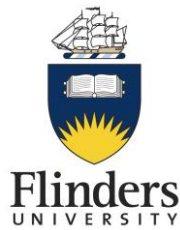


FLINDERS UNIVERSITY
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Flinders Human Behaviour & Health Research Unit

Releasing Children's Shining Potential

**Improving the social and emotional wellbeing of
primary school children through Journeywork**

Journey into Schools Report
August 2010

Background and Introduction

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Chapter 1

Background and Introduction to the Study

1.1. Background

1.1.1 Mental health in Australia: Social and emotional wellbeing of children and adolescents

Twenty-six percent of the total Australian population are children and adolescents ^[4], and nearly one in five, or more than three million Australians in total, are affected by a mental illness in any one year ^[5]. *The Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing* estimated that 14% of 4 to 17 year old children and adolescents have a mental health problem, and young people from low-income, step-parent or blended families, and sole-parent families, are more likely to experience mental health problems ^[3]. The most common problems identified are delinquent behaviour problems (7.1%), attention problems (6.1%), and aggressive behaviour problems (5.2%). The prevalence of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) for example is 11.2%, or an estimated 355,600 children and adolescents; the prevalence of depressive disorder is 3.7% or an estimated 117,000 young people in Australia ^[3]. While ADHD decreases as children get older, other conditions such as depression tend to increase with age ^[4].

Mental health reform has been ongoing, particularly since the *National Mental Health Strategy* was agreed by the Australian Health Ministers in 1992 ^[8]. The *National Mental Health Plan 2003-2008* and the *National Action Plan on Mental Health 2006-2011* continue to build the reform agenda by adopting a population health focus, which includes children and adolescents, and applying an holistic approach to mental health and wellbeing ^[5-7].

Family doctors, school-based counsellors and paediatricians provide the majority of services that are used by young people. Of those children who need professional help, only one child in every four receives any kind of assistance. Interventions need to provide assistance for parents and families as well as for the young people themselves. Specialist services do not have the resources to provide all of the direct care required. Consequently, attention needs to be increased in mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention programs ^[5].

In early childhood, a focus on social and emotional wellbeing can increase resilience in children, with the possibility of reducing the risk of mental health problems developing later in life ^[4]. Alternative approaches need to be developed to increase the social and emotional wellbeing of the Australian population ^[3]. One approach to improving mental health in the community is to increase parent's, children's and adolescent's knowledge and understanding of what mental health is, and where possible, educating them to become more effective at managing their own social and emotional wellbeing ^[3]. Australian governments recognise the need for a collaborative approach to mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention programs across the health, education and welfare sectors. Across these sectors, a variety of generalist as well as specialist wellbeing professionals need to be engaged ^[7].

1.1.2 Reform in Australian primary schools: Implementing wellbeing programs

It is known that experiences such as academic failure at school and experiences of bullying or peer rejection put children at increased risk of health and learning issues arising ^[1]. Learning problems such as literacy and numeracy issues, student mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, family problems such as family breakup, and physical and mental health issues, along with negative or defiant classroom behaviours, have all been identified as having a significant impact on student wellbeing ^[23]. Research suggests that families are increasingly isolated and are experiencing lower levels of support; socially, emotionally, and practically ^[24]. It is also known that social and emotional support has a positive effect on learning and on physical and mental wellbeing ^[25-28].

While the home is the most influential environment for the child, the school environment also has an impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of children because they spend so much of their time at school. The educational setting can provide safety and support and is well placed to promote mental health and wellbeing for its pupils ^[4]. Research has shown that resilience develops over time. Resilience develops through the provision of caring, supportive, safe and secure environments, and developing children's personal skills such as positive attitudes and values, and good decision making and problem solving skills. In addition, providing opportunities for enjoyable and meaningful social interaction enhances resilience. Encouraging children to participate in a variety of activities and share their stories, express their feelings, and explore the causes of their own and others behaviours has been found to increase personal skills and resilience ^[4]. Therefore practical strategies need to be continually developed to provide an appropriate school environment for promoting good mental health in children, which is integral to learning and academic achievement. Students who are mentally healthy are better equipped to learn and have more functional relationships with their teachers, family members and peers.

KidsMatter is an Australian national primary school initiative for mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention ^[29]. Drawing on available research and expert consultation, the *KidsMatter* initiative is a response to improving the mental health and wellbeing of primary school students. *KidsMatter* was developed from the partnership of the Australian Government Department of Health and Aging, *beyondblue: the national depression initiative*, the Australian Psychological Society, and Principals Australia, with support from the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund. *KidsMatter* aims to:

- improve the mental health and wellbeing of primary school students
- reduce mental health difficulties amongst students
- achieve greater support for students already experiencing mental health difficulties.

As highlighted in the *KidsMatter Evaluation Final Report* ^[29], the *KidsMatter* initiative has shown that wellbeing initiatives, with the appropriate resources and support, can be provided by teachers, staff and others who may not be specifically trained mental health professionals. *KidsMatter* is an holistic approach to the development and implementation of evidence-based mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention strategies. It provides a framework, implementation process, and resources, and consists of four components:

1. Positive school community
2. Social and emotional learning for students
3. Parenting support and education
4. Early intervention for students experiencing mental health difficulties.

To assist schools in making informed decisions about appropriate and effective school mental health programs, the *KidsMatter* web site provides a *Programs Guide* [30]. When a school wants to choose a wellbeing program, they can view a number of specifically targeted programs. For example, to “Create a welcoming and friendly school environment where there is a sense of belonging and inclusion” they are directed to the “Component 1” programs. To “Help students to recognise and manage their emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships and handle challenging situations effectively”, they are directed to the “Component 2” programs [30]. Funding is provided to schools through the *KidsMatter* initiative to conduct wellbeing programs.

As more programs become available, they can be added to the *Programs Guide*. Journeywork fits into the *KidsMatter* framework as an early intervention program for primary school children, and particularly for those children who are experiencing emotional and social challenges. Thus, specifically developed Journey Programs can be added to the *KidsMatter Programs Guide*. Appendix 1 provides an example of programs from which schools can choose at the time of writing this report, and the evaluation criteria for Component 2: Social and Emotional Learning for Students. The *KidsMatter* web site is undergoing continuing development and information related to submitting a program for evaluation and inclusion as an option in the *Programs Guide* can be accessed from the *KidMatter* web site.

1.1.3 Journeywork and Journey Programs: Releasing children’s shining potential

The social and emotional learning goals of Journeywork in school children aim to develop children’s ability to recognise and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations effectively.

1.1.4 Journeywork: Approach and theoretical framework

Journeywork is a process of guided introspection and is used with both adults and children [10, 12]. Journeywork is suitable for children and their parents, other family members, as well as for teachers themselves. Like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and its many techniques and strategies [31], Journeywork acknowledges that there is a relationship between thought, emotion and behaviour. Journeywork differs from CBT and has more in common with other mindfulness-based therapies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) [32, 33] in that it accepts and allows thoughts that arise in the mind, without evaluating, or judging them, or trying to reduce them; a thought is simply that, a thought (words in the mind) – it may not be concrete reality or absolute truth. By noticing that the mind is continually making commentary, the person can acknowledge thoughts, seeing them for what they are without judgement; then they are free to release the thought – to ‘let it go’. As emotions arise, they are accepted, and through guided introspection, the person can identify where in the body these are felt. The person is guided through these layers of emotion, for example hurt, sadness, scared, until they reach a ‘core’ state or peaceful emotion and quiet within. During guided introspection, stored or repressed memories may be accessed, resolved, understood and let go. People find their own inner stillness and wisdom, allowing them to work through their own challenges [10-12, 34-36]. Journeywork facilitates people tapping into a knowing and resilience deep inside themselves, and draws on mindfulness, imagery and forgiveness techniques

to free themselves from self-limiting thoughts, the residual effects of painful memories, unhelpful emotions and uncomfortable or painful bodily experiences.

Mindfulness is widely accepted today, and can be described as paying attention with flexibility, openness, and curiosity [9, 37]. Mindfulness is an awareness process, not a thinking process. Mindfulness can be used as an approach to living our daily lives, and also practiced as an approach to meditation (mindfulness meditation). Being aware and paying attention to what you are experiencing in the present moment is about focusing attention on what you are doing right now, leaving little room for worry about the past or future, or getting caught up in thoughts. Mindfulness cultivates a way of being in a harmonious relationship with what is, whether that's nagging thoughts, uncomfortable feelings, external stressors, or physical discomfort. Through fully opening to what is present in your internal experience and being curious about it, rather than resisting or pushing it away, a deep acceptance and ability to rest more fully in the present moment is cultivated [38]. In mindfulness meditation for example, the person can be resting in awareness itself, often reaching a thought-free stillness [12]. Mindfulness can be used to increase our awareness of how we feel, think, and react – it can assist in the development of emotional resilience.

Imagery entails the use of imagination to review and change perceptions of events, surroundings, and experiences. During imagery, visualisation, as well as the formation or recall of smells, tastes and internal feelings are engaged. Imagery occurs in all people, and especially in children. Guided imagery techniques have been used in adults, for example to improve breast cancer survivors' quality of life [39], to facilitate relaxation and insight in people with diabetes [40], and in the emergency department to assist in decreasing pain and reduce anxiety [41]. Guided imagery techniques used in children have been shown to be effective in situations such as separation anxiety, test anxiety, ADHD, abuse, low self-esteem, and exposure to trauma, violence, and loss [35]. Guided imagery is also used as an additional mind-body modality in current health care systems to increase children's coping skills for example in releasing and reducing anxiety, stress and fear associated with illness and hospitalisation [42], reducing pain [43], migraine headaches [34], and in children with asthma [44]. Following guided imagery sessions, children experience increased self-esteem and confidence because they can gain some control over the complicated feelings arising from everyday living [34]. The approach to guided imagery in Journeywork moves beyond traditional guided imagery processes, in that the person is also guided to create their own 'scripts'; providing an opportunity for the adult or child to find their own resolution to their problem by identifying what it is that they need to reach a state of wellbeing.

It is widely recognised that as people go about their daily lives, they experience a variety of environmental, physical and emotional stressors that affect their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. While short-term stress can be motivating, for example triggering a child into studying for a spelling test, prolonged stress can lead to physical illness and/or emotional change such as anxiety and depression. The theoretical underpinnings of Journeywork are based on research findings from the field of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI). It is not within the scope of this report to elaborate on this complex field; however, evidence has demonstrated that our brain and nervous system, endocrine glands and immune system are in constant communication via a series of neuro-chemical responses [45]. PNI evidence suggests that thought, emotion and behaviour affect body systems at the cellular level – this is referred to as mind-body communication [46-49]. PNI operates from the premise that the mind and body are indivisible. Journeywork supports the theory that through mindfulness and imagery, people can modify the images they produce, and as imagery changes, so do emotions and behaviours, as well as changes in physiology and biochemistry, resulting in reduced stress and improved mood [39]. Journeywork assists people; children in this case, to get access to the deeper level of mind-body interaction, to

uncover emotional (i.e. neuro-chemical) blocks, and through awareness, feeling and imagery processes, impact on the neuro-chemical response to release these emotional blocks that are often the root cause of the behaviours that parents and teachers so often find challenging ^[10].

Journey Programs and Journeywork provide practical, user-friendly tools in the form of step-by-step processes, guided meditations, imagery, therapeutic metaphors (specially designed healing stories/story intended to create change), group exercises, play and activities (drawing, role play, journaling), to facilitate the release and expression of children's shining potential. *The Journey Classroom Process* (Appendix 2) for example, is a simple classroom process of guided introspection which takes each child on a guided tour within themselves. On this very special adventure of discovery they uncover a time where they experienced an upsetting issue or past trauma for example when they felt scared, lonely or sad, and are guided to discover the reality of that time for themselves, thereby creating empathy and understanding of the given situation(s). They imagine resources such as being able to tell an adult, finding courage to speak etc, that will enable them to see, hear and feel things differently. By releasing stored emotional blocks children are able to balance their previous perception of what happened, leaving them free of the negative experiences and emotions of the past, and free to utilise their new resources in the future, thereby facilitating a change in their behaviour. Thus, the child's skill level in dealing with issues such as bullying, lack of self confidence, poor social skills, and defiant or unsociable classroom behaviour can be improved.

1.1.5 Journeywork in schools

Internationally, Journeywork is being conducted in 28 countries across Europe, Australia, Asia, Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Israel and Japan. Case study ^[10-12] and anecdotal evidence ^[50] support the positive impact of Journeywork on adult's and children's lives. The first pilot study of Journeywork in schools was conducted in South Africa by school teacher and Journey Practitioner, Jayshree Mannie, whose aim in designing classroom Journeywork for children was to improve their emotional wellbeing, while at the same time monitoring their academic results. One class received a Journey process every week; one class received occasional Journeywork, and the other class did not undergo any Journeywork. At the end of the year, the class who received no Journeywork were averaging a 67% pass rate. Those who underwent occasional Journeywork were averaging 76% pass rate and those who received regular Journeywork – once a week – were averaging a 91% to 93% pass rate ^{[10,p23][51]}. Subsequently, Journey Programs in schools have been running in South Africa for some years and further research has shown that Journeywork is successful in developing learners socially, emotionally and academically, while at the same time being enjoyable and liberating for participants. In addition, the program was well regarded by educators and parents. Using *The Journey Classroom Process* South African results ^[19, 52] have shown:

- increased academic performance
- better attendance rates
- improved interaction between peers
- reduced bullying
- better relationships between children and their teachers
- an increase in self-esteem and confidence
- improved behaviour and discipline in the classroom and playground
- that children can use the practical Journey tools when they need them.

Journeywork is being conducted in a small number of Australian primary schools in Queensland ^[14], New South Wales ^[15, 18], Western Australia, South Australia, and Victoria ^[13]. Case study, anecdotal evidence and formal review ^[18] provide support for the impact of Journeywork in Australian schools. There have also been two program evaluation studies ^[16, 17].

Most recently, an independent review of the Journey Program which has been running in Newcastle since 2004 was conducted. This review consisted of examination of the background, aims and principles of the Journey Program, its implementation methodology, written comments by parents, impact on children as seen through their drawings, and interviews with 5 key informants including the Principal, assistant principal, Journey facilitator and a parent whose children had been involved in the program over recent years. Participants were invited to describe the various program scenarios and articulate the program's perceived strengths and weaknesses. Additional questions and comments arose incidentally throughout the interview. Findings from this independent review revealed that the Journey Program provided personal development of the children, enhanced student resilience, inner strength, and self-esteem, with children playing together in a more positive way, having more fun and fighting less with their siblings. In addition, the Journey Accredited Practitioner was reported to have a strong sense of responsibility and close collaboration with the Principal and school counsellor. Furthermore, parents often initiated their children's involvement in the Journey Program and a number of parents also participated in Journeywork for their own development outside of school hours. Consequently, evidence from the independent review supported the continuation of the Journey Program within the school ^[18].

In South Australia a Journey Program consisting of 5, weekly sessions was conducted in a Year 2 classroom of 28 students in Term 3 of 2008. The aim of the program was to provide the children with the tools to explore their emotions and improve their self-esteem and resilience. Program evaluation showed that the children enjoyed the Journeywork. They learnt that when they are sad they can draw on new skills of relaxation, and courage, knowing that inside them they have inner beauty, a shining diamond, and a special friend in their heart. In addition, one child learnt that they were now better at saying sorry and thank you to people; another child realised that they could now speak out whenever they are scared. The Class Teacher found the Journey sessions so valuable, that the Program was extended for a further 7 weeks in Term 4, noting that the sessions helped in the classroom and in the yard ^[16].

In Western Australia, a Journey Program was conducted weekly in 2007 in a Year 2 class with the teacher supported by three Journey Accredited Practitioners. The aims of the Journey Program were to address academic development, social awareness, resiliency and life skills, and the development of competencies such as problem solving, critical thinking, and communicating. Results from the analysis of student pre- and post-questionnaires, classroom observation, and teacher interviews showed that the children's attitudes toward school, academic progress, organisational skills and work habits, social and emotional development, resilience, communication, level of happiness, and sleep patterns, had improved. The children felt that the Journey Program was important in helping people and improving wellbeing and that the skills learnt helped them to be able to discuss their problems more with others, including their parents. In addition, teachers found that teaching the children became easier and more rewarding because the students were more punctual, enthusiastic and their self-management and self-discipline had improved. Parents noted an improvement or positive difference in their child ^[17].

No Australian research studies have been conducted to formally evaluate the impact of Journey programs. Consequently, this study has been designed to address this gap.

1.2 Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of participant primary school children.

Specific objectives included:

- 1) ensuring that the children were happy and left at ease following each Journey session;
- 2) provision of support and tools for the children to deal with daily life events and emotions;
- 3) evaluating the effectiveness of conducting Journeywork sessions on the social and emotional wellbeing of children;
- 4) evaluating the effectiveness of conducting Journeywork sessions on children's behaviour in the classroom and school environment;
- 5) evaluating the effectiveness of conducting Journeywork sessions on the academic progress of the children.

1.3 Significance of the study

This study addresses an area of urgent concern – how to improve the welfare of our children, that is, their physical, social, and emotional health and wellbeing.

Journeywork and Journey programs provide children, and also their teachers and parents, with practical, step-by-step tools to use in a variety of circumstances; in the classroom with groups of children, with groups of teachers and/or parents, and in individual sessions with both adults and children. The individual tools can be incorporated into daily activities and used throughout the day as issues arise. Teachers and parents can learn Journey techniques and processes and integrate them into their current home life, teaching programs, and health programs. Drawing on mindfulness, introspection and guided imagery techniques, Journeywork enables people to access their own internal resources and enhances the child's ability to communicate more openly, thereby creating opportunities for improved social interaction ^[10].

Consequently, this study can benefit schools, teachers, parents, and students in a number of ways.

- It provides an example of a Journey Program that can support the implementation of evidence-based mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention strategies into schools.
- Parents and teachers can encounter children with improved behaviours in the classroom, school, and home environment.
- Children will be provided with the tools to deal with life events and the many emotions they encounter daily.
- Parents and teachers can learn the tools and integrate them into daily home and school life.

- Children's relationships with parents, teachers and peers may become more positive.

The study was conducted introducing Journeywork into a metropolitan primary school in Victoria (Australia) with 24 students from Years 3 and 4, in Terms 2 and 3 of 2009. For the purposes of this study, each session was allocated a one-hour time-slot to cover research requirements as well as conducting the session.

1.4 Terms and conventions used in this report

This report is written with the potential and diverse audiences in mind: Education departments, primary school principals and teachers, researchers, mental health professionals, parents and Journey practitioners. Overall, the aim of the report is to present the process and outcomes of the research in a language that makes them accessible to this diverse group of key stakeholders.

In the interests of readability, many of the results have been presented as tables, graphs and figures. Terms used in descriptive statistics have been explained in the 'definitions' chapter. Descriptions of statistical significance have been included in the texts where appropriate for those readers who may seek this information.

In this Chapter (Chapter 1), the background, aims and significance of the study have been discussed. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the study design, and in Chapter 3 the methods of recruitment, data collection and analysis are presented. The results have been reported in Chapter 4 to 9 and these are discussed in Chapter 10. With all research studies, there are limitations, and these are outlined in Chapter 11, before summing up with the conclusions in Chapter 12. Recommendations are elaborated in Chapter 13, and examples various documents used throughout the study are presented in Chapter 14, the Appendices.

Each chapter ends with a chapter summary to assist the reader in accessing the information and findings more readily.

1.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter an outline of the importance of mental health and emotional wellbeing strategies in primary schools were discussed, along with an introduction to Journeywork and the aims and significance of this study.

For references, refer to Reference Document