



Government of South Australia

Department for Education

Elizabeth Vale Primary School Case Study



This case study tells the story of Elizabeth Vale Primary School's journey in implementing trauma-informed practice in their school to support children's wellbeing and academic achievement.

What is trauma-informed practice in education?

South Australia's trauma-informed practice in education approach supports preschools and schools to provide learning environments that are responsive to the diverse learning needs of all students regardless of their circumstances, with an inclusive focus on the engagement and learning of children that have experienced trauma.

The approach provides expert capacity building opportunities and implementation support to staff to understand and embed practical strategies that promote student engagement, wellbeing and success in learning, through:

- understanding the impact of trauma on the developing brain,
- promoting pro-social behaviours,
- building positive relationships for healing trauma,
- and rebuilding connections in the child's brain.

Trauma-informed practice in education is not an individual student-level therapeutic intervention. It is a process of cultural change that enables educators and support staff to understand the impact of childhood trauma and respond to the learning and engagement needs of individuals affected by childhood trauma. Trauma-informed practice influences interactions and what occurs at the individual, classroom and school levels, transforming school culture, building a supporting infrastructure and altering curriculum content and interventions.

The strategies are applied and of benefit to all students, with an aim to provide safe, supportive, engaging and challenging environments for learning. A particular focus is placed on social and emotional learning that fosters skills, habits, and mindsets that are enablers to effective learning and productive behaviour. This links strongly to the skills, behaviours and dispositions for successful 21st century learners reflected in the general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum, particularly the personal and social capability.

Case study objective

The objective of this case study is to communicate the implementation experience of an effective trauma aware school to staff in preschools and schools. An early adopter school that has been implementing a trauma-informed practice in education (TIPiE) approach for a number of years was selected. Qualitative data from focus groups and interviews was used to understand the current status of the implementation within the early adopter school.

There is no one size fits all in implementation and each school will call on a range of knowledge and practices which are supplemented by specific professional development in trauma-informed practice in education to undertake local planning to embed effective practices within the school culture and learning environment.



A trauma informed practice approach to education recognises that adverse experiences impact on core learning skills and dispositions for learning such as: attention, memory, sequencing and processing skills, problem solving, perseverance, social skills, behaviour regulation, hopefulness and self-esteem.

Unconditional positive regard, developed by Carl Rogers, is the basic acceptance and support of a person regardless of what the person says or does. Positive regard is not withdrawn by parents or significant others if the person does something wrong or makes a mistake. For children, experiencing positive regard helps them feel secure, free to try new things and make mistakes and learn to their full potential.

Why EVPS focused on supporting children's wellbeing to improve learning



Children learn best when they are alert, calm and feel safe.



Children's emotional and social wellbeing impacts their behaviour and learning.



How children feel right now may be because of something that happened earlier, that is happening now, or they are worried will happen later.



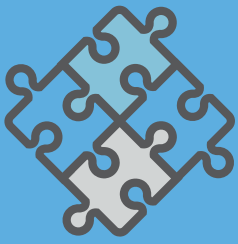
When children have not yet developed skills to manage their feelings, their feelings manage them.



Children learn to regulate their emotions with the support of adults. When children are young they need adults to soothe them. With this support they gradually learn to soothe themselves.

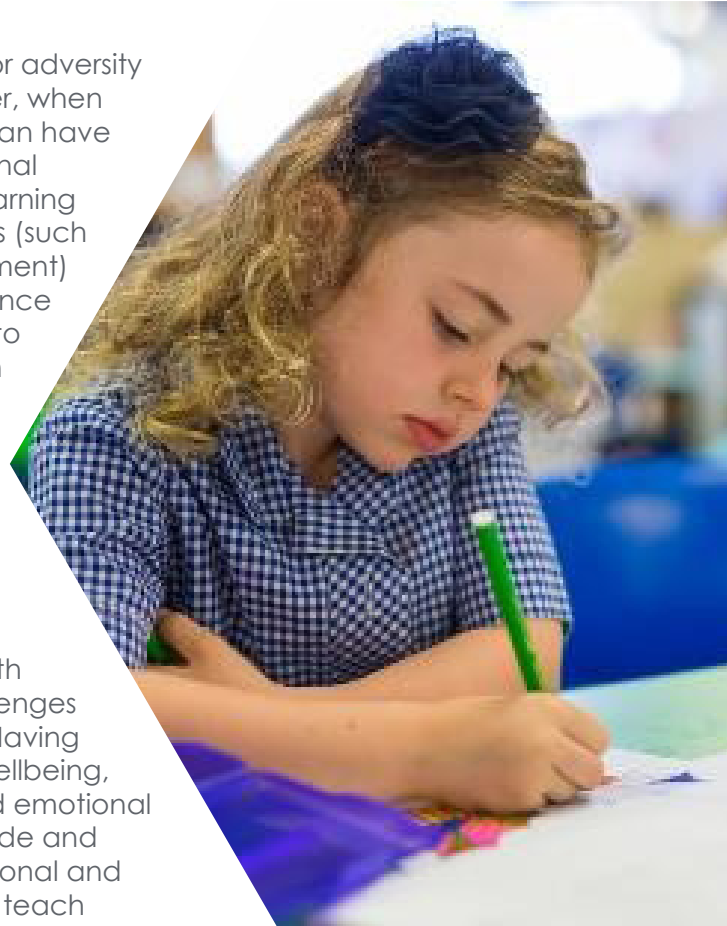


Positive dispositions for learning include courage and curiosity, trust and playfulness, perseverance, confidence and responsibility.



The Elizabeth Vale Primary School community is diverse and although the community has many strengths, like all communities it faces challenges.

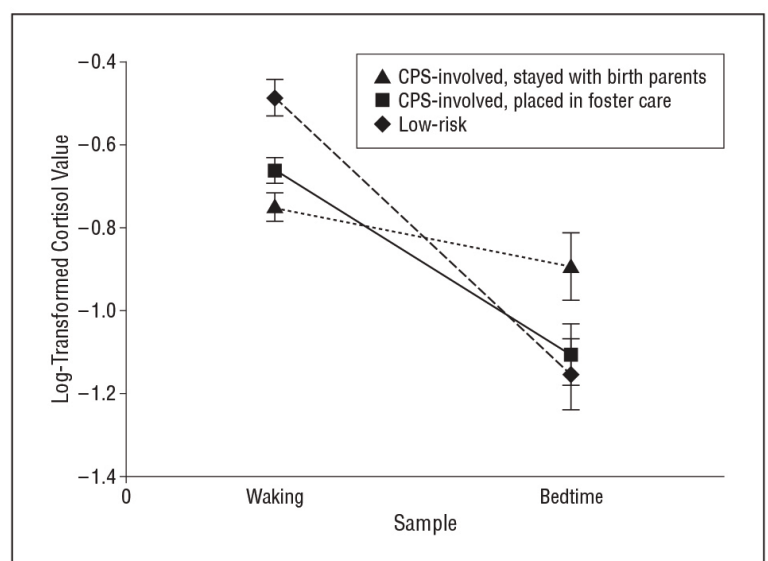
Experiencing everyday moderate and brief challenges or adversity is an important part of early child development. However, when experience of adversity is excessive or long-lasting, this can have an impact on children's ability to develop the foundational capacities that enable them to effectively engage in learning when they get to school. Within communities, challenges (such as financial stress, domestic violence, access to employment) can influence the level of adversity that children experience and impact the capacity of families to support children to learn adaptive coping strategies and support early brain development. As a result, children and young people can experience difficulties in learning, behaviour and physical and mental health. Aboriginal, humanitarian migrant and refugee families often face additional challenges related to the loss of culture and the intergenerational effects of trauma impacting their families and communities.



Prior to implementing trauma-informed practice, Elizabeth Vale Primary School noticed children experiencing challenges in engaging in learning and regulating their behaviour. Having tried a number of approaches to improving children's wellbeing, the school found it hard to teach higher order social and emotional skills such as growth mindset, character strengths, gratitude and kindness when children were lacking foundational emotional and social skills. The school needed to find tools to help them teach resilience and strength to children in this context.



When stress is a frequent part of our daily lives, it impacts our stress response system. Growing up in adversity has been found to dampen children's daily cortisol pattern, meaning they are less alert in the morning and more fatigued by the end of the day. This means they are less prepared to cope with the demands of the day.



(Bernard, Butzin-Dozier, Rittenhouse, & Dozier, 2010)

Elizabeth Vale Primary needed to find a way to build the emotional and social capacities of the children, recognising these are critical preconditions to being prepared to learn skills that are fundamental to successful learning. Having learned about the impact on children's development and learning of stressors in early childhood, the school decided to take a trauma-informed approach. The school trained all staff in the Berry Street Education Model (BSEM). The BSEM provided knowledge around the neuroscience that explains how trauma can impact emotional regulation, behaviour, and a child's ability to learn. The training supported the school to apply strategies to support children's emotional regulation to support children to engage in learning.

The BSEM resonated with Elizabeth Vale Primary as an approach that was well suited to the challenges they faced. They took this new knowledge of a trauma-informed practice in education approach and built upon previous learnings relating to positive psychology, growth mindset and positive education to create something fit for context.

"SMART training was some information about the brain; Pos[itive] Psych[ology] was, this is what you need to be able to flourish. We couldn't teach that without first the kids being ready to learn and what I think ... we got from the Berry Street was getting ready to learn, how is my body reacting, what am I doing, how can I influence it...?"

– Leadership

On reflecting on the connection of trauma-informed practice to other educational approaches:

"I actually think all of these things have been important... So we actually have pulled in lots of theories and programs and now we're filtering them through this funnel, so what we come out with at the other end is actually contextualised to here."

– Leadership

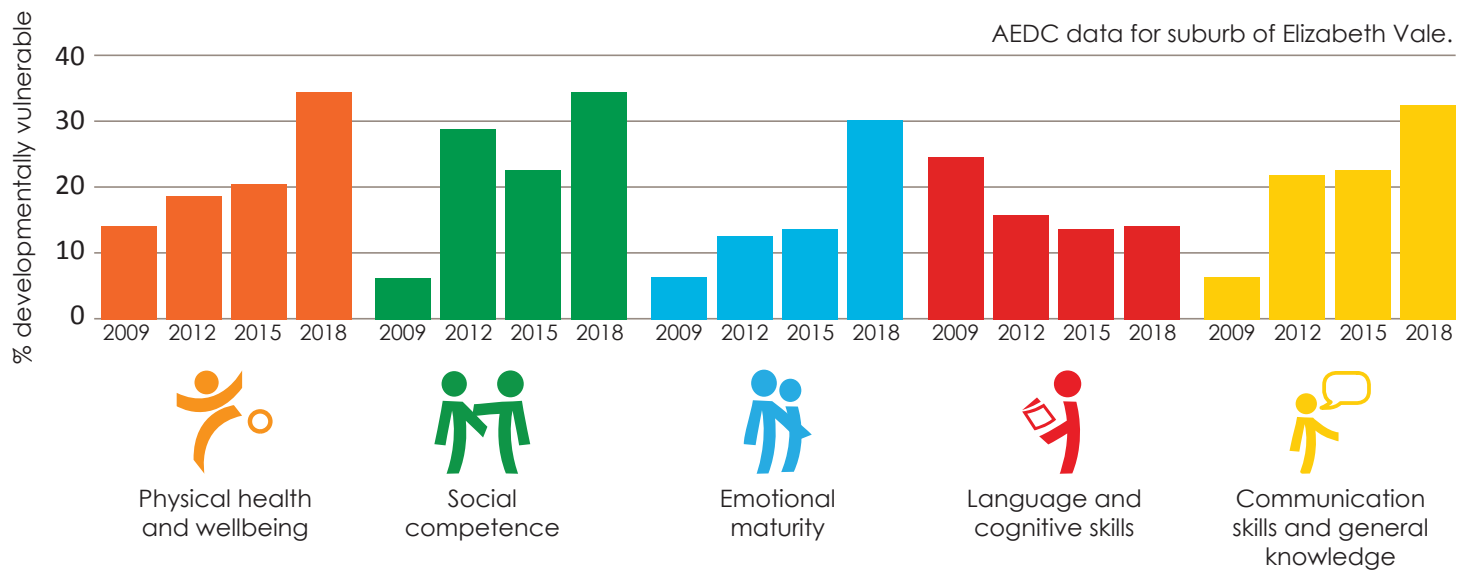
To do this, the school needed to shift how they thought about children and their behaviour. This meant separating the child from the behaviour and understanding that a child's response was the best that child could manage in that moment.

"Whereas once upon a time I might have said, because I didn't have the depth of thought about it, it's not okay to be angry. Actually, it is okay to be angry; it's not okay to throw a chair. So we're much better at that now through our trauma-informed work."

– Leadership

In the Community:

With Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data showing more and more children starting school without the basic foundational skills in emotional regulation and social competence, schools are likely to experience increasing challenges in engaging children in learning.



Families had poorer access to resources and employment compared to other areas of South Australia.

Unemployment

Elizabeth Vale - 20%
SA - 6%

Completed Year 12

Elizabeth Vale - 33%
SA - 53%

Single parent under 25

Elizabeth Vale - 2%
SA - 0.3%

Child attended preschool

Elizabeth Vale - 88%
SA - 92%

Source: AEDC website

At Elizabeth Vale Primary School:

There has been a growing number of enrolments.

203 ▶ **380**
(in 2009) (in 2018)

Enrolments have been steadily increasing over time

Many children come from culturally diverse backgrounds.

85%

of students have a language background other than English

13%

of students identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

A large proportion of students struggle with their regular attendance, and this is a bigger challenge for Aboriginal children.

61%

of students attend school 90% of days or more

34%

Of Aboriginal students attend school 90% of days or more

Staff within the school noticed that students had low expectations of themselves. This demonstrated a need to improve educational aspirations.

"But what we're hearing, things that the kids were saying, like 'Oh it's all right, I'm from Elizabeth' ... We were seeing results where kids were so low, that they just couldn't get back up, and they couldn't understand why. We're seeing kids that had emotional responses to tests that they couldn't explain, so therefore, tests sucked and we don't want anything to do with them anymore. And I do not care if I get a zero..." – Leadership

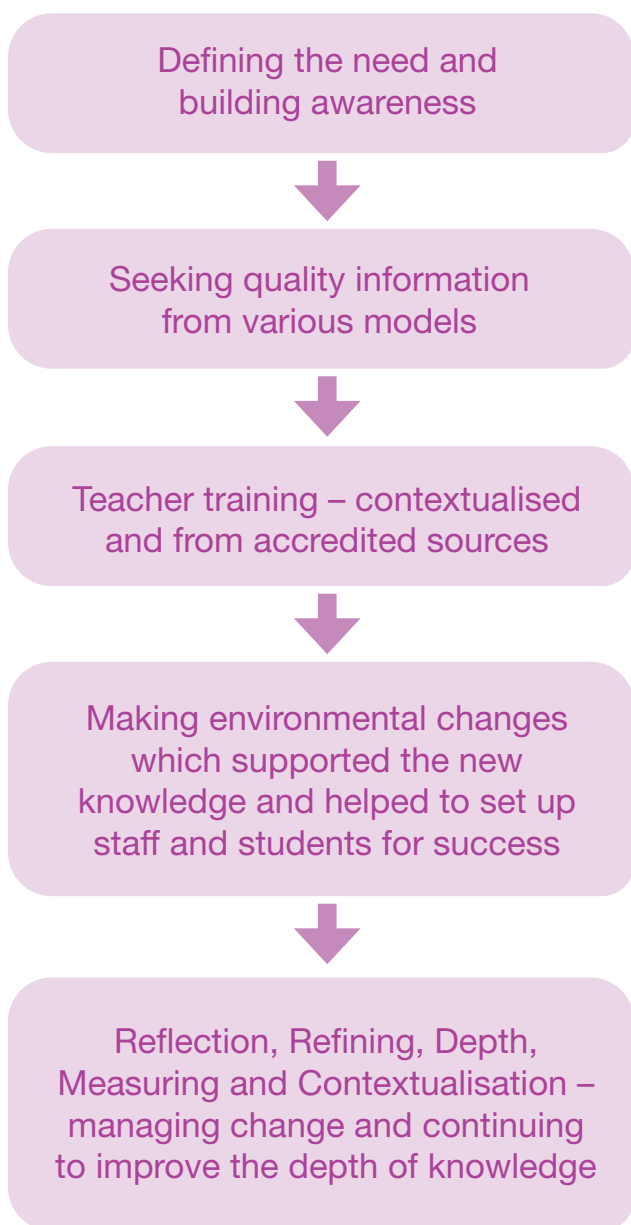
"Our goal, our major goal is to get kids better at reading and writing, that's what a school's here for. If we're talking about purpose, about why we started doing this, it's because we saw a huge need. We saw a need for our students to improve." – Leadership

"This is the Vale, this is Cat 1, but these kids they love going to school, they want to be at school... We want our kids to be little professionals. We want our kids to feel smart, sound smart and be smart." – Leadership

Focusing on the “why” the “what” and the “how.”

Rather than taking principles from a pre-established program and applying them immediately, the school considered their context and focused on the “why” – why is children’s developmental vulnerability on the AEDC domains increasing? This investigation prompted a discussion of what they wanted to achieve and how they could apply what they had learned from various training to work toward this goal within their context.

Developing intentionality of practice has been a key step for Elizabeth Vale Primary School in their journey towards implementing trauma-informed practice. ***The school engaged in reflection, training and an intensive implementation process to shift practices to meet the needs of children.***



How practices were shifted

- A community of practice was developed – all staff learned together and took part in reflective practice, examining what worked and what didn’t
- All school staff received training regardless of their role
- Staff meeting time was used to interrogate how concepts were working when applied
- The school’s values were reviewed and changed from “excellence, honesty and respect” to something concrete that students could operationalise: “work hard, be kind”
- A common language was developed to describe behaviour and responses
- Policies and programs were reviewed and restructured based on experience
- Environmental and administrative processes such as a documented accessible curriculum and structured inductions were focused on

Reflecting on their journey, school staff identified a number of things that helped them review and shift their practices:

- Staff felt safe to share their challenges and learn together
- Change was driven by strong and passionate leadership, committed to a vision for their school and students
- Staff were dedicated to moving implementation forward – supported by a lead within the school (Wellbeing Coordinator)
- The school holds a high expectation mindset for both students and staff
- Staff have regular check-ins, both formal and informal
- Masterclass workshops were held, built around current context and areas of need to increase staff understanding and capacity to implement
- Programs were accessible to all students (not targeted at only a few students)
- Staff developed an increased depth of knowledge of the context of students, families and the community

Identifying what was getting in the way of children being ready to learn has informed the strategies the school has implemented. The school identified factors across all aspects of the school experience that were likely to impact on a child's ability to be ready to learn.

"We want to increase rigour, wellbeing, and ultimately academic outcomes. That's where we want to be. We can't do it unless we're intentional. We can't do it unless we're intellectualising what we're actually doing and why we're doing it."
– Leadership



What does this look like in practice?

Routines within the classroom are used to help create a sense of safety and reduce decision fatigue. By ensuring children know what is expected and what is coming next, they are more likely to engage in learning and reduce stress, ultimately improving impulse control and behaviours.

Positive Interactions

School staff engage in positive interactions with children and families including verbal greetings using names, positive body language, fist bumps, knuckles, handshakes and high fives. Teachers make sure to start and finish each day with some form of positive interaction. This extends to interactions between staff members, with staff meetings started with positive interaction. Positive interactions have been introduced to create a feeling of acceptance and inclusion amongst children and families. Engaging in positive interactions has supported the development of positive relationships between staff, students and families and has played a role in increasing feelings of self-worth and value amongst students.

Morning Circle

Morning circle; a routine by which children are greeted, are able to share their feelings, take part in a group activity and are provided with news and announcements; supports each child to establish membership in the class while developing a classroom community and culture. Incorporating the Circle into morning routines has helped provide students with nurturing experiences which in turn help: to build attachment, make children feel safe within their environment and lower stress levels, resulting in smoother transitions and children feeling ready to learn.

Restructuring to reconnect

The structure of the day within the school has also been considered to ensure students are able to make the most of their experiences and adapt to their surroundings while also reducing break time incidences. Meal times have been adjusted so that children are given an initial longer opportunity to play outside, before being welcomed back inside to eat. This inversion of the usual structure means students have an opportunity to regulate their heart rates and revert to a relaxed state before returning to learning. Extra SSO time has been allocated so that SSOs can provide additional support in the yard both for group supervision and intentional one-on-one support for individual students requiring adjustments based on their need. This additional time ensures that classroom teachers are available to welcome students back to the classroom following yard time, creating a predictable routine and sense of familiarity for students. As a result, transitions back to learning have been smoother. Eating in class has also reduced school yard rubbish which has resulted in a cleaner school yard, reinforcing a high expectations mindset and sense of valuing the school amongst students.

Check-ins

Check-ins have been integrated into day-to-day practice at the beginning of the day and after recess and lunch. This involves staff members checking in with students to see how they are feeling and ensure that they are ready to learn before commencing lesson time. Additionally, a child is able to check in with staff verbally or non-verbally at any point during the day to let them know how they are feeling. Check-ins were implemented to give children autonomy in self-assessing their readiness to learn and respect each student's individual needs and agency. This strategy has supported children to develop self-awareness and reflection and in doing so has supported them to develop the capacity to engage in self-regulation strategies. School processes have also been revised to ensure staff are able to provide the support children need to succeed.

The Ready to Learn Program, the key to prevention

The Ready to Learn Program brings students and teachers together to plan for children's engagement in learning. The Program was introduced to ensure that behaviour management and engagement in learning is intentional, explicit and developed collaboratively between staff and students. At the beginning of each school year and again at the start of each term, students and teachers work together to identify factors that impact each student's readiness to learn and what works for each child to support them to regulate their behaviour in class and to be ready to engage with learning. Strategies, resources and supports are then documented in Ready to Learn Plans. In this way plans increase agency for each student and make clear the resources they can draw on for support. The Ready to Learn Program draws together information about stress and the brain, clear and explicit class routines and expectations, and individual Ready to Learn Plans. The program has allowed students to have control over their own behaviour management and develop self-regulation skills and independence in learning. Teachers have also benefited as they have been supported to help students regulate in a way that takes into consideration individual needs which has resulted in less classroom disruption.

Unconditional Positive Regard

Students at Elizabeth Vale Primary are treated with unconditional positive regard. This ranges from higher level concepts such as understanding that a child's response in a given situation is the best they are able to do in that moment, down to smaller interactions such as making sure to use a child's name when saying hi to them in the schoolyard. Under this concept, every student every day hears their name in a positive way. Unconditional positive regard has been integrated into practice to promote a growth mindset and reinforce the idea that a child's behaviour does not define who they are. This strategy has reduced the stigma associated with undesirable behaviour and has increased the sense of wellbeing, self-value and confidence amongst students.

Brain Breaks

Brain breaks have been introduced as a strategy to support students to self-regulate in order to achieve readiness to learn. Children at the school have individualised strategies they can use inside or outside of the classroom at any time if they need breaks to regulate and prepare themselves for learning. There are expectations associated with the use of brain breaks to ensure that these are indeed used to help the child to refocus rather than to avoid tasks. Strategies that children use for brain breaks are intentional and are developed in collaboration with each individual child. Brain breaks are used throughout the day to help the child energise or calm depending on their needs at the time. Similar to check-ins, the introduction of brain breaks has supported children to develop independent skills in self-reflection and self-regulation. The process helps to ensure students' needs are met, allowing them a place of safe haven within the school environment. As a result, classroom environments have improved and learning is less frequently disrupted as students have the necessary skills to remove themselves from the learning environment when needed.

12 Months Growth, Every 12 Months

The school has a philosophy of expecting 12 months of academic growth for 12 months of learning for every student, regardless of their starting point and any complexity in their life. For some students starting behind, there is an expectation of additional growth within 12 months, exceeding their peers and beginning to catch up. This policy supports staff and students to maintain a high expectation mindset and ensures that academic rigor remains a core focus of the school. The introduction of this philosophy has resulted in an increase in students' perceptions of self-worth and development of confidence which is reflected in the increasing number of children now able to participate in academic assessment activities such as NAPLAN. With fewer children now withdrawing from NAPLAN, this impacts the ability to compare NAPLAN results over time, but once these figures stabilise, the school will better be able to monitor their academic progress.

Where are we now?

Since first implementing trauma-informed practice, Elizabeth Vale Primary School staff have reported a number of changes in their school.

- School staff receive positive feedback from parents with parents expressing that they feel their children are valued, understood and supported by the school.
- Children are showing improved wellbeing and behaviour in the classroom.
- Students demonstrate the ability to self-reflect and self-regulate and show an increase in self-worth and confidence.
- Teachers are experiencing an increase in job satisfaction, feeling better supported to work with students around behaviour management and self-regulation, and having a better understanding of children's readiness to learn and the factors that impact this.
- Students show improved self-confidence and approach towards academic assessment. Students who would previously be unable to sit for formal academic assessment such as NAPLAN are now showing a willingness to have a go.
- Children are adopting a high expectations mindset, seeing themselves as valued members of the school and the broader community.

By implementing the strategies they've learned through the various professional development they have undertaken, Elizabeth Vale Primary School is starting to see improved emotional regulation and communication of needs in children.

"Having a child explain it is very powerful... She couldn't. So it's sort of feeding her all the strategies and the tools and consistent dialogue all of the time... I just like the way that she explains it. 'This is how I'm feeling, my heart starts racing'." – Staff

The school has used data to inform their planning and monitoring processes. Using data to monitor changes over time has presented its own challenges and has prompted Elizabeth Vale Primary to consider data within the context of what is happening for their students. Thinking about the story that sits behind the data has allowed the school to develop a more in depth understanding of what might be happening for their students.

Teachers identified that for many students being able to undertake the NAPLAN assessment was a reflection of their increased ability to self-regulate and take part in formal assessment processes. These were often students who had previously struggled to engage in education. Teachers also noted that calmer classrooms meant all children benefited from more learning. This may be reflected in increased proportions of students achieving in higher NAPLAN bands. NAPLAN results in 2019 reflect both an increased proportion of children scoring in the lower bands as well as in the higher bands, and an overall stable aggregated NAPLAN score.



The Wellbeing and Engagement Collection presents data on a number of wellbeing indicators. When considering the potential impact of trauma-informed practice a number of indicators are better placed to monitor areas that the school's approach may impact upon: Connectedness to school; Emotional engagement with teachers; School climate; School belonging; Perseverance; Cognitive engagement; Academic self-concept. As the school progresses their trauma-informed initiatives, these indicators will be a relevant source of data for the school to monitor the impact of their approach. Thinking carefully about what each individual indicator measures and what it can tell the school about the impact of trauma-informed practices, will be an important step in using wellbeing data for monitoring progress. Although early in their journey the school is already seeing improvements in Emotional engagement and Perseverance.

Where to next?

The school has identified that a significant next step will be to document the trauma-informed practices and systems they have developed into the school's formal policies and practices.

"I think now ... we've got some of the non-negotiables but we need to document it into policy process and practices so it doesn't get lost in the business of schools... But also remembering the things that got us on board, the things that inspired us early on. Ensuring that we find those moments of inspiration again..." – Leadership

Trauma-informed practice implementation at Elizabeth Vale Primary School addresses educational standards of practice in the following areas:

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL)

- 1.1 Physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students
- 1.2 Understand how students learn
- 1.5 Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities
- 3.1 Establish challenging learning goals
- 4.1 Support student participation
- 4.3 Manage challenging behaviour
- 6.2 Engage in professional learning and improve practice
- 6.3 Engage with colleagues and improve practice

The Australian Professional Standard for Principals

- Developing self and others
- Leading improvement, innovation and change

Early Years Learning Framework

- Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
- High expectations and equity
- Respect for diversity
- Ongoing learning and reflective practice
- Holistic approaches
- Responsiveness to children
- Intentional teaching
- Children have a strong sense of identity
- Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

NQS Quality Standard

- 1.1.3 Program learning opportunities – all aspects of the program, including routines, are organised in ways that maximise opportunities for each child's learning
- 1.2.1 Intentional teaching – Educators are deliberate, purposeful, and thoughtful in their decisions and actions
- 1.2.3 Child directed learning – Each child's agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions that influence events and their world
- 2.1.1 Wellbeing and comfort – each child's wellbeing and comfort is provided for, including appropriate opportunities to meet each child's need for sleep, rest and relaxation
- 3.2.1 Inclusive environment – Outdoor and indoor spaces are organised and adapted to support every child's participation and to engage every child in quality experiences in both built and natural environments
- 4.2.1 Professional collaboration – Management, educators and staff work with mutual respect and collaboratively, and challenge and learn from each other, recognising each other's strengths and skills
- 5.1.1 Positive educator and child interactions – Responsive and meaningful interactions build trusting relationships which engage and support each child to feel secure, confident and included
- 5.2.2 Self-regulation – each child is supported to regulate their own behaviour, respond appropriately to the behaviour of others and communicate effectively to resolve conflicts

“One of the challenges I see is about what happens when the young people here leave this nurturing environment... It’s a different world and that consistency of practice, while it may continually be improved here isn’t necessarily what happens for those young people when they go.”

– Leadership

A potential next step for Elizabeth Vale Primary may be to consider how they can further apply their learnings and apply these to extend their influence on children's wellbeing beyond the school walls. Sharing the approach with other systems that touch the child could further contribute to enhancing children's wellbeing and academic achievement. Taking this step would address additional standards such as:

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL)

3.7 Engage with parents/carers in the educative process
7.3 Engage with the parents/carers
7.4 Engage with professional teaching networks and broader communities

Early Years Learning Framework

Partnerships with families (Principles)
Continuity of learning and transitions (Practice)

The Australian Professional Standard for Principals

Engaging and working with the community

NQS Quality Standard

6.1.2 Parent views are respected
6.1.3 Families are supported
6.2.2 Access and participation
6.2.3 Community engagement

Safe and engaged learning through informed trauma aware practice in education:

What does it look like?

Trauma aware preschools and schools practice and reinforce underlying principles to support all children and young people to feel safe and engage in learning. These principles include unconditional positive regard for each member of the school community, thinking 'what has happened to this child?' to understand why a behaviour is being observed, and maintaining high expectations through setting and enforcing limits in a consistent way. They encourage and promote positive relationships and connections between all members of the school community – child to teachers and support staff, child to peers.

Specific strategies – ranging from individual to classroom and whole school levels - are in place to support the learning needs of children and young people affected by trauma. These strategies and processes include consistent, predictable routines and expectations.

Educators and support staff have the knowledge, skills and confidence to build students' abilities to self-regulate through co-regulation and explicit teaching of strategies. They discover and build on students' interests and competencies, providing opportunities to support participation. These safe environments and relationships support the development of resilience and engagement in learning, encouraging skill development and academic achievement

