were coded to this theme.

As Table 12 illustrates, many students' comments suggested they learned something of value from LGiS. Aspects of social and emotional literacy such as growth in communication, connection and trust were highlighted by students, with 71% of their comments expressing these views. These positive outcomes paralleled findings from the quantitative analysis that indicated positive growth in student peer relations. As part of reporting improvements in peer relations, some students noted an appreciation of differences and developing respect. The relational focus of the LGiS approach was especially prominent for many of the student participants. They felt supported by the attention given to respecting and caring for others, and they valued the opportunity for experiential learning about what it was like to feel respected and to respect others. For other students, learning how to minimise distractibility and manage strong emotions such as anxiety, were acknowledged as having a variety of positive impacts. Reduced impulsivity and increased exposure to school staff within LGiS made it easier for more reserved or anxious students to participate in lessons and interact with their teachers.

Several students identified that emotional literacy and regulation were also key areas which were focussed on. These students described the positive wellbeing impacts of learning to de-stress, understand themselves and develop skills of self-regulation. Importantly, for a few students, they reported that they are more knowledgeable about when they need to seek support and aware of the available options for themselves to seek and gain this support. Finally, an increased ability for perspective taking, as one of many social and emotional skill developments learned in LGiS, helped a few students to increase their understanding and value of teachers at school which could increase school belonging for at risk students.

Students' Perceptions of Changes Due to LGiS

In both initial and post-LGiS interviews students were asked if they felt they had changed as a result of their participation in LGiS. Overall, approximately half the students felt that they had changed, with some unsure whether they had changed, some reporting that they had changed their understanding of other students, and some saying they had not changed at all. More students noticed changes in themselves during the program, with some drop-off occurring in the post-LGiS interviews. Students who reported that they had changed spoke directly about the type of change they had witnessed in themselves and could articulate how what they had learned in LGiS contributed to and supported that change. In contrast, students who felt they had not changed at all after LGiS, did not articulate reasons for this, except for one student who explained that the reason they had not changed was due to their culture. However, they also indicate that they found LGiS helped them learn how to support their friends more. The changes within the LGiS student body were observable to others, with students noting that their peers were more outgoing, less anxious, and more engaged in the sessions.

Table 13. Students' Perceptions of Change

Themes	Sample Responses	%
Yes I Have Changed	<i>"Yeah, mostly my mental wellbeing and my choices and stuff like that. Like thinking about it more and thinking about what I should and shouldn't do."</i>	50%
	<i>"I'm a lot more confident, and I can socialise a bit better, yes. So I'm happy."</i>	
	<i>"I think I changed when - I go to classes now. That's change."</i>	
	<i>"I'm more polite, I'm more freely to talk to, I'm more open and just became a different person."</i>	
	<i>"I don't get mad as much now. I can control my anger."</i>	
	<i>"When I'm feeling very angry, LGiS, it helped me know what's triggered it, and what I can do to help cope with it."</i>	
No I have Not Changed	<i>"Not being as scared, or not being alone. Not being alone."</i>	18%
	<i>"No."</i>	
	<i>"Not really."</i>	
I've Understood More About Other Students	<i>"Not that much. I just like the teachers, because they're so kind."</i>	17%
	<i>"I feel like the program is helpful for me to help others, but not really for me."</i>	
I Don't Know if I Have Changed	<i>"Well, the conversations I've had I think some people are really finding themselves in LGiS. They're finding their confidence, being able to be more outspoken about it. A lot of people that I know are more like, getting generally like oh okay, it's normal to feel this way and express it. Because I know that's hard for them sometimes. So it's good to see a good change for the better for them."</i>	15%
	<i>"I am not sure. I don't know."</i>	
	<i>"I haven't really paid much attention to that."</i>	

Note: A total of 102 responses was made by the subset of interview students who responded to this question.
(%) Percent indicates the percentage of responses that were coded to this theme

Student Responses to Withdrawal from Classes to Attend LGiS

Although some schools elected to run LGiS with an existing class, several schools withdrew students from their regular classes to attend LGiS. While some students preferred to attend LGiS, others were concerned about missing important lessons. Eighteen students raised the issue of missing other classes to attend LGiS. Table 14 provides a breakdown of the types of comments made.

Some students initially viewed their participation in LGiS as a legitimate reason to avoid regular classes. However, towards the end of the program, one student expressed regret for holding this belief. They realised the impact of missing a significant amount of classwork, particularly on their assessments. This example highlights both the value that students placed on LGiS and the impact that timetabling issues had on their other learning.

Table 14. Students' Responses to Missing Classes

Themes	Sample Responses	%
I'm Happy to Miss Classes When in LGiS	<i>"To be completely honest, I just like skipping out on a period"</i>	44%
LGiS as a Means to Avoid Class	<i>"Excited, because I don't really like science. Every time we have LGiS, I actually skip science".</i>	22%
I Dislike Missing Classes During LGiS	<i>I usually miss out on key subjects, while I was taking LGIS, and I came to my assessment task, and I barely got it done, because I was relying on other people to help me out.</i>	22%
Timetable Means Missing Classes	<i>We've had a lot of interruptions to LGiS [with exams, school events or special extracurricular events].</i>	11%

Note: A total of 18 responses was made by the subset of interview students who responded to this question. (%) Percent indicates the percentage of responses that were coded to this theme.

As shown in Table 14 some students were delighted that LGiS gave them a legitimate excuse to avoid other classes. Other students expressed frustration that timetabling of LGiS interfered with other classes, or the reverse – that timetabling conflicts led to inconsistent delivery of LGiS.

Several students expressed concern about having to choose between participating in subjects they enjoyed and attending LGiS sessions. Some students were worried that attending LGiS would result in significant absences from regular classwork, making it challenging to complete their assessments without external help.

"Some classes I miss hugely, and, yeah, when I get an assessment task, it's like, oof! I didn't know I would be missing geography so much. I love geography, but I didn't really know much about how LGiS would impact my studies, and I wanted the questions to be answered, before getting into LGIS."

These issues reflect the challenges associated with introducing an external program into already overflowing school timetables and reveal some unintended consequences for students of the schools' attempts to implement the 7-7-7 formula.

Student Preferences to Continue Participating in LGiS

Of the students asked at the conclusion of the program, 23 out of 28 agreed that they would like to continue attending LGiS. Many of these students were keen to keep engaging with the safe space they had found LGiS to be. Two students did not want to continue and three were unsure. Table 15 provides examples of the reasons students gave for wanting to continue LGiS.

Table 15. Reasons for Students’ Desire to Continue in LGiS

Sample Reasons Given by Students
<i>“Yes, it helped me, and it was a good way to get to know everybody as well and see what's happened to them and see how they cope with it and how it could help other people.”</i>
<i>“Yeah, because I like the mentors. They're cool. I just like to use LGiS as a time to just discuss, yeah, deeper subjects that I guess we can't have a conversation with some of the students.”</i>
<i>“Yes. Because you get to learn about things that most teachers don't teach you in the classroom. You get to learn about things that don't relate to topics that are actually taught in schools.”</i>
<i>“Because it does get fun sometimes. But at the same time, sometimes it gets boring.”</i>
<i>“It's a chill class. It's calms and helps you with stuff, so yeah”.</i>
<i>“Yeah. Because it's fun. It's better than everything else. It's just that you actually get to talk to everyone in there. [But the] other subjects you just sit there and do the work.”</i>
<i>“Yeah. Just the growth [with the] teachers, just connecting with [everyone, just] become friends.”</i>
<i>“Yeah. Before LGiS, my teachers kept saying - all my friends and teachers mostly, kept saying I was too much in my shell. I wouldn't come out and speak, when I put my hand up. If something was going on with me, I wouldn't say it, but since I did LGiS, my teacher and my maths teacher said that ever since I did it, I started to come out of my shell more. I've started putting my hand up more, every time I have a problem I went to them and told them, and it helped me understand what's going on.”</i>
<i>Stay out of class.</i>

Note: These examples are drawn from responses provided by 23 of the 28 students who responded to this question.

Improvements to LGiS Suggested by Students

When asked in the follow-up interviews what, if anything, they would seek to change about LGiS, 29 out of 42 students indicated no improvements were needed. The remaining students provided a number of specific suggestions for improving activities and program delivery. Table 16 shows examples of the comments and recommendations they made.

The most frequently sought improvement was to reduce the amount of writing required of students. This recommendation was closely linked with suggestions to increase student engagement by including more physically active activities to reduce the amount of sitting. Students would also like to increase the number of activities that include games or those that could promote social cohesion along with taking activities outside to break up the lessons and increase student engagement. While acknowledging that the food is a generous inclusion that students appreciate, value and respect as healthy, they would also like to see a wider variety of food options to be included.

Some students sought more opportunities to provide reflections on their progress and wellbeing outside of the LGiS sessions. Some felt that the reliance on verbal content delivery was unbalanced and would like to see the verbal content broken into smaller chunks of time. This could suggest an opportunity for breaking up the content with more of the desired physical or hands on games to promote optimal student engagement and participation. Students expressed concern that the

focus on the gems became too competitive at the cost of the LGiS program content focus. Additionally, some students felt that the disparate group sizes gave some students an unfair or unbalanced advantage compared to smaller groups of students within LGiS sessions.

Table 16. Student Suggestions for LGiS Improvement

Main Categories	Examples	%
No Improvement Sought	Keep doing what you're doing <i>"Nothing really. It's pretty good the way it is."</i> <i>"I just reckon it's a great thing to have in school and a good opportunity for people to come into a safe environment and learn and grow as a person."</i> <i>"I think it's perfect the way it is. But I feel like they could add more topics to help others learn about others and stuff."</i> <i>"You shouldn't change how the teachers are the same as the students."</i> <i>"We don't get in trouble for talking across the table. We put our hand up for when we want to talk, and we don't have to sit on one table. If we want to sit to another we can ask nicely and they say, yes you can, or maybe soon. I think they make it very fair."</i>	69% of Ss
	Reduce the writing component <i>"I just don't really like writing. It's not everyone's cup of tea. But I'm a really slow writer, so it just makes me extremely insecure."</i> Increase physical activities <i>"Just a bit more active like including sports or anything to include some lessons to get everyone involved in different activities. Just sitting in there is kind of boring sometimes. Being active brings everyone together."</i> Increase games, Promote Social Cohesion and Using Outdoor Spaces <i>"More activities, games that are hands on... We should do the one where you throw the ball and talk about how you feel. Or you could do this game where you pass the stick, and you say something that has happened to you."</i> Increase the variety of food options <i>"More food varieties. They do bring food and it's healthy. I enjoy it."</i>	22% of Ss
Program Delivery Improvement	Increase the student follow-up throughout the week <i>"Maybe checking up on their students, like maybe twice a week or once a week, to see how they're going. Instead of just that one lesson – like individually checking up on them."</i> Break up the verbal content delivery into smaller sections of time <i>"All the talking, it just feels like there's just so much talking. Sometimes it can get really boring, just sitting there listening to them talk. I understand that's what it's for. Sometimes you can be a little bit too much talking."</i> Remove gems and competitiveness <i>"Instead of having groups and with the gem earning points, I feel like everyone should just be able to go freely without having to worry or to get the most points or to get the least points and stuff like that. Because it was meant to be about our feelings, not about who can win."</i>	9% of Ss
	Reduce Timetable Conflicts <i>"I didn't know I would be missing geography so much. I love geography, but I didn't really know much about how LGiS would impact my studies, and I wanted the questions to be answered, before getting into LGiS."</i> <i>"I think maybe the time they pick sometimes, because people usually miss out on key subjects, like, while I was taking LGiS, I missed out on probably half the term of geography, and I came to my assessment task, and I barely got it done, because I was relying on other people to help me out."</i>	

Note: A total of 42 student participants responded to this question. (%) Percentages indicate the percentage of students whose responses fell into each category.

Part 2. Summary

The analysis of student responses revealed most students agreed that LGiS had helped, improved their social and emotional literacy and improved peer relations. Classroom benefits that some students mentioned included learning to minimise distractibility, manage strong emotions and improved interactions with their teachers. Some students reported positive changes in their behaviour, emotion regulation, and an increased ability to seek support when needed. Further, some students observed positive changes in their peers, such as increased confidence. Most students expressed a desire to continue participating in LGiS, while a minority of others were more motivated by the opportunity to skip classes. A number of students offered suggestions for improving LGiS in terms of program content and delivery.

Student Reflections on LGiS: Conclusion

The qualitative findings provide revealing insights into the thoughts and experiences of the student participants who were interviewed for this pilot evaluation of LGiS. Students generally viewed LGiS as a distinctive program that provided a warm pro-social climate and facilitated opportunities to develop social and emotional skills that underpinned positive experiences with peers and, for many students, with teachers. The impact of missing other classes so that students could attend LGiS was an issue for several students, some of whom raised concerns about negative impacts on their learning in important subjects. Some students raised the need for a more transparent selection process as a key area in need of improvement. Thus, while most students felt they benefited from LGiS, attention is required to student selection and timetabling to avoid unintended consequences for student engagement and equity.

The final word on student reflections must be had by the students themselves. The following quote sums up the positive aspects of the student experience and highlights what is valued by students:

“I don't think anything could get done better, because I think they're doing really, really good with us kids doing it. They let us have a chance, they let us colour when we're talking, they let us put our hand up to say Acknowledgement of Country and I respect you with great affection and great respect. They let us kids take turns to read it. They let us share it.”

Section Five:

School Staff Reflections on LGiS

Introduction

The staff reflections to be discussed here relate to 4 of the 6 schools participating in 2022 and are drawn from final staff focus groups held at the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023. Staff from the remaining two schools were invited to participate but declined to attend due to the pressure of work. Key themes derived from these data include connection, safe space, real relationships and rapport, respect, changes observed, and student engagement in school. Each of these themes is presented and explored through examples in the section below. Further details relating to data gathered during the initial and midpoint phases of the evaluation can be found in the two previous reports: the Interim Report of the 2020 Implementation and the Interim Progress Report for the 2021 Term 2 Implementation.

Part 1: Staff Observations of the LGiS Program in Practice

The role of school staff in enabling and facilitating the LGiS program is key to its effective implementation. Consequently, the views of key staff who had undertaken LGiS training and led the program in their schools were critically important to the evaluation. Focus groups with these staff were undertaken using a semi-structured format that invited them to reflect on their experiences of undertaking and facilitating LGiS activities. Their responses are discussed next.

Connection

Overall, school-based facilitators and mentors found that the approach taken in LGiS and the emphasis on getting to know and engage with students on a personal level supported the development of strong and affirming connections, particularly for students who may have had little prior opportunity to experience this kind of relationship.

“We had the two mentors from LGiS and every Tuesday morning, those kids that were here - and our attendance rate was very high for the program, they were energetic. They were excited to see the mentors.”

“The program does really encourage for the mentors and facilitators to have that vulnerability with students, and I think that was really powerful, especially with the group of students that we had. They very rarely see adults having that vulnerability and being human, so it was a good opportunity for them to go, oh yeah Miss is kind of just like us or has had a rough life or whatever. It was really good for them to connect in that way.”

These comments may be noted to affirm the LG philosophy and practice of “each one, teach one,” which highlights that the best learning and connection take place in an atmosphere of openness and reciprocity.

Safe Space

Beyond cultivating positive connections between facilitators, mentors and students, the sense of care and safety associated with the LGiS sessions was highlighted by many staff as one of its most beneficial features. The opportunity provided to build this sense of safety and care was valued more highly than the program content.

“I don’t think the content is that great, to be fair but it was just that it was a safe environment and there was consistency every Tuesday, period 1, they knew that they were going to see that person who was going to bring good energy and bring a sense of care towards themselves.”

“I wouldn’t put it down to just the LGiS program that we’ve seen some improvement with our students. I guess it was just a platform that gave our kids a weekly opportunity to connect with a safe and trusted adult in an environment that they enjoyed.”

Interestingly, the staff comments emphasise the sense of safety deriving from the opportunity to be cared for and heard by the whole group and to have deep conversations.

“The lessons were really about encouraging deep and meaningful conversations, so the students really found that it was a very safe space for them to come to. ... We had created that safe space and we had that group contract. They felt okay about being vulnerable with other students as well, even though they were there, and every student was respectful for that.”

Staff observed that the students opened up in the nurturing and safe environment that LGiS provided.

“I think it gave a few of the students, especially a couple of the girls, a bit more confidence to share their experiences. There was a few of the girls who, when they first started, didn't feel confident talking about things that they've been through, whereas by the end, they were almost fighting for the opportunity to share their stories.”

“A couple of students were able to share throughout, started off throughout and were happy to share their lives and everything that was happening. Then we did see some quite anxious students or quite shy students grow that ability as well, which was really rewarding to see that.”

“Like I said, one of the Year 9 girls was coaxed into talking about a couple of personal things eventually, which was great, and I felt that was good. But then she came back another week, and then I think that boundary was put back up, like she'd shared too much.”

These contrasting comments underline the need for effective and skilful wellbeing support in the delivery of LGiS. Without specific information about the context of this student's boundary setting, it is difficult to know what she made of her experience or where it took her. Was this an instance of this student learning to open up safely, or was it a situation in which protective interrupting may have been a more supportive strategy to enable her to access individual and confidential counselling support for dealing with personal issues? An important part of managing safety in a school setting is to model and maintain respect for privacy and to provide effective referral pathways for students who may require them. The extent to which this was recognised as an important underpinning for the effective implementation of LGiS is not clear.

Real Relationships & Rapport

School-based staff also reported that the quality of staff-student relationships developed through LGiS went beyond the program itself. Qualities of rapport and trust were modelled by the LG mentors and built on by school staff, leading to sustained changes in the ways that students interacted with LGiS staff elsewhere in school.

"Our mentors had such a good relationship with the students, and they built amazing rapport."

"One more highlight would probably be the rapport that we have, that continues on from the program. These kids who I had not yet met or didn't have a relationship with, now we say hey, and they can trust me."

"They really managed to build relationships with us and accept us into their environment. Like xx said, being able to walk through the hall or the corridor and actually, hey Miss."

"Students were able to come up to me and talk to me about how their day is going on a regular basis ... but it's more towards me and it's not more towards other teachers ... I think having that rapport is massive when it comes to those particular students."

"The relationships that I have with the students from last year is completely different to other classes that I work in, and actually being able to see that other side of them that other teachers don't get to see, because we've built that rapport together. It's definitely impacted I think the way that they do come to me, or the interactions that we do have when we're passing each other."

In counterpoint to the quantitative findings regarding student belonging, these qualitative findings suggest that there were some improvements in students' sense of connectedness. Importantly, any such improvements have occurred through developing supportive relationships with

particular staff members, but did not carry over to the more general sense of being supported by the school as reflected in the quantitative measures.

Respect

It was evident that many school staff had taken on board the Learning Ground ethos of offering deep respect, exemplified in the protocol that begins each session: “I greet you all with great respect and great affection” (LGiS Training Manual).

“It was about that respect and positive reinforcement, I felt like some of the kids didn’t get that in other areas of the school, where they were kind of stereotyped into the bad kids label and this space was where they were treated with respect.”

“We spoke to them with respect, we never scolded them, we never yelled at them. By modelling that respect I noticed that they gave us respect too. ... I would talk to the teachers and kind of go, oh you know, I never had that issue with them, they were listening and everything else. They were like, oh they don’t do that in our class, and I’m like, well maybe it’s because they have a different experience where they’re treated like little adults, not children.”

These examples show how school staff centred the importance of respect in their dealings with student participants. References to positive reinforcement and modelling respect suggest that these staff backed up their understanding with the core LGiS practices of descriptive praise and emotion coaching. The benefits of the LGiS approach for students’ social and emotional development were summarised by one staff member as follows:

“Learning ground is very much about building the person from inside so they’ve got the confidence to shine outside.”

Changes Observed

When asked what behavioural changes they had observed in students because of the LGiS program, school staff nominated positive impacts, including increased communication and confidence.

“While we were at face-to-face it was fantastic to see the changes and see the kids lightening up about school and their home lives and everything else in between.”

“I did see a lot of kids kind of come out of their shell and wasn’t scared to - they felt comfortable in sharing a lot of their perspectives and a lot of their culture, which is something important to some of the kids.”

One staff participant noted, however, that these kinds of positive changes did not necessarily translate into improvements in learning and engagement in other areas.

“From what they were like at the start of the program or before the program even started and then towards the end, very, very different. Students were able to ... give more insight about their life and what TV shows they’re watching and some of the things that they’re enjoying. So a lot of these things are good, but ... I did still see some of the students that were having problems with specific subject areas were still having those same problems.”

One staff member reported that their school’s behavioural data monitoring system had identified some improvements in student behaviour in the school overall, although, as they note, the change was not clearly attributable to LGiS alone.

“Based on the data on Sentral, I did see 58% of the students did show an increase in above-the-line behaviour. So they weren’t misbehaving, which is a good thing, but it could be through a variety of factors and other programs that we ran at the school as well. But we also saw a 35% reduction in below-the-line behaviour. So they weren’t students getting put on Sentral for a lot of negative behaviour.”

Some staff participants identified that students who may have exhibited problematic behaviours in other classrooms did not show the same problems in the LGiS sessions.

“Some of the students that we have are behaviour issue students, but we don’t have those behaviours in our rooms when we go through the program.”

This observation reflects equally on the changes in the students and on changes in the ways that staff involved in LGiS have learned to deal more effectively with students’ challenging behaviours.

Their comments also reflect that their recruitment approach may have shifted away from students with obvious behaviour issues to focus more on the range of presentations suggested in the 7-7-7 profile provided by LG.

“Outside the classroom I didn’t see a dramatic change. Although to add to that, many students, the tricky students, the trickier students, those are the ones that refused to join. So perhaps there would have been a bigger change in their behaviours had they stayed.”

“We had a bit of everything, but they weren’t kids that truanted all the time. There was more emotional or social things that they needed to work through, rather than behavioural. So I think those changes are kind of more quiet than big behaviour changes like stopping truanting or stopping cussing at teachers.”

One staff member suggested that some students’ behaviour became worse after the program as a result of no longer having LGiS support.

“There were a couple of kids that kind of went off the rails a little bit after the program. I would say that it’s because they didn’t have that safe space, they didn’t have that option any more, and that’s really hard to measure.”

School staff perspectives on behaviour change were overall very positive in relation to changes in student behaviour that were observed within the program. The main behavioural improvements observed by school staff were broadly in alignment with the quantitative student findings, insofar as improved behaviours were more likely to be seen in peer relationships and in reduced internalising symptoms such as anxiety. However, there was more equivocation regarding the extent to which reported changes in students' self-regulation were enacted in the school environment, with improvements in externalising behaviours being less evident to school staff outside the safe space of the LGiS classroom.

Student Engagement in School

In keeping with the qualitative student data analysis, school staff reported that student engagement with LGiS was not immediate. Some students were cautious as to why they were there, but after experiencing the program students at several of the schools found it very beneficial and looked forward to attending.

"It started – they didn't really want to do it and they called it things like, the – forgive my terminology, but the sped class. But then towards the end they absolutely loved it, and they still ask me if they can do it again."

"We also saw a 47% increase in student attendance and again, that's based on data off Sentral."

"Some kids had improved attendance into school, so one kid didn't come to school but he always came on Thursdays for Learning Ground. That translated to his increased attendance for term 4, which was fantastic to see, and he still comes to school."

"None of our kids have truanted. They turn up. Sometimes in the beginning there's a whinge and a moan about not wanting to be there, what is this crap and all the rest of it, but they're still turning up."

In addition to improved attendance for some students, increased engagement in opportunities the school offered academically were noted by one school staff participant.

"Some of the teachers gave feedback that a couple of the kids were more open to engagement but then more open to asking for assistance with their studies, more open to interventions."

On the other hand, one school staff participant acknowledged that they had found it difficult to engage students, particularly in 2022, due to their perception that they were missing out on other classes to attend LGiS.

"So unfortunately, I found it difficult to find a way to encourage kids to go to something they did want to go - to come to this class, which they found boring or something like that. ... They figured out that if they whinged enough or just didn't show up or did certain things, they

could get to those classes that they would prefer to be at, like the PDHPE and like the visual arts and stuff like that.”

Again, this concurs with the student data showing that while the majority of students across the sample valued their involvement in LGiS, some students felt that LGiS was keeping them from preferred activities.

School Staff Reflections on LGiS Content and Programming

Whereas the school staff responsible for delivering and administering the LGiS program strongly endorsed the value of its relational pedagogy, it was not straightforward for school staff to match the structure and content of LGiS with the systems governing curriculum content and programming in their schools. Staff reflected that some elements of content and programming worked well in their contexts, while others caused concern. Accordingly, this section elaborates and contextualises the comments made by staff regarding content and programming. It is important to note that all staff were overall very supportive of LGiS, and offered constructive feedback intended to improve the accessibility and useability of the program for their settings.

LGiS Content

Lesson content was seen as broadly coherent with elements of the PDHPE curriculum, though teachers generally felt it was not at a year 9 level and was more suitable for years 7 and 8. They felt the handbook material dragged at points and needed tightening.

“The content within LG is very similar to the life coaching class that the head teacher of wellbeing and the year advisors run, and also PDHPE. Very, very similar content. We only managed to get through the first book over two terms and we felt like it was a bit dragged out and not as maybe direct as it needed to be. So we made the decision just to go through the first book because it was just very, very long. The content was great but sometimes it could have been more confined.”

Some of the language was unfamiliar and not transparent for staff to use in teaching, or for the current generation of students to understand.

“We only did about 15 sessions from booklet 1, but I would say probably five to seven of those sessions, there would be something in it, some type of language, some type of wording, some type of activity where myself and the [SLSO] facilitator, would be like (a) well I don’t even know what that means and we’d have to really think about it and then (b) we’d be like, our kids won’t get that - if we don’t get it they’re not going to understand it.”

Questions were also raised about the currency of the program developers’ knowledge and familiarity with young people in schools today.

“Like we said, there’s a strong link between PDH and LGIS. [But] are there people who have been doing this, living and breathing it, knowing these kids that we’re targeting and knowing what content is best for these kids? Are they a part of the development of each of the sessions? Or is it the same people that’s been developing the program with a similar view for the last 15 to 20 years on what’s important for young people?”

The approach to the ‘spiritual me’ seemed too shallow for one teacher-facilitator who felt that the way it was framed did not provide enough weight to the strong sense of purpose and service that resonated with his personal and cultural understanding.

“I think for me, the one that sticks out is the spiritual dimension, where they explained that as the wow factor. Like you can’t explain it as just the wow factor. I explained it a little bit differently with my group and I explained it to say that it’s a strong purpose in your life. So whether you can relate to your faith or your culture, you can relate to something that you’re really passionate about. So whether that’s climate change or helping others. But their explanation was the wow factor.”

These comments suggest a number of opportunities to further develop the LGiS content so as to build stronger cross-curriculum links, for example with civics education, human rights, religious studies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies and environmental sustainability.

Programming Issues

According to the NSW Education Standards Authority (2021) educational programming “enables teachers to plan for the delivery of syllabus content, cater for the diversity of student learning needs and improve student learning outcomes in a particular year and/or stage.” As part of demonstrating the quality of their teaching, schools and teachers are required to document “the process of selecting and sequencing learning experiences which enable students to engage with syllabus outcomes and develop subject specific skills and knowledge.” Programming provides teachers with a basis to reflect, evaluate and adjust the ways that teaching and learning are designed and implemented.

When asked to provide feedback on the process of running LGiS, school teaching staff discussed several programming factors that reflected on constraints and possibilities for implementing LGiS. The commitment of staff to program LGiS effectively, through investing time in planning lessons and making necessary adjustments to its implementation, was evident in the following comments, which were echoed by several teachers.

“You’re planning the lessons, you’re changing them from a booklet to a Google slide, adding videos, adding different things. That’s what we’ve got to do to make it 2023 worth learning. You can’t just print it, photocopy a booklet and go, here kids, do this worksheet.

You’re actually teaching. It’s not supervising. It’s actually leading the implementation of the program which includes lesson adjustments, differentiation, getting the lesson ready. So it’s just like teaching a KLA.”

The comments below from a senior teacher show the complexity, and the effort required, in planning and delivering LGiS in their setting.

“We’ve got our own curriculum that we do. So it’s hard to timetable and I know that’s one of their biggest pressures is to try and timetable it on. We don’t timetable a class, we use it as a withdrawal targeted program so kids are coming out of their normal timetabled class to come to it. So I think that’s a difficult thing and I know they would really love it to be timetabled

The length of the program is definitely way too long. I think with any intervention, 10 to 15 weeks, if you’re using it as an intervention like we are. So you know, full respect to those schools that are doing it as a class, that’s their choice. Lucky them, because it’s a nightmare timetabling wise. If they can run this program for 40 weeks, which is what the program initially was, then that’s great. But if it’s a withdrawal program, you’re not doing 40 weeks. You’re just not. So for us, 10 weeks is a good number. We pushed it to 14 in case kids missed a few sessions but I’d love to hear how schools are going if it’s a timetabled class, I’d love to hear how the whole year goes because, for us, it just wouldn’t work.

It’d be great that schools had the flexibility with curriculum hours and minutes to give a period away because if you’re asking for LGiS to be a period, you need to take it from somewhere else. I’d have to go, ‘Hey, English, give me one of your Year 8 periods,’ and they would look at me and go, ‘No, we’ve got to do this, this and this.’ So that’s a challenge.”

Over the course of the project LG has sought to accommodate these kinds of challenges by adapting its approach to offer a version of the LGiS program that can be run in 15 session blocks across two years. Based on this feedback from school staff there is substantial scope for the LGiS materials and resources to be further developed so as to match schools’ programming needs and reduce current challenges to the program’s deployment.

Cultural Concerns

As discussed in Parada et al. (2016), the original Learning Ground program was co-developed with Aboriginal leaders from Western Sydney and is informed by a desire to privilege Aboriginal knowledge concepts. The LGiS manual states that “the methodology of Learning Ground in School is based on the latest holistic approach to behavioural change coupled with profound Aboriginal teaching about connection” (inside front cover, *LGiS Training Manual for Professionals*, 2021). Although local Elders were involved in developing the content, its dissemination beyond the original setting has given rise to some disquiet. The issue has been recognised by Learning Ground, as discussed in the following reflections from a leading LG mentor.

“A lot of our facilitators don’t feel comfortable delivering content around Aboriginal spirituality and the conversations, what is the difference between guides and totems. We’ve been fortunate enough to have time with our facilitators to prepare in advance for the program itself, so we’ve been able to have that conversation. But then they feel really uncomfortable with delivering that. I think that comes from a space of not wanting to get it wrong and not wanting to offend. But we’ve assured our facilitators that our program has been collaborating with our community, with our Elders, permissions have been given as permission has been asked. I think that was a really big barrier for some of our facilitators.”

The following extract from a school staff member indicates the nature of the cultural concerns prompted by some of the LGiS content.

“I really struggled with the Aboriginal content. I am not Aboriginal, I felt like some of the content was bordering on appropriation. I really struggled, and the only reason I was okay with delivering some of that content – and I didn’t deliver it – I asked our Aboriginal mentor to deliver it. And the thing was this year I don’t have an Aboriginal mentor, so I would not be delivering. I would make the decision not to deliver some of that content ... I just can’t – I feel like it’s almost like a very frivolous dealing with that content in that context, when there’s thousands of years of culture behind it and it’s not given that gravity.

I feel like it is not my place to be handing out totems – like giving significant cultural labels to these kids in a very shallow approach? I don’t know. When I am personally not Aboriginal, it just felt wrong. That was one of the biggest issues that I had with the program, and I’ve spoken to other SSO’s, social workers, that have this similar concern with the content.

There’s lessons where it is about appreciating Aboriginal culture and I am absolutely okay with that, using the stories and tying that in with everything else. I have no problem with that. It was things where we were kind of – I think it was the lesson with the totems – it was very clear that’s not something I would do if I didn’t have an Aboriginal mentor with me. She was okay with it, and I did talk to her about the concerns that I had, but when I run it this year I wouldn’t do it.”

As expressed here, this staff member is not simply worried about getting things wrong, but is concerned about claiming ownership and authority for others’ cultural knowledge. Although Learning Ground has maintained its own appropriate communications with knowledge holders and been given permission for sharing activities gifted by Aboriginal mentors within its onsite program at Learning Ground, this kind of cultural permission is not generally transferable to a third party. To ensure cultural safety, the staff member has followed appropriate protocols of asking for the advice and assistance of a local knowledge holder who does have the cultural authority to determine whether to go ahead with the activity and whether they might facilitate it. This concern is consistent with departmental policy that states as follows.

Schools should seek to understand appropriate protocols, materials and resources for their students, obtain appropriate permissions from members of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities whose knowledge is being shared, and avoid tokenistic approaches (Morrison et al., 2019). Schools should not claim ownership of any cultural knowledge or practices that community members give permission to use in the school (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2022, p. 27).

It was similarly important for the research team to follow cultural protocols by ensuring that we were appropriately informed and advised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues with expertise in Aboriginal education. After discussing with Learning Ground the need for an Aboriginal cultural review of the program materials, Ms Virginia O’Rourke was commissioned to undertake an analysis of the LGiS training manual and program handbooks. (See Section Six).

Part 2: Implementation of LGiS by Schools

As identified in the school intervention literature, implementation factors have direct impacts on the effectiveness and sustainability of any school-based intervention. A review of LGiS implementation, incorporating considered appraisal and analysis of key implementation factors, is therefore of crucial importance to the ongoing development and success of the LGiS initiative. While the findings reported so far in this report indicate clear benefits of LGiS for many students in the program, investigation of program implementation reveals several continuing challenges. The implementation issues of most concerns for schools in the pilot include staffing, timetabling, and the contextual fit of LGiS for the in-school setting. While it is important to acknowledge that LG has made significant efforts to address the findings discussed in the LGiS pilot and interim reports concerning student recruitment, engagement and attendance, it is equally important to consider the effects of the adjustments made to this point.

To support the investigation of implementation factors, this section unpacks the specific implementation issues encountered through jointly analysing reflections from both LG and school staff. Many of these comments have been tabulated in columns and juxtaposed, in order to facilitate direct appreciation and comparison of the issues brought to light from LG and school perspectives. This format helps to promote a kind of asynchronous dialogue between LG and school staff and enables appraisal of convergences and divergences among the views expressed.

COVID 19 Destabilisation

As noted at the outset, the disruptive impacts of the Covid19 pandemic cut across the critical implementation phase of LGiS, as well as the research, and are still playing out in schools in relation to ongoing learning, wellbeing and staffing needs. The November 2021 interim report documented difficulties with the implementation of LGiS during periods of lockdown and foreshadowed expectations of needing to deal with wellbeing and behavioural issues when schools returned to normal. Less open to prediction at that stage was the extent to which ‘normal’ would remain an elusive sanctuary in a period of growing instability, system incapacity, and social inequity.

Given pre-existing levels of disadvantage in the populations serviced by the participating schools, this continuing period of intersecting disruptions could be expected to have heavy impacts on their students and families. In November 2021 school staff indicated that they expected to have to meet additional student demands for learning, wellbeing and behaviour support. By that stage school executive members involved in the research recognised that their staff would also have similar wellbeing and support needs. It is not clear, however, whether they predicted the challenge to their resources flowing from increased demands during a period of elevated staff illness and attrition, alongside teacher recruitment and availability shortages (Gore et al., 2020).

These circumstances of increased student behaviour and wellbeing demands suggest the heightened relevance of programs such as LGiS which focus on student wellbeing support and reengagement. At the same time, it must be recognised that prevailing conditions and resourcing in schools have become more tenuous and demanding for staff. The following extract from comments made by a senior LG mentor describes the cascading impacts of implementation of LGiS in one school.

“I’ve seen a lot of the different schools and different models. I feel that 2021 in YY was just marvellous. Unfortunately we had COVID, which disrupted everything. It was a timetabled lesson, it was a classroom, so that the kids knew each other. It built up all the things that we want for LGiS. It was built on their relationships with each other, relationships with the staff, even though they were Mister and Mrs, except for the SLSOs. ... Last year was all these wonderful things, the program was doing everything. Now I’ve walked in and you’ve got four students. It was because they could look out the window and see everyone running around having fun and to not go into LGiS. So there was such a change, and we’ve talked about the logistics of staffing and the reason why LGiS is not sustainable in this school, that for timetabling, staffing, costing, the resources as well.”

There is no doubt that unanticipated disruptions occasioned by the pandemic challenged schools and affected LGiS implementation. LG responded to these difficulties by adjusting requirements for implementation and offering additional supports. While these adaptations allowed the program to proceed in most schools, inevitable challenges remained. Key themes that emerged from the analysis of both the school staff and LG mentor data related to student selection, staffing professional learning, and implementation support.

Student Selection

In March 2021 the interim research report identified that students feeling stigmatised for attending LGiS was attenuating their engagement in the program and leading to attrition. At the same time, Learning Ground staff were finding that the diluted intensity occasioned through timetabling only one lesson per week made it difficult to engage and sustain the program with students of high need and poor attendance records. The 7-7-7 recruitment guidelines were devised as a way to enhance social modelling and mutual learning within the program. This approach was also a means to build engagement and reduce the stigmatisation of those participating. In the following extracts we see how differing interpretations have informed the application of the 7-7-7 guidelines within schools.

It is evident from the comments of both the Learning Ground mentors and the school staff in Table 17 that the 7-7-7 model was viewed as a means to effect a workable balance in the LGiS classes to try to maximise program effectiveness in the school setting. There was evidently some fluidity in the ways that the criteria were interpreted in different schools, with the emphasis shifting

Table 17. Application of the 7-7-7 Principle to Student Selection

LG Mentor Reflections	School Staff Reflections
<p>(A) My notes that I took was how important it is for student selection to be using the 7-7-7 model. Making sure that you were taking the right participants out of each category to encourage one another not discourage.</p> <p>(B) Both last year and this year going into schools as a mentor and what I found, where we saw really good success was determined by correct selection of student participants. That's kind of the key to everything and seeing that reflecting in this year. One of the schools did it really well. One of the schools I was in not so well and it was very obvious. So, the school that didn't do it so well have come back on board this year and has made better selections. So they did learn.</p> <p>(C) I think, yeah, the 7-7-7, getting that right has been one of the best things. Especially at [XX], we noticed the first couple of years the selection probably wasn't the greatest and in the last year it was quite spot on and it really worked well.</p> <p>(D) On that criteria for selection, with [XX] this year, they have not chosen many from that top tier. I think we've only got two or one from that seven. They've chosen more from here and here, because they're finding the needs have changed. So it is the anxiety, it is being you know, lost in the system. Part of the furniture. We don't want them to be part of the furniture, you know.</p> <p>(E) It's less behavioural.</p>	<p>(1) The students were chosen by the deputy principal. They were given the classifications that Learning Ground has, the category 1, 2 and 3. They found particular students to do that. We found that we had about 18 that stayed on with the program, not quite 21 I think.</p> <p>(2) I wasn't involved with the selection process. It was my deputy principals that both spoke about students they thought would most benefit from the program. So, 75 per cent of our students were male and they did dominate a lot of the discussions.</p> <p>(3) I think maybe in the future, maybe it should be more towards 50-50 per cent ratio if possible. Just so more girls could feel a little bit more comfortable to share their opinion.</p> <p>(4) I looked at attendance data, I looked at suspension data, I looked at class data. I didn't necessarily focus on academic performance, mainly looked at that social and emotional development and where they are in regard to their peers.</p> <p>(5) So let's start with the seven who were the role modelling behaviour. They were selected based off consultation with myself and the year advisor because they know that group of students best. They're students that are aspiring to be in leadership roles but not necessarily naturally leadership comes on the forefront of what we see.</p> <p>(6) They're the students that other kids want to be around. Some of them were students who have challenging behaviours, but they're quite a popular and trustworthy student amongst their peers.</p> <p>(7) The targeted level of students were the students who we've seen pockets of real great academic work and social and emotional development but needed probably just a safer environment to be able to really project themselves up into that leadership opportunity.</p> <p>(8) Then our students that we deemed are either at risk of disengagement or at risk of developing some mental health concerns, some peer and friendship concerns, were our students that we chose as needing that really intensive and additional support.</p>

in some instances, from addressing risks associated with behaviour and disengagement to addressing more general social and wellbeing issues identified by staff. In one school the predominant selection of male students seemed to reflect a focus on behavioural challenges (B, 2). In another school the shift towards a more prominent wellbeing focus was deemed to be more workable after previous

difficulties with stigmatisation of students at risk (C). While this does appear consistent with the category definitions provided by LG (see Figure 1), as noted by the LG mentors, the focus on wellbeing may have unintentionally resulted in a shift away from engagement of students with difficult behaviours. Though not directly explored in the focus group sessions, it is possible in part that this shift was felt necessary as a response to the wellbeing impacts of the COVID 19 disruptions.

There were also implementation differences regarding year levels targeted. Selection advice from Learning Ground nominated years 8 and 9 as the most appropriate levels for LGiS. Schools that tried the program with year 9s identified that it was not a good fit as students in year 9 were more difficult to recruit, and it was harder to maintain their engagement. All schools delivered the program with year 8s, but some schools felt it would be most useful and beneficial if it was pitched for year 7s to support their transition to school. Staff from these schools were aware of students in year 7, and some primary school age students, who were undertaking the Learning Ground program onsite at Mt Druitt, and this understanding helped to inform their assessments of the most appropriate year level for LGiS.

Timetabling

Although the logic of the 7-7-7 model appears to have been broadly accepted in the majority of schools, its implementation proved more complex than LG had anticipated, particularly with regard to timetabling. Below, Table 18 contrasts the perspectives of LG and school staff in relation to timetabling issues, thus providing a window into the complexity of timetabling and the measures that were taken to try to accommodate LGiS aims.

Table 18. Timetabling Issues as Seen from LG and from Schools' Perspectives

LG Mentor Reflections	School Staff Reflections
<i>(A) Timetabling is so important. When you [have it] scheduled, there is no other space for them to be in at that time and they are able to fully commit themselves to the learning. What has worked really well is when we have the principals, or the APs, or the deputies come in on that first session to speak to the young people as to why they've been selected for this program, that it's not because you're the naughty kids or that this is a special program for special people.</i>	<i>(1) I'm not too sure if Learning Ground realise when we lock out two periods on the timetable, we're actually putting a lock on other periods going on at that time because we're locking in our Head of Wellbeing, who also teaches a bit of PDHPE, and that fills up his timetable. So we're locking out staff and periods. So, there's a whole lot that goes in the background that I'm not 100 per cent sure if the Learning Ground team understand that, the complexities that we have to deal with in order to get a program up and running.</i>

Continues

Table 18 (Continued). Timetabling Issues as Seen from LG and from Schools' Perspectives

LG Mentor Reflections	School Staff Reflections
<p>(B) <i>I think going from a school that wasn't timetabled to now, being timetabled, I can definitely see the change in – when it's not timetabled you really have that leniency to choose 7-7-7. Whereas being a timetabled class, it's very much like, yep, one class you've just shoved into this classroom. Definitely the numbers are higher when it's timetabled, but you can see the shift in the 7-7-7. So it's hard to try and get the best of both worlds in that sense.</i></p> <p>(C) <i>So one school asked if it could be 15 weeks, then I think that would fit in more neatly with what's required for wellbeing throughout the year for the school. Rather than 36 weeks that the program currently is. But we were willing to work with that school for them to do book one in one year and then book two in another year. So they could still do their 15 weeks. 36 [sessions] with both groups but just one year at a time.</i></p> <p>(D) <i>We think we need to be flexible about the time, about the place where the program's delivered. Even receiving a minimum number of students or a maximum number. But we can't cut corners on some of the essentials to the program.</i></p>	<p>(2) <i>I was a part of it last year with Year 8 as well, and I completely agree that last year just seemed better. In general, I think because it was timetabled. The kids, even when we went into lockdown, we still had kids coming online to do it.</i></p> <p>(3) <i>Ours was not able to be timetabled. That was tricky when students needed to have assessments or they had a cooking class, or something practical they couldn't really catch up on. It was a bit unreasonable to ask them to be here when they needed to be there.</i></p> <p>(4) <i>Yeah, so the timetabling, exactly the same as us. It is difficult. Just getting kids. So our program ran for around 20 - I think it was 20, 21, 20 weeks. I actually don't remember exactly. So kids missed out on one period a week, that's 20 periods and I know that we want kids to engage in their learning and things like that but also, they are missing a lot of class which made it difficult.</i></p> <p>(5) <i>The LGiS program across one class on a particular afternoon dictates where I place year 11, 12, 10, and 9 on a timetable. That can't happen. It's not simple and it's not straightforward when you've got significant constraints around number of teachers on a particular course or teaching on a particular line.</i></p>

It is evident from Table 18 that LG mentors viewed timetabling as a means of providing the conditions needed to maximise program benefits. Over time they came to appreciate that constraints within schools required adjustment to their preferred model of program delivery. School staff viewed timetabling in terms of its effects for managing staff work requirements. They also expressed concern that missing other classes in order to participate in LGiS could be disadvantaging student learning in other areas. For some executive staff, the challenge of adjusting timetabling equitably ultimately became a make-or-break issue for their capacity to run the LGiS program.

Staffing

Following the 2020 pilot, which identified the need to ensure that school-based LGiS facilitators and mentors were relationally oriented and understanding of the aims of the program, LG adjusted its staff recruitment communications. Alongside the student selection criteria, they identified that LGiS facilitators should be “selected from the teaching staff of each school, preferably someone connected to student wellbeing, mental health care, with experience to recognise stress issues, behavioural change and care needed in relation to student’s families.” In Table 19 below LG mentors discuss in the left column the characteristics and attitudes they regard as ideal for school

staff to facilitate the program, and the kinds of challenges they were attuned to. The right column shows the staffing issues that were most prominent for school staff.

Table 19. Reflections on Staffing

LG Mentor Reflections	School Staff Reflections
<p>(A) Staffing is incredibly important. We have found that schools are giving us who's available, not necessarily who is the right fit for the position. In that space, they're not teachers they're facilitators. I think the language that we've used with them is quite important is to help them on that journey from taking the teacher hat off and putting the facilitator hat on.</p> <p>(B) I've found that having facilitators and mentors from the wellbeing sector in the school has been a big tick, in my experience. Whether they'd be SLSOs or what not, I think that they just get the content that we're trying to deliver.</p> <p>(C) There's lots of hierarchy. I think it varies from school to school. In say two of the schools I've been in, it's been quite cohesive. The contributions from everyone in that space are valued and everyone feels free to contribute. Where there has been other schools where the SLSOs are treated as if they are just to sit and observe. That their contributions aren't valued and may have been spoken down to in front of the participants, to which they've mentioned or said something, oh that wasn't a very respectful way to speak to one another. The kids have called out behaviours in this space.</p> <p>(D) A lot of the teachers or SLSOs want to try and find a shortcut in how to prepare for the program. I found that they want PDF files and the mentor books, so that they can pretty much copy and paste. So they're trying to shortcut the program, without even reading it. Even when they're trying to prepare, they're constantly trying to find ways to offload onto others, rather than trying to take ownership.</p> <p>(E) What we're facilitating today in a large part, is being real and taking ownership of your own realness. If you're not willing to reflect on who you are and share that with the other people, they're not going to reflect on who they are.</p> <p>(F) If some participant can relate to the facilitator in one experience, it creates a whole different level of rapport. So by not having that time for self-reflection and doing that self-reflection it really puts a barrier between those real conversations and facilitating a program that's handed to you.</p> <p>(G) It is really important for us coming in this year as consultants and not mentors that they're not as dependant on us to fulfil a mentor position in their school, where that is put on their school selection of staff.</p>	<p>(1) You can't have anyone running the program. It needs to be someone that can connect with the kids. Someone that has a lot of behavioural - like discipline skills. You need to have someone that can control that group. Having 21 - we had - I think we had a little bit more, maybe. To have all those students in the one class is - can be very, very difficult.</p> <p>(2) One of the biggest issues we had last year was that although we had the success of the groups and everything, financially, what we did was not sustainable. Because we had basically three teachers and four SLSOs all doing - or three SLSOs all doing Learning Grounds on that one period, which meant that - well, that was three SLSOs not looking after students that actually had funding or other classes and everything else.</p> <p>(3) So although that was really nice in the way we got it, it wasn't sustainable. If we could find a way to do it to make it sustainable, it would be fantastic.</p> <p>(4) I have a lot of other programs that I lead at the school and just the workload is ridiculous at the moment. They did ask for me to lead LGiS again and I couldn't do it because I couldn't do that to myself.</p> <p>(5) It's just not going to be possible for us to run Learning Ground next year, based on the fact that we can't take out of any more classes. Even though that one was successful, with the Year 8s, two years ago, it wasn't sustainable, because of the number of teachers that we had. But also, too, for us to do that, we had to take from their English lesson, one English lesson and one HSIE lesson. That put a lot of onus on us to try and catch them up, and this was a learning and support class [with] very, very low literacy.</p> <p>(6) If LGiS had three or four mentors that they sent and then there was one teacher in the class with three or four mentors from LGiS, it would be more accessible. However, at the moment, you're taking resources from a place where there's already limited resources.</p>

From Table 19 we see that the LG mentors' focus was on the personal characteristics of the staff and their ability to remain present to the students so as to convey a sense of calm and thoughtfulness. They were concerned about the quality of relationship being modelled in the classroom and found that school-based support and wellbeing staff were more able to engage non-hierarchically in the authentic relationships they sought to cultivate in the classroom. While school staff recognised the need for relational abilities on the part of those running the program, the predominant staffing issues for them were the additional time and effort required to implement LGiS effectively when they were already stretched by a shortage of teaching staff. As a result of the pilot experience, LG has adjusted staffing requirements for 2023-24 and offered more direct support from Learning Ground consultants and mentors.

Professional Learning

As reported in the March 2021 interim report, evaluations of the training workshops collected by LG strongly endorsed the content and orientation of the overall LGiS program. School staff who participated in the research evaluation also found the professional learning opportunity valuable. Table 20 compares reflections from LG mentors and school staff regarding the benefits of the LGiS professional learning workshops.

Table 20. Professional Learning Benefits

LG Mentor Reflections	School Staff Reflections
(A) <i>The professional learning program really gives them a lot of encouragement and enthusiasm. For the most part we can tell that they're enthusiastic and they want to have a go and do LGiS in their school and that for some they have been able to push through and remain enthusiastic.</i>	(1) <i>I don't think you could be a mentor of one of the groups without having the training, if that makes sense. Each group needs a mentor sitting with them, so to have one trained person in the room, like the facilitator, it's not really feasible, because each group can't be led by someone that doesn't have that training. I think the conversations that need to be had need that background. Even the whole "I greet you with great respect and great affection." Unless each mentor for each group knows how that runs and knows how that process happens, it's - yeah. You can't just have any random person sitting there that doesn't have that training.</i>
(B) <i>We're finding with staff, that they are continuously, in every school that we've offered professional learning, we have found at least a number of the staff got engaged in the professional learning and made remarks to the effect that they would have liked to have had this material in their teacher training.</i>	
(C) <i>Teachers – the facilitators and mentors were more open to sharing because they've gone through that training, knowing that vulnerability is important.</i>	(2) <i>Last year, the classroom definitely felt like everyone was on the same page, because we were all experiencing the same thing. We all went to the exact same training day. We all knew exactly what each other knew.</i>

Notwithstanding these appreciative perspectives, school staff who participated in the research focus groups recommended improvements to the professional learning that included the clarification of the role expected of teachers from the outset, as well as adjusting the length and pace

of the three-day professional learning requirement. They also felt that a more explicitly targeted approach, with more scope for hands-on practice and preparation, would have been more effective for supporting their needs and more inclusive of their relevant prior knowledge.

As a result of discussions with schools regarding their capacity and preferred modes for professional learning, LG has recently adjusted their approach to reduce the face-to-face requirement to two days. This is preceded by a 3-hour introductory block of self-paced online professional learning, and followed at a later date with another 3-hour block. From June 2023 the 18-hour professional learning package has been accredited by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) in the priority area of student/child mental health to count towards maintaining Proficient Teacher Accreditation in NSW.

Implementation Support

The literature on implementation of school initiatives highlights the need for effective support throughout preparation, initiation and delivery (Albers & Pattuwa, 2017; Dobia et al. 2020). Effective supports (in the plural) are drawn from a range of possible tools, including professional learning, curriculum and teaching materials, evidence guides, monitoring tools, supervised practice and effective coaching. In implementing LGiS, the involvement of the LG mentors was clearly crucial.

The LG mentors provided guidance to school staff to ensure that session delivery occurred in the spirit that LG intended. They assisted the school-based team in prior planning of sessions, they modelled the quality of relationships and communication considered essential during LGiS sessions, and they reviewed the progress of the program through post-session debriefings. The modelling that the LG mentors provided, particularly in the early stages of implementation, was strongly appreciated by school staff and provided important support for them to develop confidence in employing the depth of relational pedagogy that is fundamental to the LG philosophy and practice.

Despite this expressed appreciation for the LG mentors, their role was substantially more complex and less circumscribed than the mentor roles they usually performed. Onsite at Learning Ground they were mentors to students and were not simultaneously engaged in guiding teaching staff on how to implement a new program in a large school which had been allocated one lesson per week. While the overall findings from this study suggest that the LG mentors were in the main very successful in conveying the core LG teachings, the focus group data collected from each of the groups separately showed a level of disjuncture in their perspectives on contemporary educational practice and on the organisational constraints and opportunities in schools.

The perspectives juxtaposed in Table 22 speak to the different priorities held by LG mentors and school staff, and the processes of accommodation that would be required to support school staff to integrate the LGiS program into their day-to-day roles in schools.

Table 21. LG Mentor and School Staff Comments Relating to Implementation Support

LG Mentor Reflections	School Staff Reflections
<p>(A) <i>Buy-in from the teachers – whether they take the ownership of the program and whether they’re willing to share of themselves with the other students – is a major factor in everything.</i></p>	<p>(1) <i>I definitely felt like the mentors had all the knowledge and they knew what we had to do, and they knew the expectations. But sometimes I think there was a disconnect because I was facilitating it, but I wasn’t doing it the way they thought it needed to be done, or I wasn’t including the things that they thought needed to be included.</i></p>
<p>(B) <i>It is building up and that support about what the program’s about. So I think we’re constantly re-visiting what it’s about. We can’t presume that they get it. We’re building on each activity what it can bring out.</i></p>	<p>(2) <i>They need to cater for both types of plan – people that need a lot of support and just little chunks of information so that they’re not overwhelmed, but then also cater to those that can plan and have run it before. We’re not going to be looking at the little bits, we’re looking at the whole program and kind of going, okay this worked from last year, this is not going to work this year, how do we adjust it?</i></p>
<p>(C) <i>We are really very mindful of the need for change in the school environment. We’re also very mindful of the colossal expectations that are already placed on school staff and how difficult it is for them to fulfil yet more obligations.</i></p>	<p>(3) <i>So, we’d like some understanding from the Learning Ground team that assessments and exams are happening. We had to finish up in this week because of assessments and what have you and then I became like the middle person. I can’t remember who called me. Because they’re at me about what they’d like and I’m telling them what we’re doing, and it had to be a conversation with [the staff member].</i></p>
<p>(D) <i>I think because everything is technology based, now that we’re moving into the new age. We give our physical handbooks, our physical copies, we don’t tend to give the PDF version. A lot of the questions that they would ask would be, do you have a PDF version of this? Because, God forbid, they have to open a book and read it and then interpret it into a PowerPoint slide or a Word document.</i></p>	<p>(4) <i>I did ask if they had an online version or something like that because, for my teaching style, I do like to have things projected. With the teacher workload already adding more workload to those teachers who are teaching those students as well, but also to myself, it was extra workload. Because even though we were given these booklets, I had to create the whole program online, which actually annoyed me a lot.</i></p>
<p>(E) <i>They want the PowerPoints done for them already. They want the PDF version of the mentor handbooks. Just so that they can kind of copy and paste into Word doc or into a slide instead of really sitting there, reading the content from the physical handbook and then interpreting it in their own way onto a PowerPoint slide. I think that bit of disconnect is something that we’re continuing to see in these teacher trainings. Definitely down the track, they kind of switch on and go, hang on, I can make of this what I want it to be, but trying to fight that constant fight at the start all the time, gets a little bit exhausting and repetitive. But yeah, I think it’s just the technology side of it. They just want to try and find an easier way to relay the content onto a PowerPoint slide.</i></p>	<p>(5) <i>I knew that all this fantastic content was in this green book that I really wanted to get to because those were the deep and meaningful conversations that kids needed to have about domestic violence, about trauma and things like that. But because we only had the red book – and I kept asking the mentors, can we have this green book so we can do this planning? I really struggle with it because I would like to plan it so that I can pick up the really important topics for times when they’re not going to have major assessments, so I can do that timing. If I have all the information, I can do that planning and do it in a very conscious way. Why isn’t this just being given to us? ... There is a bit of incongruency between their view of giving more autonomy to the schools, but also wanting quite a large amount of control over the content. You can’t have it both ways.</i></p>

Despite supporting the benefits of the program, school staff at times expressed frustration that Learning Ground did not appreciate the organisational constraints and priorities they are subject to. Learning Ground advises that its approach to implementation has allowed for a continual evolution of the program in consultation with pilot schools. Understanding and accommodating the needs of schools has been a significant and evolving process requiring ongoing communications between LG and the participating schools.

Sustainability

Despite the promising findings relating to student impacts, resourcing issues for the LGiS program remained significant throughout the trial and contributed to the withdrawal of two of the seven schools. Comments from one school who felt unable to continue with LGiS due to financial and resourcing constraints nonetheless reflected positively on the program.

“I believe it's a good strong program, but it's the, how do you adapt it into a comprehensive high school, which has got a complex set of complex constraints. The only way you can do that is if you've got the budget, which will enable to do that.”

This school had undertaken successful implementation of LGiS in 2021 but found in 2022 that the priority needs of many students coming back to school after lockdowns were concentrated in literacy.

“There's no way we could have taken from our Year 8s, because the Year 8s we had this year desperately needed literacy interventions. The Year 7s that we've got coming up into Year 8 even more desperately need literacy interventions. We've got kids working still at a Year 1 level and a Year 2 level, going into Year 8. So it's like Learning Ground or literacy: it's going to be literacy, I'm afraid ... because not all of them actually need Learning Ground”.

The combination of acute student needs, staffing availability, timetabling dilemmas and other systemic educational initiatives meant the school could no longer find ways to accommodate LGiS within its timetable and resource availability.

“What we did, pulling kids out, we pulled kids out that needed Learning Ground, but then where do you put it? We've got nowhere in our timetable next year to put it. Then with a new curriculum coming in, the new behaviour management stuff coming in that we have been assigned, it's like that's going to take up a majority of our time next year, actually creating that behaviour management stuff that's got to come into the school and supporting students with behaviour and risk management and stuff like that. There's too much going on.”

School Staff Suggestions for Adapting LGiS

While discussing the difficulties they faced, some schools also saw opportunities for modifying the approach to LGiS to make it easier for them to implement. Several senior school staff suggested options for setting up LGiS in ways that would accommodate their needs in relation to timetabling, staffing, and targeting. One school identified LGiS as an approach to early intervention within their welfare framework.

Figure 7. Care Continuum (NSW Education, 2023)



NSW Education’s continuum of care (Figure 7) applies a framework for prevention and intervention drawn from the field of health promotion. This approach seeks to facilitate access to the most appropriate level of support in a graduating sequence of need. In a school setting this model aims to promote “a whole-school, prevention-focused, and positive approach to behaviour support to meet the needs of all students” (NSW Education, 2023). The continuum of care intends that all students are provided with curriculum that supports whole school prevention and promotion of positive wellbeing. Those students identified at greater risk of difficulties are eligible for more intensive targeted intervention, while those at highest risk are provided with individualised treatment or support.

The public health model is often depicted as a pyramid or triangle. In this form it is known as a multi-tiered system of support. The three tiers are numbered from the bottom, which is tier 1, with tier 2 and then tier 3 catering to students at increasingly higher risk. This configuration of the continuum of care is utilised in the PBIS/PBL system of school behaviour support as shown in Figure 8. The continuum of care and multi-tiered frameworks are important models to bear in mind when seeking to embed any intervention in a school setting. These frameworks are intended to ensure that, in a system with limited resources, the students most in need have access to the most intensive supports.

Although the original Learning Ground program caters to groups, its focus as a highly specialised and individualised approach for high-risk students locates it as a tier 3 intervention. In seeking to extend its reach into schools LGiS has undergone a number of significant changes in

Figure 8. Tiered System of School-Based Behavioural Support

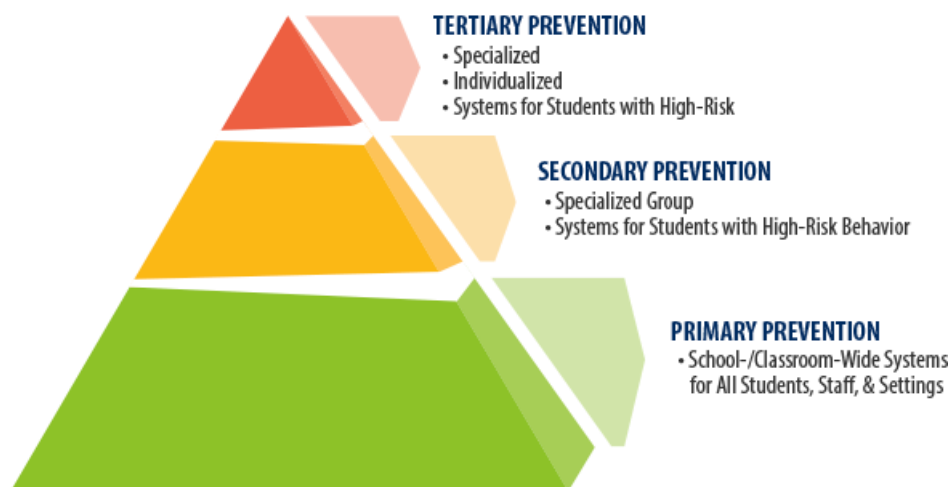


Image source: <https://www.launchps.vic.edu.au/page/315/School-Wide-Positive-Behaviour-Support>

relation to student and staff ratios, frequency, and intensity of delivery. The 7-7-7 approach that it adopted does not fit neatly into tier 1 or tier 2 – which contributes to the difficulties currently associated with timetabling and staffing. As can be seen from Figure 8, Tier 2 and 3 interventions are able to provide a higher level of support because they are targeted to smaller numbers of students with identified needs.

During the research consultations several senior school staff made suggestions as to how to create a more workable fit for delivery of LGiS in their schools. Their recommendations, shown in Table 22, were very much in line with the continuum of care. The table arranges these suggestions in descending order from the more universal approach to the most targeted for high-risk students. These suggestions suggest strategic opportunities that could support the sustainability of Learning Ground in School by meeting the needs that schools have identified within their operational frameworks and capacities.

It is important to note that not all these suggestions could be supported by LG simultaneously. They should be considered as alternatives, each with different advantages and disadvantages that would benefit from careful consideration in relation to LG's and schools' objectives and require further development. It is particularly important for LG to consider the most effective ways for LGiS to maintain a high level of support for the disadvantaged young people at the heart of its approach.

Table 22. School Staff Suggestions for Improving Ease and Sustainability of LGiS Implementation

Suggestions
<i>In the first week of every new year, every single student should do the first 10 lessons with the same teacher or a rotating amount of teachers because you're not tied down by curriculum. You're not tied down by syllabus or assessment. It actually just gives you time where you can just be a human and just interact with kids with content to drive it.</i>
<i>In an ideal world we could pick a class and deliver it to one class. So we're not taking it out of a curriculum area. Because at the moment, we're taking these kids out of all different subjects. So, in an ideal world, we would have the perfect mix of kids in one class, and we would deliver it to the one class only. Again, in the perfect world, we would go right 10 to 15 weeks.</i>
<i>We've got Learning Ground in School in our continuum of care. From memory, it's - so you've got the universal but we've put the Learning Ground in School in the early intervention section because we do hand pick those students.</i>
<i>Within our wellbeing policy and the way we do things here, the workshops are the way that the wellbeing things go or our social worker has those period workshops that only go for a short amount of time, so they might only go for a term, so things like RAGE and SHINE and those. So they go for one term, and then the students go back to their class, and it's only one period.</i>
<i>In an ideal world, if Learning Ground could come into the schools, like Perfect Presence does, that would be brilliant. Because we could again get those students out, and it would be a half-day, but it would be worked out better than just one period. ... It's one day, but one lot come period one and two, another lot come period three and four, and those kids know they're missing those lessons. The teachers help them catch up.</i>
<i>I've just talked to some of the kids that have gone [to Learning Ground] for the full days, and then talking to [Student], for example, who was in this year's. She really loved it, and she actually said that it's really helped her be able to speak out and actually have confidence to say what it is she needs and stuff like that. That's a really big thing for that girl. So, would it have been better for us to send her to Learning Ground on the Monday or was the way we did it enough for her?</i>

Section Six:

A Cultural Evaluation of Learning Ground in School

Connection: A Pathway for Reconciliation

By Virginia O'Rourke

Introduction

A core highlight of the LGiS program is the recognition that Aboriginal knowledge is of educational benefit for all participants. By making Aboriginal knowledge central within LGiS, the program is encouraging positive relationships to be built as the participants learn and grow together. Ultimately, these positive relationships highlight a pathway towards reconciliation at a grass roots level. Reconciliation recognises the strengthening of relationships as a benefit for all Australians (Reconciliation Australia, 2021). Key considerations from the relevant research literature will be reviewed prior to the discussion of the evaluation approach, findings and sharing of key recommendations.

Key Consideration from Research Literature

This section will review considerations from relevant research literature for the purpose of the evaluation of the LGiS pilot materials. Given the LGiS pilot program was designed and implemented within NSW, this section will focus on the perspectives of Aboriginal peoples within NSW and use the term Aboriginal for this purpose. Through reviewing the ongoing impact of trauma that Aboriginal peoples endure, student behaviour will be placed within a context where the effective responses to this trauma, such as trauma informed practice, can be best understood. A brief review of both cultural competence and the need for culturally responsive pedagogy highlights the need for responses to trauma to be culturally responsive so they will be able to address the needs of Aboriginal students within schools. The evaluation findings pertaining to the LGiS pilot materials will then be presented, focused on the central themes inherent within culturally responsive pedagogy as endorsed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers. These themes include: the consideration of the historical context; consultation; participation; elevating Aboriginal voices; recognising cultural diversity and intellectual property rights. Finally, recommendations will be shared.

Learning Ground in School and Aboriginal Knowledge

Learning Ground in School (LGiS) is not a targeted Aboriginal program, nor a cultural adaptation of an existing program aimed for an Aboriginal audience. LGiS represents a program that, by design, includes Aboriginal content at its core. This inclusivity recognises and respects the valuable strengths and empowering wisdom of Aboriginal peoples. The application of Aboriginal

knowledge within LGiS is thus important to assist LGiS to achieve the aims of the program for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants.

Colonisation, Trauma and Student Behaviour

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced profound and enduring hardships since the colonisation of Australia. From the losses of land and language, forced child removal, and relocation onto missions among many other hardships, these immeasurable traumas have had detrimental effects on the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Consequently, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are at a heightened risk of developing various forms of mental health distress. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people report symptoms of anxiety and depression at twice the rate of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2014), higher rates of hospitalisation for intentional self-harm, and higher suicide rates compared to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2014; Lopez-Carmen et al., 2019). These experiences of distress indicate that the impacts of colonisation are not simply in the past but rather are able to be witnessed in the present, and without access to appropriate care when experiencing mental health distress, the ability to achieve wellbeing and healing is limited (Dillion & Westbury, 2007). Efforts to counter the effects of colonisation, while a worthy goal, are often undermined by systemic forces that create disparities within domains such as education.

Education systems are cultural artefacts shaped by the norms, values, and historical biases of the culture that create these systems. While Australia's education system has made efforts to become more culturally inclusive, education systems within settler-colonial countries continue to marginalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Burgess et al., 2023). If the culture-bound nature inherent within the policies and practices of education is not scrutinised, efforts towards incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge within education will inevitably be unsuccessful (Khalifa et al., 2018). Ineffective reforms leave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students navigating an education system "representing Western colonial values and yet dealing everyday with the ongoing deleterious effects of colonisation" (Burgess et al., 2023, p. 112). An example of this is the largely ineffective *Closing the Gap* strategy that aimed to reduce educational disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020), which focused on school attendance without addressing the factors that present barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Often the discourse of educational reforms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students relies on deficit commentary that reinforces the perceived failures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students rather than the failure of the education system (Burgess et al., 2021). This is

evidenced by the ways that schools respond to the behaviours of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, often using suspension or exclusion. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have shared that schools and educators lack the ability to identify the trauma that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students endure, nor are they able to respond skilfully to that trauma (Morgan et al., 2023). Further, by failing to ask students about what challenges they face or what might be causing their behaviour, educators are demonstrating “a lack of awareness and understanding of underlying causes of behaviour” and this results in “missed opportunities to engage early” (Morgan et al., 2023, pp. 23-24). The result of educators’ lack of skills and capacity to effectively support students with complex social and learning needs reveals a broader problem regarding the responsibility of the unsatisfactory educational outcomes of these students (Warren, 2005; Smyth & Hattam, 2004). All too often, the onus of these unsatisfactory outcomes is placed within the students, rather than on the inadequate ability of educators to meet student needs (te Riele, 2007; Smyth and Hattam, 2004; Deschenes et al., 2001).

Inadequate and ineffective responses to student behaviour often result in students being removed from school, which in turn disrupts learning and further impacts educational outcomes. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are over-represented in school suspensions compared to their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers. For example, 3.3% of all NSW students were suspended in 2021, whereas 10% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were suspended in the same time frame (NSW Department of Education, 2021). Given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students comprise 8.6% of all government school enrolments, this data highlights the magnitude of the over representation of school suspensions (NSW Department of Education, 2021). To address continuing educational disparity Australian education must be decolonised (Graham et al., 2023).

To systemically attain cultural capacity within policies and teacher training, Australian educators must work closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to become more culturally responsive and effective in teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. While there is a variety of current efforts to respond effectively to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, these must occur within a culturally competent framework that considers the holistic needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. LGiS represents one such effort, with its approach to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at risk of educational disengagement to find a pathway to reconnect to their future and re-engage with education.

Trauma Informed Practice

Trauma informed practice (TIP) is a mindful approach to understanding how trauma can negatively impact both learning and behaviour for young people. Understanding the impact of trauma on a student’s ability to learn, as well as regulating their emotions and maintaining

relationships, along with many other skills that underpin successful educational attainment, is imperative for educators (Downey, 2007). All behaviour within this approach is understood to be a message about what that student has and is experiencing, with behaviours seen as masking emotions such as anxiety, despair or frustration (Hughes, 2004). When educators understand the impacts of trauma on students, they are better able to use effective strategies to meet student needs (Minahan & Rappaport, 2012). While not all behaviour is related to trauma and could instead be due to a range of benign causes, using TIP gives educators a framework to understand young people and look for the cause of their behaviour in a compassionate and supportive manner (Downey, 2009). This approach facilitates equity as “students exposed to trauma perform best in schools that adopt trauma-sensitive practices” (Ballin, 2022, p. 107). Given that over half of Australians have experienced trauma, being able to respond effectively is important (Mills et al., 2011). However, in a recent survey of NSW teachers, only 45% had received any trauma related professional learning, with the amount of trauma professional learning being a significant predictor in educator trauma literacy (Eastman & McMaugh, 2022).

There is evidence that schools and educators can provide a pivotal interface to support students who have experienced trauma (Miller & Berger, 2020; Santiago et al., 2018; Alisic, 2012; Australian Childhood Foundation, 2018; Downey, 2007). Using TIP within schools supports “all students to feel safe, welcomed, and supported and where addressing trauma’s impact on learning is central to teaching and learning” (Cole et al., 2013, p.11). Through selecting this central, universal approach to being trauma informed, schools do not need to identify which students have been impacted by trauma for TIP to be effective (Cole et al., 2013). TIP is connected to the teaching of social and emotional skills.

Developing social and emotional learning within schools supports academic engagement and success along with promoting prosocial behaviours (Jones et al., 2018; Greenberg et al., 2017). The combination of TIP with social and emotional learning is argued to support equitable education (Jagers et al., 2018; Nava et al., 2021). For social and emotional learning to be effective, educators must model the skills in their teaching, which does not require changes to the curriculum of what is taught but rather using curriculum as an opportunity to demonstrate these skills for their students (Brunzell et al., 2019; Ballin, 2022).

While social and emotional learning helps students experiencing trauma, it should not be assumed that social and emotional learning is necessarily trauma informed in and of itself. Relying on social and emotional skill development without considering how contextual factors such as racism within education risks undermining the entire process (Venet, 2020). Although there is much international evidence to support that adopting trauma-informed approaches benefit students who have experienced trauma, the programs within Australia are yet to be evaluated in terms of both their

effectiveness in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and in terms of the quality of cultural responsiveness of these programs (Miller & Berger, 2020).

Cultural Competence & Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Terms such as cultural awareness, cultural safety, cultural security, cultural competence, and cultural responsiveness, are often used interchangeably, so that the nuance between terms is obfuscated and often people falsely assume they have achieved the depth of competence required (Lopez, 2016; Grant et al., 2013; Coffin, 2007). Cultural competence is viewed as the culmination of progressing through the related concepts of awareness, safety, and security (Gower et al., 2007). This view implies that cultural competence is a destination, rather than the ongoing process of learning that it is (MacMillian, 2013).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander views of cultural competence focus on developing proficiency and skill to interact with others in a dynamic process that relies on self-reflection and the examination of contextual factors, such as power dynamics, to work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Gower et al., 2007). According to Bamblett and Lewis (2007), there is a two-step process to capacity building to effectively engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: “both building cultural competence, but also building an awareness of dominant culture and how it privileges the non-Indigenous against the Indigenous” (p.50). This two-step approach resists the concerns that despite the aim of cultural competence being respectful engagement with diverse cultures, some approaches to cultural competence may essentialise culture (Thackrah & Thompson, 2013).

Working without culturally competent or responsive practices “erodes fundamental cultural and human rights for all Indigenous peoples” (Walker et al., 2014, p. 197), whereas poorly embedded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in a program can misrepresent the nuanced cultural diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and can tokenise knowledge (Maxwell et al., 2018; Milner, 2017). Culture-based education occurs when programs are designed to include cultural content as targeted programs to meet the needs of specific cultural groups and have resulted in increased social-emotional wellbeing and improved school achievement (Kana’iaupuni et al., 2017; Demmert Jr, 2011). Such programs can often be considered as culturally responsive. Culturally responsive pedagogy is an educational approach that uses “the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p.106).

Culturally responsive educators focus on student learning while scaffolding “students’ cultural competence and their critical consciousness” (Ladson-Billings, 2017, p. 142). The aim of culturally responsive pedagogy is to raise awareness of the dominant cultural norms, values and beliefs that underpin education to decolonise educational systems. Decolonisation is the process of

restoring the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and learning within Australian education (Martin, 2008). It is not an approach that essentialises culture and it is not the same as cultural competence. Being able to deliver programs that are culturally responsive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is important in terms of working effectively with communities to meet their unique strengths, opportunities, and challenges. While the LGiS program and materials are not a targeted program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but rather are considered for all students of diverse backgrounds, the inclusion of Aboriginal content merits evaluation in recognition of the effort and high regard that Learning Ground extends to Aboriginal peoples and knowledges.

Pilot Manual and Handbooks Cultural Evaluation

An evaluation of the quality of the application of Aboriginal knowledge and values included within the LGiS pilot materials inclusive of the *Training Manual for Professionals* and the *Facilitator and Mentor Handbooks* was undertaken. The purpose of the evaluation was to review the LGiS pilot materials in terms of how effectively Learning Ground has articulated the depth of knowledge they have regarding Aboriginal peoples' knowledges and perspectives. The concepts used to evaluate the pilot materials have been drawn from the background research literature and include consideration of the historical context; consultation; participation; elevating Aboriginal voices; recognising cultural diversity and intellectual property rights. As discussed in the prior Key Considerations from Research Literature section of this chapter, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to experience immeasurable traumas as a result of colonisation.

Without an understanding of this historical context and this trauma, educational reform efforts, including trauma informed practice, will remain ineffective. Awareness of this historical context forms the basis of culturally responsive practice. Working in a culturally responsive way restores respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and human rights. Programs that are culturally responsive typically include the concepts used for this evaluation (Foley, 2003; Coffin, 2007; Dillon & Westbury, 2007; Gower et al., 2007; United Nations General Assembly, 2007; Thackrah & Thompson, 2013; Walker et al., 2014; Kana'iaupuni et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2018).

The evaluation commenced by undertaking meetings with key Learning Ground staff. The meetings served to appreciate the respect and engagement Learning Ground has taken over many years with the local Aboriginal community. These meetings allowed for the historical foundation and future direction of Learning Ground to be discussed along with facilitating awareness of how engagement with Aboriginal people has been at the heart of Learning Ground from its inception. Notes were taken during these conversations and shared with the participants for review, revision,

and confirmation of accuracy and understanding before analysis of the LGiS pilot materials was undertaken.

Subsequently, a review of contemporaneous materials was undertaken regarding Learning Ground, including publicly available reports, evaluations, and documentary materials. A methodical approach was used to evaluate the LGiS pilot materials, which commenced with a preliminary reading of the *Training Manual for Professionals* and the *Facilitator and Mentor Handbooks*. Each book was evaluated using a thematic analysis of their content with reference to each of the six core themes identified from the relevant research literature. Each of these themes will now be discussed in turn.

Consideration of the Historical Context within LGiS

The history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia has been marked by colonisation, dispossession, genocide, and discrimination. Educational programming must acknowledge this history and its ongoing impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, while also emphasising the resilience, strength, and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The LGiS pilot materials acknowledge the resilience of Aboriginal peoples in surviving the consequences of colonisation including trauma and losses, however this could be more fully articulated within the pilot *Manual and Handbooks*. For example, within the *Manual* (pp. 61-63), the “Thinking about Violence” section draws links between life circumstances such as unemployment and domestic violence and what some participants may be currently experiencing. Developing this section may include a focus on both intergenerational trauma and how resilience has been demonstrated by many Aboriginal people facing difficult challenges, including the pathways to healing that Elders have used to build their resilience.

Additionally, by incorporating a trauma informed approach within the LGiS program, the materials would then provide the ability for participants to explore the social context within which violence occurs. For example, when commenting on choosing non-violence within the *Facilitator and Mentor Handbooks*, this topic could consider the role of the socio-political context surrounding the issue of violence. Drawing on examples such as Aboriginal sporting stars who have faced racial violence and considering which strategies, they used to navigate the impacts of violence, could assist participants to reflect on the strategies they might use within their own lives whilst acknowledging the impact of the social context. Offering workshops on the skills of emotion coaching and descriptive praise would support the needs of Aboriginal students to develop resilience among other benefits.

Consultation with Aboriginal Peoples within LGiS

Aboriginal peoples must be consulted when designing educational programs, such as LGiS, that draw on the knowledge of Aboriginal peoples to ensure the programs are respectful, culturally appropriate, and relevant to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal communities.

Learning Ground staff have undertaken consultation through “long unhurried conversations with Darug Elders over a continuously significant length of time,” as shared within the supplementary meetings. As Elders are the custodians of each Nation’s oral traditions and knowledge, their guidance and input are an important and necessary part of LGiS. This contribution needs greater acknowledgement within the *LGiS Manual and Handbooks* for readers to appreciate the valued contributions of Elders. Supplementary meetings indicated further consultation and engagement with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG). The ongoing fruitful discussions, learning and experiences have strengthened the connection between Learning Ground and the AECG in recent years. This engagement with the wider Aboriginal community demonstrates the respect held for Aboriginal knowledge along with continuing consultation and professional development.

As engagement with the wider Aboriginal community is not within the LGiS pilot *Manual and Handbooks*, it could form part of an overview of the continuing consultation process that underpins and informs LGiS. Additionally, the meetings revealed that from the conception of Learning Ground, Elders have participated in a Council of Advice where the commitment to respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge as the cornerstone of Learning Ground first occurred. This Council of Advice has been paused as Elders have expressed their preference for more informal yarns, as this approach allows them to engage not only as they are able but in more relaxed and free flowing discussions. The conversations with Darug Elders continue and are more frequent than if the Council of Advice was used as the form for these connections. This level of detail is not included within the pilot *Manual and Handbooks*; however, transparency within the LGiS materials regarding the consultation process would highlight the respect and commitment shared with both the Darug Elders and the community.

Participation of Aboriginal Peoples within LGiS

The participation of Aboriginal peoples in the design and implementation of programs, such as LGiS, demonstrates essential acknowledgement and respect for the unique cultural and historical experiences of Aboriginal communities.

Whereas Aboriginal participation in implementation is not specifically reflected within the LGiS pilot *Manual and Handbooks*, the *Facilitators Handbook* does suggest the inclusion of guest presentations (which could include Aboriginal presenters) during the implementation of LGiS.

Elders and Aboriginal community members could make valuable contributions to the delivery of LGiS. However, depending on a facilitator's level of engagement with the local Aboriginal community, they may or may not be well placed to invite local Elders or other community members to be actively engaged during implementation of LGiS. It may be helpful to provide a list of contacts (who have consented to be included for this purpose) to be provided for each LGiS implementation site to support facilitators in including Elders or community.

The participation of the local community within LGiS is evident by the creation of the Aboriginal Cultural Advisor role within Learning Ground. This expansive role involves strengthening relationships and developing deeper connections with community, and equally important is how this role enhances the understanding of Aboriginal ways of knowing and ways of engaging for Learning Ground participants and staff. While further discussion of the Aboriginal Cultural Advisor role is outside the remit of the evaluation of the pilot materials, this role is a vital bridge between Learning Ground and the local Aboriginal community. By creating this role, Learning Ground is demonstrating respect for the contributions of Aboriginal people and expanding their contemporary knowledge base. The Aboriginal Cultural Advisor role makes an indispensable contribution to participation by Aboriginal people within LGiS and the local community.

Elevating Aboriginal Voices within LGiS

Elevating Aboriginal voices ensures that their experience and knowledge are represented authentically, rather than being told through a non-Aboriginal lens. This can increase collaboration between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples. Since colonisation, European perspectives were privileged, and Aboriginal knowledge was delegitimised as vastly inferior within that dominant discourse (Foley, 2003). Given the longstanding refusal to recognise and respect Aboriginal knowledge, the need to elevate Aboriginal voices remains a critical priority (Morgan et al., 2023). Elevating Aboriginal voices refers to the acts of listening to and acknowledging what Aboriginal people offer to share and increasing the status of Aboriginal knowledge, along with challenging and dismantling systemic barriers that have excluded and marginalised Aboriginal peoples and knowledge.

Both the *Manual and Handbooks* communicate that there are valuable lessons for all participants to be learned from the inclusion of Aboriginal content and LGiS has elevated Aboriginal voices as being helpful for all participants' learning. The 'Successful Connection Through Culture' section is one example that highlights that learning through Aboriginal culture will take place within LGiS. Articulating more fully why this perspective is so fundamental to the LGiS program, in terms of both the value and significance, will help all readers of the *Manual and Handbooks* to easily

understand and engage with learning through an Aboriginal lens. This is important, not only for Aboriginal participants, but also for all other participants from diverse backgrounds.

It must be emphasised here that simply embedding Aboriginal content in a program does not equate to elevating Aboriginal voices. While there is a clear effort to elevate Aboriginal knowledge within LGiS, Aboriginal voices could be articulated more clearly within the *Manual and Handbooks* by including attribution to the Traditional Owners who have contributed knowledge, art, or advice. One example where this would be of service is within the ‘Choosing A Guide’ activity related to the use of Aboriginal totems. Darug Elders have given their approval to this activity as a means of helping participants develop their sense of identity that is influenced by the Aboriginal perspective on the relationship between humans and nature. Extending an attribution to these Elders of their contributions to this activity would demonstrate the respect for this knowledge, that is clearly held by Learning Ground as shared within the supplementary meetings. Attribution could include profiles of Elders who have contributed to LGiS within all the *Manual and Handbooks* on a side panel on pages where they have contributed, and potentially Dreaming stories they may wish to share.

This ‘Choosing A Guide’ activity as written in the *Facilitator and Mentor Handbooks* can provide a deeper awareness for non-Aboriginal participants of the roles and responsibilities regarding totems for Aboriginal peoples. It is important to respect the voices of the Darug Elders regarding the use of this activity both on Darug lands and within the LGiS pilot *Manual and Handbooks*. Equally, it must be acknowledged that, given the diversity of Aboriginal peoples, not all groups will have the same approach to undertaking this activity as it is written within the pilot *Manual and Handbooks*.

During the supplementary meetings, Learning Ground staff shared that as the program extends beyond the pilot phase, the aim is to ensure LGiS can be used within the widest range of communities and that they have responded to concerns raised with them around this activity and have undertaken a review of the language and clarity of concepts to meet the needs of other Aboriginal communities. This openness to feedback demonstrates the willingness of LGiS to respond to concerns shared with them and displays the respect they have for cultural knowledge that is shared with them.

Recognising Cultural Diversity within LGiS

Aboriginal peoples represent cultural diversity with each Nation having its own language, traditions, and beliefs. It is important to reflect this diversity so that Aboriginal peoples are not presented as a homogeneous group or essentialised to a stereotyped portrayal.

Within the LGiS pilot *Manual and Handbooks* there are references to Aboriginal peoples, indicating awareness that Aboriginal peoples are diverse and not merely one group. This is further witnessed in the use of Dreaming Stories within the *Handbooks* as these have been selected from multiple Aboriginal language groups which are clearly identified. The inclusion of further Dreaming Stories that represent the diversity of language, along with highlighting the diversity of artistic styles across Aboriginal Nations is aimed to be included within future revisions as shared in supplementary meetings. When providing artist attributions for artworks created by Aboriginal artists that have been reproduced in the Handbooks, including which Country an artist is from would also assist with recognising cultural diversity. Recognising the diversity of Aboriginal peoples within programs can help to preserve languages, art, and Aboriginal viewpoints and help these to be shared with future generations.

Intellectual Property Rights within LGiS

Australian Aboriginal peoples have specific intellectual property rights over their cultural knowledge and expressions. It is important to respect these rights and to seek permission from Aboriginal communities before using cultural content.

LGiS endorses the intellectual property rights of Aboriginal peoples within Article 31 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which provides for Indigenous people to “maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property” (United Nations General Assembly, 2007). All artwork used within the *Manual and Handbooks* is clearly attributed to individuals on each page where it is shared. As these are pilot materials, future revisions may include additional artwork to illustrate important concepts and messages as this would further demonstrate the ongoing commitment to showcasing Aboriginal knowledge in an affirming way.

The application of Dreaming Stories within the pilot *Manual and Handbooks* is founded on recognising that sharing this Aboriginal knowledge is a way to increase learning from an Aboriginal viewpoint. It also honours the strong lessons that can be found within Dreaming Stories. The use of Dreaming Stories to select the group names for participants to be grouped into, could suggest that LGiS applies a superficial use of this valuable knowledge. Within the wider framework of the LGiS *Manual and Handbooks*, this use aims to promote the deeper values of connection and help participants to reflect on their sense of identity. The use of this knowledge was granted by Darug Elders for the purpose of supporting learning about identity formation and connection within both the personal and collective aspects.

Connection is a vital concept as it “it is the pathway for healing” both personally and collectively, as shared during the supplementary meetings. This is further endorsed by the Healing Foundation (2020) who observe that healing occurs when people can gain insight into who they are, develop the capacity to create a positive future drawing on strategies such as “reconnecting with

culture, strengthening identity, restoring safe and enduring relationships” (Healing Foundation, 2020). The ‘Team Name Change’ activity represents these strategies and therefore is an area where intellectual property rights could be further upheld by including a statement regarding the permission for use. Commenting on the significance of this content for the participants in terms of connection and healing could help communicate the depth of meaning and relevance of this activity for all readers of the *Manuals and Handbooks*. Each Dreaming Story had a clear author attribution, although the attribution of authorship was not found for the Dingo Story within the Handbooks. Including the author attribution for the Dingo Story for future revisions will continue to demonstrate more fully the commitment of LGiS to supporting the intellectual property rights of Aboriginal peoples.

Recommendations of the Cultural Evaluation

The following recommendations suggest several pathways to enhance the articulation of Aboriginal content within the LGiS program *Manual for Professionals* and *Facilitator and Mentor Handbooks*. These pathways include:

1. ***Include a statement of rationale within the Manual and Handbooks regarding the significance and value of Aboriginal content within LGiS.***

By including a clear statement regarding both the significance and value of including Aboriginal content within LGiS, all readers of these materials will be able to understand and realise the purpose of including this content for both Aboriginal participants and participants from all other backgrounds.

2. ***Apply a trauma informed approach to underpin the use of social and emotional learning.***

During the supplementary meetings, it was found that the principles of a trauma informed approach underpin the selection, inclusion, and use of these strategies within the LGiS program. This trauma informed approach needs to be formally stated within the program materials to assist readers in understanding how equity and healing can result from using a trauma informed approach.

3. ***Develop and deliver professional development workshops on descriptive praise and emotion coaching.***

These workshops would ensure that educators, pre-service teachers and other professionals who work with young people would have opportunity to develop skilful use of these approaches. These skills, when presented within a trauma informed approach, will facilitate a more contextual understanding of the behaviour of young people and present a more

cognisant pathway to engage with this behaviour. Successfully upskilling people who work with Aboriginal youth is vital so that they can effectively support young Aboriginal people. Additionally, these workshops could be another potential method of recruiting suitable Advisory Working Group members.

4. ***Establish an Aboriginal Advisory Working Group that has a clearly stated purpose and terms of reference. This is vital for long term program sustainability.***

The purpose would be to advise on the quality of the cultural articulation of the Learning Ground content within the Manual and Handbooks, along with content for training workshops. Members would engage in regular cycles of planning, reviewing and feedback to Learning Ground representatives. The group could highlight aspects of the program that are flexible and able to be adapted for each community where programs are to be delivered. This group needs to be ongoing and meet regularly to deepen the genuine relationships and trust between the members and Learning Ground representatives. The group composition could include pre-service teachers; AECG members; health professionals such as psychologists; and local community members who represent multiple perspectives across multiple generations. Respecting that local Elders have expressed their preference for informal conversations over meetings, they may feel comfortable nominating community representatives who will be able to contribute to more formal meetings. Elders are critical for the mentoring and sharing of their lived experience and their continued inclusion in less formal aspects of the group will facilitate important intergenerational knowledge transfer. Youth participation is vital to sustain changes as well as equip the emerging generation with leadership and community building skills. Should Learning Ground offer an Enablers Leadership program focusing on Aboriginal leadership this could be an additional method of recruiting suitable Advisory Working Group members.

5. ***Aboriginal knowledge, and how it is used and described within the LGiS program Manual and Handbooks, should continue to be a core focus of the ongoing review and revision cycles to maintain and extend the current process of program material development.***

This demonstrates the ongoing commitment of Learning Ground to review content and engage respectfully when concerns regarding content are raised, such as the use of Totems. The revision from how Totems are described and used within the pilot materials expresses the genuine value Learning Ground places on respecting, protecting, and valuing Aboriginal culture.

6. ***Update the permissions for the use of Dreaming Stories the ‘Teams Name Change’ activity in the LGiS Facilitator and Mentor. Include a statement of permission for use of the Dreaming Stories within the ‘Teams Name Change’ activity in the Facilitator and Mentor Handbooks.***

Identifying this permission will demonstrate commitment to upholding the intellectual property rights of Aboriginal peoples.

7. ***Continue revising the Manual and Handbooks for consistent terminology regarding Aboriginal peoples and concepts.***

Through continuing the cycles of review of the program materials, focusing on using consistent terminology will ensure these materials reflect the genuine deep respect and regard towards Aboriginal peoples inherent within Learning Ground.

8. ***Expand the variety of Dreaming Stories and group names to allow for Elders and communities to suggest the most appropriate Stories for use on their lands.***

This will articulate more fully the values Learning Ground holds around the diversity of Aboriginal peoples by communicating that Learning Ground recognises that certain Dreaming Stories or group names may not be appropriate for some Nations, so being able to select alternate Dreaming Stories and/or group names will recognise and respect that diversity.

9. ***Facilitate the invitation of Elders and other Aboriginal individuals to participate within each Learning Ground in School implementation.***

The inclusion of local Elders and other Aboriginal community members within the program delivery would provide cultural support for participants and augment the program’s delivery of cultural content aligned with each Elder’s Country. Highlighting where and when to include Elders and community members within the LGiS program would assist schools in involving the local Aboriginal community in LGiS implementation. By facilitating the invitation of local Elders and other community members, schools will be supported to engage with the most appropriate people, should they not already have established connections within the local Aboriginal community.

10. ***Include a pathway for LGiS participants to connect with their culture through providing a list of organisations that can help them explore their family history and connect them with opportunities to engage with their local community.***

For participants whose families have recently become aware of their Aboriginal identity, providing a list of where to find assistance in learning more about whose Country they belong to and links to access related resources may be helpful in exploring their identity further. This will communicate and reinforce the values of belonging, place and connection for Aboriginal participants who are reconnecting with their culture. Likewise, these resources may also support non-Aboriginal participants who would like to engage more meaningfully with their local Aboriginal community as a result of participating in LGiS.

Section Seven:

Conclusions and Recommendations

The successful integration of methods for addressing the links between student behaviour and wellbeing remains a conundrum for many schools (Shean & Mander, 2020). Consequently, approaches to behaviour that feature systems of reporting and punishment tend to alienate the already marginalised, rather than provide the relational focus needed to reengage and support them (Howard et al., 2022). The emphasis in Learning Ground in Schools (LGiS) on relational pedagogy and deep respect seeks to address and overcome the behaviour-wellbeing conundrum that has the greatest impacts on students who are already disadvantaged. There is a clear parallel between these central features of LGiS and recent definitions of trauma responsive practice in schools (Avery et al., 2022; Howard et al., 2022).

Findings from the present study into LGiS implementation reinforce previous evidence of the effectiveness of Learning Ground's relational pedagogy for supporting young people's sense of wellbeing and growing their self-awareness and communication skills (Parada et al., 2016). The current evidence regarding student re-engagement was somewhat more equivocal, with quantitative results for school connectedness showing a lessening effect for participating students' attachment to school, whereas qualitative findings were overall rather more positive. Emergent findings relating to implementation of the LGiS initiative reflect the difficulties entailed in introducing external programs into complex school systems. While a number of implementation issues were addressed, questions remain as to what might constitute the most effective and sustainable form for Learning Ground to engage with schools to make a difference for the young people it seeks to serve.

The main goal of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Learning Ground in School program in terms of a) how the LG program could be effectively translated into school settings, b) what challenges may be encountered, and c) what benefits may be gained. Below we revisit the key research questions, summarise the relevant findings for each, and provide recommendations for further development of the initiative.

Question 1: Benefits for Wellbeing and Resilience

Overall, the Learning Ground in School (LGiS) program offers significant promise in promoting positive student mental health and social wellbeing. Its core messages of a deeper understanding of the self and respect for self and those around you were well received by students and schools alike. Student participants reported positive changes in themselves and others following participation in LGiS. Clinical instruments indicated that some student levels of emotional distress

reduced from clinical levels to levels comparable to the general population following their participation in LGiS.

Learning Ground in School can be considered a program that aims to increase students' sense of self and connection and builds social and emotional skills. As outlined in Section Three, students reported experiencing fewer emotional difficulties, conduct problems, difficulties with peers, and less feelings of anxiety, depression, instances of bullying and being lonely. For many students these results were clinically significant, taking them from levels experienced by clinical populations to levels just above or at the average population level. From these results and the results from the qualitative interviews, we may conclude that they made gains in two critical aspects of wellbeing which are linked to long-term resilience. These are managing peer relations in a positive way and being able to manage internal emotional arousal states. Additionally, students reported not getting as angry, stealing or being in fights as often as they used to prior to attending LGiS. These negative behaviours are linked to higher probability of a host of social difficulties including being excluded from school and increasing the likelihood of contact with the justice system. If maintained, these changes are also contributors to greater societal and personal wellbeing. In combination these skills contribute to general functioning and long-term success at school and in society in general (Parker et al., 2015; Salovey, & Grewal, 2005). Based on these results we may conclude that LGiS has positive effects on students' overall wellbeing and resilience.

Question 2: Re-Engaging Students at Risk of School Failure

The schools who adopted the LGiS initiative appreciated the benefits of its relational pedagogy for cultivating an enabling sense of safety and support among the students who attended. This appreciation for the intent of the program was encapsulated in the idea expressed by a senior school staff member that Learning Ground is about *“building the person from inside so they've got the confidence to shine outside.”*

There was evidence that both staff and students enjoyed the quality of connection they developed with each other through LGiS. Many of these observations were contained in staff accounts of the ways that students responded to them with a growing sense of ease and appreciation. Some students with previously highly inconsistent school attendance found LGiS so beneficial that they made a point of attending without fail on LGiS days. However, although several staff reported improvements in students' behaviour and increased engagement in learning, these observations were not uniform. Several staff said they could see changes in the students in LGiS and with them personally, but it was not transferring to other settings and with other people in the schools for all of those students. There may have been internal change for these students, but it had not yet manifested in external behaviour. At one school several students disengaged from LGiS in preference for

attending other classes. As behaviour is contextual, if the change is not happening at the level of school climate it may not manifest in student behaviour.

As reported, the quantitative results from the School Belonging Scale (SBS) indicated that the participating students overall had become less rather than more connected to school over the duration of the project. Possible explanations include post-COVID disengagement; sense of connection being limited to staff members involved in the delivery of the program but not generalising beyond them to the rest of school; and effects of some students feeling more alienated by LGiS selection processes that they did not understand or that they felt disadvantaged them in other subjects. Given the predominance of positive student evaluations of the LGiS program from the interviews and the outcomes they had derived from it, the reasons for a lessening of school connectedness are not obvious.

In evaluating the effectiveness of the program's intent to re-engage 'at risk' students, it is important to consider the extent to which changes to the student recruitment strategy had diluted the targeting of students 'at risk' of school failure. Transferring the Learning Ground program into schools entailed several consequential changes to the intensity, purpose and delivery model of the program and ultimately also to the groups targeted. With the introduction of the 7-7-7 model LGiS went from being a highly concentrated program, with a focus on those most marginalised (tier 3), conducted offsite from schools, to a brief program run once a week in schools with a group that combined all tiers of intervention simultaneously. This approach not only made timetabling difficult; it also made it difficult to ascertain whether those with the highest needs were getting the level of support they needed. At least at one school the legitimate question was raised as to whether running LGiS for one period once a week, with the range of organisational and social complexities the schools faced, could deliver the quality of engagement and support that was available to students who went to Learning Ground in Mt Druitt for a whole day once a week and experienced the full program.

Question 3: Implementation Factors

Having considered the range of evidence relating to LGiS development and implementation in schools, here we consider implementation of the initiative, by applying important perspectives from the field of implementation science (Albers & Pattuwage, 2017; Dobia et al., 2020).

Using evidence-based implementation criteria from a recent international review of social and emotional learning frameworks for education systems (Dobia et al., 2020), this assessment is aimed at identifying what further work may be needed to support successful and sustainable implementation of the LGiS initiative.

Table 23. Assessment of Factors Influencing Successful School-Based Interventions

<p>Fidelity (Adherence): <i>To what extent has the intended delivery model been adhered to?</i></p> <p>Based on common use of the facilitator handbook across all delivery settings, standards of fidelity appear to have been met in terms of the content covered. The involvement of LG Mentors in providing planning and facilitation support is likely to have boosted the level of implementation fidelity, however differences in the approach taken across different schools, and a range of adaptations made it difficult to fully and accurately assess fidelity according to the program aims.</p>
<p>Dosage (Exposure): <i>How often and for how long is the program being delivered?</i></p> <p>During the trial, classes were delivered weekly rather than twice weekly. Differences in length of lessons (i.e., some single and some double lessons) resulted in variable exposure. Single dose delivery of professional learning could be improved with more effective distribution across the period of delivery.</p>
<p>Quality: <i>How well are the program components delivered?</i></p> <p>Quality of implementation of LGiS relies on the depth of its relational pedagogy. During the trial, quality assurance was the primary role of the LG Mentors. Consistent evidence regarding improvements in the quality of teacher-student relationships suggests that quality criteria were well met.</p>
<p>Responsiveness: <i>How fully do participants actively engage with the program?</i></p> <p>Student responsiveness to the program was overall positive; however, limitations surrounding selection processes had negative impacts on engagement for several students. Inhibiting factors affecting responsiveness included the fit, complexity and imprecision of student recruitment strategies. Staff identified the need for greater currency and students for more experientially focused learning activities.</p>
<p>Program differentiation: <i>Does the program provide clearly distinguished aims and methods?</i></p> <p>Program aims and methods are clearly outlined in terms of Learning Ground ethos and objectives. Content overlaps with PDH curriculum. Aboriginal content could be enhanced with clearer articulation and updating to meet requirements for cultural safety.</p>
<p>Monitoring: <i>Is there an effective system for monitoring quality and progress?</i></p> <p>Monitoring of quality and progress has occurred through LG Mentor role and research evaluation. Methods and measures of quality and progress need to be developed and looped into professional learning and practice support.</p>
<p>Reach: <i>How well does the program reach its target participant group/s?</i></p> <p>Program reach and effectiveness must go hand in hand. In attempting to extend the LG program, originally designed for young people at high risk (tier 3), to all three tiers simultaneously there has been a loss of program specificity. Further work is required to clarify which students and what outcomes the program seeks to target.</p>
<p>Adaptation: <i>What adaptations, if any, are required to fit the context?</i></p> <p>LGiS began as an adaptation of the existing LG program for schools. The pilot has helped to clarify core content that can be effectively implemented in school settings. Ongoing adaptations are required to ensure viability. Program goals and implementation strategies need to be informed by an understanding of system constraints and possibilities for working with schools.</p>

It should be noted that the factors presented here are very widely used and have been derived from many studies and meta-analyses into the essential factors that can support effective implementation of interventions in schools. Table 23 (above) lists the eight factors and, for each one, provides a brief assessment of LGiS implementation.

Researchers in the field of implementation emphasise the need for program coherence and specific intervention targets. When programs have a clear structure and guidelines, when they are supported by effective professional learning and supplementary advice and resources, when programs are well differentiated, have sufficient dosage, and are carefully monitored, implementation issues can be picked up quickly and addressed. When these conditions are not in evidence, it is much more difficult to meet the criteria for effective implementation and ensure successful and sustainable implementation (Durlak, 2016).

As LGiS seeks to work in a context where there is growing interest in schools becoming more trauma informed, a deeper understanding of the practicalities and principles of the complex systems that are schools (Avery et al., 2022) will help with articulating what LGiS has to offer to a trauma responsive approach. As Stokes & Brunzell (2019), have pointed out, shifting schools' practice towards being trauma responsive requires a systemic understanding that has the potential to direct pedagogy, procedures, and policies of the school based on the understanding of how childhood trauma affects neurodevelopment, learning and student outcomes. By understanding the models and frameworks that inform schools' work, Learning Ground can position its own expertise with relevance and creativity, and in ways that are mutually enabling for both schools and Learning Ground.

The strong support for Learning Ground demonstrated by all the participating schools over this period attests to the schools' commitment to meeting the needs of the young people in their care and to their recognition of the benefits that the Learning Ground approach can bring. The LGiS pilot has shown that the program and approach is valued and can translate into schools. At this point the key task of development is one of consolidation and refinement in order to develop an approach that can effectively support schools in their vital role. Learning Ground can work in schools. The challenge now is to see whether Learning Ground can also work for schools. With this in mind, the research team offers the following recommendations:

Key Recommendations

1. Review the program logic for LGiS to ensure that aims, scope and implementation processes are well targeted and well matched to school structures, needs and available resources.

As part of this work the researchers recommend that Learning Ground review its existing program logic to:

- i) Benchmark LGiS program against current field in trauma-informed practice and Aboriginal perspectives in education and reconciliation.

- ii) Seek specialist advice to ensure that program planning is informed by current policy and practice in relation to trauma responsive practice and continuum of care in schools.
- iii) Review the suggestions put forward by schools for ways that LGiS could best be accommodated in their settings. These are summarised in Figure 10 below which maps the proposed options to the multi-tiered model of student support in ascending order of targeting. A careful consideration of the pros and cons of each of the options, bearing in mind Learning Ground’s mission and expertise should be undertaken before selecting which approach/es are most coherent with Learning Ground’s existing program (shown as Tier 3 in the model), aims and capacity (See also Figure 8).

Figure 9. Recommended Options for LG Engagement with Schools



2. Further enhance cultural safety of the program through continuing engagement with Aboriginal knowledge holders.

- i) Include a statement of rationale within the Manual and Handbooks regarding the significance and value of Aboriginal content within LGiS.
- ii) Establish an Aboriginal Advisory Working Group that has a clearly stated purpose and terms of reference.
- iii) Aboriginal knowledge, and how it is used and described within the LGiS program Manual and Handbooks, should continue to be a core focus of the ongoing review and revision cycles to maintain and extend the current process of program material development.

- Update the permissions for the use of Dreaming Stories the ‘Teams Name Change’ activity in the LGiS Facilitator and Mentor. Include a statement of permission for use of the Dreaming Stories within the Teams Name Change activity in the Facilitator and Mentor Handbooks.
 - Continue revising the Manual and Handbooks for consistent terminology regarding Aboriginal peoples and concepts.
 - Expand the variety of Dreaming Stories and group names to allow for Elders and communities to suggest the most appropriate Stories for use on their lands.
- iv) Facilitate the Invitation of Elders and other Aboriginal community leaders and/or educators to participate within each Learning Ground in School implementation.
 - v) Include a pathway for LGiS participants to connect with their culture through providing a list of organisations that can help them explore their family history and connect them with opportunities to engage with their local community.

3. Based on the above recommendations continue to refine LGiS content to ensure that it is effectively targeted and has appropriate scaffolding and support for both staff and students.

- i) Review and refine purpose and rationale considering current human rights-based movements emphasis on reconciliation and Aboriginal Voices.
- ii) Consider how to ensure fidelity of relational pedagogy through providing appropriately spaced and sequenced professional learning opportunities.
- iii) Dosage of student and staff program components should be carefully considered and monitored for quality and outcomes.
- iv) Program content should be enhanced with active learning strategies and checked for currency in relation to curriculum and professional and research literature in education.
- v) Particular attention needs to be paid to student selection processes to avoid stigmatisation and misconceptions.

4. The pilot reported in this report can be considered a proof-of-concept in relation to LGiS, as such, continued evaluation is needed

Traditionally, the process of developing an intervention and putting it into action is laid out in a hierarchy of steps. The first step entails creating a treatment philosophy that emphasises and precisely states the justification for a certain strategy. After then, the process of evaluating an intervention usually starts with proof-of-concept research to gather early evidence in favour of the strategy, such as proof that it can be delivered successfully and that it is safe and acceptable to important stakeholders. A significant advantage of the pilot conducted is the fact that it took place in

‘real world’ conditions and thus assessed its effectiveness. The results reported indicate that the program has significant promise, however, three important factors need to be considered to avoid overreach:

- i) The statistical effect sizes reported need to be interpreted contextually. Although care was taken to avoid small sample bias, the sample used was still small.
- ii) There was no long-term follow-up of the schools or students who participated. We are therefore unable to determine long-term effects, either positive or negative.
- iii) We were unable to adequately assess implementation fidelity. Implementation fidelity refers to the degree that a program is delivered as it was designed, written, or intended. Although the use of printed manuals and mentor training is likely to have contributed to LGiS being implemented as intended, results from the qualitative component of the evaluation indicate that some schools had a somewhat different approach to how the content was delivered and which content was delivered.

Therefore, it is recommended that further research is conducted to evaluate LGiS with a big enough sample size to generate a well-powered assessment of whether the intervention can achieve its aims with the target population and sustain them over an extended period. Such evaluation would benefit from the recommendations listed herein and ideally, evaluate fidelity and adaptation, include a control group, and have at least a six-month post-program follow-up. Larger studies with appropriate control groups, evaluation of fidelity and adaptation, and longer follow-up will assist in determining whether the intervention results are due to specific components of LGiS, whether positive results obtained can be improved even further, and whether the intervention can be trimmed. Importantly, it will allow an investigation of who benefits most from LGiS and under what conditions.

End of Report. June 2023.

References

- Albers, B and Pattuwage, L. (2017). 'Implementation in Education: Findings from a Scoping Review. Melbourne: Centre for Evidence and Implementation. Retrieved from <https://evidenceforlearning.org.au/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/implementation-in-education>
- Alisic, E. (2012). Teachers' perspectives on providing support to children after trauma: A qualitative study. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 27, 51–59.
- Allen, K., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2018). What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 30(1), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9389-8>
- Anyon, Y., Jenson, J. M., Altschul, I., Farrar, J., McQueen, J., Greer, E., ... & Simmons, J. (2014). The persistent effect of race and the promise of alternatives to suspension in school discipline outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 44, 379–386.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2014). *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2014-15*, Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2015), *About ICSEA*, Retrieved from: http://docs.acara.edu.au/resources/About_icsea_2014.pdf
- Avery, Deppeler, J., Galvin, E., Skouteris, H., Crain de Galarce, P., & Morris, H. (2022). Changing educational paradigms: Trauma-responsive relational practice, learnings from the USA for Australian schools. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 138, 106506–. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106506>
- Ballin, A. E. (2022) Connecting trauma-sensitive schooling and social-emotional learning to promote educational equity: One school's intentional design, *Children & Schools*, 44(2) pp: 107–115, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdab032>
- Bamblett, M., & Lewis, P. (2007). Detoxifying the child and family welfare system for Australian Indigenous peoples: Self-determination, rights and culture as the critical tools. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 3(3), 43–56. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069396ar>
- Braun, V., Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–10. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Brunzell, T., Stokes, H. & Waters, L. (2019) Shifting teacher practice in trauma-affected classrooms: Practice pedagogy strategies within a trauma-informed positive education model. *School Mental Health* 11, 600–614 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-018-09308-8>
- Burgess, C., Fricker, A. & Weuffen, S. (2023). Lessons to learn, discourses to change, relationships to build: How decolonising race theory can articulate the interface between school leadership and Aboriginal students' schooling experiences. *The Australian Education Researcher*, 50, 111–129 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00546-z>
- Burgess, C., Lowe, K., & Goodwin, S. (2021). What's the problem represented to be? Analysing Indigenous education policy as discourse. In N. Moodie, K. Lowe, R. Dixon, & K. Trimmer (Eds.), *Assessing the evidence in Indigenous education research: Implications for policy and practice*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14306-9>
- Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2022). *Strong strides together – Meeting the educational goals for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students*. NSW Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/education-data-and-research/cese/publications/research-reports/strong-strides-together>
- Chain Reaction Foundation. (2021). *Facilitator handbook: Learning ground in school pilot program*. Chain Reaction Foundation
- Chain Reaction Foundation. (2021). *Mentor handbook: Learning ground in school pilot program*. Chain Reaction Foundation
- Chain Reaction Foundation. (2021). *Training manual for professionals: Learning ground in school pilot program*. Chain Reaction Foundation
- Coffin, J. (2007). Rising to the challenge in Aboriginal health by creating cultural security, *Aboriginal & Islander Health Worker Journal*, 31(3), 22–24.
- Cole, S., Eisner, A., Gregory, M., & Ristuccia, J. (2013). *Helping traumatized children learn: Creating and advocating for trauma-sensitive schools (Vol. 2)*. Massachusetts Advocates for Children, Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative.

- Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, (2020), *Closing the Gap Report*. <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdf/closing-the-gap-report-2020.pdf>
- Demmert Jr, W. G. (2011). What is culture-based education? Understanding pedagogy and curriculum. In J. Reyhner, W. S. Gilbert, & L. Lockard (Eds.), *Honoring Our Heritage: Culturally Appropriate Approaches to Indigenous Education*, (pp. 1-9). Flagstaff Arizona: Northern Arizona University.
- Deschenes, S., Cuban, L. & Tyack, D. (2001). Mismatch: Historical perspectives on schools and students who don't fit them, *Teachers College Record*, 103(4): 525–547.
- Dillon, M. C. & Westbury, N. D. (2007) Beyond humbug: Transforming Government Engagement with Indigenous Australians. West Lakes, SA: Seaview Press
- Dobia, B. (2014). Facilitators and challenges associated with PBS implementation in Greater Western Sydney schools. Presented at *Australian Association of Special Education National Conference*, September 2014
- Dobia, B., Arthur, L., Jennings, P., Khlentzos, D., Parada, R. H., Roffey, S. & Sheinman, N. (2020) Implementation of SEL. In UNESCO MGIEP (Ed.) *Rethinking Learning: Mainstreaming Social and Emotional Learning in Education Systems*. New Delhi: UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development. ISBN 978-81-89218-73-7
<https://mgiep.unesco.org/rethinking-learning>
- Downey, L. 2007. *Calmer Classrooms: A Guide to Working with Traumatized Children*. Melbourne: Child Safety Commissioner.
- Downey, L. 2009. *From Isolation to Connection: A Guide to Understanding and Working with Traumatized Children and Young People*. Melbourne: Child Safety Commissioner.
- Durlak, J. A. (2016). Programme implementation in social and emotional learning: basic issues and research findings. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 46(3), 333-345.
<http://doi:10.1080/0305764X.2016.1142504>.
- Eastman, K. B., & McMaugh, A. (2022). Teacher understanding of trauma in the classroom and their professional learning experiences: every little bit counts. *Professional Development in Education*, (ahead-of-print), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2022.2155984>
- Endedijk, H. M., Breeman, L. D., van Lissa, C. J., Hendrickx, M. M. H. G., den Boer, L., & Mainhard, T. (2021). The teacher's invisible hand: A meta-analysis of the relevance of teacher–student relationship quality for peer relationships and the contribution of student behavior. *Review of Educational Research*, 92(3), 370-412. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543211051428>
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A.-G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G*Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods*, 39(2), 175-191. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03193146>
- Foley, D. (2003). Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous standpoint theory. *Social Alternatives*, 22(1), 44–52.
- Frankenhuis, W. E., Panchanathan, K., & Nettle, D. (2016). Cognition in harsh and unpredictable environments. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 7, 76-80.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.08.011>
- Fray, L., Jaremus, F., Gore, J., & Harris, J. (2022). Schooling upheaval during COVID-19: troubling consequences for students' return to school. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 1–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00572-x>
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106-116.
- Goodman A, Lamping D.L, Ploubidis G.B. (2010). When to use broader internalising and externalising subscales instead of the hypothesised five subscales on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ): data from British parents, teachers, and children. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 38, 1179-1191.
- Goodman. R. (2001). Psychometric properties of the strengths and difficulties questionnaire. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40 (11), 1337-1345.
- Gore, J., Fray, L., Miller, D., Harris, J., & Taggart, W. (2020). *2020 Report to the NSW Department of Education. Evaluating the impact of COVID-19 on NSW schools*. The University of Newcastle.
https://www.newcastle.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/704924/Evaluating-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-NSW-schools.pdf
- Gower, G., Nakata, M. & Mackean, T. (2007). *Achieving appropriate outcomes in the teaching of Indigenous Australian studies in universities*, Paper presented at the 3rd Annual IHEAC Conference, Adelaide.
- Graham, L., Killingly, C, Laurens, K., & Sweller, N., (2023) Overrepresentation of Indigenous students in school suspension, exclusion, and enrolment cancellation in Queensland: Is there a case for systemic inclusive school reform? *Australian Educational Researcher*, 50(2), pp. 167-201.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00504-1>

- Grant, J., Parry, Y. & Geurin, P. (2013). An investigation of culturally competent terminology in healthcare policy finds ambiguity and lack of definition, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 37(3), pp. 250-6. doi: 10.1111/1753-6405.12067
- Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. P., & Durlak, J. A. (2017). Social and emotional learning as a public health approach to education, *Future of Children*, 27, 13–32.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2017.0001>
- Healing Foundation. (2020). *Glossary of healing terms: A guide to key terms related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing*.
https://healingfoundation.org.au/app/uploads/2020/07/HF_Glossary_of_Healing_Terms_A3_Poster_Jul2020_V1.pdf
- Hemphill, S.A., Toumbourou, J.W., Smith, R., Kendall, G., Rowland, B., Freiberg, K. & Williams, J. (2010). Are rates of school suspension higher in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods? An Australian study, *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 21(1), 12-18.
- Howard J, L'Estrange L & Brown M (2022). National guidelines for Trauma-Aware Education in Australia. *Frontiers in Education* 7:826658. doi: 10.3389/educ.2022.826658
- Hughes, D. A. (2004). An attachment-based treatment of maltreated children and young people, *Attachment & Human Development*, 6, 263–278.
- Jagers, R., Rivas-Drake, D., & Borowski, T. (2018, November), *Equity and social and emotional learning: A cultural analysis* [CASEL Assessment Work Group brief series]. <https://casel.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/CASEL-Resources-Measuring-SEL.pdf>
- Jones, W., Berg, J., & Osher, D. (2018). *Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative: Trauma-sensitive schools descriptive study final report*. American Institutes for Research.
<https://traumasensitiveschools.org/descriptive-study/>
- Kana'iaupuni, S.M., Ledward, B & Malone, N. (2017). Mohala I ka wai: Cultural advantage as a framework for Indigenous culture-based education and student outcomes. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1 suppl), 311S-339S.
- Keen, S., Lomeli-Rodriguez, M., & Joffe, H. (2022). From challenge to opportunity: Virtual qualitative research during COVID-19 and beyond. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 16094069221105075–16094069221105075. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221105075>
- Khalifa, M., Khalil, D., Marsh, T., & Halloran, C. (2018). Toward an Indigenous, decolonising school leadership: A literature review. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 55(4), 1–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X18809348>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2017). The (r)evolution will not be standardized: Teacher education, hip hop pedagogy, and culturally relevant pedagogy. In D. Paris, & H. S. Alim (Eds.), *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*, (pp. 141-156). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lakens, D. (2013). Calculating and reporting effect sizes to facilitate cumulative science: A practical primer for t-tests and ANOVAs [Review]. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00863>
- Law, D., & Wolpert, M. (2014). Guide to using outcomes and feedback tools with children, young people, and families. UK: Press CAMHS.
- Leatherdale, S. T. (2019). Natural experiment methodology for research: A review of how different methods can support real-world research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 22(1), 19-35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2018.1488449>
- Li, S. H., Beames, J. R., Newby, J. M., Maston, K., Christensen, H., & Werner-Seidler, A. (2022). The impact of COVID-19 on the lives and mental health of Australian adolescents. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 31(9), 1465–1477. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01790-x>
- Lopez, A. E. (2016). *Culturally Responsive and Socially Just Leadership in Diverse Contexts: From Theory to Action*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Lopez-Carmen, V., McCalman, J., Benveniste, T., Askew, D., Spurling, G., Langham, E., & Bainbridge, R. (2019). Working together to improve the mental health of Indigenous children: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 104, 104408. doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104408.
- Martin, K. (2008). *Please Knock Before You Enter: Aboriginal Regulation of Outsiders and the Implications for Researchers*. Teneriffe, QLD: Post Pressed.
- Maxwell, J., Lowe, K. & Salter, P. (2018). The re-creation and resolution of the ‘problem’ of Indigenous education in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum priority, *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 45(2), 161-177.
- Miller, J., & Berger, E. (2020). A review of school trauma-informed practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth, *Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, 37(1), 39-46, DOI: 10.1017/edp.2020.2

- Mills, K. L., McFarlane, A. C., Slade, T., Creamer, M., Silove, D., Teesson, M., & Bryant, R. (2011). Assessing the prevalence of trauma exposure in epidemiological surveys, *Australian New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 45(5), pp: 407-15. doi: 10.3109/00048674.2010.543654.
- Milner, H. R. (2017). Where's the race in culturally relevant pedagogy? *Teachers College Record*, 119(1), 1-32.
- Minahan, J., & Rappaport, N. (2012). *The Behavior Code: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Teaching the Most Challenging Students*. Cambridge, USA: Harvard Education Press.
- Mooney, M., Dobia, B., Yeung, A. S., Barker, K., Power, A.M. & Watson, K. (2008), *Positive Behaviour for Learning: Investigating the transfer of a United States system into the New South Wales Department of Education and Training*. Penrith NSW, University of Western Sydney.
<http://handle.uws.edu.au:8081/1959.7/19702>
- Morgan, G., Butler, C., French, R., Creamer, T., Hillan, L., Ruggiero, E., Parsons, J., Prior, G., Idagi, L., Bruce, R., Twist, A., Gray, T., Hostalek, M., Gibson, J., Mitchell, B., Lea, T., Miller, C., Lemson, F., Bogdanek, S., ... Cahill, A. (2023). *You can't pour from an empty cup: Strengthening our service and systems responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who experience domestic and family violence* (Research report, 01/2023). ANROWS.
- Noltemeyer, A. L., Ward, R. M., & Mcloughlin, C. (2015). Relationship between school suspension and student outcomes: A meta-analysis. *School Psychology Review*, 44(2), 224-240.
- NSW Department of Education (2015) *The Wellbeing Framework for Schools*, Sydney, Australia, Available at: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/whole-school-approach/wellbeing-framework-for-schools>
- NSW Department of Education (2020), *Trauma-Informed Practice Professional Development Pilot*. Retrieved from: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/our-disability-strategy/initiatives/trauma-informed-practice-professional-development-pilot>
- NSW Department of Education (2021) *Achieving School Excellence in Wellbeing and Inclusion*, Inclusion and Wellbeing Directorate, Sydney, Australia. Available at: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/whole-school-approach/wellbeing-framework-for-schools>
- NSW Department of Education (2022). *Suspensions and Expulsions Semester 1 2022*. Sydney, Australia. Retrieved from <https://data.cese.nsw.gov.au/data/dataset/c0a90a6f-2509-45c5-ba77-cf5b00350043>.
- NSW Department of Education (2023). *The Care Continuum*. Retrieved from <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/attendance-behaviour-and-engagement/behaviour-support-toolkit/support-for-teachers/the-care-continuum>.
- NSW Department of Education. (2021, December, 13th). *Semester 1 2021 Suspension and Expulsions*. N.S.W Department of Education. https://data.cese.nsw.gov.au/data/dataset/suspensions-and-expulsions-in-nsw-government-schools/resource/7d039678-7527-4744-93a5-e162aa74de11?view_id=2a44576e-ba03-4775-92ec-e2a27d557519
- NSW Education Standards Authority (2021). *Programming*. Retrieved from <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/k-10/understanding-the-curriculum/programming>
- NSW Education Standards Authority (2021b). *Principles of effective professional learning*. Retrieved from <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/teacher-accreditation/professional-development/information-for-providers/professional-learning-principles>
- OECD (2023). *Education policy outlook in Australia*. <https://www.oecd.org/australia/education-policy-outlook-in-australia-ce7a0965-en.htm>
- Parada, R. H. (2019). Assessing perceived school support, rule acceptance and attachment: Evaluation of the psychometric properties of the School Belonging Scale (SBS). *Educational and Child Psychology*, 36(2), 106-116.
- Parada, R.H., Dobia, B., & Kalos, K. (2016). *Each One Teach One: An evaluation of Learning Ground Mt Druitt. Final Report*. Penrith: NSW. Chain Reaction Foundation/Western Sydney University.
- Parker, J. G., Rubin, K. H., Erath, S. A., Wojslawowicz, J. C., & Buskirk, A. A. (2015). Peer Relationships, Child Development, and Adjustment: A Developmental Psychopathology Perspective. In *Developmental Psychopathology* (pp. 419-493).
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470939383.ch12>
- Raffaele Mendez, L. M. (2003). Predictors of suspension and negative school outcomes: A longitudinal investigation. *New Directions for Youth Development*, (99), 17-33.
- Reconciliation Australia. (2021, September 23). *What is reconciliation?*
<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation/what-is-reconciliation/>
- Roffey, S. & Boyle, C. (2018). Belief, belonging and the role of schools in reducing the risk of home-grown extremism. In K.-A. Allen & C. Boyle (Eds.) *Pathways to Belonging – Contemporary Perspectives of School Belonging*. Leiden: Brill.

- Rogers, M. A., & MacLean, J. (2023). ADHD symptoms increased during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 27(8), 800-811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10870547231158750>
- Salovey, P., & Grewal, D. (2005). The Science of Emotional Intelligence. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14(6), 281-285. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uws.edu.au/stable/20183048>
- Santiago, C.D., Raviv, T., & Jaycox, L.H. (2018). Creating healing school communities: School-based interventions for students exposed to trauma. Concise guides on trauma care series. American Psychiatric Association Books. 10.1037/0000072-000
- Schäfer, T., & Schwarz, M. A. (2019). The meaningfulness of effect sizes in psychological research: Differences between sub-disciplines and the impact of potential biases [Original Research]. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00813>
- Shean, M. & Mander, D. (2020). Building Emotional Safety for Students in School Environments: Challenges and Opportunities. In R. Midford, G. Nutton, B. Hyndman & S. Silburn (eds.), *Health and Education Interdependence*. Singapore: Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-3959-6_12
- Shochet, I. M., Dadds, M. R., Ham, D., & Montague, R. (2006). School connectedness is an underemphasized parameter in adolescent mental health: Results of a community prediction study. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 35(2), 170-179. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15374424jccp3502_1
- Smyth, J. & Hattam, R. (2004). 'Dropping Out', Drifting Off, Being Excluded: Becoming Somebody Without School. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Stokes, H., & Brunzell, T. (2019). Professional learning in trauma informed positive education: Moving school communities from trauma affected to trauma aware. *School Leadership Review*, 14(2), 6.
- Sullivan, A. L., Klingbeil, D. A., & Van Norman, E. R. (2013). Beyond behavior: Multilevel analysis of the influence of sociodemographics and school characteristics on students' risk of suspension. *School Psychology Review*, 42(1), 99-114.
- te Riele, Kitty. 2007. Educational alternatives for marginalised youth, *Australian Educational Researcher*, 34(3): 53-68.
- Thackrah, R. D. & Thompson, S. C. (2013). Refining the concept of cultural competence: Building on decades of progress. *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 199(1):35-38.
- Thapar, A., Cooper, M., Eyre, O., & Langley, K. (2013). Practitioner Review: What have we learnt about the causes of ADHD? *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 54(1), 3-16. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2012.02611.x>
- United Nations General Assembly. (2007). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>
- Van Bergen, P., & Daniel, E. (2022). "I miss seeing the kids!": Australian teachers' changing roles, preferences, and positive and negative experiences of remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00565-w>
- Venet, A. S. (2020). *Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education*. New York: Norton.
- Vincent, C. G., Sprague, J. R., & Tobin, T. J. (2012). Exclusionary discipline practices across students' racial/ethnic backgrounds and disability status: Findings from the Pacific Northwest. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 35(4), 585-601.
- Walker, R., Schultz, C., & Sonn, C. (2014). Cultural competence: transforming policy, services, programs and practice. In P. Dudgeon, H. Milroy & R. Walker (Eds.), *Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practices*, 2nd edition (pp.195-220). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.telethonkids.org.au/our-research/early-environment/developmental-origins-of-child-health/expired-projects/working-together-second-edition/>
- Warren, M. (2005). Communities and schools: A new view of urban education reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(2): 133-173.

Appendix A: Scales Used in this Evaluation

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 2001)

See also www.sdqinfo.org

Self-administered, 25 items are scored on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from ‘(1) Not True’ to ‘(3) True’. 5 scales make up the SDQ: Emotional symptoms, Conduct problems, Hyperactivity/inattention, Peer relationships problem, and Prosocial behaviour. Additionally for general populations, these scores can be combined into ‘internalising problems’ characterised by depressive and anxiety-like difficulties, and ‘externalising problems’ representing problematic behaviour related to poor impulse control, including rule-breaking, aggression, impulsivity, and inattention.

School Belonging Scale (SBS, Parada, 2019)

Self-administered, 12 items are scored on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from ‘(1) Completely Disagree’ to ‘(6) Agree’. Three Scale scores are possible: School Support, Acceptance of Rules, and School Attachment. An overall School Belonging Score is also possible by combining the individual scale scores.

School Belonging Scale Items	Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire Items
<i>School Support Scale</i>	<i>Emotional Problems Scale</i>
I can get good support from my school	I get a lot of headaches, stomach aches
I can count on help and support, if I need it, from my school	I worry a lot
I can get back as much support as I give from my school	I am often unhappy, depressed, or tearful
I am confident that I am well supported by my school	I am nervous in new situations. I easily lose confidence
	I have many fears, I am easily scared
<i>School Attachment (Positive Affect) Scale</i>	<i>Conduct Problems Scale</i>
I feel good about being in my school	I get very angry and often lose my temper
I feel the best when I am at my school	I usually do as I am told (R)
I feel that I have a good attachment to my school	I fight a lot. I can make other people do what I want
I feel I have a strong connection with my school	I am often accused of lying or cheating
	I take things that are not mine from home, school or elsewhere
<i>Acceptance of School Rules Scale</i>	<i>Hyperactivity Scale</i>
I accept the rules and procedures set by my school	I am restless, I cannot stay still for long
I agree that there are suitable standards and values set by my school	I am constantly fidgeting
I accept the rules of my school	I am easily distracted; I find it difficult to concentrate
I accept that there is good sense in the rules and procedures of my school	I think before I do things (R)
	I finish the work I'm doing. My attention is good (R)
	<i>Peer Problems Scale</i>
	I would rather be alone than with people of my age
	I have one good friend or more (R)
	Other people my age generally like me (R)
	Other children or young people pick on me or bully me
	I get along better with adults than with people my own age
	<i>Prosocial Scale</i>
	I try to be nice to other people. I care about their feelings
	I usually share with others, for example, CD's, games, food
	I am helpful if someone is hurt, upset, or feeling ill
	I am kind to younger children
	I often volunteer to help others (parents, teachers, children)
	(R) Items are reversed scored.

Scale Reliabilities with pre-intervention sample N = 75.

Scale	Reliability
SDQ Emotion Difficulties	.67
SDQ Conduct Difficulties	.72
SDQ Hyperactive/Inattentive	.76
SDQ Peer Difficulties	.46
SDQ Pro-Social Skills	.76
SDQ Internalising Difficulties	.70
SDQ Externalising Difficulties	.81
SDQ Internalising (Emotional + Peer Difficulties)	.70
SDQ Externalizing (Conduct + Hyperactive/Inattentive Difficulties)	.81
SDQ Total Difficulties (Emotion+ Conduct_ Hyperactive/Inattentive+ Peer Difficulties)	.74
SBS Rule Acceptance	.88
SBS School Support	.91
SBS School Attachment	.90
SBS Total (Rule+ Support+ Attachment)	.94

Note: Reliability using Cronbach's Alpha.

Appendix B: Overview of Statistical Results

ANOVA Results

Times available

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Pre	45	42.9	42.9	42.9
	Post	30	28.6	28.6	71.4
	PrePost	30	28.6	28.6	100.0
	Total	105	100.0	100.0	

Tests of Homogeneity of Variances

		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
SBS-Total	Based on Mean	.111	2	102	.895
	Based on Median	.043	2	102	.958
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	.043	2	100.033	.958
	Based on trimmed mean	.087	2	102	.917
Total SDQ Difficulties	Based on Mean	2.681	2	102	.073
	Based on Median	2.554	2	102	.083
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	2.554	2	101.422	.083
	Based on trimmed mean	2.705	2	102	.072

Note df= Degrees of Freedom

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
SBS-Total	Between Groups	312.703	2	156.352	.780	.461
	Within Groups	20447.811	102	200.469		
	Total	20760.514	104			
Total SDQ Difficulties	Between Groups	32.651	2	16.325	.375	.688
	Within Groups	4441.978	102	43.549		
	Total	4474.629	104			

Paired samples correlations for students with both pre and post measures

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Total SDQ Difficulties	37.43	30	5.557	1.014
	Post Total SDQ Difficulties	36.57	30	4.946	.903
Pair 2	Emotional Difficulties	9.53	30	2.389	.436
	Post Emotional Difficulties	9.10	30	2.040	.372
Pair 3	Conduct Difficulties	8.53	30	2.432	.444
	Post Conduct Difficulties	8.20	30	2.369	.433
Pair 4	Peer Difficulties	8.23	30	1.357	.248
	Post Peer Difficulties	7.60	30	1.734	.317
Pair 5	Prosocial Strengths	11.70	30	2.292	.418
	Post Prosocial Strengths	11.80	30	2.235	.408
Pair 6	Hyperactivity/Inattention	11.13	30	2.047	.374
	Post Hyperactivity/Inattention	11.67	30	1.900	.347
Pair 7	SBS-Support	10.77	30	5.022	.917
	Post SBS-Support	12.90	30	5.561	1.015
Pair 8	SBS-Rules	9.80	30	4.230	.772
	Post SBS-Rules	11.50	30	4.622	.844
Pair 9	SBS-Attachment	12.93	30	6.280	1.147
	Post SBS-Attachment	13.63	30	6.105	1.115
Pair 10	SBS-Total	33.50	30	13.564	2.476
	Post SBS-Total	38.03	30	14.550	2.656
Pair 11	Internalising	17.77	30	3.213	.587
	Post Internalising	16.70	30	2.830	.517
Pair 12	Externalising	19.67	30	3.800	.694
	Post Externalising	19.87	30	3.683	.673

Paired samples correlations for students with both pre and post measures

		N	Correlation	Significance One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
Pair 1	Total SDQ Difficulties & Post Total SDQ Difficulties	30	.667	<.001	<.001
Pair 2	Emotional Difficulties & Post Emotional Difficulties	30	.675	<.001	<.001
Pair 3	Conduct Difficulties & Post Conduct Difficulties	30	.747	<.001	<.001
Pair 4	Peer Difficulties & Post Peer Difficulties	30	.334	.036	.071
Pair 5	Prosocial Strengths & Post Prosocial Strengths	30	.614	<.001	<.001
Pair 6	Hyperactivity/Inattention & Post Hyperactivity/Inattention	30	.668	<.001	<.001
Pair 7	SBS-Support & Post SBS-Support	30	.479	.004	.007
Pair 8	SBS-Rules & Post SBS-Rules	30	.617	<.001	<.001
Pair 9	SBS-Attachment & Post SBS-Attachment	30	.663	<.001	<.001
Pair 10	SBS-Total & Post SBS-Total	30	.622	<.001	<.001
Pair 11	Internalising & Post Internalising	30	.474	.004	.008
Pair 12	Externalising & Post Externalising	30	.773	<.001	<.001

Cohen's *d* and Hedges's *g* Formulas

Cohen refers to the standardized mean difference between two groups of independent observations for the sample as d_s which is given by:

$$d_s = \frac{\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2}{\sqrt{\frac{(n_1 - 1)SD_1^2 + (n_2 - 1)SD_2^2}{n_1 + n_2 - 2}}} \quad (1)$$

The formula for Cohen's d_s , which is based on sample averages gives a biased estimate of the population effect size, especially for small samples ($n < 20$). Therefore, Cohen's d_s were corrected using Hedges's g , which is unbiased, and given by:

$$\text{Hedges's } g_s = \text{Cohen's } d_s \times \left(1 - \frac{3}{4(n_1 + n_2) - 9}\right) \quad (2)$$

Paired Samples Effect Sizes for students with both pre and post measures

			Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate (Effect Size)	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower	Upper
Pair 1	Total SDQ Difficulties - Post Total SDQ Difficulties	Cohen's d	4.321	.201	-.163	.560
		Hedges' correction	4.437	.195	-.158	.546
Pair 2	Emotional Difficulties - Post Emotional Difficulties	Cohen's d	1.813	.239	-.126	.600
		Hedges' correction	1.862	.233	-.123	.584
Pair 3	Conduct Difficulties - Post Conduct Difficulties	Cohen's d	1.709	.195	-.168	.555
		Hedges' correction	1.755	.190	-.163	.540
Pair 4	Peer Difficulties - Post Peer Difficulties	Cohen's d	1.810	.350	-.022	.716
		Hedges' correction	1.858	.341	-.021	.697
Pair 5	Prosocial Strengths - Post Prosocial Strengths	Cohen's d	1.989	-.050	-.408	.308
		Hedges' correction	2.042	-.049	-.397	.300
Pair 6	Hyperactivity/Inattention - Post Hyperactivity/Inattention	Cohen's d	1.613	-.331	-.696	.040
		Hedges' correction	1.656	-.322	-.677	.039
Pair 7	SBS-Support - Post SBS-Support	Cohen's d	5.419	-.394	-.762	-.019
		Hedges' correction	5.564	-.383	-.742	-.018
Pair 8	SBS-Rules - Post SBS-Rules	Cohen's d	3.888	-.437	-.809	-.059
		Hedges' correction	3.992	-.426	-.788	-.057
Pair 9	SBS-Attachment - Post SBS- Attachment	Cohen's d	5.086	-.138	-.496	.223
		Hedges' correction	5.223	-.134	-.483	.217
Pair 10	SBS-Total - Post SBS-Total	Cohen's d	12.255	-.370	-.737	.003
		Hedges' correction	12.584	-.360	-.718	.003
Pair 11	Internalising - Post Internalising	Cohen's d	3.118	.342	-.029	.708
		Hedges' correction	3.201	.333	-.028	.689
Pair 12	Externalising - Post Externalising	Cohen's d	2.524	-.079	-.437	.280
		Hedges' correction	2.592	-.077	-.426	.273

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes. Cohen's d uses the sample standard deviation of the mean difference. Hedges' correction uses the sample standard deviation of the mean difference, plus a correction factor. SBS is negatively scored 1 to 7 (1 = Strongly Agree – 7 = Strongly Disagree) higher scores mean lower agreement

Correlations Between SDQ and SBS scales and Gender Pre-LGiS Full information group

		Gender	Emotional Difficulties	Conduct Difficulties	Peer Diff	Prosocial Strengths	Hyp/In	Total SDQ	SBS-Supp	SBS-Rules	SBS-Attach
Emotional Difficulties	Pearson Correlation	.483**									
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007									
	N	30									
Conduct Difficulties	Pearson Correlation	.139	-.074								
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.462	.696								
	N	30	30								
Peer Difficulties	Pearson Correlation	.075	.429*	.306							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.694	.018	.100							
	N	30	30	30							
Prosocial Strengths	Pearson Correlation	.074	.263	-.354	-.110						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.698	.160	.055	.563						
	N	30	30	30	30						
Hyperactivity/Inattention	Pearson Correlation	.232	.373*	.436*	.237	-.351					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.218	.042	.016	.208	.057					
	N	30	30	30	30	30					
Total SDQ Difficulties	Pearson Correlation	.372*	.639**	.641**	.649**	-.198	.777**				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.043	<.001	<.001	<.001	.294	<.001				
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30				
SBS-Support	Pearson Correlation	-.317	-.070	.304	.089	-.378*	.433*	.284			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.088	.714	.102	.639	.040	.017	.128			
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30	30			
SBS-Rules	Pearson Correlation	-.032	.045	.621**	.225	-.565**	.625**	.576**	.597**		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.866	.813	<.001	.232	.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30		
SBS-Attachment	Pearson Correlation	-.238	.019	.183	.224	-.351	.518**	.334	.848**	.425*	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.206	.923	.333	.233	.057	.003	.071	<.001	.019	
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	
SBS-Total	Pearson Correlation	-.237	-.003	.391*	.207	-.479**	.595**	.439*	.949**	.730**	.910**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.206	.987	.033	.272	.007	<.001	.015	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Gender 1=Male 2=Female. SBS is negatively scored 1 to 7 (1 = Strongly Agree – 7 = Strongly Disagree) higher scores mean lower agreement.

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Correlations SDQ, SBS, and Gender Post LGiS Complete group

		Gender	Post Em Diff	Post Cond Diffs	Post Peer Diff	Post Proso Streng	Post Hyp/In	Post Total SDQ	Post SBS- Sup	Post SBS- Rules	Post SBS- Att
Post Emotional Difficulties	Pearson Correlation	.582**									
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001									
	N	30									
Post Conduct Difficulties	Pearson Correlation	.114	-.118								
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.547	.533								
	N	30	30								
Post Peer Difficulties	Pearson Correlation	.039	.119	.423*							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.837	.531	.020							
	N	30	30	30							
Post Prosocial Strengths	Pearson Correlation	.212	.368*	-.253	-.173						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.260	.046	.178	.362						
	N	30	30	30	30						
Post Hyperactivity/Inatt ention	Pearson Correlation	.071	.071	.483**	.000	-.414*					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.708	.709	.007	1.000	.023					
	N	30	30	30	30	30					
Post Total SDQ Difficulties	Pearson Correlation	.336	.425*	.764**	.602**	-.189	.645**				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.070	.019	<.001	<.001	.317	<.001				
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30				
Post SBS-Support	Pearson Correlation	-.104	-.412*	.703**	.300	-.498**	.405*	.427*			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.586	.024	<.001	.108	.005	.027	.019			
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30	30			
Post SBS-Rules	Pearson Correlation	-.095	-.338	.633**	.232	-.638**	.542**	.453*	.812**		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.616	.067	<.001	.217	<.001	.002	.012	<.001		
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30		
Post SBS- Attachment	Pearson Correlation	-.294	-.174	.463**	.165	-.602**	.524**	.409*	.673**	.614**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.114	.357	.010	.384	<.001	.003	.025	<.001	<.001	
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	
Post SBS-Total	Pearson Correlation	-.193	-.338	.664**	.257	-.646**	.547**	.479**	.923**	.886**	.872**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.306	.068	<.001	.170	<.001	.002	.007	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). 1 = Male 2 = Female. SBS is negatively scored 1 to 7 (1 = Strongly Agree – 7 = Strongly Disagree) higher scores mean lower agreement.

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Paired Samples *t*-test for students with both pre and post-measures

		Paired Differences					<i>t</i>	df	Significance	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
					Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	Total SDQ Difficulties - Post Total SDQ Difficulties	.867	4.321	.789	-.747	2.480	1.099	29	.140	.281
Pair 2	Emotional Difficulties - Post Emotional Difficulties	.433	1.813	.331	-.244	1.110	1.309	29	.100	.201
Pair 3	Conduct Difficulties - Post Conduct Difficulties	.333	1.709	.312	-.305	.971	1.069	29	.147	.294
Pair 4	Peer Difficulties - Post Peer Difficulties	.633	1.810	.330	-.042	1.309	1.917	29	.033	.065
Pair 5	Prosocial Strengths - Post Prosocial Strengths	-.100	1.989	.363	-.843	.643	-.275	29	.392	.785
Pair 6	Hyperactivity/Inattention - Post Hyperactivity/Inattention	-.533	1.613	.295	-1.136	.069	-1.811	29	.040	.081
Pair 7	SBS-Support - Post SBS-Support	-2.133	5.419	.989	-4.157	-.110	-2.156	29	.020	.039
Pair 8	SBS-Rules - Post SBS-Rules	-1.700	3.888	.710	-3.152	-.248	-2.395	29	.012	.023
Pair 9	SBS-Attachment - Post SBS-Attachment	-.700	5.086	.929	-2.599	1.199	-.754	29	.229	.457
Pair 10	SBS-Total - Post SBS-Total	-4.533	12.255	2.237	-9.109	.043	-2.026	29	.026	.052
Pair 11	Internalising - Post Internalising	1.067	3.118	.569	-.097	2.231	1.874	29	.036	.071
Pair 12	Externalising - Post Externalising	-.200	2.524	.461	-1.143	.743	-.434	29	.334	.668

Appendix C: Interview Protocols

LGIS Student Interview Protocol | Pre-LGiS

- Introduce yourself and what the purpose of the interview is and thank the participant for their participation and check that they consent to be interviewed.

E.g., Hello I am ... I am completing a ... I need to interview you to ... are you ok with this ...? Do you have any questions before we start?

First, I am really interested in knowing about you at this school. Remember, anything we discuss will be treated as private and confidential. No one at this school will have access to what you tell me.

- Tell me, how long have you been at this school?

Now, try and think about what things were like before starting the Learning Ground in School Program, in Term one of school

- How do you like school in general? Explore
- What would you like to get out of school?
- What kinds of problems do you experience at school?
- What's best about school?
- Why do you think you have been invited to join LGiS?
- How did you feel about being asked to join LGiS?

Now I want to ask you about being part of LGiS

- When did you start LGiS (this is to check whether they joined halfway through)
- Have missed many sessions?
- What do you think LGiS is about?
- What are some of the things you've been up to in LGiS?
- Thinking about the LGiS activities that you have taken part in, tell me some of the things that you have learnt, whatever you can remember, even if you don't remember exactly what to call it.
- Do you think you have changed in any way by going to LGiS?
 - Yes – How?
 - No – Why?
- Anything else you would like to share about LGiS?

LGIS Student Interview Protocol | Post COVID-19 Lockdown

- Introduce yourself and what the purpose of the interview is and thank the participant for their participation and check that they consent to be interviewed.

E.g., Hello I am ... I am completing a ... I need to interview you to ... are you ok with this ...? Do you have any questions before we start?

First, I am really interested in knowing about you at this school. Remember, anything we discuss will be treated as private and confidential. No one at this school will have access to what you tell me.

Tell me, how have things been since the return to school?

Now, try and think about what things were like when you were doing LGiS.

- What do you remember most about LGiS?
- What are some of the activities you enjoyed the most/least?
- Do you think you have changed due to LGiS? How?
- Do you think LGiS has helped you? How?
- Do you know if LGiS has helped other students you know did it? How?
- What would you change about LGiS?
- How did you feel about being asked to take part?
- Would you like to continue doing LGiS? Why (yes/no)

Lockdown related.

- How were things for you during the time school was closed? Ask to elaborate answer with examples.
- Did you use anything you learnt at LGiS to help you during the time the school was closed?

- Do you think it would have helped to be in touch with your LGiS group (and LGiS facilitators) during lockdown? Would you have liked to continue with the LGiS online?

LGiS Student Interview Protocol | Post-LGiS

- Introduce yourself and what the purpose of the interview is and thank the participant for their participation and check that they consent to be interviewed.

E.g., Hello I am ... I am completing a ... I need to interview you to ... are you ok with this ...? Do you have any questions before we start?

First, I am really interested in knowing about you at this school. Remember, anything we discuss will be treated as private and confidential. No one at this school will have access to what you tell me.

- What stood out for you most about LGiS?
- What are some of the activities you enjoyed the most/least?
- Do you think you have changed due to LGiS? How?
- What have you learnt by taking part in LGiS?
- Has LGiS helped you manage your emotions/behaviour? How?
- Has LGiS helped you at school? How?
- Were there things that you feel you learned about yourself from LGiS? Which things?
- Has LGiS helped other students you know who did it? How?
- What, if anything, would you change about LGiS?
- Would you like to continue doing LGiS? Why (yes/no)
- Tell me what you think about school in general ?
- What is best about school?
- What problems do you experience at school?
- Has LGiS made any difference to the good or bad things about school? In what ways?
- If you were doing an ad for LGiS, what would you say?
- Anything else you would like to share about LGiS?

LGiS Mentor, Facilitator and Executive Interview Protocol | Post-LGiS

Please introduce yourself and your role in LGiS and give us an overall summary of how LGiS was implemented and how you found it went in 2022 at your school.

How has student engagement been?

- If you were advising another school about the demographics of students who best suited the program, what would you say?
- What made the program more or less effective for these students?
- For students who engaged, or you found that the program was more effective for, were there particular changes in them that you could attribute the program to?
- Were there any other changes that you noticed, behavioural perhaps? Or otherwise? Attendance or anything like that?

What are some of the **features of the programme** that you think provides you with that strong belief in the programme? What also could be improved?

- How distinct is learning ground to other social-emotional programs that come into your schools? In what way?

Are there **structural or process** things that you thought are important for the success of the programme?

- How has LGiS looked in regard to timetabling at your school?
- Are there thoughts on the length of the program? Did you follow the sequence, did you feel you had to cut some lessons?
- For the number of students who attend, what is the ideal resourcing of staffing numbers and why?
- Any perspectives from an administrative side that should be considered?

Was there any **aspect of the training**, for example, that you were given to give the programme to students that need to be looked at? Or any recommendations? Or did you feel the training was adequate for you to run the programme?

How was **parental engagement** with the program?

What are the **plans** for LGiS at your school this year? And/Or moving forward?

How would it look for LGiS to be more embedded in the school plan or student wellbeing or the curriculum/school programming?


Putting on the problem solving hat, **how logistically would you see LGiS working** both effectively and practically in schools?

Appendix D: Excerpts from Program Manuals

This is copyrighted material. No parts are to be used without the consent of the copyright holders.

LGiS Training Manual for Professionals. A summary of key topics and points addressed across the professional learning sessions.

	DAY 1
DAY 1 SESSION 1	<p>MENTORS AND FACILITATORS The role of participants, mentors and facilitator Those involved are teachers – who we now refer to as MENTORS, also during the delivery of the program, in school and an appointed teacher/leader, whose role is to progress the program and is referred to as the FACILITATOR. Students are referred to as PARTICIPANTS. Facilitators, mentors and participants are engaged in LGiS together following the Learning Ground philosophy – Each One Teach One. Four phases of Facilitating and Mentoring:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiation • Cultivation • Separation • Redefinition
DAY 1 SESSION 2	<p>DESCRIPTIVE PRAISE When facilitators and mentors use praise effectively, the teenager develops a healthy self-esteem – a positive and realistic sense of self-worth. Over time facilitators and mentors see more of the behaviour and values they want to encourage and less inappropriate or undesirable behaviour. As a result a positive relationship is nurtured between adults and teenagers and communication has a opportunity to flourish.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluative Praise compared to Descriptive Praise • Benefits of using Descriptive Praise • How to use Descriptive Praise
DAY 1 SESSION 3	<p>EMOTION COACHING Being an emotion coach involves:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising, respecting and responding to the participant’s emotions • Modelling how to handle our own emotions • Coaching participants on how to manage feelings
	DAY 2
DAY 2 SESSION 1	<p>SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS Be Realistic, Be Prepared, Be Clear, Be Connected</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on words, body language, eye contact. • Intentionally set up the environment. • Troubleshooting issues. • Holding Group Meetings.
DAY 2 SESSION 2	<p>JUST THINK LIKE THEY DO Teenagers have specific developmental tasks and their brains are primed to fulfil these goals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To integrate with their peers • To take risks and have new experiences • To work out their self-identity • To gain autonomy and independence
DAY 2 SESSION 3	<p>JOURNEY TO THE HEART All in all we are making what we will call A JOURNEY TO THE HEART. The journey will follow four steps:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. BELIEF: Looking at values, attitudes, experiences, rhythms in our lives, memory, tradition and history. 2. PLACE: Listening, listening, listening – interaction – connection. 3. KINSHIP: Depth of relationship – familial, tribal, totemic, educational. 4. SPIRITUAL: How we live the connection and interconnection to achieve the ultimate sense of belonging. <p>Living without separation, thus achieving A JOURNEY TO THE HEART At Learning Ground in School we will further our experiences of behavioural change management through holistic education or as the most recent pedagogical language expresses using a wrap-around model of undergoing behavioural change in the spirit of ‘Each One Teach One’ a methodology that demands:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal connection • Creative community connection • Such that it enables us to become who we really are

	<p>Practicalities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting ready for first day of learning ground in school • The way we do things at learning ground in school <p>Protocol One “I greet you all with great respect and great affection”</p> <p>Protocol Two “We offer our respect to the Darug people (or tribal name of local Aboriginal people) on whose land we are meeting today. We particularly respect the elders past, present and future and go on to respect all our ancestors who through their place in history have lead us to Learning Ground in School at our school today.”</p>
DAY 2 SESSION 4	<p>THE WHOLE ME</p>  <p>The Orange Activity- Understanding the Whole Me.</p> <p>Dividing the parts of the orange reminds us of dividing the parts of the Whole Me. Understanding the Whole Me leads to knowing my really true self. Australian Aborigine tells us getting to know the Whole Me is the beginning of a wonderful journey called “the journey to the heart.” where each of us really belongs and where the truth is held.</p>
	DAY 3
DAY 3 SESSION 1	<p>RESPECT, SAFETY, RESPONSIBILITY</p> <p>The story of the great Rainbow Serpent provides an ideal backdrop for the learning and how it can be applied not only to the Dreamtime but also in our everyday life and how it is affected by the theme of the story.</p> <p>We will be preparing for the certainty that change happens and continues to happen as part of life’s journey. This is what we are striving to achieve for participants at Learning Ground in School. Providing useful tools for the handling of change as</p>
DAY 3 SESSION 2	<p>BIG ISSUES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding belonging is not where we live but how we live • Self-respect and self-esteem • Counselling respects and heals • Thinking about violence • Choosing non-violence • Knowledge is power (recognising anger) • Stress breakers
DAY 3 SESSION 3	<p>CHOOSING LIFE VALUES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening in a quiet place inside me – an important value • Attitudes • Experiencing rhythms in our lives • Sense of place • Kinship • Guides

LGIS Facilitator and Mentor Handbook- Part 1

Outcomes for each session extracted from the handbook.

Part 1 – THE WHOLE ME Expected outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A detailed understanding of the development of the whole person in five ways. • Valuable skills to manage the physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual aspects of our growth. • Commencement of the recognition of one’s survival needs for food, clothing, shelter, love and affection and an acceptance of how these needs have been met in one’s life, sometimes to a small degree and sometimes in abundance. • Each participant will be able to recognise that they have survived and can continue to do so, thus gaining courage to acknowledge the beginnings of lasting SELF-RESPECT AND SELF-ESTEEM. 	
Sessions 1, 2 & 3	THE WHOLE ME <i>A detailed understanding of the development of the whole person in five ways – The Physical Me, Intellectual or Thinking Me, the Emotional Me, the Social Me, and the Spiritual Me.</i> Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider themselves as a whole person through The Whole Me, reflecting on who they are as a whole person. • Think of ourselves as a whole person made up of different parts, each with a function and purpose. • Understanding the ‘Whole Me’ helps to understand the different parts of me and just like getting to see all the parts of the orange, knowing each part of me helps to recognise what makes each part work well or not so well. • Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People tell us getting to know the “whole me” is starting at the beginning of a wonderful journey called the journey to the heart, they say it is the true place where each of us belongs and where the truth is held.
Sessions 4, 5 & 6	THE PHYSICAL ME <i>Listening in a quiet place inside of me lets me see me.</i> Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider themselves from a physical perspective and how this has changed over time. • Understand the impact physical wellbeing has on the wellbeing of the self as well as the wellbeing of others • Understand that physical appearance often affects what we think and feel about a person and how quick we can be to make judgements based on appearance which may have given us the wrong idea. Prejudices like racism, fear, sexism can all cause anxiety about ‘the other’ and is often triggered by physical impressions. • Caring for our physical self – hygiene, physical activity, eating well, good sleep
Sessions 7 & 8	THE INTELLECTUAL OR THINKING ME <i>When I keep my truth, I know the inner beauty of my spirit.</i> Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider what stimulates/hinders a healthy mind, how to nurture the Thinking Me • The role of the five senses in the Thinking Me • Consider links between the Physical and Thinking Me • Recognise triggers that effect behaviour • Recognise personal experiences where knowledge has been power for them • Reflect on their ‘environment’ • Impact of Heredity, Environment and Personal Choice on the Intellectual Me
Sessions 9 & 10	THE EMOTIONAL ME <i>Thank you. You are there. I accept you as you are.</i> Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the primary emotional drivers of love and fear and examine their meaning. • Compare differences in our personal choice from one occasion to the other. I am IN CHARGE of me, that is both my right and my responsibility. • Understand the primary emotional drivers of love and fear and examine their meaning. • Examine why we feel the way we do about experiences. Learning about motivation for our feelings coming from experiences of love or fear. • Identify where our feelings are coming from, this leads to understanding the choices we have to react to the feeling.
Sessions 11 & 12	THE SOCIAL ME <i>I love you as you are. You are there. It is enough.</i> Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop positive relationships in various aspects of life • Making informed decisions • Taking more responsibility for ourselves in interacting with others and finding our own place in the world

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The benefits of being concerned with the growth of the society around us • Imagine what kind of society do we want Australia to become: this is the generation that will create change for the future
Sessions 13 & 14	<p>THE SPIRITUAL ME <i>I am in awe. It took my breath away. It is the Ruah.</i> Students learn about/to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Spiritual Me shows itself and has the opportunity to grow in different ways and may take a different path in each one of us, but it is a special value to know which is the best path for each of us as individuals • Each person has a right to feel comfortable in his/her own skin, to search for truth in one's own way and to realise beauty and truth wherever we find it. • Aboriginal Spirituality comes out of the Creation narrative, the Dreaming, which is part of that narrative, the belief system which holds Aboriginal values, experiences, memory, tradition and rhythm of life. • It also involves belief in the place of birth, the actual birth of a child, the land and the people being all as one. Human relationships are a big part of the Creation story, and they are complex and inter-related. • The deepest part of Aboriginal spirituality is all about how we live these connections and interconnections. • Aboriginal Spirituality has an enormous amount to teach us about something we all hunger for which is CONNECTION.
<p>Part 2 – BEYOND THE FIVE MEs</p> <p>Expected Outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the need to belong and understanding that this is the way the teenage brain is wired • Seeking to belong will be seen as a natural way forward to adulthood • Awareness of the challenges that go with this will be seen as something to embrace, to learn to manage and to live more fully with through accepting them and developing skills to cope with the natural desire to be connected • Increased capacity to think more deeply • Becoming more confident in being able to search for meaning in what is seen, heard and read • Skills developed in comprehension and analyses • Feeling a level of comfort at being able to express oneself both in the LGiS group as a whole as well as in smaller discussion groups • Take initiative in expression of ideas without feeling threatened, vulnerable or exposed • Develop the ability to accept the real possibility of learning from cultures other than one's own • Recognise the benefits of being a part of a multicultural multi-faith society 	
Session 15	<p>THE CHALLENGES OF CHANGE <i>A journey to the heart of what it means to belong</i> Students learn about/to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The only thing we can be really certain about for the future is that there will be change • Handling change -good or bad - and dealing with it to progress to a new experience of day-to-day living. • Managing change when we are young often arms us with skills to manage it in our adult lives.
Session 16	<p>RESPECT, SAFETY & RESPONSIBILITY Students learn about/to: <i>Gadju, Gadju.</i> The Great Rainbow Serpent - a story of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change and hope celebrated in many different ways by Aboriginal communities across Australia. • New beginnings as all stories of change. • Dreaming spirits being roused from their sleep. • Inviting us to be roused from some kind of sleep. • Gadju Gadju told the people what they were witnessing/looking at, was part of them, and they were part of it. • Gadju Gadju told the people they must respect everything because they are part of everything they could see, hear, touch, taste or smell.
Session 17	<p>FREEDOM FROM & FREEDOM TO <i>Listening in a quiet place inside me</i> Students learn about/to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living with a code of respect, safety and responsibility will enhance the wellbeing of all of us. • Understanding the concept of search for freedom that we all make and how that search plays out in all our lives, as individuals, as families and even as whole nations. • Thinking about why it is important for us to be free to be our real selves • Thinking about freedom at school, in the community we live in, and in Australia • Considering the role of Respect- Safety, Responsibility in constructive adult life interactions • Behaving and being safe and respectful online
<p>Part 3 – ANCIENT DREAMTIME, MODERN DREAMING</p>	

Expected Outcomes:

- We will now strive to understand why human beings work so hard to enjoy the value of connection with one another, with animals, birds, insects indeed all forms of life as well as with places we visit and objects we hold dear.
- Looking at connection with the things we dream about, recognising we can ‘daydream’ imagining ourselves in another place or conversation and we can ‘night dream’ when we are in bed and sound asleep.
- At LGiS we have a unique opportunity to understand the different levels of dreaming and how they add to our life experience and how dreaming links to connection. Because we are living in possibly the most ancient land on earth we live in a place that yields wonderful stories of connection and especially connection through dreaming. We are able to learn the value of the Aboriginal Dreamtime within Australia and to discover the sense of wonder and peace of mind this knowledge can bring.

Session 18	ANCIENT DREAMTIME, MODERN DREAMING Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expanding the Five Mes encompass Respect, Safety, Responsibility, Action, Reaction, Interaction• Dreaming as threads of learning at LGiS• Making connections - It's all about connection• Aboriginal Dreamtime and web of connection:• Story of Gudju Gudju, the Great Rainbow Serpent• Dreamtime Stories of Lyre Birds, Brolgas, Mallee Hens, and Waratahs
Session 19	CONNECTION, CONNECTION, CONNECTION <i>A journey to the heart of what it means to belong.</i> Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Specific qualities and responsibilities reflected in the stories:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ THE LYRE BIRD - thoughtful reflection on good and evil and the force for good.○ THE WARATAH – how/who to trust and the implications for connections in our own lives○ MALLEE HEN – how easy it is to jump to conclusions, respecting each other and being willing to understand the needs of others, taking responsibility for own actions○ THE BROLGA – took the risk to move against a popular idea of the crowd, learning to trust one's inner voice and staying safe• How to see ourselves, all of us, as more mature, more in charge of ourselves and shows us ways to be happier with the decisions we are making.• Role of Totems in Aboriginal cultural practices.• Given at the birth of an Aboriginal child, inherited through the family blood line• Gift of dreaming and deep thinking
Session 20	IF YOU COULD SEE THE REAL ME Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflect on how they work to reach the goal of their team guide• Reflect on own learning about themselves and others through the LGiS program• Lessons to be learned and strengths to be gained from each season of life; just as nature evolves stronger and more resilient so too do humans if they embrace and accept the highs and lows.• Looking after our own person like looking after a garden, preparing it for all seasons and the challenges that will inevitably arise.

LGiS Facilitator and Mentor Handbook- Part 2

Outcomes for each session extracted from the handbook.

Expected outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strong recognition of the need to belong and understanding that this is the way the teenage brain is wired. Seeking to belong will be seen as a natural way forward to adulthood. The challenges that go with the direction of this journey will be seen as something to embrace, to learn to manage and to live more fully with as a result of accepting them and developing skills to cope with the natural desire to be connected. • An increased capacity to think more deeply. • Becoming more confident in being able to search for meaning in what is seen, heard and read. • Skills developed in comprehension and analyses. • Feeling a level of comfort at being able to express oneself both in the LGiS group as a whole as well as in smaller discussion groups. • Starting to take initiative in expression of ideas without feeling threatened, vulnerable or exposed. • The ability to accept the real possibility of learning from cultures other than our own. • Being able to see the benefits of being a part of a multicultural, multi-faith society 	
Session 21	THE MAGIC ME Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HOW I PRESENT MYSELF- being responsible for how they look leading to how they feel about the day before them. We will introduce the idea that how we look often affects how we connect and even how we expect others to treat us • WHO I CHOOSE TO BE WITH- to what extent the kind of people we hang out with influences who we ourselves are becoming. The choices can of course be both good and/or bad. • Reflect on which of the five Mes are doing well this week. • Focus on a Me to concentrate on for the coming week. •
Sessions 22 & 23	COUNSELLING PROTECTS AND HEALS Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think about the need for protection and healing leading to an understanding of services that are available to us all in the communities of which we are a part. • The role of the school/community counsellor and the accessibility of such support • Have the opportunity to meet the counsellor within the LGiS session.
Sessions 24, 25 & 26	WHAT ABOUT VIOLENCE Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it very clear that it is NOT OK to hurt anyone and in particular not to hurt someone you say you love or have responsibility for such as a partner or a child or parent • Domestic violence is NEVER the responsibility of a child or a teenager and also that teenagers in the program are NEVER the cause of domestic violence occurring in their home • Be looking at a range of feelings that are experienced when people live with abuse
Session 27	CHOOSING NON-VIOLENCE Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on how violence is portrayed over the past week in the media. • Anger and the role anger plays in the exercise of violence. Including in our own lives. • Consider scenarios that could lead to violence and address appropriate ways of handling associate anger to develop skills helpful for leading a non-violent life. • focusing on developing real maturity, growing up and reaching adulthood as a choice for non-violence,
Session 28	ANGER MANAGEMENT <i>Recognising, preventing and responding to own anger</i> Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more mature approach to personal choice in regard to anger management • Being responsible for our own choices in anger management • Parts of the body where they feel anger rising. • Measuring and controlling anger
Sessions 29 & 30	KNOWLEDGE IS POWER <i>Understanding Triggers, Thoughts, Tantrums and Trouble</i> Students learn about/to:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on how they have managed anger lately • Recognise moving from recognising anger to letting go of it. • Thoughts following Triggers lead to Tantrums. • Trouble usually follows thoughts, triggers and tantrums.
Sessions 31 & 32	STRESS BREAKERS Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on breaking the stresses that lead to what has been discussed previously • Who is affected by what we each say and do today • Renew our awareness of our own behaviour and the results of that behaviour in our daily lives. • Seek stress breakers to make the most of taking care of ourselves. • Examine our breathing as an indicator of our level of stress.
Sessions 33 & 34	CHOOSING LIFE VALUES Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our values, once understood, are our life guides and affect how we think and how we behave in relation to everything that happens in our lives.
Session 35	LOOKING AT ATTITUDES- YOURS, MINE AND OURS Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will think about both positive and negative attitudes. • Identify the main attitude that lives within them. • Is it a CAN DO ATTITUDE or a NOBODY LOVES ME attitude and how do I choose the attitudes I live with? • Will think about the attitudes of those we know and live with and other attitudes that we find ourselves ‘taking on’ due to influences new and old, as well as personal choice.
Sessions 36 & 37	EXPERIENCING RHYTHMS IN OUR LIVES Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recall a big experience they remember having as a child. They will also speak to how they feel now when they recall the experience to their mind. • Consider the rhythm of our lives at LGiS, introducing the protocols we are now very familiar with and inviting each one to allow the words we say to influence how we are feeling today.
Sessions 38 & 39	MY PLACE, THE LAND AND US Where is my place? Is it the place of my birth? The place that calls me. The place that speaks to me about being me. The place that owns me. Students learn about/to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will think deeply about the land we see ourselves coming out of. • Understanding an enriched sense of place does two things: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provides a deep sense of belonging, allowing us to ponder the value of who we are and where we come from. ○ It sets the value base straight. The house we live in can be seen only of monetary or physical value, not fundamental value. Our value is much bigger than that.
Session 40	CELEBRATING LEARNING GROUND IN SCHOOL Inclusions in the session could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guest of honour – possibly Principal or Deputy-Principal • Certificates of attainment presented in a way that each participant will recognise the ‘descriptive praise’ used as unique to them and the growth we have seen in them • The certificate of attainment will display a pledge to carry participants achievements forward in a way that is expected to be able to be taken by those present • Paintings for presentation to guest of honour “Rhythm of Life” • Facilitator, one mentor and two participants ready to say a few words about the LGiS experience • A guest artist drawn from within the school community who can play the didgeridoo, or dance, sing, recite a piece of poetry pertinent to the occasion • Celebratory food

Appendix E: 2020 Implementation Interim Report

Learning Ground in Schools (LGiS): Interim Report of the 2020 Implementation

Dr Roberto H Parada
Dr Brenda Dobia
Dr Michelle Walker
Ms Julie Regalado

Western Sydney University
School of Education
March 2021

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



Acknowledgements

The research outlined in this report was funded by the Chain Reaction Foundation through a grant from the Neilson Family Foundation. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Neilson Family Foundation, Margaret Bell AM, Melissa Hood, Rumbi Mabambe, Pamela Gilbert, mentors, group facilitators, volunteers and participants of Mt Druitt Learning Ground and Learning Ground in Schools.

We also wish to thank participating schools, their executives, teachers, students and parents/caregivers without whose cooperation this research would not have been possible.

Table of Contents

Background	1
Context for Learning Ground in School - LGiS	1
Interim Report Research Aims and Scope	1
Research Approach	2
Professional Learning Workshops and Materials	2
Student Participant Recruitment	3
Indicators of social and emotional functioning of participants: Findings from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire	4
Profile of Students Who Attended LGiS	4
Findings to Date	6
Post Intervention Strength and Difficulties (SDQ) Analysis	6
Student Reflections on LGiS	10
Observations of LG Mentors on Student Responses to LGiS	12
Observations of Teacher/Facilitators on Student Responses to LGiS	12
Challenges encountered	13
Discussion	14
Conclusions and Recommendations	15
References	17

Background

Despite research showing that those students most prone to behaviour problems are disproportionately exposed to an array of social and personal risk factors including trauma, abuse, racial discrimination, mental health concerns, social difficulties, and learning problems (Vincent, et al., 2012; Raffaele Mendez, 2003; Sullivan et al., 2013), punitive and counterproductive disciplinary measures such as suspension remain a common response to their challenging behaviours (Dobia et al., 2014; Anyon et al., 2014).

Excluding students from school compounds academic difficulties, increases antisocial behaviour, impacts negatively on students' wellbeing and is strongly implicated in the school to prison pipeline (Hemphill et al, 2010; Noltemeyer, et al., 2015). The social exclusion impacts of school suspension are particularly evident for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In 2018, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students made up 29% of all long suspensions in NSW with the average length of long suspensions being 12.3 days (NSW DOE, 2019).

A recent research evaluation noted that the Learning Ground (LG) program is a rare example of a successful intervention that can work effectively with the most difficult young people to address the risks they face, repair relationships and re-engage them with their education (Parada, Dobia & Kalos, 2016). In 2019-20 LG was funded to work with a small number of schools in the Mt Druitt area to trial a professional learning and in-school intervention program – Learning Ground in School - based on its successful approach with the aim of supporting schools to work more effectively and proactively with at risk young people.

Context for Learning Ground in School - LGiS

Three high schools in the local Mt Druitt area who were familiar with the existing Learning Ground program were approached by LG and agreed to trial the Learning Ground in Schools - LGiS program. Subsequently one school had to postpone participation. Hence this interim report is based on two schools.

Whereas the established Learning Ground program runs one day per week out of school, the LGiS program was designed to be delivered via two weekly sessions of 60-80 minutes each, with implementation carried out in ten week blocks over two terms for a total of 20 weeks. The pilot was developed by LG with the expectation that school staff would be trained as primary facilitators and would be supported by an experienced Learning Ground mentor. A 3-day training package was developed by LG to introduce staff to the program, and weekly lesson plans were prepared based on the Learning Ground curriculum.

The role of the LG mentors was to model the approach to working with students and provide coaching support as needed to the school-based facilitators and mentors. An additional male mentor from LG was assigned to support LGiS in School 1 due to that school's decision to initiate LGiS with an all-boys cohort.

Interim Report Research Aims and Scope

The purpose of this report is to provide preliminary results of key collected data and information in relation to the implementation of the Learning Ground in Schools Program over the course of the second half of 2020. It is intended that a more comprehensive report will be made available following implementation at new sites that were not able to participate in 2020. The main goal, therefore, of this report is to provide informed feedback on the implementation of 'Learning Ground in Schools' an adaptation of the LG methods specifically designed to be used within schools. It aimed to investigate a) how the LG

program could be effectively translated into school settings, b) what challenges may be encountered, and c) what benefits may be gained.

The key research questions for the evaluation which form the basis of this report were:

- How can the LG program be taken up in school settings to re-engage students at risk of school failure?
- Does the LG program have benefits for general wellbeing and resilience in students participating in the program?
- Does the implementation of the LG program improve the disciplinary culture of schools by promoting teachers' use of positive, culturally sensitive behaviour management?

Research Approach

A mixed-method approach included data collected via interviews, focus groups and surveys which were intended to be undertaken at the start of the program, middle and as follow up at the completion of the program.

Interviews and focus groups were undertaken with Learning Ground staff members, students, teachers implementing the programs, school executive members and parents. Students participated in interviews, initially when they joined the program and again at the end of the year. LG Staff and participated in initial focus groups and in final interviews. Due to the difficulty of teacher-facilitators being available for research engagement they were invited to participate in brief written reflections via email. They were also invited to participate in interviews at the end of the program.

Surveys were used to collect discrete data on behavioural functioning of the students participating in the pilot program. It was intended to undertake surveys with the students (self-report), parents and teachers to assess potential wellbeing improvements as a result of the program. While numerous attempts were made to enlist parent participation no surveys were completed. Due to gaps and delays in teacher participation in the surveys there was insufficient pre-post data to allow meaningful analysis.

Professional Learning Workshops and Materials

Professional learning for school staff was conducted in a 3-day block that was offered in early June for staff from two schools and was repeated in early July for staff from a third school as well as some staff who had missed the initial opportunity. Written evaluations were completed by 15 participants and showed strong engagement and positive responses to the program, materials, and delivery. Table 1 below shows the average rating for each of the evaluation items based on a scale of 1-5 with higher scores indicating a higher agreement.

Evaluation items	Mean
Overall satisfaction	4.5
Benefit of LG concepts and practices	4.6
Relevance of training content	4.7
Benefit of training with colleagues	4.7
Difficulty of content	2.9
Usefulness of manual	4.7
Usefulness of training materials	4.9
Overall delivery	4.7
Opportunities to interact	4.8

Table 1. Participant Training Average Satisfaction. Note: Highest score possible = 5.

Open-ended comments regarding training further showed that it was well appreciated. Some participants suggested further elaborating content, such as techniques for emotion coaching.

Amazing! A definite eye opener! Would be great to see more in depth of content that we're teaching.

Overall, there were positive evaluations of the materials provided. Some participants requested further opportunities to practice skills being learnt.

Having more role playing to practise facilitating and mentoring would be more beneficial. More depth about how the implementation will be conducted within the school.

Suggestions included maximising the training time by having participants view the video documentary prior to the training. There was very strong acknowledgement of the Learning Ground facilitators' skills in delivery, and the venue and catering were universally complimented.

Student Participant Recruitment

Student recruitment was undertaken by the two schools in response to criteria supplied by Learning Ground. Both schools decided to integrate LGiS with their existing learning support plans for a new program of intensive learning and behavioural support, and selected students on this basis. In practice this meant that some students were simultaneously participating in two conduct/emotion related programs.

This overlap was evident in some students' views as to why they had been invited to participate.

I struggle with some things. I think this will help me to improve. I just struggle with work, writing and spelling and shit.

Because like the teachers don't get me, they don't help me. Some teachers do, some don't. Like a few – they just tell me to do it and I need help. ... When I'm in his class, he helps me.

Other students were unsure why they had been asked to participate or what the purpose of the program was.

Miss just told me to come.

I don't know. All the naughty kids go there.

The perception that the program was for the naughty kids was associated with a sense of stigma that impacted on motivation and attendance. Low numbers led one school to add a second group to the LGiS program a few weeks into the term. These students seemed better informed about the nature of the program and why they were invited to attend.

I think it is because I always sometimes cause problems, some places. I cause problems lots sometimes. I think that's why I was invited.

I think I was invited just because I needed help finding a way to talk to others and not make them take it straight to heart.

I don't know - because we have problems or something.

Because I'm really loud and my teachers don't like me because I'm really loud and I disrupt all the classes.

Each school selected one of its teachers as lead facilitator of LGiS and assigned 2-3 additional support staff as mentors. At School 1 the facilitator was an experienced teacher who had substantial direct experience of assisting in the pre-existing LG program. Due to the school's decision to integrate LGiS with their own learning support program the lead teacher of that program and two support staff were assigned as mentors for LGiS.

As School 2 was seeking to integrate its new learning support program with LGiS the teacher chosen as facilitator was the school-based coordinator of that program. Two Student Learning Support Officers (SLSOs) were enlisted as LGiS mentors. An inter-school learning support coordinator also attended alternate LGiS sessions.

I was asked to attend, but found it a fantastic program, that I fully support. ... I think it has great potential and I would love to see it as a standard in the schooling environment, just as PBL was integrated.

Parents were contacted by phone to discuss consent for their children to participate in the research and to invite their participation in the survey. Unfortunately, many parents were difficult to contact and minimal meaningful data was collected. As a result, it was not possible to gauge parental/care giver views on the program.

Indicators of social and emotional functioning of participants: Findings from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 2001) is a brief emotional and behavioural screening questionnaire for children and young people. The SDQ is one of the most widely and internationally used measures of child mental health and has been translated into more than 80 languages. The tool can capture the perspective of children and young people (CYP), their parents and teachers. The SDQ can be completed by children and young people aged 11-17 years old. Clinical experience indicates that the SDQ may be appropriate to use with CYP with mild learning difficulties, but not with more severe learning difficulties (Law & Wolpert, 2014). The 25 items in the SDQ comprise 5 scales of 5 items each. The scales include: Emotional symptoms subscale, Conduct problems subscale, Hyperactivity/inattention subscale, Peer relationships problem subscale, and a Prosocial behaviour subscale.

For the purposes of the evaluation the SDQ Self-Report was completed by each of the students for whom consent had been obtained to participate in the evaluation of the LGiS. Although School and Parent SDQs were also sought, there were insufficient numbers for pre – post comparisons. Therefore, only results from the students for whom SDQ scores were available are reported here.

Profile of Students Who Attended LGiS

Based on self-report scores of the SDQ and recommended cut off scores, student's scores can be classified according to their expected frequency in the general population. Figure 1 below shows results for students participating across all sites (n=17; 7 males; Year 8; 29% Identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander).

Using the Total Score – a combination of all the SDQ problem scales - results from the student's self-report shows that 47% of students rated themselves in the Very High level of total behavioural and emotional problems. 6% at the High level, 18% at the Slightly Raised and 29% rated themselves at the Average level.

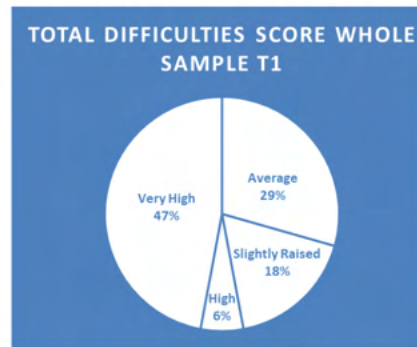


Figure 1: LGiS Student Classification based on SDQ Total Difficulties Scores. Note: Very High = top 5% of the general population, High = top 10% of the general population; Else (Slightly Raised & Average) is regarded as Average for the population.

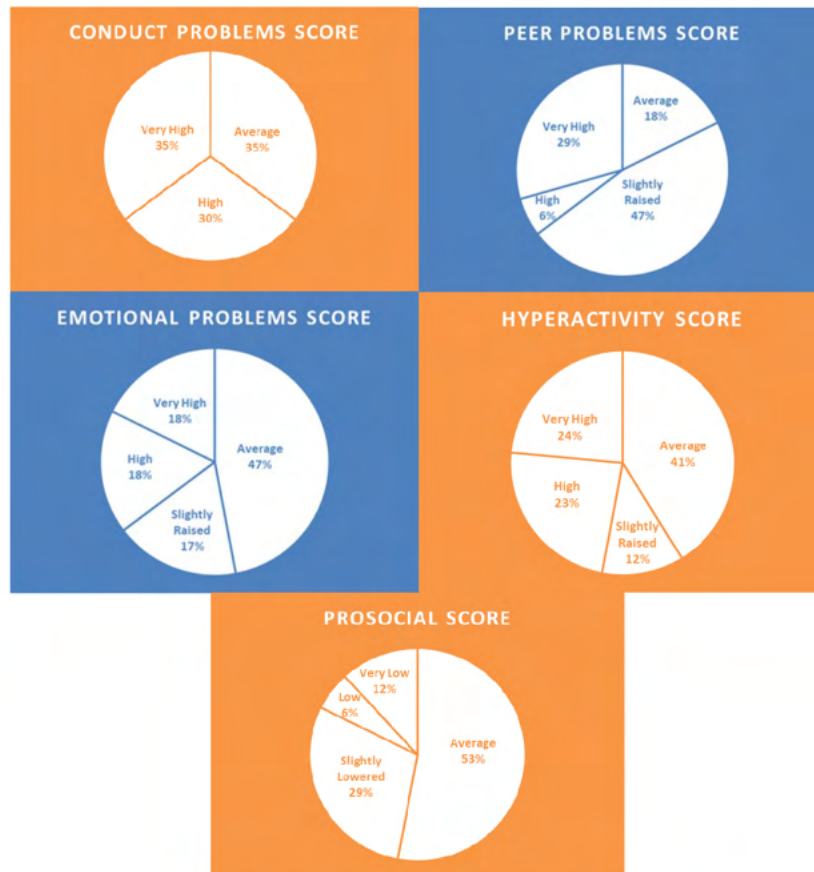


Figure 2: LGiS Student Classification based on SDQ Scores by Domain. Note: Very High = top 5% of the general population, High = top 10% of the general population; Else (Slightly Raised & Average) is regarded as Average for the population

In the general population only 10% of the total population would be expected to score in either the High or Very High level. The students self-report shows that 53% of the participants in the LGiS groups reported scores elevated enough to be classified as requiring clinical attention (Very High and High Levels). Results for each of the remaining scales are presented next (see also Figure 2).

The student self-reports indicate that many students selected for the LGiS were experiencing significant emotional and behavioural difficulties. Conduct difficulties (E.g., endorsing items such as: 'I get very angry', 'I fight a lot', 'I take things that are not mine') were present in 65% of the students who were selected to a degree that would be considered substantially outside the general population expectations (e.g., expected in less than 10% of the general population).

Presenting with a similar pattern of elevated difficulties were 47% of the participants who self-reported difficulties of a hyperactive type (e.g., 'I am restless', 'I am easily distracted'); 36% reporting emotional difficulties (E.g., 'I worry a lot', 'I am often unhappy', 'I have many fears'); 35% reporting peer problems (E.g., 'I am usually on my own', 'Other children or young people pick on me').

The SDQ also has a Prosocial scale (E.g., 'I try to be nice to other people', 'I usually share with others', 'I am helpful if someone is hurt'). Most students (53%) self-reported pro-social skills in the Average range with only 18% meeting criteria for impaired pro-social functioning.

In summary, the students chosen to participate were experiencing a variety of significant psychological and behavioural challenges. Chief of these were conduct problems and difficulties with self-regulation (hyperactivity/concentration). Many of the students also reported simultaneously experiencing peer and emotional difficulties which were elevated enough to warrant concern and intervention.

Findings to Date

Post Intervention Strength and Difficulties (SDQ) Analysis

As part of the evaluation process the Strength and Difficulties (SDQ) questionnaires were collected towards the end of the school year from those students who consented to complete the questionnaire again. A total of 6 students SDQs were available for the analysis (2 males). Due to the small number of available questionnaires no formal statistical inference statistics could be applied therefore a descriptive approach was used.

First, each of the problem scales of the SDQ scores were again converted into Average, Raised, High and Very High scores for each of the students. This would allow to examine whether participating in LGiS produced a clinically significant change in the students, rather than a statistical change. A clinically significant change is a change that has taken the person from a score typical of a problematic, dysfunctional, group to a score typical of the "average" population. This method regards a movement of students to a lower impact category as a positive outcome. So, for example, a student moving from the 'Very High' which places them at the top 5% of the population to the High, 10% of the population, can indicate that although they still have difficulties, these are not as marked. The method also allows an assessment of iatrogenic effects - inadvertent increase in the problem - which also offers valuable information.

In the second approach, individual student scores for each SDQ scale were examined to assess where the students were reporting change (or lack of it). This would allow to assess whether the student self-reported changes were across the SDQ domains or in selected areas.

It must be noted that neither of these methods is able to rule out whether the changes reported by the students occurred merely by chance. As such, they are useful for the purposes of exploring the outcomes obtained rather than making a definite conclusion as to the effectiveness of the intervention. The results of these analysis are presented in Figures 3 to 8.

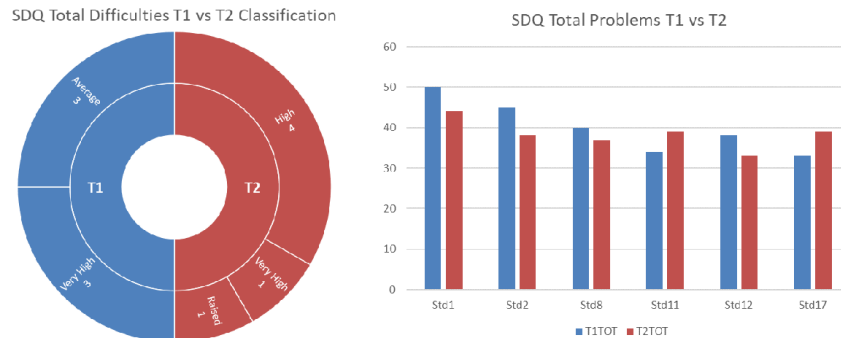


Figure 3: SDQ Differences T1 vs T2 Total Problem Score. Note: SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2. Std = Student. T1TOT = Time 1 Total. T2TOT = Time 2 Total. Very High = top 5% of the general population, High = top 10% of the general population; Else (Raised & Average) is regarded as Average for the population. Maximum score = 60. Differences in total scores between T1 and T2 were not able to be assessed for statistical significance.

The results for the SDQ Total Problems Scale (Figure 3) show that initially three of the six students were in the 'Very High' range of total problems in the SDQ. By the end of the year only one student remained in this category. However, only one student remained in the Average (Raised) category with four students moving to the High category. Examination of the individual student scores for the Total Problem Scale of the SDQ shows that 4 of the students experienced a lowering of their total difficulties, whilst two reported an increase in their total problems by the end of the year.

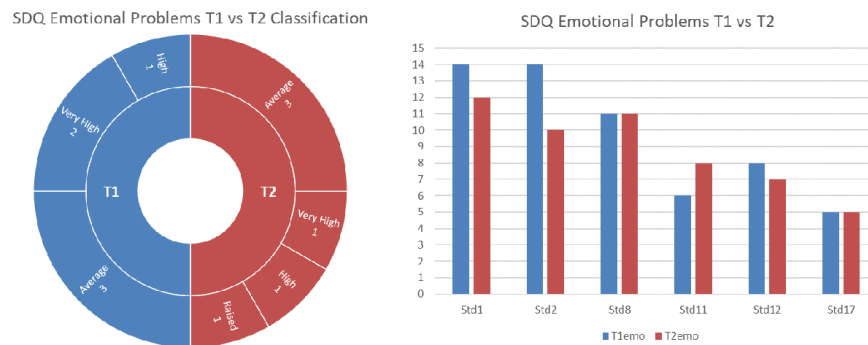


Figure 4: SDQ Differences T1 vs T2 Emotional Problem Score. Note: SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2. Std = Student. T1emo = Time 1 Emotional Problems Total. T2emo = Time 2 Emotional Problems Total. Very High = top 5% of the general population, High = top 10% of the general population; Else (Raised & Average) is regarded as Average for the population. Maximum score = 15. Differences in total scores between T1 and T2 were not able to be assessed for statistical significance.

In relation to Emotional difficulties (See Figure 4) two students were in the Very High and High range prior to the LGiS program. At the end of the year two were in these categories. From the individual student scores three students reported a reduction in emotional problems, two remained the same and one reported an increase in emotional problems by the end of the year.

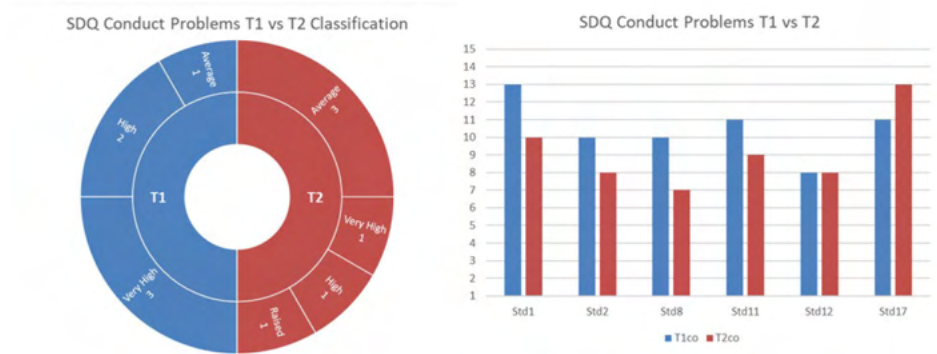


Figure 5: SDQ Differences T1 vs T2 Conduct Problem Score. Note: SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2. Std = Student. T1co = Time 1 Conduct Problems Total. T2co = Time 2 Conduct Problems Total. Very High = top 5% of the general population, High = top 10% of the general population; Else (Raised & Average) is regarded as Average for the population. Maximum score = 15. Differences in total scores between T1 and T2 were not able to be assessed for statistical significance.

Conduct problems (see Figure 5) were reported in the Very High and High range for five of the participating students. By the end of the year two students had high enough scores to be placed into this category. Four students reported less conduct difficulties, one stayed the same and one reported more negative conduct behaviours by the end of the year.

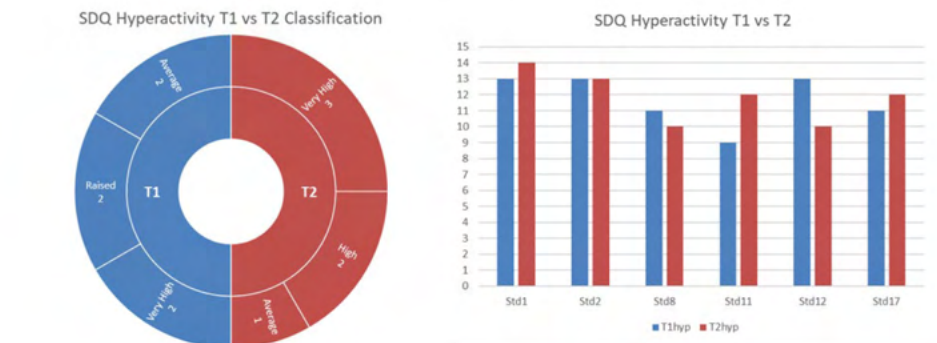


Figure 6: SDQ Differences T1 vs T2 Hyperactivity Problem Score. Note: SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2. Std = Student. T1hyp = Time 1 Hyperactive Problems Total. T2hyp = Time 2 Hyperactive Problems Total. Very High = top 5% of the general population, High = top 10% of the general population; Else (Raised & Average) is regarded as Average for the population. Maximum score = 15. Differences in total scores between T1 and T2 were not able to be assessed for statistical significance.

Difficulties with attention and self-control (see Figure 6) were reported in the Very High range by two students at the start of the LGiS program. By the end of the year five students reported sufficient difficulties to be placed in the Very High (3 students) and High (2 students) range. Individual student analysis showed no improvement for one student, improvements (that is less hyperactivity) for two, and an elevation of Hyperactivity for three of the students.

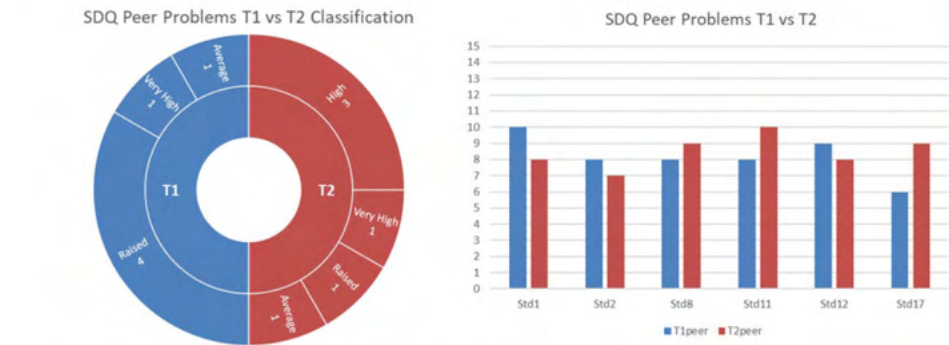


Figure 7: SDQ Differences T1 vs T2 Peer Problems Problem Score. Note: SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2. Std = Student. T1peer = Time 1 Peer Problems Total. T2peer = Time 2 Peer Problems Total. Very High = top 5% of the general population, High = top 10% of the general population; Else (Raised & Average) is regarded as Average for the population. Maximum score = 15. Differences in total scores between T1 and T2 were not able to be assessed for statistical significance.

Elevated peer problems (see Figure 7) were reported by two students at the start of the program. This increased to one student reporting Very High and 3 students reporting High levels of peer problems by the end of the year. Individual student scores showed that for three students there were less peer problems by the end of the year whilst for the remaining three, there was an elevation in peer problems.

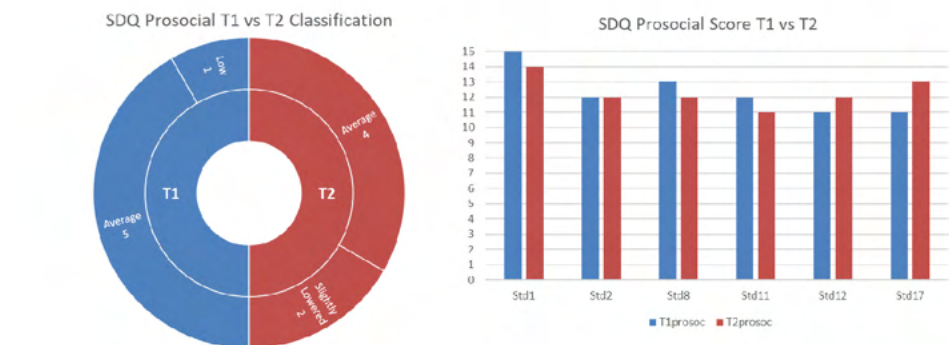


Figure 8: SDQ Differences T1 vs T2 Prosocial Skills Score. Note: SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2. Std = Student. T1prosoc = Time 1 Prosocial Total. T2prosoc = Time 2 Prosocial Total. High Prosocial Scores are desirable. Very Low = bottom 5% of the general population, Low = bottom 10% of the general population; Else (Slightly Lowered & Average) is regarded as Average for the population. Maximum score = 15. Differences in total scores between T1 and T2 were not able to be assessed for statistical significance.

Students' self-report scores on the prosocial skills scale (see Figure 8) at the start of the program indicated that only one of the students met criterion to be considered Low (bottom 10%) in these skills. By the end of the year there were no students meeting this criterion, with students having moved to the average range. Individual student scores indicate that one student reported no increase or decline, three reporting a decline and two reported an increase in self-reported social skills.

In summary, the analysis indicates that the students experienced various changes in relation to each of the domains measured by the SDQ. This change was not uniform across all domains nor was it unidirectional. There were areas of improvement, no improvement and deterioration in self-reported scores observed in this small sample of students. Four of the six participants reported reduction in their overall difficulties (the SDQ total score), however results for the individual domains were varied. Preliminary observations would indicate that the most consistent effect was in a reduction of conduct difficulties in which four students reported less such behaviours, one no change and one an increase. Importantly only one student remained in the Very High range. Similarly, there seemed to be an improvement in pro-social skills for most of the students. Other domains, as can be seen above were more varied. Interestingly, Hyperactivity results seemed to be quite mixed. It should be noted that there is nothing within the LGiS program that is reported as targeting Hyperactivity like behaviour for intervention, so this is an unexpected outcome. Due to the small sample size any further partitioning of the results or interpretation runs the risk of speculation. In future, with a larger sample size more detailed analysis may shed further light on which specific domains and for whom LGiS is best suited.

Student Reflections on LGiS

Analysis of follow-up interviews with participating students yielded several recurrent and telling themes. Several students identified that LGiS was fun.

It's really fun in Learning Ground I'm not going to lie.

It's fun. We get out of class. We're learning about different stuff and that. We mainly talk.

Fun. I've got some of my friends in [LGiS] that I can trust... We don't really have to as much test and all of that. It's not like annoying where all the kids yell and teachers have to yell over them and all that.

While one student identified that getting out of class was part of the fun, they elaborated that it was the kind of content and the quality of listening and learning together that made it fun. In addition, beyond simply being fun, several students identified that LGiS was helping them to learn.

I like Learning Ground. I think I find going to Learning Ground better than going to class because Learning Ground, they actually help me to learn. Class, it's usually just the teacher screaming at me or a different student for a tiny, small reason.

I feel like when I go to Learning Ground, I feel like I'm in a much happier environment... Probably my favourite thing is how they are - like everybody take their time to understand and process what's happening inside of the lesson.

Learning was supported by the quality of attention they received, which included slowing down to take the time to understand and support the students' learning process. A

number of students identified the positive wellbeing impacts of learning to de-stress, understand themselves and develop skills of self-regulation.

It gets me relaxed before I have to have another class and get stressed. It's not that stressing in the other classes, yep.

[LGiS] just kind of gives you a little bit of a break to learn about something different that you're not really learning in all your other classes... [I've learnt] how to respect yourself more and your culture and your intellectual self and just all different type of things.

I remember, pretty sure yeah, it was last term. In the middle somewhere last term, we did a lesson which were - which included these bears that would express your emotions and I actually really enjoyed that.

The relational focus of the LGiS approach was especially prominent for many of the student participants. They felt supported by the attention given to respecting and caring for others, and they valued the opportunity for experiential learning about what it was like to feel respected and to respect others.

It's good, I like it because you can talk and you know that nobody is going to go off and say oh, like he said this about himself or something like that.

Like no one will run off and say what you said and stuff like that.

It is different to me because some of the stuff we learn in Learning Ground I never actually knew. ... Basically like respecting people and ways to show respect to others.

When they're talking you always like look at them and listen to what they have to say and always be nice to them.

I used to never feel respected before Learning Ground and then ever since I started I just feel like more happy you know and more respected. Because like the teachers like always listen to me with what I have to say and like they're always nice. Now every time I go to Learning Ground I'm just always happy.

Several students described further significant impacts for their own self-development that enabled them to make profound changes in their most important relationships. The qualities of self-reflection and self-understanding revealed in these student comments are all the more noteworthy given the high levels of difficulty identified in the student cohort.

It just makes me a better person because I used to like not really be nice to people but then every time when I go to Learning Ground I start to respect people more who they are. Because that's basically what we learn is how to respect people for who they are and not what they look like - yeah.

Good... You can discuss different things with your friends and you can find out different things about your inner self or your culture or where you're from.

How all different things can change you if you decide to change yourself in that type of way.

Me and my sister are closer than we were...before Learning Ground we were like really distant so we don't, we didn't talk to each other, we didn't help each other with homework.

Although the student interviews revealed many benefits of the program, these were not universally evident. One student felt he did not belong in the cohort and resented the sense that he was required to participate.

I don't even like the program... We don't really do anything fun. ... It's a waste of time.

Another suggested that it was simply a way for her to avoid regular classes.

I go there just that way I don't have to go to my classes.

One student who presented with complex problems and a tendency to reject any help offered commented:

*I haven't learnt anything; I was just there. I honestly just go there for chocolates.
It's just made me cry more; it hasn't helped me.*

Observations of LG Mentors on Student Responses to LGiS

The emphasis on enabling the students' sense of connectedness and valuing of self and others was evident in the reflections provided by LGiS mentors.

I feel that each kid - each student got quite a lot from the program, whether it was an understanding of themselves or just the others in the room.

Definitely. We've had kids who have only been able to be in there for five minutes who are staying whole lessons.

They observed tangible outcomes for emotional and behavioural self-regulation.

There is the young girl who - she didn't say anything but she was escalating and then she then said, I greet you with great respect and great affection, and then she calmed down [laughs]. Which was - it was good to see that - her remembering, that this - what the place was for in that moment so she could...

They're more - with some of the young girls who have had some issues outside the LGiS room they're making up in that program and saying okay, well here we learn about how to let other people speak about their feelings, not just hear all about mine.

Observations of Teacher/Facilitators on Student Responses to LGiS

Only one of the teacher facilitators completed the teaching program. She commented on the level of understanding she was able to achieve with students through facilitating LGiS.

For myself I think I have gotten to know the students better, because in school in general, like just being a class teacher you don't get to find out what's going on with the students in their home life or in the community out there, because us teachers are not told everything about each and every student. So this program sort of makes me more aware of what the kids are going through.

The other teacher/facilitator observed that the LGiS ethos and approach to facilitation created dissonance for students with regard to behavioural expectations, leading to ongoing misbehaviour and a drop-off in attendance. They felt this was exacerbated by a growing sense of stigmatisation around being selected for LGiS by the students.

Challenges encountered

Numerous significant challenges were encountered in the initial LGiS pilot. These included the overarching backdrop of COVID-19 as well as issues related to differing organisational priorities and capacities, buy-in and skill of school staff, student recruitment, engagement and attendance, and contextual fit of LGiS for the in-school setting.

COVID-19 delayed the training and implementation schedule not only for LGiS but also for the new learning support program designed by the schools. This meant that the schools were simultaneously implementing two new unfamiliar but overlapping initiatives, while seeking to make up for time lost due to COVID-19 and accommodating associated health restrictions. These restrictions also impacted on the conduct of the research. The ability to collect consent forms from parents and students was significantly affected. COVID restrictions also curtailed important opportunities for face-to-face research engagement both at the recruitment stage and during data collection.

Although significant time and attention was invested by LG in preparing and conducting the staff training, limited investigation of the school systems into which it was to be introduced left gaps in understanding how the philosophy and practices of LGiS might be most effectively disseminated to achieve broad buy-in and support. These gaps emerged, for example, as differences in the aims and expectations of staff regarding the school-based learning support program in which LGiS was embedded, compared with the aims and practices of LGiS. One of the school-based mentors mentioned that

I think it's potentially beneficial to come out [referring to the LG mentors] and actually see the kids in a couple of classes first and meet them, rather than coming in on day one, saying, this is what we're doing.

Went further to also suggest that:

I know I really wanted to go over and see how Learning Ground ran, so just so I could get my head around that a little bit more and see their values and expectations

A further significant challenge related to the suitability of some staff selected as program mentors, particularly in one school where, despite having participated in the 3-day training, it became apparent that they were invested in a system of behaviour management that relied on consequences rather than emotion coaching. Instances were observed in which school-based mentors in one school who lacked buy-in and skill for LGiS actively sought to undermine its approach.

Inconsistent attendance and participation were significant barriers to student progress. While one of the facilitators put this down to the students' vulnerability to various day-to-day

experiences, there were also factors related to student recruitment that clearly influenced the attitudes of students who felt stigmatised about being placed in a program which they felt was intended for students with behavioural problems and/or learning difficulties. The social impacts associated with this perception were keenly felt by several students and could not be avoided in the school context where social status was affected by being included in what was seen by the student body as a remedial program. This clearly affected the ongoing engagement of some students in LGiS.

One school reported an increase in truancy on LGiS days. While supporting the overall aims of LGiS a staff member at this school reported that, by comparison with the structured expectations of the general school program, LGiS's greater tolerance for misbehaviour led to unsettled behaviour by students attending LGiS spilling over into other classes on the days they attended the program.

At the end of 2020 one school decided not to continue with LGiS, citing incompatibilities between the in-school model of LGiS and the school's approach and objectives. This school strongly supported the value of the LG program in which students participated offsite for one day per week, but identified issues including those cited above as reasons why LGiS was not compatible with their preferred approach to supporting student learning, behaviour, and social-emotional development. They felt their emphasis on supporting students' academic achievement was better served by a more structured approach that integrated social-emotional learning into the curriculum and could fit with the school's overall approach to behaviour management. They also cited the need for intensive staffing in LGiS as a financial cost that the school could not continue to support.

Discussion

These initial findings from the LGiS 2020 pilot suggest some benefits of the program but also identify several areas where implementation could be improved.

There were positive initial responses to the professional learning workshops by school staff who strongly endorsed the content and orientation of the overall LG program. With the notable exception of a key staff member who had regularly participated in the ongoing LG program, over time the positive view held by school staff who undertook LGiS training in 2020 was eroded as problems with the implementation process, rather than the program itself, emerged. There is some evidence that, despite a range of difficulties with the in-school delivery of the program, there were benefits for some of the student participants. However, the data is insufficient to draw definitive conclusions, particularly as some students appear not to have benefitted.

The implementation challenges encountered to date by LGiS are clearly outlined in the scientific literature on school-based interventions, with a useful summary appearing recently in a UNESCO publication (Dobia et al, 2020, p. 170).

Fidelity (Adherence)	To what extent has the intended delivery model been adhered to?
Dosage (Exposure)	How often and for how long is the programme being delivered?
Quality	How well are the programme components delivered?
Responsiveness	How fully do participants actively engage with the programme or initiative?
Programme differentiation	Does the programme provide clearly distinguished aims and methods?
Monitoring	Is there an effective system for monitoring quality and progress?
Reach	How well does the programme reach its target participant group/s?
Adaptation	What adaptations, if any, are required to fit the context?

Table 2. Factors influencing successful school based social and emotional learning interventions.

It is evident that each of these implementation factors need to be carefully considered and applied if LGiS is to succeed in its attempt to transfer the effectiveness of its offsite LG program into schools.

Questions remain as to whether the whole day offsite LG program can be successful and produce outcomes when transferred into schools in a brief form. Further investigation should consider whether the objectives and expected outcomes of the program are clear and realistic for the school context. The evidence so far highlights differences of orientation, with LG emphasising personalised content and process, whereas school staff are more strongly oriented to curriculum, structure, and outcomes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To effectively address the issues identified in this interim evaluation report it is important for both LG and the schools to be familiar with each other's wellbeing philosophy as well as practice. It is of particular benefit that commonalities and differences in both of these areas are identified early and an assessment made whether LG and the school's practice and philosophy are in alignment. Any misunderstandings must be addressed early and common avenues to resolve unforeseen discrepancies which arise as the program is delivered are created.

The following suggestions are informed by the implementation research literature and based on our observations and data collection so far.

- **School-based LGiS facilitators/Mentors** require developed SEL skills and well-informed understanding of and sympathy with the aims of the program. In order to gauge suitability and develop buy-in, the process for recruitment and selection should entail discussion of the aims of the program, reasons for volunteering for the role and realistic appraisal of the time and effort expected of them. Consideration should also be given to what the staff are seeking for their own development through taking on the program. The time and effort requirements also need to be made clear to the school executive and any direct supervisors.
- **School and LGiS ethos and practice** in relation to the approach both take to managing students with challenging behaviours needs to be articulated in a clear manner prior to engagement. The information presented above clearly shows that the material and content of LGiS was very well accepted by school staff as measured by post-training feedback. As the program was rolled out in the school, however, the data collected indicates that tasks, delivery style, the way students responded to the different LGiS structure/activities were a concern for schools, for whom the LGiS practices were unfamiliar. Practice is different from content and although the school mentors may have been familiar with the content, they reacted differently to the practice. So that for example, the less structured LGiS lessons were seen by school staff as opportunity for the more challenging students to be disruptive rather than expressive. The free-flowing nature of LGiS activities were perceived as inconsistent with school practices of tight curriculum with mandated content, rather than as a deliberate attempt to work at the student's pace/level/need. An attempt early in the training needs to be made to incorporate how the LGiS content translates into practice in the LGiS lessons in the school. As suggested by one of the school mentors, this may be achieved by both parties visiting each other as part of the initial engagement and prior to school based activities starting.
- **The process for selection of students** needs to be worked through with the schools based on systems they have in place for identifying students in need of additional support. Giving them a list of attributes, that LG staff might be looking for is not

considered sufficient. This assumes that the schools are positioned to make effective assessments on this basis. In our experience they are not. The importance of working with their systems as a means of identifying appropriate students will help to put the emphasis and onus back on the schools to think clearly through the ways they assess student behaviour. It will serve to cultivate ownership by the school system (and not just individual staff) and help to embed the program as an integral part of their strategy for dealing with behavioural issues.

- **Creating student buy-in** is also very important. There is a substantial risk that simply being nominated by the schools will create a sense of stigma. LG needs a process to ‘sell’ the program based on what it is offering the students in a way that is appealing and not stigmatising. Currently with the on-site LG program there is an intake interview that includes a discussion and informal contract setting where the participant (and parent?) has the chance to consider what is on offer and whether they want to participate. It may not be necessary to undertake this individually, but an introduction to the program and opportunity to discuss it would be beneficial and would lead to a process of informed consent to participate that is negotiated with LG, thereby clearly establishing that participation is for them and not because they have been deemed a problem.
- **Clear and effective consideration needs to be given for referral of students** in LGiS to onsite LG at Bidwill and/or to other services, including establishing and articulating criteria that would trigger referral. This should be seen as being for the benefit of all parties – students, schools and LG itself. It will help to sharpen the focus of the program and make it clear that it is not a panacea for all difficulties, while also ensuring that the schools are developing processes for meeting the wellbeing needs of students with complex issues.
- While acknowledging the difficulties often associated with **engaging parents** it is nonetheless recommended that a coordinated effort to inform and involve parents be put in place as an immediate action following full briefing of the principals. Again, it would be beneficial for the LG team to have the opportunity to meet with parents so that they get a sense of what the program is and to model to the schools the importance of treating parents with respect. To the extent that this can be achieved it will undoubtedly have payoffs for student attendance and for the school’s wellbeing team to follow up on any home-based issues that need additional support. From the research ethics point of view, it is a strongly preferable to seek to engage the parents and go through a process of informed consent prior to the commencement of the program.

End of Report. March 2021.

References

- Anyon, Y., Jenson, J. M., Altschul, I., Farrar, J., McQueen, J., Greer, E., ... & Simmons, J. (2014). The persistent effect of race and the promise of alternatives to suspension in school discipline outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 44, 379-386.
- Dobia, B. (2014). Facilitators and challenges associated with PBS implementation in Greater Western Sydney schools. Presented at *Australian Association of Special Education National Conference*, September 2014
- Dobia, B., Arthur, L., Jennings, P., Khlentzos, D., Parada, R. H., Roffey, S. & Sheinman, N. (2020) Implementation of SEL. In UNESCO MGIEP (Ed.) *Rethinking Learning: Mainstreaming Social and Emotional Learning in Education Systems*. New Delhi: UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development. ISBN 978-81-89218-73-7 <https://mgiep.unesco.org/rethinking-learning>
- Goodman, R. (2001). Psychometric properties of the strengths and difficulties questionnaire. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40 (11), 1337-1345.
- Hemphill, S.A., Toumbourou, J.W., Smith, R., Kendall, G., Rowland, B., Freiberg, K. & Williams, J. (2010). Are rates of school suspension higher in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods? An Australian study, *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 21(1), 12-18.
- Law, D., & Wolpert, M. (2014). Guide to using outcomes and feedback tools with children, young people and families. UK: Press CAMHS.
- Noltemeyer, A. L., Ward, R. M., & McLoughlin, C. (2015). Relationship between school suspension and student outcomes: A meta-analysis. *School Psychology Review*, 44(2), 224-240.
- NSW DEC (2019). Suspensions and Expulsions 2018. Sydney NSW: Author. Retrieved from <https://data.cese.nsw.gov.au/data/dataset/suspensions-and-expulsions-in-nsw-government-schools/resource/5dcdd60-9c6b-4e80-a4c8-d1d485c1f736> 18/01/2020.
- Parada, R.H., Dobia, B., & Kalos, K. (2016). Each One Teach One: An evaluation of Learning Ground Mt Druitt. Final Report. Penrith: NSW. Chain Reaction Foundation/Western Sydney University.
- Raffaele Mendez, L. M. (2003). Predictors of suspension and negative school outcomes: A longitudinal investigation. *New Directions for Youth Development*, (99), 17-33.
- Sullivan, A. L., Klingbeil, D. A., & Van Norman, E. R. (2013). Beyond behavior: Multilevel analysis of the influence of sociodemographics and school characteristics on students' risk of suspension. *School Psychology Review*, 42(1), 99-114.
- Vincent, C. G., Sprague, J. R., & Tobin, T. J. (2012). Exclusionary discipline practices across students' racial/ethnic backgrounds and disability status: Findings from the Pacific Northwest. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 35(4), 585-601.

Learning Ground in Schools (LGiS): Interim Progress Report for the 2021 Term 2 Implementation

Dr Roberto H Parada
Dr Brenda Dobia
Kate Eastman
Julie Regalado
Megan Atkins

Western Sydney University
School of Education
November 2021

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



Acknowledgements

The research outlined in this report was funded by the Chain Reaction Foundation through a grant from the Neilson Family Foundation. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Neilson Family Foundation, Margaret Bell AM, Melissa Hood, Rumbi Mabambe, Pamela Gilbert, mentors, group facilitators, volunteers and participants of Mt Druitt Learning Ground and Learning Ground in Schools.

We also wish to thank participating schools, their executives, teachers, students and parents/caregivers without whose cooperation this research would not have been possible.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Context	1
Interim Report Aims and Scope	1
Research Approach	2
Thematic Analysis.....	2
Student recruitment for LGiS	2
Growing student engagement.....	3
Safety and openness	4
Growing respect and care	5
Improved behaviour	5
Relationship building	6
Addressing old problems in different ways	6
Improved teaching practices	7
Challenges.....	8
Post COVID schools and wellbeing	8
Interim conclusions	9
References	10

Context

Despite the recognised importance of social and emotional skills education in school settings (Dobia, et al., 2020), there is a dearth of Australian developed school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs (Frydenberg, et al., 2017). A research evaluation conducted by Western Sydney University in 2016 concluded that the Learning Ground (LG) program is an example of a successful SEL intervention that can work effectively with the most difficult young people to address the risks they face, repair relationships and re-engage them with their education (Parada, et al., 2016). In 2019-20 LG obtained funding to work with a small number of schools in the Mt Druitt area to trial a professional learning and in-school intervention program - Learning Ground in School (LGiS) - with the aim of supporting schools to work more effectively and proactively with at risk young people.

Whereas the established Learning Ground program runs one day per week out of school, the LGiS program was designed to be delivered via two weekly sessions of 60-80 minutes each, with implementation carried out in ten-week blocks over two terms for a total of 20 weeks. The pilot was developed by LG with the expectation that school staff would be trained as primary facilitators and would be supported by an experienced Learning Ground mentor. A training package was developed by LG to introduce staff to the program, and session lesson plans were prepared based on the Learning Ground curriculum. The role of the LG mentors was to model the approach to working with students and provide coaching support as needed to the school-based facilitators and mentors.

In 2020, despite significant setbacks caused by the COVID 19, LGiS was piloted with a number of students in schools in the local Mt Druitt area. An evaluation of the implementation process and uptake by schools is being undertaken by Western Sydney University researchers. Following the 2020 pilot, five high schools in the local Mt Druitt area who were familiar with the existing Learning Ground program were approached by LG and agreed to join the trial of LGiS in 2021. Subsequently one school had to postpone participation. Hence, this interim report is based on four participating schools.

Early in 2021, four schools received training and support for the full implementation of the LGiS program within their schools. The schools also agreed to participate in the evaluation of the program. During Term 2 of 2021, all of the schools began to run the program with students selected by the school based on protocols developed by LGiS. Unfortunately, by the end of Term 2, the New South Wales government initiated strict stay at home and lock down procedures as a response to a new strain of COVID 19. This eventually led to the closure of schools for all but a few students. The outcome for LGiS was that groups were unable to continue and were not implemented for the full 20 weeks.

Interim Report Aims and Scope

This report presents qualitative data from school-based LGiS facilitators and members of the school executive of all four participating schools. These data were gathered via a series of focus group consultations conducted in August and September 2021. The consultations aimed to gather perceptions of LGiS implementation prior to the commencement of lockdown, to learn about strategies the schools were implementing to maintain student engagement over the lockdown period, and to hear about their plans and expectations going forward.

The purpose of this report is to provide preliminary findings from the staff perspective about their experiences of implementing LGiS prior to school lockdowns and their efforts to maintain connections with the students involved during the period of home schooling. It presents the perspectives of school principals, executive and school-teacher mentors in relation to: a) their opinion of LGiS suitability for school implementation; b) what challenges may be encountered, and c) what benefits may be gained.

Research Approach

In-depth, individual and group consultations were held online via Zoom with the school's principal, executive and school-teacher mentors from all of the participating schools. Each interview was recorded and transcribed into text. A qualitative, thematic analysis was then carried out using all of the available transcripts. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data, in this instance text derived from the interviews. Initially, specialist software (NVivo) was used to extract key themes. These key themes were further analysed by the primary researchers from Western Sydney University. Once it was agreed that the themes accurately reflected the data, a third researcher - who had not participated in the original classification of the data - cross validated the qualitative data and themes. This approach enabled a high level of validity in relation to the key results being presented

Thematic Analysis

The findings from the thematic analysis are presented in this section. Each theme is introduced with a brief description, followed by directly quoted examples in the voices of the participants. The material has been preserved in this format to allow readers to get a feel for how the school staff themselves responded to the program. In order to maintain confidentiality, all identifiers have been removed from the presented data. Themes that have emerged at this stage will ultimately be compared with the wider data set, including student reflections and quantitative findings once the evaluation data collection is complete.

Student recruitment for LGiS

Summary

During the 2020 pilot, student engagement was found to be impacted by a sense of stigmatisation, with students invited to attend LGiS feeling they had been targeted for poor behaviour. To address this issue in 2021 student recruitment followed a strategy referred to as 777. This encouraged the recruitment of a more diverse cohort with selection based on 7 students at very high risk, 7 at medium and 7 at low to very low risk, to be recruited for the groups. The move to the 777 model of selecting students was found to be successful this year, with students across all levels of difficulty being positively impacted.

Sample quotes:

As you know, last year we targeted the real intensive kids, and that included our kids as well. So, probably – obviously less successful, but this year, we've really hit the 777.

... compared to last year, it's been a lot more successful and there are a couple of factors as to why Learning Ground in schools has been a lot more successful this year. We really took on board that – the [777] combo, student combination. ... that was a really good piece of advice to work with.

During the first half of 2021 groups were progressing well and with perceived success. There was excitement by the students, students were understanding the expectations, were beginning to actively participate and communicate, connect with each other, and were motivated, felt safe and comfortable to attend. The move to the 777 model of student selection has assisted in the success of groups, with additional opportunities for leadership development amongst the students.

I think at the beginning the greatest benefit was, for the lack of better terms, the level one and the level two kids seeing the level three kids in the same program. They were the ones that received the first benefit because they were like oh, it's not just a program for kids like me...then over time those level three kids like I mentioned before have been able to

build that confidence, that leadership skill and just even form different relationships with kids that they wouldn't normally build relationships with.

Growing student engagement

Summary

Challenges for student engagement were associated with inconsistent attendance at school, timetabling clashes, and initial student reluctance to attend the program. However, in most instances, once students had experienced the program they chose to attend, readily engaged and began to be open in the process. This has had positive implications for the educators themselves.

Sample quotes:

Once it all started to flow, I guess it worked well. However, there were a couple of students over time that just became very reluctant to attend the sessions and some of them even just left it and just dropped out of the whole program.

...one of them was because she wanted to go to maths, so she didn't want to miss out on maths as a result of that.

It overlapped with sport as well for some of them so they were like no, we don't want to miss out on sports for that.

...[there] was probably, two girls that were really hard to manage...on the flip side these girls would bring other girls in for the period. They wouldn't go to Learning Ground in schools unless they had another child – another friend with them, so that was another opportunity to actually invite some other kids in that we didn't really initially have on the list to actually do Learning Ground in School.

When they are in class they ... do attend, they actually really love the whole program and the activities.

We've really seen the kids engage quite well. Obviously, in the first weeks we had the same issue with getting them on a timetable, making them remember when to come. We have had about ...maybe 10 to 20 each session and a lot of them have really opened up - a lot of the kids that you wouldn't normally get in attendance in the classroom or they're late arrivals.

One of the students gave up on going to Zone [athletics carnival] because he wanted to attend the program that day - and he's an athlete, he loves sport. He was like, no I'm not going to go to Zone, I'm just going to stay here for the program, so that was amazing.

I've really enjoyed the program so far and I think some of our students have too. I think we've struggled with momentum of having inconsistent students each week. I don't know if there's been many students who've come three weeks in a row, for example we'll have some of the group this week and then others of the group the next week.

I think the kids are engaged in it. I guess some of our kids, like most things, are a little bit weary because they've been let down right through their entire lives by most adults in their world.

We found at [our school] that some of our more reluctant kids at the beginning are some of our most engaged students now in the program. Also as an [teacher role], they are asking me to go into their classes with them to support them, because we have built such a good strong rapport with one another.

I know a lot of students have really, really engaged with it and they look forward to the program...There are a lot of students who are really engaged in it. The way they just come into the classroom all happy and excited to just be a part of it, it's just amazing to see.

In some instances, the strength of student engagement saw them taking on peer leadership roles within the LGiS context that had not been witnessed previously at school.

Sample quotes:

[This student] is one of them [information that the student was one which had difficulties at school], yeah, he comes in, he goes around and gets kids to remind them and he leads discussions.

Those kids I'm talking about have the potential to be leaders but probably haven't had the confidence or the space to be leaders previously last year and Year 9, he could have gone either way. He could have gone down the leadership role or gone down the complete painful toe-rag horrible child role. So for the fact that he's given up a sporting carnival and actually, it probably says – it says a lot about him and the program...

Safety and openness

Summary

Establishing an atmosphere of safety and trust is essential for supporting students to engage in deep reflection on their emotions, behaviours and identities. In the following quotes we see the teachers appreciating the role of honest and open communication. This is enhanced through carefully building rapport with students through the use of first names, refraining from judgement, and communicating positive regard. The Learning Ground program intentionally cultivates these qualities by greeting everyone 'with great respect and great affection.' Students responded to the establishment of a safe and respectful atmosphere by honestly and respectfully engaging in the dialogue and sharing their opinions. This has included students who were previously seen to be reluctant participants. Staff report seeing the students anew because of creating a space where authentic dialogue could occur.

Sample quotes:

I think one of the things they do like too is, all of our guys, we open [up] very much to them as well. I think they are seeing us as real people, not just as teachers or mentors or whatever. I think they're seeing the human side of us and I think that's helping some of them.

It was really important to create that environment for the kids where they felt that they were supported and they were able to talk and voice their opinion.

...some of the conversations they felt that the kids were able to engage in because they were not at home, like there was no judgment.

What I did find really pleasing was a couple of the kids who I would have least expected to get involved have gotten involved and have really, really opened up whereas I don't think they would have normally.

I think at first the kids were a bit reluctant and a bit worried in terms of what it was going to look like and be like, but as the weeks progressed we had a lot more of them opening up and sharing. ...which was really nice.

We found that once they came back from suspension they were completely disengaged or just didn't return to the program, but that's only been about three to five of the students. The others have been engaged throughout the whole thing, and I think one part that gets them engaged is actually the names. So being able - allowing them to call me [my first name], I think that was a really exciting thing to start with because it allowed us to get onto the same level.

The way it was set up and the environment in which it was set up and the way it was conducted, it actually opened that avenue for dialogue to happen and then for the check ins.

I saw the kids in a different light - like some kids that generally will have issues, being a bit silly in class when we do the LGiS sessions, I've noticed them being very respectful, trying really hard.

... it's good to give them a space to really voice whatever is happening with them and how they feel about certain things. It's like we have created such a safe space for them to be able to do that. Yeah, that's been a massive positive thing with the program for these kids.

Growing respect and care

Summary

Students were reported to be growing respect for each other and the teachers/mentors, in the sessions, in conversations, with their behaviour and even with the way they communicate online. The participants described the development of empathy and compassion for one another and their opinions, with students trying hard in the process. Students appeared to be developing confidence and leadership capabilities.

Sample quotes:

...like some kids that generally will have issues, being a bit silly in class when we do the LGiS sessions, I've noticed them being very respectful, trying really hard.

I can see a lot of student, they really [got] good impact and the behaviour is changing, they're showing more respect.

...just the respect that they're showing towards us on a different level now. I've also noticed with the online learning recently as well, watching the Google Classroom emails come through from Years 7 to 10 and the Year 8s, just how polite they are to one another. I truly believe that's all come down from Learning Ground, just showing that respect to one another and just saying, hey how are you going today and just being really respectful to one another.

I'm finding that with Year 8 we're just noticing more - I'm noticing more empathy with each other. There's a lot more constructive talk between them in regards to how each of them are feeling as opposed to it just being a sort of black and white, well this is how I feel and that's all that matters. I'm finding that you can see there's a lot more compassion between them.

Improved behaviour

Summary

The participants reported that, prior to the commencement of lockdown, there was some evidence of improved student behaviours. Amongst some students who had previously engaged in frequent challenging behaviours the improvement was particularly noticeable. Students were observed choosing to avoid conflict and learning to talk through situations instead of just reacting. Also evident in these quotes is the growth of a sense of responsibility and leadership on the part of some students.

Sample quotes:

When I think about some of the kids at that crucial seven, some of their behaviours were starting to improve. You could see that because they weren't getting sent up to the front office as much and sometimes when they were they were able to self-regulate a lot better. So rather than sitting outside ...[office] and saying this person is [explicit] and this

person is this and this person is that, what happened is they could actually start talking through what went wrong and what was their part and what had they done to escalate a situation.

So at the pointy end we were seeing better behaviour from some of those kids which was really good to see and we haven't seen that, [focus on] the kids in Year 9, we hadn't seen that in the whole of the Year 7 and 8. All of a sudden in Year 9 we were seeing it. Now, typically Year 9 is the hardest year in a high school, in every high school, so we're seeing some of our real icon frequent flyers starting to show self-regulation and combining that with seeing our leaders, the seven leaders in people like [student] who just - you can see him throughout school just, I don't know if blossom is the right word or bloom, but he just became this totally different character.

...they said the kids were comfortable, like when they were there, they were comfortable. Like there was no - there wasn't conflict. There wasn't - they were involved and they were moving along with the program.

Relationship building

Summary

The teachers remarked on the changes the LGiS program had made to their relationships with the students and the powerful impact of building positive relationships in which students are related to as individuals rather than being known for problem behaviours. The students are benefiting from these changed relationships and learning to reciprocate the respect being modelled through LGiS.

Sample quotes:

I guess the positive that came out of it from my work with the program would just be the relationships with the kids.

...through building those relationships with those kids you're able to then say hello to them and ask how their day was without them thinking, oh miss is only talking to me because I'm getting in trouble. One of the boys in particular I ended up calling his mum because I didn't know what he was like in any other classes but he had been doing really well in the program and then the mum was almost in tears because she's like no-one ever calls and says anything positive about my kids. She's like I got a negative call about maths and this and this, so I'm glad that he's at least being respectful in this program. So yeah, from then any time I would see that boy, normally he wouldn't make eye contact with anyone or he'd just do his own thing, but then he then started saying, good morning Miss.

Addressing old problems in different ways

Summary

Participants appreciated that in their view LGiS was addressing a very difficult and complicated problem that schools face by re-engaging students who are otherwise frequently in trouble. They ascribe the improved engagement of students to the program's content and activities, seeing the interactive nature of the tasks as helping to cater for socially and educationally disadvantaged students. The quality of interactions, providing a different student-mentor relationship to that of a regular classroom, was seen as beneficial for engaging students in a safe environment where they were able to open up and have conversations they would normally not have the opportunity to have.

Sample quotes:

I think this program is doing one wonderful thing to try to solve one very complicated problem in our schools.

A lot of kids we're getting in this program is the kids who are very lower side of education and who got suspended and they're really in big trouble. So if we're looking at the way [still] this program managed to work with them is really great.

I think that it's the activities in themselves. A lot of these kids are from low socio-economic status, they don't have great literacy and numeracy skills, so with the activities that we use they're very hands-on, and if there's writing, there's not a lot of writing...

I think it's the way it's facilitated, it's not very classroom - it's not your typical classroom set-out and the way things are structured and done. There's a lot of interaction with the mentors with the students and I think that's why at the start they're all a bit iffy, because they just think it's another crappy school program. But after a few weeks they come to realise that it's a lot of fun and they're actually learning things about themselves, which is why they get engaged throughout the later weeks.

...conversations that they would not normally have if they were surrounded by family and things like that that made - they would not feel safe to share that information. But felt that that was actually really good because the way it was set up and the environment in which it was set up and the way it was conducted, it actually opened that avenue for dialogue to happen and then for the check ins.

Improved teaching practices

Summary

Teachers and mentors have changed the way they approach communication with students based on the LGiS training. They are more likely to use skills, such as descriptive praise, not just in LGiS, but also in their other classes and with other students. Focusing on the positives in the students has changed the way one-to-one conversations are structured. Strategies to build relationships, such as the use of first names, has improved student-mentor connection and improved the quality of conversation.

Sample quotes:

It's been great. I've loved collaborating with [the staff and] the mentors and getting their feedback and implementing their feedback to create even better lessons and to, yeah, just make them a bit more innovative and use what's already there to create more engaging lessons for the kids.

Especially doing the training, the skills that were taught to us, like descriptive praise. I love that so much and I've started to use that with all of my classes. Even with my siblings at home and my friends. I feel like that's worked really well.

My biggest thing - my biggest take-away is descriptive praise. I've been using that in every single class with every single student and I've seen a lot of positive outcomes as a result of that. Students respond just a lot more positively to the feedback and to their work and they feel a lot more encouraged to want to continue to do well as a result of descriptive praise. So that's something that I've implemented a lot more.

...it has really improved a lot of my communication skills, but as well as my feedback to kids as well. I've started to not, I guess, grasp onto the negative straight away, but really identify the positive first and then give feedback on the positive and work from that rather than just immediately noticing that negative first.

It's actually the [way] it comes to know your student better, that part, it really helps us and I think as a teacher.

... in my class when I see some kids really having some trouble and then I have one-on-one talk with them, that's the time when I use some techniques I've learned with this program, so it's really helpful because then I know how to talk with kids.

Challenges

Summary

While the program was clearly held in high regard by the staff participants, there have been a number of practical challenges associated with its delivery. It has been a challenge to find the balance with timetabling for both students and staff. This has not been ideal for students losing class/work time. Further, it has been problematic for staff and the other students they teach, disrupting the continuity of teachers with their other classes across the week. There was concern expressed at the high cost of funding staff for the program, finding the right staff, and staff having the time capabilities for the ongoing continuation of the program. Additionally, the transient nature of students and their inconsistent attendance is problematic for group progress. The staff acknowledge that change will take time, as well as to build trust with the community. However, there are systematic barriers to this process.

Sample quotes

...the biggest challenge from my perspective with the program is the timetabling aspect.

... another challenge obviously has been, some of those kids who have struggled just not being in their timetable class.

...with our class, we've got four teachers in there at a time and one week we miss a lesson of science and one week we miss a lesson of English. Now because I teach both of those subjects I lose that lesson a week for my kids - which I understand is all about timetabling.

The other problem that we've got with this particular way that we were doing it, which was basically the best way we could do to actually give Learning Ground a go, was that to have this, we're taking out of one English and one science class, which means that we've got to then find ways to get the content and the work that they need to do in their other classes.

Then you had kids who just were away so that - they were probably the two biggest issues.

...there are lots of different reasons why we have that transient movement in the group. If we keep the same group next year I think [we'll] definitely see some progress happening because they've already gone through nine weeks of it, and then that will be a continuation for them to see the benefit of it I think.

At the moment too, for this one period we are using four teachers and two SLSOs and [staff] from Learning Ground. Economically that can't continue...

...it all comes down to time and finances that allow you to have that follow-up but you're not always in a situation where that can be there.

But the thing that I think is critical, and I think I've spoken about this before, is that it takes five to seven years to change the culture of the school. I'm not the research expert that's here to tell what's right and wrong. But what I do know is it takes time to make change. Because trying to make change equals you need to have trust within the community, you have had to build relationships within the community.

Post COVID schools and wellbeing

Summary

Those participants in executive positions indicated that the priority in the return to school is wellbeing for both students and staff. Time is required to support and equip staff, to be able to best support students as they process the past months. The communities that the students are a part of are disadvantaged in many ways, learning from home has increased this disadvantage. There will be challenges with student behaviour and appropriate expression of emotions. There are fears for students' ability to self-regulate on their return as the family environments they

have been in are so dysregulated. The return to school in 2020 was evidence of this as the incidences of fighting, anger, frustration and bullying increased. They are therefore anticipating that student behaviours and relationship skills will have diminished following the lack of positive social interaction and family dynamics whilst learning from home. Participants felt that staff are going to need to be equipped for how to support all the students needing help on their return to school.

Sample quotes:

Post COVID the focus will be on wellbeing and trying to put teachers and kids back together again.

I think in all the schools that we work in, wellbeing together with academic, they go hand in hand.

Look, it's going to be an absolute nightmare. My first concern is about student wellbeing at the moment. We're getting emails and phone calls and it's starting to break down with the kids who are just lacking contact with people. The next concern is staff wellbeing because of the exact same thing. I spend a lot of time on my phone to staff who just want to talk.

So in terms of the post COVID world, ...- kids are going to come back and want to vent and discuss and talk about all the stuff that's happened and all the - and they're going to do that on top of my staff who already need that time themselves.

It's going to be rough when they do come back. Some of them are holding it together because they don't have any other option to, so I dare say when we come back right from the junior years through to the seniors, [we] learn every week that we go through, [that] another kid is added to the list of kids who are stressing out and not coping. So when we come back, I definitely foresee that there's going to be lots of challenges. There's going to be lots of kids needing help.

... all the momentum there was and all the relationships or setting the boundaries or creating the environment or all those things that they were doing actually COVID just put a stop to it.

I think when we came back last year from COVID, we found that the kids were so disengaged. I think they were so heightened and they were so stressed that the level of violence actually grew.

Interim conclusions

These initial findings from the LGiS 2021 pilot suggest that a number of benefits were identified by teachers and the executive to have emerged from the program. There are also several areas where implementation challenges remain. The interim findings reported here show clearly that LGiS is being well received and that students and staff have found the program engaging and worthwhile. Participants in these consultations identified that, for most students undertaking LGiS, improvements were observed in their behaviours and communication skills through their engagement in the program. Importantly, the pilot identified areas of excellence in relation to student engagement, teacher-student relationships, and the use of descriptive praise. Based on the reflective responses from the staff, it is clear that the program is also affecting their self-awareness and their awareness of their students in a positive manner. A number of suggestions were also made as to how LGiS could be further developed and implementation support could be provided in order to assist with embedding the program and ensuring its effectiveness. For example, the ability to timetable the program so that it is part of the curriculum or at least it does not place students in the position of having to choose between LGiS and other preferred activities would be beneficial.

End of Report. November 2021.

References

Dobia, B., Arthur, L., Jennings, P., Khlentzos, D., Parada, R. H., Roffey, S. & Sheinman, N. (2020) Implementation of SEL. In UNESCO MGIEP (Ed.) *Rethinking Learning: Mainstreaming Social and Emotional Learning in Education Systems*. New Delhi: UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development. ISBN 978-81-89218-73-7 <https://mgiep.unesco.org/rethinking-learning>

Frydenberg, E., Martin, A.J., & Collie, R.J. (2017). *Social and emotional learning in Australia and the Asia-Pacific*. In E. Frydenberg., A.J. Martin., & R.J. Collie (Eds). Social and emotional learning in Australia and the Asia Pacific. Singapore: Springer.

Parada, R.H., Dobia, B., & Kalos, K. (2016). *Each One Teach One: An evaluation of Learning Ground Mt Druitt*. Final Report. Penrith: NSW. Chain Reaction Foundation/Western Sydney University.

Parada, R.H., Dobia, B., Walker, M., & Regalado, J., (2021). Learning Ground in Schools (LGiS): Interim Report of the 2020 Implementation. Penrith: NSW. Western Sydney University.

End of Report 2023. This page in blank.