

Integrated Systems Approaches: Creative applications for working with disengaged youth

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Abstract

Acknowledging the central role secondary schools can play in establishing socially inclusive cultures, this article proposes an Integrated Systems Approach (ISA) as a salient model of practice. This model emerges from a secondary school specialising in engaging students with a range of complex challenges including learning difficulties, family dysfunction, risk of homelessness and substance misuse. To address these psychosocial complexities educator-researchers prioritise relationship development, personal accountability and self-reflection within a broad, creative education that engages students in transformative learning experiences. Utilising the ISA model, practitioners aim to increase students' resilience and engage them in their own continued growth. This is done through revitalising family connections, connecting students with appropriate services, fostering positive peer associations, and capitalising on staff guidance. While acknowledging the limitations of many conventional Australian education contexts, a closing case study illustrates how the ISA embodies inclusive education, with applications to secondary schools.

Key words: disengaged youth, secondary education, transformative learning, inclusive education, holistic education model

Introduction

Youth that have disengaged from education form a unique group that are often difficult to work with due to disruptive behaviour and emotional dysregulation (Wheatley et al., 2009). They often present with a spectrum of challenges, including mental health concerns, hyper-responsive, violent or impulsive behaviour, discontinuity of education, and substance misuse. These issues are often nuanced and responsive to family and community contexts. This spectrum of concerns are indicative of complex trauma engendered through lifestyles that

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augment vulnerability and risk (McGoldrick, Carter and Garcia-Preto, 2013; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2014). While this cohort are not unique within educational contexts,

many conventional educational frameworks do not always respond adequately nor remedially to them. It is argued that much can be done to address their needs more appropriately and effectively through implementation of this Integrated Systems Approach (ISA). This approach has applications across a range of secondary school settings where young people present as hostile, reactive or difficult to engage.

The site of development and implementation for the ISA is a private inner-urban Brisbane City Special Assistance School that hosts forty-five historically disengaged students comprised of boys aged between twelve and eighteen years of age (with a mean age of fifteen). It is staffed by two male youth workers, one male community development worker and a female curriculum coordinator/family therapist. While some students may have goals of reintegrating into mainstream education, the majority will complete their education within the Special Assistance School. The school engages students with a curriculum which has embedded creative design-oriented tasks, in order for them to achieve educational outcomes that stimulate their creative, social, emotional, and ecological intelligences. The primary educational goal within the school as a Department of Education site, is the completion of a vocational curriculum that will contribute towards students' achievement of a Queensland High School Certificate of Education. Emotional growth and self-management, relationship accountability and diversity tolerance are considered parallel and salient learning goals. To achieve these goals, staff utilise the ISA Model, which draws on theoretical features of systemic therapy and restorative justice as well as transformative learning processes. Transformative learning theorists recognize that behaviour changes as a part of a social reconstruction of perspectives through meaningful experiences and relationships (Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 1998). Through the use of this model we seek to optimise support from family, school, peers and available networks while, within-school, we support positive socialisation, values reflection, self-management, emotional containment and self-regulation.

It is acknowledged that conventional Australian secondary school contexts do not offer opportunity for a cohesive and thorough outworking of the ISA due to their limited scope and capacity for delivery. However, the long engagement with students which secondary school education offers is recognised as providing a substantive opportunity for students to have an experience of difference. It offers a valuable setting where young people can develop alternative experiences and narratives about their capacity, creativity, endurance and resilience. The ISA model within secondary education, while optimally involving a whole-of-school shift, may have aspects of utility that promote positive social, psychological and educational outcomes for disengaged youth across a range of high school settings. The current limitations of educational understandings and responses to student behaviour will be explored, with subsequent discussions focusing on the alternative ISA model, providing an extended case study that explores its application with a disengaged youth.

Background: Systemic versus behavioural frameworks for understanding children's behaviour

Australian public education has placed increasing emphasis on 'safe learning', providing sets of guiding principles, practical tools and resources to help schools build 'positive school culture' (Australian Government Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2015). The core underlying assumption informing these approaches is that children, when given opportunity and resources, want to learn. Student behaviour that is not compatible with learning goals and processes, usually established by teachers, is perceived as requiring management or curtailment.

This paper does not seek to provide an exhaustive review of literature and practice surrounding educational frameworks and approaches. In general, however, the literature

presents a range of constructions for the presentation and behaviour of students that emphasise behavioural explanations and approaches. Examples of behaviour-based understandings include Glasser's (1989) Choice Theory, where an individual's behaviour is understood as purposefully controlling for an end result. Rogers (2007) in explaining his classroom management framework, acknowledges that 'there are many factors in the background and home environment of students... that a school cannot directly affect' (p. 10). These conceptualisations have offered a structure for understanding and addressing behaviour in young people. Functional analysis has become commonplace in schools and while positive behaviour support approaches may be identified as best practice, punitive behavior management narratives and practices still predominate. We believe that traditional behavior-based explanations do not sufficiently account for, nor address, the complex relationally-informed learning patterns that result in behaviour. This may lead practitioners to drawing lines of causality that are limited and, therein, misleading, particularly where disengaged youth are concerned.

Causal interpretations such as 'children are capable of and do make conscious decisions to behave as they do' underpin many current whole of school approaches (Fields, 2014, p. 46). While these kinds of statements may be undeniable and are arguably self-evident, we believe they neglect the broader system-informed narratives that are fundamental to holistically framing the purpose of behaviour. We propose that interventions based on a limited understanding of the complexity of motivation and behaviour fail to support long-term positive change and may contribute to their compounding sense of personal failure.

Perhaps a central hindrance to developing a systemic understanding of children's aversive responses in school contexts is the language used to conceptualise the perceived problem. The literature in this domain shows a proliferation of problematising language, including expressions such as 'discipline', 'control', 'correction', 'punishment', 'disruptive behaviour', 'insubordination' and 'behaviour management', which are used to directly state or imply that students hold deficits in appropriate behaviour and that teachers need to 'manage', 'discipline' and 'control' them (Atici & Cekici, 2012; Fields, 2014; Nobile, London & Baba, 2015; Sugai & Horner, 2006). In spite of this, a study exploring teachers' classroom management practice found that the factors inhibiting teachers from using their preferred management styles was personal rather than student-centred. They included factors such as too little energy, too many things to do, stress, as well as a lack of support at a school level (Salkovsky, Romi & Lewis, 2015). In short, the study found that teachers' inability to enact preferred classroom management practices were personally-located and had little to do with causal or responsive behaviours of students (Salkovsky, Romi & Lewis, 2015).

Many contemporary theorists advocate the use of cross-school disciplinary practices that are relationship-based, proactive rather than reactive, and provide greater opportunities for student voices to be heard in decision-making (Lines 2016; Pianta, Hamre & Allen, 2011; Rogers 2007; Salkovsky, Romi & Lewis, 2015). Some also discuss the use of prevention strategies using a systemic perspective, but are essentially and fundamentally informed by analytic behavioural theories (Sugai & Horner, 2006). These approaches may provide a more positive, supported and compassionate framing for disciplinary practice. However, they make behavioural assumptions that do not acknowledge behaviours as meaning-full and functional responses emerging from life-learning. Behaviour is not acknowledged as nuanced to individuals' unique social learning experiences, even if it is attributed as typical of a social subgroup which young people identify with. Therein, approaches that purport to use a systemic perspective fall short of being truly systemic.

From a systemic perspective, changing behaviour is understood as requiring adjustment to existing processes and the underlying stories through which individuals make meaning of their experiences. Remapping these underlying stories and processes may take

time and patience for those working alongside disengaged youth and must be acknowledged as a process that individuals themselves hold agency over. We believe that the ISA, utilising a systemic lens which acknowledges the complex interacting factors that inform student behaviour, is especially salient when working with vulnerable and disengaged youth.

Contextual complexities and constraints

What students bring

This school hosts students with a range of personal challenges to engagement, including: long term disengagement from education; substance misuse; poor motivation and self-esteem; aggressive and/or violent behaviours; mental health concerns; social-emotional complexities; learning difficulties including attentional, oppositional and processing disorders; intellectual impairments; reactive attachment; complex family contexts including acrimonious parenting partnerships; poverty and homelessness. While use of these labels does not well represent our intention to reduce pathologisation of students and increase inclusivity, within the context of this paper they provide a descriptive picture of the complexities and challenges that comprise the milieu of the student body. A more relevant framing of this spectrum of concerns from a holistic, non-pathologising stance, and in line with ISA ethos, is as complex interactions between students' personal and contextual stresses with cultural and social stresses, including social judgement and stereotyping, low hierarchical position and powerlessness (McGoldrick, Carter & Garcia-Preto, 2013). It should be recognised when working with disengaged youth, that behaviours are often functional responses to their experiences of distress and difficulty. Remaining curious and open, attentive, caring and responsive to individual students while concurrently considering the wellbeing and needs of all students sharing spaces in a school is a challenging but crucial balancing act. A further consideration is the creation of therapeutic spaces where students are able to learn and grow. While this may represent optimal practice, we are limited somewhat by the constraints of the school context.

School mandates, constraints and ethical behaviour

Almost all Australian schools, whether private or public, are heavily or solely funded by government. As such, they must adhere to the mandate to educate students and abide by certain curriculum requirements with pre-approval for programs beyond this scope. The school context we are reporting on is a special assistance school that has met with a range of program pre-approval requirements while holding scope for flexibility of delivery. Students are required to attend for 4 hours per day. This presents risk for some students as the neurobiological impetus for adolescents to increase their social connectedness with peers may lead them to engage in activities that have potential for both positive and negative outcomes (Siegel, 2014). For many adolescents this is a life phase when relationship circles are widened and young people may distance themselves from their normal family supports (Siegel, 2014). It is recognised, for at-risk youth, that increased out-of-school time isolated from adult input and with peers who are engaging in risk-taking behaviour, frequently leads to negative behavioural outcomes (Siegel, 2014). While we are unable to change this context constraint it underscores the importance of using the school forum instrumentally, to promote positive interactions and supportive relationships between peers as a template for them beyond school.

Special Assistance Schools working with at-risk populations experience a range of service constraints that negatively impact on their capacity to meet student needs. Further, there are concerns around potential loss of rapport with students through service referral external to the school. School contexts constrain workers from acting in the interests of students' holistic wellbeing where this reaches beyond the scope of educational mandates. In line with a systemic perspective it is argued by the authors that relationships are a crucial foundation for the effective functioning of Special Assistance Schools. Therefore, staff should

be empowered to act beyond standard school mandates in the interests of students' wellbeing where a professional program team including the principal is in agreement on a course of action. While acknowledged as an important aspect of holistic care for students, this point will not be strenuously argued in this article.

An Integrated Systems Approach

The Integrated Systems Approach has two key aspects which work together to uphold central features of care and service delivery, which are: systemic social-emotional support and transformative learning experiences. Social-emotional support is difficult to articulate separate from transformative learning experiences since the two are employed interactively to support students across their school experience. However, for the purposes of this discussion they have been expressed according to their key components. A visual model is provided (Figure 1) which describes the interaction of aspects of the ISA, with systemic social-emotional support and transformative learning experiences being the central driving approaches within which the four processes fit, these being: safety enhancement, restorative justice processes, student support and advocacy, and creative and critical thinking. For reference, a summary table (Table 1) is also provided which describes the key goals, activities, processes and approaches of the model.

Figure 1 The Integrated Systems Approach Model



Table 1 Integrated Systems Approach Summary Table

<p style="text-align: center;">Systemic social-emotional support</p> <p>Goal: Communicating consistent care for students across learning, wellbeing, and a holistically healthy lifestyle, in order to promote social, emotional, and ecological health.</p> <p>Activities: check-ins, one-to-one teacher support for learning, small group discussions, personal development sessions, peer mentoring, school community meetings, restorative justice activities, student conferences, case conferences and working with families</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Transformative Learning</p> <p>Goal: Students engage in development of their intellectual, social, emotional, and ecological intelligence</p> <p>Activities: Engaging in transformative learning through school curriculum, creative/design projects, and sports and recreation activities; supported through teachers and youth workers constructive use-of-self, role-modelling discursive processes that promote empathy, creative and critical problem solving.</p>	Processes	Activities/Features
		<p style="text-align: center;">Safety Enhancement</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Program design elements: small class sizes, daily check-ins, personal development sessions, student leadership groups, community meetings, and restorative justice applications 2. Cross-curriculum promotion of inclusivity, collaboration, co-design, anger management skills development, other-mindedness practice, and empathy coaching 3. Development of a culture of safety through discussions across a range of school contexts in formal group meetings such as the student leadership teams and discussion group electives, or informal conversations arising during ritualised activities i.e. student check-ins or community meals
		<p style="text-align: center;">Restorative Justice Practices</p>	Students having opportunity to make amends for their offences, have inter-personal issues addressed, remap interactive working rules and boundaries between students or students to staff
		<p style="text-align: center;">Student Support and Advocacy</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Staff stance that students possess innate worth and positive intention 2. Regular staff case conferences to explore concerns and develop shared understanding of holistic student wellbeing 3. Promoting communication between home and school, involving parents in meetings to address concerns and highlight student strengths 4. External advocacy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • linking students with external service support • representing in juvenile justice proceedings

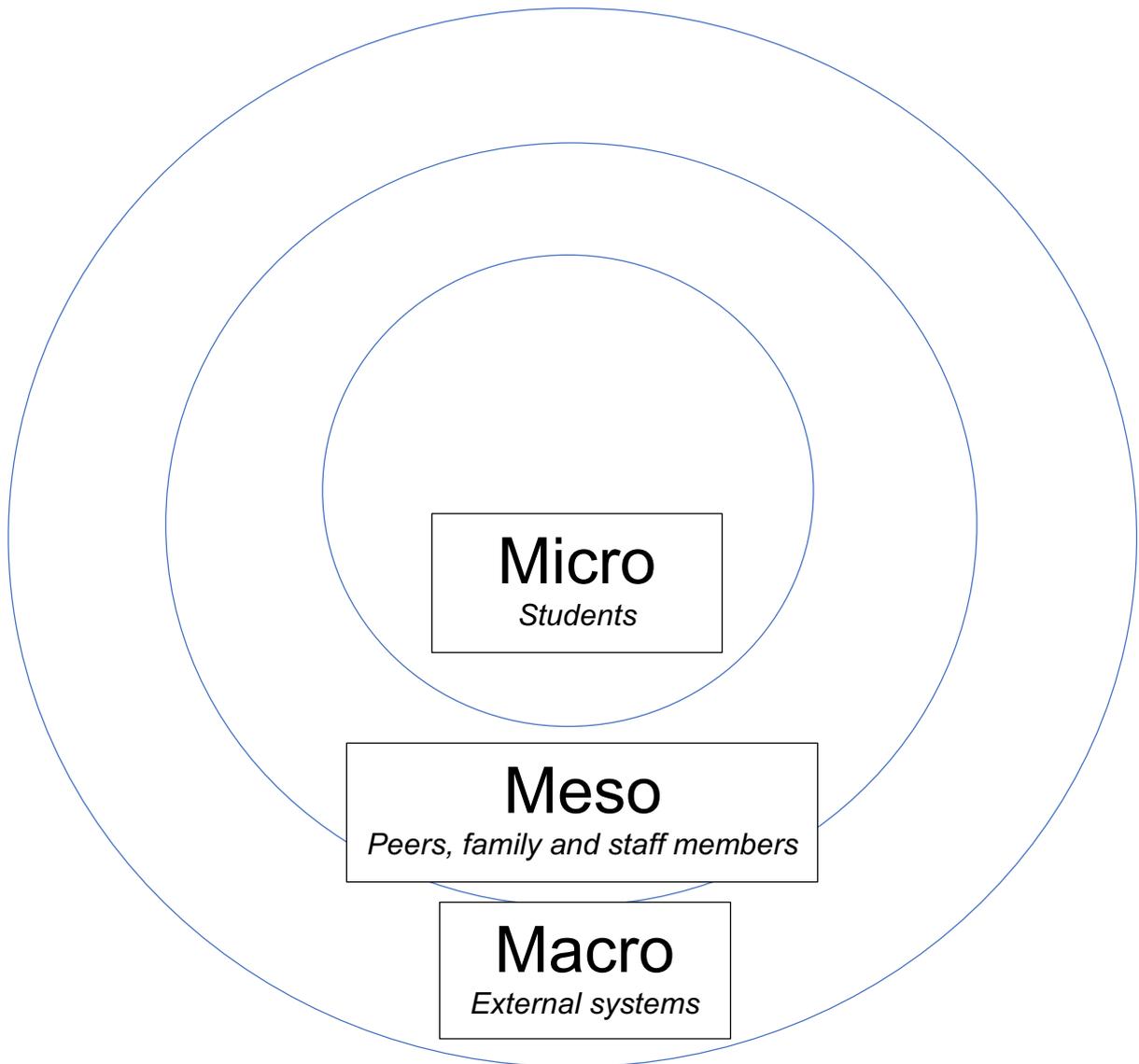
Systemic social-emotional support and multi-system approaches

Within the ISA learning and growth are viewed as occurring optimally in the context of trusting

relationships and a safe, consistent, emotionally containing environment. We perceive it as a highly valued goal to develop bilateral trusting relationships with students in spite of the fact that students may not always behave in trustworthy ways. Through expression of interest, concern and trust within intentional engagement we seek to communicate consistent care for students across learning, wellbeing, and a holistically healthy lifestyle, in order to promote social, emotional, and ecological health. We actively promote student care through the use of systemic cross-curriculum pastoral care activities. These include class activities such as check-ins, one-to-one teacher support for learning, small group discussions, personal development sessions, peer mentoring, school community meetings, restorative justice activities, student conferences, case conferences and working with families. Students are found to respond to these processes and activities with varying degrees of ease and self-disclosure. Whilst not all students are able or willing to engage in all activities, space is created for those who are. Scaffolding is provided for students to participate if and when they are able, and the acceptability of engaging is confirmed. Respect for students' boundaries and level of chosen personal engagement has had benefits in supporting students' self-management of personal boundaries in other domains. Further, it has helped create stronger connections between students as well as between students and staff, enhancing their sense of value for their schooling experience and workplace respectively.

We have found that a more useful framework for understanding student behaviour is a systemic model which draws on the overarching principles of Multisystemic Family Therapy (MST). The multiple systems theory of change from which MST emerges is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Model. This model can be applied in the following way: where young people (at the micro level of the model) are understood as engaging with multiple systems (meso level and macro level systems) that shape their responses and behaviours (Fox & Ashmore, 2015). A description of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Model with categories relevant to this discussion is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Model



Meso and macro level systems in this context include family, peer groups, ecological/natural environment, the school and the broader community (Henggeler, 2011). Within MST processes, therapeutic work is often targeted at peer relationships (meso level systems) to increase prosocial peer connection which may be extended to and beyond school contexts (meso and macro level systems). Importantly, interventions are tailored to address areas of concern for each student (Huey et al., 2000). Evidence indicates that MST approaches yield improvements in family functioning, reduction in delinquent peer association and delinquent behaviour, and reduced antisocial behaviour (Huey et al. 2000; Tighe et al., 2012).

While a multi-systemic approach is difficult to enact in a school context due to a school's limited service mandate, it offers a more compassionate and holistic frame for understanding students' total behaviours and responses and for targeting important intervention. It acknowledges the major impact of life stressors on students' capacity to engage in learning, creativity, and social experiences. Further, application of MST understandings can promote staff willingness to suspend judgement, and remain curious, open, attentive, caring and responsive to students while modelling supportive behaviour. While acknowledgement of student stress may be difficult for staff given the unpredictability of student presentations and

reactions, the importance of these core conditions cannot be understated, with staff providing substantial role modelling, support and leadership within the school community.

In order to implement effective systemic social-emotional support we seek to build close connection and accountability between the school domain and students' other life domains. Through these connections we promote experiences of ecological belonging (O'Sullivan, 2001), revitalising family connections where possible, and fostering positive peer associations. Staff seek to retain a positive perspective of students, providing social-emotional as well as educational support and guidance for students; and connecting students with support services where limited by service mandates. To promote life goals and industry support for students we generate constructive industry-placement mentoring in consultation with them. This multi-tiered approach is strongly informed by a multi-systems method, incorporating domains of care that are tailored to individuals' contexts. In terms of the nexus of these outlined approaches with educational goals, a flexible curriculum within transformative learning experiences have good fit.

Transformative learning experiences

In keeping with our multi-systems approach we employ holistic cross-curriculum strategies that encourage students to engage in their own systems-thinking in order to better understand their context. We encourage students to engage in the development of their intellectual, social, emotional, and ecological intelligences through the use of transformative learning experiences. This approach sits within a social constructivist learning paradigm, which understands students as creating relevant shared meaning through engaging in social learning activities (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009; Vygotsky, 2012). Habermas (1984) highlights language and communicative action as an emancipatory process used to form lifeworlds and identities. Drawing on Mezirow's (2000) work in transformative learning we seek to integrate processes that transform students' existing frames of reference based on engaging with new learning in social settings. Domains we support them to transform include their meaning perspectives, narratives, and mind-sets, so that students become more discerning, accepting, open to change, emotionally resilient, and reflexive. Using more flexible and open-reference systems, students are facilitated to generate increasingly personally honest and justified beliefs and opinions that might inform their actions on all levels (Mezirow, 2000).

Though theories vary on whether transformative learning is a cognitive or an intuitive and holistic process, most theorists agree that transformative learning results from a new insight or experience that is in conflict with an existing meaning perspective (values and beliefs) so that it cannot be easily assimilated. This, in turn, creates a disorienting dilemma in which either the new insight must be rejected or the meaning perspective adjusted or transformed (Taylor, 1998). Within the school context we seek to identify and utilise such disorienting dilemmas to support the transformative process through creative use of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse.

The vehicle we use, integrated with systemic support, is school curriculum, creative design projects, and sports and recreation activities, which are designed to promote engagement with transformative learning experiences. Creative projects, restorative justice processes, personal development workshops, and peer-to-peer/student-teacher discussions generate the materials of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse used to construct new perspectives. Many behavioural approaches attempt to manage or correct what is seen as undesirable or antisocial behaviour in young people. By contrast, the project-based and design-oriented learning experiences we employ are intended to be inclusive, collaborative, meaningful, engaging, student-led, and designed to develop students' skills as well as emotional, social and ecological intelligence. Many identify design approaches to problem solving as an effective way to develop skills and knowledge as well as attitudes and

mindsets (Carroll, 2015; Cross, 2006; Irwin et al., 2015). Goldman et al. (2012) observe that design thinking approaches to teaching and learning can lead to changes in young peoples' resilience, empathy, approaches to new challenges and epistemological viewpoints.

Within design tasks, students have opportunities to develop projects, negotiate material problem-solving and creative design, as well as work on group task problem-solving. In curriculum work, students have agency, within constraints, over the work they will undertake day-to-day, negotiating with peers in shared activities and with teachers who provide learning support. Students engage with teachers to achieve new learning within curriculum areas such as maths and English. In sports and recreation, students negotiate activities, games, rules and fair play outcomes. In school life, students engage in discussion groups to explore topical social issues, work as peer mentors to support struggling students, and participate in leadership teams to explore student concerns, making decisions on behalf of the school. While students' personal challenges do not always facilitate them to make optimal responses or achieve positive outcomes, the structures and staffing supports remain consistent and thus students move in and out of experiences of difficulty and success, ideally towards more constructive experiences. To support this, teachers and youth workers seek to employ constructive use-of-self, role-modelling discursive processes that promote empathy and creative and critical problem solving.

Rather than manipulating behaviour through external rewards and punishments, we use discursive and reflective processes to foster the development of complex thinking and greater internal motivation, generating transformative learning. Optimally, as a staff team we seek to move away from conventional transmissive learning of moral or "right" behaviours and toward engaging students in self-reflective and transformative learning patterns. Through transformative learning processes, students are able to hold a more inclusive and holistic perspective that informs and guides new behaviours (Sterling, 2001).

Processes of an Integrated Systems Approach

Within the framework of a multi-systems approach, which incorporates systemic social-emotional support and transformative learning experiences, four central practices support its delivery. First, safety is enhanced through daily check-ins, small class groupings, personal development sessions, student-peer mentoring and leadership, and community meetings. Second, restorative justice approaches are applied through holistic conflict resolution practices, restorative justice meetings, and relationship and community development. Third, student support and advocacy is enacted through case-conferences, working closely with supportive family members, and referral to relevant support services. Fourth, creative and critical thinking is fostered through non-standardised curriculum and project-based design work.

Safety Enhancement

Psychological safety is a strong priority alongside physical safety when working with disengaged youth. We promote safety and resilience in three overlapping activity fields. The first field is program design elements, which include small class sizes, daily check-ins, personal development sessions, student leadership groups, community meetings, and restorative justice applications. The second field is cross-curriculum promotion of inclusivity, collaboration, co-design, anger management, other-mindedness practice, and empathy. The third field is student involvement in the development of a culture of safety.

Safety is defined and redefined regularly in discussions across a range of school contexts with student ideas and feelings integrated, and empathy and other-mindedness promoted. We believe that it is through student participation in both defining safety and owning

safety-enhancing processes that co-creation of a culture of safety is most effectively supported. This occurs in formal group meetings such as student leadership teams and discussion group electives, or informal conversations arising during ritual activities such as student check-ins or community meals. These group meetings and check-ins provide, both, a context for exploring safety, and a source of safety through familiar rituals that affirm a sense of belonging. The impact on students can be seen in their responses that confirm this sense of belonging and safety, such as their expression of appreciation in community group settings for “having a school family”.

Restorative Justice Practices

We have found that approaches to antisocial or problematic behaviour that have greatest symmetry with our systemic perspective of student behaviour are restorative justice practices. This is due, centrally, to restorative justice process requirements for intentional and meaningful relationships to motivate students to engage in restoration following harmful interactions.

Restorative justice is an alternative to conventional disciplinary practice, which engages individuals in a process of “building and strengthening relationships, showing respect, and taking responsibility” for actions (Teasley, 2014, p. 132). Restorative practices build on existing positive relationships, implying the need for foundational attitudes from staff towards students of positive regard and belief in good intention. In our practice we extend this perspective to acknowledging the complex interplay of factors that inform students' responses and behaviours. Where difficulties arise, we use restorative justice to “restore balance to relationships and events where conflict and fear may otherwise ensue” (McNevin, 2010, p. 63). A forum is provided, often mediated, where students who have caused offence can hear from those affected as well as being heard themselves. This is facilitated with a view to students having opportunity to make amends for their offences (Gonzalez, 2012), potentially remapping working rules and boundaries where needed. This process is not always linear and may require several reconvened meetings due to the inability of students to either maintain psychological safety for others, or tolerate their own emotional dysregulation. However, the end goal of mutually acceptable restitution is maintained.

In our experiences, when embedded in the framework of positive relationships restorative practices in school contexts create opportunities for self-reflection, relationship restoration, affirmation and reconnection. Further, they short-circuit the too-familiar cyclic experiences of failure that lead to disconnection from peers and staff. School staff, trained in restorative practice by Margaret Thosborne (2016), move through a process that includes: identifying what happened from multiple perspectives; what those involved were thinking or feeling at the time; who was impacted; and what can be done - which is often a process - to restore relationships and rebuild trust. This process often moves backwards and forwards between stages and may take several attempts at meetings to result in a final product, which is the restoration of relationship. We utilise this process in small incidents throughout the day as well as more serious matters, sometimes involving other members of the community. Restorative justice provides a process whereby students are able to be ‘restored’ to the school community once amends have been made that meet the needs of all parties. We have found this process to be effective in preventing the cycles of suspension and exclusion that commonly emerge when young people are punitively managed. Further, students frequently express appreciation for the opportunity to “have their say” and to “make up” with their peers, supported by staff who hold concern and care for their interests.

Student support and advocacy

Advocating for students and supporting their psychosocial needs forms a significant working principle supporting our use of the ISA. This is underpinned by our choice to perceive students

as possessing innate worth and positive intention towards their schooling, and to hold hope for them in restoring positive relationships. To facilitate action based on this belief we regularly hold student case conferences with staff where we are able to explore the circumstances of students we are concerned for. We consider the interactive background factors of family context, current stressors, criminal justice issues, possible physical and mental health concerns. In case conferences we highlight students' strengths and positive traits as well as our concerns for them, focussing on individualised plans of action to support students. Importantly, through this process we develop a shared picture of students that is predominantly positive and hopeful, and we generate a direction of action to address concerns and support growth. This is helpful for staff members, secondarily, in providing them with a holistic perspective about students' wellbeing, and in supporting staff to remain positively focused about students in their continuing work.

Where students and/or parents are willing to engage we work closely with their families, holding meetings to engage with parents and promote personal connection as part of our school community while addressing arising issues for their student. We attempt to keep open lines of communication with parents, calling when concerns arise or particularly good outcomes occur. When there are social-emotional concerns, attendance is poor, or students are struggling with aversive behaviours we establish meetings with families to explore contextual issues and gain collateral. In these meetings staff are often able to establish a cross-context approach to addressing concerns and close the communication gap between home and school. We involve students in this process as much as possible so that they, alongside their parents or carers, may witness our care and appreciation of them and participate in addressing arising concerns. Further, we believe students more clearly conceptualise our support and advocacy for them when we are physically present. Family members and carers, likewise, are supported by observing staff identifying strengths in their young person and thinking creatively and positively to address shared concerns. However, not all families are supportive of their children and our advocacy is sometimes required. Our external advocacy is also periodically needed, particularly when they are involved in juvenile justice proceedings.

Where students' concerns reach the limits of our service mandate or our professional capacity, or their behaviour impacts significantly on the safety of other students we offer referrals to support agencies. We attempt to build personal connections for students with a range of other service providers through our personal development sessions, where service providers lead discussions on relevant topics. Services and support groups include: legal advocacy, juvenile justice advocacy, sexual and reproductive health services, LGBTQI support services, social activist groups, mental health and anger management services, and alcohol and other drug education and support. These discussions create both a platform and a language for exploring relevant issues with students beyond the sessions themselves. They also create a ready pathway for referral that we are able to facilitate either on-site or through external appointments as appropriate.

Promoting creative and critical thinking

We promote creative and critical thinking within the school community through three central activities. We model creative and critical approaches to daily problem-solving, we incorporate project-based learning throughout the curriculum, and we design our programs in a manner that utilises collaboration to address school issues. Staff model creative and critical thinking by responding reflexively to individual students' learning needs and styles, maintaining flexibility in teaching and curriculum tasks. Further, we make adjustments daily for the number and combination of students in attendance and their apparent mental and emotional states. The school's programming, electives, and curriculum are structured in a way that allows students to be co-designers who can contribute to creative and critical thinking within the scope of their class-group. In doing this they develop skills such as divergent thinking, design-oriented

problem solving, and reflective practice which assist them beyond the scope of school engagement while also complying with basic educational literacy and numeracy goals. Cross curriculum themes such as inclusivity, sustainability, and global citizenship are developed through discursive and interactive group activities which invite rather than enforce participation. Group activities include design projects, personal development workshops, sports and team building activities, discussion groups, and flexible project-based literacy and numeracy tasks. Non-assessable activities such as café discussions also allow staff to creatively engage students in in-depth explorations of topics from different perspectives and across multiple systems of connection. Often staff invite student groups to experiment with creative and critical thinking through addressing problems affecting the school community. This is achieved through a scaffolded, solution-focused process. Together, these activities serve to support our promotion of creative and critical reflective practices as significant life skills often in deficit with disengaged youth.

Case Example of Robert

Students lives are complex and growth is often non-linear, therefore a systemic and transformative approach requires constant adjustment alongside long-term commitment and relational engagement. The following story is representative of many of the students we work with and demonstrates the application of the ISA model. Key processes of the model are identified in brackets throughout.

Robert's Story

In year nine Robert was enrolled in the Special Assistance School after a combination of bullying experiences at his previous school, domestic violence concerns in his family of origin, and a recent foster care placement, which led him to refusing to attend school. In the interview process Robert and his foster carers were able to provide us with some of Robert's school, family and behavioural background. After discovering some of Robert's interests and skills, staff were able to engage him in the program through a co-curricular class in which students design and build skateboards (design-oriented learning experiences). To accommodate Robert's sensory processing issues and consequent lack of curriculum output, a youth worker was assigned to work with him twice weekly to support his learning and scribe his verbal responses to self-paced learning tasks (systemic support/transformative learning).

In year ten, as mutual trust and respect were established between Robert and the program staff along with his peers, his attendance and practical engagement in core subjects increased. This represented a strong achievement, where development of sufficient safety for Robert enabled him to predominantly stay on-task with school activities as well as being less preoccupied with over-perceived threat. As Robert's focus improved, however, it became apparent that compulsive lying made it hard for him to develop close friendships. This issue presented in him telling embellished stories about his finances and online gaming success, in spite of clear evidence this was untrue. Through regular staff case conferences (student support and advocacy) premised on staff holding unconditional positive regard and belief in students' innate worth and value, a strategy was developed when engaging with Roberts of not exposing or confronting his stories but creatively affirming his value in the school community in other domains i.e. his consistent commitment and ongoing achievement in mural design (design-oriented education/transformative learning). In order to address the problem of lying as a recurring theme across the school community, small group discussions (safety enhancement in program design elements) were used to explore dreams and aspirations held by students and how education might help them move towards these (critical and creative thinking). This served the purpose of identifying more truthful and realistic goals with students and a shared understanding about these. Additionally, cultivating empathy and other-

mindedness (safety enhancement processes), senior leaders were engaged in discussions during their leadership meeting (safety enhancement in program design element/creative and critical thinking) about how younger students might be feeling within the school, drawing on their own experiences from earlier in their schooling. The group were invited to develop strategies for supporting younger students to feel valued, which included verbal recognition and encouragement for effort and achievement. While Robert continued to lie about small concerns, this behaviour dramatically reduced as the school community began to be more supportive of one another. The impact on the school community, including staff, was positive, leading to a greater sense of student collaboration and staff team effectiveness.

Later in the year, an emerging incident occurred where Robert was found to be stealing from a classmate. While substantial background work needed to be done to lay a foundation for safe communication between students, rather than alienating Robert, the restorative justice process (restorative justice practices) created a pathway for him to be able to be honest about his choices and to develop deeper, more trusting relationships with staff and his peer. It also provided an experience of difference for him (transformative learning experiences) and the other young person, where they were able to see restoration of relationship as a possible and achievable outcome; as well as having a broader system impact by increasing harmony within the school community (systemic social-emotional support).

In year eleven there were large gaps in Robert's attendance as he transitioned back into his mother's at-home care. Regular contact from staff with Robert's mother (student support and advocacy) which had been created at the point of his care transition was capitalised on to create a feedback loop about Robert's attendance and engagement. Staff efforts resulted in Robert connecting strongly with one youth worker at the school, and through their collaboration, a plan emerged for Robert to be connected with mental health support (student support and advocacy), and also to engage one-day-a-week in work experience placement, which resulted in him securing long-term paid casual employment (creative and critical thinking). Strong connections were actively fostered by school staff with Robert's mother, which facilitated support for Robert by creating stronger accountability for him with the adults involved in his world (student support and advocacy).

In year twelve, Robert began taking more responsibility for his actions and attitudes which resulted in healthier relationships with family and friends. Robert's experimentation with alcohol and other substances, however, were impacting his school attendance and employment. By liaising between his mother, youth worker and traineeship placement officer, staff identified and provided the key assistance Robert needed to complete his High School Certificate, traineeship and maintain his employment. The community connections established while at school continued to support Robert after graduation in the form of accommodation access, employment and positive social connections. Robert also continued to return to school periodically to share about successes in his life and encourage younger classmates.

Conclusions

Working with disengaged male youths and other at-risk individuals presents a significant challenge to conventional educational contexts. In our experiences, current constructs and processes for addressing school-context problematic behaviour communicate unhelpful messages that further entrench experiences of failure in youth who are struggling to maintain positive connections due to complex life problems. The Integrated Systems Approach explored in this paper offers a salient model of practice for use within the secondary education field working with disengaged youths, and has potential applications, at least in part, across a range of secondary educational settings. Using the ISA, attention is shifted from students' historical behaviour to relationship development and accountability with a broad educational emphasis on transformative learning experiences within a social constructivist learning paradigm.

Utilising this approach, practitioners promote students' capacity for creative life responses, coping and resilience through: revitalising family connections (where possible), fostering positive peer associations, capitalising on staff support and guidance, connecting individuals with relevant support services, as well as generating constructive industry-placement mentoring. The ISA approach utilises design-oriented and reflexive transformative learning experiences to engage students in critical self-reflection, rational discourse, and active participation. Employing processes of critical and creative thinking, restorative justice, student support and advocacy, and safety enhancement as explored in this paper, young people are supported to perceive their own value and to reengage with education as a meaningful activity. They are also facilitated to reconnect more holistically with society and more aspirationally with future employers. Ultimately, we have found that use of the ISA cultivates a holistic education that can have a highly transformative impact on emotional and behavioural self-regulation, empathy, diversity tolerance, and emotional, social, and ecological intelligence.

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Biographical Notes

Emma Gatfield is a researcher, counselling practitioner and educator who is passionate about individual, family and community work across a range of complex contexts. With professional experience in teaching and psychotherapy, Emma has engaged with school students and adult learners; vulnerable communities including refugees, the intellectually impaired, disengaged youth, individuals with mental health challenges and their families. Through her work with Mercy Community she has engaged with families affected by domestic and family violence (DFV). Reflecting this focus, Emma is currently a PhD candidate exploring the impact of DFV on parenting and family function.

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