Addressing the social and emotional learning needs of Sudanese students

Similar to other western suburban schools in Melbourne, this college has increased its enrolments of Sudanese refugees. Through several focus group and student action group meetings, this Action Research Project addressed the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) needs of African new arrivals. Over the course of several weeks, 23 Sudanese students discussed their cultural identities and school experiences. The group then decided to consolidate the shared information into a jointly-created multilingual podcast, readily available to incoming Sudanese students and their families. In this action research project, the group self-reported on five SEL core competencies pre- and post-podcast development, and overall improvements in SEL were identified. Qualitative data recorded during group discussions also signified a notable strengthening in purpose, agency and overall school connectedness, with students voicing a keen willingness to engage in similar future actions. To sustain this project, a 2013 initiative to celebrate Sudanese culture to the wider school community was recommended and an initial framework was offered. A critical reflection on the action research project’s processes and outcomes, guided by the change and leadership literature, was then presented. Keeping a regular journal was also identified as a worthwhile process, as it helped shape the project’s cycles and phases and was a source of regular reflection. Finally, it was recommended that other researchers recognise that Sudanese students are equipped with a social capacity to lead and work collaboratively to institute effective school change.

INTRODUCTION
Overview and Rationale
In addition to helping foster academic and behavioural success, twenty-first century secondary school teachers are also responsible for facilitating the social and emotional learning (SEL) of their students. In its broadest capacity, SEL is recognised as a process to develop fundamental skills for life effectiveness (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2011). This facet of wellbeing has met recent challenges following the changing face of multiculturalism in Australia. One group that forms part of this culture shift is Sudanese refugees who have entered Australia under its Humanitarian Program. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that these students face significant SEL difficulties and often enter mainstream classrooms that are ill-equipped to provide effective SEL support (Matthews, 2008). Research further encourages schools to present culturally diverse students opportunities to discuss their identities and experiences, as this is one way to improve their school connectedness and overall SEL (e.g., Warin, 2011).

School Context
This action research project was undertaken in 2012 at a Catholic girls’ secondary college of 740 students, located in a suburb of significant ethnic and community diversity west of Melbourne. The 2008 Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage
and Disadvantage ranks the suburb as Greater Melbourne’s second most disadvantaged locality, in the most underprivileged Council in Greater Melbourne (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The 2012 sociocultural demographics of the college are therefore not surprising: 155 students were born overseas; students identify with at least 13 different religious beliefs; and nearly 72 per cent of students live in the City Council suburbs.

In 2011, 22 students enrolled at the college were granted Temporary Humanitarian Visas (THVs) subclass 202 (Global Special Humanitarian), a category issued to individuals subjected to human rights abuses in their home country (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012). The number of THV holders at the College has since risen to 39 (Catholic Education Commission of Victoria, 2012).

Background Information

The Sudan is a multicultural country with over 130 living languages and 400 tribal dialects, several of which are represented in Australia (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). While this project acknowledges this diversity, the college’s Sudanese students all affiliate with Arabic or Dinka ethnicities and are therefore referred to as one broader cultural group. Concerns involving the SEL and wellbeing of Sudanese THV and ex-THV holders at the college who currently hold, or have held, refugee status had surfaced at a student-based Justice and Democracy Forum (JDF) where some Sudanese students representing the college spoke about fear of discrimination from others, and feeling isolated and disconnected after struggling to maintain school-based relationships.

Similar concerns had arisen following conversations with parents. In particular, during parent–teacher interviews, some caregivers of English as a Second Language (ESL) Sudanese students discussed how their children reported occasional schooling problems, including social withdrawal, despondency, and an inability to adapt effectively to various academic demands and deadlines. Dialogue with staff further confirmed the importance of addressing the social and emotional needs of the college’s Sudanese students, and highlighted instances of acculturative stress, with the Sudanese students often struggling to identify with their new school culture (personal communication, June 20, 2012).

The college’s 2012 Annual Implementation Plan (AIP) offers further insight into the SEL needs of the school’s Sudanese students. In 2012, the AIP, drawn from the college’s 2011–2014 School Improvement Framework, categorically connects school improvement to the core values of the college and outlines Wellbeing as a Strategic Intention, with an overarching goal to ‘embody the importance of connecting learning, teaching and wellbeing of all members of the College community’, asserting the importance of meeting the growing cultural and diversity needs of its students through this goal. A recent informal discussion with the Principal (personal communication, June 21, 2012) highlighted that one impetus driving this 2012 AIP wellbeing focus shift was the rise in refugee background students and also the wellbeing concerns and challenges observed, including regular inattentiveness in class, disputes with others, and high truancy rates.

Regular observations and data have therefore shifted and shaped the priority and focus of the 2012 AIP Wellbeing Strategic Intention, which serves to provide a conceptual framework for staff to recognise the importance of student health and wellbeing and ensure it is an ongoing educational imperative. The evidence indicates that students, staff and parents within the school community are recognising, in Sudanese students, various wellbeing concerns that are permeating the school culture.

Project Aims

The project’s long-term goal was to improve the SEL needs of all Sudanese students in the school. The short-term aims were to:

• develop an improved understanding of the SEL needs of the college’s Sudanese students
• encourage Sudanese students to share their cultural identities and school experiences
• inform incoming Sudanese students and their parents about the college
• increase the voice and agency of Sudanese students through focus groups and collaborative student action groups.

These aims were guided by an overarching research question: *Will the process whereby Sudanese students share their cultural identities and experiences, and then present this information to others, improve their SEL?*

In providing these students opportunities to discuss culture, it was anticipated that their sense of purpose, self-worth and identity would also benefit.

Several steps were associated with meeting the short-term goals of the project:
• investigate, through initial needs-based processes, which experiences the Sudanese students wanted to discuss, and with whom they wanted to share this information
• invite students to report on their own levels of SEL, as identified through the five SEL core competencies (CASEL, 2011)
• produce, collaboratively, an information document for incoming Sudanese students and their families to explain the importance of Sudanese cultural identity and college experiences
• give students an opportunity to readdress their SEL levels towards the end of the project, and note any emergent differences from their earlier self-reports.

**Project Facilitation**
My current Positions of Leadership (POLs) at the college are Head of English and Justice Coordinator. In the latter role, I have worked closely with the Literacy Coordinator, ESL Coordinator and Literacy Support Staff to help address the literacy and language acquisition needs of ESL and mainstream students. The latter role has also enabled me to work with students to explore multiculturalism, democracy and local solutions to entrenched poverty. Both POLs have afforded me the chance to work closely with students from socioculturally diverse backgrounds who sometimes struggle to access the college’s resources and to maintain healthy social relationships at school.

**The Collaborative Group**
The collaborative group established to lead the project consisted of me, the Literacy Coordinator, and a participant group of junior and senior Sudanese students. Two Year 11 Sudanese students and two Year 12 Sudanese students also helped lead the project. The embedded processes of the project, as defined by the student-strong collaborative group, followed the broadly recognised understanding that action research is a significant vehicle for systematic educational change that empowers students and teachers alike (Johnson, 2008).

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**The Growing Importance of SEL**
This project’s *theory of action* was guided by a growing body of research on the importance of SEL in secondary school education (Wentzel, 2012). With its ability to develop life effectiveness, a number of SEL improvement frameworks have recently emerged in the literature and the teaching of SEL skills is now recognised as key to helping create and maintain safe and productive learning environments. Leading the contemporary perspectives on SEL is CASEL (2011), an organisation that identifies five SEL core competencies schools should address: *self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.* There has also existed broad agreement in contemporary education literature that strong SEL underscores the enhancement of effective student outcomes (e.g., Lazarus & Sulkowski, 2011). For example, in their investigation on SEL, Bird and Sultmann (2010) reported that students with high SEL had distinctive personal and group competencies and maintained excellent relationships with others.

In the secondary school education sector, a surge in the number of programs aimed at maximising SEL benefits has been reported. An investigation by Kress and Elias (2006) identified three major
types of SEL learning programs – classroom-based delivered by teachers, classroom-based conducted by researchers, and multi-component. The authors further reported a significant positive impact on students in multiple areas across all three types, affirming that SEL programs can be successfully integrated into routine teaching practice. In their meta-analysis of 213 Australian school-based, universal SEL programs, Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) documented ongoing improvements in social and emotional skills, academic performance, behaviours and attitudes in comparison to controls. The authors further reported that all reviewed SEL programs led to strong positive influence on outcomes. With respect to this project, addressing SEL clearly underscores the necessity to attend to students’ social and emotional states in order to strengthen opportunities for regular and ongoing success.

The SEL of Australian Refugee Background Students

In 2005 Sudanese refugees were the largest single group of arrivals to Australia under the humanitarian immigration program (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005). This movement is representative of growing worldwide displacement. In response to these resettlement patterns, studies on refugee students’ social and emotional wellbeing are emerging. For example, Davidson, Murray, and Schweitzer (2008) investigated the challenges of the migration experience and, following semi-structured interviews, identified several difficulties facing refugees shortly after entering an Australian school, including, internalisation of negative symptoms, acculturative stress, and reduced self-esteem. In another study, Bond et al. (2007) reported a range of problems facing Middle Years Australian refugee students, including difficulties with social integration and maintaining healthy school-based relationships. A further study by Tangen (2009) documented, following several administered questionnaires, high anxiety levels in a small group of Burmese–Australian refugee students, and poorer states of mental health and wellbeing in comparison to non-refugee controls. Finally, Kaplan (2009) responded to growing concerns that refugee students underperforming at school were receiving inaccurate diagnoses of intellectual disability, inconsistent with their normal levels of functioning. Kaplan confirmed this view, reporting that refugee students often present with problems in cognitive performance and emotional functioning that are often misinterpreted as signs of intellectual impairment, but are a direct result of exposure to traumatic events.

With this growing breadth of research on the refugee experience, a picture begins to emerge – when refugee background students, following significant disruption, commence secondary schooling, a number of SEL needs become apparent. As of 2012, only a handful of Australian studies have investigated social and emotional wellbeing in secondary school refugee background students. Momentum, however, is clearly gathering with the importance of such research becoming increasingly evident.

Cultural Identity and SEL

To begin addressing the observed SEL needs of the college’s Sudanese students, this project drew on growing evidence that identifying with one’s own culture can improve social and emotional wellbeing. Banks (2004) noted that integrating diversity and citizenship education into curriculum can enhance and facilitate cultural acceptance by clarifying community identities and instilling an overall appreciation of multicultural practices. Of further note, Mellor and Corrigan (2004) reported marked increases in the social and emotional skills of Indigenous Australian secondary school students, including heightened self-esteem and the development of positive relationships with others, following outward expressions of Indigenous culture. The authors further recognised that benefits extended beyond the immediate school setting as the broader community developed a heightened awareness of traditional Indigenous practices. Therefore, as an initial framework, the acknowledgement of cultural identity, provides a practical capacity for the college’s culturally diverse students, such as the Sudanese, to develop their SEL through strengthening their identity and relationship skills.

Engaging students in regular dialogue is another approach to help Sudanese youth identify with their culture. A study by Poppitt and Frey (2007) reported, following semi-structured interviews, that
Sudanese students living in Brisbane felt that having opportunities to talk about their heritage and cultural identities would help them better immerse into the school climate. This project, therefore, adopted the approach that giving Sudanese students the chance to talk about their cultures and their college experiences, and then sharing this information with others, would increase their school agency and thereby benefit their overall SEL.

The Action Research and Change Literature
This project was regularly shaped and informed by action research and change literature. It was noted that the three key foundations for successful action research and subsequent change described by McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead (1996) were satisfied in this project, as the action was a systematic and critical enquiry; an informed, intentional and committed form of action; and a process driven by a worthwhile purpose. The project was practitioner-driven, using a model whereby research is conducted in the researcher’s own educational practices (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007), and also aligned with the theoretical action research processes outlined in Takala (1994), namely inherent simplicity, self-reflection, collaborator reflection and entering regular dialogue with others.

In further addressing the literature, it became apparent that distributed leadership underscored this project, with the Literacy Coordinator and four senior Sudanese students assuming leadership roles in association with me. Given that the very nature of the project was guided by needs-based discussions through student-centred focus groups, a democratic style of leadership, as outlined by Bush and Glover (2012), and Goleman (2004), was also employed to enable the participation of all. The project further fostered students’ sense of equality, an important process in ensuring collaborative group success (Stringer, 1999). At times, however, it was important to have employed an authoritative style to set up expectations and processes, and a coaching style to help guide the student leaders.

ACTION RESEARCH PHASES
From its early conception, the project evolved across five distinct phases:
1. Initial Processes
2. Action Cycle 1
3. Action Cycle 2
4. Action Cycle 3
5. Concluding Group Meeting

The action cycles were informed by the Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) model of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each cycle helping to increase my understanding of the project and its overarching aims and goals.

Phase 1: Initial Processes
I met with the Principal on 21 June 2012 to open initial discussions regarding the proposed aims, directions and timeline of the project. Some school data (i.e. observations and policy shifts) relevant to understanding the SEL needs of the college’s Sudanese students were also consulted. My ideas were met with enthusiasm and support affording me the opportunity to plan immediately and to recruit collaborative group members. Following this initial meeting and subsequent planning, it was anticipated that the project would run over the course of 13 school weeks between the final two weeks of Term 2 and Week 1 of Term 4.

Phase 2: Action Cycle 1 Needs-Based Analysis
This cycle that took place from Friday 20 July 2012 to Friday 17 August 2012, consisted of four stages and aimed at exploring the needs of the collaborative group.

Stage 1: First meeting
A meeting was held on Friday 20 July (the first week of Term 3) with 12 VCE Sudanese students who had expressed interest in forming part of the collaborative group. These students had responded to a College bulletin advertisement, which ran from Week 11 of Term 2 until early into Term 3. During this
gathering, I informed the students that I was interested, through the course of Term 3, in exploring the Sudanese culture and sharing this information with others. Students were keen to take part in the project and also asked if other Sudanese students could join. I was pleased with this reception, and with the possibility of involving other students; it helped meet my initial concern with the age similarity across the 12 volunteers, as I wanted a reasonably equitable representation of younger and older participants. After some further brief discussions, we agreed to meet every Friday, during lunchtime, throughout the course of Term 3. I also informed the group that any newly interested students were welcome to attend another brief meeting on Wednesday 25 July 2012.

Stage 2: Second meeting

Eleven more Sudanese students attended this meeting. It was noted that they were from Year 7 to Year 10 and therefore, along with the initial 12 senior students, better represented all the college year levels. During this meeting, the scope of the project was reintroduced and the goals and aims revisited. This group also agreed to meet weekly throughout the remainder of Term 3. As noted in my journal entry made shortly after this meeting, the students’ readiness to take part in the project was an excellent indicator of initial success.

The significant rise in participant numbers led to careful reflection on how best to accommodate all 23 students. After consulting Mertler (2006), who advocated that student action groups should consist of no more than 10 to 12 members, I decided to divide my cohort into two: Group 1 (G1) consisted of 12 students and Group 2 (G2) consisted of 11 students. Group membership was stratified to ensure a fairly equal distribution of junior and senior students. I then immediately revised my planning to ensure that enough time was available to meet weekly with both groups throughout Term 3 and early into Term 4.

Stage 3: Investigating SEL

Stage 3 involved exploring students’ self-reported levels of SEL. This occurred across two separate meetings: G1 met on Friday 27 July and G2 met on Friday 3 August. Shortly before G1 met, the Literacy Coordinator voiced interest in assisting with the project, and after a consultation with the Sudanese students, she was warmly welcomed. Two Sudanese students (one in Year 11 and one in Year 12) helped co-lead G1 and another two Sudanese students (one in Year 11 and one in Year 12) helped co-lead G2.

Three activities ran during each of the two Stage 3 meetings. In the first, students were introduced to the SEL core competencies (CASEL, 2011). To help prompt and stimulate conversation, the Literacy Coordinator and I used typed summaries, and a simplified SEL diagram. Students were then invited to ask any questions or address any uncertainties they held about SEL. In the second activity, students individually ranked each of the five competencies from most important to least important. This task required each student to collect five laminated yellow cards that boldly labelled each of the competencies on one side and offered a simple description of the competency on the reverse. This activity-oriented approach was adopted from Colucci (2007) who advocated ranking as a successful technique for student-based focus groups that deal with culturally-defined and sensitive areas of investigation. In the third activity, students were asked to record, on a 1 to 10 scale, their self-reported abilities across the five SEL core competencies; therefore, helping to set a pre-intervention benchmark of SEL. On this scale, a statement was presented about each competency and students were informed that a measure of 1 indicated ‘no ability’ and a measure of 10 indicated ‘excellent ability’. Students selected their responses without any assistance. In both the self-reporting and ranking exercises, the CASEL (2011) five core areas of competence were adopted because they are widely accepted in the contemporary wellbeing literature as encompassing essential SEL competencies (Durlak et al., 2011). After this stage, students were reminded about upcoming meeting times and locations.

Stage 4: Focus group meetings

Focus group sessions were held on Friday 10 August for G1 and Friday 17 August for G2 to ascertain
what cultural experiences the students wanted to share, and how to best present this information to others. A series of questions, constructed according to Rakow’s (2011) practical advice on developing focus group activities, helped prompt and guide discussions during these sessions. The elected Sudanese student leaders, along with the Literacy Coordinator, assisted facilitation of these meetings. Student responses were recorded using the iPhone 4 Voice Memos application and summaries of responses were also typed on a college laptop. Following Stage 4, students were reminded of upcoming Term 3 meetings for G1 on Wednesdays and G2 on Fridays.

Phase 3: Action Cycle 2 Student Action Groups
Taking place from Wednesday 22 August 2012 to Wednesday 12 September 2012, the second action cycle signalled a shift from the earlier needs-based focus, with students now clearly defined as a collaborative group of action researchers. This project phase was characterised by eight 50-minute action group meetings: four for G1 and four for G2. During these meetings, students actively brainstormed and shared ideas about their Sudanese cultural identities and experiences at the college, and then decided how best to present the information to newly arriving students. The group requested that the information be available to parents and guardians of all the college’s Sudanese students; and that the best way to share the information would be through a jointly-created multilingual podcast.

Phase 4: Action Cycle 3 Podcast Creation and Discussion
During this third action cycle from Friday 14 September 2012 to Friday 21 September 2012, G1 and G2 members critically reviewed and analysed the information collected during Action Cycle 2 meetings and the podcast script was then developed in English. On Friday 14 September the podcast dialogue was officially recorded with one student from G1 reading the script in English, and another student from G2 translating the text and then reading it in Dinka and Arabic. All three versions were recorded using iPhone 4 Voice Memos, then edited into one audio file using Audacity 2.0. The file was then checked by the Sudanese Liaison Officer and uploaded onto the college server in Week 1 of Term 4. Next, meetings were held for students to self-report again on their levels of SEL. Differences from the initial SEL self-reporting were identified. G1 met on Wednesday 19 September and G2 met two days later on Friday 21 September, the final day of Term 3. At the start of these meetings, students heard the podcast in all three language versions and discussions were then held and documented on their views about the processes and outcomes of creating and recording the podcast.

Phase 5: Concluding Group Meeting
All G1 and G2 students met on Friday 12 October (Week 1 of Term 4) to discuss the project and its successes. Responses were recorded using iPhone 4 Voice Memos and a college laptop.

Data Collection
Data was collected to monitor and evaluate progress towards project goals. It was hoped that, through observing and recording student engagement in each of the phases, a greater understanding and insight into the agency and SEL of Sudanese students would emerge. Data was recorded and collated through several methods, as reported below.

Action Cycle 1: Needs-Based Analysis Data
Following the initial two meetings of Phase 2: Action Cycle 1, I completed two lengthy journal entries that became a record of students’ interests in the project. It was particularly noted that students were keen to develop their agency and school connectedness by informing other Sudanese students, and their parents, about their identities and college experiences.

During Phase 2: Action Cycle 1: Stage 3 (Investigating SEL) and Phase 4: Action Cycle 3 (Podcast Creation and Discussion), students provided valuable SEL data. Firstly, they reported on their levels of SEL, as indicated by the five SEL core competencies, and this data was collected and tabulated and averages were then recorded for each of the five SEL areas. Separate averages were recorded for G1 and G2 and an overall average was calculated. Secondly, the students ranked the SEL competencies
from most to least important. The results of this exercise were also collated, tabulated and averages were recorded for G1 and G2, and an overall ranking result average was calculated.

It was decided that the information gathered during Stage 4 of Action Cycle 1 (Focus Group Meetings) on what cultural experiences the students wanted to share, and with whom they wanted to share it, would be both digitally recorded on an iPhone 4 and further summarised on a college laptop. Following this stage, I met with the Literacy Coordinator to reflect on the data and summarise students’ responses to the eight questions (see Findings from the Needs-Based Analysis below). Two of the four Sudanese group leaders cross-referenced our summaries to ensure they accurately reflected the student group discussions. Involving these student leaders was a valuable process, as it provided an opportunity to develop further their sense of purpose and agency. The final summaries were then rewritten as simplified statements, ready to present to all the Sudanese students during Action Cycle 2 meetings.

**Action Cycle 2: Student Action Group Data**
Given that the student-generated discussions during Action Cycle 2 ran over several weeks, a vast amount of data was generated, including several hours of recorded dialogue on approaches to developing, refining and sharing information about cultural identities and experiences. The data reflected the importance of this cycle, which functioned, essentially, as the project’s main intervention. The recorded information was summarised into a final typed document ready to present to G1 and G2 students. The Literacy Coordinator and one senior Sudanese student leader volunteered some time towards this lengthy process. The information was grouped into categories according to themes emerging throughout the action group sessions, and summary statements were then typed to reflect these key ideas accurately.

**Action Cycle 3: Podcast Creation and Discussion Data**
Given the shift towards the end of Action Cycle 2, whereby students decided to create and share a multilingual podcast, the summary statements were prepared and rewritten as a dialogue to be read in English, and then translated into spoken Dinka and Arabic. Before this script was presented to G1 and G2, it was checked by the Literacy Coordinator, all four of the Sudanese leaders, and the Principal.

**Concluding Group Meeting Data**
During this final Project Phase, students again self-reported on their levels of SEL. This data was collated and averages were calculated for G1 and G2, and an overall average was determined. Differences between students’ initial SEL self-reports (Action Cycle 1: Stage 3: Investigating SEL) and their post-intervention SEL self-reports (Concluding Group Meeting), were also recorded. This process of observing and calculating any differences in what students self-reported in their SEL capacity before and after the podcast, was created to help identify and investigate any changes that may have occurred as a result of the engaging and collaborating processes in which the Sudanese students were involved. Students were also invited to share their views about the project’s processes and outcomes. This information was digitally recorded using an iPhone 4 and later summarised by the Literacy Coordinator and me, and key emergent and recurring themes in the students’ responses were identified.

**FINDINGS AND OUTCOMES**
The findings and outcomes of the project are presented below. Given that a vast amount of raw qualitative (and some quantitative) data was collected during the three and a half months of the project, the summaries reported herein are of those findings considered most pertinent to exploring the key ideas inherent in the project.

**Students’ Self-Reported Levels of SEL**
Table 1 presents the averages for students’ self-reported SEL levels across the five core competencies before and after the intervention (Podcast Creation). Averages were calculated for G1 and G2 and an
overall average was also recorded. Table 1 illustrates that the Sudanese students self-reported higher levels of SEL post-intervention. This was apparent in both groups and across nearly every condition. The calculated differences in the Both Groups averages (Before and After Intervention) highlight that the greatest reported improvement was in responsible decision-making followed by relationship skills, social awareness, self-management and self-awareness.

Table 1 - Students’ Self-Reported Levels of SEL Before and After Intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Averages Before intervention</th>
<th>Averages After intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G1</td>
<td>G2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-management</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social awareness</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship skills</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible decision making</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ranking the SEL Core Competencies

Following the exercise whereby students individually ranked the SEL competencies, data was collated and averages were recorded. These calculated averages for G1 and G2 and both groups collectively are reported in Table 2. The data in Table 2 illustrates that, on average, students ranked relationship skills as the most important aspect of SEL and self-management as the least important.

Table 2 - Averages of Students’ Rankings of the Five SEL Core Competencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEL Competency</th>
<th>Averages*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship skills</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social awareness</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible decision-making</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-management</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 1 indicates the highest ranked competency; 5 indicates the lowest ranked competency.

Findings from the Needs-Based Analysis

Using eight questions to help stimulate discussion, students were asked to discuss their cultural identities and school experiences. Patterns in student’s verbal responses across both groups were identified, recorded and eventually consolidated into writing the podcast script. Summaries of findings (identified themes) for each of the eight questions are reported as follows:

1. What is great about being Sudanese?
   Students identified strong and positive familial bonds as a highlight of being Sudanese. One student in G1 commented that ‘Being Sudanese is all about family and helping each other out.’ Maintaining traditional customs and cultural practices was also highlighted as important to Sudanese heritage.

2. Why is it important to talk about where you come from?
   Students highlighted that discussing cultural origins is a positive and welcoming process that helps celebrate and share culture, heritage and identity with others. One student in G1 reported that ‘It shows that I am proud to become [sic] from Sudan and speak to others about it. It also helps me know that I cannot forget where I come from.’
3. What are the great things about coming to school at this college?
Three key themes emerged from responses to this question. Firstly, students reported ample opportunities to learn at school. Secondly, they commented that the academic work, while often challenging, can also be interesting. Finally, the students noted that the college had so far offered a range of extracurricular programs that they found ‘very exciting’ and ‘fun.’ Some students further reported that these activities afforded opportunities to share common interests, speak to new people and take positive risks.

4. What would other Sudanese students coming to the college need to know about the school?
Three key themes were identified in response to this question. Several students commented on the importance of Homework Club, with one G2 member mentioning that ‘Homework Club is something that students need to know about especially the younger ones that find it hard to get work done.’ Students also reported that newly arriving Sudanese students need to be aware that the college assists with English needs, especially for those who do not have a fluent grasp of the English language. Some students, especially those in Years 8 to 10, suggested that incoming Sudanese students need to know that the college’s camps provide several opportunities to meet new people, work in groups, problem solve and take responsible risks.

5. What do other people need to know about the Sudanese culture at the college?
One G1 member commented that ‘[The college] sometimes lets others know about the Sudanese students and makes sure that all students know about it.’ The key theme that emerged from discussion on this topic was the belief that the college embraces Sudanese culture. The group also felt that newly arriving students need to be aware that the college employs a Sudanese Officer who is readily available to assist with various educational needs.

6. What have you learnt at the college?
The Sudanese students identified three areas of learning. Firstly, they reported improved English skills since commencing at the college. One student in G2 responded that ‘My English is much better because I learnt lots in class ... it is important to tell others this too so that they know their English can get better.’ Secondly, students discussed their ability to communicate with others more effectively in and outside of the classroom. Thirdly, students reported that their experiences were sometimes challenging, with some identifying instances of bullying as often manifesting into periods of isolation and frustration. For example, one student in G1 noted, ‘when I do not understand what the teacher is telling me, I get upset. I then later worry that I will get in trouble.’

7. What is your understanding about the academic expectations held at the college?
Students listed four academic expectations that they felt were important to share with others. These were: homework is necessary; always ask questions whenever unsure; complete set work on time and inform the teacher before the due date if a deadline cannot be met; and revise work to help better consolidate what was learnt in class.

8. What would you like to share with others? Why is this important?
Students felt that the information shared during discussions on the previous seven topics needed to be communicated to others. They also suggested that others include all Sudanese students at the college, and all parents of currently enrolled, and incoming, Sudanese students. The group also recommended that parents be informed that homework is a valuable and regular process that must be incorporated as part of home routine. One student in G1 reported that ‘my family and relatives do not think homework is important’, while another student also in G1 responded that ‘I have no time to do homework because I always need to vacuum the whole house and cook for my four little sisters.’ Students also felt that the college should be recognised as a richly multicultural school with opportunities available to learn about different cultures. Finally, the group felt it was important to share that, alongside English, students can also study either Italian or Indonesian, and while often challenging, exploring another language is often an enjoyable part of the curriculum.
Discussions about the Podcast and the Project’s Overall Processes
A draft of the podcast script was presented to G1 and G2 and feedback was offered. The Sudanese student leaders, the Literacy Coordinator and I considered the several recommendations, and changes were made accordingly.

In the final meeting, all G1 and G2 students discussed the overall outcomes and benefits of the podcast-creation process. Conversations during this gathering revealed that students felt: the podcast, and the processes leading up to its creation, was well received; they reported feeling more involved in the life of the college; a greater sense of responsibility and agency following their overall involvement in shaping, creating and publishing the multilingual podcast; a sense of pride in their achievements; a genuine sense of ownership; and an interest in meeting in the future to continue working closely as a 2013 action group.

DISCUSSION, REFLECTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Following a critical reflection, a number of interpretations of the data were drawn. Overall, these highlighted some benefits of the project and provided further insights into the role of SEL in the college’s Sudanese students.

Getting Involved Helps Address SEL Needs
Engaging the Sudanese students in a structured process to discuss their cultural identities and experiences yielded many benefits. In particular, the self-reported increases in SEL competency were an indicator of some development in their overall states of wellbeing. Most of the students also shared how collaborating with others improved their ability to relate effectively and to empathise with teachers and other students. Upon closer reflection, it therefore appears that over the course of several weeks, intragroup decision-making and problem-solving processes provided the Sudanese students with the capacity to work productively and purposefully, and their self-reported SEL, as a result, signalled some improvement.

The positive changes in self-reported levels of SEL post-intervention, confirms the growing body of research indicating that increasing opportunities for multicultural students to develop their school agency and purpose improves social and emotional wellness (Wei, Liao, Heppner, Chao, & Tsun-Yao, 2012). In quoting one student: ‘working to make the file [podcast] made me proud and I knew I was a better part of the school’. The current project was therefore a critical and cultural method of helping Sudanese students to work together and to develop a genuine sense of school connection and agency.

Relationship Skills are Important
Students in both groups, on average, ranked Relationship Skills as the most important of the five SEL core competencies. Forming positive and healthy relationships and working with others was therefore a most highly valued and important part of the secondary school lives of the Sudanese students. Conversations during Action Cycles 2 and 3 further highlighted that students recognised specific sociocultural factors, including literacy and communication, as often preventing them from working and relating effectively with others. The literature on multicultural education offers similar findings that socioculturally diverse students often identify with having problematic relationship skills, yet are keen to work towards effectively developing them (Strohmeier, Spiel, & Gradinger, 2008).

Sudanese Students Welcome Opportunities to Work Collaboratively and Share with Others
The Sudanese students involved in the project worked productively in a collaborative setting and were keen to share information with others. One key recurring theme that emerged from the final group meeting discussions (Phase 5) was that students wanted regular gatherings in 2013 to work on bigger culturally-defined actions. They also voiced their heightened sense of responsibility and purpose at the end of the project and felt that this could be developed even further in the future.
This capacity to work together, engage in responsible decision-making and value one’s actions with purpose and worth are all key features of excellent SEL (CASEL, 2011), and supports the broader link between student engagement and overall wellbeing.

The Change Process
During the change process there was occasional resistance from some staff who felt that the amount of energy and effort invested in the project was a hindrance rather than a benefit. Some concern was expressed that the project was merely another extracurricular activity that ran during an already ‘crowded lunchtime’, while other concerns regarded students returning late to class and being distracted in class. Those individuals who voiced these concerns were invited to take part in the project and to recommend ways to improve its processes. According to Bolton (1986), adopting such proactive approaches helps in managing resistances that arise in conflict, and further promotes a school environment where all can feel positively involved. Towards the latter part of Term 4, I will present to staff a summary of the project and its proposed long-term benefits. Staff will then be invited to work with students in 2013 to help them celebrate their Sudanese cultural identities and showcase their heritage to the wider community. Regularly entering into dialogue with staff, commencing in December this year, will also be key to a successfully implemented 2013 action. Marsh (2000) advocated open communication as necessary to any change process, arguing that teachers must engage in regular conversation about uncertainties and broader issues regarding school improvement initiatives. It is therefore anticipated that having open channels of communication will act as a facilitating force for the proposed 2013 project involving Sudanese refugee diversity celebrations.

The action and research components of the project operated under a decentralised frame of leadership in which leadership was distributed between the Literacy Coordinator, four senior Sudanese students and me. The project was therefore built on the understanding that the college is a learning organisation that develops shared goals, encourages initiatives and establishes collaborative processes. This paradigm shift from a traditional ‘hierarchy of power’ to a ‘sharing and learning community’, suggests Doyle (2004), helps schools transform into cultures of inquiry and critique, and to places that procure and coordinate resources. Both of these transformative processes were relevant to the current project and to a possible whole-school celebration to be proposed for 2013. With the former, teachers could be afforded opportunities to ask difficult questions (for example, Why should Sudanese students be removed from classes, or return late to classes, after working on culturally-defined activities?). With the latter, a small group of teachers will be invited to meet as a team and plan, coordinate and allocate available resources, such as distributing funds and time-release allowances, to ensure coordinated and systematic success of the 2013 action. Fostering collaboration and shared decision-making in schools such as ours, ultimately empowers all staff and develops a culture receptive to community building and welcomed change. This would further help address a possibly held view that the preservation of cultural identity, based upon difference, is a divisive force at the college.

One of the more significant challenges I faced in the project was effectively manoeuvring through the tight timeframes to ensure the intervention was completed by early Term 4 so that outcomes and processes could be critically addressed. Fortunately, as documented in two journal entries, the project was described as a development of an existing school concept that did not ‘start from scratch’. As reported earlier, the college had briefly started the process of addressing the needs of its Sudanese students by broadening the Wellbeing Strategic Intention of the AIP, and this project aimed at developing this initial shift. The literature on educational innovation and change also supports this approach, with the finding that staff generally respond more productively to minor change within existing structures. For example, Elias, Zins, Graczyk, and Weissberg (2003) reported that the fastest and most effective improvements occur in schools that do not ‘break the mould’ (p. 313), but rather integrate needed change into established school processes.
Recommendations
The project had a positive impact on those involved, with its findings indicating that the wellbeing of the college’s Sudanese students can be developed through uncomplicated processes. Below are recommendations for continuing to address the SEL needs of the school’s Sudanese students:

1. Hold a whole-school celebration of Sudanese and refugee diversity that fosters an environment in which sociocultural differences between Sudanese and non-Sudanese students are identified and celebrated as part of the school’s culture, and that provide a practical capacity for Sudanese students at the college to develop their SEL and further strengthen their relationships with others.

2. Ensure that the project’s long-term goals are revisited in the future, that the work is continued and sustained, and that the Sudanese students work collaboratively to prepare for a range of activities during National Refugee Week (Friday June 14 2013 – Thursday June 20 2013), with students once again co-leading and co-facilitating selected actions.

3. Ensure maximum participation from the wider community, by inviting parents and teachers to help recognise and celebrate Refugee Week. This may involve designing and creating heritage costumes and instructing the students in traditional singing and dancing in order to foster parent involvement that research (Zhang, Hsu, Kwok, Benz, & Bowman-Perrott, 2011) shows increases student attainment and achievement, and reflects properties of successful partnership programs involving multicultural families.

4. Present a summary of the project’s findings and outcomes to staff at the college’s final staff meeting (Monday December 10 2012). Aside from to showcase the project; to help plan for a 2013 action, with staff invited to share ideas and offer recommendations; and to identify the reported benefits of the project and thereby better position staff to prepare for the 2013 initiative.

5. It is recommended that these students should rather be treated as assets for building a rich understanding on global connections and positive cultural experiences.

Conclusion
The results of this project highlight the college’s capacity to meet some of the SEL needs of its Sudanese students by simply working with them in an engaging and collaborative manner. The processes and its outcomes produced many benefits, including increased self-reported levels of SEL and an overall enthusiasm from the Sudanese students to continue working together in 2013. Discussions with the students also signified a clear strengthening in their overall agency and sense of purpose. While few studies exist in the education refugee literature on the SEL of Australian Sudanese students, one paper by Matthews (2008) states that secondary schools are a stabilising feature in the unsettled lives of young refugees, as they regularly provide positive experiences, healthy interaction and meaningful learning opportunities. The college is in a position to continue providing for the SEL needs of its growing cohort of Sudanese students through initiatives that increase student agency and help maintain positive and meaningful relationships.

References


