I found my thrill on Pyramid Hill—the Festival for Healthy Living in a rural setting

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The Festival for Healthy Living (FHL) is an exciting and innovative program using the performing arts to promote mental health for children and young people in schools and communities. This initiative is a way of bringing schools and their communities together in a spirit of inter-sectoral co-operation to celebrate well-being.

The aim of the FHL is to build the capacity of schools and communities to promote mental health and well-being through the performing arts.

Beginning in 1998 as a collaboration between the Royal Children’s Hospital Mental Health Service and the Department of Education, the FHL has grown consistently both in the number of schools and regions participating and in the depth and breadth of their involvement.

Students develop solution-focused performance pieces related to mental health topics, through a process that involves professional development opportunities for school staff and performing arts workshops for students. The project is a collaboration between the arts, education, mental health and the community sector.

Contribution to the field of mental health on a local and state level.

The Festival for Healthy Living (FHL) addresses the factors associated with the risk of mental illness in children and young people and the psychological barriers to seeking and obtaining help. 14–20% of children and adolescents experience mental health problems. Mental health problems in children and adolescents impact on schooling, social development, present enjoyment of life and future mental health.

Research indicates that children and adolescents fail to seek help early because of the stigma and fear associated with emotional difficulties. They also lack an understanding of the continuum of mental health and the possibility of taking responsibility for and developing positive mental health. As well, they generally equate “mental health” with mental illness and commonly describe it in negative stereotypes such as ‘psycho’ and ‘schizo’.

The Festival therefore addresses two main areas of need. The need to:

- promote a more helpful orientation to mental health issues and help-seeking
- promote understanding by teachers and students of how mental health can be enhanced by developing more positive school environments and adopting problem-solving approaches to dealing with life’s adversities.

The Festival’s implementation model, processes, organisational structure, materials and results to date have significant implications for mental health. Importantly, by providing a model for communities (based around their local schools) to work together in a spirit of collaboration and celebration, the Festival has an important role in building connectedness, partnerships and enthusiasm for further joint mental health initiatives.
A whole school community approach

The FHL addresses risk factors such as bullying, peer pressure and poor social skills and builds protective factors such as connectedness, problem solving, social skills, and healthy values systems. It creates opportunities for positive success and recognition of real achievement. The targeting of young people “at risk” within a whole school approach rather than by isolation in “alternative” programs avoids the deficit approach of tagging of some young people as “problems” while still making available to them the experiences and skills they need.

The culminating performance is delivered to the community in a significant large event to acknowledge the importance of what the students have to say and is an opportunity for parents, particularly parents of more “at risk” students, to see their children in a positive light. Parents and teachers have generally been impressed with the quality of the performance, the confidence and self-efficacy demonstrated by the young people.

The Festival is a real community celebration of the young people’s achievements. Feedback from principals has reflected this as highlighted in the following quote:

the college takes our responsibility to work with the community very seriously. The Festival has given us the opportunity to promote the message of mental health to the community.

Another principal commented:

confidence of the community in this school is only improved by such positive events.

Promoting sustainability

A key feature of the program in terms of enhancement of mental health activities is the fact that participation in the FHL has precipitated significant changes in mental health and well-being approaches in school communities. For example:

• some schools have implemented their own festival program using their own resources in the following year
• some schools have prioritised social competence and the performing arts as core school activities. Many schools have undertaken further mental health promotion professional development activities for staff
• one secondary school has re-employed their artist in residence to develop a pilot program for higher risk students with two other secondary schools because of their experience with the Festival program
• one primary school decided to allocate locally raised funds earmarked for tackling the issue of truancy towards employment of four artists for one day a week. They reported marked increases in attendance and engagement from the target group of at risk students.

These strategies have demonstrated that the Festival for Healthy Living program is not an isolated event but a catalyst for further sustainable change. As part of our model development all Festival programs are now building in a sustainability plan. This means that following the Festival program the local steering committee will continue to meet to ensure that there is a plan to integrate the gains of the Festival program for the longer term.
Participation of young people and parents

The Festival for Healthy Living program has a strong commitment to the involvement of young people and parents at all levels of the Festival program.

In relation to the involvement of young people it is important to highlight that the Festival program is underpinned by a process “whereby the content, ideas and themes of the performance is fundamentally driven by young people.” This ensures a genuine process of participation which is supported by a professional artist and school staff. Young people are also involved in teaching skills they have learned to parents as part of parent information nights. As well, at the end of the process, feedback from young people is sought and informs the future development of the model. As a way of reflecting on the importance of student participation one principal commented that:

I have seen students grown in their own self-confidence through a process which enabled them to have some control and contribute their own ideas and experience.

Parental involvement includes representation on both the Victorian Steering Committee and Regional Steering Committees. Parent representation in direct management of the program will ensure that the program continues to strengthen the link between students, and the school and home environments. The underlying message in this collaboration is that “promoting well-being involves teachers, students and families.”

Introduction to Pyramid Hill

Pyramid Hill is a small town, one hour north of Bendigo on Victoria’s northern plains. The town’s population is approximately 500. The town has experienced many hardships in recent times including the impact of the drought and salinity. There are 2 schools in the town, a Catholic Primary School with about 18 students and a Prep-10 College with about 145 students. In 2005 the Festival worked with the two schools and representatives from the local community to implement the Festival for Healthy Living in Pyramid Hill.

Pyramid Hill—Phase One

The Festival program was delivered in a series of intensive week-long workshops over two school terms. The program was delivered as part of a whole community model and so included collaborations and partnerships with the local police, School Focused Youth Services (SFYS), members of the shire, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), Department of Education and Training (DET) representatives, and the local football club. Evening circus skills workshops were held for parents of school students and the wider community in an effort to promote broader participation, encourage inclusiveness and extend the positive impact of the Festival beyond the school setting.

Evaluation of the whole community model showed the Festival program had positive impacts on the students who participated in terms of personal well-being: “self confidence”, “believe in yourself. Don’t be afraid of showing people what you can do”; positive peer and teacher-student relationships: “we learned to be nice to each other. To respect each other”, “our teachers found out that if you weren’t good at some things you were good at other things. Like if you weren’t good at writing but you could juggle”; and the benefits of being a part of something not usual to small rural town: “most of the time not much is happening here and we’re usually bored. We were down but now we’re up”, “there was not much stuff happening in (name of town) so it [the Festival] was good.”

The benefits to the local community were also illustrated in the comments below:

it was a huge event. 90% of the town came. The hall was packed, standing room only at the back.
Town things have been done before but hardly anyone attends. People you wouldn’t expect to have come came. Other people had stalls, they were not just school stalls.
whole town events, limited in Pyramid Hill these days, predominantly revolve around sporting club functions, since events such as the Agricultural Show have ceased in recent years. Therefore the decision to combine the performance with a town fete was a masterstroke, as it brought the whole community into the Festival. Many community members had attended the evening sessions in the town hall, however the fete captured an extended mix of people.

**Pyramid Hill—Phase Two—Road shows to other communities and mental health ambassadors**

Following on from the successful Festival for Healthy Living celebrations in 2005, a road show was developed that could be taken to other school communities in the district. The road show involved a shorter version of the original performance but still contained the positive mental health messages developed in Pyramid Hill. A number of students were also trained as mental health ambassadors to provide further clarification of the messages in the show.

Over 100 students volunteered for the road show and twelve ambassadors were eager to pass on the good mental health messages. The artists returned to the schools and there was a period of development and rehearsal for the students. This created an opportunity for those students to revisit the Festival and its messages.

The ambassadors chose to focus on the keys to life which formed the theme for the Pyramid Hill Festival. They spoke about how they used the keys in their own lives thus creating credibility and authenticity for their peers in the audience.

Shows were held in Kerang, Boort and Wedderburn and the response was enthusiastic with some teachers being keen to follow up on the messages in their classrooms.

**National implications**

In keeping with the National Action Plan for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health, the Festival for Healthy Living adopts a universal approach. It focuses particularly on promotion and prevention, and creates opportunities for enhancing the capacity of school communities for early intervention.

Each year the Festival for Healthy Living (FHL) is delivered to new schools and communities throughout metropolitan and rural Victoria. To date, the FHL has occurred in 75 schools across 7 regions. As such the model has been shown to be transferable to a range of settings – metropolitan, rural and remote.

The Festival model in its application in a rural setting has direct replicability nationally. It has the potential to achieve this because of a number of key principles that inform the program. Firstly, the program promotes community ownership from the outset and is informed by locally identified needs. Secondly, the program focuses on promoting a positive message rather than on adversity. The program also provides an opportunity to promote connectedness and encourages strong partnerships with community agencies. All of these factors are common to any community that is committed to promoting its health and well-being.

The success of the Festival for Healthy Living has highlighted the powerful impact this program can have, particularly in rural areas facing significant challenges. Based on our experience in rural Victoria, the FHL has the potential to be replicated in similar communities across Australia.

**Policy recommendation**

That the service system work together to develop initiatives that promote resilience of children, parents and the local community using schools as core social centres.
References


Presenters

Harry Gelber is senior social worker and manager of Community Development at the Royal Children’s Hospital Mental Health Service. Harry was one of the founders of the Festival for Healthy Living Program and is very interested in innovative approaches to promoting resilience and connectedness with families, schools and their broader community.

Jenny Mitchell is a social worker currently working in child and adolescent mental health as a mental health promotion worker. She is very interested in rural issues and in encouraging people to think about and come to understand the concept of ‘good mental health’: What is it? How do we get it and how do we keep it? The Festival for Healthy Living provides a glorious opportunity to explore these issues with children and young people and with their communities.