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Pedagogical Approaches of a Targeted Social and Emotional Skilling Program to Re-Engage Young Adolescents in Schooling

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Abstract: This paper forms part of a larger study that examined the effectiveness of a targeted social and emotional program to re-engage early adolescents who were already showing signs of disengaging from schooling. Using qualitative methodology, data for this paper come from an in-depth interview with the teacher/facilitator of the program presented as six individual vignette case studies. Each vignette highlights the individual challenges and outcomes of a student who had completed the TLC program. These student cases represented the types of disengaging behaviours students who entered the program were displaying. Findings indicate this short-term targeted social and emotional program is highly successful in re-engaging these students with sustained benefits. The authors call for more awareness of and education for teachers to have the skills to embed targeted social skills when planning their curriculum. This is particularly salient during early adolescence when students begin to exhibit early signs of disengagement.

Keywords: adolescents; early adolescence; learning engagement; middle-level education; social and emotional skills; responsive teaching



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1. Introduction

For young adolescents, the early signs of disengagement from schooling manifest as disruptive behaviour in the classroom, school or work refusal, absenteeism, poor academic achievement, or alienation from school or their peers [1]. When faced with these challenges in the classroom, the starting points for schools to respond are often in the areas of behaviour management, a focus on academic skills that need remediation, or the need for professional development for teachers to improve pedagogical approaches to engage students more effectively. However, more than a decade ago, social change (increasing technology use and social media) was linked to the developmental changes that occur during early adolescence. Findings show current generations are displaying different emotional responses, different brain functions, and a less-developed social and emotional skill set than previous generations [2]. More current research has not only confirmed these findings but has shown that these changes are accelerating [3].

The effect that social and emotional learning “gaps” can have on a student’s behaviour and academic outcomes can be overlooked [4]. Although social and emotional skills are recognized as an academic enabler, the targeted use of social and emotional programs that focus upon fundamental units of behaviour or “kernels” [5] (p. 75) to re-engage students who are showing early signs of disengagement has not been considered as quickly as other proactive strategies. This is surprising as research shows that effective social and emotional learning (SEL) programs can have immediate and long-lasting positive effects on students, and the timing of the programs’ delivery is also important [4]. Within the classroom, SEL programs are typically characterized by approaches that support self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness, and self-awareness [6–8].

This paper presents vignette case study findings from a larger, longitudinal study of bespoke social-emotional skills and learning re-engagement program known as the

TLC program [1]. The data for this paper come from six audio-recorded case vignettes from the teacher/facilitator of the program—whom we refer to as the TLC teacher—as she recalled six student vignette cases of learning disengagement. The first section of the paper presents a succinct overview of the nature of student learning engagement and the factors behind and consequences of learning disengagement. The aims and methodology of the investigation are then presented. We present a narrative summary of the six vignette cases in a table before highlighting the categories of responsive teaching which are captured in the findings. We conclude with our thoughts about the role and potential of these custom, responsive teaching practices in a broader school application.

2. Student Engagement and Disengagement

Student engagement has been defined as a complex and multidimensional construct that includes three distinct dimensions, i.e., behavioural, emotional (affective), and cognitive engagement [8]. Although each of these dimensions has been used to define, measure, and research student engagement, the holistic integration of all three is necessary to understand what student engagement looks like in practice. For the most part, teachers focus on behavioural engagement, which has been described as one's willingness to participate and the level of effort or involvement that is committed to the learning process [9]. However, when considering the engagement continuum [10], a student's behavioural engagement can be mistaken as their passive (compliant) rather than active (cognitive) involvement in learning [11]. Building on the work of Bandura [12], student engagement in learning can be enhanced through their social interaction with others within the learning context, including their peers, teachers, parents, and other ancillary staff [13,14]. These interactions are not incidental, but rather, they can be deliberately facilitated by a targeted pedagogic approach that also includes a social and emotional curriculum focus.

Research within Australian schools is showing that student disengagement from school is an increasing concern [15–17] and that effective classroom management can have a positive effect on a student's academic, behavioural, and social-emotional outcomes [18]. However, student engagement or disengagement is not always directly linked to effective or engaging teaching practices. That is, classroom teachers are not always able to control some factors, and their effectiveness as a teacher is strongly influenced by a student's physical and social, and emotional state.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] [19] takes a broader view of wellbeing based on key dimensions of human functioning including psychological aspects, for example, a sense of purpose; cognitive functioning, such as proficiency in numeracy, or problem-solving; social interaction, including forming and engaging in positive relationships; and physical considerations such as engaging in physical activity and eating well. Within the context of the classroom, student wellbeing encompasses a broad range of physical, social, and emotional factors. Over the last two decades, student wellbeing has increasingly gained attention within educational research, with strong evidence that student wellbeing has a direct impact on their academic achievement and mental health [19–22].

During the critical developmental stage of early adolescence, establishing social skills and emotional health are important protective factors, as a sense of belonging and esteem contribute to a positive self-concept. During this time, social allegiances begin to shift from the family towards a more peer-group focus. This shift in allegiances requires young people to learn how to act appropriately in a range of social situations (e.g., one-on-one, small group, and whole group). Developing and being able to effectively use a range of social and emotional skills such as reflection, self-control, problem-solving, and cooperation is critical. Research shows that failing to develop social and emotional competencies can result in poor outcomes in several domains, including personal, social, and academic outcomes [23].

A meta-analysis of SEL programs provides clear evidence in support of the explicit teaching of social and emotional skills as academic enablers and supports the positive development of relationships and pro-social behaviour. [23,24]. However, although teachers

recognise the importance and benefits of social and emotional skills, their reported lack of understanding and confidence to teach these skills in their entirety, combined with the reality of a crowded curriculum, discourages them from doing so [25].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Methodology

The investigation into the student learning re-engagement program at the TLC Centre sought to understand the specific pedagogic practices of teachers and interactions with students that were effective in re-engaging them with learning. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained through the relevant education jurisdiction as well as the researchers' university (GU ED83/12/GREC). Case study methodology was chosen within a subjective, interpretive paradigm [26]. The case study is insightful when the researcher has little control over the events being investigated, especially in a real-life classroom setting [27]. Along with document analysis of the custom curriculum and real-life observations of the classes in action ($n = 26$), we employed a vignette case study methodology [28], allowing for the study of the particularity and complexity of students as cases which, in this paper, were created from data collected in a semi-structured interview with the TLC teacher. As a methodology, vignettes can capture participants' complex thoughts and subjective views and allows the researcher "to reflect on...and note elements of similarity/difference between them" [28] (p. 543).

Fitting within the research aims, the data consisted of six vignette case studies gathered through a video recording of the TLC Teacher's response to the question: Describe a student's entry presentation, your practices to support the student, and their exit information. The interview focused on six individual students (case studies) and provided examples of the outcomes for students who participated in the program. Each vignette case is aligned to a vignette framework of conception (capturing content), design (succinct, question/s and setting specific to the study), and administration (clear instructions and point-in-time of data collection) [28]. Data were analyzed by both authors/researchers using hand coding to identify pedagogic approaches when delivering the program, theoretically framed by the literature around social and emotional learning and essential attributes for successful middle-level education [6,29]. Coding for each vignette was then discussed so that agreement on meaning was achieved.

3.2. The Intervention

The teacher participant, who is the focus of this paper, designed and delivered a targeted SEL program for between 8 and 10 weeks per term to 12 to 15 students from Year 3 or Year 4 (approximately 10–12 years of age). All students who attended the TLC Centre, which was held in a classroom at one Queensland primary (elementary) school, were referred to the program by their regular classroom teacher from nearby state (government) schools. These students were collected from their regular school by the program bus in the morning and participated in the intervention program at the TLC school site until 1:30 pm, upon which time they were transported back to their regular school before the end of the school day. Three iterations of the program were delivered across a school year (i.e., Term 1, Term 2, and Term 3), with the interview with the classroom teacher being conducted at the end of the school year.

The custom curriculum, including responsive pedagogic approaches, was delivered by the TLC teacher, a teacher aid (with a sporting background), and supported by regular visits from high-profile sporting role models. This program facilitated students' SEL by connecting their subjective experiences of schooling to their everyday classroom decisions and actions. The ten-week program was thematically guided by topics which, although scheduled in a particular order, could be adjusted and returned to, depending on the stage of learning of the participants. Topics and activities reflected the *five essential components* of an effective SEL program [6] (Refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Program Topics.

Week	Theme
1	Developing rules and accepting consequence, goal setting, avoiding negative behaviour (Self-awareness, self-management)
2	Assessing situations before acting—finding out the facts, Narrative—“the missing lunch money”, listening for prediction and main ideas in a story; following verbal instructions (Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making)
3	Assessing situations before acting—finding out the facts, Narrative—“the missing lunch money”, listening for prediction and main ideas in a story; following verbal instructions (Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making)
4	Honesty, cheating, being tactful; drama –skit (Self-awareness, self-management)
5	Fairness; social justice—what is fair?; being responsible; supporting others (social awareness, relationship skills)
6	Co-operation—what is co-operation?; accepting difference (assessing similarities and difference); accepting and rejecting (self-awareness, social awareness, relationships skills)
7	Co-operation—what is co-operation?; accepting difference (assessing similarities and difference); accepting and rejecting (self-awareness, social awareness, relationships skills)
8	Respect; good manners; being friendly; recognising how someone is feeling (self-awareness, relationships skills, responsible decision-making)
9	Problem-solving; identifying situations that are worrying; identifying and solving everyday problems; understanding feelings and emotions (self-awareness, relationships skills, responsible decision-making)
10	Being assertive; “I” statements, recognising and responding to signs of anger; end of program reward excursion. (Self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making)

Adapted from [1] (p. 1059).

We interviewed the TLC teacher after two years (six iterations—three in each year) of observations and gathering data on the TLC program and asked her to choose six students whose experiences and eventual learning best reflected the intentions of the program. Every student that completed the TLC program had a unique story. Selected students were not necessarily the “best” students but rather experienced observable and documented changes in their behaviour, exhibited SEL skills, and improved attitudes towards learning following their engagement in the program.

It is acknowledged that whilst these vignettes offer valuable insights into this teacher’s observations and practices, they represent a single perspective and may not capture the full complexity of each student’s situation. However, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the significant gains that can be made through a targeted SEL program in a short period of time.

4. Results

The TLC teacher was a very experienced upper primary school teacher (elementary school) who had been co-facilitating the TLC intervention for seven years. The six case vignettes presented in Table 2 describe the reflections of the TLC teacher as they worked with selected students who were already showing signs of disengagement from schooling either through school refusal or other anti-social or disruptive behaviours. The six cases below were each drawn from one of the cohorts that we observed over a two-year period, participants for whom we had also been collecting classroom observation data, pre and post-questionnaire data on social skills, and various learning artifacts such as student diaries and assessments (Refer to Table 2).

Table 2. Case Studies: Student participants.

Student	Main Concerns	Responsive Teaching Practices	Outcome at End of 10-Week Program
Alex	Alex was experiencing extreme difficulty in all areas of the curriculum, particularly literacy and numeracy and wherever any written work was required. Despite having a differentiated curriculum in the classroom, he was increasingly teary and was also regressing socially. He lacked self-esteem and confidence and really had a can't do attitude. Anything that was asked of him, he just was so negative with everything. He was getting into trouble on the playground also because of his poor choices and was spending a lot of time with the behaviour teacher.	Building trust through relationships; opportunities to participate and experience success; relevance of content; feeling empowered (his choices = his behaviours = his consequences); explicit social and emotional skilling through curriculum delivery. He gradually built trust in myself and Sam, our teacher aide, and he began very slowly interacting more with the children who were in the program. So, either participating in an art and craft or a handball at lunchtime. His confidence was boosted by developing those concepts through role play and relating them to real life experiences. He was also receiving praise for his good attempts at his work and was receiving three positives to one negative, which was a great response to his choices.	By the end of the program, he was developing more self-control and confidence and so much so, that at the end of our program, at our excursion, he volunteered to give our vote of thanks to more than 50 odd people. So that was the players included, which was a great feat for him. After the program ended, I had gone back to his home school classroom and the teacher couldn't believe the change in him and how that self-doubt no longer existed for him.
Beau	Beau was frequently late to school and was suffering from work refusal. In his NAPLAN (national literacy and numeracy test) testing, he wrote his name and then that was it. It didn't matter how many lunchtime detentions he received, he just refused to do any work. He had the attitude of, "I can't do it," so without even trying, so he just didn't do anything. He didn't have many friends, often ate alone at lunchtime.	Goal setting (collaborative); explicit social and emotional skills development; positive reinforcement; positive consequences. We begin the program looking at the children's goals, so we do goal setting, which is in the first week of the TLC. This gives the student something that they'd like to achieve while out here. Beau's goals were to get started on tasks straight away, stay on task, and to complete all his work. Encouraged to get recognised for a principal's award. He had lots of praise, positive comments about how well he was doing with his work, he was getting to meet his goals.	Beau was positively interacting with the other students and would volunteer to give a vote of thanks when the players came in to visit. He was completing all his work on time. At the completion of the program, he went back to his Year 4 classroom, no longer has detentions at lunchtime, stays on task, plays with the other children, and is consistently finishing his work in the classroom.
Drew	Drew was put forward for the TLC program by his classroom teacher, as he had major confidence and anxiety issues, as well as a reluctance to participate in any activities. He was often absent from school and has a heart condition with a side effect that makes him look a little different to other children. He's also on the ASD spectrum.	Risk taking environment (safe); explicit social and emotional skilling within content that is relevant and targeted to students' needs. We reiterate that it's a safe environment, which means it's a no put down zone allowing the children to feel free to have a go and to always include others with difference. We incorporate this as a small unit of work where the children investigate what it means to accept difference, by looking at the similarities and differences amongst other students and their families. We bring numeracy in here. The children collect data and graph their results allowing them to visually interpret what this concept means and how it's okay to have differences.	His class teacher reported back to me that he now had friends at lunch time, so he wasn't sitting back by himself. When he was back in his home school classroom, instead of sitting by himself, he always had someone around him, so that was just lovely to see. His attendance had also improved, and he generally just seemed a lot happier in himself, you know, every time you'd see him, he'd give you a big smile and so it was great to see. One year later: Survey result from Drew's mother noted he's excelling in his behaviour, his social skills, and his learning engagement.

Table 2. Cont.

Student	Main Concerns	Responsive Teaching Practices	Outcome at End of 10-Week Program
Dan	<p>Dan was suffering from anxiety, self-esteem, and confidence issues. He would, at times, give a rude comment or remark in retaliation to others who were doing the same thing to him. He has an ESL background and has major communications issues, so he didn't always realize what he was saying was wrong. He would attempt to follow instructions, but would end up following or copying others, and sometimes that would get him into trouble. He was very willing to please, and this led him to being verbally, emotionally, and physically bullied at his home school.</p>	<p>Explicit social skilling through curriculum content; game play (handball) to promote group cohesion; fun through games. Him, lacking appropriate social skills to know how to deal with his problem, was the main concern for us while he was here. Our major focuses of positive reinforcement, supporting others, problem solving and accepting difference were very beneficial to Dan. He enjoyed the role plays and games, and he felt like he had a voice of his own. He would interact through handball with the other children at lunchtime, and because he was a bigger boy, he was very good at it, which gave him credibility with the other TLC students.</p>	<p>His father phoned around Week 6 of the program to let me know that Dan was genuinely happy for the first time going to school. He was talking to them about his day and was loving his time in the TLC. Following his appearance in a promotional video, he will always be known as the boy on the video with the infectious laugh at the end of the footage because he was just so happy by the end of it all.</p>
Joe	<p>Joe was referred to the TLC through the classroom teacher after his parents felt like it was their last resort. His nomination stated that he was suffering from low self-esteem, poor social skills, and anxiety. He had trouble dealing with social situation. For example, turn taking, and problem solving. If he didn't get his own way, he would run away or yell. He was also very low academically</p>	<p>Social and emotional skills embedded in curriculum; relevant and targeted curriculum; role models; fun. Literacy is richly entrenched in the TLC and together with the ability to work in small groups enabled me to focus on what Joe was struggling with academically. Titans (football) players also come in each week and worked with him (discussions, role plays, and stories) on his other social and emotional issues. Joe's willingness to pursue a task even when he was having difficulty showed a vast improvement. Many role-play activities focusing on the concepts we're learning at the time seemed very beneficial for Joe, particularly with problem solving situations which was one of his main areas of concern.</p>	<p>By the end of the program, Joe's TLC report showed him with a B for English, particularly his comprehension. His confidence to have a go improved. The No Put Down rule in the TLC, enabled students to feel free and safe to say what they're thinking without the fear of being laughed at or ridiculed for basically not giving the correct answer. Joe was quite a bright child, but the social issues he was trying to deal with were inhibiting his ability to believe in himself.</p>
Tim	<p>Tim was referred to the TLC program because of anxiety and a major lack of confidence. Every day he would do anything to get out of going to school and his mother struggled to get him through the school gates. Quite often the principal would have to get into the car and help her encourage him to come up to school. He was very low academically in most areas of the curriculum particularly his spelling and writing.</p>	<p>Goal setting; clear expectations; small group work; relevant and targeted curriculum; explicit social and emotional skilling. One of his academic TLC goals was to try and improve on his spelling whilst in the program. His personal goal was to come to school every day. Because of the small group cohesion and the group work that is undertaken in the TLC, we were able to give Tim more one on one time to encourage him to have a goal and not to become too stressed if he couldn't achieve every day. One of his main struggles was that if he didn't achieve, he would get really, really stressed and anxious. However, as long as he was trying his best at all times, which is one of our TLC expectations, which is displayed in our room at all times and referred to often, he was feeling like he was achieving.</p>	<p>We concentrated on his phonics and blending letters and after only about three weeks, he was getting a lot of his spelling words correct in his weekly spelling test back at his home school classroom. this began to build his confidence. He began to want to go to the TLC and wanted to go to his home school classroom again. His mother was amazed, and it just made it a lot easier for everybody involved.</p>

All six students highlighted in this project were male, and all were described as showing behaviours that were negatively impacting their engagement in school. Behaviours reported included anxiety, poor social skills, low self-esteem or confidence, poor academic performance, and work refusal. Responsive practices for young adolescents require teachers to consider the developmental attributes of the age group as well as the needs of each individual within their class [29]. In the TLC program, a cluster of developmentally appropriate responsive practices was used to support students. Table 3 outlines the key responsive practices discussed across the six case vignettes.

Table 3. Clustering of responsive practices.

Responsive Practice	Key Terms and Phrases Used by the TLC Teacher
Clear expectations	Choices and consequences, clear expectations
Goal setting	Success, goal setting (personal and academic), risk taking, success
Relationships	Relationships, collaborative, small group work, role models, group cohesion, participation
Social and emotional skills	Social and emotional skills
Curriculum relevance	Relevance of content, relevant and targeted curriculum
Fun	Fun, games, game play

4.1. Responsive Teaching Practices

This We Believe: The Successful Middle School sets out the five essential attributes of education programs endorsed by the Association for Middle-Level Education to support young adolescent learners. The first of these attributes is that programs must be responsive and use “the distinctive nature and identities of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions...are made” [29] (p. 8). Explicit responsive practices used within the TLC program and highlighted through the vignette cases include: (1) establishing clear expectations; (2) facilitating goal setting (both personal and academic); (3) building relationships (teacher-student; student-student), (4) explicit teaching of social and emotional skills; (5) highlighting the relevance of the curriculum to the children’s lives; and (6) making learning fun. How each of these practices was embedded in the TLC teacher’s planning and teaching will now be discussed together with an explanation of how each practice is developmentally responsive.

As shown in Table 1, the topics covered in the TLC program were thematically planned, drawing on CASEL’s framework [30] of the five essential components of effective SEL programs, i.e., self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness, and self-awareness. It is important to remember that these examples of responsive practices overlapped in weekly topics, thematic approaches, and activity types, which is particularly apparent in the use of student diaries.

4.1.1. Establishing Clear Expectations

Within any classroom, when teachers provide clear expectations and consistent responses, students experience the security of a structured learning environment, which promotes increased behavioural participation in their schoolwork and a stronger sense of belonging at school [31]. Furthermore, when students perceive teachers’ expectations as being fair and reasonable, and these expectations are coupled with appropriate scaffolding to support the student’s autonomy, students experience more positive attitudes towards their learning [32].

As shown in Table 1, setting the expectations for the program was conducted in week 1 but reinforced over the life of the program. Students spent the first three lessons of the program discussing and developing rules for the program, which were illustrated on posters displayed around the room but also in their diaries. The diaries served as the basis

of their learning, with tasks, assessments, and communication between the teacher and parents/caregivers all recorded within.

Setting the expectations and co-designing rules were key elements in the learning journey of all students but particularly the rule of “no put-downs.” Insulting, or “sledging” between boys is a particular form of toxic masculinity that results in avoidance, anxiety and/or retaliation. Drew and Joe were on the receiving end of bullying, while Dan, with his English as a Second Language background, was skilled in retaliating. These boys were constantly modelled appropriate behaviour and reassured that put-downs, or sledging, are not the currency of schooling, that respectful communication is possible, and that the teacher was committed to ensuring it.

4.1.2. Facilitating Goal Setting

Goal setting is intrinsically linked to self-regulation, which is a critical social and emotional competency. Self-regulation underpins student wellbeing as it is the act of “managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions” [33] (p. 1). Setting individual goals helps students to develop a broad range of additional skills. For example, students develop the persistence to achieve complex goals, to use critical thinking skills to problem solve to achieve goals, to practice and experience delayed gratification to achieve goals, develop self-monitoring and self-reflection skills as they monitor their progress, learn to manage frustration and seek help when necessary. Rowe et al. [34] also found that there was a strong correlation between goal setting and a student’s active academic engagement.

Goal setting was a Week 1 activity captured in student diaries. At the beginning of the program, students were asked to select at least two goals for their time at the TLC. One goal needed to be related to their academic work (e.g., improve spelling), and another goal needed to be related to their social and emotional (affective) development (e.g., controlling outbursts). Seeing their goals in the early pages of their diaries each day offered the chance to remind and reflect upon what they thought they would achieve by participating in the program and what they had achieved upon conclusion.

We saw this, particularly through the cases of Beau and Tim. Beau’s work refusal was tied to his belief that he could never finish anything, so why bother? Tim needed assurance that his work was good enough as long as he was trying his best, another TLC rule. Tim was gradually reassured that the goal he set for himself to improve his spelling was achievable, and his recorded efforts in the diary proved this to him. Beau’s goal of starting and finishing his work and capacity to do so also unfolded before his eyes over the 10-week program, captured in his diary.

4.1.3. Building Relationships

Behavioural engagement has a positive impact on adolescents’ academic outcomes, emotional outcomes, and social outcomes [35]. With much research focused on the various indicators of student engagement, social relationships have been found to have a significant effect on how engaged or disengaged adolescents are in learning [8]. Positive teacher-student relationships contribute to a student’s improved behavioural and academic outcomes. With adolescence typically signaling a period of academic decline, there is a need for positive and supportive teacher-student relationships [36]. During adolescence, peer status and peer relationships are increasingly important and become more complex, with studies showing that stronger peer relationships are positively related to their sense of belonging, participation, effort, and concentration [37].

A critical focus of the TLC was on building strong teacher-student and student-student relationships. Each week commenced with a talking circle, where students sat on the floor with the TLC teacher and talked in turn about their weekend and the previous few days they had spent at their regular school. For students such as Drew, who was bullied because of his medical condition, low confidence, and anxiety, gaining trust in the power of the talking circle to articulate his concerns, as well as his small achievements, combined with the rule of no put-downs, was liberating.

4.1.4. Explicit Teaching of Social and Emotional Skills

Increasingly, the importance of including social and emotional skills within the curriculum is evidenced globally, with a significant number of countries having SEL as a key component of their education standards or curriculum. An OECD report specifically references the Australian Curriculum as a good example of a curriculum framework with a strong social and emotional element with capabilities “not added as subjects in the curriculum, but...addressed across subjects” [38] (p. 99). Having social and emotional skills addressed across or embedded within subjects is key when teaching young adolescents. The authors of the 2015 CASEL guide of SEL programs emphasized that the “specific teaching practices to create classroom environments that foster social and emotional learning” [37] (p. 31) were critical to delivering a developmentally responsive approach to SEL for this age group.

The explicit teaching of social and emotional skills was highlighted by the TLC teacher in each case vignette. In most instances, the teaching of social and emotional skills was referenced in relation to being embedded when teaching the curriculum or through the curriculum content (i.e., the topic had a direct social and emotional focus). This approach is significant for this age group, with CASEL noting that “current innovative perspectives on educational practice are aligned with SEL or create opportunities for SEL” [30] (p. 32). That is, opportunities for the explicit teaching of social and emotional competencies are directly linked to daily practice and not a ‘stand-alone’ feature of the daily routine.

A daily feature of the program was 4-square handball at lunchtime. The participants were given three choices for spending their lunch hour after eating, which was to either play handball, finish off any class work, or read/play board games inside. The majority of students tended to play handball, as a weekly highlight of the program was a visit by sporting players who played with them. The sole game of handball (with four players on the court at any time) meant that up to nine students would need to wait their turn to get into a square. Getting “out” meant going to the end of this line, watching, and waiting until they could rejoin the court. Following the agreed rules and learning to respectfully take turns were the key learning moments for students of this activity. For students such as Joe, persisting with handball taught him that he did not need to throw a tantrum when he was out because watching others play and waiting for your turn (which wasn’t that long) were enjoyable opportunities to learn to socialize in authentic playground situations. For students such as Alex, handball built his self-esteem and confidence to speak up. For students such as Dan, who was really good at handball, it offered him an arena to be a role model to others.

4.1.5. Highlighting the Relevance of the Curriculum

Relevance of the curriculum requires the purposeful selection of topics and practices that have a direct link to the current or future lives of students. When young adolescents see connections between what they are learning to either their current or future lives, they develop a greater sense of purpose in the learning process. In turn, this sense of purpose promotes higher self-esteem, academic achievement, and a sense of meaning in life [39]. Where the curriculum is relevant, it fosters deeper learning and authentic engagement [10] and supports the development of transferable skills that are critical to the student’s success later in life [40].

As illustrated in Table 1, each week had a focus on one of the five components of effective SEL programs and drew upon essential learnings (curriculum intentions) of the Queensland Curriculum in five subjects. These included Health and Physical Education (HPE), particularly in the Personal Development Strand, Creative Methods—the Arts; Mathematics, focusing on numeracy skills; English, with a focus on written, aural, and oral literacy; and Technology, with a once-a-week computer lesson, usually related to completing a numeracy task. These tasks were transferred to student diaries as a record of their engagement in learning, with all five subjects combined into one artifact, representing a substantial compilation of their achievement.

Each of these tasks was as authentic as any regular classroom task, thematically tied to the over-arching purpose of SEL and learning re-engagement. For example, in weeks six and seven, assessing and understanding differences were captured from a simple tally/survey of participant characteristics (such as hair and eye colour) and articulated into a comparative bar graph. For students such as Drew whose appearance was connected to his experiences of bullying, and students such as Alex and Dan, who often “joined in” with poor choices made by peers, the simple numeracy task took on more meaning in accepting and respecting difference.

4.1.6. Making Learning Fun

Fun (pleasure, enjoyment, or entertainment) plays an important role in learning, and researchers have noted the many benefits of using fun in the classroom, including making learning inviting [41], increasing engagement [42,43], and improving learning outcomes [44,45]. Neuroscience research also confirms that the positive effects of fun are evidenced through a person’s biochemical levels. During early adolescence, the cognitive developmental changes that are occurring make this age group particularly receptive to fun when learning [46].

Unlike their regular classrooms, the TLC program made *structured playing* a part of the daily experience of the TLC participants. Chance, unsupervised encounters with peers in the playground were eliminated and instead replaced by adult-supervised play on an adventure playground once per week, as well as the option of lunchtime and programmed, in-class board games with the teacher every day. The daily handball with peers, the teacher aide, and once per week with visiting sports stars was also a key site and deliberate strategy to inject fun into the students’ experience of the TLC program. Additionally, the Week 10 program included an excursion for students and parents to the home ground of the sports club, partnering with the program to meet the premier league players and play in a giant inflatable maze with each other. It was the culminating, fun reward of successfully completing the program.

5. Discussion

School disengagement and resulting school dropout rates are increasing. Within Australia, the Year 7/8 to Year 12 retention rate in 2022 was 84.9% for females and 76.3% for males and averaged 80.5% [47]. This percentage translates into almost 20% of students not completing their compulsory years of schooling but it also does not tell the full story of some significantly worse statistics in rural and remote areas and with Indigenous populations [47]. What is also known is that school dropout is not an event but, rather, a process where students begin to disengage from school and begin a downward spiral of disengagement to failure to find meaning in learning [35]. The importance of engaging and re-engaging students earlier on their educational path is critical to avoid or at least minimize the risk of later school dropout [48].

The program was highly successful in its intent to re-engage students in schooling with clear examples of positive student outcomes. The six vignette cases describe each student’s challenges when entering the program and progress that was recorded over the period of the 10-week program, and highlighted the significant progress each student had made by the end of the program. Key to the program’s success was the intentional use of responsive practices by the TLC teacher where they established clear expectations, facilitated goal setting, built, and promoted relationships within the classroom, embedded the explicit teaching of social and emotional skills within the curriculum, ensured the curriculum was relevant to the children’s lives; and made learning fun.

Even though the TLC was a custom program, the careful analysis of practices in use demonstrates that any teacher in any classroom can build SEL and adopt responsive practices in their daily teaching practices. These responsive strategies can be assembled within any context so long as *they are all present*. That is, the practices evidenced in this program are part of a suite of age-appropriate pedagogies that aimed to address the social

and emotional ‘gaps’ that were manifesting as barriers to students accessing the curriculum and align with the essential attributes of effective middle years programs [29]. That is, the practices are responsive (attend to the distinctive developmental attributes of the age group), challenging (have high expectations), empowering (students take responsibility for their own actions), equitable (socially just), and engaging (learning is relevant, participatory, and motivating). Further, these social and emotional learning responsive practices build on ideas of behaviour management such as “kernels” [5]—individual program components which cannot be removed from the whole and build on established orthodoxy and evidence in positive behaviour [24].

Targeted programs, such as the TLC program, can be highly effective in re-engaging young people in learning. The results of this study align with the findings from other studies that show that the length of the program is not as important to long-term success as the quality of the intervention program [38]. Moreover, programs such as the TLC program that target the development of particular social and emotional skills rather than a general skillset are shown to have more positive outcomes.

Social and emotional skills are capabilities that can be developed. Students with strong social and emotional skills perform better in school both socially and academically, and these skills are predictive of future life success [38]. Over the last decade, there have been numerous calls for the teaching of social and emotional skills to be part of teacher training programs [4,49–51]. As such, the authors again call for more awareness of and education for teachers in the embedding of targeted social skilling within the curriculum, particularly in the initial stages of the middle years of schooling when students can begin to exhibit early signs of disengagement [52].

6. Conclusions

We set out in this paper to illustrate how short-term, targeted social and emotional learning programs can succeed in re-engaging middle years’ students in learning by focusing on their stories as told by the teacher entrusted with their learning. We have conducted a content analysis of the TLC program against empirically derived criteria for effective SEL programs and employed an analytical heuristic of responsible teaching practices to make sense of, and draw connections, between the deliberate learning and teaching practices of the teacher in a targeted SEL program and the consequences for students’ social and emotional learning and academic re-engagement.

We argue that the success of the TLC program can be replicated in the wider schooling sector. The adaptability of the content to a wide range of schooling contexts and the *teachability* of the learning and teaching approaches employed means that targeted social skilling can and should be included in preservice (or initial) teacher education and the focus of ongoing, in-service teacher professional development.

7. Limitations

Vignettes are an effective tool to generate diverse and thorough data, particularly in situations where young participants are involved. An adult can pull together the salient aspects of the young person’s story with a sophistication of language that young people cannot employ themselves. However, a limitation of the use of vignettes is that the adult narrating the story is not realistically representing the experience of that young person but their qualified and partial interpretation of it. Partiality in and of itself is not a limitation [53], as collecting multiple partial views is a trustworthy way to socially construct reality. The potential danger here is with accepting one partial view *as* reality. By engaging in content analysis of the TLC program structure against rigorous criteria for effective SEL programs alongside the TLC teacher vignettes, we have established the trustworthiness of the findings.

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