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# Wellbeing in schools: research project: summary of findings from staff interviews

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## RESEARCH PROJECT

# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM STAFF INTERVIEWS

In 2012, we held interviews with principals and teachers at your school to find out more about wellbeing in schools. This summary outlines the emerging findings from these interviews.

# EMERGING FINDINGS FOR PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

Your school has been involved in a very important research project that is investigating teacher, student and policy views on wellbeing in schools. This research is particularly interested in whether and how 'recognition' (being cared for, respected and valued) influences wellbeing in schools.

The research is timely and has attracted significant national interest since it is addressing a persistent concern about the wellbeing of young Australians and how best to support this in the context of education.

The project is being undertaken 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 Catholic Schools Office, Lismore, Interrelate Family Centres and Good Grief Ltd.



Data are being collected across three Catholic School Dioceses.

# phase

1

- Entailed a comprehensive analysis of national, state and sector-specific wellbeing-related policy
- This analysis drew attention to the minimal and ad-hoc wellbeing policy environment that exists across all three layers of the education system and the need for an overarching framework that draws together the different policy interests that appear to comprise 'wellbeing'.

2

- Involved interviews with primary and secondary principals (n=17) and teachers (n=72), and focus groups with primary and secondary students (n=606)
- Interviews with principals and teachers sought their perspectives on a range of issues including: how they would generally describe or define 'wellbeing'; whether and to what extent policy shaped their understandings and approach; how they perceived 'wellbeing' was facilitated and supported in their schools ('what helps and hinders'); the impact of leadership on wellbeing in schools; the relationship between teacher and student wellbeing; and how the concept of 'recognition' was perceived in relation to wellbeing.
- **Your school was involved in this phase of the study.**

3

- Builds on the findings of Phase 2
- Involves on-line surveys with principals, teachers and students across the three participating school regions.

**This summary for principals and teachers provides a 'snapshot' of these findings from Phase 2 and an invitation to schools to participate in Phase 3.**

# SO... WHAT HAVE WE FOUND OUT?

The data from the interviews and focus groups provides a rich insight into the tacit and explicit ways in which student wellbeing can be supported in schools, with **quality of relationships** perceived as key.



FIGURE 1: Teacher and principal perceptions of spheres of influence on student wellbeing in schools

Eleven significant themes emerged from the Phase 2 interview data. These themes tend to cluster within or across one or more of three spheres – relationship, environment and personal/self - which together interact with notions of wellbeing. As depicted in Figure 1 above, some themes are evident in two or more spheres and issues in one sphere can exert an influence on another. These spheres are further described as:



## Personal / Self

There are strong links between teacher and student wellbeing, with teacher wellbeing impacted by both relationships and the environment. The individual teacher has his/her own underlying beliefs, attitudes and values about wellbeing in schools and these appear to influence in both tacit and explicit ways their understandings and practice.

Within each of these three spheres - relationships, environment and personal/self - there was an evident tension between aspirations around wellbeing and the lived everyday reality of school life. The eleven themes woven within and across the three spheres are exemplified below, including reference to some of this evident tension:



## Environment

A number of issues pertain to 'environment'. School culture impacts in a major way on wellbeing and is, in turn, impacted significantly by relationships, Catholic and Christian identity, leadership, the policy environment and the kind of support programs being implemented. The approaches to supporting teachers in their own wellbeing and in pedagogical practice also influence wellbeing, with relationships again perceived as a critical factor. Hence, the overlap between the relationship and environment spheres becomes evident as each exerts an influence on the other and, in turn, impact on how wellbeing is understood and facilitated in schools.



## Relationships

The vast majority of themes emerging from Phase 2 data tend to cluster around relationships, indicating that relationships are at the very core of student wellbeing in schools. A number of important relationships were highlighted in the data, including relationships between:

- Teachers and students
- Principals and students
- Counsellors and students
- Counsellors and teaching staff
- Parents and teachers/schools
- Relationships with the wider community
- Principals and teachers

These relationships all contribute to and influence student wellbeing. In addition, relationships are at the core of pastoral care and pedagogical practices, impacting on the school environment and both teacher and student wellbeing.

# TEACHERS SAY WELLBEING IS:

## 1. MULTIDIMENSIONAL

"My understanding of "wellbeing" is a very holistic sense; I believe in our spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual development as human beings and I feel that "wellbeing" is a permeating culture that we should have at the school."

"I guess looking at the dimension of the whole person ... I think that phrase, putting all those words together – spiritual, moral, social and emotional – can get bandied about a bit and I think it's really important to take a good, honest look at it and say "Well what do we actually mean and how do we actually do this."

## 2. DEPENDENT ON RELATIONSHIPS

"Do you know what I really think the biggest thing is? I think it's people stopping, taking a moment and listening ... I think that's a big thing to start off with; actually listening and I don't mean as in "hearing" – really listening to what they've said and being able to comment and feel like they as individuals have contributed in some way to the classroom, building that relationship."

"I certainly feel that with my workload that one of my frustrations is that there are so many pressures and so little time to do what needs to be done that it makes it difficult to build the sort of relationships that are positive with students. We do the best we can and sometimes that can be very frustrating as a teacher – that you want to do more but you can't."

### 3. EMBEDDED IN CULTURE, WHICH IS SHAPED BY CHRISTIAN VALUES

"If there's a central message that I want to take home it's that you can have a toxic school culture, you absolutely can have an environment within a school that is foul for teachers and students alike, that nobody likes turning up to and all that."

"To me, I believe that wellbeing ties on to the back of our whole Catholic ethos and trying to bring that element into all areas of our teaching and our relationships with students."

### 4. EXEMPLIFIED IN PASTORAL CARE

"I think of [wellbeing] mainly as pastoral care – probably because that's what it's been called in a lot of the schools where I've been; ensuring that students feel happy, safe and staff as well."

"I think as well... it seems contradictory but it's a fine line between... you can set up a pastoral care program and not actually have any pastoral care occurring. That's pretty easy to do; you just put the teacher and the kids in the room for the set amount of time."



## 5. DEPENDENT ON TEACHER WELLBEING

"... a teacher's wellbeing has to be cared for if they're going to be resilient enough or have their tanks full enough to be able to be caring so student wellbeing goes hand-in-hand with teacher wellbeing."

"And that's probably the most important thing. Yes, it's the most important thing – you get weighed down with ticking – you've got to do this, you've got to do that, you've got to do this and that but you forget probably the most important thing of being a good human being really."

## 6. IMPACTED ON BY PEDAGOGY

"Teachers have a responsibility to teach well but clearly, if you're going to be an effective teacher, you have to have really effective relationships with students, you need to respect them, you need to make sure that they're aware that in the nature of the work that you're doing that you're well prepared, that you're seeking to engage them, that you are involving them in the process of learning and then for wellbeing, you're looking at their wellbeing."

"Lots of teachers might say "Oh, I'm too busy to take anything more on" but your class is going to function so much more easily, more smoothly because you've got that pedagogy and you've got that wellbeing approach then you've spent less time so I'm saving you time; I'm not causing you time – I'm saving you time."

## 7. SUPPLEMENTED BY PROGRAMS

"Between all the areas of outcomes, programs etc. and wellbeing, teachers go – and they're not complaining – they just go "Oh, what? It's just another..."

"Well it's like anything; there are teachers who will take that on wholly and solely and they'll work with it and maybe incorporate other issues like I say into their program but then you will have teachers who will probably say "I do this in my class anyway. I don't need a program like this to show me what to do. Sometimes I might take some stuff on it but when I get time I'll do it". That could be a hindrance to ensuring that program is fully endorsed."

## 8. SUPPORTED BY COUNSELLORS

"Counselling and stuff – obviously we have a counsellor here and those sorts of things – but for many kids, the counselling process as it exists is "Would you like to volunteer and go to talk to a total stranger about your personal problems" which I wouldn't really volunteer to do. You'd much rather talk to someone you actually feel you have some kind of relationship with who knows who you are and what you deal with on a daily basis...it largely falls to the classroom teachers who see them the most on a daily basis and that have probably the better sort of relationship in that regard."

"... I think with counsellors in schools for instance, you could probably employ ten counsellors in a school and every single one of them – at the moment we've got two – but you could probably employ ten counsellors in a school and sure enough they'd all end up flat-out."

### 9. ENHANCED BY PARENT PARTNERSHIP

"When we talk about "kids" we're talking about them and their families and the community and ourselves as well; it's all of those really intricate inter-relationships – again relationships being the key that draws all these things together."

"I think there are high and unrealistic expectations sometimes where families can abrogate their responsibilities ... but I think that coming to an understanding between families, community and school about what our responsibilities are for the young people in our care is important. I think sometimes the expectations either way can be out of kilter."

### 10. DEPENDENT ON LEADERSHIP

"I think you need someone who is strong as a leader and understands the wellbeing of the staff and how it impacts. Obviously if the staff aren't handling stuff, the kids aren't – it has a flow-on effect."

"I think you have to, as a principal or as a leader in the school, you have to model those good relationships with kids but the sad thing about it is, particularly in a school this size, I think the bigger the school, probably the less time the principal is able to spend with the kids and even with the teachers ..."

### 11. SITUATED IN CONFUSED POLICY ENVIRONMENT

"Policy can sometimes be left on the shelf; it needs to be a practical framework – it needs to be "If you follow this and you do these things, all will be good"."

"I couldn't tell you a policy that's actually appealed to me".



# WHERE TO FROM HERE?

We are now commencing Phase 3 of the research and warmly invite your continuing involvement. Phase 3 involves on-line surveys with principals, teachers and students in primary and secondary schools across the three participating school regions.

The Phase 3 surveys have been informed by the findings and insights gained from Phase 2. As indicated in the summary above, the interviews and focus groups provided very rich and extensive data which is helping to identify how wellbeing is understood by principals, teachers and students. The online surveys aim to extend this knowledge by testing the findings with hundreds of students and teachers across the three regions. Given the emphasis in the Phase 2 findings on the important role of relationships for wellbeing in schools, Phase 3 will also be testing recognition theory to help shed further light on the findings outlined above. When completed, this research will have made a considerable contribution to understanding wellbeing in schools and to identifying pathways to continued improvements in practice.

Thank you for sharing your views with us!

We will use the information you gave us to help improve student wellbeing in schools.

If you have any questions or feedback about this research, you can talk to your teacher, or you can email or call us!

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