Improving approaches to wellbeing in schools:
What role does recognition play?

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This presentation reports key findings from Australian Research Council funded research for professional development purposes in schools. Notes have been added to the comment boxes of many of the slides. However, it is advised that the content of this presentation is considered in conjunction with the Executive Summary of the final project report.
The report for the project is available online. It is the Final Report for the Australian Research Council Linkage Project ‘Improving approaches to wellbeing in schools: What role does recognition play?’ (LP 110200656). The Report consists of four Volumes and an Executive Summary Report. The four Volumes of the Final Report are:

- **Final Report: Volume One** – Overview, Methodology, Research Design, Phase 1 Policy Analysis Results
- **Final Report: Volume Two** – Phase 2 Qualitative Interviews and Focus Groups Results
- **Final Report: Volume Three** – Phase 3 Quantitative Survey Results
- **Final Report: Volume Four** – Discussion of Findings, Recommendations, References and Appendices

Additionally, the Executive Summary Report is available online.

Additional copies of all Volumes of the Final Report can be accessed at:

[www.ccyp.scu.edu.au](http://www.ccyp.scu.edu.au)
Background to the Research
This study was an ambitious research project funded by the Australian Research Council.

The project was led by the research team at the Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, working in close collaboration with the three partner organisations: Lismore Catholic Schools Office, Good Grief Ltd and Interrelate. Partnership working was further facilitated by the Wellbeing Advisory Group (WAG) which met regularly to progress, advise and offer feedback throughout the life of the project. The WAG also included four secondary school students who remained committed throughout the length of the project and offered valuable, insightful feedback from a student perspective.

The project took place over the course of two years, involved over 12,000 participants (primary and secondary students and school staff) from three Catholic school dioceses, each in a different Australian state, and situated across a range of rural and metropolitan locations. Dioceses were selected in which a range of wellbeing approaches were practiced.
The research aimed to generate new knowledge about ‘wellbeing’ in schools.

Drawing upon insights from principals, teachers, students and existing policies, together with key ideas offered through recognition theory and Childhood Studies, the research aimed to: [Read Slide]

This study is the largest in Australia to date to invite students’ views about wellbeing in schools and, importantly, to identify similarities and differences between teacher and student views, and how these broadly align with current policy perspectives.

(More on recognition theory in upcoming slides!)
The research took a critical constructivist approach and applied the theoretical lenses of Childhood Studies and recognition theory. The mixed method research design is reflected in the four phases of the research:

**Phase 1:** An initial search was undertaken in July 2012 and repeated in June 2013. The keywords that were used in the online searches were: wellbeing; well-being; welfare; and pastoral care. Documents were included if they met the following criteria: (i) policy or policy-related documentation is relevant to children and young people; and (ii) the terms wellbeing, pastoral care or welfare are used in the title, aim or purpose; and/or (iii) important reference is made to wellbeing within the text of the document.

In addition, to the online searches the CCYP research team contacted government education departments and Catholic Education Offices in all eight states to enquire about any additional policies. A total of 99 documents were secured using the methods outlined, 68 of which are specifically from education sectors. Following review of the documents, using the inclusion criteria noted above, 80 documents were included in the analysis, 58 of which are specifically from education sectors.

**Phase 2:** 67 focus groups were conducted across 18 schools.

Each focus group comprised approximately 10 students and lasted around 60 minutes (30 minutes for Yrs 1-2).
The focus groups were conducted with four target age groups:
- Years 1-2
- Years 5-6
- Year 8
- Year 11

The focus groups involved the children engaging in group discussions with the researchers about what wellbeing means to them and what helps and hinders their wellbeing at school, followed by an imaginary schools activity where they designed a school that focused upon maximising their wellbeing.

In addition, individual interviews were conducted with principals and teachers at each of the participating schools.

**Phase 3:** 51 schools and 9975 participants took part in the survey (3906 primary students, 5362 secondary students, and 707 staff)

Questions were derived from the data collected in Phases 1 and 2, and included a variety of response options (categorical or Likert scales. The survey was placed online using Qualtrics software, and analysed using SPSS software.

The survey was designed to draw upon the ideas that emerged in the focus groups and staff interviews and explore them for greater resonance with a wider student and staff base, and through the anonymity of an online survey. Students in Years 3-12 took part in the survey. Staff participants in the survey included teachers, principals, assistant principals and non-teaching staff, such as office and technical staff.

**(NB: For those in primary schools:** A pilot survey found that the lower primary survey was too challenging for Year 1 and 2 students to complete without significant intervention from teachers. This intervention would likely jeopardise the data collected as students might feel obliged to provide socially desirable responses, and teacher involvement in further explaining key terms and ideas may affect the way students perceive these concepts, thereby affecting responses given. A version involving video proved to encounter too many technical problems for schools. Therefore, for these reasons the researchers, in consultation with teachers, principals, research partners and the WAG, decided not to proceed with the lower primary survey.)
Little research in Australia about the explicit and tacit ways teachers navigate the complex landscape of student wellbeing.

Even less known about how students view their wellbeing and how this might be best supported in schools.

Little is known about whether and how the policy environment influences practice.

Exploring the role of ‘recognition’ in understanding and improving wellbeing - ‘fresh take’

There is no research to date in Australia that has asked young people their views about wellbeing and examined these alongside principal and teacher views as well as a policy perspective...
Recognition theory potentially offers an alternative framework for conceptualising how wellbeing is understood and practiced in schools.

This is the first Australian study to empirically test recognition theory and investigates its potential in the context of wellbeing.

Why Recognition Theory?

"Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people, it is a vital human need" (Taylor, 1995, p. 226).

Recognition is simply defined by Bingham (2003, p.3) as "the act of acknowledging others, and coming to be acknowledged by others."

Honneth (2007, p.130) suggests it signals the need for "mutual respect for the particularity and the equality of all other persons."

➤ Recognition links to the fundamental importance of relationships in human life and the idea that schools are cultural communities of individuals with shared interests.

Recognition theory potentially offers an alternative framework for conceptualising how wellbeing is understood and practiced in schools.

This is the first Australian study to empirically test recognition theory and investigates its potential in the context of wellbeing.
This research draws particularly on the work of Axel Honneth who focused especially on the role and importance of human interaction in the formation of individual and social identity.

He theorised that recognition is driven by struggles over misrecognition (or a lack of recognition) across each of three concepts: love, rights and solidarity.

This is further translated for the purposes of this study in the following slide.
As noted on the previous slide, Honneth proposes three patterns of interpersonal / intersubjective recognition

1. **love**, which refers to the emotional concern for the wellbeing and needs of an actual person;
2. **rights**, which refers to respect for the equal moral accountability of the legal person; and
3. **solidarity**, which is the evaluation of particular traits, abilities, contributions and achievements against the background of ‘norms’ (Honneth, 1995).

For this study, Honneth’s theoretical concepts are drawn upon strongly but the language has been adapted to be more suitable and understandable in contemporary Australian schools – [Read Slide].
Snapshot of Findings:

1) Conceptualisations of Wellbeing
2) Importance of Relationships
3) Recognition / Misrecognition
1) Conceptualisations of Wellbeing
‘Wellbeing’ is not clearly defined or specifically identified in national or state education policies. However, despite the lack of clarity around its meaning, the term is frequently used.

For instance, education webpages signal an interest in wellbeing, but tend to encompass a range of loosely related elements, such as headlice, sun protection, bullying etc.

There is no specific policy at a national level in any sector that explicitly focuses on the wellbeing of children and young people. At a state and territory level, the amount, focus and scope of reference to wellbeing in policy-related documents, in both state education and Catholic education, varied considerably.

Wellbeing strategic frameworks in education that stand out as ‘lighthouse documents’ were identified in three states: two related to learning in Government education (Queensland, South Australia) and one Catholic education wellbeing strategy (CEOM, Victoria). Sectors (other than education) that have developed frameworks relevant to wellbeing at national and/or state levels relatively recently are health, early childhood, and child protection. The state of Victoria stands out as having the broadest range of wellbeing documentation in the sectors of health, state government and Catholic education.
Phase 1: Policy Analysis

Four domains for implementing approaches to wellbeing were evident in policy:

- systems and structures
- relationships
- teaching and learning
- environment

These domains are not exclusive and there are clearly areas of overlap.

Systems and structures - outlining protocols and procedures related to issues such as students’ safety, care and protection, and mental health.

Relationships - in which the three dimensions of recognition theory - cared for, respected and valued were most evident.

Teaching and Learning – which primarily includes pedagogy, curriculum and the provision of information.

Environment - including the school culture and ethos, as well as physical aspects of the school environment.

Some documentation, most notably that which advocated a whole school approach to wellbeing, incorporated reference to all four domains of implementation. This accounted for only 15 documents out of the 80 analysed and included half of the national educational documents. Systems and structures are the most identified domain. However, an emphasis on relationships can potentially be embedded within all the domains.
Pastoral Care

In Catholic Education documents, wellbeing is commonly cited in research and policy as the positive outcome of effective pastoral care:

- "Pastoral care…means being concerned for the total wellbeing of students, and with the development of the whole person" (Catholic Education Commission NSW, 2003).

- “Pastoral care refers to action taken…to promote and enhance student wellbeing of a personal, social, physical, emotional, mental or spiritual nature” (CEOM, Policy 2.26)
Teachers understood wellbeing as being a multidimensional concept:

“I guess looking at the dimension of the whole person … I think that phrase, putting all those words together – spiritual, moral, social and emotional – can get bandied about a bit and I think it’s really important to take a good, honest look at it and say “Well what do we actually mean and how do we actually do this.”

“My understanding of “wellbeing” is a very holistic sense, I believe in our spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual development as human beings and I feel that “wellbeing” is a permeating culture that we should have at the school.”

Teachers understood wellbeing as being a multidimensional concept, however as the interview progressed they tended to focus on dimensions of relationships.
In the focus groups, the children suggested a range of ideas about what wellbeing means and discussed a range of concepts contributing to the notion of ‘wellbeing.’ Most common were ideas about happiness and being happy.

However, the complexity of wellbeing emerged. For example, for every definition or idea offered by students about wellbeing, an inconsistency or contradiction was almost as readily identified. For instance, defining wellbeing as happiness, whilst initially met with agreement and positive affirmation, would often be subject to a deeper inquiry about whether wellbeing could not exist at times of unhappiness. As one student commented, you could be “sad happy” (A28B) and still have wellbeing.
Overall, the students suggested a range of concepts relating to wellbeing.

These centred around three domains:
The ideas and concepts generated in the focus group discussions and staff interviews informed the questions for the online survey.

Participants were given the following instructions: “Wellbeing can mean different things to different people. Choose 2 things from the list that best describe what wellbeing means to you. Type ‘1’ next to the answer you think is best and ‘2’ next to the answer you think is second best.”

There were 10 wellbeing concepts listed in counterbalanced order for primary students and staff, and 12 concepts listed for secondary students.
Differences in how participants conceptualised wellbeing were reflected later in responses to other questions. These will be explored further in upcoming slides.

Some Points for Reflection

• Why do you think the students conceptualised wellbeing as predominantly relating to happiness and safety, whilst the greatest proportion of staff linked wellbeing most closely to being connected to others?

NB: Differences in how students and staff conceptualised wellbeing were reflected again in later responses.

Key differences between:
• Staff who conceptualised wellbeing as success at school or mental health compared to connection to people/place.
• Secondary students who connected wellbeing to privacy compared to the rest of the student participants.
2) Importance of Relationships
In the focus groups the students reflected on what they felt helps and hinders their wellbeing at school:

**Things that help include:**
- when you have friends to play with and who help and understand you
- when teachers are friendly and caring and help you to do your best
- when schools is safe, and when people support you to learn fun things
- when parents and family make you feel cared for and teach you new skills

**Things that hinder wellbeing include:**
- when friends pressure you or tease you
- when teachers yell at you or say negative things
- when people at school do not listen to you, school has unfair rules and bullying happens
- when parents and family do not allow you to make your own mistakes
Wellbeing is Grounded in Relationships

The importance of relationships emerged particularly strongly in the student focus groups and staff interviews.

Students described their needs and desires to be known:

- to be “noticed”
- “visible”
- “everybody knowing you”
- “everybody knowing you are there”
- “people not forgetting about you”

Relationships with self, their school, significant people inside school, and significant people and institutions outside school emerge as particularly important in helping or hindering students’ wellbeing.

Relationships within school include those with teachers, friends, peers, the principal and school counsellors.

Features of these relationships that support student wellbeing were identified as: caring, support and encouragement, talking, fun, being kind, setting good examples, guidance, constancy and protection.

Features of relationships in school that hinder student wellbeing include: breach of trust, being yelled at, not being listened to, not being respected, being treated unfairly, receiving poor advice, being judged and criticised unfairly, being bullied and teased, and not being supported.
Teachers described working hard to build rapport and develop effective relationships, through ‘attentive noticing’ e.g.

- asking questions
- paying attention
- observing changes or events
- waving at students when driving past
- listening carefully
- knowing / saying students’ names
Conversation

• Students identified conversation as foundational to their wellbeing at school

• Students did not just want ‘one-off’ conversations with teachers but opportunities and time for conversation.

• They wanted conversation to be based in relationships:

  “They’re there so you can trust them and talk to them about things”

  “I go to her because I know she won’t go and tell other teachers”

  “They connect with you”

  “You can just have a normal conversation with them, which I think is important.”
The Reality of Relationships

“Do you know what I really think the biggest thing is? I think it's people stopping, taking a moment and listening ... I think that's a big thing to start off with; actually listening and I don't mean as in "hearing" – really listening to what they've said and being able to comment.”

“I certainly feel that with my workload that one of my frustrations is that there are so many pressures and so little time to do what needs to be done that it makes it difficult to build the sort of relationships that are positive with students. We do the best we can and sometimes that can be very frustrating as a teacher – that you want to do more but you can’t.”
In the Phase 3 survey, students identified relationships with parents and family as the most important relationship for wellbeing.

Parents and family were perceived to help wellbeing through meeting students’ essential needs (for food, shelter etc.), as well as through their love, encouragement, making students feel special by knowing them well, listening to them, being there for them, teaching them and providing skills.

However, parents and family could also hinder wellbeing by comparing students to their siblings, having too high expectations, being overprotective, and having too much influence on student values.

It is notable that students valued relationships with close friends and with other students above any relationships with teachers or other adults at school.
Staff believed relationships between students and teachers to be most important to student wellbeing at school. Whilst they did indicate the importance of students’ friends, the relationship between students and the wider student body was perceived to be much less important.

(You might like to move back and forth between this and the previous slide to compare the points of difference.) Key points of different are highlighted in the following slide.
Interesting Points of Difference

- Staff rated relationships between teachers and students above students’ relationships with their parents and friends.
- Students rated relationships with other peers (not close friends) over any relationships with staff.
- Staff rated the importance of relationships between adults (teachers and other teachers, parents and teachers, teachers and principals) as more important than students’ own relationships with their peers, the principals, and non-teaching staff.
Individuals placed different emphases on the importance of relationships. This was dependent upon their beliefs about wellbeing.

**Staff**
- Wellbeing = academic success or physical and mental health → less importance on relationships.
- Wellbeing = emotions, spirituality, connection with people / place → more importance on relationships.

**Students**
- Wellbeing = ‘having privacy’ → less importance on relationships between students and home group/pastoral care teacher
- Wellbeing = ‘being safe’, ‘being respected’, ‘helping others’, or ‘having a great environment’ → more importance on this relationship

Staff who conceptualised wellbeing as academic success or physical / mental health placed less importance on relationships. Those who conceptualised wellbeing as relating to emotions, spirituality connection with people or place placed greater emphasis on the importance of relationships for student wellbeing.

Students who conceptualised wellbeing primarily as having privacy placed less importance on relationships with teachers than the rest of the student body who conceptualised wellbeing as being safe, being respected, helping others or having a great environment.
Some Points for Reflection

- Students placed the upmost importance on family relationships for their wellbeing at school, what are the implications of this for teachers and other school staff?

- Why do you think staff did not emphasise the importance of peers for students’ wellbeing?

- What opportunities exist for students to build relationships with their wider peer group including other age cohorts?

- What opportunities are offered at your school for home group / pastoral care teachers and students to engage in conversation and develop trusting relationships?

- Do you think students and teachers hold different conceptualisations of the roles of school counsellors? What implications might this have?
3) Recognition
In making the case for why recognition should be distinguished rather than leaving it as an implicit educational concern, Bingham (2001, p. 9) argues “human beings need something from one another when they come to places like schools”.

Hence, relationships are central to recognition, with acts of recognition and misrecognition, as well as struggles over recognition, occurring in relational spaces. Conversation, identified in the Phase 2 data as a key feature of authentic relationship, provides an important space in which recognition occurs and struggles over recognition take place.

Students and teachers strongly endorsed the dimensions of recognition (being cared for, respected and valued) as important for student wellbeing.
Students described acts of misrecognition and how this left them feeling.

The idea of struggle is integral to the act of recognition. These points of struggle over recognition can fundamentally challenge prevalent school cultures, personal beliefs or values, and historic teacher-student hierarchies but by exploring these struggles, we can begin to understand what full recognition would look like.

Feelings like shame, humiliation, anger and indignation are recognised by Honneth as important for telling us where the implicit rules of recognition have been violated.
Teachers and principals named or alluded to the conditions in which misrecognition or non-recognition of students was possible, or even likely – the space between the aspirational (what they believed should happen in relation to supporting and enhancing student wellbeing) and the actual (what actually happens). However, direct discussion of misrecognition and non-recognition of students was largely absent from the teacher data. When it was addressed, it was primarily regarding systemic conditions related to systems and structures or the school environment, or in relation to teacher’s personal issues or personality, and expectations and pressure from parents.

Opportunities for recognition, misrecognition and non-recognition lie in the conversational spaces, talking, listening and hearing, which are fundamental to relationships and a vehicle for recognition.

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Being respected led to students feeling:

- Empowered
- Strong
- Like they belonged in the school community.

Not being respected left them feeling:

- Lacking in agency or independence
- A sense of loneliness and disconnection

For many students, the most tangible example of not being respected was being yelled at by teachers.
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Students were best able to describe being valued as a set of actions, for example:

- when teachers notice the abilities and gifts of students and support them to offer these to the school community
- when students have opportunities to be listened to and heard.

Students did not feel valued at school when teachers:

- didn’t know them
- spoke to them in a degrading way
- focused on the abilities of only those who excel.

Students described the experience of not being valued in the strongest terms - with links to depression.
A key aspect of recognition for students was the opportunity to have more of a say at school.

Students were keen to emphasise that a significant aspect of ‘having a say’ for wellbeing was that their views were not just heard but also taken into account.

Interestingly, secondary students rated ‘who I sit near’ as the most important aspect of having a say, while staff rated this as least important. This suggests that staff may undervalue the importance of secondary students’ friendships at school for their wellbeing. Results also imply that having a say about personal preferences and needs, and not just public or political aspects of school life, is important for student wellbeing.
Students and staff who acknowledged the importance of relationships for student wellbeing also acknowledged the role of recognition in promoting student wellbeing.

Although most staff were conscious of the reciprocity of recognition those who conceptualised wellbeing as academic success had the lowest awareness of the importance of recognition for student wellbeing. Although it should be noted that students who conceptualised wellbeing as ‘having privacy’ relied least on recognition for wellbeing.

Principals and teachers in all three regions identified distinct connections between student and teacher wellbeing. Teachers described how their wellbeing was impacted by student wellbeing and conversely how teacher wellbeing affected students.

Teachers and principals emphasised the importance of attending to and supporting teachers’ wellbeing in order for them to be effective in their teaching roles and supportive of student wellbeing. Means of supporting teacher wellbeing included: collegial support; support and appreciation from leadership; mentoring; health based activities; social (out of school) activities; and resources such as specific programs and accessible counselling for staff.

The vast majority of teachers identified lack of time and resources, overloading and additional role and work requirements as hindering them in relation to their own and students’ wellbeing.
Some Points for Reflection

- What opportunities are offered for students at your school to have a say? Do these include informal opportunities within relationships? Do these include opportunities to exert personal preferences, as well as to influence systems and structures, the school environment and teaching and learning?

- How can we be sure students elected to school councils are representative of the student body and that council members feedback / listen to the concerns of their peers? What opportunities could you offer for all students to have a voice?

- What could be done at your school to increase a culture of inclusion and respect for all students and staff? What structural / timetabling changes may need to be made? Are these feasible in the busy everyday life of your school?
Implications for Schools
While the findings highlight that recognition and misrecognition play a key role in relation to wellbeing, the links should not be oversimplified. Routinely dispensing care and attention, for example, is not sufficient to meet the requirements for being *cared for*. What is implied theoretically is the need for a positive emotional investment in the wellbeing of the other person.
These messages link to the National Professional Standards. Especially:

**Professional Knowledge**
1. Know students and how they learn (Points 1.1 – 1.6)

**Professional Practice**
3.5 Use effective classroom communication
3.7 Engage parents / carers in the educative process
4.1 Support student participation
4.4 Maintain student safety
5.2 Provide feedback to students on their learning

**Professional Engagement**
As part of professional engagement can you engage further with the standards? Are there other standards you feel also rely upon relationships and recognition? How will today’s discussions lead to change at your school?
The findings of this study suggest that there can never be a ‘one-size fits all’ approach to improving wellbeing.

Recognition theory points to the importance of recognising the individual (who is cared for, respected and valued) in their own right, as well as being a member of a social group.

Can you work towards facilitating the experience of genuinely being cared for, respected (with opportunities for having a say and having privacy), and valued (via contributions that are routinely and authentically validated)...

... for all members of the school community (including staff and parents)?
References in Presentation

References in Presentation

Good Luck

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