

SCHOOL WELLBEING AND WHY IT IS FUNDAMENTAL TO QUALITY SCHOOLING

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I am delighted to speak on the importance of student wellbeing for quality schooling, and in other ways support the work of WISA. It is an honour to serve as Patron.

I have no doubt that the work that you are doing and that you plan to do is critically important in achieving such an outcome.

In this brief address I will draw from the findings of two projects in which I have been engaged in recent years and present a challenge for policy makers and practitioners.

Importance and need

At first sight, student wellbeing is a well-researched field. It seems that every state and territory has done a comprehensive review of literature on the topic in recent years. Its importance is explained on the website of the Australian Government Department of Education and Training on Student Resilience and Wellbeing which states that:

Student resilience and wellbeing are essential for both academic and social development and this is optimised by the provision of safe, supportive and respectful learning environments. Schools share this responsibility with the whole community.

Not only do confident, resilient children with a capacity for emotional intelligence perform better academically, these skills can also contribute to the creation of strong social bonds and supportive communities, and the maintenance of healthy relationships and responsible lifestyles.

What is sought is captured well in the vision and purpose of the organisation hosting this conference (Wellbeing in Schools Australia – WISA):

Vision: School communities building resilience in all students, especially the most marginalised and those at risk of marginalisation, so they can reach their potential in education and in life.

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Purpose: To work collaboratively with and support school communities in building a strategic whole of school approach to health and wellbeing that creates a socially just environment where all students can thrive, particularly those at risk of or who are being marginalized, can thrive.

That large numbers of young people are not able to meet the challenges is indicated by data on attendance and drop-out rates, failure to complete school and failure to find a pathway to education, training and employment beyond school. Gaps between various groups of students are as wide as ever, based on measures of socio-educational advantage or Indigenous status. The numbers entering the criminal justice system and data on alcohol and drug misuse and domestic violence are of deep concern. WISA has drawn on a range of sources to document the scale of the problem.

This is despite the initiatives of school systems and schools and their communities around the country, with a host of practices such as those shared at this and similar conferences being successful by national and international standards.

I am not a specialist in the policy and practice of wellbeing but much of my research and that of my colleagues at Educational Transformations takes us into this field and we are powerful advocates, based on the evidence we have gathered in several studies. Wellbeing is fundamental to our work since we define transformation as significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all students in all settings. Two examples of our research are provided here.

The Autonomy Premium (Caldwell 2016)

The first example is drawn from our work in the International Study on School Autonomy and Learning (ISSAL) that involves researchers from seven countries: Australia, Canada, China, England, Finland, Israel and Singapore. The focus is on how schools use a higher level of autonomy to achieve improvements in student achievement. Among a range of other approaches, four case studies of schools that demonstrate the links are being conducted in each of the seven countries. The case studies are reported in *The Autonomy Premium* published in September by ACER Press (Caldwell 2016).

The case study of Specimen Hill Primary School in Golden Square (Bendigo) illustrates how strategies for addressing the needs of students as far as their wellbeing is concerned underpinned a collection of initiatives that led to impressive gains in student achievement as measured in results in NAPLAN tests. We were able to map the links between the wellbeing work and gains in achievement.

In this and other case studies it was clear that concern for wellbeing was also addressed through curriculum and pedagogical work such as personalised learning in literacy and numeracy. A major implication is that initiatives in wellbeing must be integrated with the efforts of all and not be a separate practice.

Transforming Education through the Arts (Caldwell and Vaughan 2012)

In a second example, we examined the performance of students in 10 schools in highly disadvantaged settings in Western Sydney. The focus was on programs in the arts offered by the not-for-profit organisation The Song Room (TSR). Three schools offered a longer-term program over 12 to 18 months, and three schools offered an initial short-term program of 6 months. In each instance the program was conducted for Grade 5 and 6 students for one hour on a single day once per week. A control group of four schools did not offer the program. The three groups of schools were a matched set as far as their communities were concerned (as indicated by ICSEA scores).

Important differences were found in favour of students that undertook the TSR program. The findings have national and international significance.

1. Participation in TSR is associated with a gain of approximately one year in Year 5 NAPLAN scores in reading and approximately half a year in science and technology when compared to outcomes for students in matching schools.
2. Participation in TSR is associated with higher levels of social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) on every dimension of the ACER SEWB scale compared to measures for students in matching schools.

The Challenge

As I see it, there are three challenges. The first is to continue to share knowledge of good policy and practice in conferences like this and to network that knowledge. The second is to intervene at the policy level and press for inclusion of indicators of wellbeing in measurement frameworks for Australian schools. The third is needs-based funding at system and school levels to support initiatives in wellbeing.

For the second of these, it will help the cause if there is a robust set of indicators that will enable policymakers and the public to see the impact of efforts in the field. The current Measurement Framework for Australian Schools includes, for example, results in NAPLAN tests and student attendance.

However, indicators of student engagement and wellbeing are needed and it may be some time before these are agreed on. Ministers for Education around the country are working on it, as is the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), but there

is a need for more evidence of impact of the work in which we are engaged. This is clear in the 2016 report of the Productivity Commission, an influential agency, which states that 'Student engagement is regarded as relevant to student outcomes, and is closely connected to learning. There are also important links with student wellbeing, although the Australian evidence based on this is inconclusive' (Productivity Commission 2016: Page 4.29 in Volume B). There is a role for all in supporting the work of WISA and others to ensure that the next report is more positive about impact.

Let there be no doubt: embedding good practice in wellbeing is essential if there is to be success for all students in all settings.

References

Caldwell, B.J. (2016). *The Autonomy Premium*. Melbourne: ACER Press.

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