

**Final Report of the Research Project Conducted for the
Toogoolawa School Community: An Exploratory Study
of the Transformative Capacity of Values Based
Education on Youth at Risk.**

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Voices of Toogoolawa¹: An Exploratory Study of the Transformative Capacity of Values Based Education on Youth at Risk.

Executive Summary

This paper reports on an exploratory research project examining the impact of Values-Based Education (VbE) on youth at risk at Toogoolawa School in Queensland, Australia. Through its VbE program for the predominantly “Youth at Risk” young men who attend the school, it seeks to transform them into self-respecting, caring people capable of making a worthwhile contribution to society. The mixed method study that was conducted over the course of 2021 sought, through collecting quantitative and qualitative data, to identify the extent to which it accomplishes this.

The Toogoolawa School employs an explicit conceptual underpinning based on research in the broad area of *Values-based Education* (VbE), research to be found internationally as well as in Australia, especially through the federally funded longitudinal projects that ran under the umbrella of the *Australian Values Education Program*. Research in this area has provided a range of well documented evidence that holistic approaches to education, including explicit attention to the social, emotional, moral and spiritual dimensions of human development, have a positive flow-on effect on student learning, including in the cognitive domain. There is evidence that such holistic pedagogy has an especially strong positive impact in settings where narrow instrumentalist approaches that focus solely on cognitive achievement historically fail most abjectly. This evidence is especially relevant to the Toogoolawa School context that is characterised by a cohort of boys who have been deemed to be uneducable in mainstream education.

The study reported in this paper consisted of a range of mixed method investigations aimed at eliciting data about the impact that VbE was having on the school’s clientele. Interviews were conducted with several parents about their perceptions of the effects of school life on their children. School staff and students participated in focus groups about similar matters. Staff members also completed pre and post surveys of their perceptions of student socio-emotional development specifically on developments, if any, regarding students’ self-esteem, life satisfaction, social behaviour, (including social and family ties), interest in and application towards their school work and engagement with

¹ Whilst Toogoolawa is the school’s actual name, the names of all participants have been anonymised

school. Finally, students completed pre and post surveys designed to provide insight to any growth in their self-esteem.

Results of the study provided evidence of such holistic impact on the student cohort, as well as growth in self-understanding and wellbeing of the staff. The results are reported under the main headings of *Patterns of Transformation, Mainstream* (versus Toogoolawa), *Climate* (including *Shaping the Climate*), *Common Discourse*, *Spiritual Dimension*, *Character of Staff Members*, *Being Heard*, *Role-Modelling*, *Spirit of Gratitude*.

The study adds to the substantial data already available that shows the positive effects of holistic values-based pedagogy on mainstream education.

Additionally, it strengthens the evidence because of the pedagogy's application to an especially challenging student cohort. Researchers were left with the sense that such evidence can only add weight to the belief that VbE is not the marginal or ancillary pedagogy often supposed but, instead, the holistic pedagogy that the mainstream often lacks in its narrow focus on cognitive achievement. In that sense, the study and its results have potential to inform mainstream education and its patrons.

Voices of Toogoolawa²: An Exploratory Study of the Transformative Capacity of Values Based Education on Youth at Risk.

Introduction

This paper reports on an exploratory research project examining the impact of Values-Based Education (VbE) on youth at risk at Toogoolawa School in Queensland, Australia. Through its VbE program for the predominantly “Youth at Risk” young men who attend the school, it seeks to transform them into self-respecting, caring people capable of making a worthwhile contribution to society. The mixed method study that was conducted over the course of 2021 sought, through collecting quantitative and qualitative data, to identify the extent to which it accomplishes this.

What is Values Based Education?

Broadly speaking, Values-Based Education (VbE) is a philosophy of education advocating that a school community’s collectively identified values should provide the centrepiece for everything that occurs at the school. Schools that proclaim they provide VbE ensure that the school community’s collectively identified values, such as respect, caring and honesty, are imbued in the teaching and learning processes, are embedded in the school structures, management, policies, language and they define the interpersonal relationships at the school. The school’s values are taught both explicitly and implicitly. They inform every aspect of the day-to-day life of the school. They are at the very heart of the school’s ethos.

From a more specific pedagogical standpoint, VbE can be thought of as a double helix effect (Lovat & Toomey, 2009): the symbiotic interaction between a school explicitly teaching its collectively identified values and the quality of the learning and the teaching that occurs there. That is, the explicit and implicit teaching of values and quality teaching (Newmann, 1996) are the two sides of the same coin. When one explicitly teaches the values underpinning the school curriculum, one changes the school’s ambience. According to the evidence, the school becomes calmer. Interpersonal relationships between teachers and students and between the students themselves become more deep going and trusting. The school thereby becomes a natural crucible for quality teaching (Newmann, 1996). According to Newmann (1996) quality teaching is a values-based craft which, amongst other things, includes teachers and students engaging in substantive conversations about compelling real-world issues. This requires trusting relationships between teachers and students: the very type of

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relationships that develop in classrooms that explicitly teach a school's values. It also involves providing social support for student achievement. This means engendering practices whereby students and teachers help each other to create a sense that "we are all in this together" regardless of background or levels of perceived competence. This requires students caring for each other, sharing, trusting and other values. Quality teaching also involves nurturing in students higher-order thinking skills and depth of knowledge through the deep conversations involving caring and trust. All of this is very well documented (DEEWR, 2008; DEST, 2006; Lovat & Toomey, 2009; Lovat et al., 2010, 2011).

Typically, such a values-based pedagogy also includes a service-learning dimension (Lovat & Clement, 2016). Through this inclusion, students are able to apply the pro-social values that they have been taught, and had modelled for them by teachers and other adults, to practical situations of need in their surrounding communities. Such situations include, for example, aged care, ecological degradation and worker exploitation thereby developing their social responsibility and hopefully their capacity for transcendent thinking and altruism. Arguably, this conception of VbE and its values pedagogy holds one of the keys to enabling young people to better understand their "selves" and develop the type of pro-social behaviour and responsible citizenry consistent with making the world a better place for all.

Toogoolawa School.

Toogoolawa is a first nations' word meaning "A place in the heart". The school, now in its twenty second year of operation, is inter-denominational and spiritually inclined. It's located 50 kilometres south of Brisbane, the capital of Queensland, in a suburb of the Gold Coast called Ormeau. Through its VbE program, the school seeks to create a culture that genuinely engages the five Human Values of Love, Truth, Peace, Right Conduct and Non-violence. The school attempts to have these five values inform every aspect of its day-to-day life.

It is for boys only, with an average attendance of 120 students, aged 8 – 15 years, all of whom have emotional or behavioural issues which make them unwelcome in, or unable to attend, mainstream public and private schools. Most of the boys are several years behind their peers in literacy and mathematics, sometimes because of intellectual limitations, but often because their emotional/behavioural issues have resulted in them either being excluded from class or being unable to concentrate, understand and remember critical information. Thus, Toogoolawa presents an inordinate challenge for VbE.

The school not only seeks to provide a basic education but also to give students a strong and practical philosophy for living by espousing that service, truthfulness and consideration for others lead to happy, fulfilled and authentic lives. Its abiding ethos is that, no matter what abuse its children have suffered, they have potential within themselves to find healing, strength and meaning. Students are held in unconditional positive regard by all school staff, thereby seeking to turn around futures that, without such intervention, would quite possibly be found in the juvenile justice system.

The Physical School

The school buildings include five classrooms, a manual arts room, a home economics section, an old Queenslander building for medical and allied health consultations, and administration offices. The school is surrounded on three sides by grassy fields, one of which has a running creek to explore.

Toogoolawa School's logo, imprinted on the uniform shirts and decorating a small altar in each classroom, depicts the essence of the Human Values Education approach. Encircled by the five Values, it shows a larger figure (the teacher) kneeling in front of a student, both resting in a hand (the Universe) inside a heart that conveys the message of unconditional Love permeating all policies and teaching activities in the school. Each one of the five Human Values is emblazoned in large letters across the length of the main building, visible to all passing traffic on the M1. Every room is enriched with posters of wise sayings and colourful illustrations of the values, each playing its silent, valuable, guiding role. Attendance is free, apart from a small levy to provide a preservative-free lunch to all and cost-free uniforms to the more destitute families. Weekly hampers of wholesome food are delivered to the homes of such students.

The school employs six professionally qualified teachers, assisted by 23 youth workers and student welfare officers. All staff receive regular in-service training in the principles and techniques of values-based education, and also the philosophy underlying the Human Values Education model that guides the school. There is an expectation that each member of the teaching staff will commit to engaging in an ongoing self-transformation process so as to become an exemplary role model for the five human values.

Curriculum Structure

Toogoolawa School is registered with the non-state school board of Queensland. Although greater emphasis is placed on character development, the academic program is firmly based on the national curriculum with lessons having links to values-based principles wherever possible. Understandably, the

task of having the five Human Values both explicitly and implicitly taught within the school's nine learning areas of English, Mathematics, Integrated Studies (comprising Science, Applied Technologies, Humanities and Social Science), Social and Emotional Learning, Health and Physical Education, Home Economics and Hospitality and Manual Arts continues to be a work in progress. The low levels of literacy, short attention spans and the pressing need for regular therapeutic intervention make this especially challenging. Goal-setting meetings between teachers, students and parents negotiate how the curriculum is applied for each individual student.

The school comprises six “mini” schools of roughly equal size, each with a registered teacher and a group of supporting youth workers and/or social workers tending to the educational, social and emotional needs of the boys in the mini school. Each mini school is populated according to a set of particular, but loose, criteria. Shanti, one of the six mini schools, houses mostly new arrivals aged between eight and eleven. Satya mostly contains older boys. Ahimsa consists of a mixed ability group of mostly twelve- and thirteen-year-old boys. Dhama houses older boys who present as “keen to learn”. Prema is populated by boys with a variety of clinical disorders like autism, foetal alcohol syndrome and such. Sangha houses boys who, for one reason or another, are unable to attend regularly.

Notwithstanding the school's adherence to the national curriculum, its program contains several idiosyncrasies, mostly with a spiritual bent. For instance, every Monday morning, the week starts with a storytelling for the whole school assembly. The story often makes reference to the teaching or major figures from the different faiths. Furthermore, one of the main teaching strategies is termed *Unity of Faiths*, whereby the teaching staff are encouraged to convey the message (or, better still, to draw out from the students) that the five Human Values are fundamental principles in all of the major faiths, as well as in humanism and in other people's various forms of spirituality. One of the recommended activities is for classes to visit some different places of worship – churches, mosques, synagogues, Buddhist and Hindu temples and shrines, thus inviting comment and discussion and creating understanding and a feeling of connectedness.

Furthermore, the program is not confined to the classroom but also utilises adventure therapy and service learning as opportunities to develop social skills, hands-on life experience, altruism and self-esteem. Scholastic progress is relatively slow for some students due to the many interruptions caused by emotional / behavioural / learning issues requiring attention and healing. The self-described ethos of the school is captured by the metaphor of a ‘diamond covered in mud’. This intends to convey to students and staff alike the

school's tenet that the Human Values are the five facets of a priceless, inborn, spiritual treasure (our true Self) that remains untouched and impeccable in every human being, although concealed from conscious awareness to varying degrees by the 'mud' of our fears, anger, shame, pain or sense of worthlessness. Students attending Toogoolawa School are assured that the teaching staff will help them to 'wash away the mud' and 'polish their diamond', so that they can shine with self-confidence, joy in being alive, love for humanity and all of nature, and rediscover their natural curiosity, intuition and passion for learning, embracing the mystery of our common humanity and the transformative power of our emotions. The teachers and youth workers strive to 'polish their own diamond' so as to become exemplary role models for the students and their parents, illustrating how the deeply spiritual Human Values can be made manifest in everyday life.

The Research

Over the course of 2021, the authors conducted an exploratory, mixed methods study designed to investigate the impact, if any, that the educational approach described above had on the students. We chose to undertake an exploratory study for a number of reasons. Given the absence of any rigorous investigation of the effects of VbE programs on youth at risk, we thought it best to start by exploring the lie of the land. The study also needed to take account of the irregular attendance by some students as well as the unpredictability of the students' capacity to participate thoughtfully, and with normally anticipated levels of veracity. Thus, the study was intended to explore the research questions in ways that might get a better "handle" on the issues at hand about a VbE approach to young people "at risk" and to suggest optimal ways of tackling it.

The seven research questions were:

1. *How do Toogoolawa students experience self, others, and the larger world at the outset of their educational experience?*
2. *How does the experience of self, others, and the larger world change over the course of a calendar year?*
3. *How do the students' experiences at the Toogoolawa School affect their well-being?*

4. *What findings, themes, or patterns emerge from quantitative and/or qualitative data to help illuminate processes and outcomes of change over time?*

5. *To what extent can the patterns of transformation be attributed to the VbE program at Toogoolawa school. For example, are there any effects of the VbE program at Toogoolawa on:*

- *Students' self-esteem?*
- *Students' life satisfaction?*
- *Students' social behaviour, including social and family ties?*
- *Students' interest in and application towards their school work?*
- *Students' engagement with school?*
- *Students' engagement with the local community?*

6. *To what degree, and upon what basis, may we reasonably attribute measurable changes (positive, negative, neutral) to the Toogoolawa School?*

7. *What implications, applications, and/or recommendations are derivative from this study, and our findings, which may be of relevance to educational processes, practices, and policies in general and the Toogoolawa School in particular?*

In a nutshell, the study sought to explore: 1) what changed about a group of children and adolescents-at-risk after a year's engagement with a VbE program; 2) what might be confidently hypothesised about the causes of such transformation; and 3) the implications and applications of such findings for educational pedagogies and practices in general and the Toogoolawa School in particular.

Data sources included surveys of teachers' perceptions of growth, if any, of students' self-esteem, their pride in their work, the quality of their friendships, how well they fit in at school, and how much they like school and see its relevance to their post-school lives. Students also completed pre and post surveys designed to provide insight to any growth in their self-esteem. A further range of qualitative measures were then used to explore in greater depth the patterns of socio-emotional development and to seek explanations for their occurrence and, in particular, identify the effects of VbE. These took the form of focus groups with staff and students, as well a number of interviews with parents, about their perceptions of the effects of school life on their children.

Additionally, audio-taped interviews with students and staff from a documentary film being made about the school have been transcribed and analysed alongside other typescripts of interviews and focus groups. Finally, extended site visits by two of the authors were used to collect other anecdotal evidence and scrutinise available records about students.

The Toogoolawa Boys: Then

The forty or so boys who participated in the study comprised a very mixed group. Essentially, there were three subgroups: boys diagnosed with one or more “disorders” for which they are often prescribed medication; boys who have suffered, often traumatically, from some form of bullying or other abuse; and boys who have resorted to seriously “bad” behaviour for whatever reason and who find themselves on the cusp of “juvie”, as some of them referred to juvenile detention during interviews. The one uniting thread for all of them is their unequivocal and unrelenting rejection by what they, their parents and the Toogoolawa staff call “mainstream schooling”. The vignettes, all pseudonyms, outlined below provide insight to the way of being for many of these boys before being enrolled at Toogoolawa: their constant hypervigilant, unhappy, withdrawn and often violent selves.

“*Bailey*” is a nine-year-old boy who lives with his mother and little sister. He has been diagnosed as dyslectic, having attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, anxiety and oppositional defiance disorder. He has vision and speech issues. At enrolment to Toogoolawa he was considered relatively illiterate with a reading age below a five-year-old. He had suffered protracted periods of bullying in the mainstream education system.

During an interview with his mother, he was described as follows:

“Before coming to Toogoolawa we would have really big escalations every morning. *Bailey* would often be kicking and screaming and swearing and breaking things and everything before we went to school. The whole way to school, we had about a half an hour drive, and it would be dangerous and he would, he would even try and get me to crash the car because he didn’t want to go to school. We had quite extreme behaviours and so that was one of the motivations for (him) actually being admitted to hospital. And he just was unhappy, just really unhappy. Always was feeling like he had no friends and I think he just felt a constant sense of rejection”.

“*Noah*” is 12 years old. He’s been the subject of severe bullying. His mother left the family nearly a decade ago and he still shows signs of grief and loss. He has very severe bouts of what is called, in some therapeutic settings,

oppositional defiance disorder. He struggles in social settings. His hearing impairment also makes life difficult. He struggles academically.

“Noah” was described by his step-mother as:

“was very, very, very vicious and violent. And very rude and disrespectful. If he was asked to do something, he told just him to go away, or he’d say p### off to them or eff off or whatever. If a child looked at him sideways, he bashed the child. If he didn’t like the work, he’d rip it up and walk out of his classroom. He threw scissors at teachers; he smashed the smart boards in the classroom. He was in year five. He was really, really, really naughty, very naughty, and there was nothing that the school or us as parents could do to help it. And that’s when the school kicked him out. No other school in the area wanted him. Because he’d already been to two other schools. And we were stuck. We thought our boy was never going to get better”.

“Kel” was born on New Year’s day in 2010 into a household dealing with domestic violence including verbal and emotional abuse. He clashes with his father. He suffers from anxiety and depression. At enrolment he was assessed with poor self-esteem.

Kel was spoken about as follows in an interview:

Interviewer: “and what was he like before coming to Toogoolawa?”

Kel’s mother: “He was angry and there (the other school) was a bit lost. Sort of all over the place and didn’t know how to deal with his emotions. So, um, it’s good here. Oh, he used to throw things and hit the wall or he’d hit the wall or he just smashed things”.

“Zac” is a fourteen year-old boy who is diagnosed as dyslexic, dysgraphic and suffering anxiety and depression. He has been excluded from several schools before attending Toogoolawa. He has now been at Toogoolawa for 3 years.

Before enrolling at Toogoolawa his mother describes him as follows: “Pretty much was getting suspended all the time for fighting. And, um, he, he, he was being bullied at one point and he got sick of it. So, he then became the bully because he was over people picking on him. So, then he was always suspended. If he went to school on a day, I’d get a phone call, maybe an hour later, *Zac’s* done this, or *Zac’s* done that. He’s get into fights. I mean, he’s, I think he’s been suspended here. He’d be bashing things and ripping things apart. He gets really cranky. He’s got a really bad mood temper. He didn’t like being told no. So,

when he didn't get what he wanted he carried on to the class, talked to himself just walked away.”

“*Liam*” is a fifteen year-old boy diagnosed with ADHD and oppositional defiance disorder. He is medicated for his depression. He lives with his mother, step father and his four-year-old sister. He has a very difficult relationship with his biological father.

His mother says: “Well, before I put him in Toogoolawa, um, he was being bullied a lot, um, a lot because of his hair colour and just because he’s different. Um, he’s been on med... medication for quite a long time. Um, yeah, he was never happy and it (previous school) wasn't, just wasn't, the right place for him to go, it was more of a hindrance than a help. Like if, if he, he was in quite a bit of trouble because he didn't know how to settle in and that the school was so big, they did not, he was just like another number. He just wasn't happy. And having ADHD and feeling odd, like, you know, it was very hard for him and for me to deal with it.”

The Toogoolawa Boys: Now

The following vignettes capture the same boys at the end of the study. *Bailey’s* teachers now describe him as fitting in very well and really liking school. From a very low base his literacy skills are continuing to improve and he now has a reading age of seven.

According to his mother: “now he loves going to school...it's really boosted his self-esteem and his confidence and his willingness to learn. So (prior to coming here) he wasn't making a lot of progress at all, despite the fact that he's had early intervention, since he was about two years old, he wasn't making very much academic progress. And just this morning, we (she and *Bailey*) were in with Jenny (his teacher) doing some reading testing. And he is now at level 10 for reading. And he's made about a year's worth of reading progress and he has friends, he didn't have friends before we came here. He, he struggled a lot socially. And so that's been a blessing as well, he, he told me that everybody in the school knows his name, but for the right reasons. You can’t imagine how much life has changed dramatically for the better. You can see that he has more pride in himself and in what he is doing...he was awarded the most improved student intern to his classroom, which was amazing as well...he's really flourishing. And he's gaining a lot more independence.”

Noah:

Interviewer: “Have you noticed any improvement in his behaviour?”

Noah's mum: "Oh, absolutely. One hundred and ten percent. He has done the biggest 360-degree turnaround. We now have full adult conversations with him. He tells us what he learned at school. And he wants to do his projects. And, you know, he loves that they do outings and loves that every day, he gets to have something different for lunch and knows that it's going to be healthy. And it's just that he is a completely different person."

His teachers rate him very highly (80%) on a 10-point scale for good esteem, being well connected with friends, liking school and fitting in well at school. His English is vastly improved since being at Toogoolawa.

Kel:

His mother says: "So, um, it's good here. Cause he's learned how to deal with these (negative) emotions. So that's a real, that's a positive. Oh yeah. He used to get really cranky. Yeah. And that changed since he's coming here. Um, he knows now when to walk away, he knows he can self-regulate himself. So that's good. He's more sort of capable in the world for just everyday life. Even just like, um, being down the train station and knowing when he has to be there, what time I have to pick him up and make sure he's there on time and do the right thing like that. And, um, just knowing when to be quiet and not to start fights and that on the train, like he learned, he knows all of that, you know, like to, yeah.. social skills, social skills, yeah. Get on in society."

His teachers have noted his improved self-esteem since being at Toogoolawa and his capacity to make friends. He says he now likes school.

Zac:

His mother describes his transformation: "Yeah. Yeah. He's, um, and he just, he, he's happy. And I haven't seen him happy for, for a long, long time. Yes because, um, he's not so angry anymore, yeah, and we don't see that very often anymore, which is good. He talks to me more and he, and he, talks to my husband and I a lot more than he used to. Now he, he doesn't lose it and get angry ...he's generally calmed down a lot quicker."

His teachers say that he now takes great pride in his work, he has improved self-esteem and has friends. His literacy and numeracy skills are gradually improving from a low base to now being at Grade Eight level.

Liam's mother says:

"You know what I mean? Um, he's just, just stepped up. Yeah. Um, he's happier. I'm happier. They're happier. Especially with all the other extra stresses going on with the divorce. Well, now he'll stop and think before he just lashes out. He's got more empathy for other people. Now he can feel what others are

feeling. It's nice that he's not by himself. He's not alone. And he loves coming to school. He actually gets himself ready to go like this morning."

Patterns of Transformation

Claims about the transformative capacity of Toogoolawa extend beyond those provided by some of the boys' mothers and teachers, as outlined above. Students themselves testify to it. One of the students commented during a focus group about another boy's school engagement:

"I can say stuff about Lucas because I used to go to his old school and remember him. He'd just sit down on the chairs and he'd never talk. I never even heard his voice at the old school once. He never used to wear the uniform. Now he's wearing the uniform. You can see he's talking and doing stuff. So, I think he's more mobile and more social at this school."

Another boy, *Kari*, who has been at Toogoolawa for nearly four years, has also witnessed a pattern of better self-regulation.

Interviewer: "and do you actually see changes in many of the kids who come here?"

Kari: "Yeah, I have seen lots of changes with some kids like who have come in here like with really bad anger issues. And I see them now and they are just placid, they don't hurt anything."

During another focus group, as an aside, one of the boys remarked about the development of friendships:

"So, when you were here in 2019 you were so annoying. In 2020 you were kind of better. And in 2021 you are like one of my friends now. So, you have gotten better I reckon."

A mother commented during an interview about the growth in her son's empathetic character:

"Well, he never used to care about how other people felt or if he hurt them or if he upset them, he did not care at all. Now he does. He worries about what he says, even if it's in the time when he might have an outburst, he'll walk away and he'll rethink the situation and he'll go back now and apologize for the way. Yeah. He's just, he's definitely got an

understanding now that other people's feelings and emotions mean something. It's not just about him."

Again, improved empathy is evidenced during an interview with one of the boys:

Kyle: "Yeah. You have to need to understand them".

Interviewer: "For what?"

Kyle: "Like for what they did wrong. Yeah, and sometimes they could tell you something that's really tragic. Yeah. And that makes it, that makes you really feel bad. They have felt so much pain."

Another parent offered regarding empathic growth:

"So yeah, I think he's just really taken in everybody's situations in the school and realises that, well, these people do have it a little bit harder than myself yet."

Another mother has noticed her son's growth in self-awareness:

"Yeah, it (bad behaviour) doesn't happen very often anymore as you know, compared to what it used to happen. So, I think he knows how to control, control, his anger a bit better now and not, you know, cause, and I guess, you know, he sees a lot of boys here have been through a lot of things just like him and I think that's opened his eyes as well."

Another boy, *Riley*, during a focus group insightfully said, in a very self-aware way, that it took him a long time to settle into Toogoolawa because:

"I feel like it's mostly my anxiety probably and stuff that has happened to me before. My body itself was just trying to protect itself, so it was very cautious and wanted to take its time before accepting that this place is alright, you are safe here."

Similarly, *Noah*'s mum reflects on her son's improved self-awareness:

"I think him seeing himself (in) other children like in his old situation. When he used to be the naughty child in the class that everyone was looking at and laughing at. I think when he's thought that he wasn't that child in this class, and there were other children (acting badly). And like I said he'd come home saying he would feel embarrassed. I think that he's sort of mirrored imaged. Okay, so that looks really embarrassing for that boy. We're all laughing and thinking that that's weird. I'm normally that

boy but I don't want to be that boy. So, I think he's actually seen firsthand himself in somebody else's position and gone. No, I don't like that. And has obviously wanted to better himself for that.”

Other parents and their children talk about how some of the experiences the boys have at Toogoolawa pull them up, and give them cause for reflection on their “naughty” behaviour and that of others. This gives them impetus for changing their behaviour; possibly a form of objective or relational self-awareness.

Parent: “He's gotten to see he's not the only person that, that feels like this. And you know, to an extent it's normal to, to feel anxious and you know, like he does. He looks at other boys and he doesn't like what he sees.”

Parent: “He's come home and says, you know mum, you should have seen so and so today and what he did. It was so embarrassing. Was that what I looked like when I was being naughty? I hate to look like that.”

Mia is a former Queensland Youth Services Worker, who is now part of the TIBET³ team at Toogoolawa, has a long-term view on the situation:

“I was working with a young person about 13 years ago and we had explored all sorts of education options for him. Nothing was really working. And there was a recommendation that he come here, and that was the first time I came here. And then we had quite a few boys come through and the change in them was amazing.”

Some of the quantitative data collected as part of the study also points to the positive effect Toogoolawa has on its boys. Of the thirty-five boys who responded to the survey item “I get on well with my teachers”, where 4 was “very much like me” and 1 “very much unlike me” the mean response was 3.2 with a standard deviation of .86. This is quite significant given that within the mainstream system not only did most of them not get on well with teachers, but also they didn't get on well with pretty much everyone else including family. Similarly, in response to the item “I really look forward to coming to school”, where 4 was “very much like me” and 1 “very much unlike me”, the same thirty-five previously strenuous school resisters responded with a mean of 2.5 and a standard deviation of 1.23. Given their level of school resistance illustrated in the above vignettes and the inordinate health and social pressures on these boys this is remarkable. Finally, the table below (Table 1) reflects the

³ TIBET = Toogoolawa Intensive Behaviour Enhancement Team

staff views of how well those same thirty-five boys improved over the course of the year in terms of “fitting in” at Toogoolawa.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation for Survey Item “Fits in well at school”.

Item	Term 1	Term 4
Fits in well at school on a scale of 1 to 10	Mean =5.63 SD = 2.63	Mean = 6.04 SD = 2.67

Relatively speaking, these data reflect substantial changes in the boys’ attitude to school: boys who previously felt victimised and rejected by the mainstream system. The Means of 5 to 6 approximately is a substantial increase in their attitude to school whilst the range of SD is most likely explained by the diversity of the group’s disposition and the amount of time it takes for the Toogoolawa experience to take effect with some of the boys.

Finally, the transformational effects of the Toogoolawa experience are not limited only to the boys. A staff member says:

“When I first started, I hadn’t been still (as in meditation) with myself ever. At first, I really didn’t like it because it made me feel uneasy sitting with myself. Then over time I allowed the experience in... Now I am at peace with myself and I look forward to each morning. It helps me find my calm, my peace to begin each day.”

All of this, of course, begs the question: “What is it that is working here for these boys that wasn’t working for them in the mainstream?” As is the case with all VbE programs, the evidence from this study suggests that the above transformations experienced by the Toogoolawa community are not the result of any episodic, “Road to Damascus”, moment for the boys or staff. Rather, they are the result of a cumulative, synergistic, values driven set of effects that essentially flow from two things: the school climate, what it feels like for the boys and staff to be there on a daily basis; and the character of the people, especially the teachers and the youth workers within the school. Nor are these two sets of effects discrete and separate. They intersect in the sense that the people play a role in shaping the climate and the climate plays a role in shaping the people’s ways of being. Additionally, the data make clear that the effects are not uniformly felt across the school community. Some boys take longer than

others to experience the effects. Boys who have been there longer seem more improved. New arrivals bring with them their rowdiness, their hyper-vigilance, their defiance, their disruptiveness; those walls that they learned to erect to protect themselves from what was happening to them in mainstream settings. By way of illustration, during a teachers' focus group, the whole group erupted into laughter at the familiarity of what one of the teacher's was explaining about how transformed students coexist with the new, and as yet unaffected, arrivals:

“Just before, when we getting ready to start, we had to leave the room to break up a serious scuffle that was going on outside. When we got back inside our group (of boys who had been at Toogoolawa longer than those scuffling outside) were still just sitting there patiently waiting for us.”

By way of further illustration, one boy who was in his third year at Toogoolawa offered during an interview:

“The longer you are here the easier it is to block out the noise that's around here pretty much all the time.”

Mainstream

A very strong theme in the data from parents, students and staff at Toogoolawa concerns the lack of fit between what they call “mainstream” and the boys at Toogoolawa. They talk about the boys being “just another number” in the mainstream, “being lost in the crowd”, the mainstream “not knowing how to handle him and we (parents) didn't either”. They typically do not say this so much as a criticism of the “mainstream”, but more in terms of their boys not fitting in: “He felt he was odd.” They understand that managing student behaviour in mainstream settings often has to become a trade-off for schools. They have often been told by the mainstream that its primary concern is the maintenance of a safe and healthy teaching and learning environment in the school. They witness how the needs of their boys, when they exhibit challenging behaviour, are sacrificed for the needs of the many as the school seeks to reduce those challenging behaviours primarily through deterrence by sending a clear message to students that certain actions will not be tolerated and will incur serious consequences. They talk about: “He spent more time sitting outside the Principal's office than he did in his classroom. It just wasn't working for him.”

They have come to realise that their “high risk” children, who are behaving “badly” usually because they are dealing with burdensome problems not of their own making, can't survive within such a punitive approach to behaviour

management. They see their boys in classrooms where they are labelled lazy, disruptive, defiant. They see their boys quickly learning to establish ways to protect themselves from what is happening to them. Typically, they become desperate and search for an alternative to the mainstream.

Arguably, “mainstream” schooling has such a debilitating effect on these boys because over time it has predominantly, but of course not exclusively, come to exist within what Mills and McGregor (2014) call “a ‘glocal’ (global and local) slipstream of educational ideologies and policies” (p. 79). Currently, those who are dominant favour an instrumentalist view of education with measurable outcomes and standards that may be held up for comparison, nationally and internationally. Within the global market, high academic outcomes for young people are routinely linked to high-performing national economies. So pervasive is this educational paradigm that other visions of what education could, or should, be are silenced or deemed to be ‘alternative’. ‘Real education’ is equated with what the mainstream has to offer. Perhaps even more worrying is the fact that this seems to be a trap of our own making according to the psychiatrist, turned neuro-scientist, Iain McGilchrist (2009).

He argues that, as a Western society, we have allowed ourselves to become left-brain dominant. He has produced the neuro-scientific evidence that within the bi-lateral brain, both hemispheres play a role in how the mind works: neuronal “energy” “flows”, or weaves, through both hemispheres with one or the other hemisphere being more dominant than the other depending on the context. The left hemisphere plays a dominant role when the mind is tasked with meaning-making about narrow, decontextualised, theoretical, technical inputs to the brain. The right hemisphere is more at home with our emotional and social selves. He further argues that Western society has allowed itself to become left-brain dominated. We have allowed ourselves to drift toward a reliance on abstract, de-contextualized thinking over more fluid and reflexive thought processes. As a contemporary example, we could say that our reliance on, and false belief in, algorithms to predict human behaviour in, say, industries which use them to target likely customers, stunts our emotional capacity for trust and connectedness. Similarly, the tendency for mainstream education systems to reduce student learning to measurable outcomes through standardised SAT tests (in the USA and UK) or NAPLAN (in Australia) comes at the expense of such human values as caring, intuition, cooperation, creativity and empathy. Perhaps even more tellingly, the way education systems have now even co-opted the quality teaching regime into a standardised format contributes to left brain dominance (AITSL, 2011). This pattern even extends to the way we have institutionalised metrics to assess things like accountability and quality assurance with KPI management tools. Thus, the dominant, but not exclusively so, “mainstream” system has so much difficulty with the boys who end up at

Toogoolawa because it is literally unable to recognise or discern the source of the boys' "naughtiness" and does not have much choice other than to "pathologise" it (Peterson, 2020). These boys need a better "system", so to speak. This is Toogoolawa's intention: to provide a way and means of educating "naughty" boys.

School Climate

The essence of the difference between Toogoolawa and the dominant "mainstream" is the school's climate. School climate has been described as "the heart and soul of the school ... that essence of a school that leads a child, a teacher, and an administrator to love the school and to look forward to being there each school day" (Freinerg, 1999). It comprises an interactive, synergistic, sometimes even symbiotic, interplay of ways of being with all their attendant values, beliefs, energies and interpersonal relationships: the school's ambience. As McGilchrist (2009) would have it, Toogoolawa's school climate is in no way a function of left-brain activity on the part of the school community. It is very much right-brain activity. It is an intangible composite of ebb and flow of beliefs, values and emotions about what is best, in an educational sense, for the boys at Toogoolawa. Nor should the school's climate be thought about as being an atomistic or static state. For example, as we shall demonstrate, the data from the study indicate that there are many factors that play into Toogoolawa's climate that give it its sense of community, a safe space, a collaborative enterprise, a spiritual, caring, trusting and what school community members call a "listening" place. But they are not separate, atomistic factors. They interact in an ebb and flow process of shaping the school climate. For example, trust can be a product of the quality of the relationships at Toogoolawa, what Bryk (2002) calls relational trust. But we have long since known that another of the aspects of the climate, "listening", can produce trust, or what Tomlinson (1984) calls "therapeutic listening" and what Rogers and Evans Farson (1957) refers to as "empathic listening". Similarly, "safe" has many meanings at Toogoolawa. For a parent it can mean the absence of the bullying to which her child was subjected in mainstream. For a boy, it can mean the emotional safety to act out without the repercussions with which mainstream typically responds. Thus, a good metaphor for Toogoolawa School's climate, as the name suggests, is the ebb and flow of the weather.

Another helpful metaphor, one that sheds light on the effects of Toogoolawa's climate on the school community and vice versa, is Gibson's (1966) notion of affordance: the interactive complementarity of the person and the environment-what others call an ecological niche (Schoener, 2009). McGilchrist (2021) explains:

In 1966, the experimental psychologist Gibson coined the term “affordances”, referring to the opportunities afforded by the environment (school climate) to an organism (students and teachers alike). The important point is that, an affordance is not a thing, but resides in the relationship between the environment and the organism: the affordance requires both. In this sense, affordances are emergent phenomena: they are opportunities for action that arise from a relationship and thereby define the organism as an agent”.

However, the important point about the effects of the school climate, regardless of the nuanced, contextualised and synergistic interpretations that can be put on them, is that they are genuinely *felt*. The challenge for this exploratory study was to unravel how that climate is shaped, what role VbE has in shaping it and what VbE’s contribution is to the transformation of boys like those in the vignettes above.

Shaping the Climate

During a focus group, one boy ventured:

“It’s much better here because of the mutual respect and just feeling safe here. It’s like a moral code.”

In an interview for the documentary film, the following exchange occurred:

Interviewer: “I’m trying to understand why you think kids here are being kinder.”

Student: “There’s like a code that you learn... from the virtues. I can’t really say, don’t have the word ...there’s just something about the school that tells you.”

The school’s day-to-day program plays a big role in shaping the school climate so that, as the above student says, “it just tells you”. In mainstream, the day-to-day program mainly had the effect, for a whole range of reasons, of the boys sensing what Rabello de Castro (2004) calls their “otherness”, being different, separate. Typically, but of course not exclusively, a key organisational principle in mainstream is segmentation: content is segmented into separate subjects of dubious value to the boys who end up at Toogoolawa. They speak very disparagingly about the uselessness of the school work in mainstream, but much more fondly about the life skills program at Toogoolawa. Classes are arranged in lock step in mainstream which are usually very much out of step with the Toogoolawa boys’ cognitive, social, emotional and spiritual development. At

Toogoolawa, however, the program is concerned with enabling the boys to become part of a loving “oneness”. One of the teachers explains:

“We actually have a program where we explicitly teach the virtues to the students. We do that via a program called Thought-of-the-Week. So, we have a value and a virtue, for example this week, and it's a weekly focus, this week we have Love Lived as Caring. And we have a famous, like a quote, and the kids reflect on that quote and we do a story about that quote, so that the kids can see that virtue in action, in a real way. Usually, it is a story which is something that the kids will experience. We don't do fairy tales, but real events, so the kids kind of get a sense of what that virtue looks like, feels like, we always use the virtue, refer to the virtue, and to that particular virtue that we are concentrating on for the week. For example, caring, and we try and encourage the students to use like, John was caring, showing the virtue of caring by putting his friend's dishes away for example, so, we try, and get them to notice that particular virtue in their classroom, every day.”

Another teacher explained how she builds the Human Values into her program by using a spelling exercise to expand the students' understanding of the Thought-for-the-Week in such a way that the sense of a loving family or oneness is enhanced in the classroom. For example, if the Human Value for the week was ‘Love’ and the virtue (or sub-Value) that is to be focussed on is ‘Compassion’, the Thought-for-the-Week could be: “The heart must melt in compassion when the eye sees another person suffering.” She explains how she injects this into her spelling program:

Teacher: “We are going to make up a list of ten words from our Thought-for-the-Week, and then we'll learn to spell them. First of all, we have some words in the wise saying to begin with, haven't we? What are they?” Student: “Heart?”

Teacher: “Yes, heart. Everyone of us in this room has a heart, don't we? Write down in your book the word ‘heart’. You can see it on the screen...Good. All done? What's another word we can learn to spell?” Student: “Melt?”

Teacher: “Yes, melt. What happens to an ice cream when it melts” Student: “It gets all sticky.”

Teacher: “Yes. Anyone else?” Student: “It goes all soft.”

Teacher: “Yes. When the heart melts it goes all soft. So, we've got two words here: ‘melt’ and ‘soft’. When your heart melts it goes all soft and

you can't feel angry anymore. So, write down the word 'melt' in your book."

Teacher: "All done? Good. Now what about the word 'soft'. What does it mean to have a soft heart?" Student: "You help each other?"

Teacher: "Yes, very good. When your heart is soft you want to help a boy who's flipped out to calm down don't you? So, I'm writing up the word 'soft' now. You can copy it in your book."

After ten or so spelling words have been identified and the class asked to memorise their spelling over the next two days, the teacher conducts the spelling test which goes like this:

Teacher: "Let's see how well you've learned to spell our ten words about Love and Compassion. The first word we learned was 'heart'. When our heart melts into softness, we can feel the pain that others are going through, can't we? On the blank page, spell the word 'heart'...Ready for the next one? It is 'melt'. When your heart melts, it means that you care about each other, doesn't it? And when your heart melts it means you wish you could help the people who lost everything in the bushfires. Isn't that right? Write down how you spell the word 'melt'."

The above illustrates how every situation or activity in the school day – whether academic or otherwise – can be made use of to enfold the students in the language of the loving human family. It is a language of inclusiveness, of "We are all in this together."

Common Discourse

There is a vast amount of evidence in the VbE research literature about how such practices gradually promote a common ethical language (see, for example, Hawkes, 2014 and DEEWR, 2008). The common language, in turn, reinforces the behaviours being sought for the boys. The same teacher explains:

"They start to actually use the language of values, and the teachers are always using our values language, always in all our interactions, "Thank you for being patient", "I can see you are really sitting down and trying, and putting such effort in it". "I love the way you are being, you are dedicated, you are really having a go", so the way that we interact with the students, funnily enough, when the teachers are doing it, you find that the students start picking up, and they start acknowledging, and they start doing it as well. It's a gradual process, but we do notice that they do pick up on the language, they start noticing, and they start, looking in a different perspective, more positive perspective."

The values at the heart of Toogoolawa's enterprise are also embedded in what the students call its "academics":

"For that particular week, we, whatever unit of work that we are doing, we make sure that they are able to reflect on how they are practising that virtue. So, it's really based more on action, that they are not just talking about it, but actually noticing and doing that action of being caring. For example, the themes and the topics that we teach at Toogoolawa are very much values based as well. It's very much to do with the virtues, we always have the heart component, like, getting the kids to talk about, you know, if we are looking at a character in a book that we are reading for example, one of the first questions that we ask is, you know, why do you think the character behaved in that way, what was the virtue that he was practising, what was the virtue he wasn't practising So, just always really homing in on the language of the values, and building a language of the values with our students".

Another teacher explains how she attempts to do this:

"Right now, we're doing a unit of work on a geography unit, which has an indigenous spin on it. Like the focus of our curriculum is about the spirit of the land and the sacredness of the land and our sacred duty towards being custodians of, of the land of the world. So, we try and incorporate all this into our curriculum as well."

Spiritual Dimension

Another way the school attempts to enable the boys to become part of a loving "oneness" is by imbuing the school climate with an unabashed, non-religious, sense of the spiritual. One of the staff in an interview for the documentary explained this as:

"And our jobs, as the staff here, is to really relate to that spiritual nature of our students...the students' capacity and our capacity to always be loving, always be peaceful, always be truthful, behave in the right way, in a non-violent way. So, I guess, spirituality is the essence."

Another teacher views the way she goes about her work as a spiritual exercise:

"I think an example of spirituality is basically our everyday interactions. Because when we look at our students, we look beyond their behaviour, but we look at the essence, their spirit, their capacities. So every single day, our relationships and the way that we regard our students with

unconditional love, acceptance, non-judgement, and just accepting the student for who they are.”

Imbuing the teaching and learning program with a sense of the spiritual is accomplished in several ways, one of which is the ritual called “acknowledgements” where the boys collectively identify where one of them has “lived” during the day with regard to one of the five Human Values, and is then formally acknowledged for doing so:

“One of our rituals that we do, is something called acknowledgments. So, at the end of the school day, we acknowledge each other based on the virtues, and somehow or other, when the students participate in this acknowledgment (ritual), they become more tuned to it, and they start (a) gradual process. It's not instant, they become more comfortable, because they see their peers doing it, they become more comfortable to start acknowledging people, and acknowledging how, they start noticing people living the values, and living the virtues where before all they would notice is, you know, all the bad things or all the negative things. He was talking rubbish to me. He was annoying me. Then suddenly like, actually yeah he was annoying me, but he also helped me when I was feeling really upset. so, getting the kids to think about acknowledging each other, and noticing the virtues, and the values (in each other), that very subtly gets into their psyche and (into) their language.”

As another teacher explained, such exercises go beyond the here and now: they are designed to influence the boys’ very way of being:

“(acknowledgements) it's calling to that deeper part of a student. And it's a little reminder, for them to take that little reminder, as the last thing before they leave the day, no matter what the day's been like, that they've just been acknowledged. And now someone saying, “May this light of Peace (or one of the other five Human Values) go within you and stay with you all through the night.”

During the focus groups several boys spoke about the effects of the spiritual dimension of the school’s efforts. For example, one boy volunteered:

“after quiet time and acknowledgements, you always feel good... go home with a smile on your face.”

Another said: “I’ve been here for five years. The quiet time yeah it helped me with my behaviour.”

During an interview for the documentary another boy alludes to how such growth is time dependent:

Interviewer - ‘so some of the events, or rituals, or whatever you want to call them, seemed a bit weird to you, when you first came?’

Student - “yeah, they do at the start. When you first come here, it's like, you think you are in a cult or something, it's all weird and stuff. But the longer you stay, it's like, you are doing that, it's just calms you down and you slowly realise that the longer you do it the better you are getting.”

Others refer to a sense of “energy” accompanying the spiritual aspects of the school’s program. For instance, one of the parents said that when she is in the room at the end of the day during quiet time (meditation) she “can literally feel the energy”. As a consequence of experiencing assembly during a site visit one of the authors concurs that there is a feeling of energy during assembly. Another parent reported that her child “really enjoys the meditation part of it because he says it just calms you, brings you down to a nice level.”

The way the school seeks to “still” the boys and have them get in touch with their “interiority” resonates deeply with recent neurobiological research (see, for example, Siegel 2016). Siegel (2016) defines mind as an emergent, self-organising, embodied, *relational* process that regulates the flow of energy and information. Hart (in press) makes a further point in that regard:

“The aspect of “relational” adds an important dimension to knowing, that has largely been unrecognised in the model of thinking as an individualised brain as information processor. We are always self-in-relation and the qualities of those relations impact our being and our wellbeing”.

McGilchrist (2021) concurs that the self is formed as part of a relational process and goes on to assign a primacy to context in the process. Hart (in press) goes even further when he argues that the spiritual capacities that shape and enable how we meet the world like balancing emotions, responding flexibly, considering moral awareness, empathising and drawing from bodily intuitions are all nurtured in a self-in-relation process.

The origins of this thinking go back to Attachment Theory first articulated well over thirty years ago (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991) which argued that mind is shaped by warm and attentive connections with others as part of early development. However, since then, and this is a very important point in the context of the present study, Hart (in press), drawing on the work of Siegel (2016), points out that “it appears that even if attentive warmth and care

were lacking in early years, those same capacities such as balanced emotions, flexibility, empathising etc can develop as an outcome of attuned care from another person such as a teacher, friend, therapist *later on in development*. What may be even more interesting is that it appears that if we are able to attune effectively to our own interiority through contemplative practice, we can build those same capacities for ourselves.”

Thus, in this context the teacher’s comment - “So, it’s really about oneness, even though physically we think we might be different, there is a oneness. We are one. We are a big family” takes on a deeper meaning. It may well be that such a sense of relational oneness, as it develops over time, plays a pivotal role in fashioning the boys’ transformation by enabling some form of relational self-awareness. This, of course, brings us to the issue of the quality of the relationships between the Toogoolawa staff and the boys.

The Character of Staff Members

Toogoolawa’s ethos of unconditional positive regard is palpable at the school. It is spoken about and practised by virtually everyone at the school. It is strongly *felt* by all members of the community. One of the staff explained:

“All our staff here, all of them, are very open, and they all come from a space of I want to help, I want to be able to make a difference, and I personally want to find different ways of living, so I live the human values, that I am a person that will always be, constantly trying to look at my interactions, and how I interact with my students whether I listen to them well enough.”

Unlike the responses that the boys felt they were receiving in the mainstream, they feel a different kind of relationship is being nurtured at Toogoolawa. In a focus group, one of the students expressed it as: “The teachers, if like you’re having a bad day, the teachers are always going to help you.” Parents sense this too: “They (teachers) meet them where they are at” and “the teachers here are amazing. Like all of them amazing, compassionate, just, hmm...just the way they speak to him, treat him”. Part of an interview for the documentary eloquently captures the essence of the relationship between teacher and student:

Interviewer – “What was so special about this particular teacher?”

Student – “it’s that he was, his opinion on life was just, he was really open about it. He wasn’t forcing any religious beliefs on anyone. He completely accepted all the kids here. I don’t know how he did that. It was amazing. He was just really calming to be around, and he just

accepted absolutely everyone, no matter how crazy you would be in the school.”

Another parent recounted how her son “idolises the teachers for coming here and working with the naughty children.” It seems the relationships go beyond idolising though and become more akin to Hart’s (in press) “self-in-relation” as a mother explains:

“So, I think once someone goes, ‘We want to give you a chance. We want to help you. We’re on your side’. Something sparked in his head and he went, ‘Okay, well, let’s do this. Let’s try and be a better person that everybody knows I can be’. And I truly believe that it was because he knew that he had support. He knew he had someone that was gonna back him up no matter what.”

Research about the effects of VbE is replete with accounts about how it changes the quality of the interpersonal relationships within the classroom: the relationships between teacher and students as well as between the students themselves (see, for example, Lovat et al., 2009). Osterman’s (2010) work about the importance of within classroom relationships is especially apposite in the context of this study. She points out that “The need for relatedness is a basic psychological need. When students experience belonging in the school community, their needs for relatedness are met in ways that effect their attitudes and behaviour” (p. 239). Her work suggests, as does the experience of the Toogoolawa boys and their parents that, “Children with the greatest unmet need for belonging are also less likely to receive the academic and personal support that is so critical for them. At the most immediate level, they are the children who are most challenging to teachers. Academically they are disengaged... Socially they are different from their peers and have difficulty establishing relationships. Whilst these behaviours often indicate that the students need for relatedness are not being met, unfortunately, these same behaviours tend to elicit more withdrawal and/or rejection.” Not so at Toogoolawa. The constancy of being held in positive regard, being enfolded in a shared language and a sense of oneness or family ensures that the Toogoolawa boys’ need for relatedness is being met which, in turn, gradually comes to positively affect their attitudes and behaviour, so establishing a necessary precursor for them engaging, trying harder and thus doing better with their school work.

Both parents and teachers confirm that the boys gradually come to realise the importance of their school work, begin to try harder and gradually start doing better:

One parent said during an interview:

“He's developed an understanding of the importance (of his school work) ... and so he's developed more of an appreciation for learning, which is naturally breaking down those walls of being reluctant. So, he's, he's more, he's more open to the possibility and he's feeling a lot safer in the expectations, and also the consequences. So, it's, yeah, in that sense, like he's, he's making progress where he wouldn't have before.”

Another parent commented:

“Absolutely, (he's trying harder) I think that, I think that, if I go around now, the staff, you know, (they know) when to push him, but when to back off, as well. And that's really important. Because, prior to having my child I mentioned earlier that I'm a primary school teacher, and I think that's something I didn't quite grasp when I was teaching that, you know, it's as if a child's not doing what you ask of them. They're being naughty. But like to see it from such a more holistic approach that with actually if he's not doing it, there's a reason he's not doing it. And so that there's a really good balance here of this is what we expect of you and we're going to hold you to it because we know that you can but we also know when we need to back off and give you space and what support you need to be able to come back to being great again. So, he's trying harder.”

The staff agree that the boys try harder at Toogoolawa as this exchange in a focus group makes clear:

Staff Focus Group Moderator: Okay, and another thing is trying harder. Let's see if we can get this information coming in. Try harder than they used to. Do you notice that? Or? What do you how do you say that?

Teacher 1: I don't like the term try harder because for me, it feels like stress. I'd just say that they dropped their resistance to engaging. And then they do apply themselves.

Teacher 2: We're sort of wanting to do something in the motivation, resilience and pushing through?

Teacher 3: Once they get used to the rewards. You know, when you do a good thing (and then) you get a reward? You know that's when they try harder, because they know that there's a reward for it and like they strive harder.

Teacher 4: That's really interesting, though, and not to say that the reward system doesn't work because I know it really does. But we don't have (rewards in the reading program). It's like that for them the reward is the fact that they actually realise that they can read and they start having success and that's what motivates them. That's what gets them engaged.

Teacher 5: It's (The school's approach) gonna say eliminate that fear of failure. Yeah. When they've been in a mainstream school, for example, and so much pressure has been put on them. And they come here and we tailor the curriculum for them. And yeah, they just lose that fear of failure and want to try harder, because they know that they can.

This is relatively unsurprising given the attention that the Human Value of Truth is given at Toogoolawa. As already mentioned, the school explicitly teases out selected wise sayings related to the five Human Values as a way of giving them meaning and to encourage the boys to embrace them as a way of being. Many of the wise sayings to do with Truth are about self-confidence, persevering, seeing mistakes as opportunities, believing in yourself, doing your best, and so on, as well as honesty and integrity too. The important point here, however, is that when a boy “tries harder” it is arguably a direct effect of the value being explicitly taught.

Of course, the boys “trying harder” and “doing better” with their school work, whilst most likely related, are not the same thing. The former is effort whilst the latter is accomplishment. There is already some evidence of the effects of VbE on “student performance” or accomplishment. Toomey (2010) writes of the “double helix” effect, the link between a values pedagogy and quality teaching:

There is a growing body of evidence that such effects significantly contribute to improvements in school ambience, interpersonal relationships within the school, morale, engagement with learning and perhaps even *student performance* (see, for example, Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, (2006) and Davidson, Khmelkov, & Lickona (2010).

The task of identifying any effect of VbE on student “performance” is very complex. It is now very well established that learning is more than cognitive. It is also both an emotional and social process (see for example Dimasio 2003 and Immordino Yang and Dimasio, 2007, Bandura and Walters, 1977). Indeed, some go as far as to say that it has a spiritual aspect (see, for example, Hart, in press and Culliford. 2011). Thus, linking VbE with “performance” is a formidable task, not only because there is so much going on in the process, but also because what is going on is so ephemeral. Any insight in this regard is a

genuine gold nugget for unlocking the mystery about the “double helix’s” effects on student performance. Such a gold nugget surfaced in this study.

As we have already shown, trust and respect are forged between a Toogoolawa boy and his teacher in a variety of ways through the climate that is fashioned by the VbE program. This enables the teacher to set what typically would be unacceptably high expectations for the boy’s learning. One of the teachers explained this during a focus group. In a context where, after a long struggle by the teacher with trying to improve a boy’s writing, the boy finally accomplishes a decent standard. The teacher then says, as a consequence of the trust and respect that has developed by her holding him in unconditional positive regard, notwithstanding his negative responses and his resistance, she was able to say to him: “I’m not going to accept a lesser standard from you from now on.” Because setting high standards is a key aspect of quality teaching, and because the values of trust and respect enable the setting of those standards, it is not difficult to see how the “double helix” effect makes a contribution, but perhaps not the only contribution, to the gains the boys make in literacy and numeracy reported earlier.

Of course, professing an ethos about unconditional positive regard is one thing, living it is another. One of the teachers explained how, in part, the ethos is maintained in a practical sense by the boys’ capacity for intuition:

“They can smell authenticity; they can smell it a mile away: If you give them a line and it’s not coming from the truth, from your heart, they know it.”

Finally, the teachers holding the students in unconditional positive regard leads to classroom practices atypical of mainstream schools such as “listening”. Virtually the whole community notes the importance and effect of listening on the boys.

Being Heard

Laub’s (1992) work suggests that “listening” and “being heard” are both part of a highly interpersonal, trusting and perhaps therapeutic connection:

“To testify (the boy speaks) and witness (the teacher listens) requires relationships built upon trust and respect as well as an expectation that the testimony will produce some type of acknowledgment. Bearing witness is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence

of another—in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody.”

The parents of boys at Toogoolawa sense the correctness of this: “Yes, definitely. The teachers he's got this year. Um, yeah, he really has. They listen to him. They give him the time. They definitely listened to him. Yeah” and “They listened to him. And that’s what he says: Mum they listen, they really, really listen.”

McGilchrist (2009), however, goes further than just assigning some form of reciprocity between speaker and listener by introducing a moral dimension to what occurs when one “attends” either by listening to or looking at someone or something:

“Our attention is responsive to the world. There are certain modes of attention which are naturally called forth by certain kinds of object. We pay a different sort of attention to a dying man from the sort of attention we’d pay to a sunset, or a carburettor. However, the process is reciprocal. It is not just that what we find determines the nature of the attention we accord to it, but that the attention we pay to anything also determines what it is we find. In special circumstances, the dying man may become for a pathologist a textbook of disease, or for a photojournalist a ‘shot’, both in the sense of a perceived frozen visual moment and a round of ammunition in a campaign. Attention is a moral act: It creates, brings aspects of things into being, but in doing so makes others recede. What a thing is depends on who is attending to it, and in what way. The fact that a place is special to some because of its great peace and beauty may, by that very fact, make it for another a resource to exploit, in such a way that its peace and beauty are destroyed. Attention has consequences”.

This perhaps enables one to get a fuller meaning of what one teacher was getting at when she said in an interview for the documentary:

“And I’ve had another boy recently who was yelling at me, like trying to get me to buy into his storm. And I just sat there and I listened. And I listened. And I listened. And at some point, he turns around, he says, anyway, (suddenly calming himself) why are you so ‘bleeping’ calm?”

Given the research linking “deep listening” with spiritual awakening (Ungunmerr 1988, Tooth in press, Schamer 2016), it is not difficult to infer from this interaction how the act of such intense listening might well play a role

in helping the boy, perhaps even unconsciously, get in touch with “that priceless, inborn, spiritual treasure (our true Self) that remains untouched and impeccable in every human being, although concealed from conscious awareness to varying degrees by the ‘mud’ of our fears, anger, shame, pain or sense of worthlessness”: his spiritual being. Nor is it difficult to infer that this is part of a Gestalten within which acts of such intense listening coalesce with the effects of the common discourse, the effects of the “acknowledgements” experience, the effects of meditation and other aspects of the school climate to produce an ideal crucible for the students’ spiritual development. At the very least, the above comment by the teacher provides a window into the role of what McGilchrist calls “attention” in the relational self-awareness way of becoming a transformed self.

Superficially, at least, given how so many Toogoolawa boys and their parents point out that they felt victimised in their mainstream school and usually felt that their side of the story fell on deaf ears, it is easy to see why being heard might have an impact on the boys. However, it’s arguable that such positive responsiveness to being heard goes beyond the superficial in ways that help explain the transformation evidenced in the vignettes outlined earlier. Tomlinson (1984), for instance points to a body of work about how “relational listening” can be therapeutic. Rogers and Evans Farson (1957) views on the healing effects of empathetic listening are well known and well regarded. Similarly, Schwartz (2014) has suggested that for boys from the ‘toxic spaces’ of public high school, “alternative spaces”, such as Toogoolawa, enable ‘voice, resistance and healing’. Furthermore, Loutzenheiser (2002) takes the daring step beyond linking student voice with healing when she links Passionate Pedagogy with Listening Pedagogy. Essentially, she argues that within the trusting listening experience teachers can negotiate what they teach in line with the compelling interests of their students.

There is no doubt that Toogoolawa is a trusting environment. Statements from the boys and their parents alike all resonate with this one from a mother: “He’s built a really strong connection with the adults in his class. And he trusts them”. Another mother of a boy diagnosed as autistic was able to describe the role of trust in his transformation: “He shows affection. So, he will, he shows affection towards these staff. You know, like he will go up and give these girls a hug. You could never get this boy to give you any affection whatsoever. He won't touch you. That’s a serious “no no”, he hates being touched, but he will go up and hug these girls and he will do the hand thing with the boys. He, yeah, he has got trust with these people. He does. Cause it takes a lot for him to trust anybody whatsoever. But these, these staff, yeah, he’s very trusting,”

The act of “listening”, when thought about as an act of relational trust, also helps one better understand how the “double helix” effect enables the slow but sure gains in the boy’s learning described earlier. As one teacher said, in the context of the act of listening and its relevance to doing one’s best: “I don’t think about it like doing his best. I try to work on reducing his resistance. I know when that’s fixed, he’ll do his best”. However, listening does more than enable teachers to raise theirs and the boys’ expectations for learning, it also projects the teacher as a role model.

Role Modelling

According to **Van Loan & Garwood (2020)** remaining calm in the midst of a crisis situation is key for teachers to model appropriate behaviours for their students and maintain the quality of the relationship that have been built. Their research has highlighted the importance of teachers following up with students after a crisis situation occurs, to check in on their wellbeing and let them know that despite their struggles, there are people in the school who still care for them. It’s not surprising that the effects of role modelling feature so prominently at Toogoolawa given that staff are typically recruited, in part, on the basis of their preparedness to strive to be good role models. The data from the Code of Conduct Survey (Table 2) testifies to the fit between staff day to day behaviour towards their students and how the school expects them to behave against criteria such as “am a good listener” and “use caring and respectful words”.

Table 2: Mean and SD for T1 and T2 on the Teachers’ Code of Conduct Survey.

	February	December
Mean	69.92	72
SD	6.1	3.8

N=25. Possible Maximum Score = 80

This circumstance is reinforced by both parents and students. A parent explains:

“When he was younger, his father is not the best role model in any way. But he sees the male teachers here and how they behave. I think that’s how he’s getting better at empathy.”

In an interview for the documentary one of the students testified to the effects of staff modelling:

Interviewer: “So, you are really copying what the teachers were doing for you, is that how it works?”

Student: “Yeah, I loved what the teachers did for me, and I thought if the teachers, do such a good job... with some students though they (the students) feel a bit overwhelmed, and they don't even give the teachers a chance. So, it's hard sometimes to try, and help the kids who don't want to be helped, because they are just want to leave, you know. So, I thought if I went in there, and helped with it, instead of the teachers talking to them, it was another student, someone who knew what they were going through, felt their pain so it would be different if the students could see that from another kid, but see that they are also trying to help them.”

During a focus group a teacher explained how she viewed role modelling:

“Can I add to that, too, I think for me, if I was to say why modelling works.. because when I was a teenager, I would have loved to have had a me and that in my life. So, thank goodness for my trauma. And my life experience has made me incredibly empathetic, and have a heart and a massive heart. So that's one of my biggest things. I just wish there were more of me or one of me in my life when I was there. So, I remember my teenage years, like, I remember the pain, I remember the struggle, I remember, the unease I remember, everything, like I remember the intensity of that time. And in that time, which is so chaotic for a young person anyway, to know that people see them for who they are that somebody is telling them, they're okay. There's actually nothing wrong with you, you know, you're a human, you're just having an experience, to actually have an adult that actually has their back and reminds them of their goodness, that we see beyond the other confusion. That's where I stepped from. So that to me, is really, really powerful. And I think that's why I think I connect, because I remember, and I don't ever want to forget, so it's I think everybody here is huge amounts of empathy. And they come bringing the baggage of their own personal struggles. And that's, that's the richness”.

Spirit of Gratitude

Finally, throughout all of the interviews with parents there is an essence of gratitude that runs through almost everything that they say in relation to their son attending Toogoolawa School. This essence is captured in the following words of one of the mothers:

“So, I mean look I’m covered in goosebumps just saying this because I’ve never seen anything like this before. And it’s honestly I tell everybody because there’s not one negative thing I can say about this school.”

This almost indefinable atmosphere of thankfulness throughout the School is commented on by visitors including one of the authors, and is openly expressed by many of the teaching staff who often say how much they value working at the school. At the celebratory Graduation Day many boys say something heartfelt about how they have changed for the better during their time at Toogoolawa.

Perhaps contributing to this permeating spirit of gratitude in the School is the morning ritual in each class of the Gratitude Circle. With teaching staff setting the example, all students and adults in the class take their turn to rate on a scale of 0 to 10 the level of gratitude they are feeling today, followed up with a short explanation of why they gave that rating number. Students also keep a gratitude journal which of course helps keep the spirit of gratitude alive at Toogoolawa.

It is nurtured in the homes of the boys as one of the mothers recounted in an interview:

“We talk to him several times a week about how lucky he is to be at Toogoolawa. We tell him he should feel grateful and embrace this opportunity.”

Ultimately, the boys catch the essence of this spirit of gratitude too. One teacher talked about how one of the boys in her class said with a clear tone of gratitude:

“my work’s much better now. Mum’s proud of me”.

Discussion

The five Human Values of Love, Truth, Peace, Right Conduct and Non-Violence, which are considered at Toogoolawa to be at the core of being human, define every aspect of the school. They are imbued in the teaching and

learning processes, are embedded in the school structures, management, policies, language and they come to shape the interpersonal relationships at the school. These five Values are taught both explicitly and implicitly. They inform every aspect of the day-to-day life of the school. They are at the very heart of the school's ethos.

The improvements described in many of the boys' behaviour, their engagement with school, their ways of being, trying harder with their school work, and the modest gains they make with it, admittedly and understandably from a low base, are arguably the effects of Toogoolawa's approach to VbE. The form and content of the program itself, and how it is delivered, comprise a "double helix" effect: the explicit and implicit teaching of Love, Truth, Peace, Right Conduct and Non-Violence and the role modelling of them by staff help create a trusting, caring, safe and listening climate with a common discourse with an accompanying sense of gratitude on the part of both boys and parents. The self of the "Toogoolawa Boys Then" become the transformed self of the "Toogoolawa Boys Now" by way of this double helix process that gradually nurtures their growth in relational self-awareness. That growth is developed, and sustained, as an outcome of the attuned care and unconditional positive regard the boys feel they are receiving from a very caring organisation. An email from a Youth Worker about her views on whether the students change, and if so how, why and over what period of time, captures the essence of this process of growth in relational self-awareness. It reads as follows:

"In my opinion I feel these boys come to us expecting us to be the same as everyone else they've come in contact with or the same as the education system they've come from. They don't expect the unconditional love and support we give them. And because it's foreign to a lot of them either both at home and at school or just at school. It makes them nervous. So, they fight it with all that they have to prove to themselves that everyone gives up on them when it becomes too hard or they act out in any way for whatever reason. So, they bring their worst to us as much as they possibly can and as often as they can. To get us to do what they're used to and quit on them. When we don't, and we keep hitting them back with love and acceptance it creates a storm inside them because they don't know how to accept the unconditional love we're giving. It makes them start to look into themselves and why they feel the way they do and act out in the manner that they do as well. And what I see, when this storm's created, it's only a matter of time that they then realise that no matter what they have to throw at us, we're going to withstand it and love them through every single time. That's when they find their calm, their trust in the people at Toogoolawa and accept that

this isn't an act. And that's when they start to try and attempt academics because they feel safe and know if they fail, we've got them."

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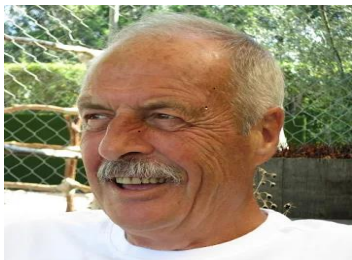
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