

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOCIO-EMOTIONAL NATURE OF THE NEW ZEALAND KEY COMPETENCIES

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Abstract

In its 2007 curriculum, New Zealand introduced Key Competencies (KCs) that are intended to ensure students' future participation in the economy, communities, and also to introduce metacognitive and socio-emotional dimensions to learning. The KCs also have important implications for contributing to students' wellbeing and resilience. However, they are open to interpretation and have been conceptualised, implemented, and taught in different ways. This research explored students' views of the KCs. Twelve students from five secondary schools were interviewed to explore their understanding and value of the KCs and their ideas for teaching them. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Results show that participants value the KCs and interpreted them in a variety of ways, though they often failed to discuss the interconnection between the KCs or identify socio-emotional aspects of the KCs. Implications for teaching the KCs in school are discussed.

Key words

Key competencies, resilience, wellbeing

Introduction

There is growing interest within education in understanding wellbeing and resilience given the links between social and emotional competencies, resilience, and ability to cope with stress (Edward & Warelow, 2005; Kinman & Grant, 2011). It is apparent that an individual's resilience, or capacity to manage stressors, is dependent on both individual qualities, such as adaptability, and environmental influences, such as family and community (Zautra, Hall, & Murray, 2010). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed account of resiliency and wellbeing research, the importance and benefits of fostering resilience within individuals and communities is clear (Trier, 2001; Zautra et al., 2010). Focusing on Key Competencies (KCs) can help facilitate the development of students' wellbeing and resilience (Hipkins, 2006), and in turn their ability to cope effectively with stress and adversity (Naglieri, LeBuffe, & Shapiro, 2013; Werner, 2013).

The KCs introduce metacognitive and socio-emotional dimensions that students are expected to attain before they complete their compulsory time in school (Ministry of Education, 2007a, 2007b). They include 1. Managing Self, 2. Relating to Others, 3. Participating and Contributing, 4. Thinking, and 5. Using Language, Symbols, and Texts. It is hoped that by developing these competencies, New Zealand youth will be better able to participate socially and economically within their communities (DeSeCo, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2007a). While not discussed here at length, the KCs can be understood as competencies that contribute to the development of individual and community resiliency and wellbeing (see Cohen, 2013, for further discussion of this concept).

The New Zealand curriculum offers a description of each KC and what attributes someone who is competent in each KC is likely to show (Ministry of Education, 2007b, pp. 12–13). However, little is known about how New Zealand students interpret and learn the KCs. This is important in order to identify gaps in students' understanding, and to identify possible teaching approaches. This paper addresses this research gap. It focuses on part of a larger research project that examined young people's understanding of the socio-emotional aspects of the KCs, their valuing of the KCs in relation to their future goals, how they thought KCs could and might be taught, and how they might be linked to school engagement (Brudevold-Iversen, 2012). The specific focus is on findings relating to participants' understanding and learning of the socio-emotional nature of the KCs.

The Research Project

Participants

Participants in this study were sampled from students in Years 11 and 12 who attended five state-run schools in Auckland from a range of deciles. They had completed a questionnaire (Peterson, Farruggia, Hamilton, Brown, & Elley-Brown, 2013) about the KCs and had agreed to possible follow-up interviews. They were selected based on a cluster analysis that identified respondents who reported low or high scores on KC clusters and to reflect a variety of ethnicities and both genders. Fourteen students were contacted, 12 of whom agreed to take part in interviews. There was one participant who no longer attended school at the time of the interview and was not engaged in any work or other activities. Of the 12 adolescents, five were male. Participants' mean age was 15 years, $SD=.47$ and ranging 15–16 years.

Procedure

Participants were interviewed¹ using a semi-structured format in which the goals included exploring student interpretations of the KCs and thoughts about teaching them. Participants were asked to interpret the meaning of each KC. If they could not do this, the first sentence of the Ministry of Education's definition for the particular KC was provided. In order to allow participants maximum opportunity to communicate their understanding, they were encouraged to expand upon their initial interpretations. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, and were digitally voice-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Upon completion of the interview, each participant was given a \$20 shopping voucher and entered into a draw to win a further \$150 voucher. Themes were initially identified by the first author and were then reviewed by an independent "naïve" reviewer to check that they made intuitive "sense". Reliability of coding was then checked through blind coding of two of the interviews. If a disagreement in coding occurred, the particular extract was discussed and an agreement reached.

Results

Managing Self

All participants talked about Managing Self as the most important KC because, as one participant put it, "if you can't manage yourself, you can't do anything". Three main themes were identified in talk around this KC: 1. time management, 2. personal responsibility, and 3. managing wellbeing.

The time management theme dominated interpretations of Managing Self, and was usually the first interpretation offered for this KC. Only two participants explicitly talked about managing their time to achieve a sense of "balance" in their schedules or to "manage your emotions", though others talked about managing their physical and emotional wellbeing in talk about other KCs. Ten participants talked about this KC in terms of taking personal responsibility for one's actions and decisions.

Some participants talked about parents helping to develop this skill: "They tell me I that I have to do something". Several discussed "natural consequences" (e.g., not getting credit for incomplete assignments) as a motivating factor to take responsibility to "get things done". There was also an aspect of morality in this theme, as some spoke of responsibility of "making the right decisions" and "doing the right thing", though this was not commonly discussed or talked about in depth.

Eight participants talked about developing and/or maintaining personal awareness to manage physical and emotional wellbeing as part of Managing Self. They spent little time on this, however, and had difficulty developing their ideas. They made comments such as, "looking after yourself ... like your wellbeing and like making good decisions and stuff like that", but often could not elaborate when prompted. Two participants again voiced a moral component to this interpretation, such as being "a good person". Another two participants were able to extend the idea of managing themselves through

¹ Interviews occurred in 2011. The KCs were required to be implemented into the curriculum by February 2010.

interpersonal awareness involving managing wellbeing through relationships. Extract 1, below, demonstrates the more generally expressed, personally specific understanding within this theme.

Extract 1

Hannah: If you have issues or if you've got a cold you need to manage yourself before you can manage what's around you whether it's studying, sports—you need to put all of that on hold until you can figure out what's wrong with you so you can make yourself well.

This participant had been involved in the Travellers Programmeⁱⁱ (Dickinson, Coggan, & Bennett, 2003), and was one of the two participants who spoke more readily and at length about this theme. She credited this programme with teaching her skills so that she was more socio-emotionally competent than her peers, saying, “other people don't really think about that”, indicating that she thought explicit teaching of socio-emotional skills was beneficial. Other participants were unsure about how they might have learned to manage socio-emotional wellbeing, and suggested they may have talked about it briefly in Health classes or that it “develops naturally” through “life experience” and increased knowledge and maturity with age.

Relating to Others

Two themes were identified in participants' talk about this KC: 1) getting along with others and 2) having awareness of others' emotions.

Six participants talked about this KC in terms of “getting along with others”, “making friends” or “building up positive relationships”. The theme of “getting along” included important sub-themes of tolerating differences and diversity, being able to problem-solve in relationships, co-operation, and communication. Having awareness of others' emotions was another theme identified under the KC of Relating to Others and was conceptualised as more than just getting along; it was discussed as part of maintaining meaningful friendships.

Seven of the 12 participants talked about having awareness of emotional states as important for relating to others and maintaining important friendships. While getting along might require knowledge of general social rules, emotional awareness requires more in-depth personal knowledge and empathy. The following extract illustrates this understanding.

Extract 2

Hartley: Seeing when others are different or not so great or normal as ... how they usually are. Like if someone is feeling like slightly glummer on a day. Being able to know that they *are* slightly glummer is like you notice it more if it's your friends.

Another participant talked about receiving peer support “through being around other people who are like-minded”. Thus, an important part of relationships seemed to be found in reciprocal relationships where people can both offer and receive understanding and support from peers.

Nine participants talked about learning aspects of this theme through group work in classrooms. Others identified socialising in extra-curricular activities, such as sports or kapa haka, and school activities, such as house competitions, as facilitating this learning. In these situations, the KC was typically talked about as something that develops “naturally” with little structured guidance. Seven participants identified the school environment as helping to develop this KC, especially in terms of tolerating diversity. One participant said, “just 'cause school is such a social place ... inherently you learn to relate to the other people”, while another said, “having lots of different cultures ... makes us not prejudiced”. Participants also talked about learning this KC through teachers asking about their wellbeing, the Travellers Programme (Dickinson et al., 2003), and supportive peer relationships.

ⁱⁱ The Travellers Programme is “an early intervention programme designed to enhance protective factors for young people experiencing change, loss and transition events and early signs of emotional distress” (Dickinson et al., 2003, p. 299).

Participants generally did not seem to think that Relating to Others was a skill that could be explicitly taught. However, they did think that negative ways of interacting, such as fighting and bullying, could be discouraged by schools.

Participating and Contributing

Two themes were identified in participants' talk about this KC: 1. participating and contributing in school and 2. helping others.

This KC was initially interpreted as taking part in classroom discussions or answering teachers' questions. Upon further questioning, most participants were able to extend this to extra-curricular activities. The most common response was "doing your fair share of work" and "pulling your weight" in group situations, which six participants discussed. There was some overlap with Managing Self, as participants talked about being able to manage their time, for example, so they could contribute to team sports. Only one participant spontaneously identified the more socio-emotional aspect of this KC without prompting in terms of valuing helping and contributing to others' wellbeing. This participant was involved in a Peer Sexuality Support Programme (PSSP).ⁱⁱⁱ She was also the participant who was involved in the Travellers Programme, and she talked about how the programme had resulted in her reflecting more than classmates on socio-emotional issues.

Thinking

All participants struggled to interpret this KC, and tended to initially say things such as, "thinking is just thinking" or "you can't not think" when asked for their interpretation. However, upon being asked probing questions, participants expanded their interpretations. Two themes were identified: 1. types of thinking and 2. managing thoughts.

Eleven participants talked about various ways of thinking, ranging from "black and white thinking" to being able to "read between the lines" and "expand your horizons". Participants identified higher-order thinking in terms of logic, creativity, innovation, and critical thinking. However, talk about this KC was amongst the least developed and participants had difficulty conceptualising what it meant for them. They identified learning particular ways of thinking through certain subjects, for example, comparing rote learning and memorisation in maths to learning to "interpret a wide range of things" in English. Some also talked about believing that critical and reflective thinking skills and the next theme of "managing thoughts" are skills that "develop naturally" or through "life experiences".

Nine participants talked about managing their thoughts in order to manage their behaviour and/or their emotions. Several of these participants talked about using this skill for inter- and intra-personal problem solving. The following extract demonstrates this.

Extract 3

Adam: It helps when you interact with others. Instead of just being so opinionated. Instead of just saying "I'm right, you're not" ... so that's kind of like getting along with others as well.

This extract illustrates the interconnected nature of the KCs in terms of directly linking Thinking to Relating to Others and Managing Self. The overlap with Managing Self was also seen in some participants' talk about "making the right choices", which they went on to say affected individuals' behaviours. Several participants also talked about managing their thoughts to affect their "mindset" or to "think on the positive side of things", as illustrated below.

ⁱⁱⁱ PSSP is a school-based programme that trains students to support other students to make informed decisions about their sexual health. At the time of publication, it was being delivered in 25 schools in the Auckland region (Auckland Sexual Health Service, 2010).

Extract 4

Hannah: You think too much about things and it's things you can't change and you're like "OK, I'm gonna carry on thinking about this I'm gonna go crazy". So you put it aside, you just focus on what's in the moment.

Participants generally talked about this skill as a "personality trait" or something that could not be taught. However, the participant who took part in the Travellers Programme credited it with helping her to develop these metacognitive skills.

Using Language, Symbols, and Texts

As with the previous KC, this KC was not easily interpreted by participants, and most seemed to think it did not need explaining. For instance, they would make comments such as, "Oh, that's communication" but then had difficulty expanding on the concept of communication. With probing questions, however, they developed their ideas somewhat more explicitly, and the theme of "understanding and communicating meaning" was identified from the data.

All 12 participants interpreted Using Language, Symbols, and Texts as involving communication. Ten participants talked about being able to communicate meaning and "express yourself in words", and discussed understanding others' communication or being able to "find the deeper knowledge".

Interestingly, participants talked about multicultural school environments as giving them opportunities to develop their ability to communicate and understand cross-culturally. They also talked about applying this skill cross-generationally and across various domains where different types of communication might be required, such as at work or with friends. They talked about learning this mostly through the school environment, group work in classrooms and direct instruction through, for example, written and verbally presented work.

Discussion

It is clear that participants' general understanding of the KCs was limited, indicating the need for further development. However, they were also generally aware of many important aspects of the KCs. For example, when talking about Relating to Others, the school environment was noted as facilitating a tolerance and appreciation for ethnic and social diversity. However, awareness of the deeper, more socio-emotional nature of most of the KCs and their interconnected nature appeared somewhat limited. For example, although eight participants talked about managing their wellbeing, most of this was individually focused and emphasised time management. Few commented on how managing themselves might affect interpersonal relationships. Similarly, while connections across the KCs can be made when analysing participants' comments, they seemed largely unaware of these connections themselves.

Although some participants were able to identify ways of Participating and Contributing in society, none talked about doing this within their families and only a few were involved in any form of community activity. Additionally, societal benefits for developing the KCs were rarely noticed by participants.

Many of the participants thought the KCs were primarily learned through socio-emotional "life experiences" rather than structured learning. For example, while participants spoke about Relating to Others as developing through classroom and extra-curricular activities and through the school environment, it was commonly talked about as something that develops "naturally" in these situations, without structured guidance.

This indicates that it may be important to create school cultures where the KCs are expressed through school norms, culture, expectations, discourse, and allowing for "space" for the KCs to be critically explored by students both in the classroom and through extra-curricular and social activities. Promoting a school-wide culture that models and enacts the KCs could be beneficial. This would likely require 1. professional development for teachers and 2. for schools to genuinely value the KCs so they can create a school culture that supports "authentic learning" opportunities (Hipkins, 2006) for students to develop them.

Across the interviews, participants expressed increased engagement with material when they perceived it as personally relevant and interesting. This suggests the need for “authentic learning” situations if students are to engage with the KC material, and the need for direct links with the community so as to provide students with real world learning situations. One way to help facilitate this might be to involve students in school and curriculum development. This is both a positive indicator of school engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) and also provides real world opportunities to enact and develop the KCs for young people, particularly Participating and Contributing within their communities.

Participants also talked about both integrating KCs into “regular” teaching in classes and offering KC-specific learning opportunities. Health and Physical Education in particular has been talked about as a class that attends to holistic student development (Brudevold-Iversen, 2012), though the Ministry of Education (2010) and Hipkins (2006) argue that the KCs can be learned in all subjects. Again, professional development and collaboration, which can be seen in the Ministry of Education’s Discussion Tools website (Ministry of Education, 2010), is a useful way for schools and teachers to develop KC-relevant teaching practices.

Additionally, participants talked about and discussed the value in learning the KCs both implicitly and explicitly. This fits with literature suggesting that learning the KCs can be achieved on both overt and covert levels (Hipkins, 2006). However, the importance of metacognitive abilities for learning (Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999; Hipkins, 2006), wellbeing, and resilience (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002; Gumley, 2011) suggests that at least some level of awareness of and self-reflection on the KCs is important for development. Thus, explicitly integrating the KCs into subject classes and delivering specific socio-emotional programmes to universal populations could be beneficial.

Within subject classes, care would need to be taken to ensure that teachers are familiar with and model the KCs themselves, so that teaching is delivered in “authentic” ways, not simply tacked on to subject content, and so that depth and breadth of both the KCs and the subject is not sacrificed. While this seems like a large task, there are indications that it can be done in ways that are not overly burdensome for teachers (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Specifically attending to and developing students’ general metacognitive skills would likely be an important component in their overall KC development, and this could be implemented into classroom practices and potentially assessment processes. The self-reflection that metacognitive skills encourage is likely to have flow-on effects for KC development.

There are likely countless strategies that schools could use to help students develop the KCs, and each community, school, teacher, and student will be different in what works for them. However, it seems helpful to think of an overarching strategy that includes consideration of the school culture. If the school has a culture of constructive, critical self-reflection and openness to change and development it seems that this could create an environment where the KCs can stay relevant to the current context and teaching can be adapted to suit the needs of students and communities.

Limitations

The majority of participants in this study appeared to be relatively well-engaged students, as indicated by the way they described wanting and trying to achieve high marks and their ongoing participation in this study. Having a more diverse sample population would have added richness, depth, and more information to the data. However, the goal of the research was not to generalise, but rather to explore some youth perspectives on the KCs in order to inform future research and practice. Further, the fact that potentially engaged students’ understandings of the KCs also lacked depth suggests that more emphasis on the KCs, what they are, and why they are important to develop is needed for these and other students.

Within all qualitative research, there is a degree of subjectivity in the analyses. While not an absolute limitation, as this can add richness to analysis, it is important to recognise. Peer review of the coding and identification of themes was conducted to limit the influence of personal biases on the analyses.

Conclusions

The inclusion of the five New Zealand Key Competencies into the curriculum highlights the increasing importance placed not just on academic learning and development but also on the socio-emotional development of the individual and the building of well-functioning resilient individuals and communities.

Two main aspects seemed to stand out as particularly lacking in participants' understanding of the KCs. While they generally described some value in all the KCs, their understanding of them and the relationships between them was limited. Participants also seemed aware of some of the individual benefits of developing the KC, however their importance for developing wellbeing and resilience within communities seemed especially lacking.

The findings of this study suggest that for the students in these five schools there is a need to focus more explicitly on the KCs in order for salient learning to occur and to increase the chance of developing resilient individuals and communities. Reframing existing learning opportunities to incorporate the KCs more explicitly and authentically seems likely to be well received and may help achieve the original OECD aims of *helping youth develop a "successful life" in a "well-functioning society"* (DeSeCo, 2005, p. 4).

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