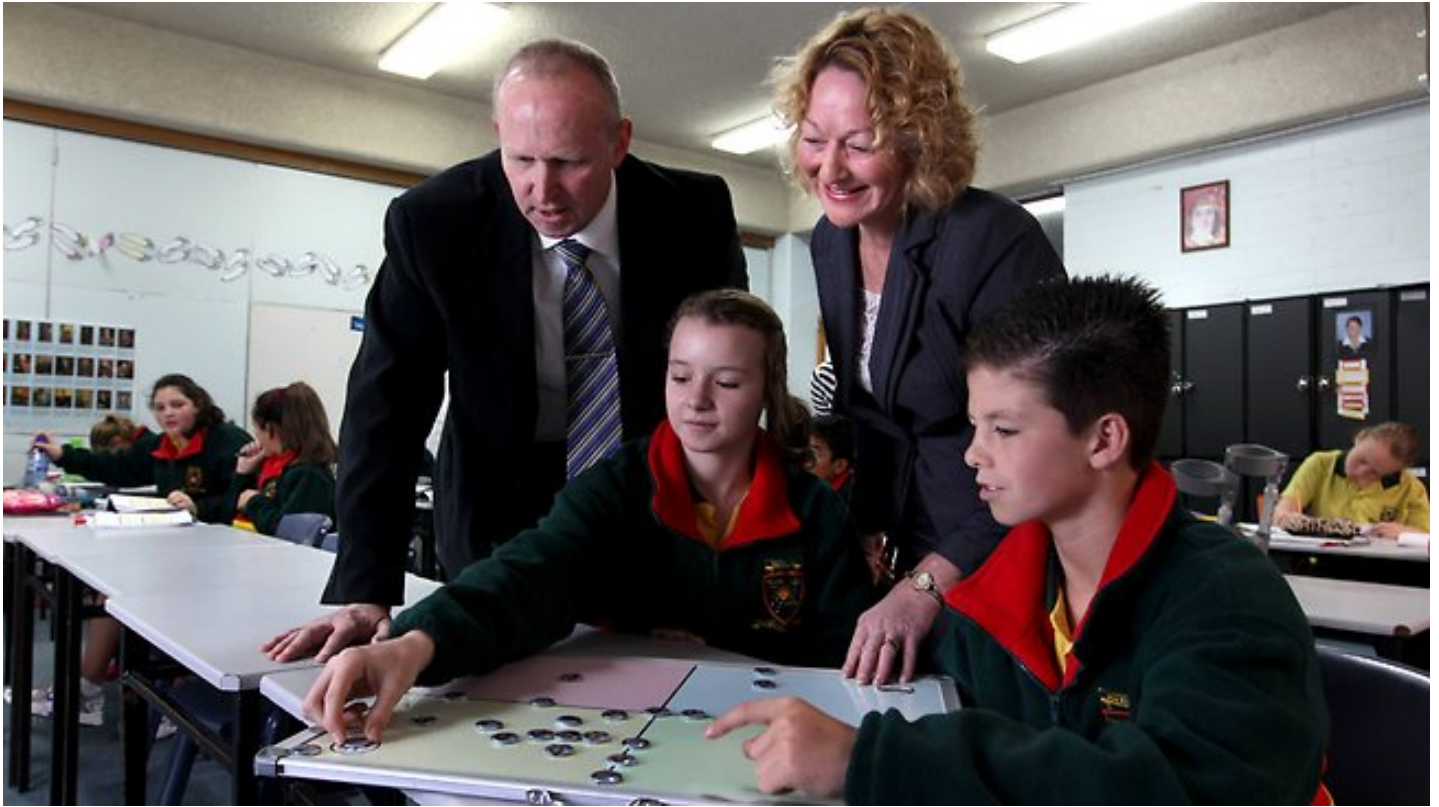


THE AUSTRALIAN

Schools trial new program to help kids keep emotions in check

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MacKillop Catholic College deputy principal Steve Higham, teacher Jan Enright and students Ryan Vidler, left, and Bailey Siwek work on the new program. Picture: David Geraghty Source: The Australian

A SWEDISH approach to teaching emotional intelligence is gaining ground in Australian schools as a way to encourage better behaviour among students.

The Four Rooms of Change theory, based on a Swedish psychological theory, is attracting interest among the teaching community after a pilot program in six Victorian schools last year.

Early data from a Swinburne University study on the schools shows students reported improvements in their ability to understand and analyse the emotions of their peers, suggesting greater empathy.

The theory involves dividing emotions into four categories, or "rooms", with names such as contentment, denial, inspiration and conflict.

In schools, teachers have introduced the concept by placing a whiteboard in classrooms and asking students to move personalised magnets between the categories as their emotions change.

The class members then discuss how and why their emotional state has changed.

Development body Teacher Learning Network has been promoting the concept, with schools in NSW, Queensland and Western Australia also indicating interest.

Executive officer Michael Victory said the program could be particularly useful for adolescent boys, who struggled to express themselves with language and often acted out.

"This program has got the potential to be successful because it gets to the kids and talks to them around emotional intelligence, empathy and understanding the emotions of others," he said.

"Whether they're at school under a teacher's eye or they're on their own at the computer with no supervision, this program gets them to stop and think about the other person before they do anything stupid or nasty.

"We think this is the big difference between this program and lots of others that are out there."

MacKillop Catholic College in Melbourne's western suburbs was among the six schools to trial Four Rooms of Change last year.

Deputy principal Steve Higham said the school was so impressed, it had expanded the program to 25 classrooms to minimise bullying and develop resilience and empathy among students.

"Most programs are like restorative practice - something has to go wrong for it to be useful," he said. "This is proactive. It gets on the front foot and teaches students about themselves."

The theory originated with Swedish psychologist Claes Janssen in the late 1960s before his wife, a primary school teacher, introduced it to schools in about 2000.

Mr Victory said that it gave teachers a clear way to teach about emotional intelligence.

"We've often talked about how important that is, but this gives them an actual mechanism to teach the kids what they mean," Mr Victory said.