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# Wellbeing in schools: summary of policy findings

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# SUMMARY OF POLICY FINDINGS

## What is the research about?

The Wellbeing in Schools project is investigating teacher, student and policy perspectives on how 'wellbeing' is understood and facilitated in schools. This nationally significant research is being conducted by the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University. It is funded through the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage program, along with three partner organisations: the Lismore Catholic Schools Office, Interrelate Family Centres and Good Grief Ltd.

## What is the research trying to do?

1. Develop a detailed understanding of how wellbeing in schools is currently understood by students, teachers and educational policy makers;
2. Investigate the potential of recognition theory for advancing understanding and improvements in relation to student wellbeing;
3. Generate new knowledge about how educational policy, programs and practices in schools could more positively impact on student wellbeing.

This research is particularly interested in whether and how 'recognition' (being cared for, respected and valued) influences wellbeing in schools.

## What does the research involve?

The research has four phases:

- **Phase 1** - a comprehensive analysis of national, state and sector-specific policy and policy-related documents (N=80) relevant to student wellbeing.
- **Phase 2** - interviews with primary and secondary principals and teachers (N=89), and focus group interviews with primary and secondary students (N=606).
- **Phase 3** - online surveys with primary students (N=3906), secondary students (N=5362) and school staff (N=707) across the three participating school regions.
- **Phase 4** - producing professional development ideas and resources for schools based on the findings of our research.

# This summary reports the findings from Phase 1

## What happened in Phase 1?

Approximately 80 policies and policy-related documents relevant to wellbeing in schools were accessed using internet searches of national, state and territory government departments; regional and state Catholic education offices; and independent schools by state. The dominant focus was education-based policy, however policy-related documentation from other sectors (like health) was also reviewed.

## What did we find out?

- The term 'wellbeing' in policy while rarely defined was frequently used and well integrated into policy lexicons, particularly those of education and health.
- There was very little policy specifically focusing on the wellbeing of children and young people in any sector – no educational policies at a national level and few at state/territory levels.
- There was considerable variation across states and territories in the amount, focus and scope of reference to wellbeing in policy-related documents, in both state education and Catholic education.
- Wellbeing was mainly linked to problem-focused discourses of safety/harm and mental health with less emphasis on broader universal conceptions that apply to all children.
- Recent attention to wellbeing was evident in education policy-related documentation, including some wellbeing-focused frameworks, wellbeing webpages and cross-sector initiatives, but these activities are not coordinated or broadly applied.

### **Four domains for implementing approaches to wellbeing were evident in policy:**

- Systems and structures - outlining protocols and procedures related to issues such as students' safety, care and protection, and mental health.
- Relationships - in which the three dimensions of recognition theory - cared for, respected and valued were most evident.
- Teaching and Learning – which primarily includes pedagogy, curriculum and the provision of information.
- Environment - including the school culture and ethos, as well as physical aspects of the school environment.

# Is the concept of 'recognition' evident in the policy-related documentation?

- The dimension of cared for was the most frequently incorporated across all education sectors. This tended to be in terms of: caring, supportive relationships for students (mostly within school communities); support networks; establishing a sense of connectedness and belonging for students within the school context; and developing a caring culture.
- The dimension of respected was most apparent in national and Catholic education policy contexts of student behaviour, pastoral care, and early childhood. The primary contexts for respect were: respectful relationships; active participation in school activities and processes; and staff having respect for students. There was little reference to participation, student voice or students 'having a say'.
- The dimension of valued was least evident in education policy, primarily appearing in relation to valuing diversity and recognising unique individual attributes. It was marginally more apparent (proportionally) in the Catholic education documents.

## What happened after we found out how 'wellbeing' is located in policy?

The policy analysis was followed by Phase 2, which involved interviews with teachers and focus groups with students. Once we heard what these teachers and students had to say about wellbeing in school we commenced Phase 3. This phase involved online surveys with many more teachers, principals, staff and students to confirm views about wellbeing in school and to explore whether an emphasis on recognition (being cared for, valued, respected) might help improve current understandings and approaches. Phase 4 involves producing professional development resources.

If you have any questions or feedback regarding the Wellbeing in Schools project please contact us at the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University: [ccyp@scu.edu.au](mailto:ccyp@scu.edu.au) + (02) 6620 3605

