Wellbeing in Primary School – Focusing on Friendship

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Introduction

Towards the end of 2018 we noticed the wellbeing needs of our primary students and their families had begun to surpass the support mechanisms we had in place. These included our chaplain, external professionals and intentional classroom practices/ programs. We found classroom teachers, support staff and our chaplain were spending a great deal of time supporting students with wellbeing needs ranging from friendship challenges and anxiety to individual disorders and family breakdowns. As a school we knew this was a concern and understood that students' wellbeing has a significant impact on their ability to be successful in the classroom (Porter, et al., 2021; Quin, 2017; Willms, 2003). Specifically, we agreed with the researched understanding that students need to feel safe, connected, and happy to engage successfully both academically and socially at school (Abdollahi et al., 2020; Allen & McKenzie, 2015).

We began to explore the trend we were seeing in our school to discover if it was a broader issue. Unsurprisingly we found in 2015 the Department of Health in Canberra completed one of the largest Australian studies into children's mental health, *The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*. This report provided a comprehensive picture of the major mental health and wellbeing issues that affect Australian children. The report stated that "one in seven (13.9%) 4-17 year-olds were assessed as having mental disorders in the previous 12 months. This is equivalent to 560,000 Australian children and adolescents" (Lawrence et al., 2015, p. 4). These mental health issues encompassed areas of depression, stress, ADHD, anxiety, and emotional/behavioural problems. This research further supported the growing recognition that children who suffer from poor mental health/ wellbeing face significant challenges when trying to access school curriculum as well as the social context of school (Redmond et al., 2016) which can have a significant impact on an individual's long term growth, development, and life success.

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School role in wellbeing

It was interesting to note from our research, schools were identified as 'on-the-front-line' to identify and address these mental health challenges for children through their social and personal development (Thornton, 2011).

Hamilton and Hamilton (2009) further explain that schools are one of the most important developmental contexts in young peoples' lives and are a key source of skill and competency development. Furthermore, they explained that schools provide accessible and relatively stable sites within which interventions can be realised to address wellbeing (Bond et al., 2007). Hence, schools are uniquely placed to play a significant role in a child's wellbeing development and intervention. So, the next question for us was how we could implement wellbeing initiatives specific to our school and students?

Being intentional

As a result, we began to examine the wellbeing needs of our school community and mapped these against the current roles, programs and practices we already had in place within our school. Naturally we had gaps. We then began to investigate the wellbeing product market and discovered there were a significant number of companies and people willing to take our money with the exciting promise of 'fixing' our school's wellbeing challenges and creating a healthy culture in our school. Sadly, it took us a little time (and money) to discover that there are no easy 'quick fix' answers when it comes to wellbeing.

As part of this examination process, we also reflected on identity as a school and decided that we would become very intentional

about wellbeing and how it fits into our school mission of developing 'the whole child'. With this intentionality we created a wellbeing landscape in our school that continued to draw on the existing capabilities and strengths of our staff and enhanced it to included elements such as: timetable space to focus on wellbeing, the position of a wellbeing officer, educational nights for parents, and referral resources.

Re-examine and re-focus

As 2020 began I don't think any of us could have imagined the impact of the two years ahead. During these years we learnt to pivot like some of the best ballerinas on Broadway (like all schools)! This was also true for our intentional approach to wellbeing. We noticed that due to social isolation, educational disruption and economic hardship, student wellbeing was significantly impacted. As a result, we were quick to re-examine and re-focus our wellbeing efforts. Areas that became priorities were student and teacher connections, a sense of belonging and anxiety support for students, teachers, and families. However, one of the most interesting areas that became a priority, and continues to be, is that of friendship.

Focusing on friendship

Building trusting and supportive relationships between students, teachers, and staff is vital for creating a connected environment within schools. Research shows that when these positive relationships exist, it leads to better academic outcomes as well as improved emotional growth (Payne, 2018; Riekie, 2016). Something that became apparent during and after the COVID pandemic was our students' difficulties developing and maintaining relationships with their peers. As a primary school this is always an area of anticipated growth and development, however, it had also become a significant lagging skill. Research suggests this can be attributed to many things over the past few years but one of the most significant is lockdowns with social isolation and the lack of in-person socialisation. Professor Louise Paatsch from Deakin University's School of Education explained that preliminary research coming out of the pandemic showed young students do not know how to interpret their peers' behaviour or co-operate during group work. Meuwissen (2022) further explained that developing friendship and social skills takes practice, and children without that practice over the past few years may need time, scaffolding and experience to catch up.

With this knowledge our wellbeing coordinator introduced a friendship curriculum for our school that involves teacher training, common metalanguage, student lessons and parent support. The program is called URStrong (2023) and is a skills-based program that teaches children how to put a voice to their feelings, create healthy friendships, and build a solid foundation for future relationships. Along with learning what's normal in a friendship and the difference between healthy and unhealthy friendships, students also learn and practice a step-by-step approach for 'putting out' common friendship conflicts and how to combat unwanted behaviour.

The program aligns with CASEL's Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework (CASEL, n. d.) and Positive Education's PERMA model (Seligman, 2018) and is a great addition to our primary school's wellbeing curriculum. As a school we are looking forward to seeing the measurable impacts of the program over the next few years.

Conclusion

Through this whole process it has reinforced for us that helping a student flourish in a fast-paced changing world is not an easy task. Unfortunately, we also discovered there is not a one-size-fits-all wellbeing approach that our school can use to support students. However, as our knowledge grows and develops, and our school intentionally re-examines and re-focuses our wellbeing supports each year we are taking some promising steps forward. As John C. Maxwell (2017) says, "Success each day should be judged by the seeds sown, not the harvest reaped." TEACH

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