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Wellbeing in schools: research project: survey results: principals, teachers and other staff

Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University

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Your school has been involved in an important research project that is investigating views about wellbeing in schools.
YOUR school has been involved in an important research project that is investigating teacher and student views about wellbeing in schools. Recently, you completed online surveys that have now been analysed and we’d like to share some of the key findings with you and the staff in your school. We are providing separate summaries of the findings for the students.

WHAT is the research about? We are interested in finding out about how ‘wellbeing’ is understood and supported in schools. Specifically, we set out to:

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.

WHERE has the research taken place? Data was collected from three Catholic School Dioceses, one each in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria.
/ WHO has been involved? /

- The research is being conducted by the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University
- The project has been funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC)
- Project partners are the Lismore Catholic Schools Office, Interrelate Family Centres and Good Grief Ltd.
- Participants include staff (Principals, teachers and non-teaching staff), and students from both primary and secondary schools
- The research team included a ‘Wellbeing Advisory Group’, which consisted of primary and secondary students, Principals, teachers and representatives from partner organisations

/ WHAT has happened so far? /

Three of four phases of the project have been completed:

phase ONE

Involved a comprehensive analysis of 80 national, state and sector-specific policy and policy-related documents relevant to student wellbeing.

What did we find?

This analysis drew attention to the ad-hoc wellbeing policy environment that exists across all three layers of the education system in Australia, in which there is little specific wellbeing-focused policy, a lack of conceptual clarity, and a fragmented approach to implementation. The analysis indicated the need for an overarching framework that draws together the different policy interests that appear to comprise ‘wellbeing’, including pastoral care and welfare, across the varying contexts of learning, health, safety and behaviour.
phase TWO  

Involved interviews with primary and secondary Principals (n = 18) and teachers (n = 72), and focus groups with primary and secondary students (n = 720).

What did we find?

The following eleven themes emerged from the interviews with Principals and teachers. These themes show that wellbeing is:

- Multi-dimensional
- Dependent on relationships
- Embedded in culture
- Exemplified in pastoral care
- Dependent on teacher wellbeing
- Impacted on by pedagogy
- Supplemented by wellbeing programs
- Supported by counsellors
- Enhanced by parent partnership
- Dependent on leadership
- Situated in a confused policy environment

These eleven themes informed the development of questions for the Phase 3 survey.
Involved online surveys with Principals, teachers and students across the three participating school regions.

Your school was involved in this phase of the study. Just over seven hundred staff (n = 707), almost 4000 primary students (n = 3906) and over 5000 (n = 5362) secondary students participated across Australia. This overwhelmingly positive response to the survey provided the research team with rich and extensive data for analysis.

**What did we find?**

The following summary provides a ‘snapshot’ of the findings from Phase 3.
WHAT is WELLBEING?

Staff, including Principals, teachers and non-teaching staff, were asked to rank the two phrases they thought best described wellbeing in schools. Figure 1 shows most staff thought wellbeing meant ‘Being connected to people’. Other popular ways of thinking about wellbeing were ‘being psychologically/mentally healthy’, ‘being connected to place’ and ‘being successful at school’. The least frequent choices for conceptualising wellbeing were ‘being physically healthy’ and ‘being spiritually healthy’.

Wellbeing Concepts

By far the majority of staff (78.4%) agreed that student wellbeing is central to the work of teachers.

Some staff (15.8%) said they spent 100% of their time on student wellbeing, and teaching and leadership staff spent more time on student wellbeing than non-teaching staff.

Most staff believed that both student and teacher wellbeing are supported well at their school, however, there was more diversity in staff opinions on teacher wellbeing than student wellbeing, with over one in four staff (27%) disagreeing to some extent that their school adequately supports teacher wellbeing.

HOW IMPORTANT IS STUDENT WELLBEING FOR YOUR WORK AS A TEACHER?

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how important are **RELATIONSHIPS** for student **WELLBEING?**

Staff viewed relationships as important for student wellbeing and rated these in the following order:

Relationships between:

1. Teachers and students
2. Students and parents/carers
3. Students and close friends
4. Students and their home group/pastoral care teacher
5. Teachers and other teachers
6. Parents and teachers
7. Counsellors and students
8. Principals and teachers
9. Students and other students who are not close friends
10. Principals and students
11. Students and non-teaching staff

Particular understandings of wellbeing influenced the importance staff placed on relationships at school. When staff thought of wellbeing in terms of a student’s academic success, or their physical and mental health, staff rated relationships as less important for student wellbeing than staff who thought of wellbeing in terms of emotions, spirituality and connections with other people and places.
This research was interested in whether notions of ‘recognition’ influence wellbeing. Students indicated that dimensions of recognition, namely being cared for, respected and valued at school are very important for their wellbeing.

**Students feel cared for when:**
- Teachers: know them well, enjoy talking with them, help them when they can’t do their school work, and care for other students who need extra support
- Other students: like them and care for them
- They: feel it’s okay to tell teachers what they need, feel safe at school, and care for their teacher and other students

**Students feel respected when:**
- Teachers: take notice of what they have to say, respect their views about religion and spirituality, and respect other students who need extra support
- Other students: are respected no matter how old they are or how they behave
- They: are treated fairly at school, respect other students, have a say about rules, punishments, what they learn, who they sit near, and whether they see the counsellor

**Students feel valued when:**
- Teachers: take time to help them, tell them when they’re doing well, and value other students who need extra support
- Other students: notice what they contribute
- They: are encouraged to work together to make things better

Students felt more cared for, respected and valued when teachers spent time with them, listened to them, helped them, and knew them well, compared to when they were given awards or received a good report.
To positively influence wellbeing, recognition needs to be both given and received. That is, wellbeing requires reciprocal acts of recognition between students and staff, students and other students, and between staff and other staff.

The research findings showed:

- Most staff are conscious of the reciprocal nature of recognition in promoting wellbeing.
- Staff who said wellbeing means ‘being successful at school’ had the lowest awareness of the importance of recognition.
- Staff who said they give respect and value to students only when they receive respect and value from the students first, reported feeling less respected by students.
- Staff who identified the importance of recognition in fostering wellbeing also felt more cared for, respected and valued by students, their Principal, other staff and parents when they acknowledged the importance of recognition.
- Staff who felt more confident about implementing particular wellbeing programs also felt more cared for, respected and valued by all members of the school community.
- Staff who were more aware of the importance of positive actions, such as teachers speaking kindly to students, the Principal using students’ names, and students’ friends making them feel included at school, also felt more cared for, respected and valued.

When asked how often they felt cared for, respected and valued by their Principal:

- About one in five staff (19.1%) said they felt cared for by their Principal ‘all the time’ and 5.8% said ‘never’.
- About one in three staff (31.3%) said they felt respected by their Principal ‘all the time’ and 2.8% said ‘never’.
- About one in five staff (20.7%) said they felt valued by their Principal ‘all the time’ and 5.7% said ‘never’.
- On average, staff more often felt respected by their Principal (*M = 5.51, *SD = 1.68) compared to feeling valued (*M = 5.02, *SD = 1.78) and cared for (*M = 4.94, *SD = 1.77).

*M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation
Compared to all other staff, Principals:

- Had a more favourable view of how well their school supports student and staff wellbeing
- Rated the importance of Christian values in helping wellbeing as higher
- Rated the centrality of wellbeing in the work of teachers as higher
- Rated the importance of their own and other non-teaching staff relationships with students as higher
- Rated relationships overall as significantly more important for student wellbeing
- Said they are less affected if students do not respect or care for them, but felt more cared for by students
- Reported feeling more cared for, respected and valued by parents
- Did not differ in how they conceptualised wellbeing

Compared to all other staff, Assistant Principals:

- Had a more favourable view of how well their school supports teachers’ wellbeing
- Viewed the importance of Christian values in helping their own wellbeing as higher
- Said that policy is more sufficient to guide and support them to facilitate student wellbeing
- Said it is more important for students to have a say about what they learn in school
- Felt more cared for, respected and valued by the Principal
- Felt more cared for by parents
- Felt more respected by students
- Practiced less conditional recognition of students
- Did not differ in how they conceptualised wellbeing
Most staff (62%) mildly agreed that: Existing policy is sufficient to guide and support the way I facilitate student wellbeing.

Most staff (60%) moderately agreed that: It would be helpful to have more guidance with student wellbeing.

Most staff (75%) moderately-to-strongly agreed that: Additional programs related to student wellbeing are helpful in schools.

Some questions for you to reflect on:

- Are the findings from this research useful to your work as a Principal or teacher? How? Why?
- Which one or two areas might be a priority you’d like to focus on in your school/classroom in the future?
- How will your school executive engage staff around these findings?
- Which findings affirmed and challenged your current practice?

We hope you feel affirmed by the findings of this research and are able to identify those aspects of student and teacher wellbeing that you are addressing well at your school. We also hope the findings highlight some areas you or others at your school might wish to work on in the future.

Phase 4 of this project involves producing professional development ideas and resources for schools based on the findings of our research. This is to assist schools that may wish to undertake further conversation and planning around the important issue of how to best support student and teacher wellbeing in schools.
Thank you for your participation in this important research project. If you have any questions or feedback we encourage you to contact us at the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University:

ccyp@scu.edu.au  •  (02) 6620 3605