Social Wellbeing in Secondary Schools
Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education
Professor Helen Cahill, Dr Babak Dadvand, Keren Shlezinger, Anne Farrelly, Katherine Romei and Associate Professor Peggy Kern
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Part 1: Research project overview

About this Report

This report provides an overview of the data related to some of the social and relational challenges facing secondary school students. Focus group discussions provided opportunities for students to identify and discuss their key stressors and challenges. Survey data offered the opportunity for anonymous accounts in relation to a range of sensitive matters such as mental health, body image, and experiences of victimisation or perpetration of gender-based violence. Taken together, the data provides a rich account of the social and relational stressors, challenges and supports that students experience in their schools and beyond.

The data was collected within a larger research project investigating how individual, system and school related factors influence the implementation and impact of the Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships (RRRR) program in the state of Victoria. Entitled Determining Implementation Drivers in Resilience Education, this Australian Research Council Linkage Project is led by the Youth Research Centre (YRC) at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE), the University of Melbourne, in partnership with the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET), the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) and the Centre for Positive Psychology (MGSE). The 3-year study (2016-2019) aims to provide evidence-informed recommendations for education systems seeking to support optimal implementation of social and emotional learning and gender education in schools.

Determining Implementation Drivers in Resilience Education builds on previous collaborations between the Youth Research Centre (YRC), DET and VicHealth. In 2014, DET commissioned Professor Cahill to develop the RRRR program, an evidence-informed wellbeing education program designed for teachers in Victorian primary and secondary schools to develop students’ social, emotional and positive relationship skills. The RRRR program provides a research-informed social and emotional learning and gender education program for students from Foundation to Years 11-12 (Cahill, Beadle, Hingham, et al., 2016).

Research objectives of the larger study

The purpose of Determining Implementation Drivers in Resilience Education is to identify the factors that contribute to the successful uptake and implementation of the RRRR program in schools. This aim is pursued by identifying the factors affecting program uptake and impact, and by seeking to better understand the perceived value and need for social and emotional learning and gender education on the part of students who are the ultimate beneficiaries of the school wellbeing initiative.

This project therefore makes important contributions to more effective delivery of wellbeing education by addressing the following questions:

- What system factors and school factors impact on the uptake and embedding of the Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships program?
- What are the relationships between the extent and quality of program implementation and student and teacher wellbeing?

These questions were investigated using a mixed-method research methodology to collect qualitative and quantitative data from students and teachers in 40 participating schools (20 primary schools and 20 secondary schools). Data collection tools include training impact surveys, school profiling measures, school audits, student wellbeing surveys, teacher wellbeing surveys, interviews with teachers and school leaders, and student focus group discussions. For more details about the research design used in this project, please see Cahill et al. (2019).
Figure 1: An Integrative Framework for Evaluating Implementation in SEL and GBV Prevention Education (Cahill et al., 2019).
The Resilience, Rights, and Respectful Relationships (RRRR) program

The Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships program is a research-informed social and emotional learning (SEL) and gender education (GE) program for students from Foundation to Years 11-12 (Cahill et al, 2016a; 2016b, 2016c). It was developed by Professor Helen Cahill and YRC colleagues for use in Victorian primary and secondary schools. The comprehensive program includes over 200 learning activities mapped to the Victorian Curriculum. The learning activities are grouped into eight thematic areas including: 1) Emotional Literacy, 2) Personal Strengths, 3) Positive Coping, 4) Problem Solving, 5) Stress Management, 6) Help-Seeking, 7) Gender and Identity, and 8) Positive Gender Relations. The program is supported by face-to-face training funded by DET, and by online professional learning developed for DET by the University of Melbourne, conjointly funded by VicHealth and MGSE.

The Participants

This report presents the findings of the focus group discussions and student survey in the Determining Implementation Drivers in Resilience Education research study. A total of 1,498 students (Years 7-12) from 11 secondary schools in Victoria took part in a student wellbeing survey. The surveys were conducted from August to December 2017. The sample included 726 girls and 747 boys. 25 students indicated their gender as ‘something else’, and 8 students did not answer the question about gender. Table 1 shows the distribution of students across genders and year levels. Given the relatively small number of survey participants from Years 11 and 12, we have excluded them from the analyses and discussions. This is to avoid the larger margins of error that arise from small sample sizes. In this report, therefore, we only use data from, and report the findings of, the survey in Years 7 to 10.

Up to 8 students (Years 7 to 11) from each of the secondary schools were invited to take part in the first focus group phase of this research. In total, 81 students from 12 secondary schools took part in the focus group discussions in 2017. Of these, 39 students were male, and 41 students were female, and one student in Year 8 identified as ‘other’. Data were also collected from focus group discussions with 48 students across 5 Victorian secondary schools in 2018. Of these, 17 were male and 31 were female.

The participating schools were from a range of demographic backgrounds and geographic locations. Seven schools were low, two were medium and three were high in terms of their Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage. Nine schools were in metropolitan areas of Victoria while 3 were from regional areas.

<table>
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Data Collection and Analysis

The focus groups were led by a team of YRC researchers. The subsequent data analysis followed an iterative logic; it involved comparing one segment of the data with another to determine the underlying similarities and differences. These similarities and differences then became a basis for grouping the data on separate dimensions, with each dimension being given a tentative name and later becoming a tentative category or sub-category. These categories and sub-categories were then further dissected or combined to create generative themes and/or sub-themes. Once a tentative thematic pattern emerged from the analyses, the data were re-analysed considering the emergent patterns/themes.

1 Prior to conducting this research, an ethics application was lodged at the Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG) at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE). A separate ethics application to conduct research in Victorian government schools was submitted to the Department of Education and Training (DET). The participants were invited to take part in this study once the ethics approvals were obtained from the MGSE’s HEAG and the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC: 1647890.1) at the University of Melbourne, as well as DET (2016_003224).
This study adds to the broader body of research which provides insight into the mental and social-relational wellbeing issues affecting young people in Australia. The data presented here is best considered in relation to the broader research literature investigating the social and mental health of children and young people, and in relation to the evidence base available to inform schools about effective approaches to education for social and emotional wellbeing and respectful gender relations.

**Wellbeing of Young People: An Intersectional Lens**

Wellbeing is a multifaceted notion that addresses the intersection of material, social, relational, mental and physical health (Cahill, 2016). The major wellbeing issues affecting young people in Australia pertain to their mental and social health. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (2018) reports that key areas of concern for young Australians include mental health, bullying, family conflict, pressure from school work, and discrimination, and as students age, their worries include their future employment prospects. The 2017 Young Minds Matter survey of over 6000 Australian families showed that mental disorders affect 1 in 7 school-aged children (Goodsell et al., 2017). Among students aged 12-17, 1 in 12 students reported having self-harmed in the 12 months prior to the survey, and 1 in 13 had experienced major depressive disorder. Girls in this age group were twice as likely as boys to report suicidal behaviours and self-harm.

It is important to adopt an intersectional lens when understanding wellbeing, as poverty, socio-material disadvantage and marginalisation can lead to poorer health outcomes. The prevalence of mental health disorders is higher in families affected by unemployment, low education levels and low income. For example, the Young Minds Matter Survey shows that about one in ten children aged 4-17 in families with household income of over $2,000 per week had a mental health disorder, whereas the rate was double at one in five young people living in families with household income less than $1,000 per week, and also for those living in two-carer families where both carers were unemployed (Goodsell et al., 2017).

National and state statistics on reported rates of anxiety and distress also confirms the scale of young people’s mental health problems. The nature of the stressors and challenges that children and young people deal with are also reflected in their help-seeking attempts. The top five issues raised by young Australians aged 13-18 who contacted Kids Helpline in 2017 related to issues including: mental health concerns (26%), family relationship issues (20%), suicide related concerns (18%), emotional wellbeing (16%) and friend/peer relationships (10%) (Yourtown, 2018). Available data also shows that from 2008 to 2015 in the state of Victoria, there was a 46% increase in the number of children presenting to the emergency department for issues such as self-harm, stress and anxiety, mood, behavioural and emotional disorders (Baltag & Sawyer, 2017).

Mental health problems among young people have short-term and long-term implications. In the short term, mental health problems have direct bearing on children and young people academic performance. Compared to their peers who do not experience a mental disorder, students experiencing mental health issues perform worse in school. Students with mental health problems also have higher rates of absence from school, demonstrate lower levels of school connectedness and have poor engagement in learning (Goodsell et al., 2017).

Anxiety and stress are other major mediators of health and wellbeing (Carlisle et al., 2018). Coping with anxiety, depression and distress were among the top issues of personal concern in the 2017 Mission Australia survey of 24,055 young people aged 15-19 (Bullot, Cave, Fildes, Hall, & Plummer, 2017). The survey shows that ‘coping with stress’ was the top issue of concern with almost half of the respondents (45.3%) being either ‘extremely concerned’ or ‘very concerned’ about it. Almost one third (36%) of the participating young people identified ‘school or study problems’ as the second issue of personal concern followed by ‘body image’ (31%) and depression (23.7%).

When a gender lens is applied to understanding youth wellbeing, it becomes apparent that gender norms, expectations and attitudes play a significant part in relation to wellbeing and mental health outcomes. Australian research shows that girls are
at much higher risk of distress and self-harm. This is reflected in the survey findings that show school-age girls are almost three times more likely to self-harm than boys (Goodsell et al., 2017; Lawrence et al., 2016).

Research also shows that LGBTIQ+ youth are at much greater risk of compromised mental health and wellbeing in Australia (Morris, 2016). LGBTIQ+ young people aged 16 and over are three times more likely to be diagnosed with depression in their lifetime (Morris, 2016). Transgender young people experience high rates of mental health disorder. A recent Australian report finding showed that 70% to 75% of transgender young people have a clinical diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety, almost 80% have self-harmed, and close to 50% have attempted suicide (Strauss et al., 2017).

**Promoting mental health via provision of school-based social and emotional learning programs**

Addressing the adversities that young people face requires a concerted effort that tackles the underlying causes that lead to stress and anxiety. A holistic strategy provides young people with the resources that they need to thrive in the face of difficulties. Providing school-based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Gender Education (GE) programs can be part of a wider strategy that helps address the wellbeing issues and concerns of young people. SEL and GE programs provide “opportunities for young people to acquire the skills necessary for attaining and maintaining personal wellbeing and positive relationships across the life span” (Elbertson, Brackett, & Weissberg, 2010, p.1017).

Given the importance of wellbeing and social-relational education for young people, various school-based programs have been developed which have an explicit focus on SEL, relationship skills and GE (for example see Cahill, Beadle, Hingham, et al., 2016). The RRPP program is one such program (Cahill, et al., 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). It pursues a range of inter-related and overlapping objectives such as developing young people’s knowledge and skills to understand, manage and communicate about emotions, fostering a sense of empathy towards others, establishing positive peer and gender relationships, practicing effective coping strategies, developing critical thinking skills to reflect on the influences of one’s choices and making responsible decisions.

Research shows that participation in theoretically-informed, well-designed and implemented wellbeing programs can have a range of positive outcomes for young people. SEL programs can improve peer connectedness (Garrard & Lipsy, 2007; Midford, Cahill, Geng, et al., 2017), add to young people’s social and emotional competence (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012), improve self-esteem and conflict resolution capacities (Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley, & Weissberg, 2017), reduce substance abuse (Midford, Cahill, Lester, et al., 2017), and decrease rates of anxiety and depression (Payton et al., 2008a).

Other benefits of school-based SEL and wellbeing education programs relate to mental health and pro-social behaviours. A meta-analysis of 213 SEL programs which involved over 270,000 students across the US and the UK showed that the students who participated in well-designed and theoretically-informed SEL programs improved their social and emotional competencies (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). This research also showed a reduction in depression among the participating students.

Research conducted by Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, and Ben (2012) shows that SEL programs can help improve students’ social skills and self-image. This is in line with the findings of other studies which have established that those who participate in SEL programs are less likely to suffer from anxiety and depression (Stockings et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2016). Research has also shown that SEL programs are effective in reducing depression and anxiety even among primary and middle years students (Corrieri et al., 2013; Werner-Seidler, Perry, Calear, Newby, & Christensen, 2017).

Another contribution of school-based SEL and GE programs is to students’ social and relational lives. Research indicates that school-based SEL programs can help improve peer relationships, reduce antisocial behaviours as well as gender-based bullying (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). The other outcomes of SEL programs relate to an improved sense of school connectedness (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004), positive teacher-student relationships (Poulou, 2016), improved peer connection (Midford et al., 2016), reduction in bullying (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011), and reduction in homophobic teasing and sexual harassment (Espelage, Low, Van Ryzin, & Polanin, 2015).

A meta-analysis of an 82 school-based SEL program with 97,406 students from the US, Europe and the Asia-Pacific showed that after 18 months, students who participated in the program (compared to the control group) still demonstrated higher rates of social and emotional competencies, prosocial behaviours and indicators of positive wellbeing (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). Other studies have pointed to positive outcomes of SEL for students with disability, including better peer connectedness (McMahon, Keys, Berardi, Crouch, & Coker, 2016), improved academic outcomes and better handling of bullying (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2016).

Recognition of the important role that school can play in promoting social health is reflected in the General Capabilities priority of the Victorian and Australian Curriculum which aim to equip young people with the knowledge and skills needed to live and work successfully in the twenty-first century (The Australian Curriculum, 2018). Within the General Capabilities, the Personal and Social Capability involves a range of wellbeing-related practices including: recognising personal qualities and achievement, recognising and expressing emotions, communicating effectively, building resilience and confidence, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, negotiating conflict, and making decisions (The Australian Curriculum, 2018).
Advancing social health via provision of gender education

A growing body of research on the impact of gender on young people’s personal and relational stress highlights the need for social and emotional learning programs that include, and are taught in partnership with, inclusive gender education. While individual perceptions about gender begin in childhood, during early adolescence young people experience increasing awareness of, and pressure relating to, dominant gender norms and expectations (Galambos, Almeida, & Petersen, 1990; Yu et al., 2017). Young people need not just be passive recipients of the pressure to conform to various gender norms, but can also act as critically reflexive agents who work to resist or alter harmful or limiting practices or beliefs (Bragg, Renold, Ringrose, & Jackson, 2018; Neary, Gray, & O’Sullivan, 2016; Yu et al., 2017).

Gender education aims to help students to understand how norms associated with masculinity and femininity influence the ways in which social roles are assigned, and to understand how life opportunities and transitions can be influenced by gender norms and associated institutional practices (Cahill, Beadle, Davis, & Farrelly, 2016). Effective gender education pursues a transformative agenda by emphasising the development of attitudes, skills and capacities needed to engage in respectful gender relationships and advance gender equality.

Inclusive gender education programs not only address those social norms and beliefs that influence relations between men and women, but also incorporate LGBTQI+ identities and perspectives, promote recognition and respect for diversity within gender identities, and ensure that perspectives and relationships outside the heterosexual norm are included and respected at school (van Leent, 2014; van Leent & Ryan, 2016).

The use of an inclusive gender education is important as social isolation poses a significant learning and wellbeing challenge for LGBTQI+ children and young people (Henderson, 2016). Research shows that LGBTQI+ students often experience more bullying and cyberbullying than their heterosexual or cisgender peers (Duong & Bradshaw, 2014), have higher rates of absenteeism from school (Bouris, Everett, Heath, Elsaesser, & Neilands, 2016; O’Malley Olsen, Vivolo-Kantor, Kinchen, & McManus, 2014), and show higher rates of depression, anxiety and stress (Baltag & Sawyer, 2017; Hillier et al., 2010), along with higher rates of suicide and substance abuse (Blosnich, Nasuti, Mays, & Cochran, 2016; Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017; Huebner, Thoma, & Neilands, 2015; Mustanski, Andrews, & Puckett, 2016). High rates of physical, psychological and emotional violence, as well as stigma, are among the factors contributing to this compromised wellbeing (Hillier et al., 2010).

The importance of collaborative learning in fostering positive student relationships

The inclusion of student voice is central to the pedagogy of effective wellbeing education. A large body of research studies have identified that use of collaborative learning activities is essential to the effectiveness of wellbeing education programs addressing social and mental health, sexuality education and drug use (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Dix, Slee, Lawson, & Keeves, 2012; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Dusenbury, Brannigan, Falco, & Hansen, 2003; Herbert & Lohrmann, 2011; Kirby, Laris, & Roller, 2007; Payton et al., 2008b; Stead, Stradling, Macneil, Mackintosh, & Minty, 2007). Collaborative learning activities involve students in peer-to-peer interaction within dialogic learning activities designed to foster development of critical thinking and social and personal capabilities and to foster the skills to carry choices into action (Cahill et al., 2013).

Young people can provide rich, and nuanced accounts of their experience that can effectively inform wellbeing education and shape pedagogy (Simmons, Graham, & Thomas, 2014). However, there remains insufficient data on students’ perspectives on the contribution of wellbeing education, and an absence of qualitative data that takes into account their perceptions on how gender relationships impact upon their experience of both social relationships and school life.

The Determining Implementation Drivers in Resilience Education study is driven by the premise that effective education interventions must seek young people’s views and actively involve them within design and evaluation of programs. For this reason, the project used qualitative and quantitative measures to consult with secondary school students about a wide range of social, emotional and educational issues that they dealt with in their everyday lives at school. The focus group discussions, in particular, provided rich opportunities to gather more nuanced understandings of experience than is possible via a survey instrument. However, the survey instrument takes a broad approach to gathering data about mental, social and physical health, and as such provides a backdrop against which to understand the range and pattern of student’s experiences.
Part 3: Secondary student perspectives on wellbeing and relationships

This section provides an overview of mental health and wellbeing of the participants from the student survey. It then outlines some of the key challenges and stressors highlighted by the secondary school students who participated in this study. These stressors and challenges related to two inter-related issues. First, friendship and fitting in with peers were discussed as a major source of concern for young people. Gender played a significant part in the way young people formed their social relationships in schools. In addition, gendered norms, behaviours and expectations emerged as another area of concern. Gender stereotypes and forms of sexist and homophobic behaviour underpinned some of the everyday encounters and experiences of young people.

Psychological Distress

The majority of the students who participated in this research reported relatively high levels of mental health and wellbeing. Overall, the findings show that most students were engaged with their learning and felt connected to their schools, teachers and peers. Nonetheless, 25% of students within the sample reported symptoms of possible psychological distress. The prevalence of psychological distress showed sharp increases across year levels for both girls and ‘other’ gender students, though not for boys. This points to the gendered nature of mental health problems. Girls and ‘other’ gender students also reported higher rates of body image distress, loneliness and disconnection, a trend that also increased with age.

To identify signs of possible psychological distress, the survey used the Kessler Six-Item Psychological Distress (K-6) Scale (Furukawa, Kessler, Slade, & Andrews, 2003). Students responded to six questions which inquired about how often they experienced anxiety and sadness in the previous week. A five-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = all the time) was used to record student responses. To create a scale, the scores from individual questions were summed to create a total score ranging from 5 to 30. Higher scores indicate greater psychological distress. Scores at or above 19 are indicative of probable psychological distress.

The findings show that about 25% of students across genders and year levels reported K-6 score of 19 or above. As Figure 2 indicates girls and ‘other’ gender students were much more likely to report psychological distress. This is in line with the findings from other research which shows increased prevalence of psychological distress across year levels, with girls and LGBTQ+ students being more vulnerable to anxiety and depression (Huebner et al., 2015; Kessler & Bromet, 2013). In our research, 34% of girls and 43% of ‘other’ gender students had K-6 score of 19 or above, compared to the 16% of boys. Years 9 and 10 proved particularly challenging for girls and ‘other’ gender students. At Year 10, the data shows 40% of girls and 100% of ‘other gender’ students having scores of 19 or above on the Kessler scale.
Higher rates of mental health distress were evident amongst girls and those students who do not identify within the male-female gender binary. As Figure 3 shows girls are around twice as likely as boys to report ‘feeling so sad nothing could cheer them up’ (see for example 28% of Year 10 girls as compared with 12% of Year 10 boys), and ‘other’ gender students are significantly more likely to report ‘feeling so sad nothing could cheer you up’, with an increasing trend from Year 8 (44%) to Year 10 (100%).
Connectedness to teachers

Connectedness to teachers and peers in the context of caring relationships contributes to students’ wellbeing and learning outcomes (Bond et al., 2007; Freidenfelt Liljeborg, Eklund, Fritz, & af Klinteberg, 2011; Gowing, 2019; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Pittman & Richmond, 2007). It is also protective against student disengagement from school (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2018; 2019). Positive relationships with teachers can act as a protective factor against mental health distress. Overall, most students in the survey indicated that they get along with their teachers well, with the notable exception of those who identified their gender as ‘other’. 58% of boys and 61% of girls indicated that they get along with their teachers well either ‘a lot’ or ‘totally’. The proportion was significantly lower for ‘other’ gender students (38%), with 29% indicating ‘little’ or ‘not at all’ in response to the statement.

Another question in the survey asked students about their perceptions regarding whether their teachers cared about them as a person. Overall, a similar pattern emerged with 62% of boys, 60% girls and 54% of ‘other’ gender group either ‘agreeing’ or ‘strongly agreeing’ with the statement. However, a considerable proportion (29%) of ‘other’ gender students either ‘strongly disagreed’ or ‘disagreed’ with the statement ‘my teachers care about me as a person.’ This contrasts with the much lower proportions of 8% for boys and 6% for girls in the sample.

Friendships and fitting in with peers

Psychological distress can have many causes, some of which relate to the social landscape of schools and classrooms, and the quality of peer relationships. Within the focus groups, friendships and fitting in were reported to be among the most important stressors that the students faced in their day to day school life. Research shows that developing close, inclusive and supportive relationships with peers is one of the main challenges that students face, especially middle years students (Juvonen, 2007). Friendships and fitting in stressors took on different forms. There was frequent reference in the focus groups to accounts of ‘peer pressure’, ‘bullying’, ‘name-calling’, ‘teasing’ and ‘physical encounters’. This was particularly prominent among male students who were often described by their female counterparts as acting ‘physical’ and ‘rough’ with each other.
The survey findings indicated that name-calling was common, with 64% of boys, 57% of girls and 63% of ‘other’ gender students reporting that they were called mean names in the week prior to the survey (see Figure 5). Name-calling instances showed a gradual decline from Year 7 to Year 9 for both boys and girls. However, there was an increase in the reported rates for name-calling in the Year 10 sample.

Social media and online spaces play a significant role in young people’s lives and in their interactions with peers. The integration of the offline and online spaces for interaction for young people means that many of their issues play out across the boundaries of private-public, past-present, as well as school and home. The participants highlighted this reality by discussing how their concerns about friendships and fitting in with their peers played out not only in the physical spaces of schools and classrooms, but also in online spaces and on social media.

*Male student: There is the standard stuff that could come along with any school like friendship stresses, social… managing school work and friendships, all of it together. Things outside carrying into school, a lot of it is online nowadays, like you have a fight with someone, it carries along into school and that can go into the classroom.*

Regardless of whether they transpired in the physical or virtual space or both, concerns about making friends and fitting in were often associated with the existence of membership clusters or groups. Students discussed the complexities of navigating these friendship groups due to the (in)visible boundaries that allowed and/or denied group membership, and curtailed interactions between groups. These boundaries, which were drawn based on factors such as popularity, interest or gender, worked to include some while excluding others.

*Male student: In my year level, we’ve kind of got… I found this not so much clashes, but it is very segregated almost. Like you have social groups and there is not too much interaction between them. So, segregated, you are in a positive environment with your friends, but there is not too much going on between groups.*
Although the ‘segregated’ group dynamics provided a sense of belonging to those within the closed circle of friends, it was a means of exclusion for others, and a breach in the overall sense of connectedness to peers. This is confirmed by the survey findings which show that a significant number of students across different year levels experienced exclusion by other students. Rates of perceived exclusion were higher at Year 7, indicating challenges experienced at the time of school transition (23% for boys, 42% for girls, and 67% for students identifying as ‘other’ gender) (see Figure 6). It can also be noted that exclusionary experiences had a gendered profile. Girls were almost twice as likely to report exclusion by peers compared to boys, with the overall data showing that 37% of girls and 20% of boys reported that others had left them out in a mean way in the last week.

Concerns about making friends, peer acceptance and fitting in were more noticeable among students at the lower year levels of secondary school. Transition from primary to secondary school and adjusting to a new school environment were mentioned as a difficult experience in which students had to re-negotiate their friendships and re-create their social networks in the new setting.

Female student: In my class, it is just me and my friend. We didn’t really know anyone else and none of the girls, except one or two, have actually invited us to be friends with them. So, we’re just alone a lot of the time in class. […] When I am not there, she is by herself, like right now she is by herself. I kind of feel bad…

It was common for the students to report strong patterns of gender segregation in their friendship groups. Whilst at times these ‘girls’ groups’ and ‘boys’ groups’ managed to get along well, the students also talked about tensions between the gendered groups.

Male student: Year 9… in our class, it’s pretty much the boys versus the girls! Even at recess, like…

Female student: It depends, like people lack civil, but there is a lot of hate, arguments and stuff… I feel like some people… like both people [boys and girls] have people that are really immature, that like make the argument worse… like on both sex sides!

Young people’s friendship challenges, and the gendered differences around peer relationships, are also reflected in the student survey data. A considerable proportion of students across genders reported experiencing social isolation, and this isolation increased with age. Girls reported a much higher sense of loneliness compared to boys, with 12% of boys, 20% of girls and 50% of gender non-binary students at Year 10 reporting that they felt lonely ‘most days’ or ‘everyday’ (see Figure 7).
What is also worth noting is that concerns about the levels of respect and inclusion in peer relationships varied among schools. In some schools, students talked about a sense of community. A greater sense of connectedness to other students and the school staff was in some instances attributed to the fact that in small schools, students had more opportunities to know and relate to each other.

Female student: It is such a small school everyone is like either sharing with each other or treating each other you know like absolute trash because… I mean everyone here because everyone knows each other, you don’t really get away with it!

Female student: Everyone is accepted here for who you are and sometimes when new people come in, there is a little bit of hate, it always gets sorted out pretty quick and people learn just to accept even if they don’t like it. But everyone in general is very accepting here.

Some students used the analogy of family to talk about their peer relationships in schools. This was most manifest in the discussion about inclusion and acceptance of others who were from a different religious background or those who had a disability. As the following focus group exchange helps demonstrate, being able to connect to other students on an individual level in a small school was an important factor in establishing positive relationships with peers.

Male student: It [the school] is very inclusive; everyone… there is no bit of like excluding people or anything. It’s just everyone’s one big family. It’s not like… because we are not the biggest school, you kind of get to know everyone.

Female student: It’s very communal a lot of the time, and everybody sees people as people. Like somebody has a headscarf or has a disability, they can still be your friend. It is not gonna separate you.

These findings are in line with the findings from research that shows that close and supportive peer relationships can have positive impacts on a range of mental, socio-emotional, educational and behavioural outcomes among young people (Gowing, 2019; Graham, Van Bergen, & Sweller, 2016; Jóhannesson & Bjarnadóttir, 2016; Noble & McGrath, 2012). Positive peer relationships are important in fostering a strong sense of connectedness and belonging to the school and staff. Close and supportive relationships which are based on principles of mutual respect and acceptance of diversity are also significant in reducing rates of peer bullying and harassment among students on the basis of gender (Espelage et al., 2015). This is a topic that we turn to in the next section of this report.
The students in the study reported a range of stressors and pressures to comply with gender norms and expectations. Gender norms influence the everyday practices and work to sanction distinct behaviours and expectations for different genders (Butler, 2005). Gender stereotypes also inform internalised norms of behaviour, and influence discriminatory attitudes such as those associated with homophobia (Mayo, 2017). While there is a long tradition of research into bullying and physical forms of violence in schools, it is only in the past couple of decades that researchers have turned to the role that gender relations play in violence perpetration between and within genders, and to forms of violence against gender non-conforming and LGBTIQ+ students.

**Pressure to conform to gender norms**

The importance of gender in mediating peer relationships was reiterated by many of the participants in this research. Girls in particular complained about both overt and subtle forms of sexism and gender bias among their male counterparts. This was evident in comments made about how male students often made ‘sexist’ comments and/or jokes about girls ‘without realising it’.

For males, however, pressure to conform to gender norms and expectations manifested primarily in narrow norms around what were deemed to be ‘masculine’ patterns of behaviour. The students talked about how the behaviours of male students were often driven by ‘testosterone’. There were also frequent references to male students acting ‘rough’ and ‘physical’ with other male students. Competitive sports and recess times were occasions in which male students were reported to engage most in such conduct.

**Male student:** With the way that genders treat each other, definitely as, especially in Year 9, relationships with boys can sometimes be fuelled by testosterone as their masculinity comes out sometimes. Especially, because most recess lunch we’re playing soccer or basketball and that could be quite intense sometimes because some of the boys wanna like prove to everyone else that they are like the ‘alpha male’ kind of… do that sort of analogy, to show everyone that they are better than everyone else on some occasions. That can lead to fights and stuff sometimes, just outburst of emotions.

For girls, pressure to conform to gender norms surfaced commonly in body image expectations, and pressures about appearance. Broader research shows that body image is among the top three issues of personal concern for young people aged 15-19 in Australia (Bullot et al., 2017). This research also shows the gendered nature of body image concerns with 41.9% girls, as compared to 22.7% boys, being ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ concerned about their body image.

**Female student:** One other thing that I have definitely struggled with is body image, you know… Everywhere you go, you see all these people… and like people are just talking about you know… how you know they are in… boys like girls with big boobs and stuff. That stresses me out because I’m like, ‘oh no... I don’t look like that!’ So, I think homework definitely, but then body image and like all the expectations like they have for you to look perfect. [...] I was kind of raised as… my mum doesn’t wear any make-up and she doesn’t really believe in all that stuff, so I was kind of raised that way.

The survey data collected in this study also shows that girls report high rates of body image distress, and this distress is heightened as they age. Those who identify as non-gender binary have particularly high rates of body image distress. For girls the prevalence of high levels of body image distress rises from 24% at Year 7 to 37% at Year 10, as compared with 11% of boys at Year 7 and 22% at Year 10 experiencing body image distress (see Figure 8).
Students’ accounts of unrealistic body image expectations often went hand-in-hand with their experiences about other forms of gendered harassment and teasing. Being body-shamed was a major stressor for girls, who reported being called names such as ‘giraffe’, ‘ugly’ and ‘fat’, by their male peers.

**Male student: In my class the teacher teaches us - tells us to don’t judge how people look. But people in class, if they see a fat or something animal, they say a chubby person’s name in the class and that gets them upset.**

**Female student: My friend gets called giraffe because she’s tall.**

The sexism experienced by girls is reflected in the responses to a survey question about sexual commenting. A question asked the participants about the number of times in the past week that they heard boys making sexual comments to girls. Both male and female students recounted sexualised comments about girls. Girls, however, recounted higher rates of sexualised comments than boys, with 58% of Year 10 girls and 31% of Year 10 boys reporting that they had heard boys make sexualised comments to girls in the last week. Those Year 7 and Year 10 students identifying as gender non-binary reported the highest awareness of boys making sexualised comments about girls, with 100% of them observing this in the last week (see Figure 9).
Pressure to comply with gendered norms were at work in other ways in schools. One medium through which these pressures materialised was in gendered friendship groups, which was often seen as a measure of one’s gender-identity and sexuality. This was reflected in the accounts from some students who discussed how boys would be labelled as ‘feminine’ or ‘gay’ if they were part of a female group.

Male student: I tend to find that in this school, there is some sort of divide between boys and girls. Like girls hang out together or whatever and then boys hang out together. If a boy joins a girl group, they are considered feminine or whatever. I just find that there is a divide for some reason.

Gender and interpersonal conflict

There were stark differences in the ways male and female students described approaches to navigating interpersonal conflict. Male relationships were routinely framed as easy-going and pragmatic, whereas female relationships were described as complex and often covertly antagonistic. Often, a hierarchy of values was implied in these conversations, which excused boys’ ‘physical’ and at times violent behaviour, and problematised girls’ ways of navigating conflict as covert, sneaky, ineffective, or nasty. Girls tended to be more critical of both themselves and other girls than of boys. For example, some female students talked about a gendered pattern in conflict resolution that heralded boys for ‘fighting’ but then ‘getting over it’, whilst criticising girls for ‘whispering’, ‘bitching’ and ‘dragging arguments out’.

Female student: Well, this is my opinion and not to offend anyone. I am a girl myself, but I reckon females are a funny species because they’re either all over each other and you go shopping, and you do this, and you do that. But girls are not like boys. I feel like boys are a bit more tolerant if something happens. Girls I see … it is like conniving; it’s whispering and it’s bitching. It’s all like done really like nasty … girls are really nasty when it comes to things like that.

Girls also tended to take a critical stance against other girls for colluding with and ganging up on each other. Some of these critiques pointed to prevailing ‘femininity deficit’ and the internalisation by girls of the external deficit discourses (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002). Some of the critiques offered by girls’ comments pointed to exclusionary practices, internalised negativity towards female bodies, and the prevalence of sexualised forms of labelling:

Female student: I feel like in my class there is this ‘queen bee’ group that are just so cool and calling each other like S*L*U*T*S*, saying all these things about … like I was sitting behind the locker and one of them was like, ‘oh my god, my crush sexts the other girl and she has no boobs and I’m so much prettier!’ And that actually happened, and I was like, ‘are you kidding me right now!? I had a good group of friends… five, six people that are just like really trusting, like they take care of, and they take care of me… and the other people they go around calling each other these weird things. I’m like, ‘girls, stand up for each other! You need to stick together.’
Research points to gender-specific forms of bullying and peer harassment such as sexual rumour spreading, ‘slut-shaming’ and homophobic labelling among girls in schools (Miller, 2016). In contrast to female students, the male participants in this research did not engage as much in self-critique when discussing their relationships with other male students. Some students, nonetheless, acknowledged that girls were often subject to what was described as “subconscious” gender bias and sexism.

Male student: In terms of boys treating girls, you’ve got... again it depends on the boy, it depends on your upbringing and what experience you had in the past. If you’ve got a father figure who has grown up somewhere where a woman is treated differently and you’ve been brought up through that in your household, so you’re gonna express that. But I think the kind of general consensus is you’ve got a lot of boys who are kind of disrespectful, but not knowing it almost because they’re going through ways that is accepted in society nowadays. It is kind of accepted in society that boys judge women on their looks and treat them differently. It’s kind of just even subconsciously you do it.

The following exchange between Year 8 students illustrates the vastly different social realities that male and female students perceive themselves to be occupying.

Male student: Boys – they’re pretty simple. Boys, they see each other, they’re like high five, fist pump, and then later they see each other, they’re like ‘What’s up?’, ‘How you doing?’ They play soccer, and then, I don’t know the girls – I don’t know actually how even to explain them. Boys - they’re easy.

Male student: Yeah, if boys fight, they’ll just get over it, but girls – they’ll take the whole year.

Female student: Girls don’t take like weeks, some boys take forever to get together too. Don’t put it all on girls.

Female student: Miss, for girls it’s actually really hard to make friends with other girls. Like if I came to Julie and talk to her, and then I had a fight with Julie, maybe she’d think that I’d go and tell another person what she said about them. That’s why girls in here don’t really make friends.

Male student: At first when you see guys hanging out in the field, they might seem a bit aggressive, and it might seem overwhelming for other people. And also, whenever they play fight – that happens a lot – it can turn into an actual fight.

In several focus groups, as in above, female students spoke back to and resisted the judgments that they felt had been placed on their modes of interaction. Similarly, some male students reflected critically on the assumptions made about their forms of interaction and resisted the tendency to excuse male violence.

The qualitative research also shows dominant norms and expectations related to masculinity and femininity played a significant role in the ways in which same sex attracted or gender non-conforming students were treated, as well as those who did not fit within the gender binary of male-female. For example, the focus group discussions pointed to patterns of discrimination against those students who identified as, or were perceived to be, same-sex attracted or who did not conform to gender norms.

Overall, this research shows that powerful discourses relating to gender were part of the everyday relationships among students across many schools. These discourses sanctioned for students appropriate or expected ways of interacting with others. These discourses exerted a strong impact on what was expected of male and female students, and manifested in the treatment of those who were or perceived to be gender non-conforming.
Part 4: Impact of the Resilience Rights and Respectful Relationships program on student relationships

The qualitative data collected in secondary schools during the second wave of focus groups conducted in 2018 provided an additional opportunity for secondary age students to report on their experiences of the program.

Our capacity to understand RRRR program impact in secondary schools was limited as most high schools had a low level of implementation, either selecting only small sections of the program, or implementing with low fidelity to program design – a marked difference to the primary school context, in which most schools were implementing with high quality and quantity, and therefore, better able to provide rich data about impact.

Students from only two of the participating secondary schools that we interviewed in 2018 had participated in regular, sequential RRRR lessons that appeared to have maintained mid to high level fidelity to program design. At one of these high implementing schools, however, feedback from students showed that there was significant difference in fidelity from teacher to teacher, and hence some students were receiving the program as designed, but others were not.

Respondents from the remaining low implementing schools varied in their ability to recall the purpose, content and method of the RRRR lessons. Students from one school recalled participating in regular lessons, however they had only covered select lessons from Topics 7 & 8. Teachers had altered the original method of the classroom program to favor a more didactic approach, with loss in the collaborative learning activities. Student comments at this school nonetheless indicated engagement with program content and purpose. At another secondary school, students struggled to recall RRRR lessons and suggested this was due to an infrequent schedule of delivery.

Students at another high school indicated that they had participated in a significantly adapted version of the RRR program only, which did not include any collaborative learning activities or any activities from Topics 7 & 8. Teachers had altered the original method of the classroom program to favor a more didactic approach, with loss in the collaborative learning activities. Student comments at this school nonetheless indicated engagement with program content and purpose. At another secondary school, students struggled to recall RRRR lessons and suggested this was due to an infrequent schedule of delivery.

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In general, students from the two high implementing schools were more likely describe positive changes in peer relationships as a result of the program. For some students from these schools, participation in RRRR had helped them to develop a shared language which could be used to discuss emotions, reflect critically on social relations and gendered practices, and break down harmful norms, stigmas, and stereotypes. Some students in these focus groups reported reduction in bullying, and a greater awareness of how their behaviour or language might harm or support others.

Students in the low-implementing schools tended not to find that the program had significantly impacted their ability to understand or navigate the challenges of peer relationships. Reasons for this varied, and included: low quality of the delivery of the program (for example, where some of the RRRR content and topics had been addressed, but without use of the collaborative learning activities which fostered peer interaction); low exposure to the program (for example, where the program was delivered in a one-week block at the beginning of the year, rather than regularly over an extended period of time); low fidelity to the RRRR collaborative and student-centred teaching methods (for example, where wellbeing-related content was delivered using teacher-led methods such as PowerPoint presentations, videos or teacher lecture); and where the program did not have a consistent ‘home’ in curriculum (for example, where the program was situated as a few lessons in a supplementary/optional program within a Health elective).

The section below on program impact as perceived by the students is derived from the schools in which a mid to high level of implementation took place. It also includes some input from focus groups facilitated in 2017 at a high-implementing school, in which students articulated the impact of the program on their social wellbeing.

Building empathy and understanding of diverse perspectives

Some students reported that participation in the RRRR program enabled them to better understand the perspectives of, and empathise with, their peers, which in turn enabled them to build stronger and more diverse connections across the student cohort. The student below describes how recognising other people’s perspectives and experiences allowed her to put her own hardships into perspective:

Female student: They [RRRR activities] are really good for the class to bond in that way. That got me a lot closer to the class, and it was also really useful to look at, you know, my problems might seem really big, but look I mean what other people are going through. It [RRRR program] helped people because they had a chance in an environment where they knew they wouldn’t be judged let out their worries and have people understand.
Several students who had participated in collaborative learning activities identified that this helped them to better empathise with and support their peers.

**Female student:** It’s helpful to be put into that situation so you have an idea about what you’d do, or how to help other people in those situations.

**Female student:** People don’t judge people as much now cos they know people see things differently.

Recognition of the perspectives and experiences of others can also build young people’s acceptance of their own experiences and mitigate against loneliness, as one student describes:

**Male student:** The program has changed the way I think about them (challenges and stressors). It’s not only my problem, it’s a problem we all go through – it’s common. If you do go through it you know that you’re not the only one and you can talk to others and you don’t have to hide it from others. It’s helpful to know that you’re not the only one to experience this.

**Impact on problem-solving capacities**

While peer conflict was described as a normal part of relationships, some students suggested that they were better able to manage relationships with peers following the RRRR lessons. They also described practices such as knowing what to do about bullying, and trying to intervene when sexism or racism occurred in the school.

**Male student:** Problems are being solved civilly. It’s good.

Some students reflected on the difficulty of translating attitudes into behaviours. In the following exchange, students described how violent norms often come from home and suggested that students may need more support to change violent norms and behaviours that occur outside of the school.

**Male student:** The people who offend others, you can see they agree in the SEL lesson and they’re doing all the stuff, but when they get outside it’s really hard for them to remember any of it.

**Female student:** There’s inside and there’s outside and it’s a whole different thing.

**Female student:** They might have a dark history and they have grown up attached to it.

**Treatment of ethnically and culturally diverse young people**

Some participants from both mid and high implementing schools reported that the program had limited impact on the way in which ethnically and culturally diverse students were treated in the school. Students often reported mixed feelings in relation to ‘racial slurs,’ which were at times, excused as ‘just jokes’ or contextually acceptable, and at other times deemed unacceptable.

One student reflected on a growing awareness of language, and its capacity to discriminate or disempower:

**Female student:** People were set in their ways, they forgot people take offense, they didn’t know what it meant. A lot of things have stopped, people are more aware of what they’re saying. Much more making sure they’re saying the right thing.

Others believed that learning about racism had not resulted in behavioural change or reduced instances of race-related harassment, and referred to the nuanced contexts in which racist comments were excused or accepted.

**Female student:** The program didn’t do much about [racism]. Jokes are made. I tell the person to stop. She says, ‘it’s just a joke’ and doesn’t stop.

**Male student:** They know it’s wrong but they still do it. They don’t really care. My friends get really mad at others using racial slurs. With friends from the same background, it’s ok to use some names, but when other people do it, that’s not ok.

Other focus groups highlighted their school’s monocultural demographic and suggested that there were limited opportunities to demonstrate whether there had been any shift in attitudes towards ethnic and cultural diversity at their schools.

This data highlights the need to further develop students’ awareness of subtle and everyday forms of racism, and equip them with the skills for understanding how privilege operates to reinforce inequities.
Relationships across/between genders

Students also commented on changes to student relationships as a result of the program. A few students at the high implementing schools reflected on the increased capacity for female peers to resolve conflict and identified improved relationships between the girls in their school.

Female student: The girls are doing more communication and are more engaged.

However, some male students at a high implementing school framed relationships between girls as more superficial and unfriendly than those between boys.

Male student: Girls - like I am not trying to be like ‘all girls’ - girls are normally more interested in social media, and some of their friends say something bad about them.

Male student: Girls normally call other girls ugly.

Some students believed that RRRR had invited them to think critically about traditional masculinities, and that relationships across genders had improved as a result.

Female student: When you are first friends and stuff, they (boys in the class) don’t really show the inside, they’re more like trying to be tough men. Once we are in SEL they actually show that they have emotions and feelings… this helped to get to know them more, to know how they really are.

Some students also identified an increased awareness of the limitations imposed by gender stereotypes.

Female student: It’s not like one sport is for the girls and one is for the boys. The SEL program has taught people that they can do it all together.

The importance of stress management for maintaining positive peer relations

For those in high implementing schools, learning strategies for managing emotions and coping with stress helped some students to more effectively build and maintain positive relationships with their peers.

Male student: It was helpful because when you are angry you sort of lash out. With the coping strategies you can sort of calm yourself down easily.

This improved capacity to prevent or address conflict was identified by some students as the most important impact of RRRR.

Male student: The most important thing we learn in the SEL program is how to control and identify our emotions. For example if you’re feeling anger you can learn how to identify this and then help yourself so that you can feel in a positive mindset.

Some students reported that they used self-calming exercises and coping strategies to support friends to de-escalate anger, manage social tension in the yard and to manage academic stress.

Male student: I have used some of the strategies with friends. My friend got into a fight and I held him back and used these to help calm him down. I told him to count to ten to calm down and then to walk away.

Female student: I see that out in the yard. If someone gets into a fight or gets angry I see other people helping out and helping to calm the person down.

Female student: Once you go into Year 9, 10, 11 and 12 you have more tests and even VCE, you can stress about that.

At one mid-implementing school, however, the stress management strategies addressed in their classes were not relevant for all students.

Male student: We were taught strategies, but I don’t think some of us take them on board. It’s like we have the information, but it doesn’t work for some of us.

In the exchange below, male students at a high-implementing school observed that the social support strategies taught in SEL lessons were challenging when issues are very personal, and at these times they were more likely to draw on strategies to release energy than on social support or relaxation techniques:

Male student: The way they teach how to deal with stress here is not useful.

Interviewer: Can you explain what you mean?

Male student: They say, ‘talk to someone’. You can’t talk to someone because it’s way too personal. For me what I do is just listen to music, just lay down and just relax.
Male student: I have found like some websites, like Breathe, like they say just lie down, and breathe in and let all the anger out. They don’t work on, like teenagers. The thing is, they have like so much energy.

Male student: You can also, like, if you go to a sporting club, or like mixed martial arts or something, you discipline yourself to be not as stressed as you would be.

Male student: I find that sport is actually very good to calm me down. Everybody does groups, they get happy, they play, your heart [goes up].

Social and Emotional Learning builds capacity and confidence to prevent, intervene, and seek help for bullying

Another impact of the RRRR program in high implementing schools was enhanced peer support and help-seeking. Several students reported that the RRRR program not only improved their capacity to empathise with their peers, and recognise when others might need help, but also equipped them with skills needed to provide peer support.

At one high implementing school, SEL was perceived as an effective strategy for building student confidence to report bullying or harassment.

Male student: This SEL program helps a lot of students with bullying. Say if they are bullied they know a situation where they can go to welfare or teachers, someone that they trust.

Female student: We were put in a group and we were able to act out if someone is getting bullied how we could help them and check in to see if they are ok. The activity was helpful, it taught people that it’s ok to ask if someone is ok, that you don’t have to be scared.

Whether or not a student identifies as a victim of harassment may also influence their perceptions on the usefulness of SEL.

Male student: I feel like, if you were not a victim, SEL wouldn’t be as important as your maths and your English. Because these are important towards for you to succeed in life. But if you were getting bullied, SEL would be a priority because that’s where you can get help.

In the excerpts below, a range of students share the ways in which RRRR has led to an increase in help-seeking and peer support strategies.

Female student: It really has impacted me because it’s helped me find ways where I can find help, I can ask people for help, I know what I need help with, I was so grateful to be educated to see these kind of things.

Female student: After we did that lesson about how to seek help, one of my friends came up to me and told me about how they were feeling and shared some problems as well. I learned in class that I needed to tell my teacher to get her some help…I think she came to me because she trusts me and knows that I’ll take it seriously and not tell anybody else.

Male student: Outside of the school, in your friendships, if someone is dealing with something, you know how to help them.

Female student: I have helped a friend when she was dealing with a problem at school and she was getting bullied. I helped to advise her to speak to a help service.

Female student: The SEL program has inspired me. It has shown me new ways to solve things. So if someone was getting bullied, instead of ignoring it, you would go up to them and tell them to stop or what they are doing is wrong.
Part 5: Summary of the findings

In this report, we presented data collected from secondary school students through focus group discussions and a wellbeing survey. We provided an overview of the students’ psychological wellbeing, and the social wellbeing issues that they described as impacting on their everyday experiences in schools and classrooms. These include issues relating to navigating the social landscape of secondary school, as well as experiences of gender within peer relationships. We also discussed some of the positive impacts that students reported from the provision of the Resilience Rights and Respectful Relationships program.

Overall, the survey findings showed that most students feel that they get along with their teachers and that their teachers care about them as a person. However, a large number of students (25%) deal with psychological distress, with girls (34%) and ‘other’ gender students (43%) reporting much higher rates of distress than boys (16%). Rates of loneliness and body image distress are also much higher for girls than they are for boys, and higher again for students who do not identify within the gender binary. Years 9 and 10 proved particularly challenging for girls and for students who identified as non-binary. The prevalence of sexualised comments was high, with 58% of Year 10 girls and 31% of Year 10 boys reporting that they had heard boys make sexualised comments to girls in the last week. Gender-non-binary students reported the highest awareness of boys making sexualised comments about girls, with 100% of them observing this in the last week.

The focus group data provided a more nuanced view of student experience. Students in the focus group relished the opportunity to talk about the ways in which their social and relational worlds impacted their participation and quality of life at school. This highlighted the importance of using dialogic methods to seek young people’s perspectives and priorities in relation to their own wellbeing.

Student responses showed that the social environment was important to students, with peer-related challenges identified as the major stressor in the school. Harassment and bullying were frequently reported to be gender-based. Negative behaviours included the ‘policing’ of those who do not conform to dominant gender norms and binaries and body-shaming comments. Gendered harassment was seen to occur not only in male-female interactions, but also in overt and nuanced interactions between male peers or female peers that served to reinforce dominant gender norms through harassment, teasing, violence, or bullying.

There were limitations in capacity to understand the impact of the RRRR program, as only two secondary schools participating in this study were implementing in a comprehensive way and with fidelity to the program design. Even within these two higher implementing schools, it was apparent from student accounts that program implementation was not consistent between classes, indicating the significance of individual teacher readiness, commitment, and ability to deliver the program. Those students who had participated in learning activities from the RRRR that had been delivered with fidelity to program design reported that it had helped build self-awareness and self-management skills, as well as improved their relationship skills and capacity to solve problems, seek help, negotiate conflict, address limiting gender norms and expand their repertoire of self-expression.

These findings have relevance for schools as they highlight the prevalence of mental health problems and the social challenges that students experience in their peer relationships. They also point to the importance of providing a comprehensive approach to the delivery of programs addressing social and emotional learning and respectful gender relationships.
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