Scholarship experience has shaped teaching practice

By Sarah Dinan
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As the 2021 recipient of Lynette Virgona Memorial Scholarship, I was able to undertake the invaluable Berry Street Education Model (BSEM) training.

Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 constraints, I was prevented from participating in the face-to-face delivery. However, I completed the four-day training via Zoom videoconferencing and found the experience to be informative, enlightening and affirming.

BSEM lived up to my hopes and exceeded my expectations. I believe that it is an essential course for any professional working with young people.

The Berry Street Education Model delivers classroom and whole school strategies, which are sub-divided into five categories, or domains.

The first session introduces Domain One: Body, which focuses on self-regulation, de-escalation, mindfulness and being present, centred and ready to learn.

As the title suggests, it prioritises the body and considers the impact of chronic stress and how this affects an individual's regulatory abilities.

Physical and neurological developmental factors are explored, and the unit seeks to establish an empathetic awareness of and for students and staff.

The second session, Domain Two: Relationship, focuses on the importance of relating and belonging. It states that we are hard-wired for connection. Emotionally, physically, mentally and neurologically we depend on connections with others to grow, develop and maintain our well-being.

The greater the sense of belonging and pride in the classroom and/or school, the more the student will toe the behavioural line and assume the well-being and performance of the group.

Generating a collective sense of student belonging reduces student-authority conflict and enhances peer regulation of classroom expectations.

Without a sense of acceptance and belonging, and in an attempt to be noticed, students who feel unwanted and disconnected may create opportunities to engage in less productive ways.

A common example might be a student, who is consistently sent to a buddy class or suspended, being far more likely to engage in maladaptive, disruptive behaviours to have their needs met, essentially making their behaviour worsen as a consequence of their punishment.

This domain emphasises the teacher- student relationship and importance of creating safe opportunities for learning.

The eight sub-categories include attachment; unconditional positive regard; redefining power: empathy and Zen mind; golden statements; process vs person praise; active constructive responding; whole school relationships; and teacher self-care.

Each sub-category is afforded at least one lesson plan, with suggested resources to adapt or use as is. Differentiation, particularly of resources, is not always necessary as they have created handouts, games and activities that are accessible across age and ability ranges.

Domain Three: Stamina and Domain Four: Engagement are delivered consecutively in session three.

When given opportunities to learn, practise and reinforce stamina in daily ways, we know that students can succeed – once they build their own confidence to face life's big and small adversities with strategies that have the potential to last a lifetime.

The cluster of four sub-categories include growth mindset; emotional intelligence; mindfulness and resilience.

BSEM defines student engagement
as being determined by "a complex interaction of behavioural, affective and cognitive motivations and competencies".

They assert that teachers can foster student engagement through the following seven sub-categories: Positive movement and rhythm; humour/play/fun; physical theatre and clowning around; positive emotions; willingness; cultivate wonder and flow.

All of the resources, lessons and suggested links are developed and backed by multidisciplinary specialists.

Every lesson can be adapted, extended or presented as is given. Engagement is "the intersection of flow, willingness, positive emotions and cultivation of wonder".

The final session is devoted to Domain Five: Character. BSEM aims for the student to be able to "identify areas of talent and extrapolate and apply the strengths that are developed through that talent to a variety of life's domains", including interpersonal relationships, vocational pathways and further education.

Essentially recognising their own strengths and working out how each aspect of the strength can be adapted, transferred and extended to other areas of learning or achievement.

Struggling students need structured opportunities to clarify and articulate their own values. Teachers must seek to clarify values with students to assist them with making life choices, solving problems and considering future goals.

The training quoted impressive and reliable research that showed increased levels of school performance, achievement and well-being when character strengths approaches are consistently used in the classroom and not merely gestured at in a weekly Health lesson.

The framework for Domain Five aims to foster gratitude and hope; recognise individual values and develop character and community strengths.

Both School of Special Educational Needs: Disability and School of Special Educational Needs: Behaviour and Engagement colleagues may benefit from BSEM practices.

We know that with the implementation of strategies and resources, teachers have support to put theory into practice and can feel confident in its efficacy.

Often I felt during the BSEM training as though they were verbalising what I already knew to be true, but did not previously have the hard data, evidence or perhaps terminology to explain.

I was already doing many of the things that the BSEM training suggested, but as a consequence of completing the course I have been able to tweak and refine my practice.

I have also started to embed some of the practical strategies supplied into my own lessons which incorporate the routines and pedagogy promoted.

Furthermore, I am now able to access the BSEM Alumni Portal, which has a wealth of resources.

I can also follow news, view further professional learning (PL) opportunities, and connect with BSEM practitioners and/ or colleagues who have also completed the training. As the course encourages participants from a variety of backgrounds and professions, this has also proved to be hugely advantageous.

I have begun to share with colleagues in my department and with members through discussion, observation and modelling. I have had discussions with my principal to schedule whole-school PL also.

I am a better teacher as a result of undertaking this course but I am not an expert. The more answers I am given, the more questions I have and the more research and training I feel compelled to undertake and share.

The Lynette Virgona Memorial Scholarship facilitated this avenue for professional and personal growth and I will remain grateful. It has made an immediate and lasting impact on me as a teacher and on my practice.

Sarah Dinan (pictured above) is a specialist teacher and union representative at Alkimos College and the most recent recipient of
the SSTUWA's Lynette Virgona Memorial Scholarship. The opinions expressed in this article are that of the author and do not wholly or partially reflect any official policies or positions of the AEU and SSTUWA. Applications for the 2022 Lynette Virgona Memorial Scholarship have closed. Stay updated on the Anna Stewart Memorial Project and Rosemary Richards Scholarship by visiting sstuwa.org.au/scholarships

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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