Strengthening young people’s social and emotional wellbeing

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About the Author

Professor Anne Graham is the Foundation Director of the Centre for Children and Young People. Anne's background is in education and sociology. Her research and professional interests include children's social and emotional well-being, participation and engagement in schools, ethical issues in researching with children & young people, and teacher learning. Anne developed the highly successful education program, Seasons for Growth which supports children, young people and parents who have experienced significant change in their family due to death, separation or divorce. More than 160,000 children and young people in 5 countries have participated in the program.

For further details and a list of Anne’s publications visit http://works.bepress.com/anne_graham/

Anne provides further information regarding her long-standing professional interest in children's social and emotional well-being in the Introduction section of this Background Briefing. She would particularly like to acknowledge her more recent collaborative work with colleagues in the Centre for Children & Young People from which she has drawn some of her content, most particularly the following articles:


Inviting your Critical Engagement

Photos used throughout this publication are sourced from Shutterstock (http://www.shutterstock.com). They have been selected to highlight the diversity of ways in which children and childhood can be represented.

We encourage you to engage critically with these images as you reflect on the idea that 'childhood' is socially constructed. Ask yourself, ‘What message about children or childhood is being conveyed through this image’? ‘How do these images challenge my understandings of children and childhood’?
Introduction

Children and young people’s ‘wellbeing’ has become a somewhat ubiquitous, complex and politically imbued field (Ereaut & Whiting, 2008; Fattore, Mason & Watson 2007; Noble, et al., 2008; Rose & Rowlands, 2010), with social and emotional wellbeing variously described in terms of ‘mental health’, ‘resilience’, ‘psychosocial competence’ and the like. While the discourse of ‘wellbeing’ is now widely appropriated as a way of capturing our aspirations for children and young people, the term itself is poorly defined and under-theorised (Griffiths & Cooper, 2005; Hamilton & Redmond, 2010; McAuley & Rose, 2010; Noble, et al., 2008).

So whilst an emphasis on ‘wellbeing’ now permeates a considerable amount of policy nationally and internationally, writers such as Dinham (2006) suggest the term has joined ‘community’, ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ as a kind of ‘hurrah’ word that escapes meaning:

‘well-being’ lacks definition, both as a concept and in practice. Thus there emerges a range of factors identified as inherent in it or against which it is recognizable and/or measurable. Yet, at the same time, there is little or no consensus about what it really means or looks like and therefore to produce and reproduce it, and to know that it is there, proves highly difficult except in the most general of terms (Dinham, 2006, p.183).

Whilst the discussion in this Background Briefing is focused particularly on young people’s social and emotional wellbeing, it is important to locate this particular interest within broader debates, not only in relation to how wellbeing is defined but also in terms of how it is measured. I will turn our attention to such vexed matters shortly.

For immediate purposes, though, I draw on an earlier definition of the World Health Organisation which links mental health with social and emotional wellbeing thus:

Mental health is a state of emotional and social wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively or fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (WHO, 2001).

Many communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, prefer the term social and emotional wellbeing to mental health, because it reflects a more positive and holistic approach to health (Australian Health Ministers, 2003). For reasons that will become clear later in this Background Briefing, the framing of the ‘problem’ of children and young people’s mental health in terms of a wellbeing emphasis has been important in efforts to counter deficit discourses that dominated this field for many years.
It is also important, in the interests of transparency, to briefly outline my own experience so that you can assess more readily the strengths and limitations I bring to the discussion of this quite complex and contested field.

My interest in children and young people’s social and emotional wellbeing now spans 30 years. The first part of my career was spent as a primary school teacher where I had the privilege each day of engaging with the cognitive, social, psychological, physical and spiritual capacities of the children in my care. As an educator, I experimented with a range of pedagogical approaches, teaching strategies, learning taxonomies, ‘authentic’ assessment techniques and the like (indeed, any valid knowledge or skill available to me!) in trying to ensure every child in my class could recognise at least something they could excel in.

As a sociologist, I reflected at length on how different social environments – family, peer, school, community – potentially influenced outcomes for children. As I got to know the children in my class I wondered about questions like:

- Why is it that some children can adapt to adverse circumstances and not others?
- What can I do to better support children when they experience difficulties at home (such as a death or divorce) or at school (such as bullying)?
- How come we assume a deficit trajectory for children if they experience difficulties in their early years?

In my later work in social welfare, I was involved, first hand, in program intervention settings aimed at disrupting such trajectories. I was to learn a great deal about the complex interplay of social, psychological and health related issues that make up ‘wellbeing’ – or its opposite.

I was also to revise some deeply held assumptions about notions of ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’ as I observed the considerable potential of children to articulate what might be in their own best interests, problem solve around quite complex issues, practise skills to manage challenging feelings, negotiate difficult circumstances, and make good
choices. As part of these experiences I also witnessed the deleterious effects on children and young people when key relationships in their lives weren’t functioning well and/or they were disconnected from positive social support.

As an academic, I’ve continued to engage with, and critically question, research evidence and policy frameworks that overly generalise or universalise the experience of children and young people. From time to time I have also queried methodologies that utilise only administrative data or survey and interview data where proxy parent and teacher responses provide a measure on children’s social and emotional wellbeing (without hearing directly from children and young people themselves).

In my most recent work, including the development, implementation and evaluation of a loss and grief education program called ‘Seasons for Growth’, I’ve pursued the notion of ‘conversation’ within participative small group process as a tool in facilitating children’s understandings of their social and emotional lives and to explore a range of ways they can act upon this (I discuss this program later in this paper).

So, it is through this rather long lens that I offer the following ideas in this Background Briefing to open up your learning in the unit CYS03345, *Strengthening Young People’s Social and Emotional Wellbeing*.

This Briefing is not intended to cover all the territory associated with the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people but instead to highlight some key ideas that I think are both relevant and ‘unfinished’ as we continue our efforts to understand, describe and attend to this critically important area of their lives.

We turn firstly, then, to the vexed issue of what we understand by ‘wellbeing’ and how it is defined. The next section explores some of the debates and complexities in attempting to measure wellbeing – and how these position children and young people. Discussion then turns to key developments in addressing wellbeing in schools, since these have increasingly become sites for intervention at various levels. We conclude by taking a brief look at a particular program intervention with which I’m most familiar, ‘Seasons for Growth’, and unpacking it in terms of some core underlying principles relevant to the social and emotional wellbeing field, more broadly.

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1 For ease of reading I will sometimes refer only to ‘children’ rather than ‘children and young people’ but for the purpose of this Background Briefing the term ‘children’ should be taken to mean any child or young person up to 18 years unless otherwise indicated.
Defining ‘Wellbeing’

As signaled in the introduction, there is significant instability and ambiguity around the term ‘wellbeing’ both in public policy and popular discourse. Ereaut and Whiting (2008) contend that ‘wellbeing’ is a cultural construct that signals a shifting set of meanings, that is, it represents what is collectively agreed by a group or number of groups as constituting the Aristotelian notion of ‘the good life’. In a similar vein, Ryan and Deci (2001, p.141) propose that ‘well‐being is a complex construct that concerns optimal experience and functioning’ which will, of course, be somewhat relative to context.

While it is beyond the scope of this Briefing to canvass the entire literature on the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of wellbeing it is worth pointing out that current research on wellbeing has been derived from two broad perspectives: the hedonic approach, which focuses on happiness and defines wellbeing in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance; and the eudaimonic approach, which focuses on meaning and self-realization and defines wellbeing in terms of the degree to which a person is fully functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001). These two views have given rise to different research and knowledge interests that are in some ways divergent, and in others complementary. Nevertheless, both views broadly incorporate notions of a person’s good, benefit, advantage, interest, prudential value, welfare, happiness, flourishing, utility, quality of life, and thriving (Camfield, Streuli & Woodhead, 2009). Despite this, however, ‘philosophers, psychologists, economists and others who try to think systematically about wellbeing tend to use these terms to denote one simple notion rather than a multiplicity of related ones’ (Angner, 2007, p.3) which makes wellbeing less useful as an analytical concept.

Camfield, Streuli and Woodhead (2009) cite the work of White (2008) in providing a useful framework for encompassing the diversity of well-being concepts. This framework distinguishes between notions of having a good life (material welfare and standards of living), living a good life (values and ideals), and locating one’s life (experience and subjectivity). In the following Table, Camfield et al. (2009, p.70) cluster a number of influential contributions concerning wellbeing within this three-pronged framework.
Table 1: Some definitions of wellbeing (from Camfield, Streuli & Woodhead, 2009, p.70)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Having</th>
<th>Living</th>
<th>Locating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Externally assessed and approved, and thereby normatively endorsed, non-feeling features of a person’s life’” (Gasper 2007: 59)</td>
<td>‘The expansion of the “capabilities” of people to lead the kind of lives they value—and have reason to value’ (Sen 1999: 285)</td>
<td>The ‘feelings and/or judgements of the person whose well-being is being estimated’ (Gasper 2007: 59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Economic’ poverty indicators such as income per capita, income-poverty, and income inequality (Sumner 2007: 8)</td>
<td>‘What people are notionally able to do and to be, and what they have actually been able to do and to be’ (Gough et al. 2007: 6)</td>
<td>‘Intricately bound up with ideas about what constitutes human happiness and the sort of life it is good to lead’ (Honderich 2005 in Gough et al. 2007: 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five ‘capital assets’ in the sustainable livelihoods framework (natural, human, financial, physical and social) (see Carney 1998; Moser 1998)</td>
<td>‘Play[ing] an active role in creating their well-being by balancing [...] different factors, developing and making use of resources and responding to stress’ (Bradshaw et al. 2007: 136)</td>
<td>‘Differ[s] from place to place [...] as individual perceptions are grounded in shared meanings through culture; and [...] experience is essentially constituted in relation to others’ (White 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic needs such as health whose deprivation causes ‘serious harm’ (Doyal and Gough 1991: 39)</td>
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</table>

While there is no consensus in relation to the framework and definitions indicated above, all share an inherently multi-dimensional perspective on wellbeing, reflecting the complexity of children’s lives and relationships. In this way, engaging with such definitions helps to broaden understanding of the multiple factors that impact on notions of ‘a life going well’, as this pertains to the situations and experience of children and young people.

In a similar way, Australian researchers Hamilton & Redmond (2010) draw on the approaches of Martha Nussbaum, Len Doyal and Ian Gough, and Sarah White (the latter theorists also cited in the table above) to elaborate on the key components of ‘the good life’ - the search for human wellbeing. They propose these three approaches as major influences on recent innovative research on wellbeing in the UK and argue the ways in which each points to the inter-relatedness of different dimensions of wellbeing that are consistent with ‘whole child’ approaches.

Importantly, however, Hamilton & Redmond (2010) point out how dominant philosophical approaches to wellbeing, for the most part, ignore children and young people and their particular characteristics. Instead, they suggest any interest in children and their development in applied research ‘comes primarily not from a vision of ‘the good life’, or from a normative perspective on child development, but more from observation and analysis of specific problems facing individuals’ (p.viii). In other words, ‘wellbeing’ runs the distinct risk of being understood and analysed primarily from a deficit standpoint, a key point we will return to in the following section.

With the emergence of movements such as positive psychology (Seligman et al., 2009), along with ecological theories of child growth and development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) there has been a discernible shift away from framing wellbeing only in relation to issues such as mental illness, depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem etc. to focusing more on the role and potential of personal strengths and assets (Hamilton & Redmond, 2010). Likewise, the emergence of more recent interdisciplinary understandings of children and childhood from
within Childhood Studies, emphasising children’s agency and competence, have helped to prompt the shift away from regarding children as the passive victims of harmful experiences, towards perceiving them as social actors with their own views and strategies for actively coping with challenges in their lives (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 1994; 2002; Kehily, 2009).

In line with such developments, defining, monitoring and promoting ‘well-being’ is now also increasingly viewed as central to the realisation of children’s rights. For example, Camfield, Streuli and Woodhead (2009) argue that understanding well-being is critical for interpreting ‘best interests’ (Article 3) and defining what counts as ‘...the child’s mental, spiritual, moral, and social development’ as used for example in Article 27 (on provision of an adequate standard of living) and Article 32 (on protecting children from harmful work). These authors also suggest numerous other articles point to the importance of promoting ‘well-being’, for example, Article 24 (on rights to health), Articles 28 and 29 (on rights to education), Article 31 (on rights to play and recreation), as well as Articles 5 and 18 (on responsibilities of parents).

Drawing on a rights perspective in defining wellbeing, Heshmati, Tausch & Bajalan (2008) suggest ‘wellbeing’ is perceived to be the positive outcome while the opposite is a result of the neglect of their rights.

Bradshaw, Hoelscher and Richardson (2007, p.135) put it this way:

...well-being can be defined as the realisation of children’s rights and the fulfilment of the opportunity for every child to be all she or he can be in the light of a child’s abilities, potential and skills. The degree to which this is achieved can be measured in terms of positive child outcomes, whereas negative outcomes and deprivation point to the neglect of children’s rights.

As indicated above, there are numerous competing approaches to conceptualising the wellbeing of children and young people and these vary a great deal (as do the ways in which wellbeing is measured) depending on whether the main intention is the monitoring of outcomes for policy-related purposes (children as objects) or understanding the underlying factors that create wellbeing and the interrelationships between different components of child well-being (children as agents capable of acting on and shaping their own wellbeing) (Bradshaw et al., 2006). The different approaches largely reflect different constructions of children and childhood. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the policy environment continues to be contested as does the most useful approach to measuring and monitoring wellbeing.
Measuring Children and Young People’s Wellbeing

The surge in interest in notions of child wellbeing, what this encompasses, and how it is most effectively addressed, has generated some critically important debate about how wellbeing should be measured and monitored (Ben-Arie, 2006).

One of the most widely recognised assessment frameworks for child wellbeing is included in the UNICEF Report (2007) which provides a ‘comprehensive assessment of the lives and wellbeing of children and young people in 21 nations of the industrialized world. Its purpose is to encourage monitoring, to permit comparison, and to stimulate the discussion and development of policies to improve children’s lives’ (p.2). The UNICEF report card series attempts to measure and compare six different dimensions of child wellbeing: material wellbeing; health and safety; education; peer and family relationships; behaviours and risks; and young people’s own subjective sense of wellbeing. It includes, in all, 40 separate indicators relevant to children’s lives and their rights (UNICEF, 2007, p.2).

Whilst the UNICEF and similar report cards are widely recognised and highly regarded they have also been seen as fuelling social concern about childhood because they exemplify a deficit model approach to studying children’s lives (Morrow & Mayall, 2009).

Suffice to say here, international child wellbeing outcomes are typically described in terms of child poverty, social exclusion, child abuse and neglect, unsatisfactory child development, poor school performance and deaths by accident or injury. A plethora of detailed child outcomes exist alongside these including children living in families receiving welfare benefits, children of divorced parents, children in single parent families, bullying and victimization, low birth weight etc. (Heshmati et al., 2008). Such an approach highlights deficits at the expense of assets and firmly positions children’s wellbeing within discourses of ‘risk’ and ‘harm’, despite emerging evidence that treating children as a problematic category ‘can be seen as a social and cultural risk-factor in itself’ (de Winter, Baerveldt & Kooistra, 1997, p.20).
It is important, then, to reinforce the need for international indicators to move beyond the ‘survival’ space to include those that acknowledge a larger scope of children’s rights, childhood as a phase in itself, the need for children to report on their own experience, as well as the broader consequences of the changing field of wellbeing definition and measurement (Ben-Arieh, 2005). Camfield, Streuli and Woodhead (2009, p.13) suggest the following arguments have long been recognised, but are difficult to implement in practice, largely because of their qualitative dimensions:

- Including non-traditional domains such as social connectedness, community participation, personal life skills, safety and physical status, and children’s subcultures.
- Developing positive indicators (for example, healthy habits, good relationships with parents and siblings, and positive engagement in the community) and agreeing contextually valid cut-offs for these (Moore and Lippman 2005).
- Taking children as the unit of analysis and acknowledging their agency by measuring how children influence their environments (e.g. Bronfenbrenner 1992).
- Separating measures of outcomes and context, and distinguishing between the different effects of the contexts within which children live (for example, families, peer groups, schools, and communities) (Lippman 2007).
- Focusing on children’s current experiences, including their subjective experiences, and adapting measures and the timing of data collection to acknowledge how these differ at different life stages (Moore, 1999).
- Considering what chronic poverty researchers call ‘depth’ (for example, the duration of time spent in poverty) as well as ‘breadth’ (for example, the cumulative effect of potential risk factors such as low parental education, single parenthood, and large family size).
- Assessing the dispersion of scores (i.e. the range of experiences) across a given measure of well-being.

There are a number of instruments in Australia and internationally that include indicators aimed at capturing the kind of domains of wellbeing discussed above. Indeed, the array of possible indicators for systematic monitoring in the Australian context is vast. Hamilton and Redmond (2010) point out that, while some indicators can be collected through administrative sources, most are collected as part of large scale sample surveys, and draw on a mixture of self-reporting, and ‘proxy reporting’ by parents or teachers.

In terms of the measurement of social and emotional wellbeing, Hamilton and Redmond (2010) provide the following Table that summarises the properties of a number of different indicator types. These are chosen principally according to how they are collected or recorded: from administrative records; from the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), a new population measure of children’s development; and from surveys.
Table 2: Indicators of children’s and young people’s SEWB (from Hamilton and Redmond, 2010)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear conceptual basis</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted normative interpretation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparent to non-experts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reasonably</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robust and statistically validated</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsive to policy intervention</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not directly</td>
<td>Possibly (for subgroups)</td>
<td>Possibly (for subgroups)</td>
<td>Possibly (for subgroups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timely and good quality data</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Can be</td>
<td>Can be</td>
<td>Can be</td>
<td>Can be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be disaggregated</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparable across countries</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Perhaps</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost effective data collection</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Depends</td>
<td>Depends</td>
<td>Depends</td>
<td>Depends</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Child/young person characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific age group</th>
<th>15–19</th>
<th>1–19</th>
<th>4–5</th>
<th>School age</th>
<th>2–18(^a)</th>
<th>11–15</th>
<th>11–15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent/source</td>
<td>Administrative</td>
<td>Administrative</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Young person</td>
<td>Parent, teacher, young person(^b)</td>
<td>Young person</td>
<td>Young person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Wellbeing continuums**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct/indirect</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Global/local</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Global (?)</td>
<td>Global (?)</td>
<td>Global (?)</td>
<td>Global (?)</td>
<td>Global (?)</td>
<td>Global (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive/negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective/subjective</td>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Subjective</td>
<td>Subjective</td>
<td>Subjective</td>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual/relational</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Static/dynamic</td>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Static</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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\(^a\) The age ranges vary across the screening measures: the SDQ includes the range 4–16, the PedsQL includes the range 2–18 and CBCL 1½–18 years (although the PedsQL and CBCL each include different versions for different age groups). The CBCL also has a version for 1½–5 year olds.

\(^b\) The tools vary on the respondent/source. SDQ and CBCL include parent, teacher and young person instruments. The PedsQL only includes parent and young person instruments.
In summary, Ben-Arieh (2006) identifies a series of ‘paradigm shifts’ within research on children’s well-being:

- A ‘well-being’ perspective is prioritised over a ‘well-becoming’ (or outcomes-based) perspective.
- New domains for child research (such as children’s subcultures) are explored alongside traditional domains, reflected in the inclusion of indicators of play and leisure in measures of children’s well-being (e.g. Hood 2007).
- A focus on survival and the negative aspects of children’s lives is balanced by an emphasis on wider dimensions of well-being and a more positive view of children’s capacities and resilience.
- The views of experts and proxies (such as teachers or caregivers) is being supplemented by the inclusion of children’s views.

In relation to the last point, above, Ben-Arieh has elsewhere (2005, p.577) suggested a number of important questions we should consider in our efforts to study the wellbeing needs of children and young people:

1. What are children doing?
2. What do children need?
3. What do children have?
4. What do children think and feel?
5. To whom or what are children connected and related?
6. What do children contribute?

Answering such questions, Ben Arieh (2005) suggests will enable a more complete picture of children as human beings in their present life, the positive aspects of their live and in a way that values them as legitimate members of their community and broader society (p.577). In Australia, at least, we remain some way off implementing such a vision, since we’ve not yet identified for ourselves what we mean by ‘a good life’, much less initiated the kind of processes for finding out what this might look like for young people, and how it might be measured. As Hamilton and Redmond (2010, p.x) observe, ‘in the meantime, policy concern with the development of statistics for the kind of society we wish to live in, and prioritising the principles of positivity, universality and attention to the views of the child or young person, suggest that children should be asked simple, universal (or as close as possible to this ideal), quality of life questions about overall satisfaction with their lives, or with important aspects of their lives’.

We now turn our attention to the ways in which the kind of conceptual and measurement issues described above have been played out in one key site of children’s lives – the school.
Supporting children’s social and emotional wellbeing in schools

Schools have increasingly been identified as appropriate sites for supporting and promoting students’ social and emotional wellbeing. This is evident in recent policy initiatives such as the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008); the National Safe Schools Framework (DEEWR, 2010); the National Framework in Values Education and various National Mental Health initiatives such as Mindmatters (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010b) and Kidsmatter (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010a); as well as a myriad of smaller-scale programs aimed at improving classroom, school and system level responses to student wellbeing.

Locating ‘wellbeing’ in schools makes sense since schools are one of the first places children learn about personal and social relationships outside family and local community (Aldgate, 2010; Masters, 2004; Munn, 2010; Wyn, 2007). In fact, schools are now widely considered to be the ‘logical - if not the only – common, assured delivery point for wellbeing initiatives’ (ASPA, 2008). It was not until the 1990’s, however, that such views took firm hold, largely in response to community concerns about the numbers of children presenting with mental health problems and major publicity highlighting increasing rates of youth suicide (Sawyer and others, 2000). Hence, much of the discussion was heavily circumscribed by discourses of ‘risk’ and ‘harm’, and responses – in schools and elsewhere - aimed at the prevention of mental health related problems, mainly through implementing strategies to assist early identification such as screening for failure or depression.

What followed was a stronger emphasis on ‘health promotion’, effectively inserting a strengths-based discourse and opening up possibilities for re-thinking approaches to children’s mental health. In Australia, this resulted in the funding of ‘healthy schools’ initiatives, all generally linked to an emphasis on the health of the school, the quality of school relationships and attention to empowerment and equity. The genesis of these ideas can be found in the principles and strategies of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (de Winter et al., 1999).
Significantly, there was a parallel shift in language towards notions of children’s ‘social and emotional wellbeing’ and ‘psycho-social competence’, both conferring agency on the child.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) led the way in the 1990’s in setting out models for mental health promotion in schools. Since then, the mental health education agenda has continued its strengths-based emphases, culminating in a focus on ‘resilience’. Needless to say, the language of ‘resilience’ has captured the imagination of educators and other professionals working in the field of mental health, most likely because it couples closely with the ‘wellbeing’ dimension of mental health promotion (Hill et al., 2007).

As a concept, resilience has positive connotations, with caring and positive relationships, positive and high expectations and opportunities for meaningful participation integral to developing resilience (Bernard, Stephanou & Urbach, 1997). Together, resilience-led perspectives and strengths-based approaches have become a platform for progressing a range of initiatives aimed at improving children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

Despite such developments, little is known in Australia about how to systematically define, plan, implement and evaluate sound, relevant, evidence-based ‘wellbeing’ agendas in schools. Such gaps in knowledge can at least partly be attributed to the increasingly dispersed nature of the term ‘wellbeing’, as previously discussed.

In the meantime, programs and services remain very fragmented - both between and within schools, and between school and system level requirements. Teachers report feeling ill-prepared and lacking in confidence, time or skills to engage effectively with this agenda (Graham, et al., 2011; Kirchner, et al., 2000). While research points to the powerful influence teachers are in children’s lives (Lynn, McKay, & Atkins, 2003), other evidence suggests a level of dissonance around increasing requirements and expectations to support student wellbeing (Berryhill, Linney & Fromewick, 2009; Shucksmith, et al., 2005; Thornton, 2004). To date, however, there has been no research in Australia that has examined closely the explicit and tacit ways that teachers navigate the complex landscape of child wellbeing within their classrooms and schools.

Even less is known about the views of children and young people themselves in relation to their wellbeing and how they perceive this could be best supported and promoted in schools. Little Australian research has directly sought the views of young people, with the exception of work by the NSW Children’s Commission (2007, 2010). Most of the debate and decision-making has been undertaken by adult stakeholders, largely in isolation from the accounts of children and young people whose lives are the main focus of concern and intervention (Morrow, 2009).
Nevertheless, there is now a quite substantial evidence base pointing to key determinants of children’s wellbeing, which include positive adult-child relationships, a sense of belonging, positive self-esteem and opportunities for students to be given responsibility and be involved in decision-making (Bernard, et al., 2007; Bernard, 2005; Eckersley, 2008). Building on such research, whole school approaches, where ‘wellbeing’ is embedded in the culture as well as the curriculum of the school, have been identified as the most likely to be effective in realising these determinants (Noble, et al., 2008; Rowe, Stewart & Patterson, 2007; Wells, Barlow & Stewart-Brown, 2003).

While such evidence signals the central importance of relationships, this focus is often sidelined in policy discussions dominated by concerns about course content, teaching methods and compliance. One potential implication is that important aspects of wellbeing that are largely developed through relationships, such as acknowledgment, identity, purpose and belonging, become secondary priorities for education (Fraser, 2008; Honneth, 1995; Taylor, 1995). In the process, the potential of intersubjective engagement for identity formation is diminished (Anderson, 1995; Bingham, 2001; Taylor, 1995). By ‘intersubjective’ we mean the ways in which people (for example, teachers and students) jointly construct their social lives through interactions with others and their rules for doing so. Such interactions are central to existing evidence concerning children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

There is increasing evidence that providing opportunities for children and young people to have a say has a number of benefits. Their participation has been acknowledged as a powerful instrument in raising levels of social and emotional functioning, assisting children to develop a sense of belonging in the community, gain new skills and experiences, meet new people, build a sense of their own agency and feel respected (Alderson, 2000; Lansdown, 2006; Morrow, 1999).

There is also evidence from the procedural justice field that when children feel heard, they have greater trust and positive feelings about the institution and its perceived legitimacy (Weisz, Wingrove & Faith-Slaker, 2004). Opportunities for children and young people to express their views in the context of school improvement, however, still remain very limited (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Tisdall, 2009).

New research (Graham, Fitzgerald & Phelps, in progress) is aimed at utilising recognition theory (Honneth, 1995; 2004) to explore how wellbeing in schools could be improved through increased emphasis on the ways in which acknowledgement and respect within relationships are embedded within the culture and curriculum of schools. The project has been informed, in part, by the successful implementation over 15 years of one program intervention, Seasons for Growth, which sought to link a number of the above key principles in promoting social and emotional wellbeing through a small group, like-to-like peer support process.
Seasons for Growth: A Case Study

Given the social and political imperative to address the ‘problem’ of child and youth mental health, including through the kind of developments in schools described above, it is hardly surprising that the past twenty years have witnessed an exponential increase in the number of programs targeting improvements in children’s social and emotional wellbeing. These interventions are, of course, too numerous to list here. Of particular importance, is the issue of whether such programs are evidence based and found to be effective, across a range of contexts, using sound evaluation methodologies.

Hamilton and Redmond (2010) highlight a number of initiatives within Australia and elsewhere that are currently making a considerable contribution, including best practice manuals specifically developed for practitioners working with children from Indigenous backgrounds (Haswell et al., 2009); the inclusion of social and emotional wellbeing within Family Day Care National Standard and Quality Assurance Guidelines (Davis & Smyth, 2009); Queensland Health’s Early Childhood Social and Emotional Early Development Strategy (SEEDS); Britain’s, Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) program (Department for Education and Skills, 2007); the Australian KidsMatter program currently being implemented in long day care centres, pre-schools and primary schools; the Australian Government’s Headspace program (Muir et al., 2009); and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations’ National Safe Schools Framework (DEEWR, 2010).

Included in the range of current interventions is Seasons for Growth (Graham, 2002a; 2002b), a loss and grief education program that aims to promote the social and emotional well-being of children, aged 6–18 years, as they adapt to changes in their lives as a result of death, separation or divorce. The program was first developed in 1996, largely in response to community concerns about the implications of a burgeoning divorce rate on children in Australia, but also to redress the lack of support resources available for children adjusting to death in their families. A 2nd edition was written in 2002 and over 160,000 children in five countries have now participated in the program.

Common to much of the research in the 1990s (in relation to the effects of death and divorce) was a framing of children’s experiences in terms of discourses of ‘harm’, hence largely positioning them as passive victims, vulnerable and ‘at risk’ (see for example, Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Yet, what was
clear at the time, and remains evident still, is that children’s experiences of change in their families — including well-documented emotional responses such as sadness, anxiety, anger, resentment, confusion, guilt and loyalty tensions (Graham, 2004; Worden, 1991) — needed to be heard, acknowledged, respected and acted upon.

Less prominent was the idea that such reactions don’t, in and of themselves, render the child at risk of harm, nor that children’s competence or agency is compromised when their experience of change and loss is acknowledged. At the heart of this tension was, and still is, the view that the way children navigate such events ‘appears to greatly influence their psychosocial wellbeing’ (de Winter et al., 1997, p.18). Acknowledging the complex interplay between children’s vulnerability and agency heralds a deeper respect for the child and the unique and creative ways they interpret and respond to change.

Children have a quite extraordinary capacity for coping, problem solving, decision-making and goal setting (de Winter et al., 1997; Graham, 2004) although clearly they do best in developing competence with these in a supportive social environment (Smith, 2002).

Given timely and appropriate support, children are capable of reconstructing their experience in ways that enhance agency (a sense of being enabled and so acting upon what they can influence) as distinct from dependency (being constrained by acting upon decisions, processes or family dynamics they can’t or don’t wish to influence). Yet, even at the time of writing the second edition of the program (2002), children were consistently reporting their exclusion from discussions about their parents’ separation and the changes that it brings to their lives (Butler et al., 2002; Smith, Taylor & Gollop, 2000).

It was this complex social and empirical context that shaped the development of the Seasons for Growth initiative. The program is based on small group (4–7 children with 1 adult participant), like-to-like peer learning processes, creating a space for children to ‘have a say’ and providing an invitation to learn and practice new ways of thinking and responding to changes in their families. The emphasis is on understanding the effects of change, loss and grief, whilst developing skills in communication, decision-making and problem-solving through a peer support network so as to help restore self-confidence and self-esteem. It is underpinned throughout by an emphasis on the development of identity (‘I am’), voice (‘I have’) and competence (‘I can’).

The program has a sound curriculum structure and incorporates a wide range of age-appropriate activities including art, mime, role-play, stories, discussion, playdough, music and journalling. Whilst these strategies highlight the value of creative, physical and language-based activities, their ultimate value lies in children being able to have a say about which options might work best for them.
Children’s learning is largely generated through conversations with each other and respectful dialogue facilitated (but not dominated) by an appropriately trained adult, through stories shared, questions asked, skills learned, friendships developed and responses documented for later reference if needed.

As the name implies, the different seasons of the year provide a rich symbolic framework in which to explore issues of change and loss. Drawing on the wide variation in the seasons, both in Australia and elsewhere, the metaphor speaks to the ‘ups and downs’ of life, reflecting the experience of both agency and vulnerability, as well as the unique ways ‘seasons’ are experienced. There are five different levels of the program and each level includes eight weekly sessions, a final celebration session and two subsequent reconnector sessions (that range from 40 mins to an hour depending on age). Each weekly session explores a concept theme such as I am Special, Life Changes like the Seasons, My Story is Special, Feelings, Memories, Choices and Support Networks. Each concept is linked both to the imagery of one of the seasons and to one of the ‘tasks’ of grief, as theorised by Worden (1991) to:

- accept the reality of the loss;
- work through the pain of grief;
- adjust to an environment in which the significant person or thing is no longer present;
- emotionally relocate the person or thing and move on with life.

The choice of Worden’s conceptualisation of grief was significant in that the construct of ‘task’ signals a shift from passivity to action/responsibility, hence more closely reflecting notions of children’s competence. ‘Grief’ in this context is not constructed as a pathological condition that positions children as victims or dependent but in a state of being that provides them with space to acknowledge their hurt or distress and to resist powerlessness and passivity in the face of changing and often stressful family circumstances (Graham, 2004). In approaching their experiences in this way, we acknowledge that children are implicated in the project of their own well-being, and can engage their own knowing to act on themselves in relation to changes that divorce or death brings (Kaganas & Diduck, 2004).

The role of the adult facilitator is usually considered to be critical in any program or initiative that focuses on potentially ‘sensitive’ issues related to children’s social and emotional wellbeing. In many of these contexts, the disciplinary expertise, professional qualifications and experience with the subject matter quite rightly take precedent. In the Seasons for Growth program, with its emphasis on incorporating the philosophy and principles of participation, being an ‘expert’ in such matters was not, however, the primary consideration.

As the linchpin of the program was always considered to be the quality of the conversations with and between the children, the approach and skills of the adult not only needed to be explicitly identified but also clearly differentiated from other roles such as counselling. Hence, the adult facilitator was given the title of ‘Companion’ to reflect the notion of ‘keeping company with’ children throughout the conversations considered to be at the centre of the learning process.
I have written elsewhere with my colleague Robyn Fitzgerald (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010) that the word ‘conversation’, derives from two Latin words, *conversari*, ‘to dwell’ or ‘to keep company with’, and *conversatio*, ‘to change’, ‘to convert’, ‘to alter’, ‘to refresh’ or ‘to turn’. Hence conversation is understood to be a movement towards the other (*conversari*) and a movement towards oneself (*conversatio*). Conversation thus suggests the need for openness to question one’s existing assumptions, prejudices and understandings, and to change.

For Companions, a key issue is challenging pre-existing (and often deeply held) assumptions about *power and authority* as they engage in a process with children that inverts broadly accepted understandings and practices of adult–child relationships in learning contexts. The challenge is thus not only about having the skills to listen to children, hear their voices or access their views. It is also about scaffolding them to discover and negotiate who they are and their place in the world within a conversational space that allows Companion and child the opportunity to reflect on, interpret and reinterpret their experiences.

In this sense, the learning in *Season for Growth* is best understood as a relational and dialogical process whereby the active role of children in their own development is recognised and respected within a framework that acknowledges the influence of the individual needs and personalities of the participants, interpersonal factors and the curriculum context of the group. Most importantly, the role of adults and the way in which the agenda and values of adults are negotiated with children is not overlooked or assumed (Percy-Smith, 2006). Subsequently, Companions are prepared through training and ongoing development to approach their conversations with children open to the challenges and disruptions such engagement inevitably brings forth.

The *Seasons for Growth* program has been the subject of a number of rigorous, independent evaluations conducted in Australia, New Zealand, England, Ireland and Scotland, which have concluded that the program has a strong, positive effect on children. In the most recent evaluation, all stakeholders overwhelmingly reported the benefits of the program with children reporting that the program had built participants’ understanding & skills; improved participants’ emotional wellbeing; enabled participants to express themselves; and strengthened participants’ social and support networks (Newell & Moss, 2011).
The insights and issues most frequently reported by Companions centre around the ways in which their own attitudes, beliefs and assumptions — about children, grief and the potential of participatory processes for effecting change — have shifted as a result of their involvement with the program. Significantly, one area that features prominently in Companion reflections is around their own confidence and skills to facilitate respectful conversations with children about issues they perceived to be ‘sensitive’ and critically important to social and emotional wellbeing. Companions consistently report their understandings (including self-understanding) and practice have been challenged and changed through involvement in the program (Newell & Moss, 2011).

In reflecting on what we have learned from the Seasons for Growth program and from subsequent research, I turn to some critical issues that require close consideration in programs aspiring to improve children’s wellbeing. First, children yearn recognition. They want to be acknowledged and respected in the midst of the changes occurring around them and program rationales and processes need to keep this goal clearly in view. Significant numbers of children wish to participate a second time in Seasons for Growth, primarily because there is no other forum where they can ‘think out loud’ and feel understood, affirmed and challenged in relation to core issues affecting their lives (Muller & Saulwick, 1999).

Children are important and we need to ensure the processes we employ in programs aimed at promoting their social and emotional wellbeing are guided throughout by the key principles of recognition discussed elsewhere in this paper, since these are critical for their developing identity as persons of worth in their own right. As de Winter, Baerveldt and Kooistra (1997, p.21) point out:

Learning by doing, learning by participation instead of exclusion is to be concerned as a powerful tool to promote self-confidence, self-respect and a sense of control over one’s own life.

Second, children’s identities and experiences cannot be generalised or universalised. In observing the ways children understand and respond to change and loss in their lives, there are no ‘packaged’ programs that can adequately anticipate or address their unique needs, potential and what they have to say. Children’s own lived experiences — their particular stories — are pivotal to the learning process and to the ways in which they come to self-understanding.

Whilst the children in Seasons for Growth are navigating a range of change and loss experiences, they generally show themselves to be adept at identifying similarities and differences in their stories, whether these be related to death, separation or other major changes. Such capability challenges traditionally held notions of children as
passive, dependent, vulnerable or incompetent when difficult issues are being worked through in their families. A key challenge is in ensuring the program rationale, structure, curriculum and learning processes maximise opportunities for children to ‘have a say’ in safe, participative environments that don’t presume, prescribe, judge, take for granted or silence what it is that children know or find important to share.

Third, the intergenerational nature of children’s participation should not be overlooked (Mannion, 2010; Percy-Smith, 2006). Significant implications follow in terms of the role we, as adults, play when children are invited into conversation, particularly in relation to how we listen to, interpret, respond to and represent their experience. Being cognisant about which agendas are being addressed, whose needs are being met and what dynamics of power and authority are at work, is an important practical and ethical dimension of our engagement with children around their wellbeing.

As we have seen, the role of adult facilitators is not to ‘unproblematically uncover children’s own knowledge and views’ but ‘to realign and transform knowledge’ (Mannion, 2010, p.336). In Seasons for Growth, the role of the Companion is intentionally aimed at ‘deprivileging’ adult status so as to help ensure the focus is on scaffolding quality conversations between the children as they make sense of their experience and try out new ideas in ways that don’t privilege what the adult has to say over that of any child.

Hence, the Companion will often occupy a quite tense and disconcerting space between their own power as the adult in the group, and that of the children whose voices they are wishing to encourage and authorise. This can be particularly challenging as children move between accounts that highlight both their vulnerability (associated with their hurt or sadness) and their agency (the ways they respond to these issues).

In effect, this means any conceptions that adults may hold of children as incompetent, vulnerable and unable to know their own best interests, now need to accommodate the ‘Other’ of their experience, that is, their competence, autonomy, resilience and influence. The challenge, of course, is whether adults facilitating programs can live comfortably with such messy, ambiguous, paradoxical or contradictory accounts (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2006).

Fourth, it would seem that it is only through an attempt at dialogue that ‘participation’ reaches its fullest potential. Such an approach goes beyond mere openness to children’s ‘voices’ in that it challenges, and potentially transforms, the experiences, perspectives and responses of adults as they listen, learn and co-negotiate meaning through dialogue. The role of the Companion thus motions to the hermeneutic idea that dialogue
requires something of the interpreter’s experiences be put ‘at risk’, whereby adults are decentred from their role of ‘dominant carer to co-inquirer or interpretive learner with children’ (Mannion, 2010, p.332). In this way, the program supports and encourages facilitators to approach their work in a dialogic and relational space characterised by ‘flexibility, mutual respect and reciprocity in relationships’ (Percy-Smith, 2006, p.168), whereby Companions and children alike participate in, and benefit from, the learning and change that emerges from the conversations that are so central to the program’s intent.

Seasons for Growth is just one of a plethora of programs and interventions that aim to promote the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people. Many of these have been built on good evidence and have been subject to thorough and rigorous evaluation. Some have not. Children’s social and emotional wellbeing is too important to be left to chance. One of the important roles you play as professionals is to analyse closely the evidence informing such programs, the assumptions underpinning them, the tools used to collect data about their effectiveness, and the ways in which children and young people, and their wellbeing, are positioned in the process.

Where to from here?

International interest in child and youth ‘wellbeing’ is clearly growing, with ‘state of the child’ report cards just one of many indications of the extent to which it is now routinely monitored and measured (Ben-Arieh, 2008). Children’s social and emotional wellbeing, in particular, is now firmly located within the public policy sphere and a large range of interventions linked to the promotion of mental health, resilience, psycho-social competence and the like are now commonplace in education, health, welfare and other human service settings.

Yet the concept of ‘wellbeing’ remains ambiguous and its implementation fragmented and ad hoc. As such, to a large extent, wellbeing remains an aspiration and hence it is critically important we continue, in our various professional contexts, to both question and develop the programs, interventions, methods and tools we use to improve and measure it.

There have been some important shifts in recent years that will need our continued attention as we move forward. These include a more critical engagement with what a ‘good life’ means for children and young people in different social and cultural contexts, and about how this changes over time; a deeper acknowledgement of children as agents and not simply as objects of concern, with a consequential distinction between notions of their ‘wellbeing’ and ‘well becoming’; expanding the current broadly accepted domains of wellbeing to include those that reflect more closely the lived and reported experience of children and young people; a more interdisciplinary focus to help ensure the
ways we understand and approach wellbeing reflects the ‘whole’ child and not just the particular aspect that is the focus of concern; and a continuing persistence with strengths based approaches that recognise the assets and possibilities of children and young people - not just the limitations and deficits that make their lives a ‘problem’.

We also need to continue to give very close attention to ensuring the interventions we deploy in addressing concerns about social and emotional wellbeing are informed by sound evidence. Similarly, further work needs to be done in ensuring some of the more promising and empirically tested interventions and protocols are effectively implemented in a range of community settings, particularly since there is increasing evidence that the values and beliefs of professionals play a key role in whether and how these are initiated in different contexts (Aarons, Sommerfeld & Walrath-Greene, 2009).

We also still have much work to do in finding out and attending to the ways in which such programs and interventions might facilitate better interaction between children and young people and their families, schools and communities. As Jordan (2006, p.42) argues the preoccupation with outcomes of particular interventions in the lives of individual children has ‘neglected the ‘big picture’ of how all the elements in children’s experiences link together in a coherent framework’.

Given the important role of schools in governing and promoting ‘wellbeing’, further research is also needed to bring the views and perspectives of teachers and students into dialogue with each other, and with the policy imperatives that shape how wellbeing is approached in schools. Understanding different stakeholder priorities will help ensure policies, programs and services within schools are responsive to, and respectful of, the lived realities, possibilities and limitations of all those involved. New research at the Centre for Children & Young People, Southern Cross University (Graham, Fitzgerald & Phelps, in progress) will make an important contribution in this area.

The broad field of wellbeing, including children and young people’s social and emotional wellbeing, has changed quite considerably over the past 30 years. In this Background Briefing, I’m conscious that I’ve barely managed to scratch the surface of what is an incredibly important, complex and changing landscape within which children and young people yearn to be noticed, challenged, supported and celebrated. As signalled above, we each potentially play a critically important role, within our different research, policy and practice contexts, in ensuring children and young people’s own views are heard in relation to the issues that influence their experience of a life lived well.
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About the Centre for Children and Young People

The Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) was established at Southern Cross University in 2004. The CCYP works collaboratively with organisations, particularly in regional and rural areas, to enhance policy and practice related to the well-being of children and young people.

The Centre has three priority areas: Research, Education and Advocacy.

For more information about the CCYP, visit ccyp.scu.edu.au

About the Course

The Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and Master of Childhood and Youth Studies are awards which have been developed collaboratively by the Centre for Children and Young People and the School of Education at Southern Cross University, Australia. The awards meet a recognised need, expressed by a range of professionals, for contemporary knowledge and skills to assist them to work more effectively with children, young people and their families.

The course seeks to be an innovative, professionally relevant, practical and interdisciplinary qualification for people working, or intending to work, with children, young people and their families. Applicants can enrol in any one of the awards or complete individual units as professional development.

Units are delivered externally so that students can successfully study at a distance. Each unit has authentic and professionally relevant assessment and the five core units involve optional but highly recommended summer/winter intensive workshops of 2 days duration. Students who are unable to attend are able to engage with workshop content and processes live online or via recorded formats.

The course incorporates innovative and appropriate use of technology to support students’ learning, opportunities for regular engagement with tutors and fellow students and (where appropriate) multimedia elements.

The course is underpinned by a deep respect and regard for children and young people and for their views and perspectives. It also incorporates an understanding that children and young people can benefit immensely from positive relationships with adults – parents, teachers and the myriad professionals with whom they may engage over the course of their childhood. The course embraces multidisciplinary perspectives in the belief this can enhance service provision and lead to improved outcomes for children and young people.

For more information about these awards, visit www.scu.edu.au/chilhoodstudies