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The ASPIRE Principles and Pedagogy for the Implementation of Social and Emotional Learning and the Development of Whole School Well-Being

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Implementation is the process by which interventions are put into practice and is critical to outcomes. Issues related to implementation for social and emotional learning (SEL) have largely focused on fidelity to the programme, dosage, clarity of guidance and the characteristics of the facilitator, although attention has also been paid to multi-level factors within an ecological system. The primary emphasis, however, has been on 'what' should happen, rather than 'how'. Both content and process matter for both access and addressing difference. This paper details the ASPIRE principles and pedagogy for SEL and shows how incorporating these may help address diversity across needs and cultures. ASPIRE is the acronym for Agency, Safety, Positivity, Inclusion, Respect and Equity. These principles apply not only to the classroom but to relational well-being at all levels of the system and as such are aspirational. Many are based in the positive psychology literature, and are applicable to both individualistic and collectivist cultures as the intention is not to impose a set of values and behaviours but to structure activities that enable young people to explore what works for themselves and their communities. They have been put into practice within the Circle Solutions framework for SEL across Australia with both Aboriginal and Anglo communities and further afield in the UK, South-East Asia and Africa.

Keywords: ASPIRE, implementation, Circle Solutions, well-being, social and emotional learning.

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Introduction

With the rise of mental health concerns and dysfunctional relationships in families, workplaces and communities, social and emotional learning is being adopted in education systems across the world (e.g., Littlefield, Cavanagh, Knapp, & O'Grady, 2017). Sometimes this takes place in sequenced curricular activities, sometimes, less directly, under the guise of anti-bullying initiatives, relationship and sexuality education, character education, or violence prevention. Sometimes it is with targeted groups and sometimes a universal intervention.

Although implementation factors are relevant to the effectiveness of all curriculum subjects they are even more critical with any intervention/programme that touches on 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together'. This paper posits that we need to go beyond content to context and values in action in order to maximise positive outcomes for all students with diverse needs and from diverse cultures.

Durlak (2015) summarises research on factors affecting implementation in social and emotional learning and found the following to be of importance:

- Fidelity to the programme – though some adaptation and flexibility was seen to be important in order to 'fit' a particular school context and culture
- Dosage – how often a programme takes place
- Quality of delivery and how well teachers engaged students
- School leadership and support
- Staff professional development

He then goes on to talk about the process of getting SEL embedded in a school and outlines 14 steps in a 'Quality Implementation Framework'. Planning prior to commencement of any intervention needs to include 'buy-in' from the whole school and a shared vision and expectations. A school's amenability to programme implementation is correlated with best practice (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2002). The process begins with 'school readiness' and ends with critical analysis and reflection on both the programme and its implementation so that learnings might be applied in the future.

Durlak (2015) also mentions the importance of collaboration between stakeholders, many of whom may not be used to working together, but does not outline what might be involved. This was found to be a critical issue in the Aboriginal Girls Circle (AGC) initiative when the support of community elders and the involvement of Aboriginal Education Officers were critical to effective engagement of the girls (Dobia, Bodkin-Andrews, Parada, O'Rourke, Gilbert, & Roffey, 2014). Indigenous priorities and perspectives however, did not always dovetail with white Anglo expectations, norms and practices.

Cefai and Cavioni (2014) also make explicit strategies for involving all stakeholders in a school and steps for implementation. They are two of the few commentators who touch on the values and principles that need to be embedded in any program. They see a caring classroom community as not only an aspirational outcome of SEL but also one that facilitates effectiveness. If things go well, there should be a positive spiral over time that contributes to the knowledge and skills of learners and develops a positive emotional climate for learning.

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Hamedani and Darling-Hammond (2015) explored the process and impact of SEL in three urban high schools in the US where students represent a range of socio-economic, racial and ethnic diversity. These schools aimed to engage and empower student communities in an 'expanded vision of social emotional learning that incorporates a social justice education perspective… integrating students' social and emotional needs with culturally relevant, asset-based, identity-safe, and empowerment-oriented practice' (p. 1-2). The researchers found that students engaged in social and emotional learning in these schools were significantly more likely to enjoy and engage with school more, be more resilient and have a community focused orientation. The researchers also commented on the importance of a 'whole child' approach to education where the social emotional and academic aspects of education were linked. Social and emotional knowledge and skills needed to be taught and practiced but also embedded in a congruent school culture that respected and responded to the diverse experiences and needs of students.

The ASPIRE principles that follow build on the work already done by researchers on this important aspect of SEL (e.g. Brackett & Pattie, 2016; Cefai & Cavioni, 2014; Durlak, 2015). This overarching framework applies to the context, pedagogy and facilitation that addresses the 'how' not just the 'what' across both SEL intervention and the ecology of the whole school in which this is embedded. ASPIRE is not a program, it is a process. It has been developed to address the issues of safety, respect, inclusion and empowerment that are critical if SEL is to have positive impact on young people from diverse cultures, those who have diverse needs, and those who are dealing with diverse and challenging issues.

Facilitators choose activities that are pertinent to their own context and needs and many established programs can be delivered within the ASPIRE pedagogy. The framework has been utilised in schools using Circle Solutions across Australia and in New Zealand, Singapore, Hong Kong, Egypt, the UK, China and Japan (Growing Great Schools, 2017).

The Aboriginal Girls Circle (Dobia et al., 2014) is an intervention with indigenous high school girls auspiced by the (Australian) National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. Parental confidence and connection are both protective factors for children's safety and this project was designed to develop these attributes to promote future child and community well-being. Aboriginal culture does not lend itself to many of the features that are the norm in Anglo social and emotional learning. Personal information is only accessed in an indirect way, silence is an acceptable part of communication, avoiding eye-contact is seen as respectful, joking is integral to communication practices, and non-verbal communication is commonplace. It is regarded as shameful to be the centre of attention or to put yourself forward or above your peers. ASPIRE addresses these matters by focusing primarily on shared issues rather than individual experiences, and promoting collaboration, inclusion and laughter. The mixed method evaluation engaged around fifty girls, their teachers and members of the Aboriginal community. The aims of confidence and connection were met for many of the participants although generalisation to the school context was more problematic (Dobia & Roffey, 2017).

In another project (McCarthy and Roffey, 2013) eighteen undergraduate students were trained in Circle Solutions and supported implementation of this intervention in eight Greater Western Sydney primary schools for one school term. The students' experiences were recorded and analysed, giving information about

factors that made Circles a more or less successful intervention. The main facilitators/barriers were the active involvement of regular teachers and the way they positioned social/emotional needs and learning.

The ASPIRE Principles and Pedagogy

This section of the paper outlines the principles in detail, giving a rationale for each, based in research evidence. We also explore how each is translated in both the delivery of SEL and the context that supports this endeavour. The principles are given here individually, but in practice they are interconnected and inter-dependent.

Agency

Rationale, theory and evidence. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out the right of children and young people to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account on any matter that affects them. Agency incorporates one of the determinants of well-being – self-determination. Self-determination theory, initiated by Ryan and Deci (2000), is a theory of motivation concerned with supporting our natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways. This principle refers to the amount of control someone has over actions and decision-making.

The New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People (2007) interviewed 126 children and young people about what well-being meant for them. Three overarching themes were identified:

- Agency: defined as having the power to make your own decisions in everyday life
- Security: feeling safe and being safe – especially having people who will look out for you. Without this you cannot engage fully with life
- A positive sense of self: you and the people around you see you as a good person.

Those who see themselves as choosing to engage in a task or given some choice in a way a task is undertaken are more likely to see meaning in what they do. This contrasts with pressure from external non-negotiable demands and extrinsic rewards. Although teachers need to be in charge of proceedings they do not control students but empower them to come to their own understandings through a process of experimentation, reflection and discussion.

Pedagogy. Many subjects in the mainstream curriculum are taught didactically. The teacher is seen to have a body of knowledge that is presented to students. Learners are often passive recipients of information with the teacher in control of instruction. This approach is not appropriate for SEL as students need to interact with the content at both cognitive and emotional levels in order to understand concepts and apply them to their own lives. The S.A.F.E. model for SEL delivery stands for Sequenced, Active, Focused and Explicit. (CASEL, 2015) Agency can be equated with 'Active', as in not a passive recipient. Crepeau and Richards (2003) found that teachers who enthusiastically engage learners in participatory activities are much more likely to elicit positive responses. Student-centred pedagogical approaches, such as project-based and inquiry-based learning, address diversity by incorporating different learning styles. These are more likely to promote

interest and motivation, which may in turn promote academic effort, engagement, comprehension, and retention of the materials learned (Reinders, 2010; Skelton, Seevers, Dormody, & Hodnett, 2012).

Agency is demonstrated in SEL by providing students with activities, some of which are experiential, that enable them to reflect on issues, discuss these with peers and sometimes take action in the classroom to put learning into practice. One example of this might be a small group discussing the pros and cons of different responses to a challenging hypothetical situation. Each small group feeds back the gist of their discussion to the larger group (usually in a circle) saying which option they considered had the best short-term and long-term outcomes. Rather than telling young people what to think and do they are given structured activities that enable them to think and decide for themselves. This is also likely to enhance a sense of responsibility. The freedom to make sense of their learning in this way enables students from diverse backgrounds and with a range of needs to engage with constructs in a way that is relevant for them.

In the Aboriginal Girls Circle (AGC) initiative, there was a power-sharing pedagogy where girls were invited to be co-determiners of the processes and topics covered. They invariably chose projects relevant to their own culture and communities. The evaluation (Dobia et al., 2013) indicated a growing capacity within the girls for personal and collective agency, alongside raised confidence and leadership.

Safety

Rationale, theory and evidence. Safety in school is physical, emotional and psychological. There is increasing acknowledgement that students who do not feel safe are less able to access learning, more likely to have poor attendance and ultimately have poor mental health. To address both overt and covert bullying, the Australian National Safe Schools Framework (Education Services Australia, 2010) asserts that all Australian schools should:

- Affirm the rights of all members of the school community to feel safe and be safe at school
- Acknowledge that being safe and supported at school is essential for student well-being and effective learning
- Accept responsibility for developing and sustaining safe and supportive learning and teaching communities that also fulfil the school's child protection responsibilities
- Encourage the active participation of all school community members in developing and maintaining a safe school community where diversity is valued
- Actively support young people to develop understanding and skills to keep themselves and others safe
- Commit to developing a safe school community through a whole-school and evidence-based approach.

An emotionally safe school allows children to make mistakes and take risks in learning without feeling they may become a failure (Hirsh, 2004). No learner is belittled, punished or humiliated and their worth is not determined by how they measure up to others. In an emotionally safe classroom, teachers make

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mistakes. They share these mistakes with children and sometimes elicit the children's help in solving their problem. In 2001, Bluestein asserted that creating an emotionally safe school is a pre-requisite for students to learn intra and interpersonal competencies.

Pedagogy. The need to ensure that both students and teachers feel safe is critical to effective pedagogy in SEL. There have been criticisms of the secondary SEAL programme in the UK in that lessons were potentially unsafe for both teachers and students (Craig, 2007; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008). There was a concern that addressing emotional concerns with children would open 'Pandora's box' in ways that may potentially distress children and leave teachers feeling incompetent and unable to offer a helpful response. There was also a claim that a focus on emotional well-being in school would risk developing a culture of 'victims' and narcissists.

Students do need to be able to discuss and reflect on important issues, but to maximise safety this needs to stay in the realm of the impersonal, with no expectation of disclosing personal circumstances or incidents. There are many ways to do this including using stories, video clips, role play and 'pair shares', talking with a partner about an issue and seeking commonalities. Even in personal feedback, the use of 'someone' rather than 'I' can provide a safety barrier, e.g., "It would make someone angry if …" Co-operative learning in most curriculum subjects is more effective that competitive (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000), but is especially valuable in SEL. Activities that take place in pairs or small groups take the focus off the individual who nevertheless will be reflecting on how these issues apply to them. Working together also enables some of the learnt skills to be put into practice.

The right to pass and stay silent is also a safety valve for students. No-one has to say anything unless they choose to do so. In the AGC this proved to be a critical aspect of the pedagogy as it alleviated the risk of 'shame' and enabled the girls to establish a sense of comfort and trust with each other and the facilitator before choosing to engage verbally. Initial reluctance to speak out applies to other cultures, such as Singaporean and Chinese.

Positivity

Rationale, theory and evidence. Positive psychology can be briefly defined as a focus on what is going well in matters of human development and endeavour. It pursues understanding of what enables people to flourish rather than how to identify deficit and treat disease (Gable & Haidt, 2005). There is now a vast literature on the various elements of positive psychology and its application in educational settings (e.g. Gilman, Scott Huebner, & Furlong, 2009). This includes matters as diverse as resilience, flow, growth mind set, positive emotions, social capital, strengths-based approaches, and more. Student and school well-being is beginning to be embedded in various educational jurisdictions, and there is significant interest in what this means and how it works (House of Commons, 2017). This section addresses just a few of these approaches.

Pedagogy. Activities in SEL are solution rather than problem focused. This means that students are asked to consider what supports resilience, conflict resolution or confidence. They look to explore what is fair and what they and others need to thrive or learn. They may look at pictures of faces and with a partner consider what might have caused them to feel that way and what needs to happen now. Younger children may

be introduced to a teddy bear or puppet who is said to be sad or upset, and the children come up with ideas to help. There are never right or wrong answers, just reflection and discussion. We have found that when young people consider what matters to them, how they want to be treated and feel, they begin to build solutions without having been presented directly with problems. When students are working together in a safe activity they consider broad issues of well-being for themselves and others with a remarkable depth of understanding.

In the AGC girls were given collage materials and in groups of three asked to construct a collage that represented their ideal community – one in which they would like to live and work in the future (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Collage representing the ideal community of AGC girls
(Image © Emma Marshall www.emmamarshall.net)

Subsequent activities explored what they might do to help develop this – giving the girls agency to decide, with staff supporting them to take incremental steps towards their goal. One group decided that diabetes was a major problem in their families and wanted to raise awareness of the dangers of sugar, so developed a poster showing 'The Sugar in your Snacks' which was reproduced, laminated and distributed across the community. Strengths identification is also encouraged in various activities. This concerns both the strengths that people possess, those they would like to have, those that would be useful in given situations, and strengths within a family, group or class.

Finally, this aspect of ASPIRE incorporates the promotion of positive emotions. Frederickson (2009) found that positive emotions promote problem-solving and creative thinking. Feeling valued, thankful and connected matters, but positive emotions can also be elicited by playfulness. Many activities are presented as games, none of which are individually competitive (Hromek & Roffey, 2009). Some are deliberately aimed to engage students in laughing together. This raises oxytocin levels, which helps people feel connected, which in turn raises resilience. In the AGC evaluation (Dobia et al., 2013) there were many comments on the value of

having fun together; "I was surprised how making the workshops fun, the girls were engaged and were then able to discuss some deep/serious issues" (Adult participant). "You can go to AGC sad and leave it like, really happy" (Student).

This focus on positivity can be critiqued as having Western overtones but the option of opting out together with the focus on agency, respect and inclusion ensures that cultural differences in expressing sadness or negativity are accepted and understanding shared (Koopman-Holm & Tsai, 2014).

Inclusion

Rationale, theory and evidence. A sense of connectedness is now firmly established as a factor in resilience and well-being (Werner, 2004). Although belonging can be experienced in many domains a major site is within school. School connectedness is multi-dimensional with no single definition but there is general agreement that it comprises a sense of feeling cared for, high expectations for learning, and support to achieve alongside opportunities to participate (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2004). Research indicates that a sense of school connectedness enhances academic performance (Sari, 2012), psychological well-being (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009) and pro-social behaviour (Blum, 2005). A sense of belonging, however, can be inclusive, where everyone is welcome and everyone matters, or exclusive, which maintains group cohesion and superiority by keeping those out who do not meet certain criteria. For the well-being of all students, especially the most vulnerable, it is critical that schools develop a sense of inclusive belonging (Roffey, 2013). Allen, Vella-Brodrik and Waters (2017) investigated the relationship between social and emotional competencies and school belonging. In a meta-analysis of eleven studies they found that social and emotional competencies had a significant relationship with school belonging. This means not only that social and emotional learning is critical for school belonging but also that inclusion needs to be part of the implementation process for a universal SEL intervention. This principle in ASPIRE is particularly pertinent for addressing diversity and for promoting a sense of shared humanity – learning about each other as both unique individuals and what we have in common.

Pedagogy. Inclusion for SEL means that every participant has an opportunity to be involved in every activity should they choose to do so. Inclusion is also facilitated by mixing students up for SEL activities so that everyone works with everyone else either with a partner or in a small group. In a photo-film on Circle Solutions, one young boy said: "While we are having fun we learn about each other, we play some games and learn about each other". Some activities are specifically designed to inhibit pre-judgement of others on the basis of limited information, to explore the needs of those who might be marginalised and to 'walk in their shoes' (Roffey, 2014).

How teachers respond to students who do not conform is also relevant to this principle. We have increasing numbers of students excluded from school for aberrant behaviours, and it is these students who are likely to be the most vulnerable and most need to feel they matter. When a student does not conform to the basic guidelines of respect for others, usually by talking over them, the guidelines or expectations are repeated to the whole group several times. If this is ineffective he or she is taken aside while others carry out a small group activity. The pupils are first told that they are wanted as they are part of a class. They are then given the

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choice to either show respect for others or stay or leave for a while. The door is always left open for them to return – but only on the basis of positive behaviours. In eight Western Sydney schools the student facilitators found that behaviour was rarely a problem during SEL Circles, even for those who were difficult for their regular teacher (McCarthy & Roffey, 2013). Improved behaviour, however was not sustainable without the active and positive participation of their classroom teacher.

Respect

Rationale, theory and evidence. In the West, respect is no longer a 'given' that comes with authority or seniority. In some contexts, respect means being honoured or esteemed – thought worthy by others. This may depend on what is considered to be valuable by others, such as excelling in a given way. Education has moved towards a homogeneity of expectations that does not always credit individual differences as valuable, and may give little room in practice for respecting diversity. The National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools outlines nine values for Australian Schooling (DEST, 2005). One of these is 'Respect', defined as 'treat others with consideration and regard, respect another person's point of view'. Egan (2002) defines a respectful interaction as one in which one person does not overwhelm the other with their own agenda and does not rush to judgement. Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, Sorenson, Yaegar, & Whitney, 2001) is a way of putting respect into practice and is congruent with positive psychology approaches by building on strengths, focusing on an imagined ideal future, and making meaning within a collaborative framework.

Roffey (2005) explored the perceptions of respect with various stakeholders in the school environment in three qualitative studies: how it felt to be a recipient of respectful interactions and the difference this made to expectations of the self and others, motivations, confidence and positive emotionality. Respect was demonstrated by acknowledgement of presence and of the whole person, seeking and valuing the positive, acknowledgement of effort, feelings and competencies, and taking account of individual contexts. Positive communication was a critical factor, especially through active listening and not making judgements. Feeling safe enough to speak and participate was also mentioned, as was the willingness of others to admit and apologise when they had misunderstood or made a mistake.

Respect for culture is both subtle and powerful. Indigenous students in Australia are often perceived as challenging in the school context. This is evidenced by a disproportionate number being excluded from school. Although an SEL programme may be seen as an answer to this, there is a concern that SEL programs based on explicit classroom teaching of formal skills that privilege non-Indigenous ways of thinking, feeling and behaving may reinforce rather than challenge a deficit lens (Hoffman, 2009; Humphrey, 2013).

For working between cultures the flexible and open-ended methodology of ASPIRE enabled the girls in the AGC to own and lead processes that supported their sense of resilience and connectedness, encouraging them to take up issues that they found significant (Dobia & Roffey, 2017). Two-way learning sought the respectful integration of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous knowledge through a commitment to culturally responsive teaching and effective community partnerships.

Pedagogy. Respect in ASPIRE is modelled, experienced, reflected upon and discussed. Students may be asked to identify with others what is happening when they feel respected and what feelings are associated with this. They may talk about who they respect and why, being given the option to choose public figures as well as known individuals. Respect is encapsulated in two guidelines:

1. When you are speaking everyone else will listen, as what you have to say is important – this means you also need to listen to others;
2. There are no 'put downs' only personal positives.

These guidelines are stated at the beginning of a Circle session and repeated with brevity throughout as necessary. These guidelines apply to everyone, including the teacher/facilitator who needs to ensure that everyone has a turn and a voice. Students are given activities that help to develop the skills of positive communication so that they learn what active listening means and how jumping to conclusions about others can often be wrong. What has been discovered is that when these guidelines are actively followed the quieter children begin to find their voice and the more confident and louder pupils are quieter. At the end of one AGC camp one young woman stated: "I have learnt that to get respect you have to give it."

Equity

Rationale, theory and evidence. McCashen (2005) talks about the essence of the strengths-based approach as being 'power with', rather than 'power over'. It is about having a high regard for uniqueness and diversity and also respect for the commonalities between people. The human need for fairness is hard-wired. The brain's reward centre is activated when fairness and cooperation are experienced (Tabibnia & Leiderman, 2007). Fairness does not however mean rigid sameness – it means acknowledgement of different circumstances and flexibility in response to these.

Pedagogy: This final principle in ASPIRE was originally equality but that can mean valuing homogeneity rather than diversity. Equity, on the other hand, means ensuring equal access, participation and opportunity and at times may mean adaptations. These may be necessary for special needs students, those who are not native speakers and those who struggle with basic expectations. The principle is encapsulated in ensuring that everyone has a voice and has structured opportunities to participate.

In the ASPIRE approach to SEL the teacher participates equally with all students, sits in the Circle and engages with activities whether these are paired, small group or everyone together. This changes relationships and understanding as well as skills. As teacher emotional literacy is often cited as relevant in teaching SEL (e.g., Brackett & Patti, 2016) in this framework all are learning together.

Conclusion

ASPIRE is not intended to replace previous strategies for implementation, but to build on these so that teachers and students feel safe, engaged and positive about social and emotional learning. Social and emotional learning has been identified as one of the main pathways to student well-being (Noble, McGrath, Roffey & Rowling, 2008), but one of the other pathways is a safe, respectful and supportive school

environment. We consider these as both interactive and underpinned by the ASPIRE principles. This paper is not the first to say that social and emotional learning is an approach to education that encompasses not only knowledge and skills but also a way of supporting mental health, but this must also be embedded in a congruent learning environment (Greenberg, Domotrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). More research is needed to identify which of the principles have most impact on sustainability, and the ways in which these can be developed both for SEL and in establishing well-being at the heart of school ethos and practice.

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