

Relational Schools Report

Connecting Activities

The relational impact of a Year 11 outdoor
education program at Emu Gully

July 2019



Foreword

Relationships matter and are shaped by place, purpose, history and values. This underpins the work of Christian Venues Association (CVA). Venues such as camps have the opportunity to design contexts that enable relationships. And by creating different contexts they enable growth and change. People are seen in a new light. New skills are developed. New bonds are formed. Spaces and opportunities to reflect are created. The shared experiences, new perspectives and enhanced skills then create a new context for relationships, whether back at home, work or school.

Over the last two years we've been privileged to work with Christian Schools Australia with the support of Christian Venues Association to look at relationships and wellbeing in schools. We've measured the wellbeing of just under 7500 students and the strength of 17,000 student to student relationships. This is important because we know that relationships are vital for learning, health and wellbeing, and for citizenship in all its forms.

Christian schools, like many schools, have explicitly relational purposes. Their ultimate goal is 'to prepare students to live full, productive and purposeful lives, contributing to the wellbeing of their families, communities and as global citizens.'¹ They recognise that "the development of students in a Christian school takes place in community. They are places of belonging, built on shared values and beliefs, and committed to mutual care and respect." This development takes place in relationships, and is expressed in relationships.

Relationships should not simply be the by-product of decisions taken for other reasons: they can be intentionally nurtured and cultivated. We have shown that the structure, culture and practices within schools have a profound impact on relationships. But there are other things schools can do to build, boost and repair relationships. In our UK work we have already demonstrated how outdoor activities and expeditionary learning can strengthen relationships.² So we were delighted to work with the Australian organisation, Christian Venues Association, and one of their members Emu Gully Adventure Education Group to see if taking a class to camp has a measurable impact on relationships.

Emu Gully build their camp activities around the ANZAC values of Mateship, Courage, Perseverance and Sacrifice. Reflecting on the benefits of taking pupils to Emu Gully, one of the teachers said:

These ANZAC values are actually what are required to have good relationships. These values instilled in our young people help them to be able to go back to school and then to graduate and go into life understanding how to have successful flourishing relationships in the future.

There is no greater gift to a child than to nurture them within strong relationships and develop the skills and values for healthy relationships. I'm therefore delighted that in looking at the impact of one camp on a group of Year 11 students we have seen and demonstrated that there is a real and measurable relational impact.

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¹ <https://csa.edu.au/about/vision-and-purpose/>

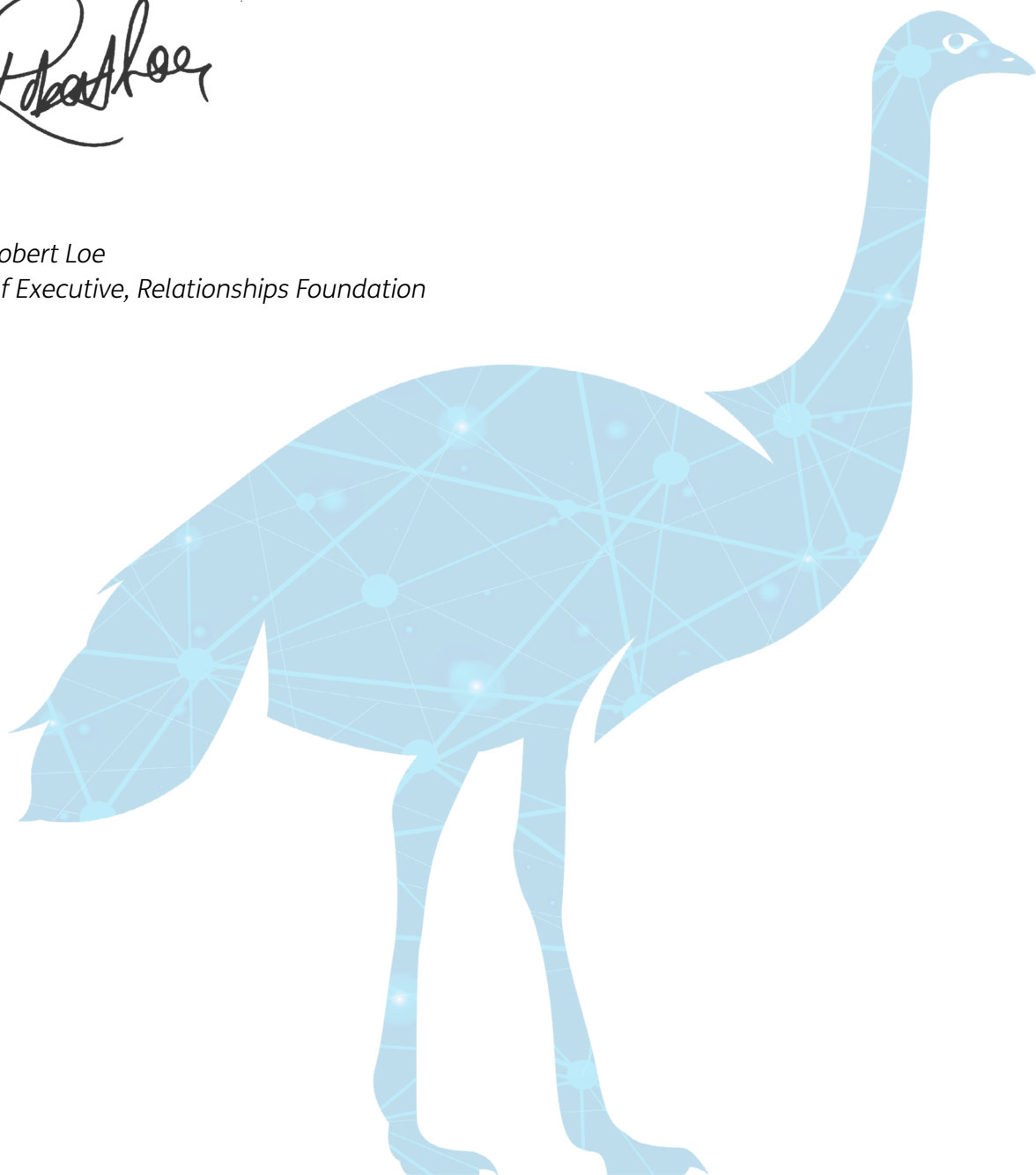
² See *Building Relationships Through Expeditionary Experiences* and *More Than Just a Ski Trip*, both available at <https://relationalschools.org/resources/>

We measured the student to student relationships before and after their camp and saw a marked change in the relationships after camp. In this report you will see that overall we found a 16% increase in our measure of the year group's student to student relationships. For one of the classes the impact was more dramatic: a 35% increase in our index measure from 51 to 69. While numbers are helpful, it is the reality of the relationships that these numbers represent that matters. They reflect students engaging with pupils they may have ignored before and communicating more effectively. It means students appreciating qualities in their peers that were previously unknown. Above all it is the recognition that all are 'mates' who belong in the group and for whom there is mutual trust and respect.

Many people in families, communities and workplaces over the years will reap the dividend of these stronger relationships. We hope that many other groups will reap both the joy and the benefit of such intentional investment in relationships in the years to come.



Dr Robert Loe
Chief Executive, Relationships Foundation



Introduction

Camps, character, wellbeing and relationships

When looking at what makes a child successful in later life, Paul Tough suggests in his book *How Children Succeed* that academic ability is a consistently poor predictor of income, happiness, or family stability. He quotes the work of Gene Smith, a psychologist in the US, who found that the test that most reliably predicted a high-school student's future didn't measure IQ; it measured how a student was rated by peers on a list of traits Smith called 'strength of character'. The list included being "conscientious, responsible, insistently orderly, not prone to daydreaming, determined, persevering." This measure was three times more successful in predicting college performance than any combination of cognitive ratings, including SAT scores and class rank. "What matters is whether we are able to help develop a very different set of qualities, a list that includes persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence", summarizes Paul Tough.

The UK National Foundation for Educational Research suggests that "although there is no universally accepted definition, character education can be broadly described as an approach to developing a set of values, attitudes, skills and behaviours that are thought to support young people's development and contribute to their success in school and in adult life. These qualities include respect, leadership, motivation, resilience, self-control, self-confidence, social and emotional skills, and communication skills."³

Character is developed in and expressed in relationships. Character traits are not simply individual inner strengths. As American educational philosopher John Dewey put it, "conduct is always shared; this is the difference between it and a physiological process. It is not an ethical 'ought' that conduct should be social. It is social, whether bad or good."⁴

For the philosopher John Macmurray, "the first priority in education – if by education we mean learning to be human – is learning to live in personal relation to other people ... I call this the first priority because failure in this is fundamental failure, which cannot be compensated for by success in other fields."⁵

Character is developed in and expressed in relationships. Character traits are not simply individual traits.

Parents (as primary caregivers) have a fundamental role in developing character and relational capabilities. For example, in the fullest evaluation to date of the effect of early childhood relationships, Egeland and Sroufe (2005) show that the quality of early parental care, above IQ or test scores, was the best predictor of whether the child graduated high school and went on to university. Children with the highest levels of parental care were also more socially competent throughout their lives, better able to engage with preschool peers, and better able to demonstrate the strengths of individual character.⁶

³ National Foundation for Education Research (2017), Case Study Report: Leading Character Education in Schools <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/2067/pace02.pdf>

⁴ *Human Nature and Conduct*, 1922 p.14

⁵ *Learning to be Human*, 1961 p.24 and p.211

⁶ *The development of the person: The Minnesota study of risk and adaptation from birth to adulthood*, 2005

But schools also matter. And one significant way is how they moderate the influence of peers. Child psychologist Judith Rich Harris, for example, found that a child who grows up in a disciplined household is just as likely to develop negative character traits as those raised in fractured homes, if their relationships at school are unhealthy with their peers and classmates.

In this regard, character development isn't just heavily influenced by the interactions with adults in a classroom, but also by the interactions between students. Indeed, how can a student learn and develop habits around qualities such as trust, empathy, optimism, and intentionality if they don't regularly or consistently experience these qualities in their day-to-day interactions with others? How can a student learn to develop these characteristics if they are experiencing the opposite in their classroom relationships? Studies of human motivation demonstrate that to flourish, children need to experience not only a sense of belonging (that they are loved), but also a sense of competence (that they are capable and seen as capable by others) and a sense of autonomy (that their actions are consistent with what they want or believe they should do).

Recent research, however, reveals that the sense of belonging in Australian schools is relatively low. For nearly two decades, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) has been measuring belonging in school. They define student belonging as, "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" as well as being "valued by their peers, and by others at their school."⁷ Evidence suggests that from 2003 to 2012 "Australia had the fifth largest decline in school belongingness and engagement of all OECD countries" and "the 2015 results, in only a three year period, showed a worsening that is similar in size to the decline over the entire decade from 2003-2012."⁸ Recent evidence published by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) would suggest there are few signs of improvement and students, in a large number of Australian schools, feel a greater sense of social isolation than their peers in other developed countries. They just don't feel they belong. Belonging is critical in the school's context because it correlates to both academic and psychological outcomes. In the Australian context, the increase in cases of mental illness "may also correspond with student perceptions of decreased attachment to their school."⁹

How can a student develop qualities such as trust, empathy, and optimism if they don't experience these qualities in their relationships?

Thus we see that character, relationships and wellbeing are all linked. We know from decades of research from institutions like Harvard or Cambridge, lessons drawn from tens of thousands of people, and hundreds of studies, and a myriad of the brightest sociologists, anthropologists and neuroscientists in the world, that relational wealth, not material wealth, is a stronger indicator of happiness throughout our lives, and that social isolation is a killer. People who are "more isolated than they want to be from others find that they are less happy, their health declines earlier in midlife, their brain functioning declines sooner and they live shorter lives than people who are not lonely."¹⁰ Conversely, we now know that "people who are more socially connected to family, to friends, to community, are happier, physically healthier, and live longer than people who are less well connected."¹¹

⁷ Willms, JD. (2003) Student Engagement at School: A Sense of Belonging and Participation: Results from PISA 2000, OECD

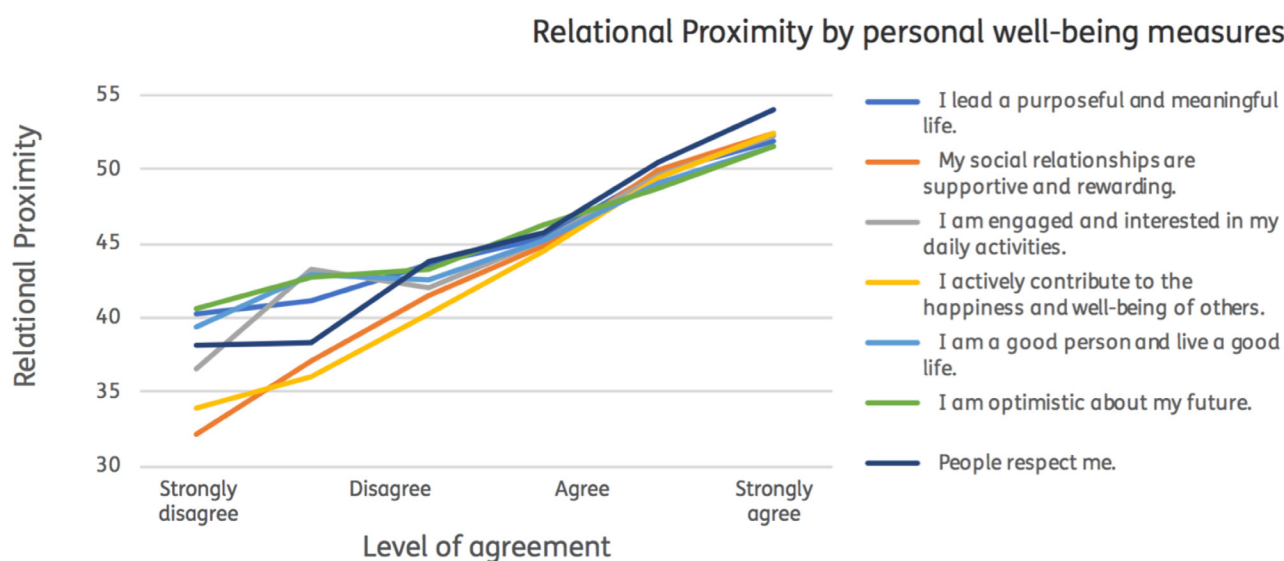
⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/09/the-week-two-wobbles-kids-are-feeling-lonely-at-school-and-its-getting-worse>

⁹ Allen, K. et al. (2018) What Schools Need to Know About Fostering School Belonging: a Meta-analysis, Educational Psychology Review 30:1-34

¹⁰ https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness/up-next#t-401774

¹¹ ibid

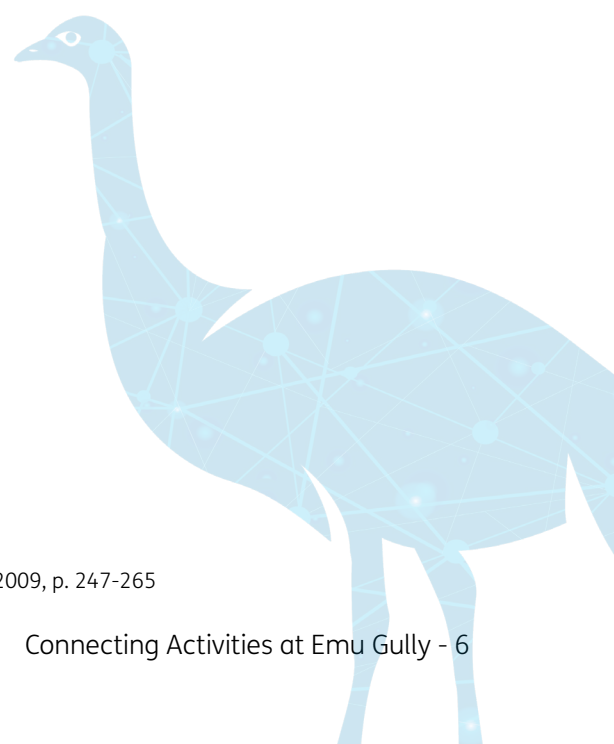
To investigate how a focus on relationships might support schools' wellbeing goals within a uniquely Australian context, we asked 7490 students in schools affiliated to Christian Schools Australia to complete a Personal Wellbeing Index ¹² as well as measuring their relationships with other students in their school homerooms.



The results show a strong and striking correlation between the relational health and the wellbeing of students. Students who have healthy relationships with their peers, are far more likely to be thriving as individuals. They are happier, more hopeful, and more excited for the future. Relationships and wellbeing are mutually reinforcing: students whose wellbeing is compromised for other reasons may also be less able to form supportive and purposeful connections. Moreover, it reveals that those individuals who become socially isolated in their homeroom context are unlikely to experience supportive or rewarding relationships anywhere in school.

There are many ways in which schools influence the relational experience of students. The grouping of students influences who relates with whom. Teachers model relationships, and schools can seek to instill relational values. Relational difficulties can be learning experiences, and schools can use these to develop pupils' skills and understanding. Extra-curricular activities create different relational opportunities, and it is therefore worth investigating how, and in what ways, camps can support schools in achieving their relational goals.

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¹² E.Diener, Assessing Well-Being: The Collected Works of Ed Diener, London, Springer, 2009, p. 247-265

The Emu Gully/Toowoomba Christian College study

We found in our research with Christian Schools Australia many factors that influenced student-student relationships. These include school size, parental separation, gender, academic attainment and the student-teacher relationship. There are many things that schools can do to help students know, respect and value their peers. In our work with schools in the UK we have already demonstrated the significant impact that outdoor activities can have on students' relationships.¹³ So we were delighted to have the opportunity to see whether taking a senior school year group to a Christian Venues Association camp would make a difference.

To understand and evaluate the impact of the Emu Gully experience, we measured changes in the quality of relationships amongst a group of Year 11 students from Toowoomba Christian College before and after the camp experience.

Participants

Toowoomba Christian College

Toowoomba Christian College (TCC) is situated on 40 acres on the northern outskirts of Toowoomba, near the township of Highfields. The school was founded in 1979 and has for many years offered the only high school within the Highfields area. Due to the flexibility of the school's educational delivery, TCC are able to capitalise on the innovations that are taking place in education as well as the developing initiatives in the Toowoomba region. TCC's flexible educational delivery allows students to begin their university studies while still at school. Through the performance of TCC graduate, the school has established a worthy reputation in the community, especially with employers and tertiary providers. The school is committed to maintaining its clear Christian focus and small, caring environment. Implicit in this is the desire to treat each student as a creation of God, unique in his or her strengths and weaknesses. As much as possible the child, not the class, is the focus of attention. The current student enrolment at TCC just over 700 students. TCC is a member of Associated Christian Schools (ACS).¹⁴

Emu Gully

Emu Gully is an outdoor education program that was founded in 1995 by Barry Rodgers OAM, an experienced educator with a passion for our national heritage and helping young people become all they can be. Emu Gully has established a reputation for delivering the highest quality leadership and team building programs. For many of their clients these have become crucial elements for enhancing culture, developing teamwork and training leaders. Now employing over 30 staff, and catering for over 15,000 participants each year, Emu Gully hosts school groups, sporting and social groups and corporates from across Australia at their campus located near Toowoomba in Southeast Queensland.¹⁵

¹³ See *Building Relationships Through Expeditionary Experiences* and *More Than Just a Ski Trip*, both available at <https://relationalschools.org/resources/>

¹⁴ <https://www.myschool.edu.au/school/48054>

¹⁵ <http://www.emugully.com.au/ourstory>

Emu Gully is a member of Christian Venues Association a peak body for over 190 Christian conference, camp, retreat and outdoor activity providers in Australia. CVA member sites total more than 24,000 beds and serve over 1,500,000 guests annually. ¹⁶

Emu Gully intentionally build their programmes around the ANZAC values of Mateship, Courage, Perseverance and Sacrifice. Students work as teams in different activities with the groupings requiring students to work with peers who are not necessarily friends. The activities are challenging, requiring students to address their own fears and limitations, and to seek and provide support from their peers. Time to reflect on lessons learned from the various activities is built into the programme.

Emu Gully intentionally build their programmes around the ANZAC values of Mateship, Courage, Perseverance and Sacrifice.

Methodology

Whilst the idea and premise of ‘relational health’ being a vitally important aspect of a school’s culture is widely recognised, it can often go ignored if unmeasured, even when indicators like bullying, disengagement and absence suggest problems.

By ‘relationship’, we assume something that is more dynamic than a connection; rather a continual process where reciprocal engagement between two people defines the quality of the relationship. We draw on a wide range of experience in different contexts - including healthcare, prisons, business, government and peacekeeping - to offer a simple account of what shapes these relationships in schools.

Individuals and organisations often see the outcomes of relationships and are aware of at least some of the ways in which policies, structures, skills, working practices, technology, culture and other factors are shaping them. There are also usually some blind spots where at least one party’s perception of the relationship is not properly recognised. Our approach seeks to identify the blind spots and identify areas of strength and weakness. We do this by looking at the key factors that influence relationships as well as people’s experience of the relationship. This enables people to talk constructively, diagnose accurately, and generate effective responses.

By ‘relationship’, we assume something that is more dynamic than a connection; rather a continual process where reciprocal engagement between two people defines the quality of the relationship.

We approach this using questionnaires which measure the distance in a relationship between two people or organisations and which determine how well each engages with the thinking, emotions and behaviour of the other. This metric enables us to distil the relational health of an organisation into overall index scores, relating to the five different ‘domains’ of relational health shown below.

¹⁶ <http://www.christianvenues.org.au/index.php>

Respondents are asked to rate different aspects of a relationship on a scale of 1 to 6.

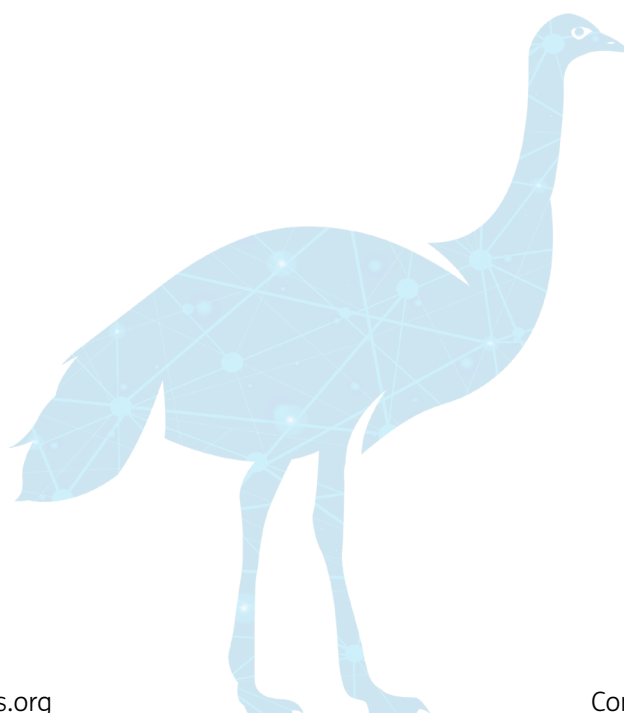
An index score of 100 would mean that every respondent had rated every aspect 6. We also measured students' wellbeing using the Diener Flourishing Scale. We did not gather additional demographic data about the students (such as academic attainment, home language or parental separation) which can allow us to provide benchmark scores that reflect the demographics of the class and the specific student pairings that have been measured.

This study assessed relationships between students in their pastoral class. Student pairings were randomly selected and were different in the 'before' and 'after' surveys. Where pupils spend more time in different subject classes or sets, sports teams or extra-curricular activities these pastoral class pairings may not capture the closest friendships or most supportive relationships. Nevertheless it provides an important indicator into the relational strength of an important aspect of the school's life.

Survey Completion Data

Student-student relationships were measured before and after camp in three single sex Year 11 classes, two male one female.

	Before	After
B1	17 out of 18	10 out of 18
B2	16 out of 17	12 out of 17
G	26 out of 29	22 out of 29

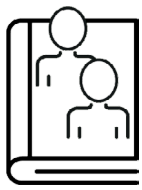


The five dimensions of relationships



Directness

Communication – The way in which people and organisations interact filters or mediates their ability to be ‘present’ in a relationship – physically, emotionally, intellectually or spiritually – and thus create encounters that enable effective communication and a sense of connection. Students will interact face to face, by phone and through social media, both in and out of school. This can create the misunderstandings that cause hurt and sour friendships, or the sense of connection that sparks creativity and conveys support. Have you had a text or email which you completely misinterpreted or which left you cold because you didn’t see the other person’s expression or hear their tone of voice at the time? Well, we look at the ways people communicate (face to face, email, text, etc) and assess the amount, quality and nature of contact and communication within a relationship, and how it builds a sense of connectedness.



Continuity

Storyline – The way in which one encounter links to and follows on from another builds the story of a relationship. This may convey trust, belonging and loyalty or a constant sense of dislocating change. Individual encounters are shaped by history – it can be hard for students to change a reputation built in earlier years. They are also shaped by future expectations – a friendship I will continue to enjoy or a stranger I may not see again. We therefore look at whether the various interactions over time build a sense of momentum, growth, stability and ultimately a sense of belonging and loyalty.



Multiplexity

Information – What we know about a person or organisation helps us to interpret their actions and manage the relationship appropriately. Students who don’t know the context for another student’s actions or responses, may misjudge them. Not knowing or understanding needs limits the scope to offer support. Not knowing skills or interests may mean that rewarding interaction is missed. This matters both within classes where group work is aided by mutual understanding as well as in social relationships. In class, if you can’t do something, when you’re struggling most, that’s when you show your real self and that’s when you need people around you, who really know you, and who can interpret your actions and manage the relationship effectively. The experience of feeling known, rather than misunderstood, is also psychologically important. We’re therefore interested in how relationships create the opportunities to gain appropriate knowledge of each other and how this in turn aids the conduct of the relationship.



Parity

Power - The ‘parity’ of a relationship refers to the way that power and influence are moderated between two people or organisations, so as to shape the ability and willingness of both parties to engage and contribute. In relationships between students they may feel that some inappropriately take the lead, hindering or ignoring the contribution of others. Some may free-load and not contribute fairly in relationships. Ultimately this is experienced as mutual respect or lack thereof. To explore these themes, we ask questions about participation, fairness and mutual respect.



Commonality

Purpose - Relationships are also characterised by values and purpose so we explore the extent to which these are aligned. Students may have a range of short and long term goals: they may share many of these or few, and the ones they share may be of greater or lesser importance to them. These goals may reflect the values and purpose of the school but also sit alongside other individual and personal priorities that command time, energy and attention. At times goals may diverge: groups may end up not working well together, teams can be fractious, and friends can drift apart as goals and interests change. Shared goals that are motivating and to which people are committed bring synergy and motivation to a relationship. When examining the purposes of a school, and its people, how deep rooted are their intentions or are the two parties pulling in different directions? For students this may find its expression in the sense that they feel part of a team, or body, and thus a commitment to each other's success.



Results

The overall relational proximity for the year group before camp was 58, with a significant increase to 67 after the camp. Despite the surveys being completed about different relationships within the classes before and after camp, the increase in the Relational Proximity score is significant at the 99th percentile confidence level. The overall wellbeing score of 76 for Toowoomba Christian College's Year 11 cohort, which compares to a CSA average of 72 for Year 11, was unchanged.

We did not gather detailed demographic data about the Toowoomba Christian College students, but we can establish benchmark comparator scores from the previous results across CSA schools. The average score for same gender student-student relationships in all years across all CSA schools we have surveyed is 58. Assuming similar ranges of academic attainment within the classes, levels of parental separation, numbers of students whose home language is not English, and a similar quality of student-teacher relationship to the average across CSA, we would expect an all male Year 11 class of the size at Toowoomba Christian College to have a Relational Proximity score of 55. The comparator for the larger all girl class is 54.

Relational Proximity scores before and after camp for Toowoomba Christian College Year 11

	Before	After	Change	Error Margin (+/-)	Significance Level
Year 11	58	67	+9	3	99%
Class B1	57	69	+12	7	98%
Class B2	70	62	-7	8	78%
Class G1	51	69	+18	4	99%

Note: all scores rounded to nearest whole number. Error margin indicates the likely range in results due to the sample.

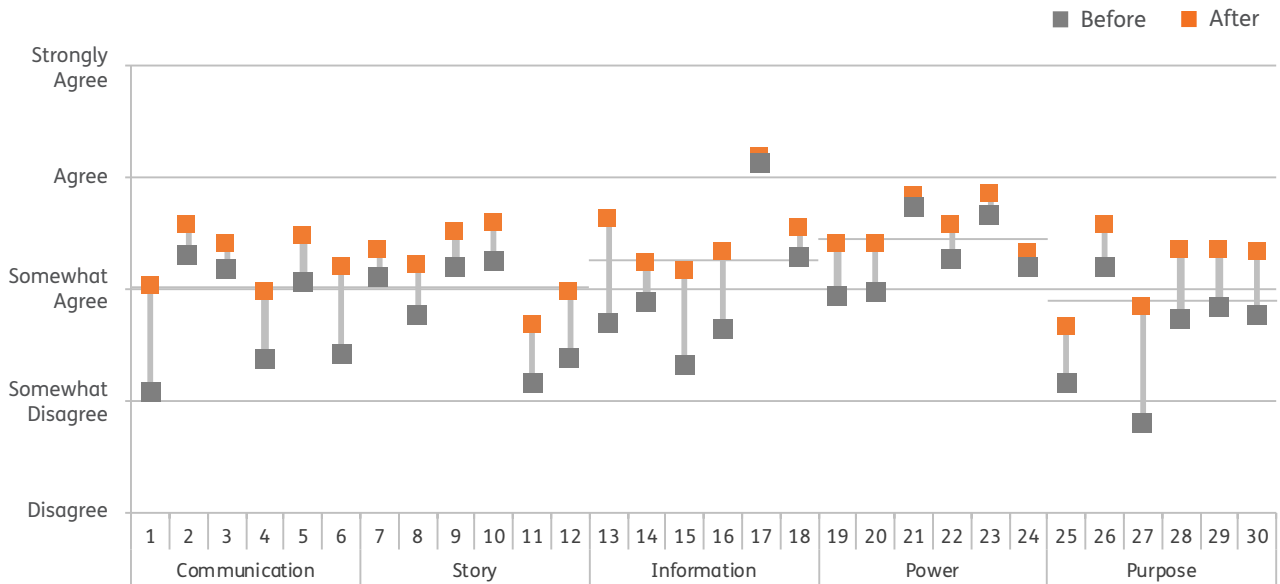
The three classes reported different results.

The all male B1 class saw a significant increase from 57 to 69. The all male B2 class had initially higher proximity of 70 (15 points above the CSA comparator of 55) which reduced to 62 after camp. Given the sampling this was not found to be statistically significant: it is possible, for example, that the relationships sampled before camp captured more of the closer relationships within the class, with the reverse being true after the camp. We have not visited the school and there may be factors known to the school which influenced this class' results. The all female G1 class saw a highly significant increase from 51 to 69. This class was therefore below the expected comparator score before camp, but well above after camp.

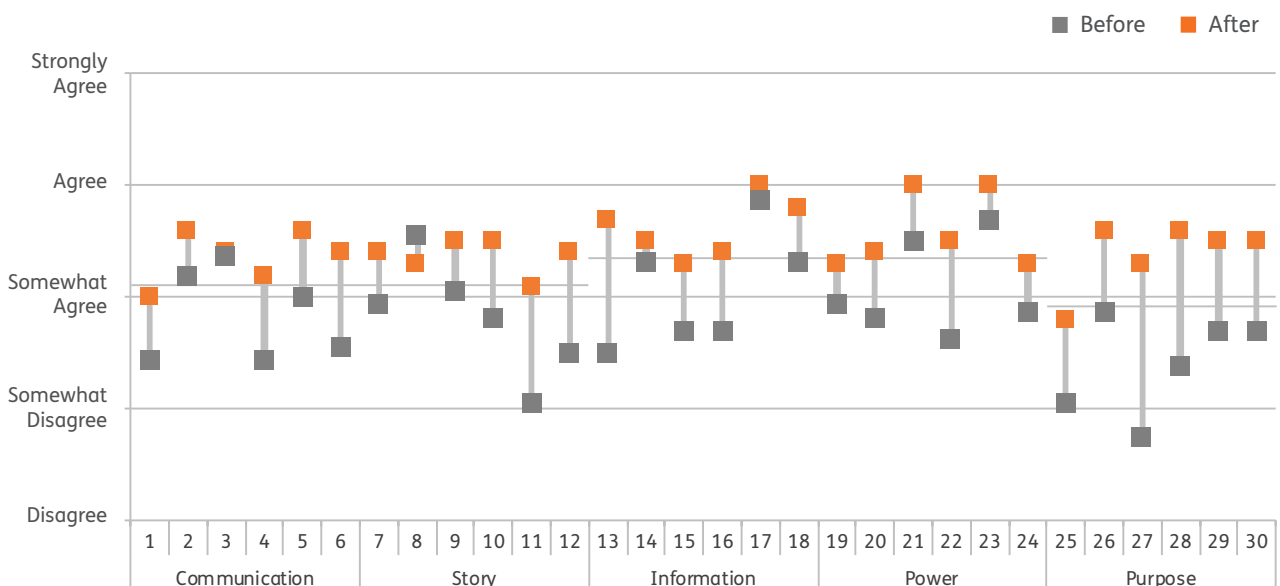
Overall these results indicate that the camp at Emu Gully lead to a significant change in relationships in the following weeks.

Summary of results

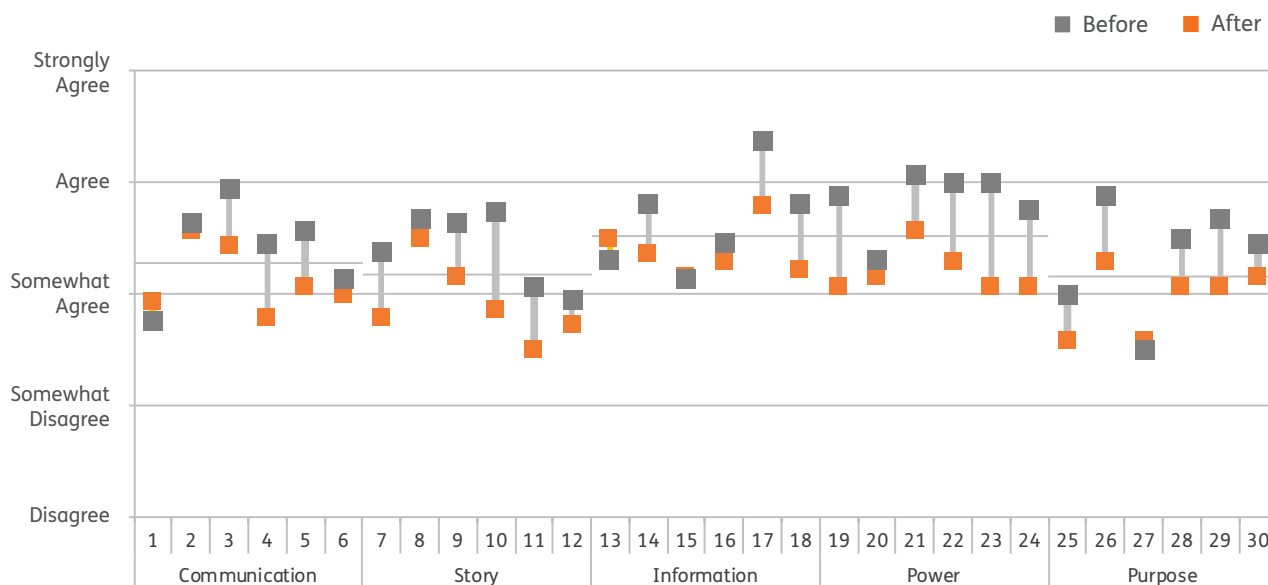
Relational Proximity agreement before and after camp: All Year 11



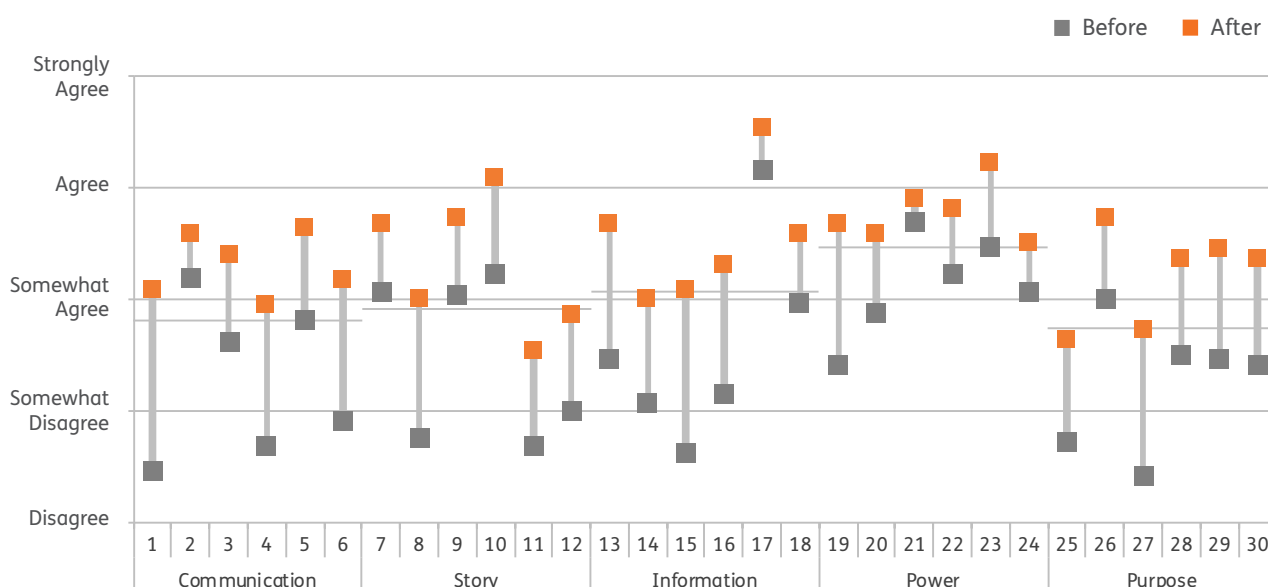
Relational Proximity agreement before and after camp: Class B1



Relational Proximity agreement before and after camp: Class B2



Relational Proximity agreement before and after camp: Class G1



Interpretation and analysis

Relational strengths before camp

Seven of the thirty statements had an average score at above 65 for the whole of year group before camp. There were in respect to:

- Appreciating and accepting their counterpart as a person (83)
- Believing their counterpart treats them fairly (75)
- Believing their counterpart's behaviour and contribution is worthy of respect (73)
- Believing they themselves are appreciated and accepted as a person (66)
- Managing to communicate with each other by one means or another when needed (66)
- Believing that it's worth investing in a good relationship with their counterpart (65)
- Believing that both do their fair share of the work in those things in which they are both involved (65).

These strengths all further improved after camp. While for the group as a whole, and for B1 and G1 in particular, we saw improvements in all aspects of the relationship, the biggest improvements were, not surprisingly, usually in those that were somewhat or significantly weaker at the outset.

	Class G1		Class G2	
	Before	After	Before	After
[Name] and I often talk together.	29	62	49	60
I can talk openly and honestly with [name].	34	59	49	64
I feel a sense of connection with [name].	38	64	51	68
I can turn to [name] if I have a problem.	34	51	41	62
Over time [name] and I have developed a great sense of loyalty.	40	57	50	68
I have seen [name] in different contexts and activities and this has helped me to get to know [him].	49	74	50	74
We have a good understanding of what each other likes and dislikes.	32	62	54	66
We have a good understanding of each other's skills and talents.	43	66	56	68
With [name] I feel I am listened to and can influence events.	48	74	59	66
In those things where we are both involved, I feel we both do our fair share of the work.	65	76	53	70
We have similar goals or things we want to achieve while at school.	35	53	41	56
I do things with [name] that are important to me.	28	55	35	66

Improving relationships through camp

Communication

When we assess relationships we look at what it means to be present in a relationship - physically, emotionally, intellectually or spiritually - and the ways in which that presence is filtered or mediated. This influences both the quality of communication and the sense of connection.

The activities at Emu Gully require students to work closely with students who are not necessarily their friends. Accomplishing the tasks requires good communication in working out how best to work together to achieve the task, resolving disagreements and conveying the support and encouragement needed when things get tough (and they do - camp activities are intended to stretch and challenge).

Emu Gully staff described how over the years they'd seen students finding it challenging to be split into groups for activities where they weren't with their best friends but rapidly building new bonds. One of the school teachers reflected on the impact of camp:

“Students who may be only had one friend they know and stick with and now they've got another group. They might not be their best friends, they might not necessarily hang around with them all the time, but at least they'll say hello to them and actually interact with some other people which helps to build the cohort so that they know each other better and can rely on each other better.”

As one female student on the camp put it, the change can be as simple as “just saying hi to each other - people you don't usually say hi to.”

The survey results back this up. Across the year group one of the biggest changes was in response to the question “[Name] and I often talk together.” Before camp this was scored at 42; after camp 60.¹⁷ The impact was particularly notable in G1 with a change in score from 29 to 62 suggesting that before camp the class may have been characterised by more strongly defined friendship groups.

We also saw a change in the quality of communication. Emu Gully staff described one of the main barriers to relationships as “the fears and anxiety we see in so many young people today and that creates distance because if I'm scared I need to back away from people.” One of the school teachers also commented on the challenge of communication:

Across the year group one of the biggest changes was in response to the “[Name] and I often talk together.” Before camp this was scored at 42; after camp 60.

“Over the ten years of coming here as a teacher - and that's a relatively short amount of time - I've seen huge changes in the way young people struggle to communicate with each other. Communication skills seem to be getting worse all the time regardless of the way that we as a school or as a community try to deal with that. But camps like Emu Gully make communication the centre point of how to get along and how to work together.”

¹⁷ Responses were on a six point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. An index score of 40 would indicate that, on average, everyone 'somewhat disagreed' while a score of 60 indicates that, on average, they 'somewhat agreed'

Students' belief that they could talk openly and honestly with their peers was another of the big changes before and after camp, with the overall Year 11 score increasing from 42 to 60.

People can co-exist face to face and communicate quite effectively without this creating any spark of connection – the true sense that you have encountered the other. It is this sense of connection that allow emotional support to be conveyed and the energy of creative engagement. From the camp leaders' experience, “when they commit to each other – there’s a sense of trust and connection that transforms the relationships.” We see this effect in the increased numbers of students reporting a sense of connection with their counterparts in the survey. For the year group as a whole it increased from 48 to 64.

Story

The way in which interactions between students are linked create a story of the relationship and build a sense of trust, loyalty and belonging - or not.

Camps provide an opportunity to reset the relationship. The camp itself becomes part of the story with staff and camp leaders speaking of this as a reference point for the future. When difficulties arise there is the opportunity to say ‘remember how at camp you...’. For one school ‘Emu Gully’ became a rallying call for a sports team – recalling the way in which they had pulled through a night hike in appalling weather conditions could be drawn on in the future.

The narrative of the relationship can also change at a personal level. One staff member commented about students who come to camp thinking others have been talking behind their backs or saying negative things about them but “doing something on camp they’re afraid of and having that person encourage them can make a huge difference.”

It can be hard for students to break the more negative stories of the relationship and it is here that the different environment of a camp may be particularly beneficial. One teacher reflected:

“Some of the biggest barriers in relationships at school occur because of hurts that linger for a long time. So something that happened back in grade 8 and it has just never been gotten over. Emu Gully purposely puts people in situations where they need to get past that and they need to recognise that getting past those things is the key to success in life. We’re ways going to have those relational barriers and relational hurts in the background of our lives. Emu Gully puts people in a certain situation where they can learn a life skill that is important for everyone which is relationships are actually what life is all about and that you need to work towards sustaining healthy relationships.”

Given Emu Gully’s emphasis on ANZAC values it is encouraging that students came from back more likely to believe that they can turn to their counterparts if they have a problem and that they have a great sense of loyalty to each other.

The girls in G1 (but not either of the boys’ classes) were more likely to believe after camp that “I have known [name] long enough to build a good level of understanding.” Although the overall duration of the relationship had not materially increased, the perception had, with the score for this statement increasing from 35 to 60. This may be linked to the increased mutual understanding that comes from seeing more about a person’s strengths and weaknesses in different contexts.

Information

One of the big opportunities of camps is that it enables people to see each other in a new light. In a different context, different strengths, weaknesses and interests are revealed. This may be particularly important for people who may not often shine in the classroom. As one leader said:

“Students can see each other in a new light through doing camp activities especially if you only ever interact with a particular student in a classroom. Maybe its not their favourite class – they just sit back, this is not where they excel. Whereas when you get to camp you can find situations where students who have been a bit of a wallflower can step forward and put across really good ideas.”

Students arrived at camp with high levels of mutual acceptance and appreciation of each other which is a positive reflection on the ethos and values of the school. In response to the statement “I appreciate and accept who {name} is as a person” the high overall score before camp of 83 only marginally increased to 84 after camp. It is worth noting that students are less confident that they are accepted and appreciated with responses to the statement “I feel {name} appreciates and accepts who I am as a person” starting at 66 before camp and increasing to 71 after camp. This difference is not uncommon, but camps are important both for learning to accept and appreciate all in the class and having the experience of being appreciated.

This is also part of the process of resetting the story of the relationship and putting it on more robust foundations – looking beyond the superficial to the strengths and qualities that really matter.

We found the positive impact of the camp experience with students being more likely to say “I have seen [name] in different contexts and activities and this has helped me to get to know [him]” which increased from 54 to 73 for the year group.

Interestingly, for G1 in particular, after camp they were also more likely to report that they had had a chance to see their counterpart’s skills and interests in classroom activities. For G1 this increased from 42 to 60 (B1 increased from 66 to 70).

Students were more likely to say “I have seen [name] in different contexts and activities and this has helped me get to know [him]” which increased from 54 to 73.

The substance of this better mutual knowledge and understanding was more confidence in having a good understanding of what each other likes and dislikes (which increased from 46 to 63 across the whole year group) and a good understanding of each other’s skills and talents (53 to 67).

Power

People’s experience of fairness and respect in relationships, and belief that they have an opportunity to influence events, is an important dynamic in relationships. As one leader said: “Mutual respect starts to happen as they build a closer relationships and rely on each other.” It links to the camp’s work on communication – encouraging people to listen and value the contributions of others.

Overall, and in common with other schools, this was the strongest aspect of the relationship before camp with an overall index score of 66 compared to 58 for all aspects of the relationship.

For the girls in G1 the weakest element of this aspect of the relationship before camp was the belief that “with [name] I feel I am listened to and can influence events.” Their score for this increased from 48 to 74 (by comparison B1 increased from 59 to 66). The weakest area for the boys in B1 was the belief that both they and their counterpart did their fair share of the work in those things where they were both involved. Their score increased from 53 to 70 (G1 65 to 76).

As with mutual appreciation, we find that students are more likely to say that others are worthy of respect than that they themselves are respected and valued. Across the whole year group the belief that the way their counterpart contributes and behaves is worthy of respect increased slightly from 73 to 77. G1 saw a bigger change from 69 to 85. The belief that their counterpart “respects and values what I contribute” increased from 64 to 67 maintaining the gap of roughly 10 points.

Purpose

A shared identity and a shared purpose are important aspects of being a group. Yet in life we may have multiple roles and identities, competing accountabilities and different priorities. If these are not aligned, and we do not have the capability to manage that alignment, then tensions in relationships are likely.

For Emu Gully this is an important aspect of the relationships they seek to nurture. They commented: “we create opportunities with a common purpose – when you unite a central focus around something everyone can commit to you get outstanding results.” It is also part of how they see ANZAC values:

“Mateship is an Australian way of saying relationship. We are simply there for each other and don’t let our mates down. It doesn’t matter who that person is, it doesn’t have to be a friend or someone we like, the fact that they’re part of the group they’re mates.”

Three core elements that we looked at in the survey were students’ belief that their counterpart was fully committed to their common goals, whether students felt part of the group, and whether they believe that they have things in common with their counterpart in the survey. There was an average increase of 11 points from 56 to 67 across these three questions for the whole year group after the camp.

The biggest change was that students were much more likely to believe after camp that they do things with their counterparts that are important to them. This was the weakest item for the year group as whole before camp and increased from 36 to 57. This matters to the extent that it indicates that any common purpose is not incidental or unimportant (and therefore at risk from competing priorities) but is an alignment around things that are valued.

There was an average increase of 11 points from 56 to 67 when it came to commitment to common goals, and feeling part of the group.

Conclusion

The basis of this study was that relationships are essential for the flourishing of students, whether in terms of their wellbeing, character development, health, academic attainment, or subsequent success in life.

We looked at the relationships of a group of Year 11 students before and after an outdoor educational program to the Emu Gully site. The relationships before camp were already healthy when compared to what we have seen among Year 11 students in schools who are part of the Christian Schools Australia project. After camp they were even better, particularly in two of the three classes.

Emu Gully and school staff described two overall impacts which are supported by our data:

“Students learn to connect deeper, see things from others people’s perspective, which helps with that deepening relationship.”

“I think camps are really valuable in helping to overcome trust concerns. I think in high school there’s so much of relationships built on appearance or they’re built on some really superficial things and fear. I think camps can provide a different experience so that students can bond with other students who they have to trust in order to accomplish the tasks.”

These changes in relationships come from being required to connect with all members of the class, to communicate effectively, and to trust and rely on them. Doing this in the context of a shared purpose creates a stronger sense of group identity and allows pupils to see each other (and staff) in a new light. These experiences provide a reference point on return to school – the reminder of successful relationships at camp provide a starting point for addressing difficulties in the future.

The relationships before camp were already healthy when compared to what we have seen among Year 11 students. After camp they were even better, particularly in two of the three classes.

There are many things schools already do to nurture and support relationships. This includes the values and culture of the school, the role-modelling of relational interactions by teachers, and the structuring of activities and pastoral settings to maximise relational learning. This study echoes the findings from similar studies in the UK that camps and outdoor activities are a powerful opportunity for supporting the development of relationships.

We began this report by quoting research that says that what matters is whether we are able to help students develop a very different set of qualities that includes persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence. The ANZAC values of Emu Gully put these in a more explicitly relational context – rightly so as it is in and through relationships that character is developed. We have only measured a short term impact over a few weeks, but both school staff and camp leaders testified to continuing impacts. We hope that many other groups will reap both the joy and the benefit of such intentional investment in relationships in the years to come.

