

## **Productivity Commission on Mental Health Submission by Dr John Bellavance**

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### **The Social and Economic Benefits of Values Education, and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**

#### **Introduction**

I maintain in this submission that without values education, and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) mental wellbeing and productivity in schools and in workplaces will always fall short. It is also accepted that values and SEL can be developed (Bellavance, 2018; Bernard & Walton, 2011; DeNobile & Hogan, 2014). Additionally, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) maintains that the values and attitudes we live, affect how we relate to other people and to all our activities in the environment, and so are a major influence on our prospects for achieving a sustainable future (Cox, Calder, & Fien, 2010).

All human beings seek to be happy and productive. When human desires are fulfilled, happiness ensues. However, “desires” can lead individuals towards unethical and ineffectual behaviours. As a result, this can lead to their unhappiness, and the unhappiness of others they interact with. The great contradiction of human beings is that we can be both good and unethical, and effective and ineffectual at times. Hence, managing ourselves and our relationships in a way that leads us to be moral and effective is crucial to our happiness and the wellbeing of society.

#### **Social and emotional learning and wellbeing**

From an educational perspective educators seek to foster knowledge and skills that students will need with respect to science, mathematics and technology, to name a few. However, knowledge of the values and the application of abilities that allow individuals to be good, successful and happy are also needed (sometimes referred to as Emotional Intelligence, and Social and Emotional Learning). Current Federal

and Victorian Departments of Education maintain that fostering values education, and social and emotional abilities in schools play an important role in the long term mental health of students because these underpin positive relationships and resilience. Education is fundamental to building a society that has strong economic growth, productivity and employment, better health outcomes and greater social cohesiveness (*The Australian Student Wellbeing Framework, 2018; Wirralung Ganai–Aboriginal Inclusion Plan, 2015*). Bernard and Walton (2011) have shown that students who had undergone social and emotional learning showed increased mental health.

### **The need for values education, and social and emotional learning (SEL)**

In this section, I argue for the reasons why we values education, and social and emotional learning with respect to mental health and productivity.

- 1) Values education needs to be part of a proactive approach to mental health by fostering values and abilities that underpin mental wellbeing, such as finding meaning and a moral identity, having self-esteem, being resilient and having positive relationships.
- 2) Values education is an integral part of a holistic education that educates the mind, the heart and behaviours, and service to others (Bellavance, 2018). A holistic values education requires a framework that ties together the values and abilities proposed by federal and state values education initiatives and other organisations.
- 3) Some challenges still need to be overcome for schools to fully implement values and SEL education.
- 4) Values and SEL education needs to be fostered broadly, in the family, in business and in governments for wellbeing and productivity to increase. For example, values promoted in the school needs to be linked to the values in the community (DeNobile & Hogan, 2014).

## **1. A proactive mental health approach**

In Australia, one in five people experience anxiety, depression and substance abuse. One in four young people are at risk of mental illness, while suicide accounts for one third of all deaths among young people aged 15 to 24 ("Facts & figures about mental health,"). Policy and practice for the treatment of mental health problems of young people has moved over the past two decades to the prevention and promotion of mental health and positive personal development (Bernard & Walton, 2011). Research has shown that values education positively affects the mental wellbeing and pro-social behaviour of students (DeNobile & Hogan, 2014). Our sense of meaning, self-actualisation, identity, self-esteem and resilience are intertwined. I have found in my own research that the young people who knew their own values were better equipped and more resilient when dealing with peer pressure with respect to anti-social behaviours while using social media. Additionally, the pro-social values held by students while using social media had a positive impact on their peers with respect to standing up to bullies and the promotion of values while using social media (Bellavance, 2018). The prevention and promotion of mental health can help alleviate some problems associated with a low self-esteem, resilience, lack of meaning and purpose in the lives of people. Additionally, an improvement in an individual's mental health can provide flow-on benefits in terms of increased social and economic participation (*The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health*, 2019).

The Beyond Blue, Be You SEL initiative maintains that children and young people who have developed social and emotional abilities find it easier to manage their emotions, relate to others, make decisions, resolve conflict, and feel positive about themselves and the world around them. They are also likely to have enhanced motivation to engage and achieve ("Be You Professional Learning Module Summaries,"). Additionally, ineffective and unethical behaviours of individuals are challenging society and educational institutions to understand the values and abilities that can mediate the lives of people, as well as, providing some means to meet the challenges they encounter in their lives.

## **Mental health and finding meaning**

One of the fundamental issues of being human is the need to find meaning and purpose in our lives. I have found this to be true for myself. A self-actualised person knows the meaning of their life, their values and purposes. They achieve a sense of fulfilment by realising their capabilities and potential. Such widespread phenomena as depression, aggression and addiction are not understandable unless we recognise the vacuum of meaning in the lives of many people. Life does not owe us happiness. One must have a reason to be happy, once found, one becomes happy. Happiness cannot be pursued; it ensues from how we live our lives, the result our actions – the actualisation of a potential meaning or purpose in our lives (Frankl, 2006).

The experience of "meaning in life" is a major aspect of life satisfaction and psychological wellbeing (Fegg, Kudla, Brandstätter, Deffner, & Küchenhoff, 2016; Joyce E. Fjelland, Barron, & Foxall, 2008). Some psychiatrists maintain that one third of patients seeking help from mental health professionals present with the issue of lack of meaning in their lives, rather than chronic anxiety and depression (Frankl, 2006). Diminished meaning in life are important factors that undermine wellbeing (Andersson, 2018; Fegg et al., 2016), while finding meaning is important in recovering from mental illness (Skogens, Greiff, & Topor, 2018). Increasing attention has been paid to incorporating meaning in life, values and spirituality as an important part of social work practice (Chan & Chi, 2017).

## **Moral identity**

A proactive mental health education also involves fostering a moral identity (Berkowitz et al., 2002). Our personal sense of identity is important to us. Identity is associated with our sense of meaning and purpose, and helps us be more resilient. Identity refers to aspects of self-definition that include, but are not limited to, one's goals, values, beliefs, commitments, and standards for behaviour. Young people develop all types of identities such as a sport identity, a performing arts or academic identities. A moral identity refers to the degree to which moral values and morality are important to a person's identity and essential to one's self-understanding. Moral identity plays an important role in moral action. Morality, broadly defined, involves the public good such as justice – values that have broader implications than personal ones, such as one's likes and dislikes in music (Bellavance, 2018; Bock &

Samuelson, 2014). Educating for moral identity is fostering in a person a set of values and commitments that are central to who that person is – values and commitments that are in the service of human welfare (Bock & Samuelson, 2014).

### **Self-esteem**

Self-esteem – feeling positive about oneself, is an important aspect of mental wellbeing. Individuals with low self-esteem suffer more distress after negative experiences than those with high self-esteem (Jordan et al., 2013). Low self-esteem is one factor associated with depression, diminished life satisfaction and even suicidal impulses (Jordan et al., 2013; "What causes depression?," 2018). A moral identity is one factor that lead to experiencing genuine self-esteem and mental health (Bellavance, 2018; Berkowitz et al., 2002). Young people who value honesty, empathy and justice as part of who they are, are more resilient (Bellavance, 2018; Berkowitz et al., 2002; DeNobile & Hogan, 2014). Self-esteem also ensues from how we live our lives based on the values and purposes we actualise (Berkowitz et al., 2002). For example, competence, and ability to satisfy values and aspirations are measures of self-esteem (Laithwaite et al., 2007). Psychological interventions fostering self-esteem improve mental wellbeing, such as fostering the right mindsets and values, and cognitive restructuring of negative self-criticism. To achieve this, programs help develop skills in awareness of self-criticism, weighing of evidence for such criticism, and the reappraisal of negative self-critical thoughts (Laithwaite et al., 2007).

### **Resilience**

A proactive mental health education also involves fostering resilience. Resilience is also associated with mental health because being able to bounce back from challenges or adversity is a significant protective factor that supports children and young people's mental health ("Be You Professional Learning Module Summaries,"). Resilience includes respectful relationships, and social and emotional skills ("Be You Educators Handbook: Primary and Secondary Schools,"). Children and young people develop resilience through a combination of individual, family, community and societal factors, fostering social and emotional learning (SEL), fostering empowerment and improving the environments around them. Additionally, fostering individual empowerment helps foster resilience. Empowerment means providing

people the opportunity to actively participate in activities and decisions that shape their lives ("Be You Professional Learning Module Summaries," ; Bellavance, 2018).

### **Positive relationships**

Another aspect of meaning and self-actualisation involves our relationships. We become who we are through others and they through us. One study suggests that more than half the respondents considered difficulties within the family or the partnership as causes of depression (Lauber, Falcato, Nordt, & Rössler, 2003).

It was argued in this section that values education needs to be part of a proactive approach to mental health. The following section discusses a holistic approach to education.

### **2) A holistic education**

I have been teaching Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in secondary schools in Australia for 19 years. On a regular basis, I am required to have conversations with students who violate our schools ICTs acceptable use policy. When seeking to address the misconduct of students, I ask them about their values and behaviours. Through these interactions, I came to understand some of the challenges that students face with respect to their personal development and their social engagement with others; challenges associated with their own attitudes and anti-social behaviours, and those of their peers. As a teacher, I have seen many examples of ethical and effective behaviours on the part of students, but also the opposite. At times, both practices were evident by the same students. Because this, I concluded that opportunities for learning and personal development are rich and schools can play an important role in fostering the values and abilities that will be beneficial in the working lives of students and their long term mental wellbeing.

My initial research interest in this area developed through my educational interactions with students in the situations I've described above. From these experiences, I concluded that a comprehensive, holistic curriculum is needed in three areas:

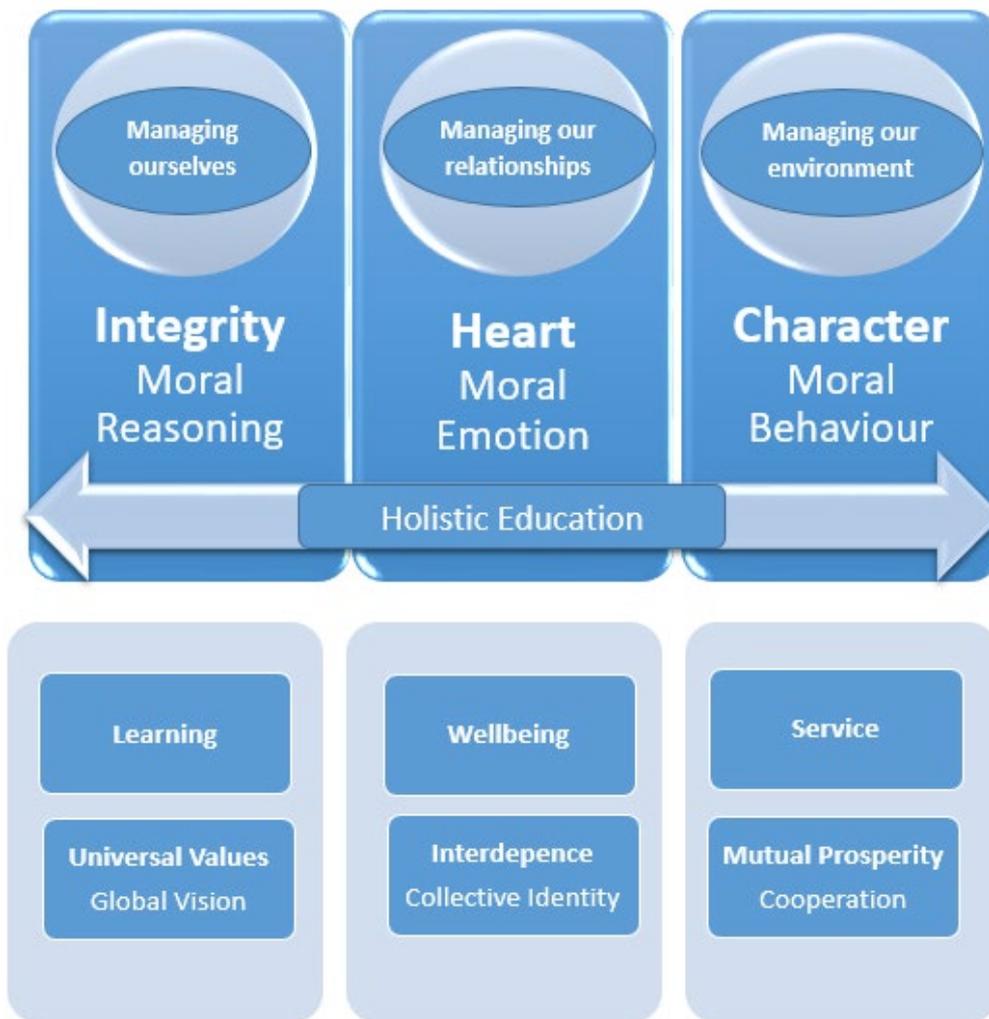
1. The values and abilities that underpin moral and effective practices that allow young people to respond to the challenges they face.
2. The values that drive anti-social behaviours and how young people can respond to these.

3. How parents, teachers and society can help support young people in their pursuit to be good, successful and happy.

Values education needs to be an integral part of a holistic education that educates the mind, the heart and behaviours. Several schools in Australia view a holistic education as incorporating academic learning, wellbeing, values education, service, understanding the broader international world and caring for the environment. I maintain that a framework is needed that ties together the values and abilities proposed by federal and state values education initiatives, and other organisations.

The following section discusses a holistic framework for values, and social and emotional education based on the following four constructs.

1. The three life goals
2. The three moral and psychological domains
3. The values and abilities that underpin the life goals and the domains
4. The teaching domains of: learning, wellbeing and service



**Figure 1** – A framework for a holistic values education that underpin the life goals and the moral and psychological domains.

**The three life goals**

Ourselves, our relationships with others and our environments are the spheres of human activity. A review of values education and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) initiatives suggests that this involves learning values and abilities that fall within the following three life goals:

**1. Manage ourselves well**, namely: having as sense of meaning and purpose, having a moral identity, managing emotions, having self-control, having self-esteem, being resilient and self-aware, having confidence, being engaged and achieving, being empowered and having a voice, persistent and organised, developing leadership skills and being authentic and accountable.

2) **Manage our relationships well** (family, peers and community), namely, having positive relationships and collaborating, being socially aware, being conscientious, having empathy for others, being able to resolve conflicts, having pro-social values such as justice, respect, responsibility and trustworthiness, valuing diversity and being inclusive.

3) **Manage relationships our physical and natural environments well**, which includes the home, the neighbourhood, and the natural world, and contributing positively to our environments.

(*The Australian Student Wellbeing Framework*, 2018; "Australian Student Wellbeing Framework," 2019; "Be You Professional Learning Module Summaries," ; Bellavance, 2018; Bernard & Walton, 2011; DeNobile & Hogan, 2014; Devine, Saunders, & Wilson, 2001; "Promoting mental health and wellbeing in your school," 2019; VCAA, 2015; *The Victorian Essential Learning Standards*, 2005)

### **The three moral and psychological domains**

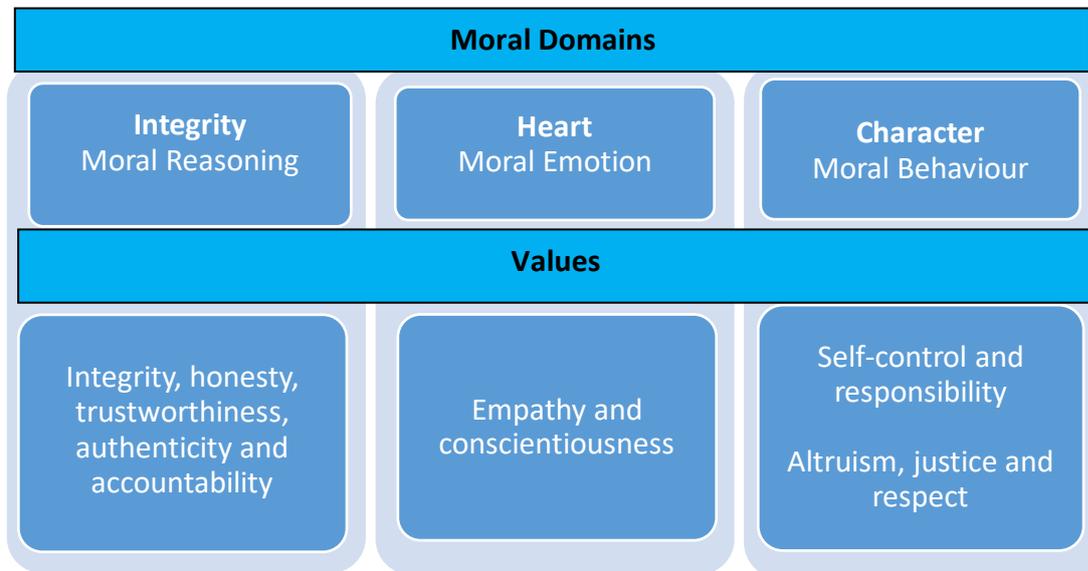
The three moral and psychological domains that underpin the three life goals are: 1) reasoning, 2) emotion and 3) behaviour (see Figure 1). Values education and SEL incorporates aspects of the cognitive (reasoning), affective (emotion) and behavioural domains of psychological functioning and development (Berkowitz & Bier, 2014; Berkowitz et al., 2002; Colby & Damon, 2015). An integrative moral educational approach aims to foster students' moral character that incorporates all three moral domains (Han, 2016). All three domains reciprocally influence each other and are intertwined (Colby & Damon, 2015). For example, moral emotions develop appropriate sensibilities and habitual responses that are cultivated through moral reasoning (Narvaez & Bock, 2014). *Integrity*, *heart* and *character* are the labels used to represent these three domains in figure 1. *Integrity* is the label used to represent the values and abilities associated with reasoning, *heart* for emotions and *character* for behaviours. What follows is a discussion about the values that underpin the three life goals and the three domains.

## **The values and abilities that underpin the life goals and the domains**

In an attempt to formulate a values framework, I recognised that the debate about whether moral values are subjective and relative to time and society or that objective moral values exist, is as old as philosophy itself (Giner-Sorolla, 2012; Minton, 1976; Morales-Sa´nchez & Cabello-Medina, 2013). Listing and justifying a particular list of values and abilities as moral, is a complex exercise for at least four reasons. First, when formulating moral frameworks for educational institutions, educators are confronted with the pluralistic nature of society, making such formulations challenging and continually open to contestation (Bauman, 2013). Second, some moral philosophers and moral psychologists acknowledge that moral judgments can be subjective (Cameron & Payne, 2013; Mercier, 2011; Pojman, 1997). Third, the task of describing moral values, not just the ones that are considered to constitute true morality, leads to the recognition that multiple moral concerns can fall within the same moral domains (Morales-Sa´nchez & Cabello-Medina, 2013). Two opposing positions can draw on the same moral values to defend their views (Giner-Sorolla, 2012), and most moral rules can be overridden by other moral rules depending on the context (Giner-Sorolla, 2012; Pojman, 1997). Fourth, some moral values are shared across cultures, while others vary between social groups (Baggio & Beldarrain, 2011; Colby & Damon, 2015). However, as Minton (1976) argued, if ethical relativism is pushed to its logical limits, it must be concluded that the moral values of all cultures are non-rational. Conversely, permissiveness is not the answer either, because it holds no genuine moral authority (Berkowitz et al., 2002; Giner-Sorolla, 2012), and intractable value conflicts can occur in the absence of shared values (Thompson, 2010). Mercier (2011) argues that even though moral judgments are subjective, because they comprise predictions about others' behaviour, it may still be possible to evaluate moral judgments using objective criteria. Hence, there is a need to identify some values that are relevant to morality (Berkowitz et al., 2002; Giner-Sorolla, 2012) and broadly shared (Colby & Damon, 2015). After all, any worthy educational program must have a defined ideal for students to reach (Bock & Samuelson, 2014).

The following section explores the moral values and abilities associated with each of the moral and psychological domains. As discussed earlier, a review of values education and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) initiatives suggests that this

involves learning values and abilities that fall within the three life goals. The three life goals are underpinned by the values and abilities associated with reasoning, emotion and behaviour (the domains) (see Figure 2 below). Moral psychology and ethics indicates that the values in Figure 2 are the most significant values with respect to moral reasoning, emotion and behaviour (Bellavance, 2018).



**Figure 2** - Digital Moral Framework (DMF) (Bellavance, 2018)

Integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, authenticity and accountability underpin moral reasoning. Empathy and conscientiousness underpin moral emotion. Self-control and responsibility underpinned moral self-management, while behaving morally towards others relied on the values of altruism, justice and respect (Bellavance, 2018). Some of the additional values that federal and state, mental health organisations and other SEL programs suggest are important can be incorporated within the framework of the three domains. For example, collaboration and tolerance can be associated with the emotional domain, while persistence and organisation associates with the behavioural domain.

## **The teaching domains of learning, wellbeing and service**

In Figure 1, the teaching domains are learning, wellbeing and service. Learning, critical thinking, self-reflection underpin reasoning. Moral reasoning relies on universal values that foster the common good. UNESCO maintains that values education must foster global citizens with a global values such as: social equity and peace, appropriate development and conservation (an ethic of sustainability), and democracy (Cox et al., 2010). A global vision that transcends nationality, race and religion is needed.

Wellbeing is underpinned by values, and social and emotional abilities and our relationships with others (Goleman, 2004). Ethics of responsible sustainability also provides values that guide our relationships with each other (social justice) (Cox et al., 2010). A sense of interdependence and collective identity underpin social justice.

Altruism/service to others, justice, respect and cooperation underpin mutual prosperity. Service learning is an integral part of values education (Bellavance, 2018; Koller, 2006).

The challenges schools face in implementing values and SEL education are discussed in the next section.

### **3. Challenges for schools in implementing values and SEL education**

Schools are now expected to teach values, personal development and emotional intelligence to children, were in the past these were learnt mostly in the home, the extended family, the community and from various faith traditions. For the most part, teachers always strive to foster in young people the values and abilities that will allow them to be good citizens, successful in their life's pursuits and happy people. However, as a teacher, I have found several challenges to meet the learning needs of young people in that space.

First, resources exist that address particular aspects of values, personal development and relationship, but there is no comprehensive and consistent framework to conceptually link these programs together.

Second, over time, as new SEL curriculums come and go. In Australia various iterations of values and personal development initiatives for school have been introduced by federal and state governments, organisations over the years. These

curriculums are often received by teachers with “sceptical enthusiasm” because new curriculums are perceived as coming and going dependent on the government of the time. As a result, they are not implemented consistently over long enough periods of time to be effective.

Third, although schools try to address values and personal development the best they can, there is often little time left when seeking to teach the content of an already crowded academic curriculum. An OECD report on teaching found that on average teachers report spending 78% of classroom time on actual teaching and learning, with the remaining classroom time spent on keeping order (13%) and administrative tasks (8%) (OECD, 2019). The question remains – how much time do teachers currently spend on values education and SEL in Australia? In addition, how many schools assess and report on values and SEL?

Forth, teachers often lack training in values education. It is important that pre-service teachers be skilled in the areas of values education in order to effectively teach values to their students. Of course, teachers who are currently in the field also need exposure to values education training. The literature suggest that there is support for values education, but little training for teachers with respect to values education (Koller, 2006). For example, pre-service teachers’ desire to assist students with values and SEL is largely not supported in an explicit way by the training they receive throughout their education degree (Mergler, 2007).

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