

Tracking student wellbeing in schools

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Student wellbeing is inextricably linked to learning and success. The profile and importance of student and staff wellbeing in schools have drastically increased in recent years and have accelerated at a remarkable rate over the last twelve months. Prior to the pandemic, much of the discussion about student wellbeing revolved around wellbeing/student welfare staff, events, and/or curriculum. While all of these initiatives contribute to supporting and enhancing the wellbeing of individual students and school communities, it is important - in the same way that we review progress by using learning analytics - that schools deliberately and consistently track the wellbeing of their community to monitor the impact they are having.

What is student wellbeing?

Following a review and consultation process, a project team from Australian Catholic University and Erebus International (see Noble et al., 2008) set out to define student wellbeing for Australian schools. The final definition presented by Noble et al. is:

“Student wellbeing is strongly linked to learning. A student’s level of wellbeing at school is indicated by their satisfaction with life at school, their engagement with learning and their social-emotional behaviour. It is enhanced when evidence-informed practices are adopted by schools in partnership with families and community. Optimal student wellbeing is a sustainable state characterised by predominantly positive feelings and attitude, positive relationships at school, resilience, self-optimisation and a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences.” (2008, p. 30)

This optimal state, as outlined by Nobel et al. (2008) is dependent on a number of factors - students’ involvement in the learning process, satisfaction with school and their social and emotional behaviour. As the authors note, this state is enhanced by evidence-informed practices; however, there is a dearth of research in the area of the effectiveness of wellbeing support in schools (Evidence for Learning, 2020). Thus, schools and leaders attempting to identify effective wellbeing practices and initiatives might rely solely on previous experience or feedback from other schools, rather than knowing definitively from the research what works.

The Australian context

In Australia, there is increasing emphasis on the role of wellbeing in schools, and this is reflected in key documents such as the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019) and the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework (Education Council, 2018). Such documents highlight the increasing emphasis on this area for Australian schools and teachers and the increased explicitness of this challenge.

The December 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration builds on the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Melbourne Declaration) which was published in 2008 (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008). It outlines the goals and

aspirations for Australian education, and like previous declarations, has been endorsed by all education ministers across the country. There are a range of similarities and differences between the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration and the Melbourne Declaration. The Education Council (n.d.) identifies that a key difference is that the 2019 declaration:

“places students at the centre of their education by emphasising the importance of meeting the individual needs of all learners, and outlines education’s role in supporting the wellbeing, mental health and resilience of young people.” (para. 4)

When considering the student-centred nature of the 2019 declaration, it is worth noting that the new declaration explicitly refers to student wellbeing on seven occasions. This is an increase from the Melbourne Declaration which mentioned student wellbeing four times, and the previous Adelaide Declaration on the Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century which did not mention wellbeing at all (see MCEETYA, 1999). The inclusion of the term ‘wellbeing’ has been a significant change in the Australian education vision over the past 20 years.

Further evidence of growth in this area in Australian schools is the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework, which was launched in October 2018. This foundation document aims to “provide Australian schools with a vision and a set of guiding principles to support school communities to build positive learning environments, and to consider reviewing their current safety and wellbeing policies and support requirements” (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020, para. 1). As shown in Figure 1, the wellbeing framework consists of five elements - leadership, inclusion, student voice, partnerships, and support - which all contribute to the development of a climate that supports and promotes student wellbeing. In the framework document, these five elements are unpacked to outline the principles sitting behind the headings, and effective practices in each domain.



Figure 1: The elements of the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework (from Education Council, 2018, p. 4).



While the framework does not set out to tell schools what they should do, it aims to support school communities by providing a consistent vision and approach through a systematic and whole school approach. The framework emphasises both the evidence that informed the development of the framework, and the importance of schools using evidence-informed practices in both teaching social-emotional skills and in the choice of wellbeing and support strategies (Education Council, 2018). Further, and relevant to this discussion on tracking student wellbeing, is that the effective practices for the five elements highlight the need for monitoring and review. In the element of ‘Support’, one of the effective practices states that schools should “critically analyse and evaluate school data to inform decision-making in order to effectively respond to the changing need of students and families” (Education Council, 2018, p. 11).

A 2020 review

Given the gaps in research, Evidence for Learning commissioned a review of literature and research into school-based wellbeing initiatives in 2020. They found that wellbeing interventions make a difference to student wellbeing; however, they are differentially effective, and not all interventions have the same impact or effect. As they reported, “everything that schools do to support student wellbeing counts but some are more effective than others” (Evidence for Learning, 2020, para. 12). For example, the study found that interventions in secondary school settings are more effective than primary or middle school settings, and short programs up to three months duration are more effective than longer programs. Another interesting outcome of the study was that compared to a universal approach, programs for disadvantaged students have a greater impact (see Australian Council for Educational Research, 2020).

This study both highlights the need for further investigation in effective student wellbeing programs and provides some indication of the approaches that are more likely to work for students and schools than others. When viewed alongside the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework and the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, schools have more guidance in this area than ever before.

The challenge

Schools and school leaders are undoubtedly trying their best to support and enhance the wellbeing of their students. Most commonly, there are three key ways that schools approach wellbeing support, through: support staff (such as pastoral leaders, form tutors, classroom teachers, and/or counsellors); school-based curriculum (which may be based on a school-based program or a pre-packaged product); and/or wellbeing events (such as guest speakers, mindfulness sessions with external providers, and/or wellbeing days). Each of these elements play an important role in supporting the wellbeing of students in different ways - events are a great opportunity to enhance the profile of wellbeing and provide new experiences for students, curriculum can provide regular check-ins, reminders and learning opportunities to explore strategies and support, and wellbeing staff offer individualised and targeted support for students in need. However, as Nobel et al. (2008) and the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework (Education Council, 2018) remind us, the strategies that will enhance the optimal state of learners must be evidence-informed.

Being more evidence-informed

Ultimately, schools can take the learnings from the research and be guided by the framing documents, but it is also important to know what is happening in their school so they can adapt to the needs of their students and the community. While wellbeing events, curriculum, and staff all contribute to this understanding, based on my experience as a teacher and school data coach, I contend that it is also important to collect and store regular information on the wellbeing of young people. This could take the form of regular surveys, focus groups, individual check-ins etc, but the key to this type of tracking is that it is done regularly, stored for comparison, and visualised in a way that assists educators to act on the findings. When used in conjunction with wellbeing staff, curriculum, and events, I believe that the regular and systematic collection of data on student wellbeing, from students, can assist schools to achieve true impact.

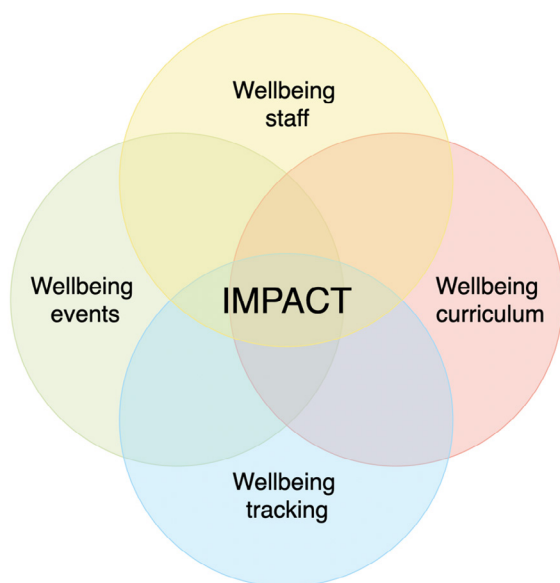


Figure 2: The overlap of staff, curriculum, events, and tracking is where schools can have the greatest impact on student wellbeing.

As shown in Figure 2, the intersection of these four elements is where true wellbeing impact can be experienced in schools. At this crossover point, schools would have wellbeing staff employed to directly support young people, there would be a curriculum built in the school to meet the needs of cohorts and individuals, there would be wellbeing events to highlight different strategies and skills (perhaps sometimes run by external providers), and there would be regular tracking where students are checking in about how they are travelling.

For many schools and leaders, the notion of regularly and formally tracking student wellbeing might be new. However, explicitly tracking student wellbeing can be beneficial as it can provide individualised information on the needs of students, it allows for longitudinal tracking over time, and it provides evidence from which school-based interventions and approaches can be adapted.

Individualised information: The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019) is more student-centred than ever before, and this is evidenced by schools that are increasingly attempting to provide more individualised care to students. The benefit of regular wellbeing tracking is that it can provide teachers and support staff with trackable information on individuals on a regular basis, rather than relying on cohort trends in annual surveys. For example, if you formally check in with students on their wellbeing twice per term, you will have individual results about the students who are most 'at risk', students who are travelling really well, and individuals who sit in the middle. Your staff could have conversations with each student about their wellbeing and use their responses to continue the conversations.

In contrast, some schools run annual anonymous bullying surveys, which provide comparative information about the prevalence and types of bullying and provide an opportunity for students to share their experience. Although this approach can be useful, as it provides information from which the school can act, it may not provide information about specific students. Due to the anonymous, and/or annual nature of these types of surveys, individualised care cannot be an action that arises from the insights. Insights from this type of survey are limited to cohort level, meaning that actions can only be implemented based on average results and overall cohort responses. Conversely, regular wellbeing surveys provide specific information about individual students.

Tracking over time: Individually tracking student wellbeing allows for comparison and tracking over time. Ideally, dashboards can be built, or visualisations can be created, which allow long-term monitoring. If schools track student wellbeing formally twice or three times per term, over time, a picture starts to emerge for individual students. There may be some students who report consistently low results, there may be some that report consistently high results, and there will be other students who fluctuate depending on relationships, family life and school pressure. By collecting this information on individuals, formally tracking student wellbeing provides individualised information and insights, which can lead to individualised care. Class teachers or form tutors could use the information to start conversations with each student. They can monitor those who are struggling and encourage students to be resources for one another. The power is in collecting individual information at regular intervals and doing so in a way that is authentic and leads to conversations with students.

Evidence from which school-based interventions and approaches can be adapted: The insights from individualised wellbeing tracking can be considered not only at the individual student level, but at the class and cohort level as well. For individual students, additional support from wellbeing staff, immediate check-ins and follow ups, and referral to external professionals are all possible evidence-informed changes that could be made as a result of this type of tracking. At a class and/or cohort level, insights from individual questions or category types could inform school-based curriculum, events, and/or interventions. I recently worked with a school where students reported a high level of concern about the way peers interacted on social media outside of school hours. This insight was used to slightly adjust the school-based wellbeing curriculum, including discussions in tutor group, and a guest speaker about online conduct. This is just one example, but there are endless ways in which the information collected from student tracking can be used to inform programs or approaches within a school.

Wellbeing tracking is NOT...

It is worth pointing a few areas of confusion in the wellbeing tracking work I have seen in schools. When I have engaged in conversations about tracking wellbeing, I have experienced the following misconceptions.

First, it is important to note that wellbeing tracking is not about evaluating personal characteristics or 21st century skills. Some schools have begun thinking about the ways in which they can track and report on progress in 'soft skills' that are not directly assessed by the curriculum. Some schools are doing this really well - they have developed success criteria and assessment rubrics for skills such as interpersonal skills, collaboration etc, and use this to recognise growth and achievement in these areas. This type of tracking could provide great information to students and parents about student strengths and gaps for improvement and could inform teachers about areas requiring work; however, this type of tracking is different to wellbeing tracking. Wellbeing tracking should ascertain how a student is, how they are coping with challenges, how their health, sleep and exercise are, and how they cope with relationships and school - it is not an assessment of other skills. Further, wellbeing tracking is a self-assessment, done by students about themselves. It is not performed by teachers.

Second, wellbeing tracking is not only engagement tracking. Some schools have started tracking engagement in lessons - whether it be semi-regular reporting to students or parents (such as daily or weekly), or more infrequent tracking (such as monthly or once or twice per term). In some instances, schools have utilised engagement rubrics

to assist the process (such as TeachThought's 5 levels of student engagement; see Heick, 2018). However, although Nobel et al. (2008) recognise that student engagement contributes to wellbeing, it is not the whole picture. Further, the use of engagement tracking in schools in this way that has just been explained is usually teacher-assessed. Student wellbeing tracking is about students using their voice to reflect on and share their experience, not for a teacher to make a judgement about how they are progressing.

Finally, wellbeing tracking harnesses the power of student voice but it is not the only way that student voice should be used. Student voice is another priority that has gained significant time and attention from schools and systems across the country (for example, see State Government of Victoria, 2019). However,

“Student voice is not simply about giving students the opportunity to communicate ideas and opinions; it is about students having the power to influence change. Authentic student voice provides opportunities for students to collaborate and make decisions with adults around what and how they learn and how their learning is assessed. This is known to lead to improved educational outcomes.” (State Government of Victoria, 2019, p. 11)

Thus, harnessing the power of student voice and agency is that students can contribute to decisions and can influence change – including student-generated assessment where they co-construct or co-design assessment or success criteria to influence the way in which they are assessed. Research has found that “both students and staff identified positive associations between having a say at school, being recognised (cared for, respected, and valued), and wellbeing” (Anderson & Graham, 2016, p. 348); however, student wellbeing tracking is not the only way that schools should be listening to students. It provides a way for schools to hear from students, but other strategies are needed to truly harness the power of student voice and involve students in decision making in the school.

Conclusion

Regular wellbeing tracking provides an opportunity to hear from every student in the community, and to provide individualised care. Tracking wellbeing of students on a regular basis is new for many schools in Australia, but it can be used as an effective approach to complement wellbeing staff, curriculum, and events. This form of tracking can also support long-term monitoring goals and be used to inform school-based programs and support. Ultimately, educators know that the more we learn about our students, the better we can cater for their needs, and this approach does not only apply to students as learners, but in also supporting and developing their wellbeing.

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