

# Cottage by the Sea

The Difference 'Take a Break' Makes

Report, March 2023

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*Cottage by the Sea: The Difference 'Take a Break' Makes* is a research report prepared by Deakin University for Cottage by the Sea.

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# Executive Summary

*Cottage by the Sea: The Difference 'Take a Break' Makes* is a research initiative of the Cottage by the Sea – Deakin University Research Partnership that seeks to understand the ways in which the *Take a Break* program at Cottage by the Sea (CBTS) in Queenscliff, Victoria, Australia, makes a difference to the lives of the children who attend. In addition, this research sought to explore the ways in which the *Take a Break* program supported the children to be active, healthy, confident and respectful. This research contributes to future directions in evidence-informed interventions that focus on young Australians experiencing vulnerability.

Since 2018, the *Cottage by the Sea – Take a Break* program has involved **over 2000 children**, aged between six and 12 years, and over 150 accompanying teachers and principals who have attended *Take a Break* programs across 20 local government areas (LGAs) in the state of Victoria including Ballarat City, Brimbank, Buloke, Campaspe, Central Goldfields, Colac Otway, Corangamite, East Gippsland, Frankston, Gannawarra, Golden Plains, Greater Bendigo, Greater Geelong, Greater Shepparton, Hobsons Bay, Mansfield, Maribyrnong, Northern Grampians, Pyrenees, Swan Hill, Warrnambool City, Whittlesea, Wyndham and Yarra Ranges. These LGAs include areas that have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and exposed to natural disasters, including bushfires and floods, or include children who have experienced vulnerability.

This report draws on data collected from student and teacher evaluations of their experiences of the *Take a Break* program, student drawings, and from semi-structured interviews with their teachers, and program leaders and members from the CBTS leadership team. This has enabled all those directly associated with *Take a Break* to share their understandings of the program. Researcher observations were made of participants undertaking a day of activities from five schools attending four separate *Take a Break* programs between May and October 2022.

## Summary of Key Findings

This summary of key findings draws from the various data sources to synthesise key insights into the ways in which the *Take a Break* program experiences **can make a difference to the lives of the children who attend**. The body of the report contains elaborations on these insights as evident in the data regarding how participation in the CBTS *Take a Break* program supports children to become active, healthy, confident and respectful. These learnings are presented as responses to **two key questions**:

1. How does the *Take a Break* program make a difference to the lives of the children who attend?
2. In what ways does participation and the opportunities provided by the CBTS *Take a Break* program support children to be active, healthy, confident and respectful?

This research provides strong affirmation of the value of the *Take a Break* program for children and teacher participants from schools located in regions of social disadvantage. Participants were overwhelmingly positive about the various ways in which the program overtly and intentionally enabled children to be active, healthy, confident and respectful, but there was also evidence of the ways in which these aims were supported through the 'everyday' cultural and relational practices of staff, leadership and volunteers.

The mission of CBTS focuses on providing opportunities for young people to build connections that can (re) frame their expectations about capabilities, pathways and relationships. It also supports young people experiencing vulnerability and trauma to feel less isolated and more hopeful about their future.

This research highlights the various ways in which the *Take a Break* program experiences offered by CBTS can make a difference to those who attend.



## Findings and Insights

Overall findings from this research showed that the lives of the children aged six to 12 years are impacted by their experiences at the *Take a Break* program. The children developed confidence, a sense of belonging, self-belief, caring dispositions, healthy mindsets, and deeper relationships with their classroom teachers. Children and teachers reported the impact of the *Take a Break* program in relation to the program staff, food and activities, including the care and respect that was shown to the children, and the opportunities provided to them to develop skills and qualities they can draw on in the future.

The following presents the five noteworthy attributes that the children developed throughout their participation in the *Take a Break* program:

1. **Increased confidence:** The program builds confidence by presenting challenges that support children to take calculated risks and extend their capabilities – challenges that ultimately prove manageable. The encouragement to participate, even in activities that initially appear well beyond a child's (perceived) capacity, is enhanced by the supportive relationships the program develops between the adult supervising staff and the children. Children also develop confidence in building friendships with their peers and report a sense of increased hope and happiness.
  2. **A sense of belonging:** A central message of the *Take a Break* program is that the children are not isolated, but rather are part of a wider community where each can provide and draw strength and support from each other. This message becomes more evident as the program progresses. Belonging to a community allows the children to become comfortable and feel safe while being encouraged to attempt things outside of their comfort zone.
  3. **Self-belief:** The *Take a Break* program provides children with self-belief, restoring a sense of community while engaging in the program activities. The *Take a Break* program enables children to learn life lessons while developing the courage to participate in unfamiliar experiences that foster a belief in themselves and in what they can achieve.
  4. **Caring dispositions:** The *Take a Break* program builds trust by providing clear expressions of care and cultivates caring dispositions within the children. The children were particularly impressed with the respect shown towards them by the *Take a Break* program staff. From the first moments that the children participated in the *Take a Break* program, the sense of care is reinforced through the handmade gifts from the volunteers and is permeated through all aspects of the program including the staff, the care in preparing healthy food, building relationships,
- and providing activities that supported the children to be active, healthy and confident. This overall sense of care encouraged the children to display respect to each other.
5. **Healthy mindset:** The *Take a Break* program is based upon the principles of outdoor education and adventure therapy, coupled with an emphasis on healthy eating. CBTS has drawn on the research of Alfred Deakin Professor Felice Jacka regarding the relationships between gut health and mental health. As such, one of the main aims of the *Take a Break* program is to improve healthy eating. This dedication of the *Take a Break* program to improve the eating and nutritional habits of the participating children was something not only noticed by the adults involved in the program, but also by the children themselves, who frequently commented that this was the first time they had tasted many of the vegetables provided over the program. The physical activity expected by the *Take a Break* program was also frequently mentioned by the children both in terms of the healthy appetite this gave them and in their sleep patterns during their participation in the program.
- Two further crucial features of the *Take a Break* program were identified by the research. These included:
- **Emphasis on relationship building:** The *Take a Break* program is organised to privilege relationship building. The classroom teachers were particularly impressed with how well organised every aspect of the program had been and how this allowed them time to fully engage with their students, helping both teachers and children to build deeper and more meaningful relationships with each other. Relationship building was a crucial aspect of the program, as teachers engaged with their students in ways that are otherwise not possible within busy classroom environments.
  - **Intentional pedagogy:** The program is based upon building the self-knowledge of students by developing their confidence through an effective ethics of care structured within an intentional pedagogy of scaffolded 'one step more' challenges. These challenges were successfully achieved and led students to develop a belief that a difference achieved now will lead to further and more consequential differences into the future.
- The research also found that there was a **decline in student satisfaction ratings** of the *Take a Break* program since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic; however, this shift has been from the highest levels of satisfaction to slightly lower levels on the Likert scales provided for the students to select – rather than towards dissatisfaction with the program. While this shift was found within the student evaluation data it was not found to be consistent with qualitative data collected through this research.

## Recommendations

The research provides compelling evidence of the various ways in which the *Take a Break* program makes a difference for the participating children and their teachers. The following recommendations seek to signpost considerations to help further strengthen the important work of the *Take a Break* program and enhance the value of this experience now and into the future.

There are **three overall recommendations**. These acknowledge that work is already being done in these areas by the *Cottage by the Sea – Take a Break* program. As such, these recommendations seek to reinforce the importance of these efforts in terms of program evaluation and improvement, developing staff capacity regarding the pedagogical principles of the program and sustainability. It is hoped that the findings of this research can be shared with all key stakeholders to ensure that they are made aware of the deep value of their work to the success of the *Take a Break* program.

### Recommendation 1

That the continued focus of the *Take a Break* program must be upon staff's capacity to deliver a pedagogically sound experience to children focused upon meeting the objectives of the program.

CBTS staff hold a wealth of knowledge and experience that is largely responsible for the high levels of satisfaction experienced by the children and the teachers who attend the *Take a Break* program. The success of the program is related to the pedagogically sound practices of program staff. Any improvement of the program will depend upon the ongoing recruitment and development of staff and the depth of their understanding of the pedagogical practices central to the *Take a Break* program. As the education sector grapples with the changing demands and emerging future needs of the children who attend, it will be important to continue to provide the staff at CBTS with professional learning opportunities necessary to meet these ongoing demands.

### Recommendation 2

That CBTS continues to ensure that volunteers and donors are made aware of the joy their efforts bring to the children who attend the *Take a Break* program.

The research project team were particularly struck by how appreciative the children and their teachers were of the gifts and handmade items the children received upon arrival in the program and the effect this had on them in feeling welcomed and in belonging to the *Take a Break* program. Some children and teachers also expressed their gratitude to the people who donated to the *Take a Break* program so that they could attend. The program staff also made it clear that securing ongoing funding was the cornerstone for the future delivery

and expansion of the *Take a Break* program. We highlight the importance for staff at CBTS to continue to ensure that volunteers and donors are made aware of the deep gratitude children feel in receiving these gifts, and the contributions of donors to support the facilities and resources provided in the *Take a Break* program. This could help consolidate their ongoing funding and vital contributions as well as build a sense of community. It would be difficult to overstate the impact this has upon the children from their earliest moments in the program. This is also true of those who contribute to the ongoing financial viability of the program.

### Recommendation 3

That there is ongoing research into the *Take a Break* program to further understand the effectiveness of the program in meeting its objectives and the broader impact of the program on the lives of children experiencing vulnerability. Specifically, there is a need to explore the longer-term impact of the program once the children return to school and home, and the impact of the program on the broader CBTS community. In addition, further research is warranted to validate the existing evaluation tools and to provide a mechanism to integrate learnings from the research and evaluation into the enacted program.

Our data and analysis clearly show that the *Take a Break* program supports children's learning within a fun environment that is happy, safe, active, healthy, and encourages them to become confident and respectful. However, the research presented in this report drew on the perspectives of children, their teachers, and the CBTS camp leaders and staff at one point in time. Further longitudinal research is warranted to investigate the impact of CBTS beyond the duration of the program itself, including the impact on the children's lives at home, school and in their community. This longitudinal research program should also involve the CBTS alumni, teachers and principals, families, referring welfare agencies, and CBTS volunteers and donors to understand more fully the impact of the program on the lives of those who attend the *Take a Break* program.

Our research findings showed that some children, particularly in the younger age group, may not have understood some items in the evaluation tool and did not always provide responses. The effectiveness of the evaluation tools used by the *Take a Break* program could be modified to take into consideration the age of the children completing these, and could therefore be made more







statistically valid, providing richer data that is better able to demonstrate the effectiveness of the program. In addition, it is recommended that further investigation is warranted to invite students to provide feedback on their understandings through additional qualitative approaches such as interviews, student drawings and reflections.

# Introduction

This *Cottage by the Sea: The Difference 'Take a Break' Makes* report provides CBTS with research-informed understandings of how the *Take a Break* program achieves its intended outcomes, and the ways in which the program makes a difference to the lives of the children who attend. The findings presented in this report answer the following two questions:

1. How does the *Take a Break* program make a difference to the lives of the children who attend?
2. In what ways does participation and the opportunities provided by the CBTS *Take a Break* program support children to be active, healthy, confident and respectful?

This research draws upon data provided by and from the perspectives of children attending the program, their teachers, *Take a Break* program camp leaders and members of the CBTS leadership team. The data included responses from student evaluations, teacher interviews and evaluations, and interviews with CBTS staff. In addition, the research team drew on their own observations made across four *Take a Break* program camps. Together, this data provided the research team with a wealth of insights into how the students themselves responded to the *Take a Break* program and how this response was both anticipated and encouraged by the program. It also helped to show how teachers and program staff understood the *Take a Break* program and its impact.

A major finding of this research was the overwhelmingly positive responses by all participant groups regarding the *Take a Break* program including the children, their teachers and the CBTS staff. The evaluations, comments and drawings by the children themselves highlighted the ways in which participation in the *Take a Break* program made a difference to their lives, including feeling safe, brave, happy, confident, and ready to try new things. The teachers frequently emphasised that the *Take a Break* program was well organised and often believed it to have been the best such program they had ever attended. The program staff manifest the sheer joy they experience in being part of the program.

A further important finding of this research was the evidence that the children who participated in the *Take a Break* program were deeply impacted by it and were continually encouraged to engage in the program's four main intended aims – to become more active, healthy, confident and respectful. Many of the children commented on their increased levels of physical activity and drew pictures to illustrate them participating in camp activities such as rock climbing, surfing and walks. Most children also commented on the quality and quantity of food they were provided with and reported feeling more healthy and very appreciative of the 'cook'. In addition, children commented that they felt more confident and had tried new things that they never thought were possible. Many children were provided with opportunities to go beyond their comfort zone and to test the limits of what they believed they could achieve. These

increased levels of children's physical activity, healthy eating and confidence were also reported by their teachers. *Respect* was also found to be a key theme in the feedback. However, what makes this program particularly effective in reinforcing the message of the need for respect was how respectfully the children themselves found that they were treated by the program staff. That is, the *Take a Break* program camp leaders and CBTS staff demonstrated respect to the children from the moment they entered the program but also expected the children to be respectful to each other and to the staff and volunteers at CBTS.

This research has found clear evidence of the impact of the *Take a Break* program upon the children who attend and of the potential for this to have a deep and ongoing impact on their lives. The variety of data from multiple participants derived from the mixed-method design of this research has allowed for a deep interrogation of the benefits and challenges of the *Take a Break* program. However, the views expressed should not be extrapolated as being understood as representing the opinions of all members of the particular groups represented. Similarly, the views expressed by the program staff of CBTS should be interpreted as those of the participants interviewed, rather than of the organisation itself. That said, the analysis attests to the richness and consistency of the data collected and provides a strong warrant to continue researching the benefits of the *Take a Break* program, particularly for longitudinal research following a sample of children to understand any ongoing impact of their participation in the program beyond the program itself.

This report provides an executive summary, background to the relationship between CBTS and Deakin University, and an explanation of the current research literature on outdoor education, particularly as it applies to young people experiencing vulnerability. An analysis of the research data collected via student and teacher evaluations of the *Take a Break* program, student drawings, and interview responses from teachers, *Take a Break* program leaders and members from the CBTS leadership team is also presented. The report also contains a series of case studies that bring together key findings of researcher observations across four *Take a Break* program camps. The report concludes by reiterating the recommendations from this research to support and further strengthen the important work of the *Take a Break* program and the difference it makes in the lives of children.

## Cottage by the Sea Queenscliff

Cottage by the Sea (CBTS) is a charitable organisation established in 1890 located in Queenscliff, Victoria, Australia. Its mission is to enhance the lives of young people by providing opportunities for inspiration and fun within a holiday environment. All programs offered at CBTS reflect their five overarching values: respect, adventure, integrity, belonging and community.

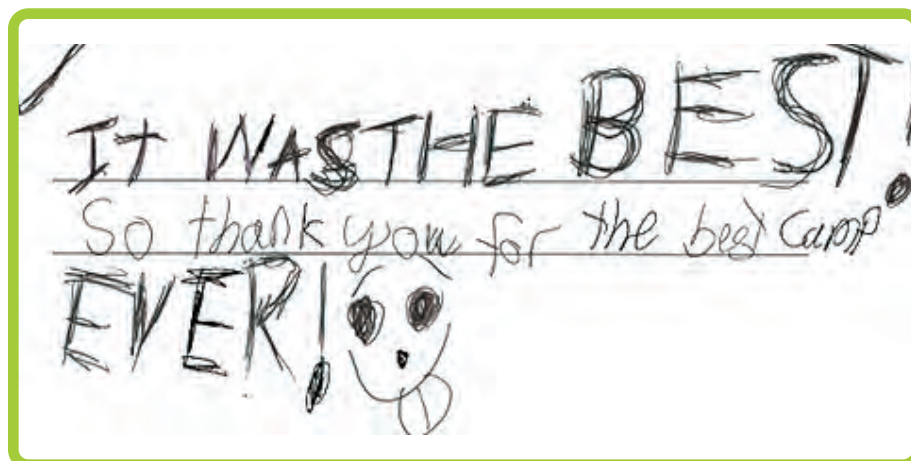
Specifically, CBTS programs support students in need and experiencing vulnerability. We adopt the term vulnerability rather than disadvantaged to recognise the 'multiple external factors that can impact on the life course of an individual learner [or young person]' (Drane et al., 2021, p. 587). For example, research shows that young people in regional Victoria are at a greater risk of experiencing vulnerability when compared with their metropolitan peers (Masters et al., 2020). This is compounded by recent events with many young people in Victoria (and beyond) experiencing back-to-back crises. Within the last four years, the State of Victoria has declared a state of emergency for both an unprecedented bushfire season that lasted longer than an entire summer and then for a global pandemic. Further, more recently, tragic flooding in many Victorian communities has had devastating effects. In addition to these crises, there are many young people across metropolitan, regional and rural areas of Victoria who experience vulnerability including children from low socio-economic areas, and those who are affected by family stress, family violence, war, mental health and education difficulties. Understanding how to best support young people experiencing vulnerability has become an urgent endeavour across the state (Drane et al. 2021).

CBTS provides four specific programs for primary and secondary students. These are:

1. **Take a Break** program (the subject of this report) is for children referred by schools and welfare agencies. Children attend *Take a Break* for up to five days. The program provides inspirational activities to challenge children, and to encourage them to participate in team building activities and engaging experiential learning.

2. **REEF** (Recreation, Education, Environment, Friendship) is a two-year program to help children transition from primary to secondary school. Children are encouraged to take calculated risks to help develop their skills that will open up opportunities both now and into the future. *REEF* consists of 10 programs of between three and five days each held over the last year of primary and the first year of secondary school.
3. **Mentor** program is for students who have participated in *REEF* and remain in secondary education. It provides a series of five programs per year of between three and five days. As mentors, the young people participate in accredited training courses, volunteer work, mentoring others, cooking programs and interstate travel. They also receive scholarship opportunities to help them pursue their dreams or to ignite their passion.
4. **National** program is run in partnership with Cathy Freeman's *Horizons Program*, now the *Community Spirit Foundation (CSF)*. It is a series of opportunities tailored to the needs of students of various age groups from remote communities. It provides trips for around 15 students to capital cities designed to enhance students' self-esteem, confidence and social skills. The focus of the trips for those in their final years of secondary school is upon post-school pathways. Students are exposed to workplaces, corporate engagements, mentoring sessions and workshops with respected Indigenous role models.

All programs are delivered in a safe and supportive environment made available to students likely to not otherwise have access to such experiences. CBTS is funded through philanthropy and has developed a devoted community of volunteers and fundraisers across Victoria and Australia.



**Student Drawing 1.** This drawing demonstrates the impact of the program on one student. The drawing includes a student's face with their tongue out as an expression of delight. Delight here is also highlighted by the large, wide eyes and the strong lines in the words 'was the best ever' followed by the exclamation mark.

## Background to the Research Partnership

The *CBTS – Deakin partnership* has been established over several years and was formally set up in 2020 through a Memorandum of Understanding led by Professor Louise Paatsch from Deakin's Strategic Research Centre in Education (Research for Educational Impact – REDI).

The *Cottage by the Sea: The Difference 'Take a Break' Makes* report is the first component of a larger program of research. This larger research program will build on the findings of the recent **Social Return on Investment (SROI)** (Social Ventures Australia Consulting, 2019) study commissioned by CBTS and funded by The Ross Trust. The SROI showed the social and economic value of CBTS programs, particularly the significant positive and enduring impact these programs have on the lives of students experiencing vulnerability. The SROI report provided the following five key insights into the CBTS's programs:

1. Learning from fun is important, and creates significant value to students
2. The impact of CBTS perseveres beyond the duration of the program itself; in fact, it can last a lifetime
3. CBTS's impact on young people is positively compounded by more frequent engagement
4. A child's happiness benefits their entire family
5. CBTS is an enduring part of the community.

The commissioned SROI study shows the broad impact of CBTS, although the report was completed prior to the disruption brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Further investigation is warranted to explore the ways in which CBTS programs support students to live a life of respect, adventure, integrity and belonging that is connected to community. As such, this report focuses upon the *Take a Break* program.

## Take a Break at Cottage by the Sea

The *Take a Break* program focuses on creating inspiration, fun and opportunity, while encouraging young people aged six to 12 years experiencing vulnerability to be active, healthy, confident and respectful. The *Take a Break* program is also available to children from areas affected by disasters, such as bushfires or floods. It provides children the opportunity to experience a wide range of activities that aim to inspire and challenge them within a fun and experiential learning environment.

Children attending the *Take a Break* program are usually in years 2 to 6 at primary school. Typically, the program runs for up to five days. There are approximately 30 *Take a Break* programs delivered each year with around 20 to 40 children attending each. Children are referred to CBTS by welfare agencies or selected by their schools based on an invitation by CBTS. Invitations are purposefully made to schools with an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) (see ACARA, 2020) below the average ICSEA benchmark of 1000, or based on identified community need (e.g., communities impacted by bushfires). Children attend CBTS either as part of their school or together with an agency group. Their CBTS experience sometimes begins virtually for particularly anxious children but is designed to be special from the first moment the children are welcomed onto the colourful CBTS bus that takes them to the cottage. Upon entering the CBTS buildings, the children receive a special gift made by CBTS volunteers including a knitted blanket, beanie and teddy bear, and partake in a delicious and healthy meal. Across the program, children engage in a variety of physical and educational activities, including games, swimming, fishing, surfing, swimming with dolphins or seals, walks, music and art lessons, and visits to the Marine and Freshwater Discovery Centre and other local attractions.

The specific aims of the *Take a Break* program are to (1) encourage children to experience a wide range of new opportunities; (2) create a safe space to enhance positive behaviours and child wellbeing; (3) encourage children to be more active; (4) endorse the benefits of healthy eating habits; (5) increase self-esteem and confidence; (6) enhance social skills in children by advocating respect for self and others; and (7) inspire children to live fulfilling lives.



**Student Drawing 2.** This drawing demonstrates an appreciation of the staff and volunteers at CBTS. The knitted items that they received as they arrived at CBTS were a highlight for this student. They were also aware of the work and kindness of the staff, as evident in the student's writing.

## Children and Young People's Wellbeing: Outdoor Experiences That Make a Difference

As described above, the *Take a Break* program is based around the provision of outdoor activities within the local coastal region of Queenscliff and surrounding Bellarine Peninsula with an intentional aim of supporting active, healthy and respectful behaviours, and building confidence in children. Outdoor education, by definition, has struggled historically to achieve a shared consensus of a universally agreed definition (Smith & Walsh 2019, p. 313). However, more recently, proponents of health and scientific disciplinary perspectives argue that *wilderness therapy* or *adventure therapy* provide a basis for the 'prescriptive use of adventure experiences provided by mental health professionals, often conducted in natural settings that kinaesthetically engage clients on cognitive, affective and behavioural levels' (p. 313). Yet, as others argue, outdoor education has greater alignment with *adventure education* as a nested experience in the broader field of *experiential education* with a key focus on the interrelationship between ecological relationships, physical skills and interpersonal growth (Gilbertson et al., 2006).

Outdoor education 'provide[s] experiences that may cultivate additional social outcomes for youth, which differ markedly from those developed in the mass education system' (McDonald 2021, p. 38). In addition, such activities take students outside their usual experiences of schooling and are 'uniquely positioned to disrupt systems of oppression and empower students' (p. 33), where 'participants experienced feelings of autonomy through having a sense of personal responsibility for the level of challenge they embraced' (Parry et al., 2021, p. 165).

Beyond the academic argument presented, we take a perspective that the outdoor experiences provided to children through the CBTS *Take a Break* program focus on teaching and learning activities and experiences, and relational components with an emphasis on adventure and challenge (Smith & Walsh, 2019) in ways that intentionally support children's sense of belonging, confidence and wellbeing. Put simply, outdoor experiences conceptualised and enacted through *Take a Break* can be understood as 'adventure experiences used purposefully by education and other professionals, typically in outside natural settings and sometimes with elements of risk or challenge, to engage individuals in ecological, physical and transformative learning' (Smith & Walsh, 2019, p. 313).

Outdoor learning experiences are ideal for promoting relational bonds and improving the overall wellbeing of young people. These relationships are not limited to those between students, but also those between student and adult. Smith and Walsh (2019) suggest that '... the strongest indicator of youth connectedness was the degree to which youth felt they could approach adults for help' (p. 320).



The socio-emotional outcomes that young people achieve through outdoor activities are likely to provide lifelong gains. Based on a qualitative study involving over 500 outdoor camp participants, Sibthorp et al. (2020) reported improved self-esteem, teamwork skills, friendships, empathy, peer relationships, a sense of adventure and environmental awareness. Nichols (2000) proposes that 'overcoming unfamiliar physical challenges [provides] a powerful metaphor that helps participants overcome difficulties in the rest of their lives' (p. 29). In large part, these gains are due to the very nature of outdoor education experiences, where these create 'realistic conflict scenarios and to the conduct of dialogue about this conflict because of its immediate relevance to students' (Quay et al., 2000, p. 15).



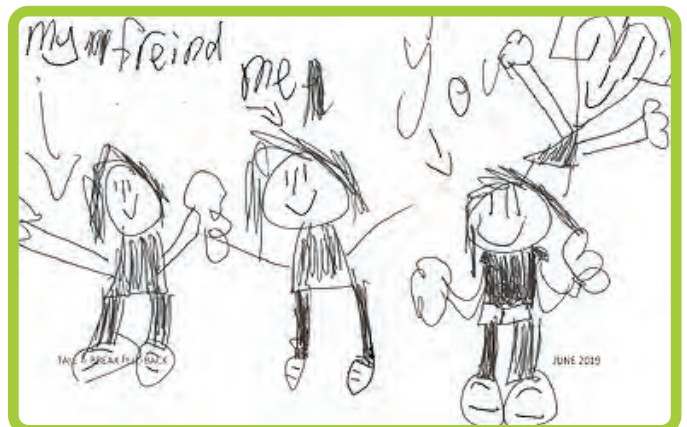
**Student Drawing 3.** A student interacts with what they would otherwise see as a frightening piece of outdoor equipment.

### A relational perspective of young people's wellbeing

Our relationships with others are fundamental to who we are as human beings. Identity is formed intersubjectively. Young people achieve relational wellbeing when they have positive and nurturing relations with others which provide substantive opportunities to interact meaningfully. A relational conceptualisation of wellbeing emphasises that even though 'wellbeing is experienced by individual young people, it is a reflection of the quality of social relationships and spaces in which young people are embedded' (White et al., 2017, p. 377). This is particularly true of the relationships that develop in outdoor education programs, where students are encouraged to solve problems with fellow students, rather than merely relying upon instruction from adults. These

practices provide more than a simple learning experience, but also a safe place where the student can experiment with who they are and who they want to become. Students in such programs 'reported developing resiliency, positive attitudes, empowerment, and independence' (McDonald 2021, p. 33). By engaging young people in collaborative activities within safe, challenging and trustful environments, outdoor learning opportunities can promote relational wellbeing and empowerment.

Meaningful social relationships and interactions promote young people's wellbeing. In capability terms, our opportunities to *be well and live well* are influenced by 'the nature of other people's lives' and the choice of others' (Sen, 1993). Relatedly, a person's social location mediates their relational wellbeing. Young people living with disadvantage generally have limited opportunities to form valuable connections or to engage in collaborative activities. A recent OECD (2022) report concluded that 'children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds fare worse in almost all wellbeing areas' (p. 8). Among this group, wellbeing inequalities persist in their access to basic material necessities, health outcomes, educational attainment and socio-emotional outcomes, including access to valuable social networks, self-belief and life satisfaction.



**Student Drawing 4.** Identifying the student, her friend and the program staff. All are smiling. The two students are holding hands.

According to Cottam (2018), relational work is transformative – it 'sees the future self a person can be and builds towards that' (p. 140). CBTS, and the *Take a Break* program in particular, provides children with an opportunity to engage and interact with each other and with adult program participants in ways that reinforce the benefits of being integrated into a community. All of the activities associated with the *Take a Break* program build on the children's sense of belonging, of trust and of meeting the challenges they face with courage and persistence. As such, they not only learn how to build upon their own sense of resilience but are provided with constant reminders of the strength they can draw upon from those around them.

## Students Who Attend *Take a Break at Cottage by the Sea*

Some of the children participating in the *Take a Break* program have been exposed to stressful events and these are likely to have caused them trauma. Trauma is a form of toxic stress; it is a response of overwhelming fear or helplessness following a painful or shocking event.

Natural disasters, including seasonal bushfires or floods, affect millions of Australians. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about loss of life, extended isolation and exposure to increased domestic violence – all of which can prove traumatic to some children. Human-induced traumatic events (e.g. violence, neglect, abuse, household dysfunction, discrimination, racism or war) leave indelible marks on the emotional and physiological wellbeing of children and young people. For refugees from war-torn regions of the world, the trauma of violence, forced displacement and resettlement are stressors that too often can be debilitating. Young people who grew up in foster care, who experience extreme poverty or who identify as LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or questioning) are likely to experience trauma that interrupts their learning and social interactions.

Student trauma is particularly prevalent. In a classroom of 20 students, it is estimated that at least three will have had a traumatic or adverse experience (Phair, 2020). In the US, the National Council of State Education Associations (NCSEA, 2019) acknowledges that there is an 'epidemic of trauma' in their schools requiring urgent public action. This is similarly true in Australia, where the National Guidelines for Trauma-Aware Schooling recognise the severity of childhood trauma (QUT & ACF, 2020).

Student trauma is consequential. Children and young people exposed to trauma expend a great deal of energy responding to, coping with and coming to terms with the traumatic experience. Trauma inhibits learning and can often drive disruptive behaviour, while increasing student stress.



**Student Drawing 5.** The smile dominates a third of the face. 'I love camp' is followed by an exclamation mark.



# This Research

## Research Significance

This study, *Cottage by the Sea: The Difference 'Take a Break' Makes*, is the flagship research initiative of the CBTS – Deakin University Research Partnership. This study will contribute to a research-informed, experiential understanding of how *Take a Break* achieves its program outcomes. As such, the findings will inform the strategic direction of the CBTS *Take a Break* program while also providing direction for other CBTS programs.

## Research Aims

The aim of this study was to investigate the ways in which the CBTS *Take a Break* program impacts the children who attend. We explored the ways in which children's participation in an immersive experience makes a difference for these children who are experiencing vulnerability. In addition, this study explores how the opportunities provided by *Take a Break* support the program's aims to foster young people aged six to 12 years to be active, healthy, confident and respectful.

Specifically, this study explored the following **two key questions**:

1. How does the *Take a Break* program make a difference to the lives of the children who attend?
2. In what ways does participation and the opportunities provided by the CBTS *Take a Break* program support children to be active, healthy, confident and respectful?



**Student Drawing 6.** Depicting the healthy food and exercise options available during the program. Note the humour of the worm in the apple.

## Take a Break Data Tools and Analysis

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to collect and analyse quantitative and qualitative data. Specifically, the study involved an exploration of evaluation responses from students and teachers across five years of the *Take a Break* program (2018 to 2022), as well as responses from interviews with teachers, *Take a Break* program leaders and members from the CBTS leadership team. In addition, an in-depth exploration of four *Take a Break* program cohorts involving participants from five schools attending CBTS in May, June and October 2022 was also undertaken.

Participants involved in this research included student attendees (aged six to 12 years), and *Take a Break* program leaders, teachers, and members from CBTS leadership team. Data was collected from five main sources: (1) student evaluations; (2) student drawings about their experiences; (3) teacher evaluations; (4) reflective interviews with teachers attending the program, program leaders and members of CBTS leadership team; and (5) researcher observations taken over four *Take a Break* programs, involving five schools (three new schools and two returning schools).

Quantitative data was collected in the form of evaluations issued to the student and teacher participants at the end of each *Take a Break* program over the last five years, since 2018. These evaluations were developed by CBTS to be administered to students and teachers at the end of their participation in the *Take a Break* program. Qualitative data was produced using the open-ended items from these student and teacher evaluations. In addition, qualitative data was generated using a case study methodology to explore the lived experiences of *Take a Break* program student participants, teachers and adult leaders. It involved the collection of qualitative data in the form of researcher observations of students, leaders and teachers, as well as student drawings and audio recordings of reflective interviews from the teachers across the four *Take a Break* cohorts. Program leaders and the CBTS leadership team were also interviewed about the *Take a Break* program.

## Student Evaluations

The student evaluation tool was developed by CBTS leadership prior to involvement with the Deakin research team. The student evaluations are completed by each student in paper format at the end of their attendance at the *Take a Break* program. The tool itself has not been validated as a survey instrument but does cover the broad range of themes that contribute to how CBTS seeks to evaluate its programs and the activities comprising these programs.

The student evaluation invites students to indicate their age and gender then complete the 10 main items. The first six items invite students to tick a box in relation to how they felt about their time at the *Take a Break* program including



the Cottage, the program overall, food and activities. They are also invited to indicate how they felt about getting ready to go home and back to school. The final four items seek to gather students' feedback about what they learnt, what they liked and disliked about the *Take a Break* program as well as responding to how their time at CBTS made them feel. The data, as will be presented later in this report, considers themes directly related to aims and objectives of the *Take a Break* program.

While there is a tendency to place weight on the outcome of large sets of evaluation/survey data, it is important to treat all such quantitative data with care, particularly that generated from surveying young children. As is made clear in Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015), such surveys are 'often designed with no recourse to the informants, and ... require relatively high literacy skills' (p. 325). The potential for young students to misinterpret the intention of a survey question cannot be discounted. This is made more problematic given that some students attending the *Take a Break* program may have challenges with their literacy skills, as demonstrated by some of the written responses included in the student evaluations. However, this is in no way to imply that the data collected is of no value, but rather to be cautious when interpreting such data. As will be discussed later in this report, some of the survey data is complicated by external factors outside of the control of CBTS. These include the ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, our qualitative data has, at times, proven to be at odds with the quantitative data gathered in the evaluations. It is not that one of these sources of data provides a more accurate picture of student perspectives, but rather that a more accurate interpretation is

likely to be gained by understanding the limitations of both sets of data.

Overall, there was a total of 1368 completed student evaluations across 2018–2022 entered into a spreadsheet and analysed for this report. It is important to note that the 2022 data is from January to March plus evaluations from the four *Take a Break* cohorts from the five schools. The quantitative data is presented as a percentage of the total number of responses for each year. Qualitative data was analysed by key themes that were identified in the data.

### Student Drawings

In consultation with the CBTS staff, the Deakin University researchers developed a drawing activity for students to complete to explore their views on the ways in which the *Take a Break* program achieved its aims of supporting them to be active, healthy, confident and respectful. Specifically, we invited students from the four *Take a Break* cohorts across the five schools to write or draw in response to the prompt 'How did the CBTS *Take a Break* help you to be active, healthy, confident and respectful?' These drawings were collected at the end of the 25-minute activity and kept at CBTS. Copies of these drawings were emailed to the Deakin researchers for later analysis.

It has not been assumed that students prefer to use drawings to compensate for low literacy levels. Rather, the modalities of both options make the student choice of either (or both) an important lens for analysis of their response, and examples of student reflections via the drawings are interspersed throughout this report.



### Teacher Evaluations

Like the student evaluations, the teacher evaluation tool was developed by CBTS leadership prior to involvement with the Deakin University research team. The teacher evaluations are completed by the classroom teachers who attend the program with their students in paper format at the end of the *Take a Break* program. The tool seeks to evaluate the CBTS *Take a Break* program including all the activities, the food and the overall program. It also seeks to understand the impact of the program on the lives of the young students who attend.

The teacher evaluation comprises six main items. The first four items invite teachers to tick a box in relation to how they felt about their time at *Take a Break* including the Cottage, the program overall, food and activities. Item 5 invites teachers to reflect on the students who attended CBTS and provide feedback regarding the impact their students' time at CBTS had on their attitude, behaviours, confidence, hope and aspirations, willingness to try new things, relationships with others, healthy choices and resourcefulness. The final item seeks to gather teachers' feedback regarding the (perceived) impact of the *Take a Break* program. The data, as will be discussed later, considers themes directly related to the aims and objectives of the *Take a Break* program.

Overall, there was a total of 145 teacher evaluations entered into a spreadsheet and analysed for this report. Data was collected within the same time period and analysed in the same way as the student evaluations. It is important to note there has only been a requirement for teachers to attend the *Take a Break* program with their students since 2020.



### Reflective Interviews: Teachers and CBTS staff

Central to the data collection for this project were the interviews that were conducted with teachers, program leaders and members of the leadership team at CBTS. These were semi-structured interviews based around a series of prompt questions suitable for each interview group. The interview format was flexible enough to ensure that if a particularly interesting response was made that the focus could shift towards that response. However, the overall structure of the prompts ensured that all participants within the various interview participant groups would cover the essential details of concern and that consistent data would be collected across interviews. Specifically, teachers were invited to share their perspective of the *Take a Break* program, how the staff may have built relationships with the students, the place, and the impact of the program on the students' confidence, and attitude towards being active, healthy and respectful. The teachers were also invited to describe their school, the students who attended their school, and their background in teaching.

### Researcher Observations

The Deakin University research team undertook a series of observations across four *Take a Break* programs involving five schools. Specifically, the researchers attended the penultimate day of each program and made notes of how students, teachers and program leaders engaged in various activities. The observations followed a protocol. Observation notes were recorded on digital tools, such as iPads and phones, and were accompanied by photos taken on the day. The observations also provided insight into both how the physical environment supported active, healthy, confident and respectful interactions, as well as the relational interactions observed between students and in their interactions with staff.

# Findings

The following sections present the findings from quantitative and qualitative data collected from five main data sources: (1) student evaluations; (2) student drawings; (3) teacher evaluations; (4) reflective interviews with teachers attending the program, program leaders and members of CBTS leadership team; and (5) researcher observations involving five schools taken over four *Take a Break* programs.

## The Difference *Take a Break* Makes: Insights from Student Evaluations

Data from student evaluations were collected between 2018 and 2022 across 24 local government areas (LGAs) of Victoria. Figure 1 presents a representation of the 24 LGAs from where the students reside or attend school. For the 2022 year, student evaluations from January to March, as well as evaluations from the four *Take a Break* cohorts attended by Deakin University researchers, were included in the analysis. A total of 1368 student evaluations have been analysed.

The following sections provide insight into how 1368 students aged six to 12 years viewed their experiences after attending the *Take a Break* program. Students' views have been summarised from two major data sources: (1) quantitative data from student evaluations between the years 2018 and 2022; and (2) qualitative data from student evaluations between the years 2018 and 2022.

## Quantitative Data from Student Evaluations

At the end of each *Take a Break* program between 2018 and 2022, student attendees were invited to complete an evaluation providing insights into what they liked or disliked about the *Take a Break* program, as well as how they felt while at CBTS and as they got ready to return home. This data has also been analysed to investigate ways to strengthen the experience CBTS offers.

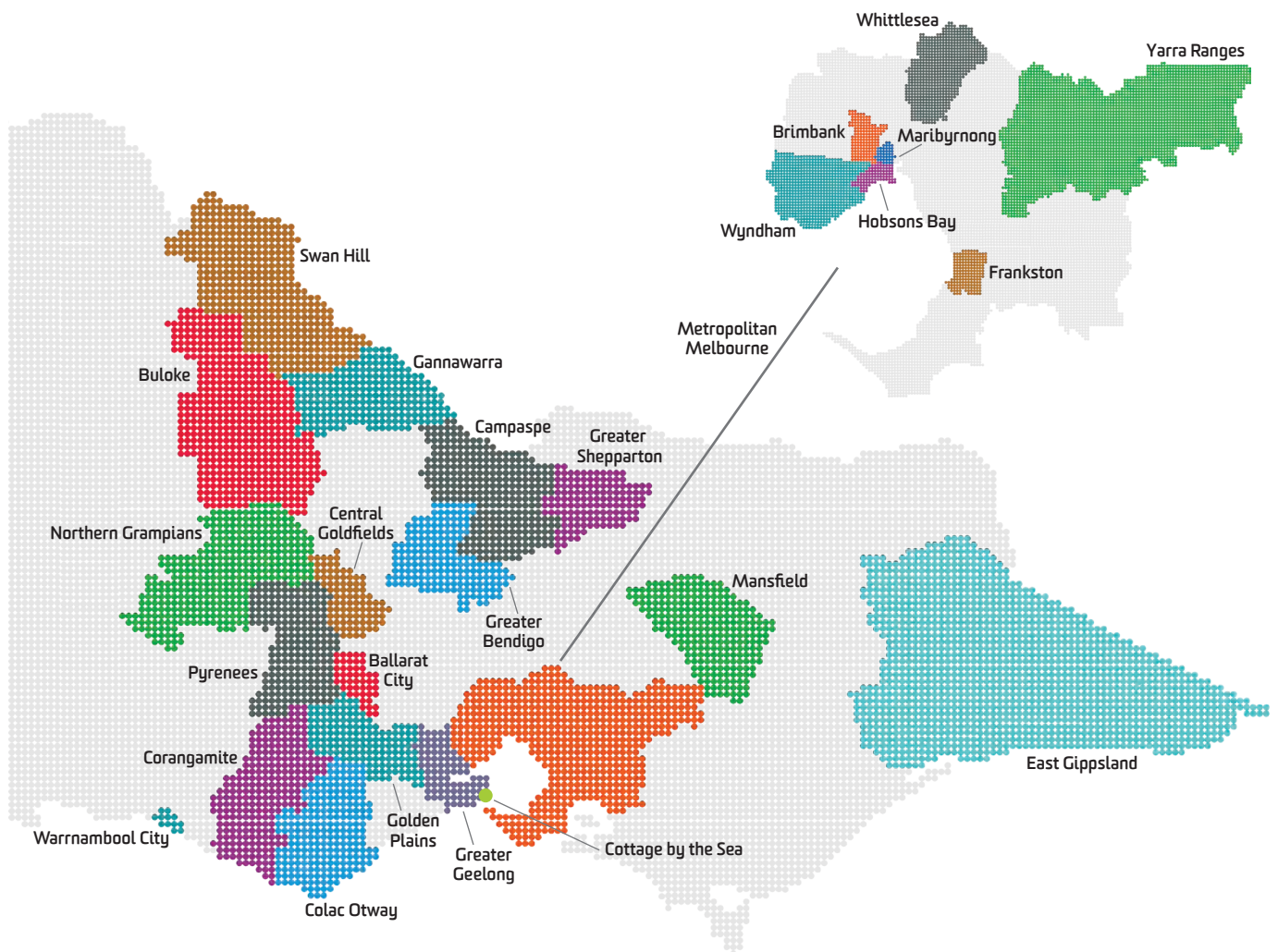


Figure 1. Map of Victoria and the Melbourne metropolitan area showing the 24 local government areas (LGAs) from where the students reside or attend school

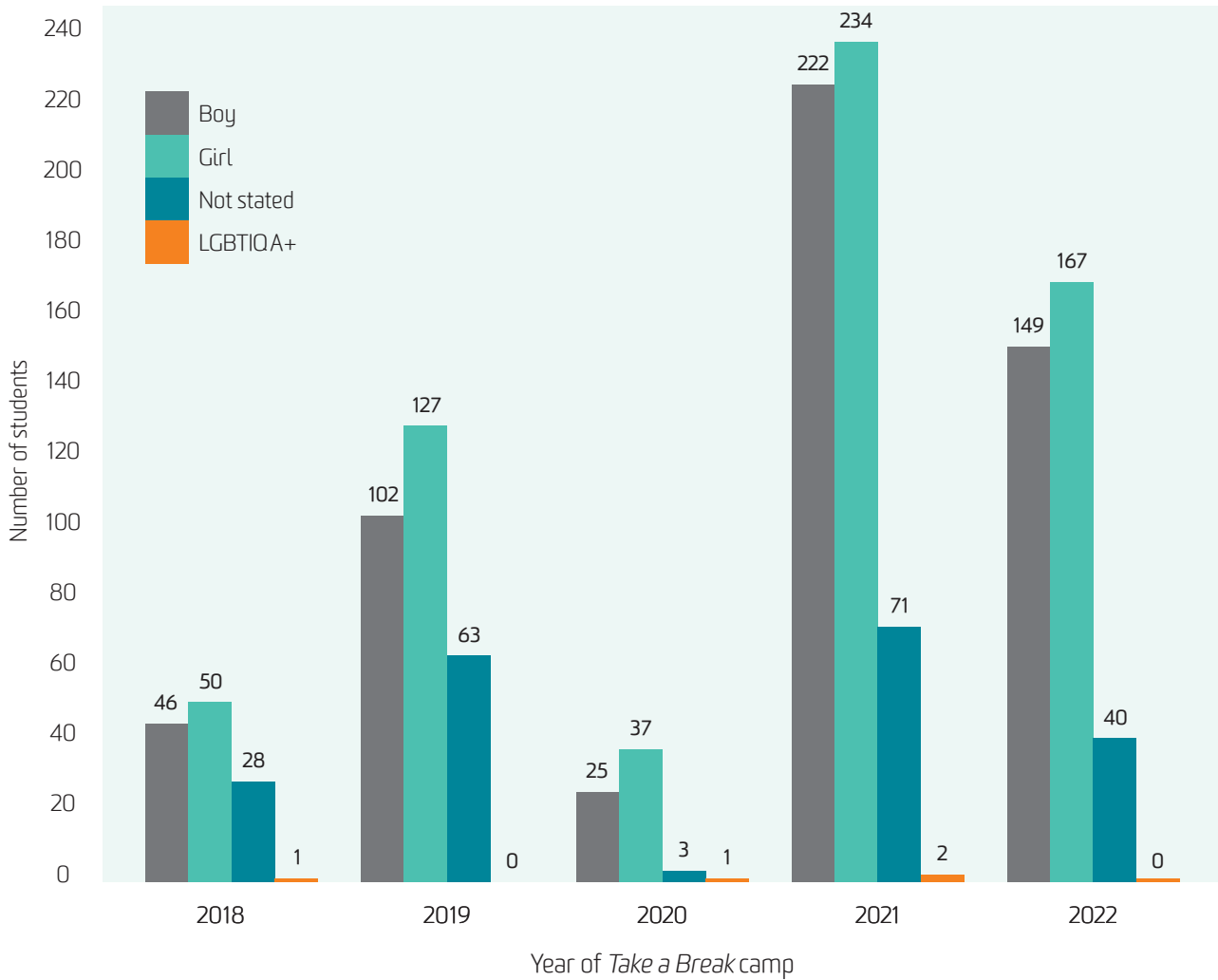


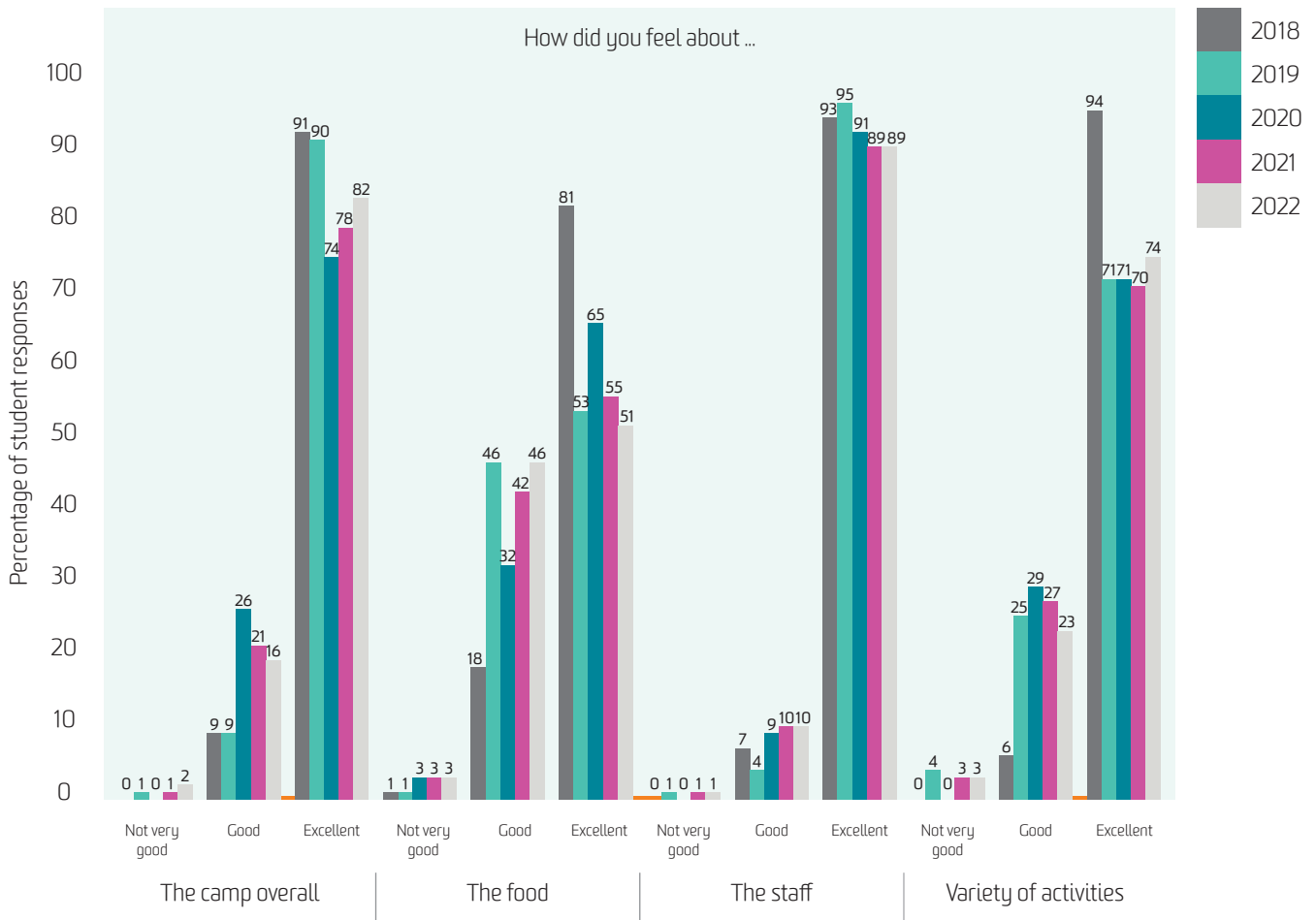
Figure 2. Student numbers and gender across the five years of *Take a Break* (N = 1368)

Figure 2 presents the number and gender of children who completed the student evaluations across the five years (2018–2022). Results show that there were similar numbers of boys and girls from the total of 1368 students who attended the *Take a Break* program. The primary school students who attended the program were spread across years 2 to 6. As such, their responses to questions of gender must take their youth and the complexity of understandings of gender into account. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of students selected the ‘not stated’ category across most years of the program. This was particularly true prior to the pandemic, with the proportions of students selecting ‘not stated’ being slightly over 20% for both 2018 and 2019. This proportion almost halved in the years 2021 and 2022. However, reasons for why these students did not select the option of either boy or girl on the evaluation is unclear.

Students were also invited to share their feelings about four key aspects of the *Take a Break* program including the program overall, the food, the staff and the variety of program activities. Figure 3 presents the results from the 1368 students who completed the student evaluations.

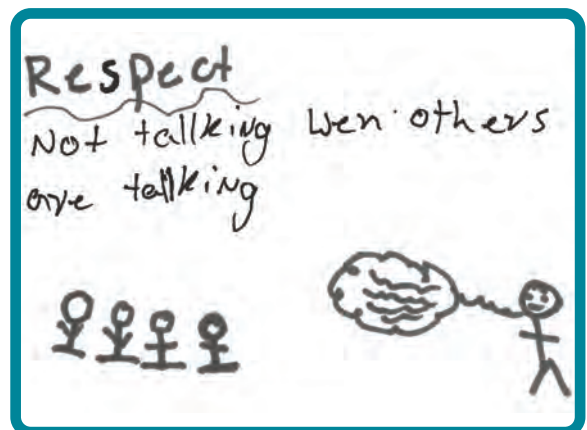
Overall findings show that the highest proportion of students across all five years reported that the program, food, staff and variety of activities were ‘excellent’. It is important to note that a significant change becomes obvious in these data as Covid-19 takes hold, and this change remains apparent despite the removal of many of the restrictions within Victoria in 2022.

Further interrogation of the results shows that despite the high proportion of students reporting that *Take a Break* was ‘excellent’, there has been a decrease in the levels of total satisfaction with the *Take a Break* program post-pandemic,



**Figure 3.** Student feelings about the program, food, staff and variety of activities (N = 1368)

compared to the very high levels of satisfaction recorded pre-pandemic. Sometimes these decreases have been in the order of a third of students no longer regarding the program as excellent. While such a large fall in satisfaction needs to be explained, it may be that this fall illustrates a change in student feelings more generally post-pandemic, rather than necessarily being reflective of the program itself. In the first year of the pandemic, nearly one in five students shifted their view of the program overall from 'excellent' to 'good'. While this figure has increased in both 2021 and 2022, it remains at around one in 10 students who have dropped from the highest level of satisfaction shown prior to the pandemic.



**Student Drawing 7.** Illustrating that respect involves listening and not talking when others are talking.

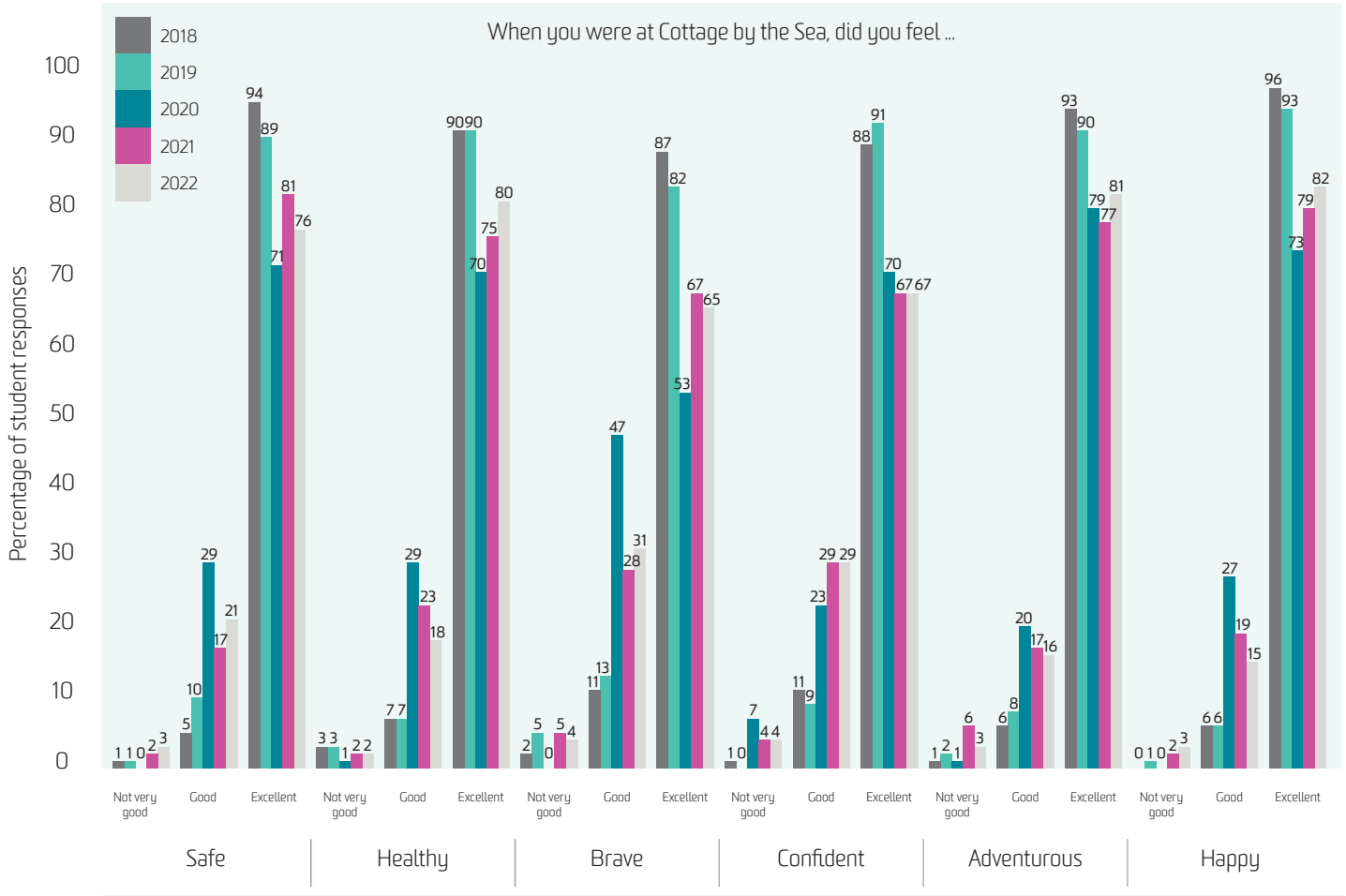
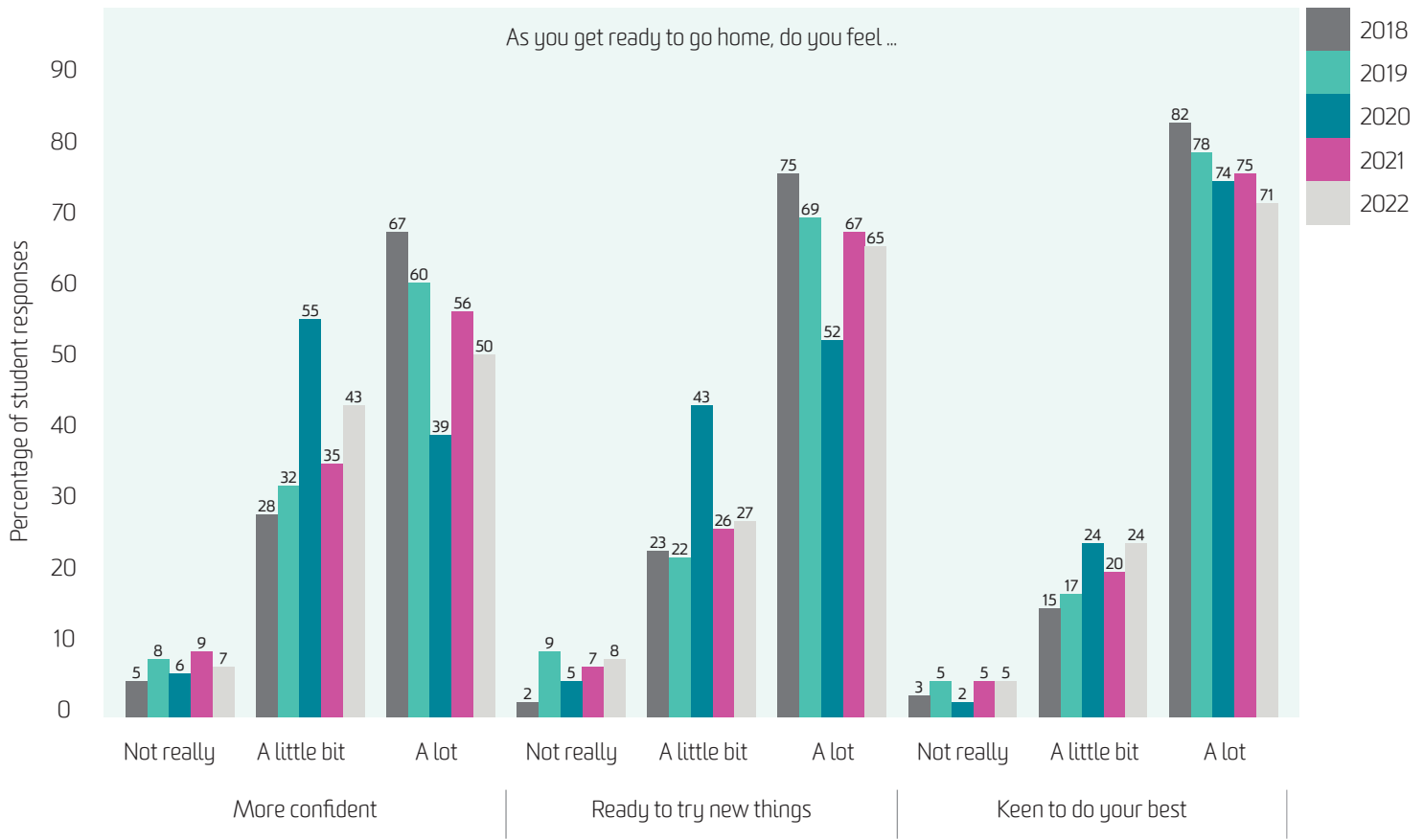


Figure 4. Student responses about feeling safe, healthy, brave, confident, adventurous and happy (N = 1368)

Satisfaction with food also decreased from 'excellent' before the pandemic, but this was also true in 2019, when it received one of the lowest response rates, despite this being prior to the pandemic. Responses to how well students enjoyed the food may be heavily influenced by the backgrounds of the students attending. Nevertheless, in 2018 four in five students felt the food was excellent, and this decreased to just above one in two for many of the years after this time. However, in contrast to some of these ratings, student responses in the qualitative data showed that food was one of the strongest themes that was evident when asked what they liked best about *Take a Break* (see the qualitative data section below).

Students were also invited to share how they felt while they were at CBTS attending the *Take a Break* program. Specifically, they were invited to select one response from the 3-point Likert scale in relation to feeling safe, healthy, brave, confident, adventurous and happy. Figure 4 presents the results from the 1368 students across the five years.

Results show the highest proportion of overall feelings of safety, healthy, brave, confident, adventurous and happy were rated by the students across the five years as 'excellent'. However, there are some interesting trends between pre- and post-covid data. Results show that while there is an overall decrease in the proportion of students who rated these feelings as excellent after 2019, this shift was towards the 'good' category, with the 'not very good' category barely changing across the years. One reason for asserting this change in feelings is that virtually the entire shift in response has been from 'excellent' to 'good'. The responses where the students judged the program 'not very good' have not shifted across five years of evaluations or across almost all the categories. As such, there is reason to believe that for some of the students, the trauma of the two years of the pandemic has made them feel less able to let themselves engage with others or feel safe. It is also important to consider the age of the students completing the evaluation (six to 12 years) and their understandings of feelings, such as safe or brave, as



**Figure 5.** Student responses in relation to how they feel as they get ready to go home and back to school

many may articulate these concepts differently to the ways in which this evaluation tool sought to explore.

The final quantitative item on the student evaluation invited students to rate how they felt as they got ready to go home and back to school in relation to feeling more confident, ready to try new things, and keen to do their best. Figure 5 presents the results from the 1368 student responses across the 3-point Likert scale.

Results show that the highest proportion of students across the five years felt that they were keen to do their best 'a lot' more after attending the *Take a Break* program at CBTS. Similarly, students were also ready to try new things 'a lot,' except for students attending the *Take a Break* program in 2020 where there was an equal proportion across the ratings of 'a lot' and 'a little bit.' There was a more mixed result for the item that invited students to comment on whether they felt more confident as they prepared to go home and back to school. Overall, students indicated a shift in confidence but interestingly a higher proportion of students attending the program in 2020 felt only 'a little bit' more confident as

they left the program to go home. A further consideration in interpreting this data may relate to the cohort of students who attended *Take a Break*. For many, they are experiencing trauma and vulnerability, and when asked to comment about how they feel when going back home, it may be possible that they related more about the situations they face going home rather than the impact of the *Take a Break* program in preparing them to go home and back to school. Further investigation is warranted to invite students to provide feedback on their understandings through qualitative approaches such as interviews, student drawings and reflections.

A similar trend in responses pre- and post-covid data was also evident in this data. A slight decline from the pre-covid data was noted. As such, some of these results must take into consideration the ongoing impact of the pandemic upon these students' overall sense of wellbeing. Given the above caveats, student ranking of the program decreased significantly as the pandemic began, and although it has improved since, it has not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

## Qualitative Data from Student Evaluations

The following sections provide insight into the students' views of their experiences after attending the *Take a Break* program. Specifically, students were invited to provide responses to four open-ended questions in the student evaluations: (1) What is one thing you learnt this week? (2) What did you like best about CBTS? (3) Is there anything you didn't like? And (4) My time at CBTS made me feel ...? All evaluations were completed at the end of the *Take a Break* program.

In contrast to the quantitative data presented above, many students' open-ended responses reflected the significant impact that the *Take a Break* program had on their feelings of being happy, confident and safe. Furthermore, they reported their love of the staff, food and activities. Students were invited to 'feel free to add any other comments about your time at CBTS'. Most students thanked CBTS for having them and asked if they could come again. Many students wrote notes of thanks, such as:

*'Thank you for helping us and activities and lot of things. I will miss CBTS and staff. I really like CBTS. I hope I will come again', 'BEST CAMP EVER!!!', 'I'm grateful for the AMAZING food from the chef. And the help from the staff and the donations', 'Thank you soooo much for everything and for the magical experience', and 'I never want to leave!'*

Other students drew pictures to show their appreciation of the time they had. The next student drawing presents a typical illustration of the ways students used drawings to illustrate their feelings about attending the *Take a Break* program.



**Student Drawing 8.** A heart and simple expression of the student's feelings towards their stay at Cottage by the Sea.

## Student Perspectives of What They Learnt During Their Time at the *Take a Break* Program

The first open-ended question from the student evaluations invited students to list one thing that they had learnt during their time at the *Take a Break* program. From the 1368 student evaluation responses spanning the years 2018 to 2022, three main themes were identified: (1) gaining knowledge; (2) building skills; and (3) developing or strengthening dispositions. Very few students stated that they had not learnt anything during their week in the program, with one student writing 'there is no learning just fun' (2022).

### The Difference *Take a Break* Makes: Gaining Knowledge

This theme relates to students building their understandings and knowledge through acquiring information from participating in the *Take a Break* program. Students reported gaining knowledge in five areas: (1) program activities; (2) self-recognition; (3) health; (4) social learning; and (5) education.

The largest proportion of student responses reported gains in knowledge directly related to the *program activities*, such as how to surf, how to swim, facts about fish, animal habitats, facts about the bay and Queenscliff, and learnings from attending local area centres, such as the Marine Discovery Centre. The following excerpts are examples of some of the comments across the five years.

*That the Pilot Blue whale can eat up to 4 million krill each day (2018)*

*Stuff about the sea (2019)*

*That your wetsuit keeps you warm (2019)*

*To bend your knees when surfing (2020)*

*About Murray Cod (2021)*

*How to hold a fishing rod and watching them (2021)*

Another notable area in this theme that emerged from student evaluation responses was *self-recognition*, where students commented on what they learnt about themselves, such as 'trying your best pays dividends' and how 'to have fun'. The following responses are a sample from the students across the five years of evaluation collection, some of which appear as strong affirmation statements.

*No matter how big or small you are you can do outstanding things (2019)*

*Whatever you do don't change for anyone! (2019)*

*To try your best because you will always make it (2020)*

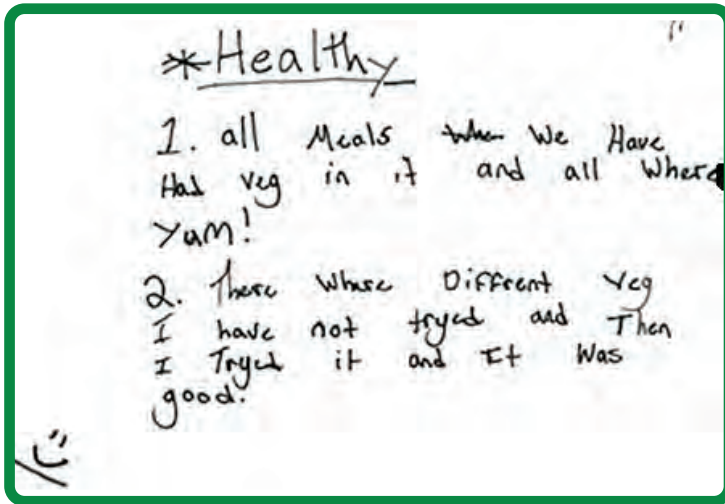
*I learnt to just have fun (2021)*

*That I could actually do stuff I ever thought I could do (2021)*

*That I can do anything I put my mind to (2022)*

*I have friends (2022)*





Student Drawing 9. For some students, even the food provided challenges. Although text driven, the smiling face at the bottom and the exclamation mark after 'yum' make it clear this student enjoyed the variety of food on offer at *Take a Break*.

Health was another area where students felt that they had learnt about healthy eating and food choices. There were comments about what healthy eating entailed, such as 'that home cooked meals are the best' (2021), and the need 'to eat more chicken' (2021), and 'that if you have fruit and a treat then it's not that bad for a mixed diet' (2022). Analysis of the responses showed that some students tried specific foods for the first time during the program and had a growing awareness of food types, tastes, and the importance of good food. As one student noted, they had learnt 'to eat better' (2019).

The final of the five areas under the theme of gaining knowledge was education, which focused on students' understandings in particular academic areas as well as the importance of ongoing learning. While smaller in the number of responses, the comments focused on educational endeavours, such as 'reading' (2022), and 'loads more games I can play at home' (2019). One poignant comment stated that for this student they had learnt 'that people are still learning' (2021).

There was evidence of *social learning*, such as understanding social rules and expectations taking place during the program. For example, representative comments were received such as 'being kind feels good' (2021), 'to be nice to people' (2021), 'respect' (2021) and 'to be friendly' (2021). One student wrote 'I learned to use manners more' (2021), while another learnt the importance of 'listening to the rules' (2022).



Student Drawing 10. A member of the Cottage by the Sea staff is shaking hands with a student attendee. The student is literally being lifted off their feet and jumping into the air by the interaction. Both are beaming at each other.

## Cottage by the Sea



### The Difference *Take a Break* Makes: Building Skills

The second theme evident from student responses was related to *building skills*. This theme related to the development, refinement or mastery of specific skills. Six distinct skill-areas were identified within this theme: (1) physical skills; (2) independence; (3) health; (4) relational skills; (5) emotional skills; and (6) leadership.

Building *physical skills*, such as swimming, surfing, snorkelling and fishing received many comments. For some students they were learning new skills while other students felt they had perfected skills related to certain physical activities. A sample of comments include 'I learned to become more confident in the water' (2021), 'I learnt to stand up on a surfboard' (2018) and 'How to swim waves' (2018).

**Student Drawing 11.** Being confident and being active often involved students engaging in sports. Many of the students were particularly challenged by jumping from the boat to swim with the seals, something repeatedly mentioned by them as a highlight.



Many students noted that they had developed skills that related to being *independent*. The skills listed ranged from tying shoelaces, making one's own bed and 'how to run a shower' (2019). Importantly, self-help skills such as 'how to look after myself' (2019), 'how to take off bathers' (2019) and 'how to get dressed' (2019) were also identified. One student wrote that they had learnt 'to pack, be safe, enjoy stuff and be hygienic on my own' (2021).

Skills related to being *healthy* related to 'trying new foods' (2021) along with caring for self and others. One student wrote that they learnt how to 'care' (2019), while a few noted 'not to drink salt water' (2019, 2021), while another said they 'learnt how to be sunsmart' (2022).

*Relational skills* closely tied to social skill development and knowing how to act in situations were well represented in the data. The students felt they learnt the skills of making friends, understanding and helping others, building trust and using manners. Other relational skills include:

'To be round more girls' (2021)  
'Spending a week with my class can be good' (2021)  
'To sleep with other people in a room' (2021)  
'That it is fun to meet new people' (2022)  
'To be nice' (2019)  
'To grow better friendships' (2019)

*Emotional skills* supporting one to know how to act and react to circumstances and situations were also mentioned in the student responses. Many of these centred on staying safe, having fun, being happy, and not being sad or scared. Some representative comments are:

'Don't cry at camp' (2021)  
'To be safe' (2021)  
'How to have fun' (2021)  
'I learnt how to ask for help' (2019)  
'Staying with friends makes me happier' (2019)  
'How not to be sad and scared' (2018)

For a smaller number of students, the program had facilitated the development of *leadership skills*. One student noted that they had learnt 'leadership' (2020), two other students wrote 'to work together' (2021), while three students mentioned 'teamwork' (2021).



## The Difference *Take a Break* Makes: Developing and/or Strengthening Dispositions

The third theme identified in the analysis of student responses was *developing and/or strengthening dispositions*. Dispositions are the qualities of mind and character that supports us to act and behave in certain ways, such as moral values, temperament and personality. These all influence a person's character. There were many aspects reported which related to dispositions which we have collated under the following four areas.

### 1. Courageousness:

#### Courage to conquer fears

'to conquer your fear' (2021)  
 'not to be afraid of a lot' (2021)  
 'to be brave' (2021)  
 'Getting up and having a go' (2021)  
 'to face my fears' (2021)  
 'To never be afraid' (2021)  
 'Have guts' (2022)  
 'Be brave and trying new things' (2018)  
 'Try to do your best when you are challenged' (2019)  
 'If you believe you can achieve' (2021)

#### Courage to try new things

'Always have to try at new things. Don't be afraid to do new things' (2021)  
 'I learnt that if you don't try something that you are scared of or never done before you will never be good' (2021)  
 'trying new things is fun' (2021)  
 'Don't say you don't like things before you try them' (2021)  
 'Have a go' (2022)  
 'To give something new a try' (2019)  
 'You can have fun if you try new things' (2019)

### 2. Adventurous:

#### Trial and error and risk taking

'To take a risk' (2021)  
 'I learnt how you be more adventurous' (2021)  
 'To be adventurous' (2019)  
 'It's OK to be scared' (2021)

### 3. Perseverance:

#### Keep trying and commitment

'Don't give up' (2019)  
 'To keep trying' (2021)  
 'To try more' (2019)  
 'Keep trying' (2019)  
 'If you fail do it again' (2019)  
 'To try my hardest' (2021)

### 4. Happiness:

#### A mindset that encompasses constructive thoughts and fulfilment

'To be more happy' (2021)  
 'Staying with friends makes me happier' (2019)

**Student Drawing 12.** A student climbing equipment supported by a rope. Displays of confidence often involved heights and students overcoming fears.



### Student Perspectives of What They Liked Best About Cottage by the Sea

The second open-ended question from the student evaluations invited students to list what they liked best about CBTS. From the 1368 student evaluation responses spanning the years 2018 to 2022, nine main themes were identified: (1) everything; (2) social aspects; (3) emotional aspects; (4) the opportunities and activities; (5) the personnel; (6) food/eating; (7) the place and its facilities; (8) routines; and (9) learning.

A few students liked 'everything', so instead of listing what they liked they gave an all-encompassing response – 'everything was fantastic' (2018) or 'everything' (2019). One student wrote 'all, I can't choose a favourite' (2022).

Social aspects were noted in several student responses. The main aspects noted were opportunities the *Take a Break* program provided for talking, and for making and being with friends. The following excerpts from student responses are representative of these social aspects: 'Talking to staff' (2019 & 2020), 'talking' (2019), 'friends' (2019), 'having friends on the first day' (2019), 'being with my friends' (2021 & 2022), 'having loving friends' (2021), 'making new friends' (2019 & 2021), 'meeting friends' (2022), 'belonging with my friends' (2019) and 'spending time with friends' (2020) when involved in activities such as playing (2021 & 2022) or when sleeping (2021). As can be seen in these excerpts, friends were something that many students noted as what they liked best about CBTS.

Emotional aspects also featured in the student evaluation responses. The idea of being and feeling safe along with experiencing a fun time were mentioned many times and as such were significant responses. In relation to fun students wrote 'it is so much fun' (2022), 'it's so fun' (2021), 'fun' (2021 & 2022), 'have fun' (2021) and 'it was fun' (2022). For one student there was a connection between having fun and feeling safe: 'it's so fun and you feel safe' (2021). Other students also noted feeling safe as the best thing they experienced attending CBTS. Their comments included 'to be safe' (2019), and 'I loved how friendly and safe I found around all the staff' (2022). Feelings of 'never get[ting] bored' (2021) were mentioned by one student.

Many of the activities and opportunities made available to the students during their time on the *Take a Break* program at CBTS featured in the student responses. Excursions, games, movies, beach-related activities and physical activities were all noted. One student wrote they liked 'how we were always doing something' (2021). The main responses across all years (2018 to 2022) were surfing, swimming and going to the beach. Many other activities were mentioned including fishing (2018, 2019, 2021), 'fishing in the ocean' (2018), 'jumping off the boat' (2018), 'kick[ing] your legs in the ocean' (2018), 'fishing, going to the marine, going to the port, beach,

light house' (2019). Other activities were 'listening to music in the bus' (2018), 'the games and activities' (2018), 'rock climbing' (2019), the 'low ropes course' (2019, 2021, 2022), 'finding crabs at the beach' (2019), 'being near the beach' (2020), 'surfing, snorkelling, basketball and the fishing' (2020), 'swimming with seals' (2021), 'snorkelling' (2021), 'the boat ride' (2021), 'I loved the discovery centre' (2021), 'rock pooling' (2021), the 'dolphin tour' (2021) and 'Bounce' (2022).

CBTS personnel were mentioned numerous times as what the students liked best – 'staffing' (2019). What was appreciated was that the staff were:

#### Friendly

*'friendly staff' (2018, 2019, 2022)*

*'the staff are friendly' (2020)*

*'how all the staff are so friendly' (2021)*

#### Nice

*'how nice the staff were' (2018)*

*'all the staff were very nice' (2018)*

#### Happy

*'all of the happy staff' (2019)*

*'fun and chilled out' (2021)*

#### Kind

*'the kind staff' (2021, 2022)*

*'the staff (very kind)' (2021)*

#### Helpful

*'all staff helped when needed' (2022)*

*'how friendly and helpful the staff were' (2022)*

*'staff are helpful' (2022)*

One student noted 'the leaders' as the best thing, explaining that 'they like to have fun and take care of us' (2019), while another student also appreciated the 'friendly leaders and staff' (2021). One student labelled the staff as 'awesome' (2022), while another wrote the best thing about CBTS was 'The STAFF!!!!' using capital letters and five exclamation marks to illustrate the importance of them to that student's experience. Specific staff members were named, but generally there was appreciation for all the staff – 'the staff was fantastic!' (2018).

Food and eating also rated many mentions across all years as the best thing about CBTS – 'I like the food' (2021) and 'eating' (2018). For example, one student noted 'the awesome food' (2021), while another appreciated the 'variety' of food on offer (2021). 'New food' (2019) was mentioned by one student, another noted 'all the pizza' (2018), 'spaghetti' (2021) and

'dessert time' (2022), and another 'brownies and ice cream' (2019), and "breakfast' (2022). The volume of food available was mentioned by one student who wrote 'getting to eat lots of food'. For another student the best thing was 'when we ate dinner' (2019).

Many comments related to CBTS itself as a place – 'the place, it's huge' (2021), 'the house' (2020), 'the cottage by the sea house' (2021) and 'the house is beautiful' (2022). One student liked 'the renovation' (2021). Comments about the different elements of the place varied greatly, noting the:

#### Location / the view

*'it was right next to the beach' (2018)*

*'the beach and the view' (2020)*

*'being near the beach' (2020)*

*'I liked that it's near the sea' (2021)*

*'the view in the morning' (2021)*

*'it has a big back yard' (2022) ...*

to highlight a few representative student responses.

#### Facilities

such as *'the games room' (2018)*

the playground – *'the big outside swing' (2021), 'I like how there was a big playground' (2022)*

the slide inside the building – *'the slide to the ground floor' (2021)*

#### Bedrooms and beds

*'bunk beds' (2018 & 2019)*

*'our new bed' (2018)*

*'how comfortable the beds are' (2019)*

*'my bed' (2019)*

*'the bedrooms' (2021 & 2022)*

#### The welcoming gifts made by the volunteers on the students' beds on arrival

*'free items from the bed' (2021)*

*'I like that you gave us the clothes and teddy' (2019)*

*'the present we got' (2018)*

*'the bears and the dorms' (2018)*



Also mentioned was 'how clean it is' (2021), 'It's like a hotel' (2021), 'the space was relaxing and calm' (2021), with one student happy 'that we got to stay' (2020).

For a smaller number of students, the routines set up and implemented during the program were appreciated. These included 'waking up early for fishing' (2019), 'waking up' (2019), and sleeping – 'we go to bed' (2019), 'Swimming and bedtime' (2019) and 'sleeping' (2019 & 2021).

A few students noted that learning things while attending CBTS was the best thing. These comments related to 'learning new things' (2019), 'learning to play basketball and air hockey' (2018) and 'education' (2019).

## Student Perspectives of What They Didn't Like During Their Time at *Take a Break*

The third open-ended question from the student evaluations invited students to list anything they did not like. The question was left open so that students could mention things they did not like about CBTS, *Take a Break* itself or their overall experience. This question is important from the perspective of CBTS, which is keen to receive constructive feedback from participants. The CBTS leadership treat all feedback as a gift enabling them a basis upon which to improve the program. From the 1368 student evaluation responses spanning the years 2018 to 2022, nine main themes were identified: (1) nothing; (2) everything; (3) food; (4) rules; (5) social; (6) emotional; (7) space and place; (8) routine; and (9) physical.

The theme *nothing* was linked to the program being 'perfect' so there was nothing to dislike. For example, in 2022 many responses to the question stated 'No'. On the other hand, stating 'everything' (2019) seemed to indicate that there was nothing enjoyable or likeable about the program. Defining the term and its use in this way seems at odds with all the other data so perhaps it was meant to be a positive comment like 'nothing'. As there were no other comments attached to the word, we can only guess the intention.

*Food* was a theme with comments linked to disliking eating breakfast or specific foods, such as 'the salad dressing' (2020) and 'the vegies' (2022), with the food described by one respondent as 'spicy and not tasty' (2021), while another commented 'I didn't like how the deserts were overly repeated' (2022). One student wrote 'I didn't enjoy the food a lot', and another explained their negative comment about the food by writing 'I don't really like the food, but I don't really like any food' (2022).

Several students did not appreciate the rules, nominating the following: 'Girls first' (2019), 'Not having my phone' (2019), 'Getting into trouble' (2019), 'No going on the grass' (2020) and 'Not being able to bring my skateboard' (2022), with one student stating that they did not receive 'a lot of information' (2021), which they disliked.

Social aspects rated highly in the 'did not like' category. The tension between boys and girls was noted across a few responses, along with some behaviours such as 'people being mean' (2019), with 'fighting' (2019) not appreciated. Having 'dorm mates' and other people 'in my room' (2020) was not an enjoyable experience for a few students. In fact, one student went as far as to say that 'everyone is annoying' (2019). Broken friendships spoilt the experience – 'Friendships a bit broken' (2019) – as did students whose behaviour did not conform to the rules, such as 'children with no table manners' (2019) and 'people were talking over staff' (2019).

For a few students what they disliked about the experience can be linked to emotional aspects. Some students found

the nights a little scary, with one respondent writing that it was 'creepy at nights' (2019) and another stating 'at night because we had to close the light' (2022). Feeling homesick was mentioned by a small number of students as they missed being with their families/parents. One student noted 'the constant suspense' (2020) as something they disliked, with another echoing this sentiment. For a student attending *Take a Break* with a gender fluid identity they felt that the program lacked support – 'Don't have support for people who identify as he/she' (2021).

The space and place attracted several varied responses. However, it must be remembered that some of these responses related to programs that were undertaken before the buildings underwent renovation and were contradictory to what many other students commented on as being the best part of the program. Some of the aspects of the space and place included:

*'the TV,' 'the colour of the doors,' 'no fan,' 'the toilets were dirty' and 'please let the girls use the bottom toilet,' 'the rooms are crappy,' 'the rooms are gendered,' 'the noisy bed,' 'no pool table,' 'the heat of the games room,' 'sharing a room,' 'getting dressed in front of people,' 'the sand,' 'the salt water,' 'the sandpit,' 'the cold showers' and 'no single swing.'*

Other students provided personal comments about the pictures on the wall ('the clown is creepy'), the need for more blankets or their own dislike for heights, with some stating 'that is in my opinion' or 'me personally'. Several students commented that the main thing they didn't like about CBTS was going home, saying 'I will be really sad to go home' and 'I don't want to go home'.

Some routines for the smooth running of the program and for the students' wellbeing, while necessary, were not appreciated by some students. These routines included showering, such as having 'quick showers' (2018) and also actually 'had to shower' (2019); sleeping, as some students found it 'hard to sleep' (across all years) due to snoring, whispering and noise; going to bed early and getting up early; washing wetsuits; cleaning; and having dinner at a time that was considered 'too early'.

The physical demands of the program experiences were not embraced by some students. Some disliked that there was lots of walking which was found to be 'exhausting' (2019), 'walking like a very long time' (2022), and another comment 'so much walking' (2021). The 'night walk' was noted as one walk that was not enjoyed by some. Other activities such as ball games, the ropes, surfing, falling off the boat, putting on and talking off wetsuits, dancing, playing outside, 'always watching movies' (2020) and 'how many movies we have' (2019) were named in the responses. Seasickness due to being on a boat was disliked along with sunburn and 'the drive' (2019), qualified by another student as 'how long the drive was to get to cottage by the sea' (2021).

### Student Perspectives of How Their Time at Cottage by the Sea Made Them Feel

Students participating in *Take a Break* were invited to complete the sentence 'My time at CBTS made me feel ...' In total, there were 1978 words used by the students across 2018–2022 and 165 different words across the total number of words. Figure 6 presents a word cloud of the words that were used by 10 or more students across the five years.

As can be seen in Figure 6, across all years (2018–2022) the most prevalent words used to describe the students' feelings after they had attended *Take a Break* were 'happy', 'safe', 'good', 'excited', 'confident', 'brave' and 'adventurous'. Other highly used words to describe their feelings included 'sad', 'great', 'scared', 'amazed/amazing', 'nervous', 'calm', 'healthy', 'tired' and 'joyful'.

The word 'happy' was by far the most used word to describe students' feelings (n = 796). Several respondents attempted to highlight the extent of their happiness as the following examples show:

- 'Really, really, really, really happy' (2019)
- 'safe and VEEERRRRRRYYYYYY Happy' (2019)
- 'very, very, very, very, very, very Happy' (2019)
- 'so so happy' (2019)
- 'really really really really really really really really really really joyful and happy with my friends' (2020)
- 'really happy and I don't want to leave here' (2021)



Figure 6. Word cloud of all words provided by students with 10 or more responses

Happiness was associated with engaging with the activities: 'I was happy because all of the activities' (2019), 'happy because there is so many activities to try and learn' (2021), 'happy and willing to try new things' (2020), 'happy and made me try new things' (2021), 'happy that I got to learn new things' (2021). The kindness of staff was noted by one student as something that helped them feel happy: 'happy because I loved how kind the staff were and making new friends' (2019). Friendships played a part in the level of happiness that was experienced, as the following responses illustrate: 'happy and I made new friends' (2019), 'Happy and sad because my friendship some of my friends didn't hang out with me' (2020). For one student the location made them happy: 'being next to the sea and walking around very made me happy' (2020). Several students expressed their happiness that they attended the program, commenting they felt 'happy that I came' (2020), while one student stated 'Happy and to have the best time of my life' (2021).

Feelings of happiness turned to sadness for several students when they realised that the program was coming to an end, and they had to leave and return home. The following data excerpt is an example of this sentiment: 'really happy and kind of sad when I figured out that I was going home' (2021).

The notion of feeling safe was also highly represented in the responses. Some examples included 'safe because the staff was so nice' (2019), 'sometimes scared but safe' (2021), 'a bit safer the longer I stayed' (2022) and 'it made me feel safe around other people' (2022).

Feelings of confidence aligned with feeling brave and courageous, such as:

*'even more brave to do other things like surfing' (2018)*  
*'more confident to do things' (2019)*  
*'more confident and keen to do things I haven't done before' (2019)*  
*'Confident. I got to face my fears and overcome them' (2019)*  
*'Cottage by the sea made me confident about things I do' (2021)*  
*'confident to try new things' (2021)*  
*'as if I could believe in me and be more confident with doing other activities' (2021)*  
*'more brave and facing up my fears' (2021)*  
*'brave and I had a lot of courage for support that got me to do stuff I was terrified of' (2021)*  
*'brave to be round girls because I don't usually hang out with a lot of girls' (2021)*  
*'I like I can succeed in anything that I try' (2021)*  
*'a better person and I noticed that I'm not limited by just what I think I am but there's so much more to try to push the limits on' (2021)*  
*'like I was accepted with open arms and it made me feel adventurous and confident' (2021)*

Feeling nervous and scared was due to either being away from home and a familiar environment or not knowing what was going to be asked of them and if they could manage it.

'Excitement' was another word used by many students to describe how they felt. Examples included:

*'Excited for everything we did' (2018)*  
*'excited for each day' (2019)*  
*'So excited and there was a feeling that is unexplainable' (2019)*  
*'at cottage I felt excited for the tasks' (2021)*  
*'excited because I did new things every day and it was my first school camp' (2022)*

One student summarised their feelings in relation to attending *Take a Break* program as follows: 'as if I was living in a dream and I was a rich kid' (2022).



**Student Drawing 13.** Being able to provide support and confidence to friends was also understood by the students as a highlight of the program.



## The Difference *Take a Break* Makes: Insights from Teacher Evaluations

The following sections provide insight into how 145 teachers viewed their experiences after attending the *Take a Break* program with their students. Teachers' views have been summarised from three major data sources: (1) quantitative data from teacher evaluations between the years 2018 and 2022; (2) qualitative data from teacher evaluations between the years 2018 and 2022; and (3) teacher interviews.

### Quantitative Data from Teacher Evaluations

At the end of each *Take a Break* program between 2018 to 2022, teachers were invited to complete an evaluation to provide insights into their views about the *Take a Break* program and the impact of the program on the students who attended from their school. Figure 7 presents the results from the 145 teachers who completed the teacher evaluations in relation to their views about the program, food, staff and variety of activities. Specifically, they were invited to rate their experiences from the 3-point Likert scale of 'good', 'very good' or 'excellent'.

Overall findings show that the highest proportion of teachers across all five years reported that the program, food, staff and variety of activities were 'excellent'. Their views on the CBTS staff rated extremely high, with all years over 97%. Similar high ratings of over 85% were evident across the other three categories.

In contrast to the student quantitative data, there did not appear to be any significant changes in teachers' views pre- and post-covid lockdown – in fact, there was an increase in positive ratings for the variety of activities offered in the *Take a Break* program. However, one notable change was in 2021 when there was a decrease in the proportion of teachers who reported that the 'food' was 'very good' rather than 'excellent'.

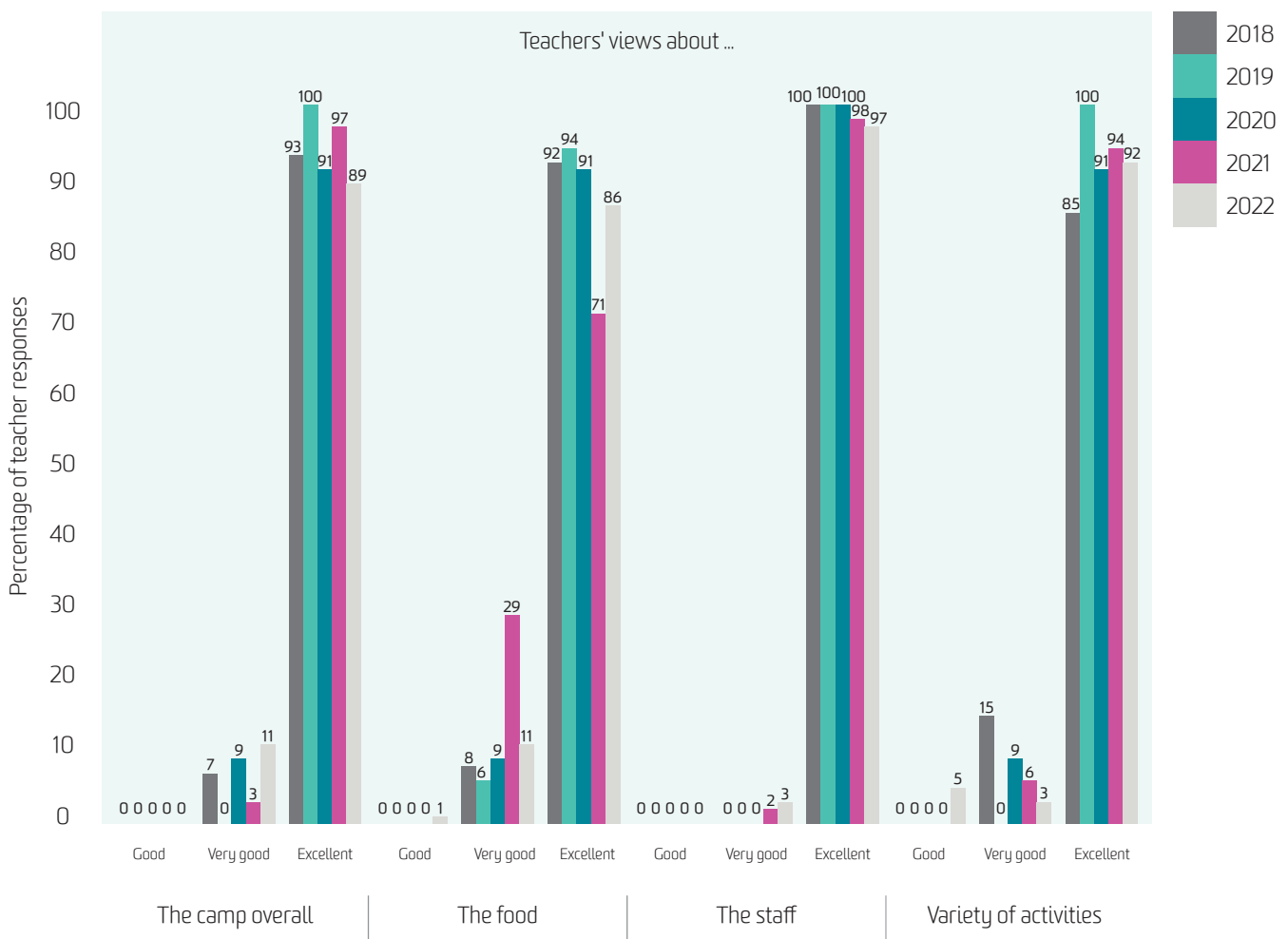


Figure 7. Teachers' views about how they felt about the program, food, staff and activities (N = 145)

Teachers were also invited to reflect on the impact of the *Take a Break* program on the students from their school who attended in eight key areas: (1) attitude; (2) behaviour; (3) confidence; (4) hope and aspirations; (5) willingness to try new things; (6) relationships with others; (7) healthy choices; and (8) resourcefulness. Teachers were invited to select one response from the 3-point Likert scale that ranged from 'no change' to 'minor improvement' to 'significant improvement'. Figure 8 presents the results from the 145 teachers across the five years.

Results show that all teachers had observed a change in students' confidence and willingness to try new things as a result of attending the *Take a Break* program. Specifically, the highest proportion of teachers had witnessed 'significant improvement' in these two areas. Similarly, a high proportion of teachers noted either 'minor improvement' or 'significant improvement' in all other areas.

There are some interesting trends to note in this data when we compare pre- and post-covid lockdown data. In 2018, some teachers noted no change in students' behaviour, hope and aspirations, healthy choices and resourcefulness. However, these results were less than a quarter of teacher responses. A higher proportion of teachers from this group also observed only 'minor improvements' in students' relationship with others (60%). In contrast, post-covid lockdown results show an increase in the proportion of teachers who reported that there were 'significant improvements' in students' relationships with others (75% in 2021 and 83% in 2022). Other differences were evident in the reported impact of the *Take a Break* program on student behaviour and attitude with a decrease in the proportion of teachers noting 'significant improvement'. Perhaps this may reflect more general trends in these areas since covid lockdown.

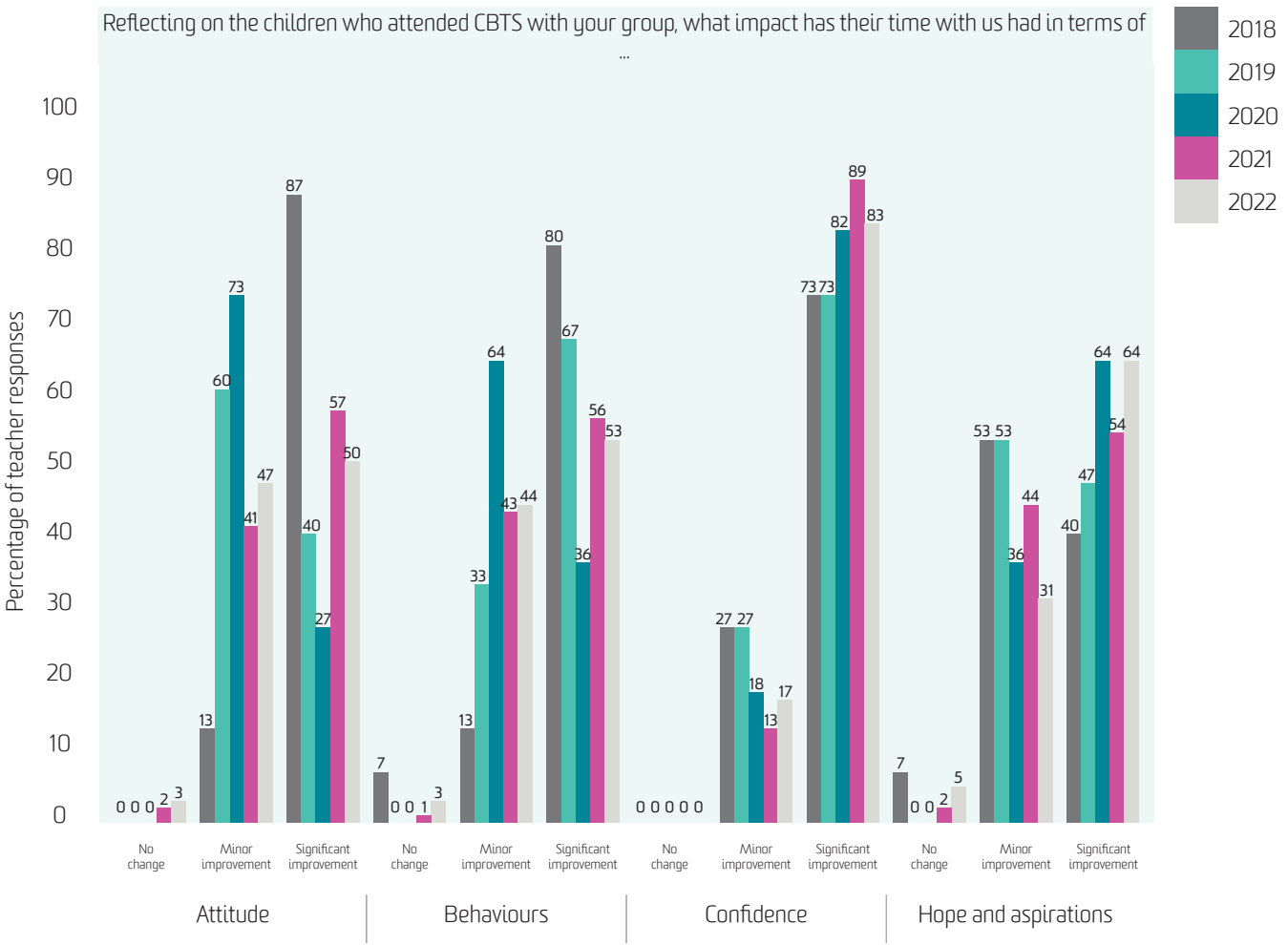
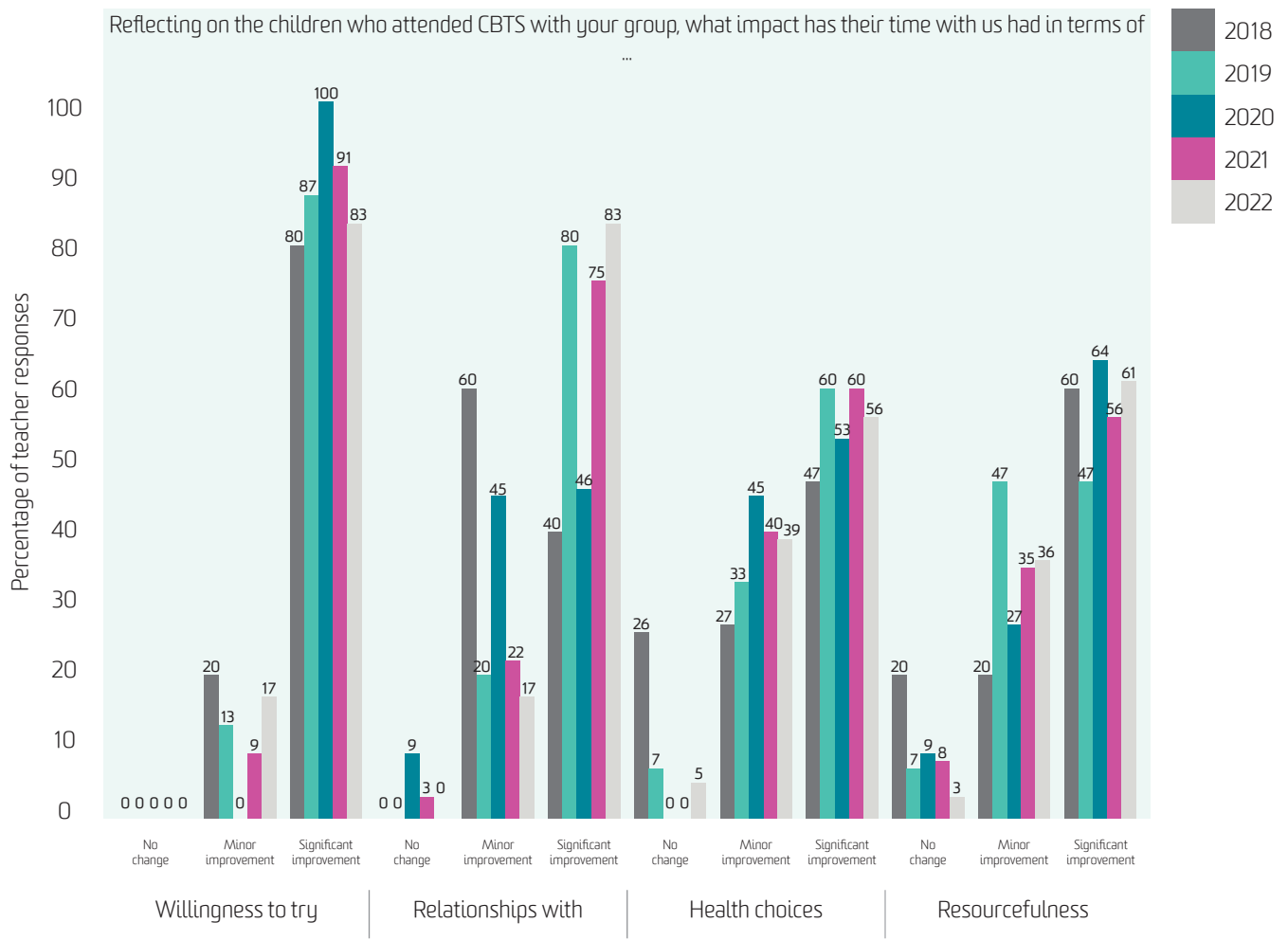


Figure 8a. Teachers' perspectives regarding the impact of *Take a Break* on the students from their school who attended in relation to eight key areas



**Figure 8b.** Teachers' perspectives regarding the impact of *Take a Break* on the students from their school who attended in relation to eight key areas

## Qualitative Data from Teacher Evaluations

Teachers were invited to respond to one open-ended question in the teacher evaluation which sought general comments about the *Take a Break* program as well as its overall impact. A total of 133 from the 145 teachers (92%) completed this evaluation item. Four main themes were identified from the data: (1) staff; (2) activities; (3) food; and (4) space and place. In addition to these themes, teachers also commented on the overall impact as well as thanking CBTS and reporting that they would 'love to come back'.

### The Difference *Take a Break* Makes: The Staff at Cottage by the Sea

Most teachers commented that the staff at CBTS had an impact on the student experiences on the *Take a Break* program. These comments included the *encouragement, care and respect* that the staff showed towards the students. Typical comments included:

*'Every leader was engaging and managed to encourage all students to participate' (2018)*

*'Staff were great at building relationships' (2018)*

*'Staff are awesome and inspiring for our kids' (2020)*

*'The staff are dedicated, passionate and positive 100% of the time' (2021)*

*'The impact of the programs and the constant support of your staff helping our students have been fantastic.' (2021)*

*'Staff interaction with the student was very impressive. Their manner, support they provided for the students to take on challenges and extend themselves was outstanding.' (2021)*

*'The staff were amazing and really cared for the students' (2022)*

*'Enthusiastic and friendly staff who have shown initiative to help the students have fun and feel included.' (2022)*

Teachers also noted that the staff were knowledgeable about the Queenscliff area and the specific activities provided as part of the *Take a Break* program. Specifically, teachers across the five years of teacher evaluation commented that:

*'From a teaching perspective, your staff were knowledgeable about the area of Port Phillip Bay' (2018)*

*'This is the first school camp that I have attended, and I am blown away! The staff have been fantastic and so knowledgeable.' (2018)*

*'It was great to take the bus to see different parts of Queenscliff. The activities were great for all abilities and the knowledge the staff had of the area was excellent.' (2022)*

Teachers also noted that the staff were very understanding of the student cohort. Many teachers articulated the importance of staff knowing about the ways to interact with the students and to be aware of the complex needs of the students attending the *Take a Break* program. Typical comments across the five years included:

*'Staff were amazing – understood our challenging cohort of students and continually working for ways to acknowledge, value and praise our students. They read our kids.' (2018)*

*'The camp staff are outstanding friendly, caring and understanding of our trauma students.' (2019)*

*'Staff were nothing short of fabulous. They were always encouraging, patient, understanding of our students and their individual needs. Our students came away feeling good about themselves. Thank you.' (2019)*

*'The staff go above and beyond to ensure that all children are able to participate and feel valued' (2021)*

*'Camp staff are amazing – understand our students, always firm, friendly, caring, clear simple instructions, join in activities with students. Genuinely want to interact and want the best for the students.' (2021)*

*'The ability to cater to the needs of our kids so close to home makes this camp something really special.' (2021)*

*'This camp was amazing! Thank you for all your hard work. I can see all the staff here really Love!!! their job. They work hard and look after the kids' needs. No request was ever too hard for the staff here. Thank you!' (2022)*



### The Difference *Take a Break* Makes: Activities at Cottage by the Sea

Another strong theme that was identified from the teacher evaluation data across the five years related to the *Take a Break* program activities provided for the students who attended. Typical teacher comments included aspects of the activities that provided a balance between structured and unstructured tasks, supported students to try new things within a safe environment, supported students to move beyond their comfort zones, and encouraged possibilities to develop trust and confidence. Examples of these teacher comments included:

*'Activities are perfect, a balance between structured and free time outside the playground, sports equipment, / play area is ideal. Best activity is watching the kids swimming in the sea. They loved it.'* (2019)

*'Activities helped the kids to gain confidence and encouraged them to step out of their comfort zone. Great opportunity for [name of school] kids that don't get out of [name of area] much to see the world. These kids have needed a break and some fun since the fires, but things kept getting cancelled by COVID. Glad that they had the opportunity to do this with COVID.'* (2021)

*'The success of some of our students in activities that they would usually give up on has been amazing.'* (2021)

*'Staff and activities were outstanding! It's great seeing kids trying things outside of their comfort zones and working together as a team.'* (2021)

*'Experiences that encouraged them to take risks, build trust with peers/teachers/adults and explore totally new places and activities (many have never left their home towns before).'* (2022)

*'Students loved the activities and friendliness of staff. They had a ball!!!'* (2022)



## Cottage by the Sea

### The Difference *Take a Break* Makes: Food at Cottage by the Sea

Teachers made many positive comments about the food provided at *Take a Break* program. These comments were often contradictory to the overall ratings of the food in the quantitative data. Overall, teachers commented about the food being amazing, delicious and healthy. Typical comments included:

*'The food was great!!!' (2018)*

*'Food was delicious and the program was outstanding' (2021)*

*'Food provided was so yummy and very adapting to children who didn't want to eat set meals.' (2021)*

*'Food is delicious – students really get to experience a great range of healthy foods.' (2021)*

*'Food was amazing! The talk with [chef] had a massive impact.' (2021)*

*'The kids have been well fed and the food was very healthy.' (2022)*



Typical comments included:

*'Thank you for the home-made gifts. Love the blankets, love how close to the beach and the beach activities' (2018)*

*'Thank you for the gifts left on children's beds, they really enjoyed the surprise' (2021)*

*'Always a fantastic time had a CBTS. Location is fantastic! More open living and more than 12 to sleep. Extra toilets, separate from bathrooms, bigger dining facilities. Outside playground is excellent' (2019)*

*'The faculties are first-class' (2021)*

*'Facilities are outstanding – clean and bright and the best location' (2021)*

*'Fantastic renovation' (2021)*

*'Great set up' (2021)*

*'Fabulous camp with beautiful surroundings' (2021)*

*'A lovely setting with great views of ships and the water. A wonderful opportunity for students' (2022)*

### The Difference *Take a Break* Makes: The Place, Space and Resources at Cottage by the Sea

The impact of the space and place at CBTS was also mentioned by many teachers. Teachers commented on the high standard of facilities, particularly after the renovations. Some teachers were also grateful for the home-made gifts and the beautiful views offered at CBTS.





**The Difference *Take a Break* Makes:  
Overall Impact of the *Take a Break* Program**

Most teachers made comments about the overall impact of the *Take a Break* program on their students. Overall, these comments reflected the incredible experiences that the program provided for the students, the care, the lifelong memories generated by the experiences, and the changes observed in their students to try new things after their time at CBTS. One teacher noted:

*'The openness and confidence in the children have grown exponentially in such a short time, they have obtained an outlook of the world that we could not have ever taught them' (2021).*

Another stated that:

*'It's been amazing to see the growth in the students who are reluctant to try something new but chose to step outside their comfort zone' (2021).*

Other changes noted in the students was articulated by a teacher attending the *Take a Break* program in 2021. She noted that:

*'I have watched kids that maybe a little naughty in class come here and absolutely turn into champions. I've seen kids that struggle to make friends come here and build amazing relationships with their peers. It truly has been life changing for a lot of these kids.'*

All teachers expressed their thanks and gratitude to the staff and CBTS community. One teacher noted the alignment between their schools' values and the mission of CBTS, noting that 'Cottage by the Sea has aspirations that blend nicely with [our school's] values and aims' (2018). Other teachers noted that the experiences at the *Take a Break* program provided lifetime experiences and wonderful memories. For example, one teacher wrote 'Thank you so much ... Lifetime memories and future a little brighter!' (2018). Similarly, another teacher commented that:

*'We love coming to Cottage and know that when we leave, we will have so many great memories of rock pooling, fishing, things they would have never had the opportunity to ever do again.' (2019)*

A teacher from a recent 2022 program also made comment regarding the impact of the program in providing long-term memories, stating that:

*'Students will return back home with many great memories of this camp and successes that they achieved to share and use at any future reference that they may face. A fantastic camp. Thank You :)'*

## Cottage by the Sea

Teachers also commented that the *Take a Break* program impacted on their students' confidence and ability to try new things because of the support and encouragement provided by the staff at CBTS. This care for students supported them to feel safe, relaxed and secure. Typical responses included:

*'Cottage is such a fantastic opportunity for the kids to just be kids. They are so well cared for, fed and looked after by the staff. They can relax and not have to worry where their next meal is coming from or if someone will be there to look after them.'* (2019)

*'The program and staff provided our students with the opportunity to venture into unfamiliar territory with their emotions, abilities, and experiences. Many found they had the ability to be scared but try a new skill/experience. The staff gently encouraged and support all students by giving them words of encouragement and supporting them when they (students) felt scared/unsure of activities.'* (2021)

Some teachers who had attended *Take a Break* previously made comments about the feelings of returning to the family at CBTS.

*'Thank you so much from the bottom of all our hearts for allowing us to be a part of the CBTS family!'* (2018)

*'By far the best camp I have been on. It was instantly like returning to a familiar place and the feeling of being one of the family set staff and children at ease. So well run and clearly a supportive working environment.'* (2021)

The following teacher response (in the text box) summarises the overall impact of the *Take a Break* program as perceived by many of the teachers who attend this program with the students from their school.



*Coming to camp at Cottage by the Sea has given our students a sense of hope that life once again can be filled with new and challenging adventures. It has given them opportunities to step outside their comfort zones, to try new things, take risks, overcome their fears and build stronger relationships with their peers. They are definitely overflowing with newfound confidence, self-belief and an enthusiasm to be curious and drive to embrace life. They have learnt to persist, be determined and to support and encourage each other. These are skills and qualities that they can draw on in everyday life, for the rest of their lives. Cottage by the Sea have created memories that will stay with them forever. Knowing that the generosity of others, which enabled them to have these experiences, will also inspire them to help others in return. Just like Cottage by the Sea put smiles on all our students faces it is our hope that our students will also grow to be grateful and giving citizens who put smiles on the faces of others, to continue to care for and give hope to others who are having troubled time or just need to know there is someone out there who believes in them. Thank you all for inviting us to come to Cottage by the Sea; it came at the perfect time when our students just needed to know life is filled with lots of adventure just waiting for them to embrace. The facilities at Cottage by the Sea are outstanding, clean, well-cared for and well resourced. The staff are amazing. They were always happy, welcoming and ready-willing and able to help us out in every way possible. They were extremely supportive and encouraging to all students and took special care of those students that found the activities challenging or had physical difficulties.* (2021)



# A Close Look at Making a Difference: A Case Study Approach

## Context of the Case Studies

To gain a deeper perspective and understanding of the work of CBTS, and the *Take a Break* program in particular, the research team conducted one-day site visits at four of the *Take a Break* programs in 2022 (May to October). While attending these programs, the research team were able to make observations of the students, teachers and program leaders as they interacted and were involved in program activities. Both teachers and program leaders were interviewed, and students were involved in a drawing activity that provided rich data on both their understanding and their emotional response to the *Take a Break* program. The observations and interviews were structured around the themes of the program itself, and to ensure an underlying consistency to the data collected. The data from the student and teacher evaluations from the five schools across these four programs has been analysed and incorporated into the larger sample of 1368 students and 145 teachers (see quantitative and qualitative data from student and teacher evaluations above). Separating the data from these programs resulted in small sample sizes and similar trends to what has been presented in the findings earlier in this report so is not reported here. In the main, this data was highly reflective of that reported earlier in the discussion of the student evaluations more generally.

For three of the site visits, the program supported the experiences of students from a specific school context, while one program involved students from two separate schools, combined based on their geographical proximity. Most of the schools in the study have a low Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage: one school is in the bottom 5% of all schools in the state, another in the bottom 15%, two around the bottom third and one slightly above average. One of the schools is from a major rural city, another is from a growing regional centre and three are from a remote area of Victoria. While three of the schools are located within close proximity to each other, their characteristics in terms of student population, socio-educational advantage and proportions of Indigenous students provide the sample with a variety of student backgrounds and experiences.

The case study schools mostly have around 100 students; however, one has nearly 200 while another under 50 students. Only one school has a significant proportion (around a third) of students from a language background other than English. Two of the schools have relatively large Indigenous student populations of around 10% while for another they have over 20% Indigenous students. Table 1 on the next page provides a summary of the participants involved in the case study aspect of this research.



Table 1. Summary of case study participants

Case study programs	No. of student participants	No. of teacher/adult participants
Case Study Program 1	21	2
Case Study Program 1	17	3
Case Study Program 1	44	5
Case Study Program 1	30	3
<b>Total participants</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>13</b>

Using a qualitative case study methodology (Campbell & Yin, 2018), the project examined the (perceived) impacts and value that participation in the *Take a Break* program had for participants within the context of four specific iterations of the program. As discussed earlier, the research team attended one day during each of these programs – usually Day 3 of the program after CBTS staff had significant opportunity to establish relationships and build rapport with program participants. Case study research positions participant voices/insights within their experiential context, therefore bringing deeper meaning and focus to their observations and experiences. As such, it is the intent of this methodological approach to bring a robust element of ‘depth’ as opposed to frequency in terms of participant perspectives of the *Take a Break* program. Through the lens of individual experience, we (the researchers) looked to identify prominent and recurring themes across the data collected as a basis for generalisation, rather than as a specific account of experience. Importantly, the intent here is to ‘illustrate’, from multiple perspectives, the themes that are distilled from the dataset and consider these against the existing knowledge base of previous research. In the carriage of this research project, we have sought to let the data tell the story and not sit in judgement of it. From this perspective, we invite readers to understand the competing tensions that arise from various accounts of lived experiences. Rather than present these as four distinct case study accounts of experience, the data generated by the various participants has been synthesised and presented in the form of key themes arising from the student reflective drawings about the ways in which their experiences at the *Take a Break* program enabled (or not) them to cultivate understandings of being active, healthy, confident and respectful. This is then followed by a thematic analysis, supplemented by specific case stories of the *Take a Break* program impact by teachers and program leaders, to provide further detail about the ways in which the *Take a Break* program experiences supported young people to achieve the intended aims.

### Being Active, Healthy, Confident and Respectful: Student Perspectives from Drawings and Written Reflections

The research team invited the students to provide the researchers with drawings as an instrument of data generation. Drawings provide an alternative means of expression that complements other forms of expression. Through drawings, children depict events, activities and interactions providing insights into their meaning and the emotions they attach to these practices and processes. The use of drawing in research understands that images reflect subjective feelings and social positions (Rose, 2016). Drawing, like writing, is a deliberative process; it allows time for reflection. Leitch (2008) argues that drawings can help children in research ‘to narrate aspects of their consciously lived experience as well as uncovering the unrecognised, unacknowledged or “unsayable” stories that they hold’ (p. 37).

Drawing entails a meaning-making process. Children use their creativity and imagination to capture their experiences in drawings. In critical visual methodology, both the content of a drawing and the circumstances of its production are equally important. As such, the meaning of a drawing is deeply situated and understanding the drawing requires us to understand both the situation the drawing was produced out of, as well as the visual elements selected by the student to express themselves. A critical approach to image analysis aims to make sense of the visual materials’ effects, compositions and meanings (Rose, 2016).

Following a brief outdoor activity after lunch, the research team invited the children from four *Take a Break* programs to participate in the drawing activity. At the beginning of the activity, each child was provided with a piece of A4 paper and two marker pens. The children divided the sheet of paper into four sections and wrote the four keywords (i.e. Active, Healthy, Confident, Respectful) at the top of each section. We then invited them to draw a picture to show how the CBTS helped them to be active, healthy, confident and respectful.



Most children accompanied their drawings with short statements or phrases. This text often helped clarify the meanings of the images, enabling us to not impose our assumptions on the children's representations. For young children (aged six to eight years), answering evaluation questions about their feelings and experiences can be difficult. We believe that the use of drawing helps to address this challenge. Drawings can serve as 'a second language' that expresses the inner world of young people (Wimmer, 2014, p. 5). Although the drawings might not fully capture what the children experience at CBTS or fully express how they feel about their experiences, the artifacts complement the data generated through observations, interviews and the evaluation instruments.

Each drawing was carefully examined, with particular attention paid to the images' overt messages rather than their aesthetic merit. We have coded the drawings under the four pre-defined themes: *active*, *healthy*, *confident* and *respectful*.



## Active

To tell us what helped them to be *active* at the *Take a Break* program, the students drew activities such as climbing, surfing, swimming, running, walking and jumping. Some students also underscored the sense of place by writing short statements such as 'I have walked a lot here' to accompany the drawings. In drawings 14 and 15 there is a clear sense of the challenge associated with the activities being undertaken by the students. In the first drawing the student is dwarfed by the activity. At the beginning of her climb, the enormity of the task still in front of her. In the second drawing, the boy is on top of the wave, arms spread to sustain balance; his smile beams confidence and a sense of achievement.



**Student Drawing 14.** By a student from Program 1 about how program experiences enabled them to be 'active' in a rock-wall climbing activity.

**Student Drawing 15.** By a student from Program 1 about how program experiences enabled them to be 'active' through 'catching a wave' in surfing.



## Healthy

Most of the drawings under the healthy theme depicted fresh food (fruit and vegetables), exercise and comfortable accommodation services. In explaining what made them healthy at the *Take a Break* program, the children commented: 'They feed you like a king'; 'We all took nice warm showers'; 'I get a good night sleep'; 'I felt like I have eaten more fruit here' and 'eating however much we want; having a shower every night'. One child wrote: 'There were different veg I have not tried, and then I tried it, and it was good'. The depiction in Drawing 16 of a bowl of fruit was typical of the student drawings.



**Student Drawing 16.** By a student from Program 2 about how program experiences enabled them to be 'healthy' by eating fresh fruit.

## Confident

For many children, trying new activities at the *Take a Break* program made them feel *confident*. They emphasised the importance of getting out of one's comfort zone. Children mentioned activities, such as 'swimming with seals', 'dancing in front of everyone', 'giving something a try' and 'talking to other people' as helpful in building their confidence. The children also appreciated that they were gently encouraged to try new things: 'letting you do things in your own comfort', 'They got me to have a go' and 'They encourage you to do new things'. One child commented: 'I gained more confidence when I was walking on the beach because it tested my limits on how much stamina I had'. Depicting confidence in drawings is particularly difficult, and so the drawings were often text heavy. In Drawing 17, the student shows the moment before they accept the challenge of the activity, depicting in the written text their moment of fear before being successful, where confidence is understood as not allowing their fear to stop them 'having a go'. In Drawing 18 the child's sad face becomes happy not after being successful in the activity, but rather after deciding to try the activity itself.



Student Drawing 18. By a student from Program 3 about how program experiences enabled them to be 'confident' through new physical challenges in the low ropes course activity.



Student Drawing 17. By a student from Program 1 about how program experiences in ocean activities, as new physical pursuits, supported their growing sense of confidence.



## Respectful

Children acknowledged that activities during the *Take a Break* program helped them become more *respectful*. Through their drawings, they expressed the importance of table manners, listening to everyone, respecting peers and CBTS staff, taking turns, asking permission, helping others, talking nicely and saying 'thank you'. They also felt that they were respected at CBTS. One child wrote: 'It was great because everyone respects **me!**' [emphasis in original]. Another child stated: 'The respect the staff gave made me respect others.' This is particularly interesting, since often children are expected to show respect to others, particularly adults, with the reinforced message being that they must be the agents displaying respect. One of the team leaders in their interview also mentioned this:

*'the one word that is constant for that camp agreement is respect, so it's part of the conversation within half an hour or being at the Cottage, and it's what you're going to show respect towards, but also how you need to make sure it comes to you.'*

That students noticed how often adults at the program actively showed their respect for the students shows how powerfully this simple action by those at the program was received by the students. Although the two figures in Drawing 19 are depicted the same, the size difference between them might imply the person asking the question is an adult here too.

While the scope of this report prevents a comprehensive presentation of the nuances in the various reflective drawings collected across the 112 *Take a Break* program participants, the selected examples above provide an illustrative account of the various ways in which the



**Student Drawing 19.** By a student from Program 4 about how program experiences enabled them to experience and enact 'respect' with other program participants.

intentional aspects of program design such as the activities and food selection, and the relational pedagogies of CBTS staff enabled through explicit role modelling, impact program participants in broadening perspectives of respectful and confident dispositions.

## Making a Difference: Teacher Perspectives and Researcher Observations

Interviews with teachers took place during each of the four *Take a Break* programs by the research team. The aim of these interviews was to gain valuable insights into the various ways in which teachers perceived the collective *Take a Break* program experience impacted on their students.

To help illustrate the findings, four composite narrative accounts that weave together perspectives from teacher participants and researcher observations are provided from across the site visits, with key themes discussed from the teachers' perspectives.



## Program 1: Catching a wave ... and building confidence within a safe and caring environment

From the moment of arrival at Cottage by the Sea, the sense of excitement and enthusiasm is palpable. Students are moving purposefully – up and down the stairs – gathering items of clothing, shoes, hats and other belongings needed for the short bus trip to Ocean Grove for the highly anticipated surfing activity. The students had only recently learned that this morning's outdoor activity was surfing, as one of the staff commented:

'While information about the provisional program is sent to the teachers, we ask them not to share details with the students about what is planned, because the only concrete plan we have is the need to be flexible – we are so dependent on the tide and weather' (Program leader).

For this group of students, dealing with uncertainty has become all too familiar following devastating bushfires and the intense periods of lockdown on account of health orders in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a teacher commented:

'These kids have had so much trauma and so many things like camps cancelled, they ask, "Well, are we actually going to get to go or is something going to happen?"' (Teacher, Program 1)

If you could capture the vibe of this collective activity in a colour, it would most certainly be 'yellow'. As water drops glisten on the full-length windows of the CBTS building and they sparkle in the sunlight streaming in, drawing the eye to the majestic blue of the ocean that spans the horizon, students are industriously gathering wetsuits – the very warm ones – and their yellow rash vest that symbolically identifies them as students from the Cottage, the thickness of the wetsuits perhaps the only reminder that this activity is taking place in late autumn as the mercury struggles to climb beyond 14 degrees Celsius. Making their way past reception with a wave to the Cottage staff, the nervous and excited chatter and laughter accompanies the students as they follow the pathway down to the bus parked in anticipation at the bottom of the steps. As students board the bus, the Program Manager darts back inside to collect their own wetsuit and rash vest and comments:

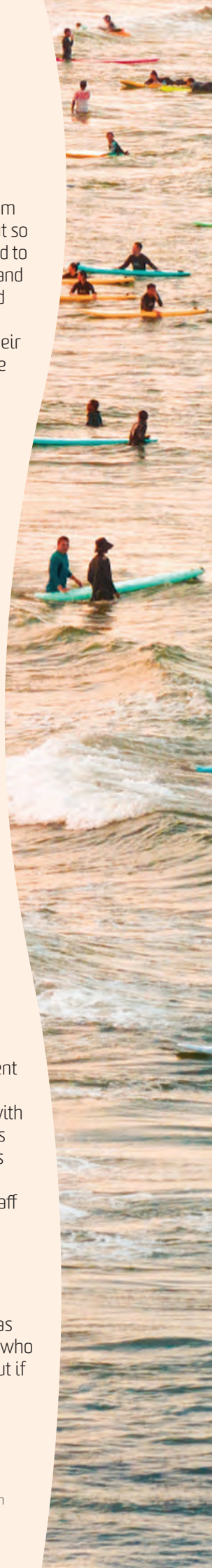
'I'm not sure if I am on the beach or in the water for this one ... it all depends on staff to student ratios in the surf.'

Standing on the beach observing the instructional phase of the surfing session two things come to mind – first, that every single student is captivated, listening intently and eagerly practising getting to their knees from a paddling position as the cold weather bites; and second, that no-one appears particularly concerned that there are very few waves despite the cold and sometimes blustery conditions as they take to the surf. As one of the CBTS staff cautions to 'only go deep enough for the water to be up to your

belly button', we notice two students who seem rather cautious about entering the water ... but so too do two program leaders. With barely a nod to their peers, both staff approach the students and while it is not possible to know what they said to each respective student as observers from afar, within minutes both students were on their board and being towed out by the staff. As one teacher comments about one of the students visibly initially cautious, 'I'm surprised she is having a go so well ... she often doesn't join in as much, I wish I knew what they said to her'. Before long, a wave swells and 14 students within the group manage to catch it in to shore in some fashion or another. In less than 20 minutes, it is observable that student confidence levels have also increased, with many students headed out into deeper water and the laughter and calamity that follows attempt after attempt to 'catch a wave' successfully is heard above the swirling winds. 'I've got it', 'I almost got that wave', 'Look at me, I'm doing it', 'I just got from my stomach to my knees' are just a few of the multitude of excited student comments that circulate, but it is the verbal and non-verbal encouragement provided by the staff that are observed as impactful. Fist pumps when someone succeeds, laughing with students as they try but slip from the board upturned in the surf, clapping, high-fiving, continued calls to 'keep paddling' give a sense of the unrehearsed yet seemingly natural caring dispositions of the program staff.

While the program leaders mark the water depth that students can paddle out to like sentinels, their body language and engagement with the students conveys a vastly different role. One program leader stands attentively with one boy lying on his board, drooped shoulders and head down as he less than patiently waits for the ultimate wave. After a number of unsuccessful attempts to catch a wave, the staff member who was working closely with this boy brings his board back to the beach before returning to encourage him to consider some 'body surfing'. As his teacher comments:

'I can't believe he is still out there and he has stuck it out so long ... he's one of those kids who if he is good at something is a real alpha but if he is not confident he just gives up.'





Participants involved in the program that comprised our first site visit to CBTS were recruited to the program through a targeted campaign that sought to provide opportunities for young people from regions recently impacted by devastating bushfires and resultant trauma. As one teacher comments:

*'One of the children here lost their house during the fires and lots of others came close, livestock and fences and things on their property – gone!... We were under ember attacks for months ... and then COVID; the kids are finally getting to achieve something without the rug being pulled from under them constantly.' (Teacher, Program 1)*



Inherent in the account above is evidence of the ways in which the selected outdoor activities are deployed to challenge students – physically and mentally. Notwithstanding the climatic conditions of late autumn, a culture of care and safety is deliberately created by the staff – through words and deeds. Through careful and purposeful planning and instruction, students are supported to build a level of confidence and trust with the staff that becomes an important element to foster engagement in physically challenging activities.

While activities in the outdoors are by nature dynamic and sometimes unpredictable, the capacity and preparation of staff to be adaptive in the carriage of the activities, in ways that are often barely observable for participants or teachers, to ensure everyone is safe and supported to enjoy the activities is testimony to the collaborative and collegial culture fostered and nurtured within the CBTS staff team.



Opportunities for students to (self) challenge are enabled through activities pedagogically set up within safe and achievable boundaries. For example, scaffolded activities that precede surfing in open water are built into the program by design to enable CBTS staff to assess students' degree of confidence in the water and swimming ability – yet in ways that are not explicit about making judgements of students' abilities. This is an important feature of the program design as often, in different contexts (e.g. school or home), abilities and dispositions, such as willingness to take on a physical challenge, can be mediated by those contexts. Further, the degree to which a young person might be willing to be challenged in a known and familiar context (such as school) can be positively disrupted in the change of environment. As one teacher illustrates through their commentary, the change of environment enables new insights about these young people that they are rarely afforded opportunities to learn, which lays important foundations for renewed or reframed student-teacher relationships following their involvement in the program. They state:

*'it is interesting to see that after school behaviour, what they eat, don't eat, how they interact and behave, how they conduct themselves at the table and around other people ... it is really eye-opening sometimes.'* (Teacher, Program 1)

The construction of boundaries within which activities are to take place – for example, marking the allowable water depth as 'only up to your belly buttons' – gives agency to the students to self-regulate within a semi-structured environment. While some staff certainly position themselves strategically facing the shore to maximise visibility of the group, their positioning also helps them to support students keen to extend the amount of time on the surfboard if they are successful in catching a wave. Importantly, the quiet words, the encouraging non-verbal 'fist pumps' and other such (deliberate) actions by staff are powerful in conveying a safe and caring environment in which students appear to respond positively to challenges that might have been initially perceived as being beyond their capabilities. As one teacher noted:

*'Just watching the kids being challenged and taking up that challenge and not throwing the towel in before they've even given it a go ... the staff have really enabled that and tried hard to make those relationships really quickly. We were not in the water with them today and yet every single one of them was out there having a go ...'* (Teacher, Program 1)

While it is difficult to make inferences about the longer-term impacts for individuals following their participation in an activity such as surfing, there is a very palpable sense of the joy, fun and confidence that is enabled for many students. Notwithstanding the fact that all students were actively engaged (a feat in itself), teacher perceptions about the ways in which participation in this activity enabled students to build confidence is highlighted through the following commentary:

*'Confidence was probably the thing that came across the strongest for me – you get this really quick transition for lots of kids. For example, one of the girls, she was really hesitant to go in the water, she is not a good swimmer but the fact she came out of the water smiling and laughing and made an effort to come up to me to tell me, "Hey, I stood up, did you see me?"; spoke volumes, she was so proud!'* (Teacher, Program 1)

### Building confidence

In reflecting on the ways in which the *Take a Break* program participation impacted their students, teachers were very attuned to the supportive and positive culture enabled by the staff and attributed this as impactful. Through the *Take a Break* program design and enactment, participants were provided opportunities to challenge themselves, as one teacher commented:

*'I love bringing them all out of their comfort zone, they are all equal here ... whatever is happening back at school or back in town, that is gone when they are here.'* (Teacher, Program 1)

In summarising teacher perceptions about the ways in which student experiences in outdoor activities built confidence, it is evident through the reflection below that beyond the selection of activities themselves it is the cultural context and safe and supportive environment fostered through deliberate relational strategies by CBTS staff that are effective in building student confidence and a mindset about the value of challenging themselves beyond that in which they may be comfortable.

*'I think it is the shift in mindset, the positivity of it, students now think 'I can have a go at things' instead of just standing back and being cautious, actually having a go and a willingness to attempt everything.'* (Teacher, Program 1)

## Program 2: Creating inclusive cultures ... A Cottage experience that is respectful of/for everyone

Gathering at the Queenscliff Boat Harbour on a sunny but cold morning in early June, there is a sense of anticipation, and for some, trepidation about the 'Swimming with the Seals' boat tour to Chinaman's Hat in Port Phillip Bay. This is Day 4 of the *Take a Break* program for students from a bushfire impacted region of Victoria, and for many, even seeing a touring boat or stepping across the gangplank to board the vessel would be a first-time occurrence. Drawing warmth from their hand-knitted colourful beanies donated to CBTS by generous volunteers, students of all shapes and sizes listen intently to the staff providing advice on the most appropriate selection of 5 mm wetsuits and strategies for getting into them while maintaining modesty and retaining body heat as the wind whistles through the marina. With snorkelling masks and flippers in hand, many of the students join the line ready for boarding. Two members of the community walking their dog past the group of students and ask, 'Are these Cottage kids?' As one of the staff nods yes, the community members engage in dialogue with some of the students, asking them whether they were excited to be going on the boat and about the other activities they had done during their week. Beyond the excited chatter and the range of responses – yep excited ... I'm scared ... this is the best camp ever – is one girl, Mia, standing to the side of the group with her wetsuit still in hand and tears welling in her eyes. Before even a tear escaped, a staff member had approached Mia and after a short conversation, proceeded to help the student put her wetsuit on. As Mia joins the line, Vinnie, a student with limited mobility, is helped into the line by one of the CBTS staff members and his mother, who was also attending the program as an additional adult school representative (to join the two teachers).

After boarding the boat and listening to the safety demonstration, and as the boat began to pull out from its docking station on the harbour, the CBTS staff move to different areas of the boat and ask the students if it would be ok to sit next to them. They engage in wide-ranging conversations – for some

it is about what they enjoyed about breakfast, for others it is a conversation about the colour of snorkel masks and the way that this might change what you can see or not when in the water. With a quick glance across the boat to each other, two staff members take up seats next to students who are visibly upset or fearful about the activity. While it is impossible to know the details of these conversations – from afar the (presumed) deliberate actions of resting their forearms on their knees as they lean in to say something quietly to the student, or the nodding of their head in relation to something the student has said, the turn of their head and warm smile for the student during these conversations or the gathering of another jacket to put around the student's shoulders as the boat picks up speed – there is an obvious 'ethics of care' displayed by the staff.

As the temperature dropped and the boat loomed closer to Chinaman's Hut, the presence of the seals invaded one's senses (they were very noisy and really smelt!). Together with the tour staff and Cottage staff, students braved the cold ocean depths to swim in smaller convoys to improve their vantage point of the seal colony – and if they were lucky, to actually have a chance to 'swim' with the seals! After seeing some of her peers jump from the boat, for Mia, this was when the real panic set in. One of the program leaders noticed this and after calm conversations with Mia, climbed over the edge of the boat and slowly lowered himself into the water – I'm going to go first, then this person and then you follow – calming instructions supplemented with lots of 'thumbs up' and encouraging nods. Not wanting to get into the water at all, Mia was encouraged to at least hang onto the rope secured to the back of the boat and following a series of scaffolded challenges, it is nearly unfathomable that in less than 30 minutes time, Mia was jumping from the top deck of the boat into the ocean and was one of the first volunteers to travel on the 'net' attached to the side of the boat as we returned to shore! For Vinnie, despite his blue lips, multiple layers of jackets to warm up and a cup of hot chocolate in hand, the sense of achievement (for both him and mum) in swimming to Chinaman's Hut and back to the boat despite his limited mobility was evident in their shared smiles as they sat quietly, likely contemplating the value of this shared participant experience!



Much like the cohort from Program 1, participants in Program 2 were also recruited from LGAs following devastating bushfires and floods the previous year. As one teacher commented, participation in the program affords students:

*'a break they just don't get in their everyday lives. Some of these kids have challenging backgrounds ... and lots of trauma.'* (Teacher, Program 2)

Beyond the embedded principles of adventure therapy that permeate program design and enactment, there appears a very purposeful intent to respect the individual capabilities of students involved in the program but to also model the ways in which respectful relationships support achievement. Key to enabling these relationships however are the intentional and unintentional acts by CBTS staff members (across all areas of the organisation) that become hallmarks of a respectful culture in which individuals belong as a member of the Cottage community – be that as someone who works within the organisation, someone who volunteers their time to knit welcome gifts or beanies, or as participants (students,

teachers and even supervising parents) who are immersed within this culture for a finite period of time over a three- to five-day *Take a Break* program.

Importantly, this respectful community culture is not contained only within the physical buildings of CBTS but is evident in, and modelled by, interactions with the broader local community. As one staff member commented:

*'by design the program has a commitment to using the local area ... that's what we want to do, we want them to see the community, we want to show ourselves as participants in the community.'* (CBTS staff member)

In the anecdote above, being identified as 'CBTS kids' by members of the local community and the enthusiasm and respectful way in which students and adults engaged in conversation about their experiences of the past week demonstrates the ways in which a student's sense of community can be expanded through a new 'community' experience afforded by the *Take a Break* program – despite the truncated time lines of a single program experience.

The identification with being a 'CBTS kid' can also support participants' sense of belonging. Feeling as though they belong and are valued and respected affords participants opportunities to also 'try on new versions of themselves'. As one staff member comments:

*'A kid may lash out but it's not just because they want to be naughty. It is because there is an underlying issue; it might be the only way they can be heard. It might be they're feeling safe for the first time, they don't know what to do, they're scared ... It's just listening to the kids and making that experience the most positive experience for them.'* (CBTS staff member)

Evident in the above narrative is a strong sense of the important role that CBTS staff play in modelling respect with diverse students with differing needs and abilities.

In juxtaposing the experiences of Mia and Vinnie described in the narrative above we get a sense of the various ways in which CBTS staff adapt their approach through relational pedagogies to respect diversity but also to support participants to achieve in scaffolded and supported ways.

## Cottage by the Sea

As one teacher commented:

*'it is remarkable, they build up this instant rapport with kids, just with fun. They're part of the activities, they're talking them up ... I sort of sit back and go, gee, I wish I could be like that a bit more ... they've just got this overall sense of inclusiveness. If you're scared, that's okay, we'll try this, we can try it that way, just really encouraging.'*  
(Teacher, Program 2)

Inherent in much of the dialogue of CBTS staff's reflections about their work is a strong shared commitment to convey messages to participants that 'they can achieve what they set their mind to, just take a few steps, there are always hurdles along the way and that's life, but we can overcome them' (CBTS staff member). This strengths-based approach embodied by the staff in respecting diversity and individuals does pay dividends and is particularly evident in one teacher's reflection about student achievements during the 'Swimming with the Seals' activity described above:

*'Just getting out there and exploring new things, like we did today, things that they don't usually have the opportunity to do ... like to go out on a boat even, offshore, that's not just like down the river but going way out where the waves effect the boat. Jumping off the boat and going into deep water. To be honest, I was even freaking out a little bit too ... I loved how some kids just jumped up and had a go. The ones that you didn't think would jump up and have a go. I was really impressed by some of our kids today ... even those who were scared and terrified and nervous - it was an experience and they'll remember it ... that is down to the respectful way the staff supported them.'*  
(Teacher, Program 2)



## Modelling respect – for individuals and the community

In reflecting on the ways in which *Take a Break* program participation supported students to develop a greater sense of respectful behaviours, teachers were glowing in their praise of the various ways in which CBTS staff modelled this. This modelling may have been through collegial relationships and interactions during the *Take a Break* program, targeted (but quiet) supportive engagement with individual children to scaffold and build confidence to try new things that might initially have been perceived to be beyond their capabilities, or through visible respectful interactions with members of the local community. As one teacher also commented:

*'One thing about Cottage by the Sea is the diversity of staff, which is outstanding in my opinion because not every kid is the same and they get to build a rapport with someone that's more like them, and I think that's really great. Everyone's different and they've got that little person to go to and go, hey, that guy's like me, or likes the same stuff I do and I can have a bit of a chat with them. Or, she's really nice and really kind and I like her and I'm going to talk to her ...'* (Teacher, Program 2)

A compelling account of the way in which staff expressions of care are respectful of, and impactful for, individual camp participants is summarised in the staff member account below following Vinnie's return home from the program:

*'I got a lovely message from the mum of the young boy that had some mobility issues – that young boy wasn't born with that condition, he had a bleed on the brain which caused the condition and mum rang a few days later and she just said, "I just wanted to thank you for treating my son like you would any other kid." She said, "I never thought I'd be getting him to do the activities that I got to do with him on your Take a Break camp." The mum was out on the boat with us and the poor little one at the end of the boat in the water, he was freezing. I helped him out of the water, we got him on the nets, so I was on the net with him before he went swimming with the seals, and a seal went under him on his floatation device and touched his belly, mum was holding him – you should have seen his face! As we got to the back of the boat you could see mum was getting tired, I just grabbed him – it's what we do, we're there to support the kids. He was exhausted but didn't want to go back to the Cottage when the other kids were off to the Marine Discovery Centre. I asked him to help me at the shopping so we could get some candles for one of the other kid's birthday party – and help me with the set-up; let's do that while the others are walking back, I said to him. We're going to go set up a surprise and ... then he decided he was ready to come back, but it was on his terms.'* (CBTS staff member)



## Program 3: New opportunities by programmatic and pedagogical design ... Choosing to (self) challenge through activity

For many of the students involved in *Take a Break* Program 3 who had travelled from Central Victoria, seeing the ocean, and feeling sand beneath their feet and in-between their toes, was a relatively new phenomenon as spring rain played havoc with the planned program activities. Students were from an identified area of social disadvantage, with many likely experiencing various degrees of vulnerability. As one of the teachers commented:

'I knew that it [the school] was quite sort of low socioeconomic ... it was probably worse than what I thought to be honest in terms of what these little people go through in their life and have experienced ... just very unimaginable for other people. People, I think, would be quite shocked at some of the stuff ... kids come in some days, and you think they're not at school to learn, they are just at school to be safe for the day ...' (Teacher, Program 3).

In acknowledgement of the diverse range of students that attend the *Take a Break* program, while selection criteria exist to enable staff to make targeted invites based on disadvantage, there are limits that constrain their ability to include more children in need. As one staff member explains, 'it is unfortunate because there's so many more kids out there that need it, and if we had the space, we would fill it' (CBTS staff member). Notwithstanding the challenging home environments many of this cohort regularly experience, being provided with the opportunity to attend the *Take a Break* program presents many of them with new experiences and opportunities – some which would be well beyond any that they would experience in their home environment. As one teacher explains:

'I would say 90% of them have never been to the beach before. So, as we were driving here on the Cottage bus, we went past a few little lakes and they were asking if that was the beach ... the beach has just been a huge shock to them.' (Teacher, Program 3)

Key to programmatic planning is a strong desire to provide students with new opportunities or exposure to things that they may not previously have had the opportunity to experience – while this appears relatively formulaic on the surface, the investment by program staff to nuance this for each group they welcome is less overt in cursory explanations of programmatic design. On closer inspection of the *Take a Break*

program, a thoughtful and careful selection of available activities that seek to provide opportunities to be physically active in contexts or environments not normally available to the student cohort are planned to maximise program impact. Programming is not a perfect science; however, as one staff member explains:

'Well, you can put together the perfect program but every week that program is going to change ... Whether it is because of staffing, the kids themselves, you get to a point where the weather is making things unsafe ...' (CBTS staff member).

Key to a successful program, however, is the ability of the *Take a Break* program staff to be flexible, adaptable and relational, and a shared commitment to supporting the children they work with to achieve in their physical pursuits.

Emma did not want to participate in the low-ropes course activity. Despite the encouragement from her teachers, following a strenuous and physical morning boogie-boarding, even Emma was physically and emotionally 'done' when it came time to the afternoon activities. As the other students eagerly leaped from balancing logs to tightly strung ropes, Emma was having none of it. With minimal fuss, a CBTS staff member acknowledged her open dissent and moved on to helping others 'spot' each other across the physically demanding course. After a few minutes, the staff member returned to Emma, who was slumped against a bordering fence, and asked her if she would at least like to put a helmet on so she could 'help' her with the spotting of her peers. Reluctantly Emma did so. With intentional but softly encouraging words, Emma responded to the praise of her actions as a 'spotter' and a few stations later, tentatively attempted to put her raised leg on the balancing beam. Turning her head to the staff member, who nodded with encouragement and asked the other students to take up spotting positions if Emma decided to have a go, everyone was ready to support Emma if she decided to participate in the activity. Sensing her hesitation, the staff member said to Emma, 'Come on, I'll be your spotter if you decide to give it a go ... it's up to you, whatever you want to do, I know you are pretty tired'. Being challenged through choice, but with agency to make the ultimate decision to participate, after a series of scaffolded, 'just one step more' approaches to coax Emma from the periphery of the activity to the physically challenging balance beam, was a winning move – and look at Emma go now, despite her weariness of being more physically active in one day than she would have likely been in her usual home environment.



As described in the narrative above, for many children who attend the *Take a Break* program, travelling in the CBTS bus to Queenscliff becomes an important part of the program experience itself. In some circumstances, this may have been one of the first times children had travelled any great distance away from their home environments. With reference to the students from her school, one teacher commented:

*'Camps and things like this are so important because sometimes that life experience outside of school and home, being active, they don't go and play sport, they don't go on holidays, they don't go and visit family from out of town ... for some of the it is the first time they have been away from home ... it's been eye-opening to them to be able to sleep without noise, be in space all day where there's not yelling or violence, it is something they will never forget.'* (Teacher, Program 3)

With awareness of the often-difficult circumstances children have had to navigate in their home lives, and for some the significant trauma that results, programmatic design and delivery of the *Take a Break* program seeks to present children with new opportunities to be physically active in a safe and supportive environment.

Key to the program design and delivery is a growing awareness of the various ways in which principles of

adventure therapy (see e.g. Pringle et al., 2022; Trundle & Hutchinson, 2021) can support young people experiencing vulnerability and trauma through carefully constructed experiences of outdoor adventurous activity. While the selection of activities become an important medium through which to disrupt (in positive ways) fixed conceptions about their worlds, for many children the opportunity to try something new becomes an incredibly powerful experience in broadening understandings of different contexts. For example, in reflecting on the value of new experiences for her students, one teacher commented:

*'so much of a kid's learning, even through reading and stuff, you have to have context to what you're reading, and what you're learning about. These children don't because their life experience is so sheltered and narrow. They've got a lot of life experience about things that other children don't, but it's not very nice stuff ... You read about beaches and stuff, but these kids have not been to one until now. Whereas from here on, when they're doing geography and stuff, they actually have a bit more context for stuff ... these life experiences are just so impactful for students actually embedding learning and remembering it you need to put something with it when you're reading to comprehend it.'* (Teacher, Program 3)

While the selection of the *Take a Break* program activities sought to maximise student experiences, the intentional pedagogies adopted by staff in their delivery of these activities is acknowledged as being a hallmark of their success in encouraging children to be active and successful in physically challenging activities. Through observations, many of the characteristics of adventure therapy can be mapped onto the intentional, and sometimes unintentional, practices of CBTS staff in their leadership of outdoor activities. Key to the intentional actions of many staff are the ways in which they use empathy to build relationships with the students during activities. As one teacher commented:

*'I think one of the big things is that, the camp staff are just so present ... whenever we're doing anything the camp staff are just there having conversations, every activity there's a group of kids around every staff member and the staff member is actually engaged in a conversation with them, listening to the kids' stories, asking questions ...'* (Teacher, Program 3)

It is through these intentional acts that students then respond to the challenges that the staff put to them, yet much of this success is attributable to the way staff issue these challenges. Empowering students to accept the challenge or not (challenge through choice) was observed to be a particularly effective strategy. In unpacking this in discussions with program leaders, it became evident that the intentionality of this is built around a 'one more step' approach, as one staff member explains.

*'So, yeah, it's always a little bit of a gentle persuasion, or something like, "You don't want to come here and then not put at least your toes in the water, or at least try to get a bit closer to dolphins or seals" ... I think it's just gently trying to persuade them to push their comfort zone that little bit. And, if you can get them to do it they're absolutely stoked by the end of it.'* (CBTS staff member)

Supporting students to be 'ready to participate' if in fact they choose to take up the opportunity is an important part of this strategy. As another staff member described:

*'Remember there was that girl who did not want to go into the water when we were getting into wetsuits and it was very much like, "Oh, you don't have to go in the water, but just put a wetsuit on ...", you know so like, just one step closer. So then, when they had the wetsuit on, when they are down at the water and seeing everyone else have fun, they're still able to join in if they change their mind.'* (CBTS staff member)

### Empowering participants through challenge and choice: The value of being supported to be active in the outdoors

In examining the way in which the *Take a Break* program design and delivery enables participants to be active and successful in physically demanding, but achievable, adventurous outdoor activities it was evident that there was a strong interrelationship between not only the activity selection, but the intentional pedagogies of staff adopted in the delivery of the activity. In reflecting on the ways in which participation in *Take a Break* enabled her students to be active, one teacher commented:

*'Are you kidding, this is the most exercise these kids have done, ever! The fact that they haven't been on, even from day one here, on a screen has probably not happened for some of these kids since birth ... they feel safe, they are trying things that they wouldn't normally try in terms of activities.'* (Teacher, Program 3)

The role the CBTS staff play in enabling this is crucial to the children's success – through reflections, the teachers involved in Program 3 attribute this to the relational approaches adopted by the staff and the ways in which they scaffold student engagement in some of the more physically challenging activities through student choice and empowerment, and a 'one more step' approach. A final teacher comment demonstrates the willingness of staff to be adaptable, relational and responsive to the needs of the children they are working with. She comments:

*'Having amazing staff, I've been to a few camps and this has been the most of the camp staff that has been with us, with the activities – it just means so much, that kids are getting more attention, more informing ... our kids are just absorbing all of it and asking a thousand questions ... this is all new information for them. Yeah, the camp staff have just been amazing and so, all the time, asking "Do you need anything? Is there anything we can help you with or get for you?" You know, out of the ordinary stuff that you wouldn't necessarily ask for like a nit comb ...'*



## Program 4: Fostering a sense of belonging ... A (healthy) birthday away from home

While many organisations claim to foster a sense of community, this can be a rather more daunting and challenging prospect when conducting short three- to five-day residential programs for children from diverse and challenging backgrounds. For many of the children that attend the *Take a Break* program, stories of disadvantage and trauma underpin their vulnerability. Key to the *Take a Break* program offering is the intent to provide these children with a break, or disruption, from the realities of their regular lives. As one teacher commented:

'I feel like some of the students here, holidays might not be something that are a big part of their lives, being able to give these kids a bit of a break from their normal routines at home, come to Queenscliff with their peers and their friends and have a bit of fun and experience something a bit different for a few days, that is a real opportunity for maybe students from disadvantaged backgrounds.'  
(Teacher, Program 4)

For some participants, a new or different environment creates this, for others it is exposure to foods and healthy habits, yet having the opportunity to observe and interact with adults in different and respectful ways creates powerful memories that can potentially alter trajectories or aspirations. As one program leader comments:

'helping them to belong is just about helping them to think about other people, not just themselves – you know, like when we have lunches or meals, everyone gets their food and you're like, "Manners is waiting for everybody to get their food before you start eating" ... you have to be explicit to show other ways to act, you know lead by example ...'

Yet for some children, despite having positive and supportive home lives, attending a residential program to *'take a break'* does not sound that appealing, particularly when it is your birthday!

For Josh, turning 11 was a big deal. As one teacher explained, Josh:

'didn't want to come on camp as he would miss his birthday and home, like we thought he wasn't coming but on Monday morning his mum had him in the car, I didn't think he was going to get out to be honest' (Teacher, Program 4).

Despite his reluctance, Josh boarded the bus and seemed very reserved and quiet during the journey.

One staff member reflected:

'He just didn't want to be there, when I asked him about what was wrong he said he was going to miss his birthday but I was trying to cheer him up by saying hey at least you get to spend it with your friends, but I didn't know him that well at that point so was hoping I hadn't put my foot in it.' (CBTS staff member)

When the day of Josh's birthday arrived, one teacher recalled waking up thinking that he wasn't quite sure how they would support Josh through the day. While much of the morning and afternoon were occupied by physical activities and outdoor adventure tasks, with the students offsite, the Cottage community prepared a surprise for Josh.

As they sat down to dinner, Josh could not believe his eyes. As his teacher explained:

'They went above and beyond. I wasn't expecting Cottage to put as much effort into it as they did. I know they are really good and we've seen great things daily with the activities, but I guess even for Josh who was the birthday boy, it was a bit of a surprise. He had wrapped presents. One of the camp leaders took me to a toy cupboard and said, "Who's his teacher? What do you think he might like?" You know he just walked past us now and he is still holding on to one of those presents! There was cake obviously organised by the kitchen, the staff came out saying 'We've got one boy, it's his 11th birthday', Josh's mum ordered some balloons. The Cottage by the Sea staff were really accommodating for Josh on his birthday, it was a real community celebration ... they did a really good job of celebrating his birthday and he was stoked!'





While a key remit of the *Take a Break* program is to support participants to be healthy, achieved through the provision of quality food, opportunities to be physically active, and the routine adoptions of sound self-care strategies in applying sunscreen and regular showers, as one teacher reflected, it's 'really it is just about creating a healthy mindset' (Teacher, Program 4). Evident in the above narrative is a sense of the way in which being healthy is also understood from a social and community perspective. Enabling and fostering relationships, modelling respectful relationships and interactions, and creating specific opportunities to make someone feel valued and celebrated, even on their birthday, are powerful examples of the various ways in which participants are supported to be healthy through their participation in *Take a Break*.

## Making a Difference: Perspectives of Program Leaders and CBTS Leadership Team

*Take a Break* program leaders and members of the CBTS leadership team (from here referred to as leaders) were interviewed by members of the Deakin research team (n = 9). The interviews were conducted as a conversation either singularly or in groups. The interviews were structured around a set of open-ended questions. The first part of the interview collected biographical data from each of the leaders including their qualifications, length of time they have worked at CBTS, their current role at CBTS, and the reasons that led them to work at CBTS. Leaders were also invited to describe the work of CBTS, and what they saw as the main impact of participating in the CBTS programs on the lives of the students who attend. The interviews also sought to explore their perspectives of the impact of the *Take a Break* program on the lives of the children who attend as well as the ways that the *Take a Break* program supported the children to be active, healthy, confident and respectful.

The leaders were all professionals who generally have qualifications in outdoor education or administration. Some have additional qualifications in youth or community services or specialist training enabling them to run activities associated with the water-based programs central to the CBTS experience. Three members of the team interviewed are qualified teachers.

The responses from the leaders were analysed for common themes. Four key themes were identified: (1) a sense of belonging and community; (2) impact on the children as perceived by the leaders; (3) leading by example – Modelling an ethic of care; and (4) *Take a Break* supports children to be active, healthy, respectful and confident. In the sections that follow, these themes are expanded and discussed with examples from key quotes extracted from the interview data.

### A sense of belonging and community

All leaders reported that one of the most distinctive features of CBTS is the strong sense of belonging and being part of the community at CBTS and the community of Queenscliff and the surrounding areas. There was also a sense of importance of belonging and the connection to community that was more than just between staff and students but also between staff, students, alumni, donors and volunteers. As one leader commented:

*'Belonging, and I think that Cottage gives that no matter who's involved, a place to belong to. It's rewarding for a staff member or volunteer to come in, or whether a board member or onsite volunteer. It's the first place that a lot of kids get to see freshly mowed lawn, a well-kept garden and the place is painted and neat and tidy from front gate to back gate and everything else within it you want to be involved in ... I believe we are a true community, and that then links into the belonging. Everyone's welcome.'*



## Cottage by the Sea

Another leader noted that one of the most important aspects for program leaders at CBTS:

*'is community – I reckon we're a great little community. I think all our camp leaders bounce off each other. I think we're in a pretty good place at the moment. I've got a really nice team, which it's just easy to come to work.'*

The leaders also commented on the importance of the children attending the *Take a Break* program at CBTS to feel this sense of belonging and community and to role model the ways in which this is shown. For example, one leader highlighted the need for the children to see the interactions between the staff and volunteers as well as sharing meals with the children. He noted that children at the *Take a Break* program have:

*'a chance to be involved in a community. Not that they're told they're in a community, but there's a chance to see that there's lots of people that work each day. Which is why it's so important we have lunch with them. You might have five people in the back office and administration, including us, and then we have lunch with these guys and the kids see, it's not just your program instructors. It's others, and they're having a chat to us, and shouting, "What are you doing this afternoon?" and "Why didn't you finish your beans?"'*

This emphasis on making the children attending the *Take a Break* program aware of the broad CBTS community was also noted by other leaders, especially in relation to highlighting the hard work and generous contributions made by volunteers and donors. As one leader commented:

*'We need to make the kids aware that they've been given this stuff [referring to the handknitted beanies and scarves as well as the resources and activities provided by volunteers and donors], but it's come from a source. That it's not just given from a pool somewhere. People have worked hard to do this for you.'*

The importance of building a strong community was notable in the leader responses. In particular, they commented on the strong relationships with the broader community of Queenscliff and surrounding areas, and the critical role that they play in providing opportunities for the children who attend the *Take a Break* program – experiences that many children would never have. One camp leader stated that:

*'The Marine Discovery Centre, they're amazing to us. They open their doors and we can have access. Our staff get training from their team, and they show us what to do and how to do it.'*

*'Down the harbour, if we get down there and the fisherman come in, they'll stop and give us their bit so we can feed a stingray, or if a seal's in then someone will let us know and that's a day that we might, the seal's in so let's not go to see the lighthouse, let's go see the seal instead.'*

This strong connection to belonging to the CBTS community was also reflected in the leaders' responses in discussing their reasons for working at CBTS. Clearly their previous positive experiences of CBTS had influenced their decisions to become program leaders. For example, one leader had been on work experience while at high school, while another volunteered as a member of the local community. Another leader had worked at other organisations but knew the work at CBTS and 'stood over there and just said to some mates, I'd like to work for this organisation one day, and three years later, I was here'. Another leader had attended the CBTS programs as a student. She recalled the impact of being at CBTS and the mixed emotions she felt when she had finished high school and therefore her time on CBTS programs. She commented on the joy of finishing her schooling, an achievement that was attributed to the many opportunities she was provided with at CBTS, but also noted her sadness of no longer being part of her 'family' at CBTS. She stated:

*'And then, this was when I was graduating. I had graduated high school, and at this stage I thought I was never coming back to Cottage – I bawled my eyes out. We said our goodbyes, and I'm literally crying so hard, because these guys, they become your family.'*



However, one leader while unsure whether they could return in the role of leader, stated that:

*'I just messaged some of the old staff that I was still in contact with, just to ask whether I was allowed to apply. Because I was a kid, I wasn't sure whether there was like a grey area from being a camper to becoming a leader. And they said that's fine.'*

The leaders also noted the positive impact on the children and staff as a result of belonging to this community. They noted that being part of this community provided 'inspiration', 'fun' and 'opportunity' for everyone, and that it's not just:

*'what we're giving the kids, that's what we all get from the Cottage, so that's what the Cottage as a whole, gives everyone. It is an inspiring place to be at. You can find inspiration in different spots and locations. It is hopefully a fun place ... and there's plenty of opportunities for everyone. It's not just the kids, but then it's also the chance to talk to the kids, they give us fun.'*

Another comment by a leader noted the joy the children brought to the staff at CBTS as they shared an experience by one of the administrative staff.

*'[Name of person] sits in one of the best seats of the house. [They] get to see them [the children] get off the bus and the excitement on their faces, and then [another person] has to put the foam down when they're going down the slide. She gets fun out of her work in seeing the kids and we all have a better day at work when there's noise at work, and it's the kids' noise.'*

### The difference *Take a Break* makes to the lives of the children: Perspectives of leaders

The interviews with leaders reported significant changes in the children's sense of personal wellbeing and the joy experienced when by the seaside and at a place where there are vistas and landscapes that are outside of the students' dominant lifeworlds. They also commented on the short-term impact of the *Take a Break* program as well as providing examples of the long-term impact as reported by students who returned to CBTS as adults or from teachers who had been on several *Take a Break* programs over the years. They commented on the importance of providing the rich experiences to support students to interact with others leading to students' improved self-confidence, self-awareness, identity and wellbeing. For example, one leader commented, '*Take a Break* is ... it's making a positive change in a short time that hopefully they'll remember in years to come.' Another leader noted that since the covid pandemic that many of the students had forgotten 'how to interact' and that the opportunities to interact during the *Take a Break* program supported the students to re-engage and 'have face-to-face conversations.'

Some of the leaders also shared stories from CBTS alumni and teachers who had attended several *Take a Break* programs over the years to illustrate the long-term impact on the lives of those who attended. One leader told the story of a woman, now aged 96 years, who attended CBTS as a student, who came back to talk to the current students at the *Take a Break* program. He reflected:

*'[Person's name] talks about, the beach is her happy place and every time she saw a picture or was at a beach, she was back at the Cottage in her head. So, for the kids to hear that today, that there's a chance this week that you're going to create a memory that's going to help you until you are 70-odd years of age.'*

He also commented that as the woman was leaving, she 'was sliding down the slide; screaming and laughing as she went', again demonstrating the joy and connection to place. This sense of joy was reflected in another story shared by a leader who commented that:

*'What we see is joy, I'd say that's the main – I remember a lady called [lady's name], a teacher who'd been here several occasions with [students]– it's what she finished with, and she said, "That's joy." And it was something about one of the children.'*

Another team leader, a previous participant in the CBTS programs, also made several comments regarding the long-term positive impact of attending the programs on her life as an adult. She commented that her participations in the CBTS programs was the:

*'Best experience of my life, and definitely one of those ones that if you compare it to the opportunities my siblings have had, because they've had the exact same upbringing, the only difference is they didn't have Cottage. My mum's even said that you can really see the difference between, whether it be confidence, just the opportunities I've got, and leadership skills and all that kind of stuff. So, definitely changed my life.'*

Leaders also noted the impact of all the work by the many volunteers who contribute to the *Take a Break* program that impact on the experiences of the students who attend. In particular, there was evidence of the joy that the students showed after receiving the special gifts made by the volunteers on arrival at CBTS. One team leader provides an example of this deep appreciation and the joy for not only the students but also for the staff who have the opportunity to observe such joy:

*'When it's 38 degrees outside and you see the kids running around in their beanies and gloves because they've been knitted and given to them.'*

### Leading by example: Modelling an ethic of care

Evident in many of the conversations with CBTS staff was a strong commitment to the role they play in modelling the respectful relationships and interactions that contributed to such a warm, caring and inclusive environment. Almost every participant conveyed a sense of how seriously they adopted a 'lead by example' approach. For example, one staff member described their role as:

*'I'm a fill-in chef, I'm a cleaner, I'm a bookings officer ... I guess wherever I am needed is where I'll be ... I don't expect anyone to do anything that I'm not willing to do, everyone gets in a gets their hands dirty, if you have to do emails at 10 o'clock at night because someone needed you during the day, then that is just what you're doing ...'*

Responses also indicated that there was an ethic of care displayed to the students by the *Take a Break* program leaders. There was deep appreciation of the need to be sensitive and empathetic to all the different needs of the students. The following excerpts show some of the typical responses from these leaders.

*'You've got to understand the kids, because kids aren't – and this comes from a facilitation training, and all of those things that I've done for a number of years, that a kid may lash out but it's not just because they want to be naughty. It's because there's an underlying issue.'*

*'It's never about being the best; it's just about giving it a go. Trying your best to give it a go.'*

*'Cottage is very focused on the individual need rather than the group or anything else. If an individual child from whatever program identifies or demonstrates a specific need, we will answer that need as best as we can, and I think we do that brilliantly.'*

In addition, what was particularly clear was the extent to which the interests and needs of the students attending the program are placed first and foremost. Specifically, as the quotes below show, there was an understanding of the need to be flexible according to the needs of the students.

*'We're only here to have fun with you, and make sure that you are having the most fun you can possibly have on camp, you know what I mean.'*

*'It's hard. It's hard work. There's no easy way to put it. No camp is ever the same, no kid is ever the same, you're*

*always thinking outside the box. Safety is our biggest thing, we have to keep our participants safe, but yet at the same time you want it to be fun, you want it to be an opportunity for them, you want them to explore and just want them to play. I think that's my biggest thing. We play out there, and you're teaching memorable moments, but they don't actually know that you're teaching those memorable moments.'*



Inherent in many of the personal anecdotes from CBTS leaders was a sense of the ways in which an ethic of care can shape cultural workplace practices that engage, motivate and sustain staff at CBTS. As one leader explained:

*'the outdoor industry generally has quite a high turnover of staff. That's less so here. I haven't got any statistics on that, but I know it to be true.'*

However, the current tight labour market is providing difficulties for many organisations, including CBTS:

*'Look, it's been a struggle since coming out of COVID, it really has. Staffing has been a massive issue, not just here but across the board, is trying to find that staff.'*

Also clear from the leader interviews was the level of teamwork that exists between them:

*'We now have a team that put a lovely program together, and I oversee it and sign off. But we always come together, whether it be through planning or whether it be feedback from the camp leaders of what worked and what didn't work to evolve the program.'*

**Take a Break supports children to be active, healthy, respectful and confident**

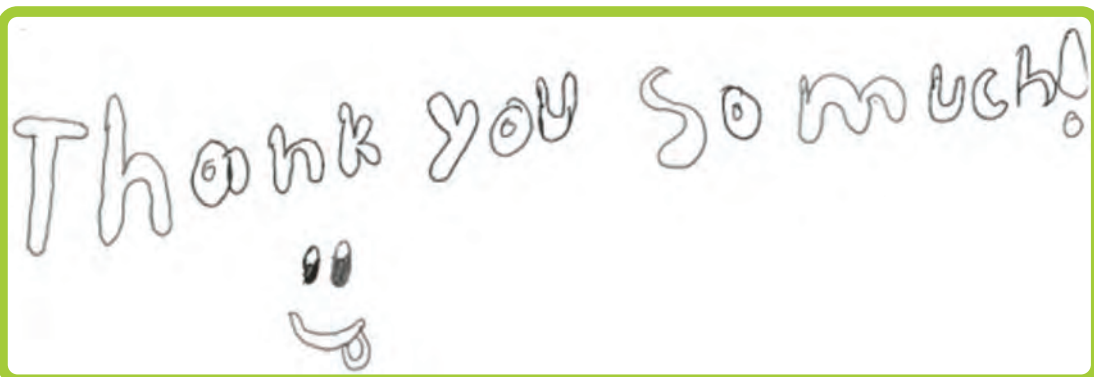
The discourses used to refer to the *Take a Break* program activities and the experiences of the children over the duration of the *Take a Break* program spoke to the importance of risk taking and building confidence, the affordances of students being out of their comfort zone and of the healthy environment and supports provided at CBTS. They well understood the impact of social disadvantage on the children's responses to the food, place and wellbeing, and how both CBTS and the *Take a Break* program positively impacted students.

As one leader commented, there are many expectations placed on the children to support them to be active and healthy:

*'Well, we're outdoors. All of our program, you can see all the activities that we offer; from climbing, to surfing, to swimming with the seals. I think we're big, ticking the box there. I think breakfast at seven o'clock is a great way of starting. It's not a, "Oh, the kids are a bit tired." There's actually, they know before they go to bed that they're up at seven for breakfast. That gets you focused already on the next day, that there's going to be food, and then I'm active. That we're going to be outside.'*

Another leader commented that they need to be positive role models in demonstrating ways to be active and healthy, as well as showing respect towards each other, stating:

*'There is a conscious effort about the way we talk to each other really does set the mood for the place, that we can be here, and the kids can be down the hall and can hear us, and the tone of the voice will impact their day. Or they may not hear us, they can still see us, and it's an understanding of everything that we do in the gate, or outside of the gate that involves the kids, has an impact on them; from the language that we use, how we sit and look at each other, and they interpret that, and then that has a big bearing on their feelings. And if those feelings then increase their anxiety and their nervousness, then they're less likely to participate in everything; from eating the food, to doing the activity or playing basketball. There is a conscious effort of being a positive role model.'*



Student Drawing 20. Yet another expression of a student's gratitude for the chance to participate in the program.

# Can *Take a Break* Really Make a Difference?

## Summary and Recommendations

This research set out to provide independent insights and research-informed understandings of the various ways in which the *Take a Break* program at CBTS achieved its intended outcomes to support participants to be active, healthy, respectful and confident. At its core, the research study was interested in understanding more about the ways in which participation in the *Take a Break* program made a difference to the lives of the children who attend. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach that enabled the research team to draw on multiple sources of data. Presented within the front half of the report is the synthesis and analysis of the perspectives of children attending the program as captured through student evaluations collected across a five-year period (from 2018 to 2022). In summary, 1368 student evaluations were analysed from participants across 24 LGAs in Victoria.

The second phase of the research report presents the findings from the quantitative analysis of 145 teacher evaluation responses collected following their experience in the *Take a Break* program across 2018–2022. Further insights were generated through a case study approach of four specific *Take a Break* programs conducted between May and October in 2022. Key data generated through this phase of the project included researcher observations and site visits, interviews with 13 teachers from five schools, interviews with CBTS staff and leaders (n = 9) and reflective drawings completed by students (n = 112). Taken collectively, this data provided the research team with deep insights about the ways in which students responded to the *Take a Break* program and the various ways teachers and program staff understood the intent and impact of the *Take a Break* program.

While it is a challenge to synthesise this large dataset in a way that provides a simple response to the question posed in this summary – can *Take a Break* really make a difference to the lives of the children who attend? – inherent in much of the analyses presented through the report are compelling empirical examples of the ways in which the *Take a Break* program made a difference for individual participants. Collectively, the research provides strong affirmation of the value of the *Take a Break* program for both students and teachers who attend from schools located in regions of disadvantage. The research also provides evidence of the ways in which the *Take a Break* program successfully supported children to be active, healthy, confident and respectful. The mission of CBTS focuses on providing opportunities for children to build connections that can (re)frame their expectations about capabilities, pathways and relationships. These experiences also support children living with vulnerability and trauma to feel less isolated and

more hopeful about their future. This research highlights the various ways in which the *Take a Break* program experiences offered by CBTS can make a difference to those who attend.

While the following recommendations provide suggestions about the areas of focus to further strengthen the program and experience, any research accounts are always partial and contingent. To more fully understanding the impact that participation in the *Take a Break* program has for children beyond the program itself, further research is needed to understand this impact as they return to school and their communities. Further, additional investigations could also seek to understand the impact of CBTS for the community, volunteers, donors and other key stakeholders involved in the carriage of this inspiring *Take a Break* program.

### Recommendation 1

That the continued focus of the *Take a Break* program must be upon staff's capacity to deliver a pedagogically sound experience to children focused upon meeting the objectives of the program.

### Recommendation 2

That Cottage by the Sea continues to ensure that volunteers and donors are made aware of the joy their efforts bring to the children who attend the *Take a Break* program.

### Recommendation 3

That there is ongoing research into the *Take a Break* program to further understand the effectiveness of the program in meeting its objectives and the broader impact of the program on the lives of children experiencing vulnerability. Specifically, there is a need to explore the longer-term impact of the program once the children return to school and home, and the impact of the program on the broader Cottage by the Sea community. In addition, further research is warranted to validate the existing evaluation tools and to provide a mechanism to integrate learnings from the research and evaluation into the enacted program.





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