

## From Vision to Practice The role of the school leader in developing wellbeing

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## Hot off the press: Sept 2007

- The American Psychological Society says school violence research shows no evidence that Zero Tolerance policies lead to improved school climate or safety
- Punitive approaches and exclusions result in a 'school to prison pipeline'
- The report sees 'a negative relationship between the use of school suspension and expulsion and school-wide academic achievement.'

## Prevention is better than cure

- There is a mass of research which connects school culture with learning outcomes as well as behavioural outcomes (see Zins, E. J., Weissberg, M.C., Wang, M.C. & Walberg, H.J. (2004) *Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What does the research say?* Teachers College Press: New York
- Pro-active, positive strategies focusing on relational values and wellbeing across the school system - school executive, staff, students and families- make for more effective learning environments

## Not just warm & fuzzy

- Caring implies a continuous search for competence.
- Caring seeks the best and produces the best in people
- Caring relationships re-structure self concept
- We respond more readily to those who care about us
- Caring underpins the ecology in communities that promotes pro-social behaviour, mental health, reductions in child abuse and family violence and ability to seek help and support in times of difficulty

## Caring school communities

What does this mean?

What are the processes by which such a learning environment is achieved?

## Research Project

- Qualitative study: exploring good practice
- What is happening in schools deemed to be working on the development of a caring community and healthy “emotionally literate” relationships.
- What are the processes by which this is being achieved and what are the perceived differences it is making to the stakeholders

## Research participants

- 6 schools: 4 primary, 2 secondary across sectors, social background and stage of development.
- Questionnaires to teachers, semi-structured interviews with principals, school counsellors, focus groups with students and teachers
- Thematic and ecological analysis

## Main findings

- The vision, role, approach and skills of school leaders were central
- Leadership style facilitated the extent to which there was agreement to and ownership of a caring school culture
- Staff and students were overwhelmingly positive about their school experiences - with a few significant detractors
- Behaviour, attendance, student engagement and home-school relations were said to have improved
- Schools had developed high standing in the community
- Change does not occur overnight and there are no quick fixes - but incremental steps add up to considerable differences over time - even starting from a low base where abusive behaviour was an everyday occurrence.
- An ecological framework is relevant to school development

## The vision of school leaders

- Comprised a focus on the whole child, their wellbeing and their potential
- Was part of their broader beliefs / world view
- Valued diversity - leading to flexible responses rather than conformity to rules
- Was focused on inclusion and connectedness
- Incorporated relational values such as respect and compassion.

## The skills and qualities of school leaders

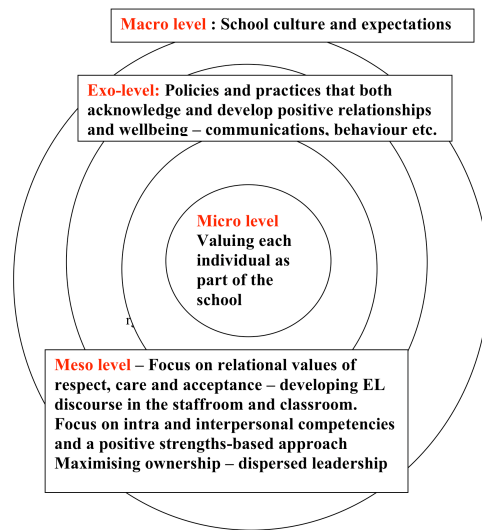
- Competent, confident, dedicated and accessible
- Ability to effectively communicate their vision to all stakeholders both formally and informally
- High expectations about relational values - respect, care, responsibility, acceptance of difference
- Congruent: emotionally literate behaviour which models expectations
- Positive and optimistic
- Resilient
- Distributed leadership - empowerment and trust - listening and open to ideas

## Vision is not enough

- Turning vision into practice and sustainable change requires:
  - Specific skills and qualities of leadership
  - Attention to an ecological model of the school community
  - The development of practices that over time change the discourse as well as a discourse that over time changes practice

## The ecology of culture

- Culture is 'the way we do things around here'. It is in constant ebb and flow
- Outcomes at any one moment are not the result of simple cause and effect (linear causality) but the accumulation of bi-directional interactive factors.
- Change occurs incrementally over time in one direction or another



## Systemic factors and practices

- Teacher wellbeing - but not in competition with student wellbeing
- Maximum participation
- Breaking down barriers - cross age / cross faculty etc
- Acknowledgement, value and connectedness
- Models of healthy relationship practice
- Support (and social) structures
- Conversations at every level
- The process of policy development
- Curricular focus on relational issues
- Appointing staff with congruent values and skills
- Positive approaches and positive emotionality

## Positive psychology

- Looks for what creates wellbeing rather than identifying pathology and treatment
- Applies this psychology universally not just with vulnerable and damaged populations.
- Many areas of research in positive psychology - one is the power of positive emotionality

## Positive emotions build social capital

- A feeling of being valued enhances cooperation
- A feeling of being cared for enhances understanding and compassion
- A feeling of being respected promotes respect for others and willingness to listen to them
- A feeling of being included enhances commitment and motivation
- A feeling of fun relieves stress and fosters belonging
- A feeling of belonging enhances resilience
- Feeling good improves creative problem-solving abilities

All of this promotes well being and caring communities

## Positive approaches are constructive and effective

- 'Yes and...' rather than 'yes but...'
- Solution focused rather than problem focused - *where do we want to go and how do we get there rather than how did we get in this mess we are in?!*
- Seeking and working with strengths
- Identifying what cannot be changed and also the first small steps towards what can

## The challenges

- Erroneous beliefs in individuals (and at a wider societal level) about what works
- A blaming and battling mentality
- Within-child models of difficulty
- Lack of emotional literacy - both intra and interpersonal skills
- Sustaining positive change

## Impact for all

- *"The whole culture has changed. Kids now know how you speak to each other with respect, peers or teachers, ancillaries or cleaners. Once its there it becomes the way things are"* (principal)
- *"I think the teachers here feel really supported, and cared about and valued, and therefore that translates over into the classroom"* (teacher)

## Sustainability

- *"I was at a school where we had a fantastic principal and there was hardly any staff absences, staff morale was high and things got done, extracurricular things got done and staff wanted to do those things. And then that principal retired, we had a new principal come in who did things very differently and people just transferred out...a lot of it does come from the top and expectations from the top and role modelling from the top as well."* (teacher)

## Where to from here?

- Use the Federal initiative on the Values Framework for Australian Schools as a hook and driver for:
  - A shift in direction: how to maximise wellbeing for all - not a negative focus on individuals
  - Intra and interpersonal skills of educators - in training / PD
  - A focus on leadership qualities and skills in new appointments
  - An emphasis on positive and solution focused approaches
  - Talking up a storm - this is what works in creating effective learning environments!
  - *“Getting everyone on board going in the same direction”*

## Useful websites

- <http://www.wellbeingaustralia.com.au>
- <http://www.sueroffey.com> (relevant papers can be accessed here)
- <http://www.CASEL.org> (the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning - many books published by Teachers College Press are by members of this group)