

June 2021

Report to Victorian Department of Education and Training

Respectful Relationships Evaluation 2019-21

Evaluation Summary



Executive summary

The Respectful Relationships initiative

The Respectful Relationships initiative provides a whole-of-school approach to embedding a culture of respect and gender equality via curriculum, policies, practices and the whole school environment.

After an initial pilot in 2015, the Victorian Government allocated \$21.8 million in 2016 to implement Respectful Relationships in schools and early childhood education settings across Victoria. An additional \$22.8 million in funding was announced in 2018 to expand the delivery of the Respectful Relationships initiative.

The Victorian Department of Education and Training (the Department) commissioned ACIL Allen to conduct an evaluation of the second phase of the rollout of the Respectful Relationships initiative. The purpose of the evaluation has been to examine the effectiveness of ongoing implementation and to capture early signs of impact on school communities and funded kindergarten programs over the 2019-21 period.

The evaluation has gathered evidence through:

- comprehensive site visits at 9 schools across Victoria, including interviews and focus groups with school leadership, school staff, students, parents/carers, community organisations and the Respectful Relationships workforce to produce rich qualitative data;
- surveys of school staff and secondary students, community organisations, early childhood educators and the Respectful Relationships workforce, to produce quantitative data on the Respectful Relationships initiative; and
- analysis of other data sources, including the Department's Attitude to School Survey and Victorian Government family violence data, to examine both implementation context and impact.

The findings of the 2019-21 evaluation will support the continued implementation of the Respectful Relationships initiative over the next funding period.

Implementation

The Respectful Relationships initiative comprises five components – a whole-school approach, Lead and Partner school model, Respectful Relationships workforce, Department-led professional learning activities and Respectful Relationships resources.

Acknowledged need for Respectful Relationships

The implementation of the Respectful Relationships initiative has progressed well over 2017 to 2021. School communities have been receptive, acknowledging they have an important role in preventing family violence, and parent/carer feedback has indicated broad based support for the objectives of the Respectful Relationships initiative.

Overall design is working effectively

The components of the Respectful Relationships initiative are widely valued by schools. The whole-school approach is recognised as essential to driving the social change required by the initiative. The workforce have provided crucial advice to schools on implementation approaches and overcoming challenges. Professional learning activities have developed the knowledge and skills of school staff, particularly regarding curriculum and the management of disclosures. The RRRR teaching and learning materials are highly respected and well utilised by teaching staff, while funding has helped to free up staff time for implementation. The Lead and Partner model has had varied success, but has contributed to shared learning when well-structured and supported.

Barriers to implementation remain consistent

There have been challenges to implementation but schools have shown a strong ability to overcome these. The challenges have included competing priorities, staff turnover and the level of effort required to maintain momentum, as well tailoring to the different local school contexts. School type also seems to be an important driver, whereby primary schools found it easier to embed curriculum and promote whole-school approaches. Secondary schools had a more difficult time, and may require additional support to help change the attitudes of teachers while finding opportunities to link curriculum. Active leadership support, a focus on the framework provided by Respectful Relationships and use of the available supports have helped to address these issues.

Local context impacts implementation

Beyond the local context, there have been other factors that have led to a great deal of variation in how schools have engaged, including the level of focus on the whole-school approach, volume of professional learning, and embedding of the curriculum. These include:

- **Starting position of the school.** Schools have started in the initiative from different baselines, with some operating from a more established wellbeing framework. Schools have also had different lengths in the initiative, with some commencing in 2017 and others in 2019.
- **Varied style of support.** The Respectful Relationships workforce takes a place-based approach to supporting school communities. This means that schools often have different experiences in the nature of assistance provided, and the understanding of what is required.
- **COVID-19 disrupted implementation.** The pandemic impacted heavily on school environments, with a switch to online learning and a focus on keeping students and families engaged. Some schools did not deliver Respectful Relationships during period, while others found the curriculum took an increased priority to help support student mental health.

Perhaps most important is that schools are only one influence on their students, with families and the local community having a significant impact on the attitudes of students. Within this context, it is vital that schools are supported to continue building the next generation, one that will not need Respectful Relationships to the same extent as is currently the case.

Need for ongoing support

This evaluation comes at an important time for the Respectful Relationships initiative. It no longer has the benefit that comes with initial announcement and the subsequent intensive mobilisation typically associated, yet has to keep up that level of impetus with new tranches of students and teachers. If there is not sustained effort to promote its importance and support its place in whole-school approaches to respect and inclusion, there is a risk that the initiative will lose its momentum and achievements to date.

Impact

The Respectful Relationships initiative's objective is to change the attitudes of school staff and students toward respect, gender equality and family violence. For this to occur, there are shorter-term outcomes that must be achieved before attitudinal change can be expected.

In the first instance, schools must recognise their role in preventing family violence and adopt the initiative. School staff need to have sufficient skills to deliver respectful relationships education in order to change the attitudes of students, and school communities need to support the whole-school approach. Once these foundations are in place, school staff can build the knowledge and understanding of students regarding social and emotional skills, respect, gender equality and family violence.

School capability and culture has improved

The implementation of the Respectful Relationships initiative has played a significant role in improving the capability of school staff to deliver Respectful Relationships education, implement the whole-school approach and respond to disclosures of family violence.

Most staff felt capable of *supporting respectful relationships education and the whole-of-school approach* (79 per cent) and *understand how to best manage and refer disclosures of family violence* (85 per cent). This is an important precursor to the broader outcomes for students and the community, as staff capability provides the foundation for cultural change in the school. There is further work required, however, to continue to build staff confidence in teaching Topics 7 and 8 for benefits of the initiative to be fully realised.

Student impact appears strongest in the primary years

Student attitudes toward gender and family violence were more varied and have greater scope for change. There appear to be particular benefits for primary school students who have had exposure to the initiative for the majority of their schooling. Primary students consulted demonstrated knowledge and attitudes that were ahead of the teaching staff in their schools, in many instances. It could be anticipated that the true gains will become evident when these students progress to secondary school and beyond.

School staff have observed positive changes in their students, ranging from improved engagement in discussions regarding respect through to increased skills in recognising and addressing disrespectful behaviour. These observations were particularly strong for primary school and specialist school students, with improvements in the secondary years not as consistent.

Cumulative exposure strengthens outcomes

Changing the knowledge and behaviours of secondary students appears more challenging. The causes here are likely multi-faceted and may include that secondary students haven't had the foundational social and emotional development that the initiative provides in primary years, peer group pressure can be stronger, and relationships differ in the later years. Feedback from students, in particular, highlighted how important they see this content and how valuable it is for their development.

Impact for parents and community can be strengthened

Outside students and staff, the impact on parents/carers and community organisations was less discernible. In part, this may be due to a lesser focus by schools on these elements of the whole-school model as part of the implementation process.

While parent and carer support was strong, they generally had a low level of awareness of the details of the initiative and the content covered. They also had not been involved in activities to help build their own knowledge and awareness. Schools were generally sharing information through mechanisms like newsletters and online portals, but it appears the cut-through may not be high. Parents/carers consistently reported an interest in increased information and the opportunity for support to help ensure that the home environment aligns with the approach of the school.

Early childhood

The aim of the professional learning for early childhood educators is to support educators to promote respectful relationships, positive attitudes and behaviours within an integrated teaching approach, to enable children to build healthy relationships, resilience and confidence. Educators are also trained in strengthening their capabilities regarding family violence response and referral. The professional learning is targeted at early childhood educators who work in funded kindergarten programs across Victoria, with 134 workshops delivered to 3,044 attendees across the state in 2018-20. The one-day training is co-presented by facilitators from Monash University and Eastern Domestic Violence Service (EDVOS).

Early childhood capability improved

On reflection post training, early childhood educators considered the professional learning to be highly valuable in improving their knowledge base and capacity. The responses were slightly lower, between 77 and 80 per cent in the follow up compared with the 91 to 94 per cent at the time of training. Impact was reported to be highest in relation to knowledge – that is, the professional learning has a stronger impact on the understanding and awareness of educators regarding family violence, gender equality and social and emotional learning. Responses were only slightly lower for the statements relating to capacity building.

There are signs of practice change at a service-level

Ability to translate the learnings to practice was also reported as high. Early childhood educators indicated that they were able to implement their learnings from the training within their own service. 81 per cent of respondents agreed that they were able to implement it in their service's practice, while 83 percent were able to incorporate it into their day-to-day practice. These reflections are a positive indicator of the likely change for early childhood services.

Barriers are common to early childhood and schools

While the responses were positive, educators noted that there were barriers to implementing practice change. These challenges were similar to those experienced by the school-based initiative, largely relating to competing priorities, limited time and the need to shift the attitudes of other staff.

Opportunities

Respectful Relationships is a generational change initiative, and it will take time for the impacts to be observable at the aggregate level. The evidence to date is positive and identifies both the critical need for, and to continue, the Respectful Relationships initiative so that the next generation of adults and children no longer requires it to the same level of intensity.

Perhaps the most revealing reflection heard throughout the evaluation is that ...

“The change will be the adults we create at the end of it.” (School leadership)

As such, the effectiveness of the initiative cannot be measured purely in today's terms and requires long term investment and sustained effort to fully realise its goals. Recognising that the Department has committed to such investment with a further four years of funding, the opportunities highlighted below have been designed to ensure that the progress and momentum to date is maintained, and that improved outcomes will continue to be supported.

1. Continue to support the Respectful Relationships initiative

Recognise and communicate the long-term nature of the initiative, showcasing its important role in addressing gender equality and the prevention of violence. This should include proactive communication to schools and the community, emphasising the state-wide commitment to the Respectful Relationships initiative, and the priority placed on it by government.

2. Work with schools to build longer-term implementation and action plans

Provide clarity to schools on implementation expectations, and steps to embedding sustainable approaches. This could include building a Resource Kit with a longer-term perspective, that explains how each step can be monitored and reviewed or refreshed to ensure that momentum is maintained. Consideration should be given to how the support provided by the Respectful Relationships workforce can be tailored to embed this focus on sustainability.

3. Support schools to integrate Respectful Relationships with other school programs

Provide resources to schools to help communicate linkages between Respectful Relationships and other activities to strengthen sustainability and limit the initiative being seen as an additional, short-term program. This may require improved collaboration between Department staff working with schools (for example, School Wide Positive Behaviour Coaches, SEILs and other health and wellbeing programs) to support a joined-up approach.

4. Expand supporting resources for schools

Provide schools with a wider range of resources including classroom ideas, materials, and whole-school activities. This could include improving the sharing of existing resources between schools (for example, collating across existing shared drives managed by the workforce) or developing those for particular topics. Areas of need identified include specialist materials, consent activities that use direct messaging (rather than metaphors) and ideas for schools on items for action plans. The RRRR materials should also be reviewed to ensure currency.

5. Strengthen access to professional development

Ensure access to consistent learning activities for schools. This could be through increased use of online resources, the strengthening of state-wide learning packages for the Respectful Relationships workforce to adopt, and a state-wide schedule to improve the accessibility and timing of activities, in line with the school's stage of implementation. Learning activities should also support the scaffolded development of skills, particularly for secondary and specialist schools.

6. Examine the resourcing and support model

Assess the current school allocation against the Respectful Relationships workforce, and the workforce approach, to build a consistent support capability across areas and regions. This ideally would be via modelling the demand for workforce capability based on factors such as number of schools and school type, community contexts, and an assessment of school capabilities. Additionally, while recognising the need to balance flexibility with consistency, consideration should be given to ensuring that schools are provided consistent advice on what is expected of them.

7. Enhance measurement of impact

Strengthen data collection to support a deeper understanding of what works for whom, and in what context. This could include developing longitudinal tracking of students from primary years to confirm whether reinforced exposure throughout school years achieves positive outcomes, and the collection and examination of activity data from the workforce (to be linked to outcome data from schools) to test relationships between styles of support and impact achieved.

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