

Evaluation of Skylight's Travellers Programme

Final report

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Executive summary	vii
Background	vii
Methodology	vii
Results	viii
Discussion and recommendations	x
1. Introduction	1
Mental health and wellbeing of young people in New Zealand	1
<i>Health and wellbeing of different groups in New Zealand</i>	1
The Travellers programme	3
NZCER's evaluation of Travellers	4
2. Methodology	5
Focus of the survey	5
Participants and survey administration	8
Student and school demographics	9
Data analysis	11
Report structure	12
3. Overall Travellers experience	15
All students	15
<i>Age when participating in Travellers</i>	15
<i>Trust within Travellers group</i>	15
<i>Benefits of Travellers</i>	16
Sub-groups	20
<i>Overall helpful vs. overall neutral/unhelpful</i>	20
<i>Māori</i>	22
<i>Pasifika</i>	22
<i>Decile</i>	23
<i>Gender</i>	24
<i>Co-educational vs. single-sex</i>	24
Summary	25

4. Increased resiliency and ability to navigate changes and challenges	27
All students	27
<i>Open-ended descriptions</i>	33
Sub-groups	34
<i>Overall helpful vs. overall neutral/unhelpful</i>	34
<i>Māori</i>	34
<i>Pasifika</i>	35
<i>Decile</i>	35
<i>Gender</i>	36
<i>Co-educational vs. single-sex</i>	36
Summary	36
5. Engaged, confident and motivated young people	37
All students	37
Sub-groups	39
<i>Overall helpful vs. overall neutral/unhelpful</i>	39
<i>Pasifika</i>	40
<i>Decile</i>	41
<i>Co-educational vs. single-sex</i>	41
Summary	41
6. Changes over time	43
Screening data from all students	43
Changes over time	44
<i>Screening results</i>	44
<i>Comparisons over time for matched students</i>	45
Summary	47
7. Relationships and help-seeking	49
All students	49
Sub-groups	50
<i>Overall helpful vs. overall neutral/unhelpful</i>	50
<i>Pasifika</i>	50
<i>Decile</i>	50
<i>Gender</i>	51
Summary	51
8. Recommendations from the young people	53
All students	53
Sub-groups	55
<i>Overall helpful vs. overall neutral/unhelpful</i>	55

<i>Pasifika</i>	55
<i>Decile</i>	56
<i>Gender</i>	56
<i>Co-educational vs. single-sex</i>	56
Summary	56
9. Discussion and conclusion	59
What are the short- and medium-term impacts of the Travellers programme for young people?	59
<i>Short- and medium-term outcomes</i>	59
<i>Logic model</i>	61
How well is the Travellers programme meeting the needs of particular target groups?	63
Can the Travellers programme be improved?	64
Summary	65
References	67

Tables

Table 1	Summary of overall short- and medium-term impacts of Travellers for young people	xi
Table 2	Summary of overall short- and medium-term impacts of Travellers for at-risk groups	xi
Table 3	Ethnicity of students	9
Table 4	Characteristics of schools of the young people who responded	10
Table 5	Description of sub-groups	13
Table 6	Impact of Travellers for students	19
Table 7	Strategies gained through Travellers (rated Travellers helpful compared to neutral/unhelpful)	21
Table 8	Strategies gained through Travellers (Pasifika compared to non-Pasifika students)	23
Table 9	Strategies gained through Travellers (students from low-, mid- and high-decile schools)	24
Table 10	Life events experienced in last 12 months by young people	28
Table 11	Additional life events experienced in last 12 months by young people	31
Table 12	Risk measures from screening survey for all young people compared to young people selected for Travellers	44
Table 13	Risk level from screening survey for all young people compared to young people selected for Travellers	45
Table 14	Changes over time (screening and follow-up survey) for the 129 matched students	46

Table 15	Sources of support	49
Table 16	Suggestions for how Travellers could be improved	54
Table 17	Summary and evidence of overall short- and medium-term impacts of Travellers for young people	60
Table 18	Summary of overall short- and medium-term impacts of Travellers for sub-groups	63

Figures

Figure 1	Original Travellers logic model	7
Figure 2	Thinking and feeling strategies learnt in Travellers (n = 212)	17
Figure 3	Relationship and help-seeking strategies learnt in Travellers (n = 212)	18
Figure 4	School and time management strategies learnt in Travellers (n = 212)	18
Figure 5	Life events experienced and how Travellers helped (n = 212)	29
Figure 6	Additional life events experienced and how Travellers helped (n = 212)	32
Figure 7	Subjective Experience of Distress Scale (n = 212)*	38
Figure 8	How the young people felt about school, themselves and the future (n = 212)	39
Figure 9	Modified Travellers logic model	62

Appendices

Appendix A:	Focus group questions for students pre-survey	69
Appendix B:	Information letter for students	71
Appendix C:	Paper version of student survey	73
Appendix D:	Student focus group questions post-survey	83
Appendix E:	Travellers co-ordinator questions post-survey	85

Executive summary

Travellers really helped me cope with the difficulties I was facing at home, and helped me open up to those who really loved me. (Female Pasifika student)¹

Background

Travellers is an early intervention programme run by Skylight for students (generally in Year 9) in New Zealand secondary schools. The overall aim of Travellers is to “enhance protective factors for young people experiencing change, loss and transition events and early stages of emotional distress” (Skylight, 2011, p. 1). Currently, the Ministry of Health contracts Skylight to provide the programme as one component of the *New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy* (Associate Minister of Health, 2006).

Skylight has a culture of evaluating and improving the Travellers programme. In order to build on existing studies on Travellers, Skylight commissioned the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) to conduct an external evaluation that explored the short- and medium-term outcomes for the young people who took part in this programme in 2008 or 2009. This study began in April 2011 and finished in January 2012.

The overarching evaluation questions were:

- What are the short- and medium-term impacts of the Travellers programme for young people?
- How well is the Travellers programme meeting the needs of particular target groups?
- How can the Travellers programme be improved?

Methodology

To collect information about the impact of Travellers on the short- and medium-term outcomes² of Travellers, we conducted a survey focusing on the opinions of young people who had completed the programme a few years ago.

¹ All quotes in this report (including those at the beginning of chapters) come from the young people’s comments in the follow-up survey.

² The short- and medium-term outcomes were those identified by Skylight as the intended goals of the Travellers programme.

The short-term outcomes that were the focus of the evaluation were:

1. access to appropriate youth-focused sharing and learning opportunities
2. improved connectedness to school
3. trusting relationships formed in the group
4. improved help-seeking skills
5. increased access to appropriate support.

The medium-term outcomes that were the focus of the evaluation were:

1. increased resiliency and ability to navigate changes and challenges
2. engaged, confident and motivated young people
3. more positive relationships with peers/families/teachers.

We also included questions that had been used in Skylight's initial screening survey³ so that the responses from the baseline data could be compared to the follow-up responses to tell us about shifts over time in relation to the above outcomes.

In total we received 212 completed survey responses from students from 26 different schools. Reflecting the fact that Travellers was first introduced in Auckland schools and has only been a national programme since 2008, many of these schools were from the Auckland region. This resulted in a higher proportion of Pasifika students completing the survey than is found in the general population.

Along with exploring outcomes for all of the young people in the evaluation, we also looked at the outcomes for students from different sub-groups, including groups that previous research had shown were at higher risk of presenting suicidal thoughts and behaviours (i.e., Māori students, Pasifika students and students from low socioeconomic communities).

We also validated the survey data findings through qualitative focus groups with students (pilot and post-survey). These three sources of data served to give us a more robust picture of impacts than any one source.

Results

Overall, Travellers appears to be a useful programme for a range of students, with the majority (82 percent) rating Travellers at the top or mid-point on a five-point scale. The majority also reported that Travellers had helped them to learn a range of strategies, in particular strategies that contribute to increased resiliency and ability to navigate changes and challenges, and positive relationships and help-seeking. For example, over two-thirds (69 percent) had asked for more

³ The screening survey is completed by students, usually at the start of Year 9, and used to determine the risk level of the students in order to help schools decide who should take part in Travellers.

support since doing Travellers. This support came most often from friends, followed by family, the guidance counsellor, and teachers or deans at the school.

Travellers was less likely to help with strategies relating to schoolwork and time management, although it is unclear whether this is because students already have these strategies or whether this is less of a focus for Travellers.

Over half of the young people considered Travellers was run at the right age for them (64 percent). Sixty-two percent said that they could trust the people in their group, and a further 22 percent answered neutrally.

The students selected to take part in Travellers mainly came from a group rated as being at high risk (as indicated by criteria on the screening survey). Since taking part in Travellers, at the time of follow-up the young people reported experiencing less subjective distress despite experiencing a greater number of challenging life events compared to when they completed the screening survey. This increase in experience of challenging life events is not surprising and is likely to be due to maturation. The fact that the young people had lower levels of subjective distress suggests that since taking part in Travellers the young people had improved their ability to manage challenging life events.

Overall, at the time of the follow-up the young people had fairly positive views of themselves and their lives, with the median score of 32 on the *Subjective Experience of Distress Scale* (with 40 or higher considered as at risk). There were also fewer young people who said they did not feel good about themselves most of the time since taking part in Travellers.

Some young people felt that the strategies they learnt in Travellers are very useful in dealing with challenging life events. However, less than half (44 percent) of the young people said that Travellers helped a lot or a bit with a difficult situation they were asked to describe in an open-ended section of the survey. It appears that while young people can identify skills and strategies they learnt in Travellers that contribute to their resiliency, it is more difficult for them to identify how the strategies they learnt in Travellers can be applied. It is not necessarily that these skills have not been applied to new situations; it may simply be that it is difficult to articulate this complex process.

However, the young people's open-ended comments clearly indicated that Travellers had positively affected their general wellbeing. Many were clearly able to articulate their feelings and experiences and made connections between their current sense of improved wellbeing and Travellers. Given that the survey required the young people to recall experiences and views about themselves from two or more years ago, the fact that many were able to do this suggests that Travellers has had a positive impact.

Discussion and recommendations

A number of data sources were used to assess the short- and medium-term impacts of Travellers for young people; in particular, comparing patterns over time, collecting data on young people's perceptions of Travellers, and views gathered through qualitative focus groups. It is always difficult to attribute causality with past programmes. However, our three sources of data in combination all paint a similar picture, suggesting that Travellers was supporting change for young people.

Table 1 provides a summary of the overall impact of Travellers. This shows that Travellers was moderately effective across a wide range of outcomes. It was particularly effective for improving help-seeking skills and helping young people to form positive relationships with peers/families/teachers.

Table 1 **Summary of overall short- and medium-term impacts of Travellers for young people**

Short- and medium-term outcomes	Summary of impact
Access to appropriate youth-focused sharing and learning opportunities	✓ ✓
Improved connectedness to school	✓ ✓
Trusting relationships formed in the group	✓ ✓
Improved help-seeking skills and more positive relationships with peers/families/teachers ⁴	✓ ✓ ✓
Increased access to appropriate support	✓ ✓
Increased resiliency and ability to navigate changes and challenges	✓ ✓
Engaged, confident and motivated young people	✓ ✓

✓ = Weak evidence, with less than 50 percent of young people responding positively to some of the questions that relate to this outcome.

✓ ✓ = Moderate evidence, with 50–74 percent of young people responding positively to some of the questions that relate to this outcome.

✓ ✓ ✓ = Strong evidence, with 75 percent or more of young people responding positively to some of the questions that relate to this outcome.

Travellers was meeting the needs of the higher-risk groups well (see Table 2). The outcomes for Māori were mostly comparable to those for non-Māori. Travellers was particularly beneficial for Pasifika students and students from low-decile schools.

Table 2 **Summary of overall short- and medium-term impacts of Travellers for at-risk groups**

Short- and medium-term outcomes	Māori	Pasifika	Low-decile
Access to appropriate youth-focused sharing and learning opportunities	✓	○	○
Improved connectedness to school	○	✓	✓
Trusting relationships formed in the group	○	○	✓
Improved help-seeking skills	○	✓	✓
Increased access to appropriate support and more positive relationships with peers, families and teachers	○	✓	○
Increased resiliency and ability to navigate changes and challenges*	○	✓	✓
Engaged, confident and motivated young people	○	○	○

× = Majority of evidence indicates lower outcomes for sub-group compared to other students.

○ = Majority of evidence indicates similar outcomes for sub-group compared to other students.

✓ = Majority of evidence indicates better outcomes for sub-group compared to other students.

* Some of the evidence for this outcome was related to how helpful Travellers was in dealing with challenging life events. There were a large number of events that few people had experienced. Therefore, the overall pattern of responses was taken as one piece of evidence, rather than the responses to individual items.

⁴ These two outcomes were combined because they were related and were explored in the same questions.

Although the data mostly suggested that Travellers was effective in meeting its aims, there was also evidence that Travellers could further enhance its model in order to benefit more young people and to have a greater long-term impact. While most young people found Travellers helpful, 16 percent did not and 14 percent said they did not trust the people in their group. Most of the young people thought that a few changes should be made to Travellers to enhance the programme. The most common suggestion was having more time spent in Travellers. Other suggestions included covering a wider range of topics, having guest speakers, and providing more information about why the young people were in Travellers.

The data suggest that students who are most in need benefit most from Travellers, and so being able to identify these students is important. Those who could trust the people in their Travellers group were more likely to report finding Travellers helpful, and so selecting students who can work together effectively also appears to be important. Selecting the right mix of students for Travellers relies on the use of the screening data, the professional judgement of school staff, and taking into account the views of the young people themselves. A suggestion for future research is to further explore how Skylight can support schools in selecting young people to take part in the programme.

In summary, the data show moderate to strong evidence of change across a wide range of wellbeing-related outcomes for most students, as well as for sub-groups of students, including those identified in New Zealand data as being more at risk of negative health-related outcomes. For a relatively short programme of workshop sessions this is a good outcome, which indicates that Travellers is likely to be a useful investment for schools when considering how best to support at-risk students and support them to develop strategies that contribute to their wellbeing. This quote is illustrative of the young people's perspectives:

Travellers helped me feel a bit better about myself and how to treat my family and friends better. Travellers taught me not to give up on life. (Female South African student)