

Evaluating a whole-of-school approach to respectful relationships education in schools

Dr Christine Dew, Good Samaritan Inn

12 Jan 2015

1. Theme

Gender Inequality & Primary Prevention

2. Key words

Research informing practice

Implementation

Innovation, quality

3. Abstract

Our Watch's recently published evidence paper notes that the majority of literature evaluating respectful relationships education (RRE) in schools focusses on the impacts of such initiatives on students.¹

At Good Samaritan Inn, a crisis accommodation service for women and children escaping family violence, our primary prevention of violence against women and children work in secondary schools has had a strong focus on relationship building with school leaders and staff in addition to students. This has been central to the development of sustainable, whole-of-school cultural change that reduces reliance on external delivery of programs and the isolated interventions that have been shown to be less effective than building capacity in RRE within schools themselves.

Our approach to whole-of-school development of RRE respects the unique culture, capacity and needs of each school as we work with staff and students to develop strategies and initiatives that suit their context in a 'realist approach' to project implementation as well as evaluation. As Our Watch advocates, the strength of this approach is its 'dynamic sensitivity to local contexts'.²

While there is much emphasis on the whole-of-school approach in the RRE literature, evaluations that focus on student attitudinal and behavioural change cannot tell us much about how those outcomes are related to a whole-of-school approach, or how those changes are enabled by what happens in their school community beyond the delivery of specific curriculum in the classroom. Such evaluations, at times, can seem to assume that the whole-of-school approach must be successful if the students have the 'correct' attitudes in post-curriculum testing.

¹ Gleeson, C, Kearney, S, Leung, L and Brislane, J, *Respectful Relationships Education in Schools: Evidence Paper*, Our Watch, December 2015, p.23.

² *Ibid.* p.23.

Sue Dyson (Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society) has suggested that essential criteria for successful RRE projects include the use of critical pedagogy, a process orientation to change and a strengths-based approach to collaborating with project partners.³ These criteria resonate with our interest in developing strong and respectful relationships with school leaders and staff who are engaged as equal partners in the project of cultural change.

When evaluating our three-year pilot project in three Melbourne secondary schools, our priority was to emphasise our work toward this whole-of-school approach, its challenges and successes. Alongside feedback from students we sought the views of school leaders and staff to help us examine the quality of our relationships, the usefulness of our tailored approach, and each school's understanding of the impact of the project on their strategic direction, professional capacity and culture.

Our evaluation report outlines our findings in relation to these questions. The accompanying video features edited evaluation interviews with school leaders and teaching staff from our three partner schools.

4. References

Report:

We Can Do It: Respectful Relationships in Schools Project: Evaluation Report, Good Samaritan Inn, Melbourne, 2015.

<http://www.partnersinprevention.org.au/wp-content/uploads/GSI-Prevention-Report-2015.pdf>

Video:

We Can Do It: Respectful Relationships in Schools Project: Staff Reflections, Good Samaritan Inn, Melbourne, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=la8pvCv3l-Q&feature=youtu.be>

5. Biography

Dr Christine Dew coordinates the *We Can Do It: Respectful Relationships in Schools* project at Good Samaritan Inn, a crisis accommodation service for women and children escaping family violence. She is a former senior lecturer in Gender, Sexuality and Diversity Studies at La Trobe University with extensive experience in community development in education, women's, youth, Indigenous and remote community settings.

³ Dyson, S, *Witness Statement: Royal Commission into Family Violence*, August, 2015.