What works best

Supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to flourish – what works best in practice

A practical guide for schools

NSW GOVERNMENT

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) undertakes rigorous and in-depth analysis of education programs and outcomes across early childhood, school, training, and higher education to inform whole-of-government, evidence-based decision-making. Put simply, it seeks to find out what works best. Its focus is all education in NSW. CESE's main responsibilities within the department are:

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- robust data collection to enable research and statistics for the education and training sector
- evaluating key policies and programs to strengthen quality delivery and student outcomes
- national engagement on education research agenda and data strategy
- driving capability uplift in the use of data and evidence as part of everyday practice
- trialling innovative initiatives to improve student outcomes.

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Acknowledgements

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About the resource

This resource is a practical guide for school leaders and teachers on how to support low-SES students' personal academic agency using quality teaching practices identified in the <u>What works best: 2020 update</u>. It presents the research findings of a new study from NSW high schools using <u>Tell Them From Me data</u>, and explains how low-SES students can be supported by implementing What works best teaching practices.

This resource has been aligned to the following 5 key drivers of What works best:

- **Classroom management** creates an environment that minimises disruptions, maximises instruction time and encourages students to engage in learning.
- Advocacy at school increases student **wellbeing**. Wellbeing is particularly important for vulnerable students and acts as an enabler of teaching and learning.
- **Explicit teaching practices**, particularly instructional relevance, provide a sense of clarity and purpose which can boost students' confidence in meeting expectations.
- **Effective feedback** provides students with relevant, explicit, ongoing, constructive and actionable information that guides their progress.
- A culture of **high expectations** ensures that all teaching practices, from classroom management to feedback, are consistently aligned towards a common objective, creating a coherent and supportive learning environment.

How to use this resource

School leaders and teachers can read, reflect on, discuss and implement principles and strategies highlighted in this practical guide as they support the <u>School Excellence Framework</u>, including learning culture, wellbeing and effective teaching practice, or as part of school-developed <u>High Impact Professional Learning</u>.

School leaders can:

- unpack the guide as part of whole-school professional development and/or stage team meetings
- encourage teachers to share and reflect on classroom implementation
- reflect on how teachers currently support low-SES students' academic agency
- facilitate discussions with staff about areas for improvement
- access <u>Tell Them From Me data</u> to support improvement strategies and monitor progress
- support staff to find connections between What works best, the School Excellence Framework and academic agency.

Teachers can:

- read the guide and reflect on current practice using the accompanying reflection guide
- determine which strategies to implement in the classroom to bolster academic agency
- reflect on the impact of implementation.

Contact

✉ Email feedback about this resource to <u>info@cese.nsw.gov.au</u>

✪ You can also subscribe to the CESE newsletter and connect with us on <u>Yammer</u>.

Introduction

While students from low socioeconomic status (low-SES) backgrounds on average report lower levels of engagement, wellbeing and academic achievement than their peers from higher SES backgrounds, many low-SES students do fare well at school and demonstrate strong academic outcomes. Understanding these students is key to sustaining their academic growth and can provide insights into how schools can better support those who are not yet reaching their potential. This practical guide presents the research findings of a new study from NSW high schools using Tell Them From Me (TTFM) data. It explains how low-SES students can be supported by implementing What works best teaching practices.

Key findings

- Among our students from the lowest SES backgrounds, around half have high or very high levels of personal academic agency, including positive academic self-concept, perseverance and sense of belonging to school.

- What works best practices like classroom management and supporting student wellbeing predict students' levels of academic agency.

- For 'vulnerable' students,[1] who have very low levels of academic agency and higher rates of misconduct, strategies that focus on classroom management, advocacy at school and instructional relevance appear to be most important.

- For 'precarious' students, who have below-average levels of academic agency but who tend to abide by school rules, classroom management, advocacy and relevance remain important, alongside explicit teaching practices and feedback.

> ### Student academic agency in NSW public schools
>
> Students report on various elements of their academic agency in the student survey offered to NSW public schools – Tell Them From Me.* TTFM reports on student, parent and teacher perspectives of school life, and provides data on students' wellbeing and engagement, as well as the teaching practices they encounter in the classroom. This practical guide presents findings on how to support the academic agency of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, drawn from modelling of TTFM data in a collaborative study by CESE and the University of New South Wales (UNSW). This study was published in 2023 in the journal Social Psychology of Education.
>
> * Tell Them From Me is provided by, and is the intellectual property of The Learning Bar.

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1   The terms 'vulnerable' and 'precarious' stem from students' agency profiles as identified in the research https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-023-09881-0.

What works best to support low-SES students to flourish

In What works best: 2020 update (CESE 2020),[2] we outline 8 quality teaching practices that are known to support school improvement and enhance the learning outcomes of our students. In this practical guide, we present findings of a new study which highlight how 5 student-centred What works best practices can support low-SES students' academic agency and achievement (Figure 1):[3]

- **Classroom management** creates an environment that minimises disruptions and maximises instruction time. Students who feel safe and fairly treated in the classroom have a greater sense of wellbeing and are more likely to actively engage in learning.

- Advocacy at school increases student **wellbeing**. Wellbeing is particularly important for vulnerable students and acts as an enabler of teaching and learning.

- **Explicit teaching practices**, particularly instructional relevance, provide a sense of clarity and purpose which can boost students' confidence in meeting expectations.

- **Effective feedback** provides students with relevant, explicit, ongoing, constructive and actionable information that guides their progress.

- A culture of **high expectations** ensures that all teaching practices, from classroom management to feedback, are consistently aligned towards a common objective, creating a coherent and supportive learning environment.

Figure 1

What works best practices for low-SES students

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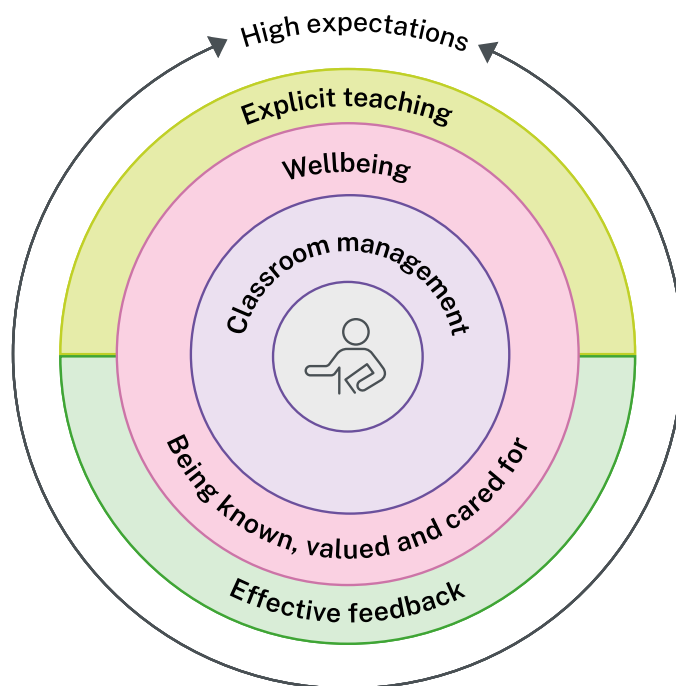
2   For more information on What works best, refer to <u>What works best: 2020 update</u>.

3   The other 3 What works best practices are measured in the TTFM teacher survey: assessment, collaboration and use of data to inform practice.

Agency and achievement among low-SES students in NSW

Students from the lowest SES background quartile on average report lower levels of personal academic agency, and academic achievement, than their peers from higher SES backgrounds. However, there are also many low-SES students who are faring well. Among all low-SES students surveyed (Figure 2):[4]

- more than half report high or very high academic self-concept
- nearly a third report high or very high levels of everyday resilience and perseverance
- 42% report high or very high sense of belonging to their school
- only a small share (<10%) report truancy or negative behaviour at school
- over 10% attain in the top 2 NAPLAN bands for reading and numeracy.[5]

Figure 2

Low-SES students with high or very high levels of TTFM academic agency factors and NAPLAN top 2 bands
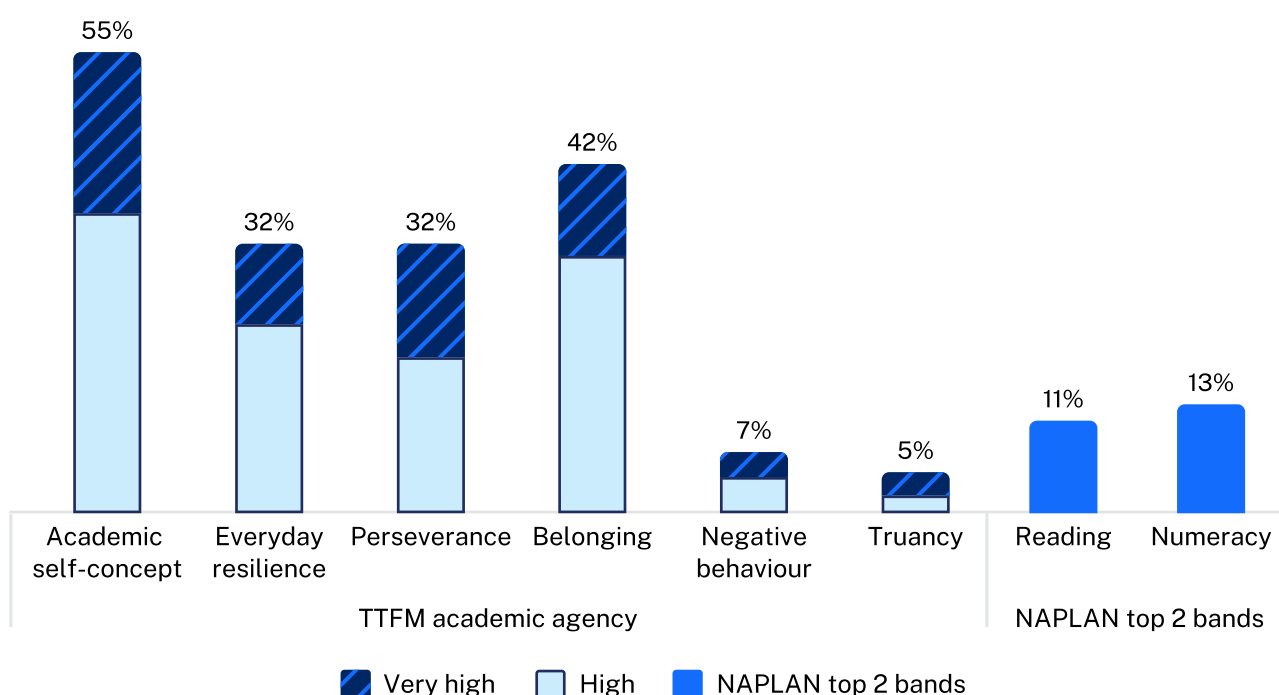
Source: TTFM survey responses of low-SES secondary students in Semester 1, 2023; NAPLAN results of low-SES secondary students in 2021.

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4   SES refers to student (not school) background and is based on students' responses to survey questions on their family structure, highest level of parental education and availability of educational resources at home.

5   The NAPLAN data reported is from before the break in series in 2021, when it was common to report the percentage of students in top 2 bands.

Agency profiles among low-SES students

CESE and the University of New South Wales (UNSW) examined the TTFM survey responses of 20,125 secondary school students from low-SES backgrounds in 421 public schools in NSW to identify ways in which they differ in their personal academic agency.
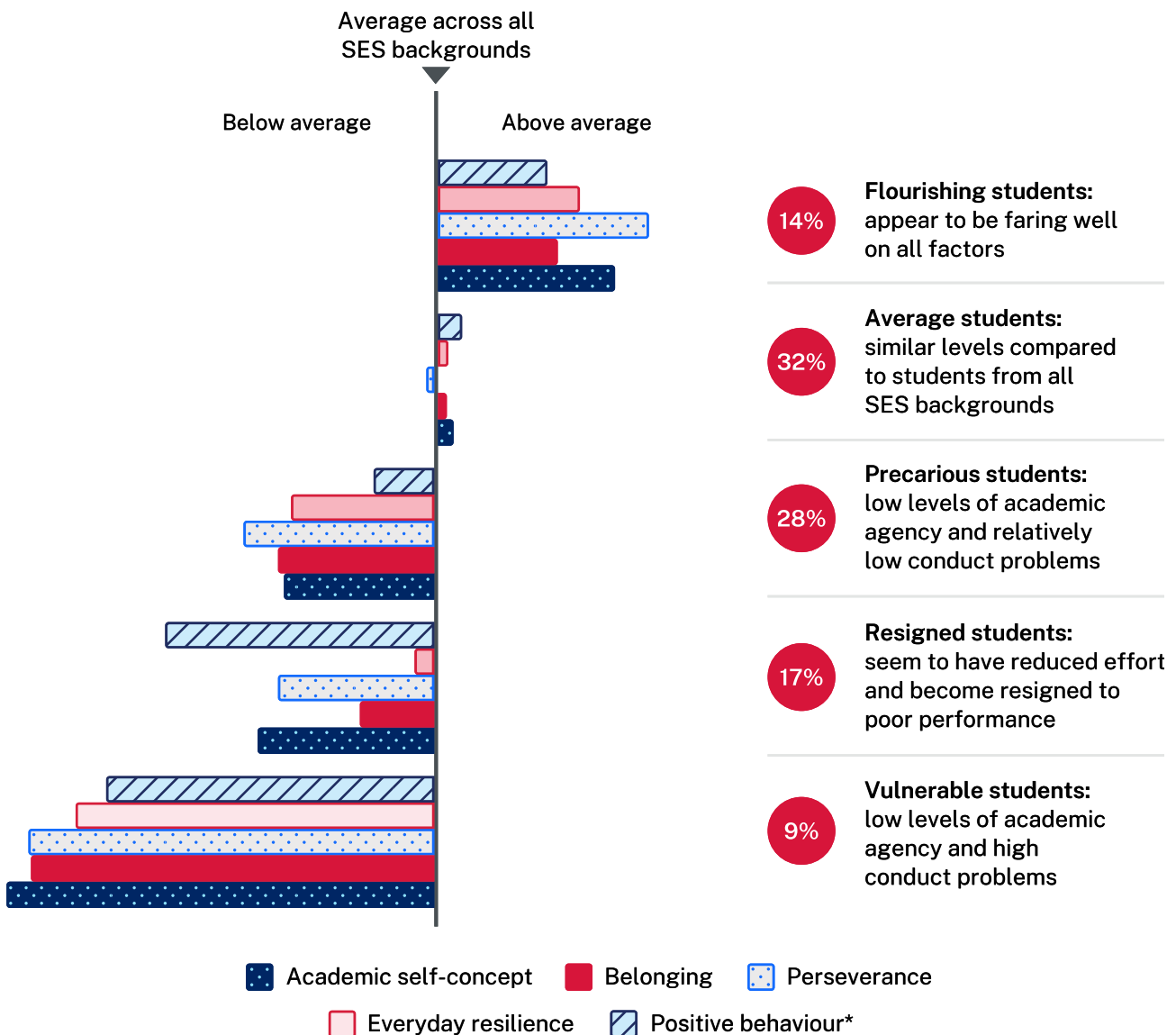
Academic agency refers to a student's ability to take an active and self-directed role in their own learning and educational experiences. It encompasses their capacity to make choices, set goals and take actions that contribute to their academic success. Academic agency is a crucial aspect of a student's development and can significantly impact their educational outcomes and overall wellbeing.

TTFM covers 5 elements of academic agency:

- **Academic self-concept**, also referred to as self-efficacy or perceived competence, represents a student's belief in their ability to succeed in a specific academic task or domain.
- **School belonging** is the extent to which students experience a sense of community and connection with their school, teachers and peers. This serves as a protective factor against stress and risk and offers emotional support in academic life.
- **Perseverance** relates to a student's dedication and persistence in completing schoolwork. It plays a central role in their engagement with extended or complex academic tasks.
- **Everyday resilience** at school, also called academic buoyancy, refers to a student's ability to overcome setbacks and challenges that are typical of day-to-day school life, such as receiving isolated poor grades or negative feedback. It emphasises proactive and adaptive approaches to overcoming academic adversity.
- **Conduct problems** encompass behaviours that breach established rules and norms. This can negatively affect students' own success and the success of their classmates.

Figure 3

Agency profiles among low-SES students, compared to the average student across SES backgrounds

Average across all SES backgrounds

Below average | Above average

14% Flourishing students: appear to be faring well on all factors

32% Average students: similar levels compared to students from all SES backgrounds

28% Precarious students: low levels of academic agency and relatively low conduct problems

17% Resigned students: seem to have reduced effort and become resigned to poor performance

9% Vulnerable students: low levels of academic agency and high conduct problems

Academic self-concept ⬛ Belonging ⬛ Perseverance

Everyday resilience ⬛ Positive behaviour*

Source: UNSW-CESE analysis based on TTFM survey responses of low-SES secondary students in Semester 1, 2019 and 2021.

* Positive behaviour reversed from conduct problems, which covers truancy and misbehaviour at school.

The research identified 5 student profiles of academic agency and found that, overall, nearly half of all students from low-SES backgrounds have high levels of academic agency (the Average and Flourishing student profiles) (Figure 3):

- **Flourishing students** reported more positive levels than the average student across all SES backgrounds in all academic agency factors. **14%** of low-SES students fell into this profile.

- **Average students** reported generally positive levels on all factors, similar to the broad average of students from all SES backgrounds. **32%** of low-SES students fell into this profile.

- **Precarious students** had below-average levels of academic self-concept, belonging, perseverance and everyday resilience, but reported relatively lower levels of misconduct. These students may be difficult to identify in the classroom as they do not show problematic behaviours. **28%** of low-SES students fell into this profile.

- **Resigned students** reported well-below average levels of academic self-concept and perseverance; below-average levels of school belonging; average everyday resilience and well-above average conduct problems. These students appear to have reduced the effort they put in (reflected in perseverance) and become resigned to poor performance (reflected in everyday resilience). **17%** of low-SES students fell into this profile.

- **Vulnerable students** had considerably lower levels than the average student across all SES backgrounds in academic self-concept, belonging, perseverance and everyday resilience as well as considerably higher conduct problems. **9%** of low-SES students fell into this profile.

The following sections are aimed at better supporting our precarious, resigned and vulnerable students.

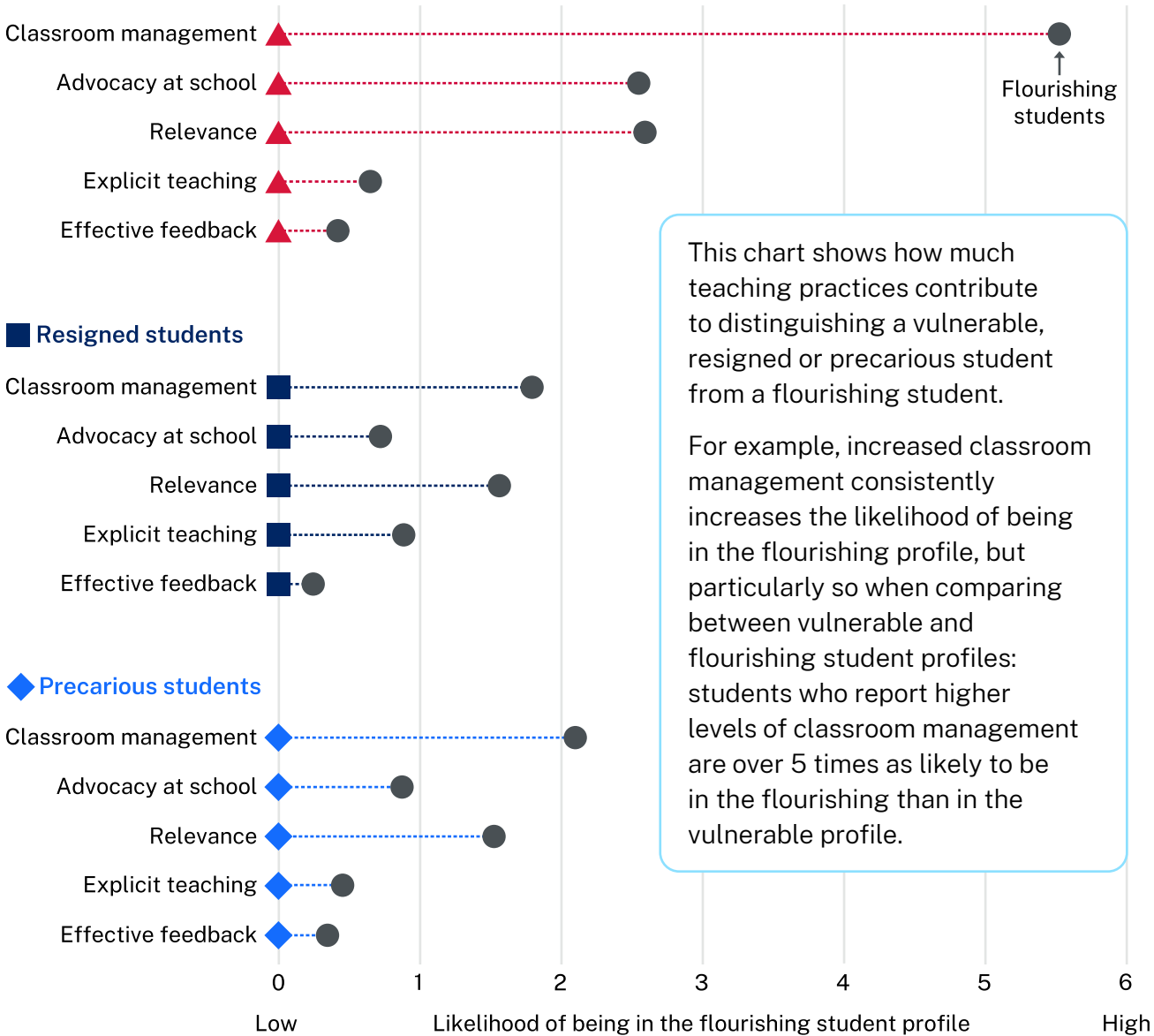# Teaching practices can help low-SES students to flourish

The research examined whether teaching practices can make a difference to students' profile membership, above and beyond their demographic background and prior achievement. Classroom management, advocacy at school, instructional relevance and explicit teaching as well as feedback all contribute to distinguishing flourishing students from those in the other profiles (Figure 4):

- Higher levels of classroom management, advocacy at school and relevance are particularly influential in distinguishing flourishing students from those in other profiles, as illustrated by the bar length (likelihood of being in flourishing profile).

- Classroom management is a key teaching practice when comparing between flourishing and other students, with results suggesting it is particularly important for vulnerable students.

- Explicit teaching practices and feedback, while still influential, seem to have a lesser impact in distinguishing flourishing students from others. Their impact is relatively stable across student profiles, suggesting these practices are equally important for different types of students.

Figure 4

Impact of What works best teaching practices expressed as likelihood of being in the flourishing student profile, controlling for demographic background and prior achievement

This chart shows how much teaching practices contribute to distinguishing a vulnerable, resigned or precarious student from a flourishing student.

For example, increased classroom management consistently increases the likelihood of being in the flourishing profile, but particularly so when comparing between vulnerable and flourishing student profiles: students who report higher levels of classroom management are over 5 times as likely to be in the flourishing than in the vulnerable profile.

Source: UNSW-CESE analysis based on TTFM survey responses of low-SES secondary students in Semester 1, 2019 and 2021. Likelihood derived from odds ratios; all odds ratios are statistically significant.

How to help boost low-SES students' agency and achievement

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often face challenges that can hinder their academic progress. For example, they often have limited access to resources such as books, technologies and extracurricular activities; family members may not be able to support them in their schooling; and cultural differences between home and school environments may mean that educational norms and expectations in schools do not align with their experiences and values. These factors can cause uncertainty about schooling and a low sense of belonging.

The TTFM research shows that schools can boost low-SES students' academic agency and achievement through 5 What works best practices: classroom management, advocacy at school (as part of student wellbeing), relevance and explicit teaching, effective feedback and high expectations. The research demonstrates that these practices support low-SES students to take an active role in their own learning and improve their capacity to make choices, set goals and take actions that contribute to their academic success.

Classroom management

A well-structured and non-disruptive learning context can help students from low-SES backgrounds develop their agency because the classroom rules, norms and goals are clear rather than implicit.

Advocacy at school as part of student wellbeing

When students feel their teachers care about them and are attuned to their learning needs, they feel valued and welcome members of the classroom. This may be particularly important for students from low-SES backgrounds who may have to navigate differences in the practices and values of their home life and their school life.

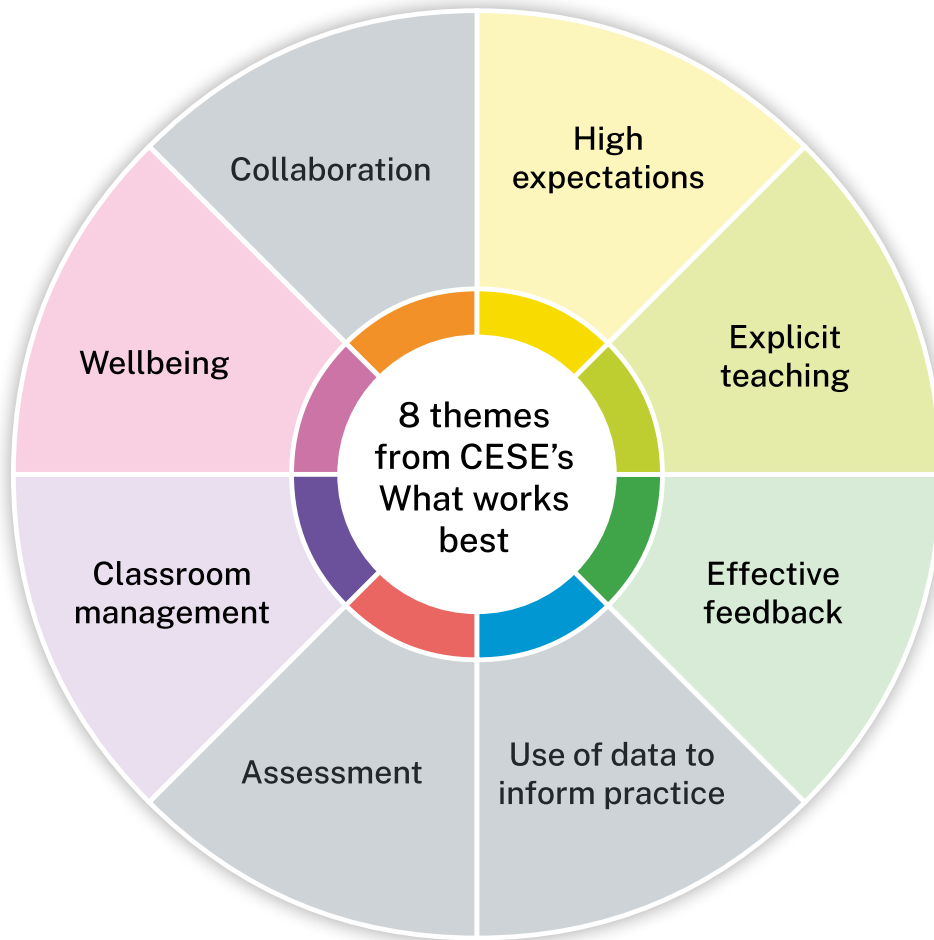### Relevance and other aspects of explicit teaching

Tying academic content to real-life situations students are more familiar with, bridges the gap between school and their everyday lives which can be wider for students from low-SES backgrounds. Explicit teaching ensures that all students, regardless of their prior knowledge or skills, have an opportunity to understand new content.

Effective feedback

Feedback offers concrete, improvement-oriented guidance and clarity. It also can serve as a validating tool, reminding students of their capabilities and potential beyond limiting stereotypes.

High expectations

Holding all students to appropriately high standards ensures that all students feel part of the learning community and are not overlooked when opportunities for advanced coursework, extracurriculars or other enrichment activities arise.

8 themes from CESE's What works best:
- High expectations
- Explicit teaching
- Effective feedback
- Use of data to inform practice
- Assessment
- Classroom management
- Wellbeing
- Collaboration

Prioritising What works best practices for students at risk and our most vulnerable students is an important step in ensuring that all students are supported throughout their schooling.

For more information on What works best, refer to:

- What works best: 2020 update
- What works best in practice.

For further resources on how to boost students' sense of belonging and their confidence, perseverance and everyday resilience, see:

- Supporting students' sense of belonging
- Everyday resilience – what works best in practice
- Growth goal setting – what works best in practice.

For CESE research on supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, see:

- Supporting Aboriginal students to attain the Higher School Certificate (HSC)
- Understanding attendance.

Classroom management

Effective classroom management is vital for creating an environment that minimises disruptions, maximises instruction time and encourages students to engage in learning. Students who feel safe and fairly treated in the classroom are more comfortable taking risks, making mistakes and asking questions. Shared rules and routines can contribute to a sense of belonging.

Classroom management is an important basis for other What works best teaching practices. A physically, emotionally and psychologically safe environment allows teachers to develop supportive relationships with students that foster wellbeing, and to set high academic expectations without fear of alienating or overwhelming students. With established routines and expectations, feedback can be a constructive and regular part of the learning process, rather than just a reaction to misbehaviour or exceptional performance.

Practical steps to promoting a positive classroom climate:

- Use explicit teaching strategies to teach classroom rules and routines and to communicate classroom expectations about how to be a respectful, collaborative class member. Rules, routines and outcomes should be consistent and predictable so students can take responsibility for their learning.

- Actively supervise students to keep them on task, including frequent opportunities for active student participation and proactively offering assistance or extension to students who may otherwise disengage or become disruptive.

- Provide consistent and calm responses to disengagement and disruptive behaviours to support students to re-engage in learning. Verbal and non-verbal feedback should be given in a consistent, fair and respectful manner.

Advocacy at school

Advocacy at school refers to the extent to which students feel that they have adults at school who they can turn to for help and advice. When students have adults they can turn to at school, they feel known, valued and cared for. This boosts their confidence to navigate challenges, ask questions and seek help when they need it.

Advocacy at school underlies other What works best teaching practices. When teachers know their students well, they are better able to provide instruction that is purposeful and meaningful to students' everyday lives, to provide effective feedback and to help students see that their teachers know them and want them to succeed.

Practical steps to promoting advocacy at school:

- Invest time to get to know students, including their interests, strengths, attitudes towards learning and aspirations.

- Check in with students regularly. This can be a quick chat to see how they are going, or if they are understanding and following different lessons or topics.

- Encourage students to express any areas of confusion or concern during lessons. Act on this information to support students to develop as learners.

- Promote student voice by asking for their feedback on lessons and other aspects of school life. Act on their suggestions where appropriate to show students that their opinions are valued.

- Ensure the cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of students is represented in leadership roles, extracurricular activities and enrichment opportunities.

Wellbeing

Explicit teaching
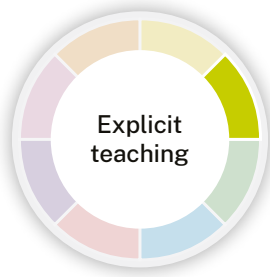
Relevance

Content and tasks are relevant if they are personally meaningful, interesting and useful. Incorporating materials that reflect and acknowledge the students' backgrounds and experiences can make them feel known and valued in the classroom. When students know the purpose of what they are learning, they are more likely to pay attention and persevere in acquiring new knowledge and skills. And when they recognise that they can build upon their existing knowledge and skills, it enhances their confidence in tackling new challenges.

Practical steps to enhancing relevance:

- Before introducing new material, review what students already know that is related to the new topic.

- Be explicit in connecting new content to students' personal lives, interests and goals or to major issues in the world outside of school, and outline how it is useful and important.

- Ensure the cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of students is reflected in teaching resources and activities.

- Personalise language and tasks where possible to provide a sense that the task is aligned to the student.
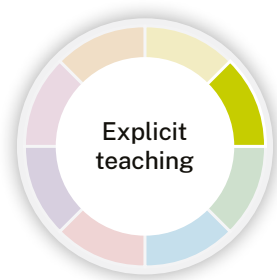
Explicit teaching

Beyond relevance, explicit teaching practices also involve teachers clearly explaining to students what they are expected to do, how to do it and what it looks like when they have succeeded. Students are given opportunities and time to ask questions, check their understanding and practise what they have learnt.

When students understand what is expected of them, it provides a sense of clarity and reduces uncertainty, which can boost their confidence in meeting those expectations. When complex tasks are broken down into manageable steps and guidance is provided along the way, students experience incremental success, persevere longer and build confidence in their abilities.

Practical steps to enhancing explicit teaching:

- Use and explain the language of the syllabus to increase students' familiarity with the vocabulary so they understand exactly what they are being asked to do.

- In early stages of learning new content and skills, reduce the difficulty to align with students' prior knowledge and learning.

- Work through examples of new or more complex learning, explaining the steps, connections or concepts. Do so in 'real time' rather than showing pre-prepared solutions or responses.

- Regularly check for student understanding and provide opportunities for all students to ask questions to clarify their thinking.

- Ensure lessons include time for students to practice and consolidate new learning.

Effective feedback

Effective feedback provides students with relevant, explicit, ongoing, constructive and actionable information about their performance against learning outcomes from the syllabus. When students receive clear and effective feedback that guides their progress and recognises their efforts and achievements, they learn that mistakes are part of the learning process, feel empowered rather than overwhelmed, perceive a sense of progress and remain engaged.

Practical steps for effective feedback:

- Talk about mistakes as opportunities for learning rather than failure, and emphasise how a student's effort has contributed to their improvement.

- Provide clear and specific feedback that identifies the next steps and skills needed for the student to improve.

- Incorporate debrief time after giving feedback to help students manage any negative emotional responses.

High expectations

Expectations for success represent the extent to which school staff value academic achievement and hold high expectations of all students by encouraging and expecting students to do their best work. Students are encouraged and empowered to strive for excellence, persevere through challenges and take ownership of their learning.

A culture of high expectations ensures that all teaching practices, from classroom management to feedback, are consistently aligned towards a common objective, creating a coherent and supportive learning environment.

Practical steps for promoting high expectations:

- Set and clearly communicate high expectations of students from all backgrounds, and as appropriate to students' prior learning and achievement.

- Use regular formative assessment to understand students' strengths and areas for improvement.

- Challenge students to develop their skills and knowledge by building on previous knowledge and by providing tasks that build on difficulty levels.

- Encourage students to set challenging but achievable growth goals for their learning and break these down into manageable tasks to provide opportunities to experience success.

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