Embedding Wellbeing, Creating Community
Children who experience chronic stress or traumatization are vulnerable to becoming chronically hyper-vigilant and constantly alert to potential dangers, or dissociative and withdrawn. In schools, such children are physically present in class but have difficulty achieving a learning state receptive to new information. They may ‘shut down’ their environment, or be highly reactive to environmental stimuli, frequently responding with aggression.

This paper reports on a project to support a Year 2-3 teacher to constructively respond to the needs of a class that included several chronically stressed and traumatized 6-to 8-year-old children. The project was developed from a partnership between Salisbury Communities for Children, academic staff from the University of South Australia’s School of Education, and a local primary school in South Australia. It aimed to provide resources to support the classroom teacher’s capacity to create a safe learning environment and well-being for each student, despite the prevalence of chronic stress and trauma in many of their lives.

Strategies to improve the class learning environment included the provision of teacher professional learning about brain development and the emotional and behavioural impacts of chronic stress and trauma, attention to the room contents and layout, class activities and daily routines promoting cooperation with others and emotional understanding of self; and opportunities for supported teacher reflection on practice, along with connection to relevant professional and service networks supporting children and families. The classroom teacher was assisted by an outreach worker from the Schools Ministry Group (a pastoral care program in schools) funded by Salisbury Communities for Children. The worker’s role included forging relationships with school staff and its communities, and identifying resources to support children’s improved capacity to learn at school.

Data collected included teacher and outreach worker interviews, children’s knowledge of feeling words, reading and spelling achievements, socio-metric records and school attendance across the school year. Researchers also interviewed parents of participating children 12 months after the project, about
their views on whether their children had benefited from the experience and whether any such benefits persisted over time.

The project identified improvements in children’s social relationships, their abilities to identify their own and others’ feelings and school attendance. Reading and spelling development trajectories were maintained, indicating that attention to social and emotional learning at school does not adversely affect children’s academic achievement.

No parents felt their child had been adversely affected. Parents who identified that their child had benefited noted improved willingness to try new things, increased confidence in identifying and expressing their feelings, increased recognition that others may feel differently about events, better relationships with peers and improved ability to respond proactively to bullying behaviours. Parents also reported improved family interpersonal interactions.

The project demonstrated that activities by the outreach worker from the School Ministry Group assisted children’s well-being at school by supporting and resourcing the teacher, directly supporting highly vulnerable children and their families, and growing parental involvement in their child’s school experiences.

Recommendations:

1. Problems with peers and authority figures create unhappiness at school for children who are excluded or bullied or who have challenging behaviours. Junior primary school children with social and emotional learning difficulties benefit from programs to improve their social skills. Educators should be resourced and supported to implement social and emotional learning programs in their schools and classrooms.

2. Social and emotional learning resources such as *Play is the Way* and *Kimochis* work well in a collective environment and can improve young children’s social relationships. They should be widely used and promoted to schools and communities.

3. School-wide implementation of programs enables teacher support and continuity of language and concepts across the school and throughout the primary years. Collective implementation builds community but also provides support for children most in need without singling them out or stigmatising them in any way.

4. Teachers require additional support to effectively introduce new resources such as *Play is the Way* so they can attend to students who run away from games while another person directs the game.

5. Parents of children with social difficulties are very keen to find ways to better support their child’s emotional development. Resources suitable for home or individual use, such as *Kimochis*, should be
made known to parents. Parents should be invited to participate in assisting the implementation of the programs at school to learn more about them.

6. Opportunities for reflection on practice were an important part of the teacher’s professional development in the implementation of the resources. Educators engaging in trauma-informed pedagogy could form localised communities of practice to share challenges and successes.

7. Implementing programs over time enabled more opportunities for generating sustainable change. The teacher acquired greater confidence in the use of the resources with practice. The children became more familiar with key terms and concepts of the resources and brought them into family practices in the home.

8. Outreach worker support was critical to the project to identify suitable resources, develop connections with families and to implement the resources. There is a need for an ongoing community development link between community services, schools and families.

School-wide implementation of programs enables teacher support and continuity of language and concepts across the school and throughout the primary years.
Recognizing the importance of the early childhood years to later development, Australian state and federal governments have, over the past decade or so, increasingly focused on providing improved support for families with young children at home, in child care and at school. Early childhood is the period of most rapid brain growth, and recent neuro-developmental research has emphasised the significance of young children’s daily environment in shaping biological pathways that set life trajectories for physical and mental health, learning and behaviour (Mustard 2008). Beyond the family context, schools provide the environments where children over five years of age spend most of their time. Children’s ability to cope with the social, emotional and behavioural demands of schooling is thus significantly shaped by their experiences in the home and in the early years of school.

To the north of central Adelaide in South Australia, Salisbury Communities for Children (SC4C) was established in 2005 with funding from the then Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services, now the Department of Families and Communities, Housing and Indigenous Affairs (FAHCSIA). It aimed to support families with children in the first five years living in the eastern suburbs of Salisbury. The Socio Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) scores based on Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 Census data for these suburbs range from 903.16 to 996.25 (Australian Early Development Index [AEDI] 2010), indicating that these suburbs are more disadvantaged than the average Australian suburb (SEIFA IRSD score 1000).

**Beyond the family context, schools provide the environments where children over five years of age spend most of their time.**
The AEDI results for 5-year-olds in the south eastern suburbs of the City of Salisbury for in 2009 (the cohort most applicable to the project) indicated that 34.1% were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains (Diamond, McInnes & Whitington 2013, p. 13). To illustrate, as many as 13.4% were not doing well on measures of emotional maturity (Diamond, McInnes & Whitington 2013, p. 13); that is they had trouble concentrating, managing their negative emotions and were not ready to help others.

In 2009 FaHCSIA funded SC4C to extend its support for children’s development into the primary school years. Following consultations with primary school teachers and children (Diamond & Willoughby 2009), SC4C funded the employment of a children and families support coordinator (referred to as the outreach worker in this report) by the Schools Ministry Group. The outreach worker liaised with counsellors, chaplains, Aboriginal liaisons and other school staff to create networks between agencies concerned with children and their families, and to provide holistic support in complex cases affecting children aged five to 12 years. As part of this initiative a year 2-3 class teacher at a primary school in the eastern Salisbury suburbs volunteered to participate in a project in partnership with the outreach worker. The teacher learnt about young children’s well-being, with a specific focus on the effects of stress and trauma, and implemented classroom pedagogical strategies to assist children’s development and resilience. Two programs used to make classroom social and emotional culture more supportive of these vulnerable children are *Play is the Way* and *Kimochis*. Another local resource referred to was *Making Space for Learning: Trauma Informed Practice in Schools* (Australian Childhood Foundation 2010). This report describes the initiative and its outcomes.

The following sections briefly review the research literature on children’s exposure to stress and trauma, and the impact of such exposure on children’s schooling experience.

**Definitions and sources of chronic stress and trauma in early childhood**

The term “chronic stress” refers to experiences giving rise to the presence of ongoing high levels of stress hormones such as cortisol. Stressors arising from negative family interactions, parental separation, family poverty, child neglect, family violence, parental chronic illness and substance abuse, neighbourhood violence, racism and discrimination threaten children’s healthy emotional development (Stien & Kendall 2004). These stressors are of particular concern when consistent nurturing and comforting responses are not provided by competent adults (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child [NSCDC] 2005).

In this report, the word “trauma” refers to a response to an overwhelming event or events where survival is threatened. Common contexts of trauma include family violence, rape and sexual abuse, vehicle crashes, serious illness diagnosis, or
witnessing violence, injury, death or disaster (Stien & Kendall 2004). Traumatic stressors arising from deliberate violence, betrayal or neglect are likely to have more severe outcomes than do traumatic accidents or natural disasters (Courtois & Gold 2009). Experiencing or witnessing family violence (i.e. domestic violence and child abuse) can cause major post-traumatic symptoms (Courtois & Gold 2009). It is estimated that one in four Australian children has witnessed violence against their mother (Indermaur 2001). Traumatic stress experienced by children in situations of domestic violence is often exacerbated by the compromised emotional state of a parent who cannot offer protection (van der Kolk 2005) and/or the betrayal involved when the traumatic experience is perpetrated by a trusted person (Levine & Kline 2007). Exposure to familial violence is usually characterised by repeated traumatic stress events over time. Complex trauma results from severe stressors that are (1) repetitive or prolonged, (2) involve harm or abandonment by caregivers or other ostensibly responsible adults, and (3) occur at developmentally vulnerable times in the victim’s life, such as early childhood... (when critical periods of brain development are rapidly occurring or being consolidated) (Ford & Courtois 2009, p. 13).

These stressors are of particular concern when consistent nurturing and comforting responses are not provided by competent adults.

Effects of chronic stress and trauma on brain development and function, including learning

The neuroscience of learning has established that school children who experience chronic stress or trauma have difficulties learning and integrating new information (Australian Childhood Foundation 2010). Chronic childhood stress and complex trauma impact on the development and function of the brain, affecting children’s emotional, cognitive, social, physical and behavioural functions (NSCDC 2005). Trauma in early childhood can "change the structure and function of key neural networks, including those involved with regulating stress and arousal" (Ludy-Dobson & Perry 2010, p. 29). Trauma “interferes with normal patterns of experience-guided neurodevelopment by creating extreme and abnormal patterns of neural and neuro-hormonal activity" (Perry 2009, p. 241). Continuing exposure to stressors creates chronic stress responses because the hippocampus, which normally operates to lower cortisol production, becomes damaged, allowing high cortisol levels to cause neural injury (Monk & Nelson 2002) and to threaten the development of cortical receptors (Gerhardt 2004). Significantly smaller hippocampuses have been found in adults with histories of early abuse (Bremner 2008, p. 26). As the hippocampus normally supports the integration of memories in the context of time and space, dysfunction can result in inability to recall (Bremner 2008, p. 32). Other brain outcomes of complex childhood trauma include increased amygdala function, associated with amplified
fear responses, and decreased medial prefrontal cortex function, associated with inability to turn off the fear response (Bremmer 2008).

When young children are exposed to chronically high stress environments, their use-dependent pathways become highly sensitive to detecting and responding to alarm stimuli (Gerhardt 2004; Monk & Nelson 2002). This focus on threat and survival means that when these children do not feel safe, effective learning of new information, like that presented at school, is diminished (Goswami 2008, p. 44). Memory problems, including intrusive thoughts and a state of heightened arousal disrupt the “collaboration between the emotional and cognitive parts of the brain – the limbic system and the neo-cortex ….often lead[ing] children to develop an emotion-based coping style aimed at managing overwhelming feelings rather than thoughtfully tackling the challenges at hand” (Van der Kolk 1997 cited in Stien & Kendall 2004, p.75).

The brain physiology responding to “alarm” sensory inputs is mobilised when either the situation is traumatic or there is one or more trauma-associated triggers present. This survival response has priority over language, thinking and problem-solving areas of brain anatomy that normally regulate emotional expression (Stien & Kendall 2004, p. 75). For children who have survived complex trauma, even minor stressors can be experienced as extremely stressful (Margolin & Vickerman 2007).

Traumatised children may experience new events or activities as threatening, and they may not feel safe enough to take in novel information such as new words. The hyper-arousal or dissociative states experienced by chronically traumatized children impede access to the brain pathways for cognition, language, reflection and abstraction (Streeck-Fischer & Van der Kolk 2000). Complex trauma is statistically related to problems with paying attention and maintaining focus (both necessary for information processing and learning) (van der Kolk 2005) memory loss (Abercrombie, Kalin, Thurow, Rosenkranz & Davidson 2003).

Social-emotional effects of chronic stress and trauma

Social-emotional outcomes of chronic stress and trauma include risky behaviours and relationship difficulties (Ko, Ford, Kassam-Adams, Berkowitz, Wilson, Wong, Brymer & Layne 2008), problems with emotional self-regulation, poor self-concept (e.g. shame and guilt), lack of behavioural self-control (e.g. aggression) mistrust in interpersonal relationships (van der Kolk 2005), and depression (Lueken & Lemery 2004). Trauma-based behaviours include internalising symptoms such as social withdrawal, pessimism about the future and anxiety, or externalising symptoms such as irritability, avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma, and explosive outbursts (Stien & Kendall 2004). In the classroom context, as well as impacting on the traumatised child, these behaviours can negatively affect their peers. Self-management of emotions and impulses is a key component of successful social interaction (Cillessen & Bellmore 2004). Trauma-affected children can alter “the experience of the whole class group and change the shape of the school day” (Australian Childhood Foundation
As a result, traumatised children are likely to find it difficult to make friends. Because traumatized children find it hard to tolerate uncertainty and tend to avoid novel experiences and social contact, their exposure to new social expectations and cultural contexts is inhibited (Streeck-Fisher & Van der Kolk 2000, p.912), leaving gaps in their socialization.

In the primary school context, children who are identified as socially and emotionally vulnerable are at risk of being rejected by their peers (Laird, Jordan, Dodge, Pettit & Bates 2001). Peer acceptance in the primary-school years is related to later healthy psychological adjustment (Pederson, Vitaro, Barker & Anne 2007) and successful learning (Laird et al. 2001). Children rejected by peers in primary school are more likely than others to perform poorly at school; to avoid or drop out, become involved in substance abuse and delinquent behaviour in adolescence, and have mental health problems or criminal convictions in adulthood (Laird et al. 2001).

**The potential of school-based interventions to support chronically stressed and traumatised children**

Chronically stressed and traumatised children require environments tailored to meet their needs so they can develop new adaptive responses, which may enable them to become socially and academically competent (Australian Childhood Foundation 2010). Teachers are instrumental in creating classroom environments to support children’s learning and development. Therefore teachers must understand the difficulties faced by traumatised and chronically stressed children, and what can be done in the learning environment to support them. Assisting children to become aware of their emotional and physical states and to learn strategies to self-regulate when they are feeling stressed or reacting to past traumas, provides pathways to improved social and emotional well-being, and enables effective learning (McCaskill 2007).

Children who succeed in life despite adversity or stress are considered “resilient” (Naglieri & LeBuffe 2005). Resilience in childhood stems from warm, supportive, stimulating, trusting relationships with a competent adult such as a parent, grandparent, mentor, elder or teacher (Masten & Reed 2002), or with siblings or competent peers (Werner 2006). Children who have competent caring adults in their lives benefit from the healthy models of effective coping and the buffer such adults provide. Such adults act as knowledgeable guides by listening and assisting children to rise to challenges, solve problems, remain persistent, manage stress and succeed despite their life circumstances. Positive interactions with safe and familiar others help
to regulate and repair stress response systems and trauma-associated difficulties (Ludy-Dobson & Perry 2010).


The Review of Funding for Schooling in Australia commissioned by the Australian Commonwealth Government argued that “Australian schooling needs to lift the performance of students at all levels of achievement, particularly the lowest performers” (Gonski, Boston, Greiner, Lawrence, Scales & Tannock 2011, p. xxix). It recommended that “school leaders should … make local arrangements to respond to particular needs related to student welfare, mental health and school readiness, and work directly with local public or not-for-profit providers of human services more broadly” (p. 219).

The establishment by SC4C of an outreach worker in schools to work with staff, children and families has developed stronger links between schools and family support services in parts of Adelaide’s northern suburbs. The partnership between the outreach worker and the Year 2-3 classroom teacher in a local primary school aimed to support the well-being of children in that class. The strategy was evaluated by University of South Australia researchers to determine whether this approach could improve children’s wellbeing, their ability to identify their own and others’ feelings, their social relationships at school and their school attendance, whilst maintaining academic progress. Children were expected to know more words naming feelings after the implementation of the Kimochis program than before, and to be reported as more cooperative in the classroom by their teacher after Play is the Way had been integrated into the teaching program. By the end of the year it was also expected that children would nominate higher numbers of their class peers as friends, and that more of those nominations would be mutual, that attendance would be improved and academic progress maintained.

It recommended that school leaders should ... make local arrangements to respond to particular needs related to student welfare, mental health and school readiness.
This section provides information about the classroom in which the project was set, the participants involved in the project, the classroom program’s strategies, the measures used to evaluate the project and how the project was carried out and evaluated.

**Participants**

The class chosen for the project was a combined Year 2/3 class of 27 children, aged from 6 years and 10 months to 8 years and 8 months. Of the children whose families who gave consent to their participation, nine (33%) were from families with English as a second language, one child was Aboriginal, a further nine (33%) had a chronic medical condition or disability, and 11 (41%) were from low income families. All children participated in class activities. The class teacher and the Schools Ministry worker both consented to participate.

**Program strategies**

The strategies and selection of resources were developed by the class teacher, the school’s counsellor and the outreach worker in consultation with the research team. The program activities involved classroom-based intervention by the teacher aimed at supporting children’s well-being at school. The project focused on assisting children to recognize their own and other’s feelings.
and to promote co-operative and safe interactions between students. Six strategies were implemented during the 2012 school year. These were:

- teacher professional development for the use of *Kimochis* (n.d.) and *Play is the Way* (McCaskill 2007) resources, and *Making Space For Learning*,

- implementation of *Play is the Way* and *Kimochi* resources to structure daily classroom activities,

- informing parents about *Play is the Way* and *Kimochi* resources and ways they can support children’s social and emotional learning at home,

- teacher modelling emotional self-regulation using *Play is the Way* and *Kimochi* resources,

- teacher engagement in three reflective interviews focussed on the project’s implementation, across the school year,

- ongoing support for the teacher and children from the outreach worker, skilled in fostering social and emotional development in school contexts.

*Play is the Way* is “a cooperative physical games program” in which “children are required to work together towards positive collective outcomes” (Street, Hoppe, Kingsbury & Ma 2004, p. 97). The structured games and language aim to promote peer support, trust, respect and understanding by engaging children’s emotions, and calling for mastery and control of those emotions for children to participate, be aware of others’ needs and interests, and to co-operate to achieve success (McCaskill 2007). Support for the efficacy of this program has come from Street et al.’s (2004) evaluation. The study found “significantly improved pro-social behaviour in the school environment and general improvements in pro-social behaviour in the home environment” (p. 97).
The *Kimochis* program aims to “teach children to identify and express feelings in positive ways” and the contexts which give rise to those feelings (Kimochis 2011). The plush toy characters are used to introduce children to a wide range of words for expressing their feelings, and come with interactive storybooks to relate each character’s feelings to the events of the storyline.

The strategies and selection of resources were developed by the class teacher, the school’s counsellor and the outreach worker in consultation with the research team.

**Measures**

- The measures used to assess the program were as follows:
  - children’s knowledge of feeling words at the beginning of Term 2 and the end of Term 4,
  - children identifying who in their class was important to them at school, at the end of Term 4,
  - four reflective interviews with the teacher focussed on the project’s implementation across the school year, and a further interview a full year later, each approximately an hour in duration,
  - sociometric\(^1\) data collected at the beginning of Term 2, and end of Terms 3 and Term 4.
  - children’s scores on the Waddington’s Diagnostic Reading & Spelling Tests (2000),
  - attendance data for Terms 1 and 4,
  - records of children’s responses to the question “What is important to you at school?”,
  - reflective journals of outreach worker and final year early childhood degree student, and
  - interviews with six parents in December 2013, using open-ended questions.

\(^1\) Sociometry is a commonly used method to track a classroom’s socio-emotional climate. Developed by Jacob Moreno (1989), sociometry can be described as a graphic representation of the social relations of individuals in a group. It is made by drawing the structure of interpersonal relations in that group, as indicated by those individuals.
**Procedure**

Ethics approval for the project was obtained from the University of South Australia and the Department of Education and Child Development (DECD). Consent to collect data was obtained from the school principal, the teacher and parents of 19 children—nine from Year 2 and ten from Year 3.

The project was implemented in stages across the four term school year using a team approach involving the teacher, outreach worker and school counsellor and undergraduate early childhood teaching students. The outreach worker played a key role in sourcing materials, including *Play is the Way* and *Kimochis*, and providing support and training in their use for school staff, including the class teacher.

In the first term there were no active interventions, however one researcher conducted an initial interview with the teacher. Early in Term 2 the sociometric data collection commenced. The teacher asked children, *“Name three people in the class who are important to you”*. The same process was repeated in Terms 3 and 4 to provide data on the children’s social relationships in the class over time.

In Term 2, the structured games and language of *Play is the Way* were introduced in the class and across the school, with the support of the outreach worker and a pre-service early childhood educator. The initial presence of an additional support person when games were being introduced to the class allowed the establishment of the game activities to continue at the same time as following up students who became upset. The project team conducted an information night in Term 2 for the parents of children in the target class. The early evening event comprised a barbecue and opportunity for parents to engage in *Play is the Way* games with their children.

To obtain base line data before commencing implementation of the *Kimochis* resource, at the end of Term 2 the teacher asked children to write as many words naming feelings that they could think of. Then in Term 3 *Kimochi* resources were introduced to the class by the teacher with the support of the school counsellor and the outreach worker. Parents were invited with their children to a second evening barbecue to engage with the *Kimochis* puppets and stories. In Term 4 the teacher again asked children to name as many feelings words that they could think of, providing data on the impact of the *Kimochis* resource on children’s feelings vocabulary.

In Term 4 the outreach worker asked children, *“What is important to you at school?”* to gain insights into what the children valued in their school experience. Teacher-collected data on student attendance, and reading and spelling levels were also provided to the researchers.

Data about the teacher’s professional knowledge and reflections about implementation of classroom strategies were collected in four one hour interviews with one researcher, conducted at the end of each of the four terms. The teacher was interviewed in the 4th Term of 2013, one full year later, to reflect on the program’s impact on the children and his professional practices.
The outreach worker provided a reflective journal documenting his activities in the project process and was interviewed regarding his involvement in the project at the end of Term 4. One of the pre-service teaching students who assisted in implementing *Play is the Way* in this classroom also provided a reflection on her involvement.

A barbecue for children and their families was provided in the 4th Term of 2013 to enable children and parents to again participate in *Play is the Way* games. Researchers invited attending parents of children who participated in the project in 2012 to participate in interview on their views of the project’s impacts on their child. Six parents, all mothers, participated. Five were interviewed during the barbecue and one was later interviewed by telephone.

Data were analysed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data analysis aimed to capture how the interventions impacted on the class social and its emotional climate, on the experiences of children, and on the teacher’s understanding of his role.

*The project was implemented in stages across the four term school year using a team approach involving the teacher, outreach worker and school counsellor and undergraduate early childhood teaching students.*
RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents results from analysis of data from project staff, the participating children and their parents. Key themes from the teacher interviews are presented, followed by reflections from a pre-service early childhood teacher who supported the implementation of *Play is the Way* and from the outreach worker who supported the teacher to implement changes. Child data analysed included class sociometrics, the numbers of feelings words identified, children’s attendance, and spelling and reading tests and responses to the question “what is important to you at school?” The results section concludes with findings from interview data from participating parents about the immediate and enduring impacts of the project on their child.

**Data from project staff**

This section presents analysis of 2012 data from the four interviews with the teacher, the pre-service early childhood teacher who assisted *Play is the Way* implementation, and the SC4C outreach worker’s interview.
TEACHER INTERVIEWS 2012

Researchers identified 10 key themes from the teacher interviews.

1. **Teacher actively builds positive, caring relationships with children, and between children, involving relationship repair.**

   I have gone to students and … sat them down one-on-one and … asked them why, but if you don’t have a … relationship at the start where they trust, they’re not going to say it, yeah, so it is about getting to know the students individually.

   So I … tend to think while I can’t sit down and talk to a student like I would as a counsellor one-on-one, that’s where like I do try and take in more of what they say, like in those little incidental conversations and stuff, to try and learn as much as I can about them in the time I’ve got and with what I’ve got, so yeah, I often sit with the kids like when they’re eating their lunch and … talk to a few of them. When I do have to discipline I’m really mindful of repairing the relationship as well afterwards.

2. **Teacher interprets behaviour as communication about the child’s state and not as child’s innate nature or similar**

   I know I’ve definitely shifted my thinking as a teacher, instead of sort of handing out consequences for poor behaviour, I ask them a lot more now about their choices and making good and bad choices, and understanding that a child who has or is experiencing trauma doesn’t have the ability to … always line up the consequences about behaviour.

   Yeah, and definitely there was a period in my teaching where I’ve asked you to do something, I expect you to do it. We don’t need this cool down, calm down, you just need to do it, and I’ve really changed my way of thinking around that time. It still comes down to picking a battle, choosing what’s important and what’s not, but definitely giving those kids time to cool down and calm down is very important.

3. **Teacher takes a holistic approach to children, is concerned about aspects of their development and learning, and includes families. Much broader than curriculum ‘delivery’:**

   Definitely those who are experiencing difficulty in learning my big thing is instilling confidence in them that they can do it because, yeah, I’m a strong believer in your positive thinking will affect your ability to learn any confidence in something … positive thoughts often lead to positive results; negative thoughts, negative results, and … I believe it carries over into other areas of your life as well, so definitely if the child can believe they can do it, more than likely they’ll try. If they can’t at the moment they’re giving up, but yeah, really trying to push them in a direction that if it is hard, well what can you do to get through it, and that comes down to that ‘Be brave, give it a go, don’t be scared if it’s too hard’.

   Yeah, and that’s the big thing that we’ve talked about all year that if you run away from it, it will never get solved. If you confront it, be brave and sort of talk about it, try and work through the solution, like I can’t promise it won’t stop but you at least know what’s causing it and how to maybe deal with it, rather than just running away and having it build up.
4. Teacher sees the class as a community, and the role of the teacher as leading the creation of that community, with himself as a positive role model. Teacher sees the school as a community too.

The thing that this group is good at is tolerance and understanding. They’re very empathetic towards others if you explain to them what the problem is, and I guess that’s … the teaching side of it…. If they don’t know what the problem is, they don’t understand it, therefore they’re not empathetic, but if I can voice what some people are feeling and understanding, they’re very good at coming up with solutions on how we can help other people. When I have challenged them to work with different people they’ve been fantastic every time. I guess it is just about teaching them those parts of society that makes us like get along and work together.

I’ve had to become more of a role model of the behaviour, like good and bad, like being able to be honest enough with this stuff, to acknowledge your mistakes. I guess it comes down to being brave yourself, putting yourself out there.

5. Teacher emphasises the importance of a whole of school approach so that children see a consistent approach with a shared language expressing shared understandings as they progress through the school.

..it’s definitely better with the whole school. I’ve noticed out in the yard, particularly with a lot of the younger students, I can ask them “Do you know the golden rule?” and because like they’ve seen the posters around the school and they say “Oh yeah, yeah, what is it?” and if they don’t know it, somebody else does. So it helps with that language to solve problems out in the yard, and things like that. That is a pretty big bonus to having a whole-school approach to it.

6. Teacher has a social and emotional development learning program, including empathy, tolerance, perspective taking, and includes parents.

It’s got to be something that’s taught. It’s a big thing, and I guess as I’ve matured as a teacher as well I do understand that it is something that needs to be taught. I remember when I first started I just expected that kids would know that, it was like the students will follow because I expect it. But now I’ve sort of learned … you do have to teach it and model it and you can’t assume that every child comes from a background where it will be taught.

The class teacher noted that after the Kimochis implementation children were more able to discuss their feelings and resolve interpersonal conflict through discussion than previously.

7. Teacher increases his knowledge about stress and trauma and its ongoing effects on children.

I did a Minds and Matters [course] where they did talk a lot about trauma and how that affects people’s ability to concentrate and function, and therefore learn.
And then in [School Y], … we did a whole professional development day particularly on trauma. … I know [trauma has a] sustained, prolonged effect, … where the mind sort of can’t switch off from that; they’re still in that heightened state. So … without knowing all the jargon and everything behind it, I do believe I’ve got a pretty good basic understanding of what [trauma] is and how it affects people, which then does help me… day to day.

8. Teacher arranges outside support to implement the social emotional learning program

Well definitely number one on that list is [Outreach Worker]and he has played a huge supporting role, particularly talking with A and B. He’s been able to supplement a lot of the content we’ve talked in the classroom and deliver it to them one-on-one or, you know, intensify it for those kids. Yeah, [Outreach Worker] has really helped support the learning in the classroom. He also came in and did the introduction for the Kimochis to give me a chance to look at it and see it as well, so he’s been huge, organising the nights, he was the one that organised the meals and got the food so yeah, I could talk for about half an hour what he’s done.

[The student] really helped get Play is the Way started, set up. I’ve talked a number of times about how it would have fallen in a hole if she wasn’t there, just the fact to have an extra pair of hands in the room where [she] could deliver the content and I could sort of translate that and sort of support those who weren’t ready to deal with it, like we had quite a few runners at that stage, yeah, and [she] was vital.

9. Teacher reflects on program, including individual children, and on his personal and professional learning:

Alot of the students, particularly the ones we’ve talked about being those potential trauma cases, they’re moving greatly from that, what we call the egocentric point of view to considering others. They still don’t always do it and in the moments of anger and the emotions taking over, they often forget it, but definitely in those calmer moments I’m seeing a lot more, I guess, understanding and empathising of other people than what I was seeing at the start of the year. I guess, yeah, that would be the biggest change I’ve seen in the kids, and I’m not sure if that’s just simply through just them getting older and developing, but definitely the language we’re using and all of the talk has been around making sure you think about how the other person would feel in that situation, and that has definitely become a lot more automatic at this stage of the year.

… I don’t consider myself to be overly emotionally literate myself, like I’ve been a person who, you know, sort of guards themselves pretty heavily and doesn’t really share too much emotion, and I still feel like I am that sort of person to a point, but it has definitely forced me to open myself up to the children a bit more, and I guess develop even closer relationships with the students than what I possibly would normally do, and I guess I found that a challenge with younger kids as well, like how do I relate to them on their level. Having taught older students for quite a while, it’s been a huge step for me, and I guess this Kimochis and Play is the Way has helped me take that step to open myself up and speak to the kids on their level, and things like that, so that’s been the biggest thing for me personally this year, forcing me to reflect on myself a bit more. I think for me it has been about that
building of myself and like being able to share with other people, and I guess giving names to different emotions and things like that too.

10. Teacher affirms the importance of predictability as an element of a safe and welcoming environment for children’s learning.

I learnt pretty early on in my teaching career that your kids need predictability, they need routine, they need structure, and I guess me as a person, I need it as well, so yeah, I’ll always teach spelling in the morning, always teach Maths right after recess, always have a bit of reading, and I will always write what we’re doing in the day, up on the board, and always talk about it in the morning. If something is going to change, I will try and give them a bit of a heads up as soon as I find out. It just takes away some of the scariness of the unknown. If the kids know what’s coming up they can sort of get their head into that space, there’s no surprises…they all sort of recommend that for autism and Asperger’s kids that there is some sort of routine and structure in place….You’ve got to have that in place, otherwise the kids don’t know where they’re thinking either, they’re all over the place, and yeah, it just makes it pretty tough, so yep, that’s number 1 on my list….it’s not just the autistic and Asperger’s ones, all children respond well to it. ..The kids need to know that there are time limits for things, even if it’s going well or going bad, all that sort of stuff. I sort of feel like I’m not doing my job right if I don’t sort of get them used to sort of chopping and changing, and moving on from one lesson to the next, and managing their time better as well. It’s about trying to get something finished in that amount of time.

The interviews affirmed that the use of the Play is the Way (McCaskill 2007) and Kimochis resources provided valuable pedagogical tools for implementing a social-emotional learning program. The programs provided language to describe key concepts so that they could be learned and discussed by the teacher and his class. Perry (2005, p. 4) suggests that there are certain developmental strengths which may help children overcome some of the adverse effects of violence, including attachment, self-regulation, affiliation, attunement, tolerance and respect.

The teacher’s interest in and commitment to the project was essential to sustaining classroom experiences that drew on these resources. Support from the school counsellor, and the SC4C outreach worker, along with undergraduate student input, meant that the teacher could fully implement the resources as he had back-up. The teacher’s interest in learning about the effects of stress and trauma on children’s development and their capacity to learn provided him with understandings from which he could build his overall approach.

The four teacher interviews with a researcher across the year provided a reflective tool which supported the teacher’s understanding of the changes being made in the classroom, stimulating self-reflection on his own professional and personal development from his involvement in the project.

Commitment in building relationships in the classroom required the teacher’s willingness to reveal his feelings to the class and to model “making good choices”. By sharing his feelings, the teacher positioned himself as a member of the class community. He understood that a relationships based approach was
critical to successful change. He engaged with the children as individuals who he cared for and appreciated. The teacher shifted from simply handing out punishments for “bad” behaviour, to inviting children to make choices about who they wanted to be in charge of their behaviour – themselves or the teacher. He coached them towards greater social and emotional competence, and the capacity to better regulate their behaviour.

Creating a community in the classroom meant that participants needed to become aware of the feelings and interests of others as well as themselves and to find ways to care for each other’s feelings.

**UNIVERSITY STUDENT’S REFLECTION**

In Term 2, a 4th year pre-service educator, with the class teacher’s and the SC4C outreach worker’s support, ran *Play is the Way* on Tuesday and Thursday mornings for five weeks. In her reflections on the successful implementation of *Play is the Way*, she noted that it was important to be familiar with and consistently use the language of the *Play is the Way* program, and identified the importance of using children’s names to address them directly and build relationships with them. She also acknowledged the support of school staff as important to the successful implementation. The student also reflected on how the program impacted on children’s behaviour:

> Children’s behaviour became easier to control and they seemed to be connecting my instructions with the effectiveness of the game and the choices they were making. By the end of Week 5, I was able to see a dramatic change in the children. Some children that would not participate in the beginning at all, went from being involved for 10 minutes, to participating in the whole session. It was quite a feeling of accomplishment as this is something the teacher and counsellor thought would not be possible for some of the children in the class.

**OUTREACH WORKER INTERVIEW**

Four themes were identified from the interview with the outreach worker:

1. **Supporting change**

The outreach worker had a clear vision for change based on values, reflection and a “big picture” approach:

> …deciding what are we wanting to see as a result of our kids going through 13 years of education. Are we wanting to see them come out, you know, get a job, or are we wanting them to come out as meaningful citizens who can actually play a role …that contributes to a greater range of things?.... What I want to be different, … rather than lots of other projects that… work for six months or work for a year, or whatever, what I want to see is something that’s more systemic in change… and making an ongoing, deeper difference.
Clearly articulated values, reflection, and an attractive, future orientated vision are requirements for effective leadership (Rodd 2006; Sullivan 2010; Waniganayke, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley & Shepherd 2012). Successful advocacy for change also requires the advocate to be well informed (Kieff 2009). The Outreach Worker ensured he took advantage of opportunities to learn more about how primary school children’s wellbeing might be supported:

“For the first probably six months, I can’t count the number of different training sessions I went to, to look at all the different programs that schools were running.”

The outreach worker stated:

“the guidance role to [the teacher] was pivotal. That made the difference in what he did in the classroom.”

This involved “challenging the process”, one of Cranston & Ehrich’s (2007) five key leadership practices:

“An essential role was challenging the thinking of that teacher, and helping him to grow throughout the year.”

It also involved enabling the teacher to act and “encouraging the heart” (two more of Cranston & Ehrich’s five key leadership practices) by:

“getting him to try new things at his pace…. When I was able to come alongside of him ….he then tried something new and moved in that new direction.”

“I highlighted to [the teacher] only last week [that a particular child has] now been in the school three terms … and this is the first time in his whole schooling life he’s not even been suspended, … saying ‘Look, even though while there’s not a huge improvement, there is movement that has been going.”

Research (Goleman 2004) has found that effective leaders score highly on measures of social skills and empathy. The outreach worker recognised the importance of the teacher:

“having someone there to actually just listen through those highs and lows.”

“It needed a lot of sensitivity around where [the teacher] was at, where was his learning at, where was his thinking at, what was he ready to look at, what was he ready to change, what was he ready to think about, so I knew very carefully that if I pushed him too much I was going to push him away. He’d struggled and he would fall back to the behaviour work of just maintaining the classroom, and I think…”

For effectively supporting change, O’Sullivan (2009) refers to the importance of creating “a climate in which it is safe for individuals to try out different ways of doing things” (p. 46) and advises that leaders of change “be visible and walk the job so people can talk to you” (p. 49). The outreach worker stated:

“generally I would spend a good four to five hours a week with that class, … sometimes it would be just sitting in on the class and just being there, and letting the teacher try new things. Sometimes it was actually being there at the start of the day or the end of the day and just talking to parents and building those relationships, which we found were pivotal when we came to the family nights.”
2. A community focus

The outreach worker emphasised the need for a community focus:

*I’m realising that my role very much is more of a community development role … trying to build capacity in the community, to actually to get them to support themselves again, and I think actually the best way I’ve heard it summed up was Bob Fitzgerald, the Productivity Commissioner at the Community for Children Conference when he was saying, [that] over the last ten years we’ve moved into the people-centric model of support, and we have just unknowingly taken away all the community support or the family support, and what we need to do is move to that more community-centric model. And I think that’s probably what I’m seeing my role … being…. If we have that community around that classroom, amazing things can happen…. if we recognise that and use the school as that pivot, we can engage parents, we can engage kids, we can engage adults, we can engage the whole community.

If we provide a learning environment the kids enjoy, where the kids flourish, then they’ll share it with their parents, and the kids acted as peer educators for their parents, bring the parents along, and all of a sudden we’re doing parenting work.

As a result, parents were willing to engage in positive activities in school with their child:

[The teacher] thought we won’t get parents, we might get two or three, and then we had over 70 people… In the optional teacher interviews at the end of term 3, the rest of the school getting one or two parents and the teacher is getting over 15… [The teacher] said one of the things this has done for him is re-ignited his faith in parents wanting to be involved with their child’s learning.

This classroom-community approach meant that the outreach worker moved away from simply intervening with individual children:

the strategies that worked best were relating them back to the classroom, so again it wasn’t me as a professional coming alongside of a child, setting something up, and then when I’m not there it fails. When it was linked back into the classroom, linked back into what was happening with their relationship with the class teacher, that’s when it was most successful.

The outreach worker said *I see schools as they’re the community central*. He added that:

One of the biggest challenges [for] interdisciplinary work is that outside agencies have a reluctance to go to schools. They expect everybody to come to them, and I can say this being from an agency myself, they expect that things will come to them, and they’re constantly frustrated [when] families don’t turn up, children don’t turn up, and so what I constantly do is try to encourage services to work in the schools…..At the same time there are some schools that don’t like letting services in, so it’s a bit of a both-way change, but it’s about changing the policies, about changing the way agencies work.
3. Good relationships are the key to better outcomes

The pivotal core here was the sense of relationships created in that classroom, the relationship between [the teacher] and the students, between the students and myself, and between parents and the class as well. That meant that there was a significant level of trust, and so the children were willing to engage with the program fully, the parents were willing to engage with it, and we got the greater outcome. [Child] started (at another) school, he was constantly suspended, constantly excluded, and when you look through his file one of the biggest things he’s never been able to do is form a relationship with someone at school, so he’s had no one to contact and want to go back to. What I highlighted to the teacher only last week was, you know, T has now been in the school three terms and this is the first time in his whole schooling life he’s not even been suspended, so something is happening right for him, and one of the things I did very early on, probably about term 2 with the teacher, was I initiated the idea of him spending some of his NIT time with [child] one-on-one, doing some models up in the Tech Room, and the profound effect that had on building a relationship between the teacher and [child]. [Child] has Oppositional Defiance Disorder, his issues are not going to go away, but certainly we saw a great reduction in his defiance in the classroom, purely because he had that relationship with the teacher.

4. Structured resources enabled children to build better relationship skills

S for example, … high on the autism spectrum, she came at the start of this year, she’s in year 3, had not been able to engage more than five minutes in her schooling life since she started, constantly leaving the classroom, constantly not wanting to be involved, would always say nobody wants to spend time to play with her, and we did the Play is the Way Program. For the first week S was really confronted by the idea that she had to become uncomfortable and try to solve a situation with her class, but by the third week S was choosing to engage, and we weren’t having to sit on top of her, she was actually freely engaging. By the fifth week she’d chosen some people she could now play with and she was reporting that she was having friends play at recess and lunch, and then we looked at her sociogram. You’ll see that she went from Term 1 where she couldn’t identify anybody at all, to term 4 where she was writing extra numbers to add extra kids on the list.

The outreach worker’s contribution was essential to establishing and sustaining the project. The outreach worker provided leadership and advocacy for positive change through relationship building. His tasks encompassed researching and selecting suitable pedagogical resources, providing training in the use of these resources, supporting and encouraging the teacher in the use of the resources in the classroom, engaging with individual children and their families and supporting parents to engage more deeply with the school and their children’s relationship to school.
The significance of the outreach worker’s contribution to the implementation of the project provides an indication of the unseen barriers to wider changes in school practices across the primary school system. A first hurdle is the high level of demand on teachers to deliver the curriculum, to prepare children for standardised testing and to meet children’s diverse needs and abilities. Placing additional demands on teachers risks rising stress levels and an understandable reluctance to take on new, extra work. The teacher in this project needed to be willing to take on professional learning about trauma and chronic stress, to implement new class activities and ways of interacting in the classroom. The school and the teacher needed to accept the presence and engagement of “an outsider” with the children and families of their school community. This acceptance itself relied on the establishment of a trust relationship between the outreach worker, the school and the teacher. The outreach worker extended those trust relationships into the classroom and engaged with children on a regular basis at the school, as well as making connections with parents at drop-off and pick-up times. Such connections were then further developed through the parent events showcasing the children’s activities using *Play is the Way* and *Kimochis*.

As the outreach worker noted, services often wait for families to come to them in preference to going where children and families are. As a compulsory universal service, schools offer a unique opportunity to make connections with families who may otherwise never engage with community services. Services would need to move to a greater outreach focus and schools to move further towards inviting community services and parents into school environs.

**Data from participating children**

This section presents results of the analysis of sociogram data, the numbers of feeling words provided by the children, children’s reports about what was important to them at school, results of reading and spelling tests, and children’s school attendance.

**Sociometric data**

Children were asked by their teacher, “Name three people in the class who are important to you,” in Terms 2, 3 and 4. Table 1 records data from participants from Year 2, and Table 2 presents data from Year 3 participants. The tables indicate how many classmates nominated each child in each term, and how many of these nominees mutually chose each other. Given that children were asked to nominate three others, the maximum possible number of mutual choices is three. To aid interpretation, symbols have been placed beside each name to indicate the direction of change over time.
The equal sign indicates no change. The minus sign indicates a decline in the child’s social network over time. The plus sign denotes an increase in the child’s social network over time, with two plus signs used to indicate the greatest positive changes.

The overall direction of change for Year 2 participants was positive (see Table 1). Four of the nine Year 2 children experienced positive change over the year, three children showed little change and two experienced a decline in networks over the year. In Term 2 the nine participants were chosen 18 times by other classmates, rising to 22 times by Term 4. Although this is a modest change in the number of times the children were chosen, the biggest difference is in the number of mutual relationships, which increased from three to ten, indicating a tighter and more positive social and emotional climate. The two children who experienced the most positive change shifted from having no mutual relationships in Term 2 to the maximum of three mutual relationships by the end of the year. Three children had a friendship with a classmate at the start of Term 2, rising to five children with at least one friend in the class by Term 4. The increase in mutual relationships is evidence of more friendships being developed between children in the class.

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Table 1: Year 2 sociometric data, frequencies for one way and mutual choices by children

The equal sign indicates no change. The minus sign indicates a decline in the child’s social network over time. The plus sign denotes an increase in the child’s social network over time, with two plus signs used to indicate the greatest positive changes.

The overall direction of change for Year 2 participants was positive (see Table 1). Four of the nine Year 2 children experienced positive change over the year, three children showed little change and two experienced a decline in networks over the year. In Term 2 the nine participants were chosen 18 times by other classmates, rising to 22 times by Term 4. Although this is a modest change in the number of times the children were chosen, the biggest difference is in the number of mutual relationships, which increased from three to ten, indicating a tighter and more positive social and emotional climate. The two children who experienced the most positive change shifted from having no mutual relationships in Term 2 to the maximum of three mutual relationships by the end of the year. Three children had a friendship with a classmate at the start of Term 2, rising to five children with at least one friend in the class by Term 4. The increase in mutual relationships is evidence of more friendships being developed between children in the class.

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Table 2: Year 3 sociometric data, frequencies for one way and mutual choices by children
For Year 3 children again the overall direction of change was positive (see Table 2). Eight of the ten Year 3 students experienced positive changes in their social relationships and two showed a decline in their social network. In Term 2 nine participants received 17 nominations by their classmates, rising to 28 nominations for ten children in Term 4. As with Year 2 students, there was an impressive gain in the number of mutual relationships developed across the year, rising from 5 to 15. Three of the ten Year 3 children had a mutual relationship at the start of Term 2, rising to nine out of ten by Term 4.

When the totals for Year 2 and 3 students are combined, the number of mutual relationships increases from 8 to 25. Across the class, six of the 19 participants had a mutual relationship in Term 2 rising to 14 with at least one mutual relationship by Term 4.

The data show that the number of mutual friendships had increased by just over 200 per cent over the three terms of intervention activities. It is however concerning that five participants finished the year with no mutual relationships in the class, and most of these did not have any mutual relationships during the year. The data suggests that Year 3 students were more successful in improving their social relationships than Year 2 students. This may be a feature of their age and development and longer experience in the school environment.

**Numbers of feeling words known by children before and after the Kimochis intervention**

When children were asked to write all the feeling words they knew, before the Kimochis intervention, the children produced between 4 and 11 feeling words. After the intervention the children produced between 5 and 22 feeling words.

A paired samples *t*-test was conducted to test whether children would score higher on the number of feelings words after the Kimochis intervention than they did before. As expected, children provided significantly more feelings words after the Kimochis intervention ($M = 11.33, \ SD = 4.94$) than before ($M = 6.75, \ SD = 2.22$), $t(11) = -3.298, \ p = .004$ (one tailed), showing that the intervention significantly improved their knowledge of feeling words.

The children produced significantly more feelings words after the Kimochis intervention so we can infer that the Kimochis interventions improved the children’s emotional literacy, as measured by number of feeling words recalled. The intervention appears to have been more effective, however, for some children than for others. Further support for the finding regarding children’s increased emotional and social literacy came from the teacher interview data.

**What did children reported as important for them at school**

In Term 4 the children were individually asked by the outreach worker “What is important to you at school?” The question sought to provide insights about what the children valued at school. Twenty-five anonymous responses were recorded and are summarised in Table 3.
The most common single response was “friends”, which was nominated by six children. Eight children nominated various academic activities. Two liked maths, two liked science, two liked reading, one liked painting and the other liked writing. Sport and play activities were named by seven children. Two liked the playground, two liked football, and other single nominations were variously the sports-shed, the sandpit and basketball. One child liked the shady trees at the school. Two children said school made them feel brave, and one child liked “not getting into trouble”.

The children’s responses reveal that classroom based activities, play and sport activities and friends were the three most highly valued aspects of school. It is interesting that two children said that feeling “brave” was important to them at school. “Brave” is a word prominent in both the *Kimochis* resource and *Play is the Way* activities, with emphases on trying new things and being willing to take a risk. Its use by children in the class is evidence of their awareness and use of a feelings vocabulary.

### Children’s Reading Achievement

Using Waddington’s Reading Test, children’s reading ages in Term 1 ranged from 81 months to 117 months, and in Term 4 ranged from 82 months to 120 months. Data for individual children’s reading ages from the Waddington’s Reading Test are displayed in Figure 1 overleaf.

A paired samples t-test was conducted to test the hypothesis that children’s reading ages increased on average across the school year. As expected, children’s reading ages, as measured by the Waddington’s Reading Test, were significantly higher in Term 4 (M=110.36, SD=10.57) than in Term one (M=102.43, SD=9.91), t (13) = -4.723, p<.001 (one tailed).
A Pearson Correlation was conducted to test the hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between individual children’s reading ages in Term 1 and in Term 4. As predicted, individuals’ reading ages in Term 1 were found to be significantly positively related to reading ages in Term 4, r(12) = .81, p < .001 (one tailed).

Discrepancy scores for the reading age data were computed by calculating the number of months each child’s score differed from the expected reading age for that child’s chronological age, as provided in Waddington’s standardised conversion table. Discrepancy reading age scores ranged from -18 months to +22 months in Term 1, and from -27 months to +24 months in term four.

A paired samples t-test was conducted to explore whether children’s discrepancy scores for the Waddington’s Reading Test changed across the school year. Children’s discrepancy scores were neither significantly higher nor lower on the Waddington’s Reading Test in Term 4 (M=7.29, SD=13.9) than in Term one (M=9.36, SD=11.69), t(13) = 1.234, p = .239.
Children’s Spelling Achievement

Using Waddington’s Spelling Test, children’s spelling ages in Term 1 ranged from 84 months to 120 months, and in Term 4 ranged from 86 months to 122 months. Data for individual children’s spelling ages from the Waddington’s Spelling Test are displayed in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Line graph showing changes in individual children’s spelling ages across the year.

A paired samples t-test was conducted to test the hypothesis that children’s spelling ages increased on average across the school year. As expected, children’s spelling ages, as measured by the Waddington’s Spelling Test, were significantly higher in Term 4 (M=108.21, SD=10.42) than in Term 1 (M=98.64, SD=13.92, t (13) = -6.132, p<.001 (one tailed).

A Pearson Correlation was conducted to test the hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between individual children’s spelling ages in Term 1 and in Term 4. As predicted, individuals’ spelling ages in Term 1 were found to be significantly positively related to spelling ages in Term 4, r(12) = .93, p<.001 (one tailed).

Discrepancy scores for the spelling age data were computed by calculating the number of months each child’s score differed from the expected spelling age for that child’s chronological age, as provided in Waddington’s standardised conversion table. Discrepancy spelling age scores ranged from -22 months to +21 months in Term 1, and from -23 months to +20 months in Term 4.
A paired samples t-test was conducted to explore whether children’s discrepancy scores for the Waddington’s Reading Test changed across the school year. As expected, children’s discrepancy scores were neither significantly higher nor lower on the Waddington’s Spelling Test in Term 4 (M=5.36, SD=12.11) than in term one (M=5.07, SD=12.53), t(13) = -.162, p=.874.

Results on the children’s academic achievement across the year, as measured by Waddington’s Reading and Spelling Tests, indicated that whilst individual children’s progress varied, all children made some reading and spelling progress.

The results for the t-tests of difference between reading and spelling discrepancy scores indicate that the focus on the children’s social and emotional development did not adversely impact on the reading and spelling learning outcomes of the class as a whole.

The increase in the range of discrepancy score, indicated that while some children were forging ahead, others were falling further behind age-mates in their literacy learning. Although this result is disappointing and of tremendous concern, it is unsurprising given international research findings of widening differences in academic achievements as children progress through school (Arnold & Doctoroff 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, Mayo, Melhuish, Taggart, Sammons & Sylva 2011). Results for South Australia also show mean reading score differences between children of parents with high education levels (Bachelor degree or above), and children of parents who had not completed high school increased from Year three to Year five (National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy Achievement 2012, p. 9 and p.73). Such widening trajectories have been explained by Hart and Risley’s findings (1995) that the number of words and how they were used in interactions between toddler-aged children and their parents, were the best predictors of, not only early language development, but also academic competence in the school years. The strong correlations between individual children’s scores in Terms one and two strengthen an argument that individual children are following trajectories largely set through language input before school entry.

**Children’s Attendance**

Children’s school attendance was logged, with principal-approved exemptions included as attendances. The percentages of days each child attended school in Term 1 and in Term 4 were calculated. A paired samples t-test was conducted to test the hypothesis that the percentage of days children attend school would be greater in Term 4 than in Term 1. As expected, the percentage of days children attended school was greater in Term 4 (M = 92.25, SD = 9.21) than in Term 1 (M= 86.3, SD= 14.62), t(25)= -1.711, p=.0495 (one tailed).

Children’s attendance did improve between Terms 1 and 4, however without comparative data (eg with the averages for Year 3/4 classes in the state), we cannot assert this result is an outcome of the project.

Although there is no evidence that the project improved academic outcomes, because school attendance
is reliably found to be associated with school achievement over time (eg Morrissey, Hutchison & Winsler 2013), we argue that consistently strong attendance along with emotional readiness to learn would set the stage for learning over the next years. We also recommend that the school provide reading remediation for school-aged children where needed, and work in partnership with the outreach worker to engage with local families with preschool-aged children to prevent “the early catastrophe” (Hart & Risley 2003, p. 110) of poor language development.

One year later

TEACHER INTERVIEW 2013

The teacher was interviewed again in Term 4 of 2013 to reflect on his practice and insights arising from the 2012 project. Four key themes were identified: “Changing use of Play is the Way and Kimochis”, “Impacts on children’s behaviour and learning”, “Impacts on the teacher’s own learning and practice”, and “Importance of some ongoing support and a school wide approach to social and emotional learning”.

1. Evolving use of Play is the Way and Kimochis.

The teacher explained that in the year following the project, his use of Kimochis had become more flexible and responsive to children’s social situations, and required less planned class time.

I’ve moved on to taking a bit more control about how I deliver [Kimochis and Play is the Way] …I still think the support for the Play is the Way stuff is crucial, particularly early in the year when you’re trying to get your class to gel and work together…Definitely I think my understanding of it has been a lot better, and because of that the delivery is a bit better as well, and we can tailor it to what the students need.

I am using them a little bit differently this year to last. Last year…I was still learning the programs…. I was doing everything by the book…. In the first half of [this] year…we did a few regular lessons there, but in the second half of the year it’s probably dropped off a little bit. It’s mainly to do with the needs of the class rather than sort of losing interest in the program as such. … so I guess the need in the class for that kind of lesson hasn’t been there this year like it was last. …We still use the language when issues in the yard arise, we still talk about the Kimochis characters, and we talk about the Play is the Way rules.

The three students I have [from last year] were happy to redo it….They were sort of almost like guides as such to the rest of the kids. They knew all the characters back to front, so they were able to share some of their understandings, and things like that, so there is still enough appeal there to do it a second time around.

Last year I was getting the kids to make a lot of posters and things like that about different scenarios, whereas this year…I feel like I don’t need to repeat that sort of stuff. I can do a better explanation by
a quick role play, or if there’s been a problem out in the yard we can use the Kimochis philosophies to solve those problems that way.

The big things that I did keep of the Kimochis were using the short stories that came in the pack… regarding different scenarios, and… talk to the class about how this could relate to our own life…. I’ve kept that book behind my desk, and if we have a particular problem out in the yard, I’ll sort of read through the book and think, Oh yeah, that one fits with that problem, and I’ll just use it that way.

Use [of] class meeting time… to talk about these issues has been more beneficial than setting aside an hour a week.

2. Impacts on children’s behaviour and learning.

The teacher described the benefits for the children as a group, as well as by individual children who had experienced particular social and emotional difficulties.

Whether it’s Kimochis or the Play is the Way, they’re starting to understand that they have more control over their emotions and how they choose to react in a situation, whereas early in the year there was a lot of comments like, Such and such made me push in the line, or, Such and such made me do that. I’m not getting those excuses anymore … they’re taking responsibility for their own choices and behaviours.

The Kimochis has been a good starting point for [Child 1]. I guess [Child’s] journey has evolved as well over time, like she’s not as heavily reliant on the Kimochis as… last time around…. She’s shifting away from those [Kimochi] characters and internalising it a little bit more…. [Child] has taken more responsibility for her own reactions. She won’t run off as much. She was doing it almost on a daily basis last year, and now… it’s [less than] once every two weeks, so there’s definitely been a shift in her behaviour. While it’s not cured, yeah, we can see progress being made. … it did help her talk to her doctor, like she was able to say, Oh, we’ve done Kimochis, and sort of talk about that. Mum and dad had said that that helps them sort of get started with that, and she had a bit more, I guess, emotional vocabulary than what she ever had before, so that’s a clear sign of where it has helped.

[Child 2] was the one that would always run away when things got tough. I don’t think he runs as much this time, but he will still come up to me in the yard and seek me out, and say hello, and have a chat. If I’m kicking the footy with a couple of kids he’ll come over and sort of have a chat… So I think part of this Kimochis thing has allowed me to show a bit more empathy to the kids as well…. and someone like [Child 2] has really responded…. You just know it’s more than just saying hello, he’s sort of using it as a bit of comfort I guess…. I had to tell [child 2] off quite a lot last year about being off task, and all that sort of stuff, but there’s been enough of a relationship maintained through the other activities that he still feels comfortable enough to come up and talk.

[Child 3] was another one whose name came up quite a bit. He’s still had his issues this year, but I believe that the work that [outreach worker] did, and the Kimochis stuff, has helped him this year…. He still gets in trouble, but not as much…. I think doing that program last year had highlighted a few of the
issues and a few of the needs [that] we were able to then talk to the new leadership about: This guy needs some help here, and they’ve been able to put that in place…He seems a lot happier coming to school now, like he still has his issues, he’s not always included in all of the games, but he’s a bit more understanding about why that has happened now, and he tries really hard to do the right thing…what he was. If somebody really pushes his buttons he’ll still snap, but he’s not, I guess, snapping at those really little things anymore, it takes a couple of things for him to build up. So he is one where I can see that he has improved in the last 18 months. He’s in the class right next door and he doesn’t seem to get sent out as much. He is starting to socialise a little bit more. He still needs some help in picking the right friends and that sort of stuff, but he’s making more of an effort, which is good. …He’s still not easy, I…talk to his teacher, a little bit, and like he’s hard work but yeah, he’s definitely not what he was last year I guess…he’s been good [he hasn’t been suspended].

I can see how … the Play is the Way stuff has helped [Child 4] become more resilient when things don’t go her way, which is pretty tough for [Child 4] with the Asperger’s.

3. Impacts on the teacher’s own learning and practice.

The teacher spoke of how his learning about trauma its effects on behaviour and about how to support stressed and traumatised children in his classrooms, had given him confidence and informed his responses to children and families. The year-long project had led to deep learning that he said he would carry forward through his career.

Having an understanding of trauma is essential. In the past, I guess for me it was easy to write off a student as…just a naughty kid, [or] they just don’t like me as a teacher, [or] they don’t like the class they’re in….Whereas with doing this “trauma in classroom” stuff, and having a bit more research behind it, I do have a greater appreciation that it may not be anything I’m doing personally, it may not be anything that anyone is doing to them in the class. If they’re carrying this baggage from home, it’s then going to come out in different ways and forms….It has helped me to sit down and have a look at my class this year. We can’t diagnose or anything like that, but you have a bit of an idea….I have a bit more… time and empathy and understanding for those students, to…try and help them through and be successful at school.

[Child] came to us on an exclusion from another school, and he’d been done for assault and things like this, so he was only eight years old and he was right up there with the most extreme kids….but definitely having an understanding of, “Yes, there has been some sort of trauma in his life, how can we sort of work around that to help him move forward?” has helped.

I guess it’s easy for teachers to say, “Yes, I have an understanding of trauma”, but how do you actually then change your practice to help those kids? That’s where I feel like I’ve been able to improve this year.

The more you do it, the better you get at it, it’s as simple as that, so yeah, I’ll keep going with it, and I’ll use it again next year.
We’re aware of [trauma], but I guess I’m guilty of going to plenty of these [training] days and you hear about it, it’s in your mind for a couple of weeks, and then after a while you just sort of go back to what you were doing anyway, whereas I feel like this one has had a bit more of a long-term impact, so it’s not just words, like there is something behind it.

I guess my emotional literacy itself has improved. I’m not the most emotionally in tune person there is out there, but [the project] has given me the confidence to talk about it and use it, and I just guess not be scared of using it.

[The project] has been a worthwhile experience, it has been rewarding, particularly the trauma stuff. I’ll carry that with me for the rest of my career, and put a bit more time and effort into the old saying, “If you don’t know the people you’re teaching, how can you effectively teach them?” It’s all that understanding stuff. Yeah, that definitely has changed, or improved, along the way.

I’ve put a bit more time in now with parents, particularly there’s a girl in my class, [child], she would be one of these trauma kids that we talked about last year…we had two or three discussions with mum and dad about just how [child] is going socially in the classroom….I suppose it has changed the… discussions…trying not to blame [child] for …but it’s more explaining to mum and dad….about the social consequences of her behaviour….I guess it’s also about having the confidence to back your judgement on these things as well. It’s not always easy, like parenting is a hard enough job without having somebody else telling you what you should be doing, or what you shouldn’t be doing, but it’s about giving them enough information that they can start making some choices as well about how they…behave at home in front of their kids.

4. Importance of some ongoing support and a school wide approach to social and emotional learning.

The teacher referred to the value of a second educator’s support when introducing Play is the Way to a new class, of having a mentor to observe sessions and share ideas, and of a whole-school approach.

[Final year early childhood education student in 2013] came in and did the Play is the Way games with us, and it was just like last year. The first couple of sessions I was still chasing kids that were running off when things didn’t go their way, so if I was doing that on my own it would have been very tough, like being stuck outside having three or four kids running off at once. It’s pretty intimidating as a teacher …[child’s] sessions at the start of the year were a good grounding point for us again, so I was able to sort of use her support at the start to make it better down the track. We were able to get through all those teething problems, and play a few more games and things later on, and use that as a discussion point down the track.

I guess on the other side it has been a bit trickier this time [2013] because I haven’t had the people to bounce ideas off this time around. No one else in the school has taken on the Kimochis stuff, it’s just been our class. A lot of people are interested in it, but because no one else is doing it I haven’t been able to just go up to them and say, What do you think about this? How can we do it here? So it’s been
a bit trickier that way around, and I guess I have been guilty a couple of times thinking, I’m not quite sure how that went. I’ll just leave that one and move on, whereas if I’d had [the outreach worker] there, or been more accountable, like having to show somebody that we’ve been doing it, I probably would have done a couple of extra lessons.

It’s just like any program that comes into the school, if it’s a whole-school, and everybody is doing it, and everybody is on board, the language becomes more ingrained around the school. Although the Play is the Way language I feel is pretty ingrained out there, like every class should be doing it, and has been doing it at some stage, but yeah, the understanding of the Kimochis has been a little bit tricky. It’s not like you can just go and sprout out to anyone in the school:…”What would Bug do in this situation?” “What would Cloud do?” [Kimochis] been a little bit harder from that angle, I guess.

The teacher’s reflections highlight that over time the resources offered dynamic opportunities to adapt to the needs of the class and to particular children. His growing experience in using Play is the Way and Kimochis enabled him to be more innovative and flexible in their implementation, although additional support was still important to introducing the games of Play is the Way.

The teacher identified that whilst the children in his class generally benefited from taking increasing responsibility for their actions, the children with the most challenges were most assisted by the resources. Children with autism, those with high emotional reactivity, those who lashed out violently at others and those who were socially excluded were seen to have developed greater social competencies and an improved ability to express their feelings.

Having an understanding of trauma, its impacts on children’s behaviour and emotional state and effective strategies to support children, enabled the teacher to develop increased confidence in dealing with children with challenging behaviours. He was more able to form positive relationships with children, even if he had to discipline them, and more able to talk to parents about how their child was faring socially at school.

The teacher also identified that extended engagement with the 2012 project enabled him to engage more meaningfully over time than was usual for professional development activities. One day of exposure to training materials was not as effective at generating sustained change as the implementation of programs over the course of the year, with opportunities to talk to others about the process.

He noted that the school wide implementation of the Play is the Way resource provided a shared basis of understanding of key concepts and language of the program, but Kimochis was only used in his classroom, and was thus little understood by other school staff. Having a resource in only one class inhibited the development of shared understandings and the capacity to workshop strategies with other professionals.

The data confirms the efficacy of sustained intervention for changes in children’s social and emotional learning and for teachers’ capacity development in delivering trauma informed classroom strategies.
PARENTS’ VIEWS ABOUT THE PROJECT’S IMPACT

Parents of participating children were approached by researchers at a *Play is the Way* barbecue in the Term 4 2013, around 12 months after the project concluded, to explore their views of any benefits to their child and whether any such benefits had persisted over time. Six parents were interviewed. Four were parents of nine year old children, one had an 8 year old and the other a 10 year old. Two had boys and the remainder had girls. Only one child had the same teacher as in 2012. None of the six parents interviewed felt their child had been adversely affected by the classroom interventions.

Parents variously noted their child’s improved willingness to try new things, increased confidence in identifying and expressing their feelings, better relationships with peers and improved ability to respond proactively to bullying behaviours, as well as improved academic outcomes.

All parents indicated that their children felt happy about coming to school in 2012, but one parent explicitly linked her child’s improved happiness to the classroom activities.

> I have noticed from after we [attended the barbecue last year] to this year, he is happier… because he knows values, he actually is able to express what he learned the values, you know like treat others like the way you like to be treated.

Two parents commented that their child particularly liked attending school.

> He just loves coming to school, it’s amazing.

> She liked that [the teacher] was able to teach her things that she wasn’t able to understand with other teachers so she had a better understanding of the subjects overall.

Parents were asked to identify anything their child did not like about school last year. Although some parents raised sport or homework, most parents identified social relationships as the aspect of school their child had found most challenging.

> He used to cry when I pick him up from school, cry, because nobody wants to play with him… I come and speak to the teacher. We sort out the problem….it’s like he didn’t know how to defend himself if somebody bully him.

> Her best friend left the school and moved to Perth, and after that she really struggled, so yeah, just finding that friend I suppose.

> Well she didn’t like bullying. She had a lot of bullying issues.

When asked if their child was helped by being in [the teacher’s] class, some parents felt that their child’s experience of the 2012 year was linked to the child’s personality.

> She got a bit of extra help, because she needs it… She’s a bit of a shy person. She keeps to herself and… other times she’ll just join in.
Parents identified the *Kimochis* resource as a specific aspect of their child’s enjoyment of school and as helping their child.

She had a good year, she enjoyed her teacher… she got on well with him, and they did some good things… like Kimochis, she enjoyed that.

She did enjoy doing the Kimochis….Just something different I think….I don’t know what else – probably everything!!.

The good thing that I think [the teacher] did help with and Kimochis as well, was for [my child] to share her feelings, and show the feelings….We definitely enjoyed last year when they did the Kimochis thing. I think it was great … [My child] did benefit from it. They helped to also understand her feelings, how she was feeling, and I mean the thing that [my child] was dealing with at school was obviously the friend issues, and the hormone issue, and and we do it at home as well.

With the Kimochis it really helped her to understand her feelings and other children’s feelings and how to respond. She’s a little bit on the autistic scale so the Kimochis program really helped her. I was really pleased about that and Play is the Way as well. It helped too, definitely. She’s made more friends. She made some really good friends last year which continued on into this year. He has been a really good teacher for her and knows where she is coming from and helped her to understand a lot of situations that happen at school and school work and she has definitely improved academically. She has always been really switched on academically but she has really come on in the last year with [teacher]. We’re happy that she is in his class again this year.

Parents were asked if the benefits to their child had continued into the current year. All parents felt that their child had developed socially. Two parents again referred to the *Kimochis* as particularly valuable and had purchased *Kimochis* to use at home to complement the school activities.

It was very hard before….It breaks my heart when I remember, but he has improved from that. Now he tells me everything….He doesn’t do something when he knows that there is consequences, and that’s what he’s learning now.

I think as well Kimochis lets them see that it’s normal, that it is normal, the way you feel. I don’t know if [Child] maybe struggled with working out her feelings and why she felt that way.

We have been using the Kimochis at home. We actually bought a couple of them. She’s got Bug and Cloud and we really used them at home and asked her which one do you feel like today? It has really helped her communicate to us about how she is feeling and helping us to get a better idea of how she works emotionally and helping her in social situations as well. She’s a very emotional little girl. We have had a couple of down bumps at the beginning because there are different children in the class but she has continued growing with [Teacher]. He has been using the Kimochis again this year. We asked him at the beginning of the year if he would be using them again and he said yes definitely. It has really helped her. Hopefully he can talk to her teacher for next year and it continues on.
When asked to specifically comment on the *Play is the Way* and *Kimochis* resources, all parents were supportive of these.

They were good. I even bought Kimochis, I bought them for home… the kids sleep with them every night actually. They really wanted them, and I gave them to them at Christmas time, and that made their Christmas. Sometimes they keep it [their feelings] inside, and other times they open up.

He’s not one that’s come home and talked about it, but he’s always been polite and all that way, sharing and that, so it would have helped him in a sense, but he has always been like that, so I think it will help my next one, he’ll do it next year.

It has changed everything, and he is able now, if somebody is doing something … prepared to come and speak… he wouldn’t be able to do that last year.

Well she does talk a lot about the Play is the Way stuff. She liked the games and team work I suppose, the play and stuff. … I think even like with the Kimochis, I mean she talks about stuff about how people are different, feel differently. OK, so you think she now understands a bit more now how people feel? I think she got stuff out of it.

what I’m teaching [child]at the moment is dealing with the way you feel, so it’s alright to feel that way but you have to learn to not spend the whole day feeling that way, which she doesn’t.

They [Kimochis and Play is the Way] were definitely useful. A lot of the kids used to be really hyper and have settled down a little but more but she has definitely started talking to kids she didn’t use to talk to and playing with new people so it has definitely been useful. Both were important hopefully more schools use Play is the Way and Kimochis because they are just fantastic.

Parents’ comments show they were generally positive about the 2012 classroom interventions, with two of the six parents buying the *Kimochis* resource to use at home. Parents of children who did not experience social difficulties were more inclined to attribute their child’s progress during 2012 as a part of their temperament or personality. In contrast, parents whose child had been bullied, excluded, or who were emotionally withdrawn or emotionally labile attributed positive changes to the program activities. Parents of children who were experiencing such difficulties noted that their children were better able to express and manage their feelings and more able to interact positively with others. This echoes the teacher’s comments that the resources most benefited those children who were struggling socially.

Parents who purchased *Kimochis* for their children did so not only because their children loved them, but also because they found them useful to use at home to better understand and communicate with their child. Even those parents who did not buy the resource expressed how they were further developing the values and key concepts expressed in *Play is the Way* and *Kimochis* to help their children understand consequences and to take responsibility for their choices.
Parents welcomed the opportunities for their child to be involved in the 2012 classroom program, as well as opportunities to share the activities with their child at school at barbecues. They welcomed the exposure to new resources and strategies to help them better understand and respond to their child’s feelings and behaviour.

The alacrity with which these resources were taken up by parents points to a potential need to make social and emotional development education resources more visible and accessible to parents. The needs and interests of parents wanting to assist their child to have better social experiences at school were not a focus of this study, but the data show that *Play is the Way* and *Kimochis*, in particular, were valuable to parents. Parents were only able to gain access to these resources by listening to their children about what was happening at school, coming to the school barbecues and participating in the activities. Each time parents were invited to a barbecue, there was a high turnout of families wanting to be involved in the activities. Parents were keen to see what their children were doing in a context which involved fun and games and no judgements about their child’s abilities or behaviour.

Involving parents as active partners with the school in their child’s social and emotional learning, would mean a conscious outreach to parents to be involved in the implementation of *Kimochis* and *Play is the Way* resources from the beginning. Such opportunities may not be significant to parents whose children don’t get bullied and are socially popular, but this study gives indications that some parents struggle to assist their child to cope with their feelings. Bullying, trauma and toxic stress, autism spectrum disorders and social rejection leave children struggling to express and manage their feelings and parents do not instinctively know how best to help them. Making *Play is the Way* and *Kimochis* available to parents enabled them to extend the activities of the school and work with the resources, concepts and language of the activities at home. Empowering parents would also have flow on effects to their other children and to wider family networks.

*Empowering parents would also have flow on effects to their other children and to wider family networks.*
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study provide promising indicators of positive change in participating children’s social relationships at school and their ability to identify their own and other’s feelings. Given that social withdrawal, lack of trust and inability to identify feelings are some common consequences of chronic stress and trauma, these positive changes can be recognised as indicators of increasing well-being for children in the classroom.

The selected resources, *Play is the Way* and *Kimochis*, provided effective tools to promoting improved social relationships and a wider vocabulary of feelings words which children used to relate to their own and other’s experiences. A whole-of-school approach and assistance with implementation of the resources proved important to successfully embedding the Play is the Way program in classroom activities.

The gradual implementation of the activities through the school year allowed all participants to practise working with the selected resources and to become more confident in their use over time. The gradual implementation of activities also allowed time for children to develop new relationships with others in their class community.

There were positive changes in children’s school attendance. Reading and spelling progress was maintained over the course of the year, indicating that the classroom interventions did not adversely affect children’s academic progress. The findings also show that some of the children who had been experiencing the greatest difficulties achieved the greatest changes in their relationships at school.

The teacher’s strategies of providing a predictable routine, forming and sustaining individual relationships with children in the class, of leading and modelling a sense of community and revealing and modelling his own management of his feelings, enabled children to develop a sense of trust, of being valued and
able to contribute to their classroom community. Again these strategies addressed some of the negative consequences of chronic stress and trauma which include difficulty trusting others, low self-esteem and a sense of loss of control.

The outreach worker played a key role in identifying resources, providing training in their use and assisting with their implementation. The role included one on one interaction with children experiencing difficulties as well as follow-up with families. The strategy of inviting parents to three barbecues to share the games with their children allowed parents to make connections between school and home activities and to adopt some of the concepts and language which their children were learning through the class activities. Staff observed that parents were using children’s learned vocabulary from the games. Coming to school for food and fun activities with their children allowed parents to positively engage with the school environment. Some parents actively implemented the programs at home, with the greatest benefits for those children who had been experiencing social difficulties at school. Some parents noted their use of the Kimochis resource had enabled them to better understand their children. Future opportunities include seeking greater parent involvement in implementing the resources and making them more directly available to parents.

The teacher confirmed the utility of Play is the Way and Kimochis resources, finding that he could adapt them to class needs as learning opportunities arose as he became more familiar with them. Children who had been repeatedly excluded or suspended, or who ran away, or who were bullied or rejected by others became more able to express and safely manage their feelings, and to take responsibility for their choices and actions. He affirmed the efficacy of sustained implementation of the resources over time, shifting the emphasis from short term professional development training to changes in daily practice and growth in awareness of trauma impacts on children. Being able to draw on the whole of the school community in implementing resources such as Play is the Way, also enabled a more effective and sustained change in school culture.

A limitation of the research design was the absence of a “control” class in the school against which to compare outcomes. This was not possible as the school had a single Year 2/3 class and comparison with a Year 2/3 class at another school would be limited by variations between the schools and their communities. This project should therefore be read as a case study of a series of classroom-based interventions which could inform practice and further research.

Given the complexity of contemporary classrooms and the widespread incidence of chronic stress and trauma in children’s lives, inclusive classroom-based interventions involving daily routines and activities offer an effective avenue for supporting children’s social and emotional development and recovery. The potential benefits flow to individual children and their families, teachers, school staff and the wider
community as children change from being isolated, unhappy and “in trouble” to becoming valued members of the communities which they help to create.

Recommendations arising from the research are summarised below:

1. Problems with peers create unhappiness at school for children who are excluded or bullied or who have challenging behaviours. Junior primary school children with social and emotional learning difficulties benefit from programs to improve their social skills. Educators should be resourced and supported to implement social and emotional learning programs in their schools and classrooms.

2. Social and emotional learning resources such as *Play is the Way* and *Kimochis* work well in a collective environment and can improve young children’s social relationships. They should be widely used and promoted to schools and communities.

3. School-wide implementation of programs enables teacher support and continuity of language and concepts across the school and throughout the primary years. Collective implementation builds community but also provides support for children most in need without singling them out or stigmatising them in any way.

4. Teachers require additional support to effectively introduce new resources such as *Play is the Way* so they can attend to students who run away from games while another person directs the game.

5. Parents of children with social difficulties are very keen to find ways to better support their child’s emotional development. Resources suitable for home or individual use, such as *Kimochis*, should be made known to parents. Parents should be invited to participate in assisting the implementation of the programs at school to learn more about them.

6. Opportunities for reflection on practice were an important part of the teacher’s professional development in the implementation of the resources. Educators engaging in trauma-informed pedagogy could form localised communities of practice to share challenges and successes.

7. Implementing programs over time enabled more opportunities for generating sustainable change. The teacher acquired greater confidence in the use of the resources with practice. The children became more familiar with key terms and concepts of the resources and brought them into family practices in the home.

8. Outreach worker support was critical to the project to identify suitable resources, develop connections with families and to implement the resources. There is a need for an ongoing community development link between community services, schools and families.
References


Children who experience chronic stress or traumatization are vulnerable to becoming chronically hyper-vigilant and constantly alert to potential dangers, or dissociative and withdrawn. In schools, such children are physically present in class but have difficulty achieving a learning state receptive to new information.

In 2012, a partnership between Salisbury Communities for Children, the University of South Australia School of Education, Schools Ministry Group and a DECD Primary School, led to planning and implementation of multiple strategies to support a Year 2-3 teacher to constructively respond to the needs of a class that included several chronically stressed and traumatized 6- to 8-year-old children.

This report details the evaluation of the project, and makes recommendations for further implementation.

*It has changed everything, and he is able now, if somebody is doing something… prepared to come and speak… he wouldn’t be able to do that last year.*

*Are we wanting to see them come out, you know, get a job, or are we wanting them to come out as meaningful citizens who can actually play a role.*

*I guess it’s easy for teachers to say “Yes, I have an understanding of trauma”, but how do you actually then change your practice to help those kids?*