



A 'Classroom as Community' Approach to Supporting Student Well-being and Reducing Bullying in Primary Schools

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Abstract

The relationship between effective teaching and learning and student wellbeing has gained increasing recognition, with various programs being developed that aim to identify and assist individual students 'at risk'. In contrast to individualised approaches, this presentation reports on a school-wide 'classroom as community' approach to wellbeing through complementary pedagogies that address the issues for children with trauma experiences. Strategies include education in emotions [1], pro-social games [2], students as wellbeing agents and parent involvement [3]. The approach uses Vygotsky's [4] notion of the socially formed mind wherein children's minds are formed in interaction with those around them [5]. Working with the whole school, the approach creates a culture enabling students to succeed in group activities [6]. Now adopted in over 50 primary classrooms in South Australia the approach is being evaluated in one school over a three year period of implementation. Measures include attendance, academic achievement, bullying incidence, and parent satisfaction.

Keywords: Well-being; Community Approach; Primary School; Bullying Reduction; Trauma Informed Pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Research has established that safety and wellbeing is fundamental to the process of learning [7] extending effective schooling beyond academic concerns. School staff also contend with children's social and emotional needs shaped in their home, community and school contexts.

US research examining impacts of adverse experiences in childhood (ACE) identified lower rates of school engagement and more chronic illness amongst these children [8]. They risk developing hypervigilance, inhibiting new learning whilst reacting to past traumas [9].

The 'Wellbeing Classroom' (WBC) initiative addresses children's social and emotional literacy using pro-social games [2] and emotional literacy resources [1], whilst coaching teachers in supporting children impacted by trauma. Previous evaluation in a single class over one school year found these children formed more friendships and better school outcomes [3]. This paper reports on a whole school initiative using the WBC approach over three years.

2. School Context

The primary school, located in a low income area, was rated '3' in 2017 on the South Australian Schools Index of Disadvantage, where one is most disadvantaged and seven is least disadvantaged [10]. The school commenced WBC activities in 2015. In 2018 the school enrolment was 366. The following table provides a breakdown of percentages of students against key indicators of need.

Table 1: Percentages of Students' Key Indicators of Need

Students	%
English as Additional Language or Dialect students	61
Students on school card (low income)	49
Students with refugee status	23
Students with a disability	12
Students with an identified trauma background	8
Students who have had Department of Child Protection intervention	5
Students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	3

Table 1 identifies that 3 in every 5 students have home languages other than Standard

English. Nearly half the population is living on a low income and nearly one in four are refugees.



3. Wellbeing Practices

The WBC approach uses place-based co-design supporting school staff to adopt 'trauma informed practice' and develop social and emotional literacies supporting peer and staff relationships [6]. WBC implementation is supported by a pastoral care organisation, the Schools Ministry Group (SMG). The school has also introduced student 'wellbeing agents' providing peer leadership in classroom wellbeing practices, drawing on peer modelling [11] and experience based learning.

Weekly 'wellbeing classroom' time includes mindfulness and emotional literacy practices led by student 'wellbeing agents' with support from the school's Child Wellbeing Practitioner, who also engages directly with children identified as having experienced trauma. Children with specific learning or therapeutic needs receive individualised support, in addition to the WBC activities.

4. Evaluation Data

The efficacy of the WBC approach is being continuously evaluated using data collected by the school and through population data drawn from standardised surveys.

4.1 AEDC Data

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) provides three yearly reports based on teachers assessing five year old children commencing school. The surveys document children's development on a 10 point scale across five developmental domains, providing population level data on the percentages of children who are vulnerable (<10th percentile), at risk (10th - 25th percentile) or 'on track'. School AEDC data can be compared across census rounds to identify changes in the proportions of children identified as vulnerable.

Table 2: 2015-2018 Change in AEDC Domains at the School [12]

		2015		2018		Significant change
		n	%	n	%	2015 vs 2018
Physical health and wellbeing	On track	22	52.4	28	70	Significant increase
	At risk	8	19	6	15	No significant change
	Vulnerable	12	28.6	6	15	Significant decrease
Social competence	On track	23	54.8	27	67.5	Significant increase
	At risk	14	33.3	7	17.5	Significant decrease
	Vulnerable	5	11.9	6	15	No significant change
Emotional maturity	On track	23	54.8	26	65	Significant increase
	At risk	13	31	7	17.5	Significant decrease
	Vulnerable	6	14.3	7	17.5	No significant change
Language and cognitive skills (school-based)	On track	27	64.3	28	70	No significant change
	At risk	8	19	6	15	No significant change
	Vulnerable	7	16.7	6	15	No significant change
Communication skills and general knowledge	On track	23	54.8	31	77.5	Significant increase
	At risk	9	21.4	3	7.5	Significant decrease
	Vulnerable	10	23.8	6	15	Significant decrease



The data show significant increases in the proportion of children assessed as being 'on track' across four of the five domains between the 2015 and 2018 AEDC and no significant change in the Language and Cognitive Skills domain. Whilst these outcomes may in part be attributed to children's experiences prior to commencing school, the generalised trajectory of positive change supports an interpretation that the school's wellbeing activities are having a positive effect across the three years since WBC commencement in 2015.

4.2 Academic Achievement NAPLAN

Australia's students are assessed in literacy and numeracy tests known as NAPLAN in years three, five and seven. The Standard of Educational Achievement (SEA) is defined as children and young people progressing and achieving at or above their year level. NAPLAN tests whether students are achieving at or above the national minimum standard for reading and numeracy.

The school reading data for years three and five students indicated a positive trend over three years. The year seven student data was less consistent but has been positive over two years and showed improvement on their year three results from 2016. The numeracy data indicated a four year trend of improvement in the percentage of years three, five and seven students achieving the SEA. The year three group in particular have made significant improvement from 51% to 70%.

4.3 School Wellbeing Audit 2018

The School has monitored the impacts of the WBC approach with biannual audits of staff and student experience, as well as monitoring behavioural data on a whole school basis. 2018 behaviour data indicated that bullying and harassment incidents decreased by 14% from 2017 and the number of students referred to the Principal's office for problem behaviour decreased by 7%. In the September 2018 audit, 22 students indicated that they had been bullied, down from 43 students in 2016. The positive trend in behaviour data was also reflected in students' attendance which increased to 91.8% in 2018, up from 89.06% in 2016 and 90.9% in 2017.

The audit surveyed student wellbeing agents about their experience. Every student leader reported they enjoyed the experience and found the role helped them develop knowledge and confidence as leaders in their classrooms. They identified that students' learning and mood had improved in class, with less bullying behaviour and more understanding of ways to support their own wellbeing and that of others.

Teaching staff feedback was similarly positive, identifying universally high satisfaction with the process of embedding wellbeing strategies into their classroom practice, working alongside student wellbeing agents. Data on 2018 parent involvement showed a 70% increase in the number of families with English as an additional language (EALD) attending family learning events compared to 2017, and a 50% increase in the number of EALD families accessing family support and health services.

4.4 Parent Survey 2018

One hundred parents (44%) responded to a school survey in 2018 regarding their experiences of their child's school engagement. The responses in Table 3 are presented in descending order, featuring a mean score of 84.5. The survey indicated highest levels of parent satisfaction with respect for cultural diversity and children's enjoyment of their school.



Table 3: 2018 Parent Survey n=100

Questions	Yes	No	Could improve	Needs urgent attention	Don't know	No Response
The school respects and celebrates different cultures.	97	1	0	0	2	0
My child likes being at this school.	94	0	4	0	2	0
Teachers at this school expect my child to do their best.	92	0	3	0	4	1
This school looks for ways to improve.	87	1	8	0	4	0
I am satisfied with the overall learning programmes offered at this school.	83	0	10	3	4	0
My child's learning needs are being met at this school.	83	1	9	2	5	0
I know the standard of learning that is expected of my child e.g. reading level.	82	0	14	2	2	0
My child is making good progress at this school.	81	0	15	0	1	3
I can be involved in making decisions about my child's learning.	80	2	11	1	5	1
I am offered regular and frequent opportunities to talk about my child's progress.	79	1	14	0	5	1
There are opportunities for me to develop my own skills in supporting my child's learning.	72	5	18	0	5	0

5. Conclusion

The statistical data indicate the WBC activities are having positive impacts on academic performance and the school's socio-cultural environment, enabling students to enjoy attending and achieve improvements in their learning standards. This is significant in a school with relatively high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity and complex social contexts including low incomes, refugee backgrounds and disability. The rapid growth in EALD parent engagement with the school and with health and family support services indicates that the WBC approach is fostering school-family relationships alongside children's improved sense of safety and reduced levels of bullying. The next phase of data collection will involve qualitative methods to gain more nuanced understandings of the impacts on children, families and staff.

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