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HANDS ON LEARNING: ALIGNMENT WITH THE EVIDENCE BASE

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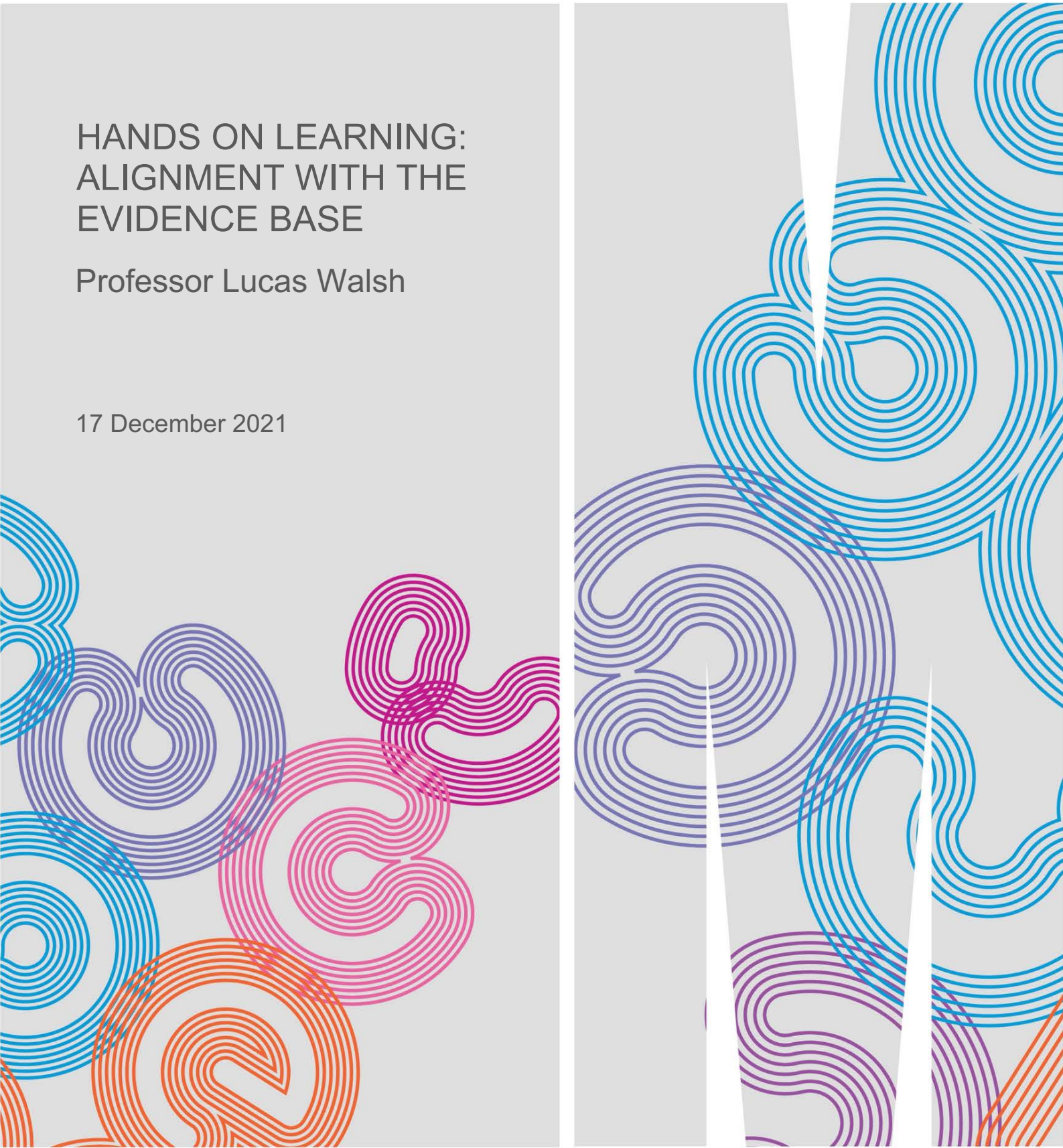

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The Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) is a multi-disciplinary research centre based in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. We undertake research into the social, political and economic factors, forces and trends that affect young people's lives. By focusing on issues that affect young people, and on developing policy and educational responses, CYPEP aims to identify the challenges to, and opportunities for, improved life outcomes for young people today and throughout their lives to build thriving communities.

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Introduction

This review of the alignment of the Hands on Learning program with the evidence base begins by setting the wider context of educational, psychological and sociological approaches and frameworks for developing social and emotional capabilities and resilience.

Context

A focus on social and emotional capabilities

In recent decades there has been an ascendance of educational thought and practice in the area of '21st century skills' and competencies. Although the development of these skills in formal education settings was seeded during the last century (Walsh 2016), they are referred to as 21st century skills and competencies 'to indicate that they are more related to the needs of the emerging models of economic and social development than with those of the past century, which were suited to an industrial mode of production' (Ananiadou & Claro, 2008, p. 5). They include learning and innovation skills (e.g. critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration), information, media & technology skills (e.g. media literacy) and life and career skills (e.g. social and emotional competencies) (Battelle for Kids, 2019; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). Kahn et al. (2012, p. 5) note that 'these skills are not just useful for the workplace but help to build cohesive communities with active citizens playing a role in civic life.'

They are also important in developing resilience. Skills such as social capability and emotional intelligence can foster and draw upon the powerful role of community and social relationships in young people. Broadly defined 'as positive adaptation despite adversity' (Bottrell, 2013), resilience refers to 'competence when under stress. Resilient children may show competence dealing with threats to their well-being' (Ungar, 2008, p. 220). But resilience is conceptualised in different ways (Ungar, 2008). As 'a culturally and contextually sensitive construct' (Ungar, 2008, p. 234), Ungar challenges

> 'a dominant view of resilience as something individuals have, rather than as a process that families, schools, communities and governments facilitate. Because resilience is related to the presence of social risk factors … there is a need for an ecological interpretation of the construct that acknowledges the importance of people's interaction with their environments' (Ungar, 2013, p. 1).

The work of Ungar and others has shown that 'the resilience of individuals growing up in challenging contexts or facing significant personal adversity is dependent on the quality of the social and physical ecologies that surround them, as much, and likely far more, than personality traits, cognitions or talents' (Ungar, 2013, p. 1). In short, resilient people 'need resilient families and communities' (Ungar, 2008, p. 221). This social ecological perspective frames much of this review.

Curriculum and education frameworks

The Australian Curriculum highlights the development of personal and social capability as students learn to understand both themselves and other people. This encompasses emotional awareness, self-regulation, persistence, and the ability to empathise and build positive relationships with others in a variety of contexts. As the Australian Curriculum acknowledges, the words ‘personal/emotional’ and ‘social/relational’ are ‘used interchangeably throughout the literature and within educational organisations. The term “social and emotional learning” is also often used, as is the SEL acronym’ (ACARA, n.d.).

One notable framework is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Framework. Developed in the USA, this framework seeks to create a foundation for applying SEL strategies to communities (CASEL, n.d.). At the core is social and emotional learning, surrounded by the development of self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness, and self-awareness. CASEL’s framework suggests key roles for the school, family, and community partnerships in social and emotional learning. This framework implicitly embodies the kind of social ecology described above, in which social and emotional learning is connected and entwined with schools, families, carers, and the wider community. These are salient to the following review of the alignment of the Hands on Learning program with the evidence base.

This review examines key features of Hands on Learning. It examines alternative education models, approaches to skills development, fostering belonging, youth agency and participation in school settings and the wider social ecology, before concluding with some final strengths and considerations.

Hands on Learning

Key features and components

Hands on Learning has been running for 22 years. It is a program that provides practical and engaging education opportunities for students who are disengaged from learning. Hands on Learning operates in more than 122 schools across four states in Australia. Two thirds of participating schools are considered rural or regional, and the majority are in the lowest socio-economic areas of the country.

Hands on Learning students spend up to a day a week in the program, working in small groups on practical projects. The program has an explicit focus on cultivating social and emotional skills, guided by Artisan Teachers, and supports students to move horizontally between the Hands on Learning program and the mainstream classroom.

The Hands on Learning program has five main components:

1) A place to belong: Students partake in the program in a dedicated, safe space within the school. They also play an active role in building, developing, and maintaining the Hands on Learning space.

2) People to belong to: The program has a small cohort of <10 students with two artisan teachers skilled at relationship-building to support the environment. The cohort work together for the whole day during at least two terms. It is structured by staff to achieve team and individual learning through practical projects. The team and environment and nature of projects completed as part of a group connect students to the local community environment.

3) Real things to do: Students partake in purposeful and most often group projects that help them develop practical, real-world skills. Students have the agency to design and deliver projects with purpose, while developing both technical skills and critical social and emotional skills.

4) A chance to give back: Students deliver projects that give back to the community, giving them the opportunity to contribute and build self-esteem.

5) Reflective practice: Ongoing and structured reflective practice underpins all aspects of the process, which has an explicit focus on growing social and emotional capabilities. Through daily Focus Plans, students set individual goals, support each other to achieve those goals, and reflect on, provide, and receive feedback on their growth. Focus Plans are shared with classroom teachers to build alignment between achievements in Hands on Learning and mainstream classrooms.

For schools, Hands on Learning staff provide a strategy for engaging students through the provision of an evidence-informed methodology, structured and ongoing implementation support, professional development and mentoring for Artisan Teachers, a learning portal with tools and resources, alongside ongoing data collection.

Outcomes

Hands on Learning is focused on three key outcomes:

1) Students experience belonging and engagement at school; and

2) Students develop strong social and emotional skills. Hands on Learning cultivates a core and critical set of social and emotional skills grounded in the CASEL framework:

- Self-awareness: recognising emotions and strengths.
- Self-management: managing and regulating emotions, setting goals and learning persistence in the face of challenge.
- Responsible decision-making: planning, understanding consequences, and making good decisions.
- Social awareness: understanding the perspective of others and cooperating effectively.
- Relationship skills: getting along with others and managing conflict well.

3) Students finish school well: Supporting students make positive post-school transitions.

Alternative Education Features

A brief overview

This section examines the assumptions underpinning alternative education programs that are run within and outside of schools. It also reviews ‘what works’ in SEL programs and approaches more broadly that promote student agency, voice and project-based learning. It seeks to locate Hands on Learning in relation to these characteristics and features.

Assumptions underpinning alternative education programs

In a review of alternative programs separate from schooling (rather than programs run within mainstream schools) te Riele (2007), a leading expert in alternative education, provides a basis for evaluating alternative education programs. Two different conceptualisations underpin many educational alternative programs. The first takes a ‘youth at risk’ perspective, while the second takes a ‘learning choice’ perspective (p. 55).

Youth at risk programs focus on developing measurable indicators of risky behaviour, seeking to provide an intervention aimed at rehabilitation of disengaged and/or marginalized students. Implicit in this approach is a deficit model whereby youth behaviours are seen as a problem to be fixed.

In contrast, learning choice approaches focus on changing educational practice using alternative forms of education that seek to empower and engage students through curriculum or different teaching approaches. The aim is to change educational processes to suit the young person, rather than change the young person to suit the educational process. This type of program assumes that all young people have the capacity to learn and attain school credentials, provided suitable educational conditions are in place. Importantly, a second assumption is that mainstream forms of education are sometimes inappropriate to the needs of some students (Holdsworth, 2004; te Riele, 2007, p. 56). This second approach broadly aligns with Hands on Learning.

Te Riele’s (2007) review identifies two aspects of effective alternative programs, particularly those targeting ‘marginalised youth’ in secondary level settings: the locus of change; and the stability of the program. The locus of change relates to the extent to which a program is focused on changing the young person, on one end, versus a focus on changing educational provision on the other. Stability relates to the capacity for a program to deliver its services, with short term, low stability programs at one end, versus long term high stability programs at the other. The latter approaches to alternative education, which focus on changing the nature of educational provision and with high stability, have ‘been shown in the US to have more pronounced and long-lasting successful outcomes’ (te Riele, 2007, pp. 64–65).

Hands on Learning broadly aligns with changing the nature of educational provision, while seeking to avoid deficit assumptions of its learners within the framework provided by te Riele.

Notably, Hands on Learning is embedded within the school rather than in a separate setting. This helps to maintain students' connection to the school and seeks to change the learning environment to better meet the needs of students. Students spend one day

a week and at least two terms in Hands on Learning, before transitioning back to the classroom. There is flexibility for increased and longer participation if that best meets the needs of the student.

Approaches to skills development

McGregor et al. (2015) examined programs targeting students excluded from standard schooling, certain findings of which are salient to this review. The two programs examined were Boronia Flexi School, a Years 7–12 alternative school, and Kurrajong College, a mainstream high school which runs alternative programs for students who struggle to fit in at school. These programs worked well in engaging students by building the curriculum around students' personal interests, setting topics according to students' individual needs and establishing meaningful connections between projects and students' lived experiences.

The researchers identified that 'greater layers of "meaning" for young people can be found in educational programs that go beyond developing basic skills to allow them to explore their personal and social selves' (p. 612). Such approaches foster

> 'a "meaningful" education: one that builds a bridge between their personal contexts and needs and a desired future. It is our view that such educational "bridges" need to be constructed in such a way as to avoid deficit assumptions of young people; assist them in filling in the gaps in their formal education; extend their educational horizons and plot pathways of possibility towards the future' (p. 613).

The assumption of the learner also avoids a deficit approach. 'Meaningful' learning occurs when the two schools worked from

> 'the principle of knowing their students, thereby enabling the teachers to develop PLPs [personal learning plans]; support the students to develop their own learning goals and identify knowledge and skills that are relevant to the students' worlds beyond the classroom. Some of this is project based and some of it is integrated into current units of work. Some of the work is personal, some completed for teachers and some is displayed through public presentation such as exhibitions. However, in each instance, the student is located at the centre of all decisions. Furthermore, what the teachers in these schools are striving for is for something that is not seen as a "dumbed down" curriculum' (p. 621).

This student-centred and project-based approach aligns with Hands on Learning. Students work on shared projects in small groups, while having the opportunity to pursue individual strengths and interests, as well as collaborating with peers.

Project-based learning (PBL) more generally is an effective way of engaging students, offering them agency in their learning, and developing social and emotional capabilities. PBL is a student-centred form of instruction in which 'learning is context-specific, learners are involved actively in the learning process and they achieve their goals through social interactions and the sharing of knowledge and understanding' (Kokotsaki, Menzies, & Wiggins, 2016, p. 267–268). Kokotsaki, Menzies, and Wiggins (2016, p. 274) provide the following recommendations for effective project based learning:

- Student support - including emphasis on time management and use of

technological resources.

- Teacher support - regular networking and development opportunities; support from management.
- Effective group work - equal levels of agency and participation.
- Balancing instruction and independent inquiry - ensuring that students have the knowledge and skills to engage in independent work.
- Assessment based on reflection, self and peer evaluation.
- Student choice and autonomy.

These recommendations are readily applicable to Hands on Learning and its ongoing development. In particular, the Hands on Learning methodology includes ongoing professional learning and support for Artisan Teachers, group projects with opportunities for agency and requirements for collaboration, and embedded reflection, self and peer evaluation through the Focus Plans.

Fostering belonging and participation in school settings

In a review of contextual factors that contribute to student retention in alternative education, schools are seen to be 'sanctuaries when they offered physical, emotional and psychological safe spaces fostered a sense of community … and employed flexible behavioural supports' (O'Gorman, Salmon & Murphy, 2016, p. 536), such as resolving conflict through discussion rather than through punitive measures (p. 544). Participants attributed their changes in attitude towards school to a perceived sense of belonging, notably manifest through experiencing acceptance. They enjoyed attending school, describing it as 'my place' (p. 542).

School belonging entails 'a sense of psychological membership at school' and 'represents the extent to which students feel accepted, respected, included, and supported in their school environment' (Allen et al., 2021, p. 139). When students have a sense of school belonging, they feel confident that they *fit in* and feel safe at school' (Allen et al., 2021, pp. 139–140, authors' emphasis). School belonging can have powerful effects on student health and wellbeing, as well as academic outcomes (Allen et al., 2018).

Allen and colleagues argue that fostering belonging is the shared responsibility of 'the whole school community inclusive of parents, staff, teachers, students, and school leadership. Every individual within a school community can help create a climate of belonging' (Allen et al., 2021, p. 140). Echoing the social ecological approach above, this insight has important implications for alternative education programs based in schools that have dedicated staff and which are based on learner choice: programs like Hands on Learning ideally actively attend to fostering belonging *within* the school community rather than *parallel to* it. Hands on Learning actively encourages belonging in a range of ways. The activities are often focused on projects that contribute to the school environment, such as building furniture, landscaping or repairing facilities. Belonging is also fostered through peer relationships and giving students opportunities to experience success and different ways of learning.

Fostering student voice and agency

A theme running through the literature is that effective programs empower students to have agency in their learning through learning choice and open-ended project-based work that encourages them to become invested in their learning (Das 2020). Learners appreciate 'having choice and control in what they learned and created in the project' and opportunities 'to make decisions in how they learned' (DeMink-Carthew & Olofson, 2020, p. 1). Students further respond positively 'when their voice [is] heard' (O'Gorman, Salmon, & Murphy, 2016, p. 545).

Alternative school-based programs can work well in providing alternative spaces for participation and the expression of youth voice. Conventional schools sometimes operate in a way that enables some students' participation over others, with the least confident and engaged students also the least likely to be heard (Black, 2012; Walsh & Black, 2009). But the evidence suggests that young people who play an active role in their schools and learning have better levels of social and emotional competence, a greater feeling of autonomy and better communication and collaborative skills (Halsey et al., 2006). They also have a stronger sense of themselves as learners (Fielding & Rudduck, 2002). Enabling possibilities for students in alternative education programs to participate in wider school life is valuable, taking into consideration their levels of confidence and engagement.

Teachers play a powerful role. Research into one SEL program highlights the benefits of teachers relating to students as individuals and caring for their well-being, 'which contributed to a climate of emotional safety in which they could reflect on their experiences' (Strahan & Poteat, 2020, p. 13).

As a key design feature of the Hands on Learning program, the low student-to-teacher ratio provides a foundation for developing high-quality, meaningful relationships as a driver of agency and learning. This, combined with the student-centred model, is arguably one of the greatest strengths of Hands on Learning.

Returning to the wider social ecology

Returning to the importance of the wider social ecologies in which students live and learn, an evaluation of KidsMatter, an Australian program providing a framework for addressing primary children's mental health, is relevant to this review. The program has four components: creating a positive school community; providing SEL learning; working with parents and carers; and helping children with mental health difficulties.

SEL is integrated into everyday interactions and practices, involving

> 'active collaboration between education staff, families and children, potentially facilitating change in culture and climate that not only supports and reinforces SEL, but mental health and wellbeing in general. This systematic approach helps create a supportive, integrated, comprehensive and coordinated context for effective SEL implementation and decreases the risk of piecemeal and fragmented approaches' (Littlefield et al., 2017, p. 301).

Noting that there is often 'a focus on the effectiveness of individual SEL programs, substantial evidence exists for the utility of adopting a whole-setting approach, which subscribes to the values and principles of SEL, and reinforces SEL in everyday

interactions within and outside of the school setting (Dix et al. 2012; Graetz et al. 2008; Roffey, 2016; Rowe et al., 2007)' (Littlefield et al., 2017, p. 303). This reinforces the evidence that successful SEL programs need to be integrated into the wider social ecologies in which children and young people live, requiring systematic approaches, policies and practices.

Hands on Learning has an explicit focus on cultivating and teaching social and emotional skills, via Focus Plans that set individual learning goals, and through ongoing modeling, feedback and scaffolding from Artisan Teachers. Social and emotional learning is embedded in and integrated with practical, real-world projects. We shall return to this in the final section of this review below.

The specific cultural milieu in which alternative education programs operate is important. A review of KidsMatter adapted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders highlights the need to be culturally aware and adapt SEL ideas to local contexts. The authors rightly argue that 'culturally responsive SEL requires a "two-way" approach negotiated with local communities on the basis of mutual learning and respect for Indigenous cultures' (Dobia & Roffey, 2017, p. 313).

The researchers further observe that 'SEL programs, particularly those that employ the CASEL framework, are widely assumed to be universally applicable. However, as the majority of "evidence based" SEL programs have been deployed and tested in urban contexts in the USA, claims for universal effectiveness remain untested' (Dobia & Roffey, 2017, p. 318). Context matters. Program flexibility and cultural sensitivity are essential to support engagement, along with the active involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander facilitators. Furthermore,

> 'To promote cultural responsiveness SEL teaching must acknowledge and work with differences in communication and relationship styles. Sharing planning and co-facilitation of SEL between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous teachers is ideal for promoting culturally inclusive teaching and learning. Exploration of values associated with SEL approaches is necessary for developing culturally responsive practice. An interactive, egalitarian pedagogy, such as the cooperative learning approach identified above, is likely to be effective for working across differences and seems well suited to the autonomous communication styles of Aboriginal children' (Dobia & Roffey, 2017, p. 321).

Dobia and Roffey challenge those SEL programs which 'assume universal norms for the development of social and emotional skills' that could 'reinforce dominant cultural values' (p. 328). Inclusive and participatory methodologies can to some extent ameliorate the risk of imposing values and assumptions 'from above'. The need for cultural sensitivity and appropriate practices has wider salience to the application of programs like Hands on Learning across different cultural settings; notably, Hands on Learning works with schools to tailor the program's approach and activities to local contexts.

Concluding Observations

Strengths and considerations

The Hands on Learning program focuses on important aspects related to the research outlined in this review, including emphases on problem solving, social and relationship management. It seeks to foster resilience that draws on a social ecology of actors, including dedicated teachers and opportunities for community engagement. It aims to be grounded in the development of good relationships with peers and educators and is intentional in its strategies to foster self-regulation and provide opportunities for greater connectedness to community. Connections to the community need to be embedded and intentional as these social ecologies play an important role in the development of resilience in the broader sense discussed in this review. Programs also need to be context-sensitive to the needs of the learner and community in which they reside, as Hands on Learning seeks to do by focusing on contributing to the community, underpinned a service-learning philosophy. Students actively contributive to the school community, often providing meals, gardening, or building to support to other organisations and community members.

At the same time, it is important to note both the physical location of such alternative learning programs within schools, as well as within the curriculum, both of which need to be cohesively integrated. There should be pathways through which students can move horizontally between such alternative education programs and mainstream school learning settings. Being embedded within schools, Hands on Learning provides such pathways, with students generally attending for up to a day each week.

Fostering the development of emotional and social capabilities, and belonging and engagement, can reduce the possibility of students disengaging from learning or exiting from school. Belonging is a rapidly growing field of research, with multiple definitions which come from a variety of fields, such as educational psychology and sociology. Discussion of these lies beyond the scope of this review but need to be critically considered as an underpinning goal of any educational program such as Hands on Learning. While Hands on Learning has the fundamentals in place, ongoing attention to this emerging research into how belonging is defined, fostered, and measured will benefit the program moving forward.

It is also important that programs such as these are targeted and not overloaded with having to solve all the challenges students face, from the scholastic to the social. Programs need to be adaptable to contexts and ultimately deliver good outcomes for the student. Students also need experienced, knowledgeable educators to guide them. Where some Artisan Teachers participating in Hands on Learning have not necessarily received a formal teaching qualification (as noted earlier in this review), it should be noted that teaching is a highly professional, skilled activity that requires deep professional learning. Seeking at least one qualified teacher to work with students is rightly recommended by Hands on Leaning.

A final and closely related point in the literature is that programs seeking to introduce different ways of teaching and social and emotional learning need time and resources to be effective (Frydenberg & Muller, 2017; Carroll et al., 2017). As a corollary of adequate

resourcing, school culture is also a key enabling factor. The support and advocacy of school leadership in creating a school culture that is open to, and integrate, alternative education approaches such as Hands on Learning is critical to the viability and success of school-based alternative education programs. While the Hands on Learning model seeks to provide implementation support and ensure adequate resources are available, implementation of the program is led by schools; consequently, to be effective, programs need the support of school leadership and be integrated into school culture.

With these considerations in mind, the evidence outlined in this brief review broadly supports the aims and approach of Hands on Learning. This program provides the basis for students for whom conventional school approaches are not the best fit and enables pathways into school environments that can deliver positive outcomes for such students.

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