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Wellbeing, recognition and participation:

the challenge for schools

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Centre for Children
and Young People

The Centre
for Children and Young People's Participation
promoting and researching participation, inclusion and empowerment

research, education & advocacy

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

An Australian Research Council Linkage Project

Research Team and Partners

- **SCU Research Team** – Anne Graham, Robyn Fitzgerald, Nigel Thomas, Mary Ann Powell, Nadine White, Donnah Anderson, Catharine Simmons, Allison Moss, Donna Shipway

- **Project Partners** – Lismore CSO, Good Grief Ltd, Interrelate

- **Catholic School Regions** – in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria

- **Wellbeing Advisory Group (WAG)** - Children and young people, teachers and principals, project partners

wellbeing
in schools

Project Aims

1 • Develop a detailed understanding of how 'wellbeing' in schools is currently understood by students, teachers and educational policy makers.

2 • Investigate the potential of recognition theory for advancing understanding and improvements in relation to student wellbeing.

3 • Generate new knowledge about how educational policy, programs and practices in schools could more positively impact on student wellbeing.

wellbeing
in schools

Project Phases

Phase 1 – Analysis of key relevant local, state and federal **policy** regarding wellbeing

Phase 2 – Interviews with teachers and principals (n=89); **focus groups** with primary and secondary students (n=606)

Phase 3 – Online survey with primary (n=3906) and secondary students (n=5362) and staff (n=707) across three Catholic school regions

Phase 4 – Analysis and presentation of findings, **professional development** for schools

Why is wellbeing at school important?

- 'Children's wellbeing is a continuing matter of national concern…with schools widely considered to be the logical – if not the only – common, assured delivery point for wellbeing initiatives' (ASPA, 2008).

- 'Wellbeing lacks definition, both as a concept and in practice… there is little or no consensus about what it really means or looks like and therefore to produce and reproduce it, and to know that it is there, proves highly difficult except in the most general of terms' (Dinham, 2006, p.3).

Why recognition theory?

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

Recognition is 'the act of acknowledging others, and coming to be acknowledged by others' (Bingham 2003: 3).

'Mutual respect for both the particularity and the equality of all other persons' (Honneth 2007: 130).

'Intersubjective recognition depends on the highly relational nature of humans, who are located in local communities of culturally shared identities and interests' (Watson *et al.* 2012: 94).

Axel Honneth: the struggle for recognition

Based on the idea (Hegel, Mead) that we define and construct ourselves in relation to 'the other'.

Distinguishes three modes of intersubjective recognition in modern societies:

- **Love** – intimate relationships in which the sense of self develops
- **Rights** – mutual respect as persons under law
- **Solidarity** – reciprocal esteem for contribution to shared values

Social progress seen as the extension of recognition to **wider** groups in **deeper** ways. Driven by struggles, which are motivated by experiences of **mis**recognition.

(Honneth 1995; see also Thomas 2012)

The structure of relations of recognition (Honneth 1995)

Mode of recognition	Emotional support	Cognitive respect	Social esteem
Dimension of personality	needs and emotions	moral responsibility	traits and abilities
Forms of recognition	primary relationships (love, friendship)	legal relations (rights)	community of value (solidarity)
Practical relation-to-self	basic self-confidence	self-respect	self-esteem
Forms of disrespect	abuse and rape	denial of rights, exclusion	denigration, insult
Threatened component of personality	physical integrity	social integrity	'honour', dignity

Methods used in Phase 2

- Interviews and focus groups in 17 schools across three regions, selected to provide a breadth of insights from both primary and secondary schools with a diverse range of sizes, socioeconomic and cultural characteristics.

- Semi-structured interviews with 89 staff (71 teachers, 18 principals).

- Focus groups with 606 students in Years 1-2 (age 6-8), Year 5-6 (10-12), Year 8 (13-14), Year 11 (16-17); 4 groups x 10 students in each school (some variation). Discussions lasted about 30 minutes for Year 1-2, 60 minutes for the rest.

Interviews with teachers and principals

Sought their perspectives on: how they would describe or define 'wellbeing'; how far policy shaped their understanding and approach; how 'wellbeing' was facilitated and supported in their schools; impact of leadership on wellbeing in schools; relationship between teacher and student wellbeing; how the concept of 'recognition' was perceived in relation to wellbeing.

Focus groups with students

Took a 'brainstorming' approach, with open-ended questions, and followed this sequence:

1. students' individual definitions of wellbeing;

2. who in their lives they saw as affecting their wellbeing;

3. what it felt like to be cared for, respected and valued (link to recognition theory);

4. their imagining of an ideal school that supported their wellbeing.

Translating Honneth's concepts in the field

Love = CARED FOR

'Being **cared for** is about how we are there for each other. When we are cared for we know and trust someone enough to ask them for help.'

Rights = RESPECTED

'Being **respected** is about the way we treat each other. For example, it means that we all should respect each other's rights to be listened to and treated fairly.'

Solidarity = VALUED

'Being **valued** is about our contributions being noticed by people important to us. When we are valued we feel encouraged to work together to make things better.'

Snapshot of Phase 2 findings

1) Concepts of wellbeing

2) What helps and hinders wellbeing

3) Recognition and wellbeing

4) 'Having a say' and wellbeing

1) Concepts of wellbeing

What is wellbeing?

In focus groups, students identified the word wellbeing as both familiar and strange. They had heard the word used many times, in particular at school, but found it difficult to define:

How you….I know what I am thinking but I don't know how to explain it.

That's actually a really hard question!

Students also discussed the ambiguous nature of wellbeing: you could be "sad and happy" and still have wellbeing.

Primary students suggested a range of concepts relating to wellbeing. These centred around:

Being
- Physical
- Healthy
- Happy
- Loved
- Safe

Having
- A say
- Support
- Friends
- Fairness

Doing
- Making good decisions
- Helping others
- Laughing
- Faith
- Playing

Secondary students expanded on the ideas of the primary students, adding:

Being
- Trusted
- Free and safe
- Connected
- Hopeful
- Energetic
- Visible
- Courageous

Having
- Positive relationships
- Enough sleep
- Fun
- Equality
- Privacy
- Justice
- Rights respected
- Morals
- Your views taken into account
- Responsibility

Doing
- Looking after yourself
- Being nice
- Saying yes to challenges
- Accepting yourself
- Keeping a positive outlook
- Being good

For **teachers and principals**, wellbeing was multidimensional:

Multidimensional and…

Multi-dimensional

Dependent on Relationships

Embedded in Culture

Exemplified in Pastoral Care

Dependent on Teacher Wellbeing

Impacted on by Pedagogy

Supplemented by Wellbeing Programs

Supported by Counsellors

Enhanced by Parent Partnership

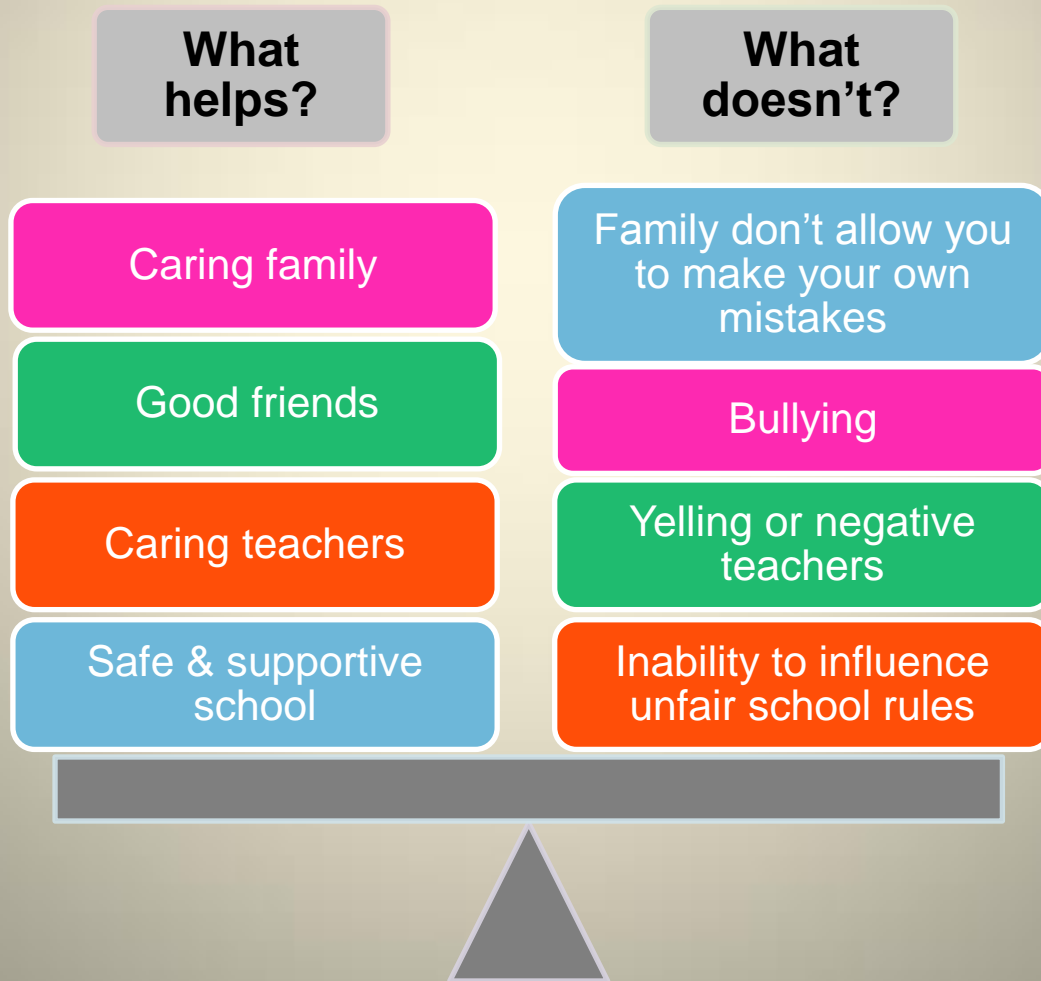Dependent on Leadership

Situated in a Confused Policy Environment
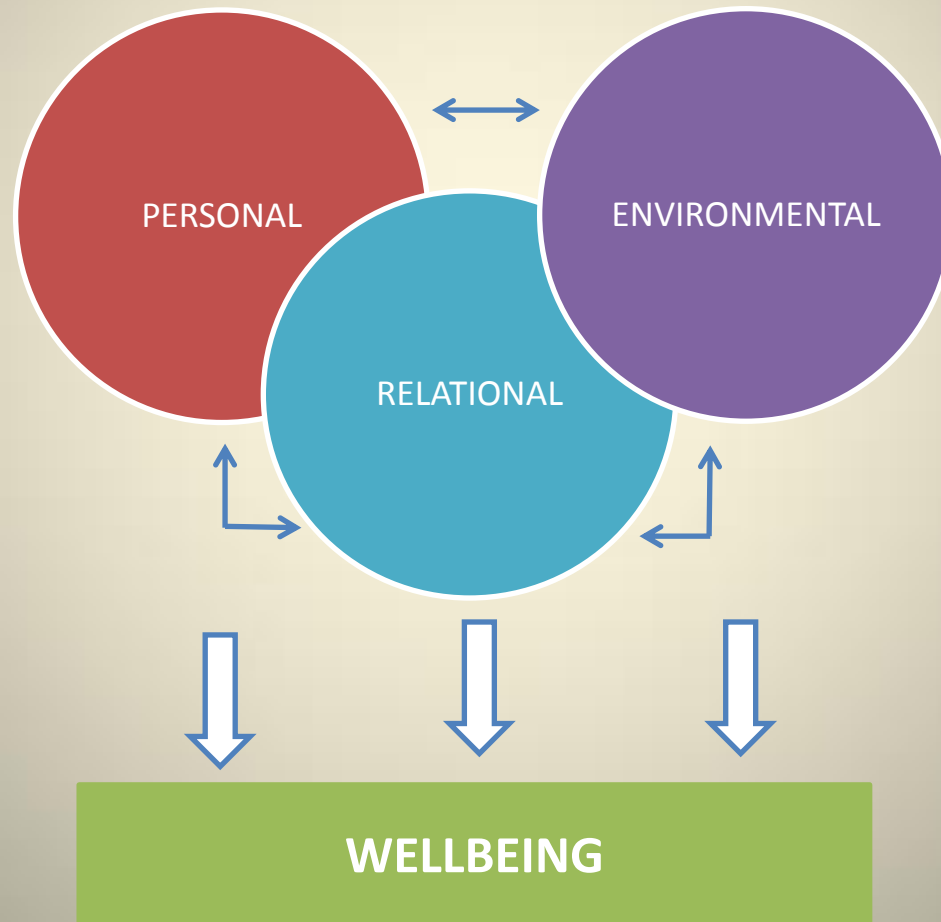
2) What helps and hinders wellbeing

What influences student wellbeing?

In focus groups, students reflected on what they felt helped and hindered their wellbeing at school:

What helps?	What doesn't?
Caring family	Family don't allow you to make your own mistakes
Good friends	Bullying
Caring teachers	Yelling or negative teachers
Safe & supportive school	Inability to influence unfair school rules

Everyday relationships with teachers

Relationships with teachers and the influence of teachers were perceived to be critical to student wellbeing.

Schooling takes up like 90% of your life kind of thing – you're there the majority of the time so you're surrounded by the teachers so they need to have a good influence on you.

Six key themes emerged for how teachers help student wellbeing:

1) Caring for students

One of my teachers sat down with me when I was crying one time and basically helped me, listened to me, gave me advice.

In religion, you have a little book. You write little comments. You pass all your books around and someone writes something nice about you. It is lovely.

2) Supporting and encouraging students

And they can help you be realistic about what you personally can achieve – especially since you're in senior years now, it's like "Oh", they might pull you back if you're not doing so well and say "look maybe that's not reachable" but in a nice way.

3) Being someone to talk to

4) Treating students as individuals

5) Mentoring students

They can give you tips on how to make friends – if you have a good crack at that and it doesn't work, they can do it again.

They teach you how to respect others...to control our tempers

They help you shine your light.

6) Teaching well

Students also identified a range of actions by teachers that hindered their wellbeing:

- Not listening to explanations / making assumptions
- Yelling at students
- Treating students unequally
- Not respecting students – conditional respect or lack of respect for ethnic / family background
- Style / Emotional delivery of negative feedback
- Approach to the enforcement of school rules – for example, correct wearing of school uniform rather than focussing on teaching
- Not 'liking' students
- Lack of creative teaching

In staff interviews, the importance of relationships also emerged

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 and feel like they as individuals have contributed in some way to the classroom, building that relationship.

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.

3) Recognition and wellbeing

Connecting wellbeing to recognition

In focus groups, students independently mentioned many aspects of the three modes of recognition, before they were introduced to the concepts. When the concepts were introduced there was an immediate resonance. Students said that they felt:

loved, *safe*, *great*, *happy*, *wanted*, *good inside*, *part of something*, *brave*, *confident*, *special*

…when they were **cared for**.

tough, **equal**, **important**, **useful**, **beautiful**, **understood**, **awesome**, **loved**

…when they were **respected**.

self-confident, **accepted**, **smart**, **included**, **special**, **important**, **joyful**, **kindness**, **powerful**, **wanted**, **purposeful**, **like they belong**

…when they were **valued**.

Cared for at school

Students feel **cared for** at school when:

- Teachers know them
- Teachers support them with their school work
- Schools place a priority on caring for students
- They feel part of a community
- Schools provide rules and boundaries

Students feel uncared for at school when:

- They are not noticed or acknowledged
- Schools focus unequally on students
- Schools exclude students or see them as replaceable

Respected at school

Students feel respected at school when:

- They are listened to
- They are given a say
- Treated equally, but not the same

Students feel disrespect at school when:

- Schools do not respect or value students' opinions
- Teachers yell or insult students
- Teachers do not use diverse methods and approaches to teaching

Valued at school

Students feel **valued** at school when:

- Teachers notice their abilities and gifts and support students to offer them to the school community
- Teachers put in extra effort for students
- They have opportunities to be listened to and heard
- Schools adopt a holistic approach to teaching

Students feel not valued at school when:

- Teachers do not know them
- Teachers focus only on the abilities of those who excel
- Teachers speak to students in a degrading way

4) 'Having a say' and wellbeing

'**Having a say**' was a key theme that emerged from the student focus groups. This was particularly important to students from Years 5-6 upwards:

Having a say. Having a say so people actually listen to you.

I think having things forced upon you can make you feel that your decisions don't matter.

We should get more of a say like with the way rules are made it's meant to be that people it affects get a say; but then again when it's just made by teachers or the principal, that doesn't feel like we get a say, and so no one likes it.

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.

Conclusions

- For both students and teachers, wellbeing was centrally about relationships, although the groups differed as to which relationships were important.

- Student-teacher relationships are key to student wellbeing; but in everyday practice they may be eclipsed by curriculum pressure and other concerns, so students attuned to experiences of not being known.

- Students felt more cared for, respected and valued when teachers spent time with them, listened to them, and knew them well, compared to when they were given awards or received a good report.

- Students wanted more opportunities to build relationships with other age cohorts and with adults.

Conclusions

- The categories of recognition resonated with both students and teachers; misrecognition was also clearly described.

- The categories appear helpful in thinking critically and specifically about the nature and content of relationships in the school community.

- Respecting and attending to multiple relationships in children's lives can have positive benefits, especially for children who are marginalised.

- School culture and environment are critically important for wellbeing. For all students to flourish, the culture must be sensitive to differences in personality, gender, ethnic and cultural diversity.

- A recognition lens draws attention not only to positive relationships and conversations, but also to sites of struggle and the negative effects of persistent misrecognition.

Conclusions

- A key implication of this research is the importance of schools developing a culture of inclusion, connection and recognition, with processes and structures that support conversation and reparation. Underpinning this is respect for the dignity and wellbeing of children and young people, and recognition of their agency, status and voice.

'Human beings need something from one another when they come to places like schools.'

(Bingham 2001: 9)

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Watson, D., Emery, C., & Bayliss, P. (2012) *Children's social and emotional wellbeing in schools: A critical perspective*. Bristol: Policy Press.

The new research

- Led by Anne Graham and team at Southern Cross

- Academic partners Sharon Bessell (Australian National University), Judy Cashmore (University of Sydney), Nigel Thomas (UCLan)

- Service partners NSW Advocate for Children and Young People, NSW Department of Education, Catholic Schools Office, Lismore

- Similar mixed methods study – but with two phases of survey

- Aim: 'to strengthen knowledge, policy and practice concerning student **participation** at school by identifying whether and how such participation improves students' social and emotional **wellbeing**' – and whether recognition helps in understanding any such relationship

- Also to produce a tool for measuring participation in schools.

Research Questions

1. How is student participation currently articulated in education policy in Australia?

2. How do students, teachers and principals currently understand and experience participation in NSW schools?

3. To what extent is participation at school associated with student wellbeing and which elements of participation, specifically, are core predictors of student wellbeing?

4. Do Honneth's modes of recognition mediate the relationship between participation and wellbeing?

How did we do it?

Student Participation
Recognising everyone

Phase 1:Policy analysis

- Analysis of local, state and national policies relevant to student participation

Phase 2: Qualitative methods

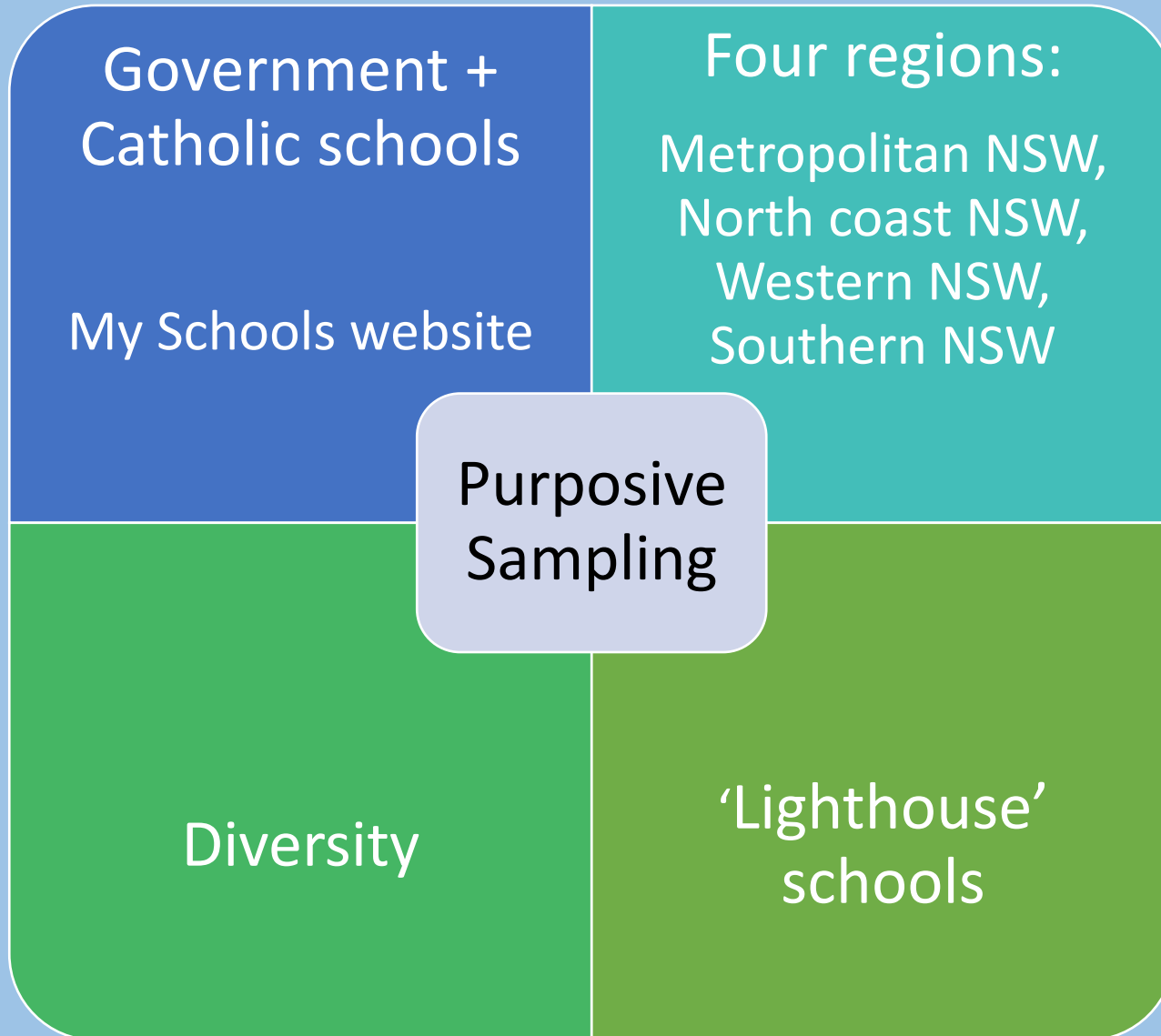- Focus groups with students and interviews with Principals, teachers and policy makers

Phase 3: Quantitative methods

- Online surveys: Scale development; reliability and validity

Phase 4: Quantitative methods

- Online survey with students to investigate the relationship between participation, recognition and wellbeing at school

How did we do it?

Government + Catholic schools

My Schools website

Four regions:

Metropolitan NSW, North coast NSW, Western NSW, Southern NSW

Purposive Sampling

Diversity

'Lighthouse' schools

Student Participation
Recognising everyone

What did we find? Phase 1 Policy Analysis

Stage 1: Mapping of 136 policies

Stage 2: Typology analysis of 53 policies

- Meaningful; Partial; Superficial; Articulated but not developed; Students not the focus

Stage 3: Discursive analysis of 16 'meaningful' policies

- Lack of clarity re operationalisation of participation; ad hoc, imprecise definitions
- Lack of coordination between policy documents (between levels of government and within departments) a barrier to realising children and young people's rights to participation

What did we find? Phase Focus groups and interviews

How is participation understood and experienced at school?

Focus groups Year 7-10 students (177 from 10 schools)

Interviews with teachers (23), principals (9) and policy makers (9)

Having voice	Having influence	Having choice	Working together

What did we find? Phase 3: Developing the survey

Student Participation
Recognising everyone

Scale development

Phase 1 and 2 findings	Expert advice + Project Advisory Group	Empirical tests EFA & CFA – two waves Year 7-10 students (n = 253; n= 283)

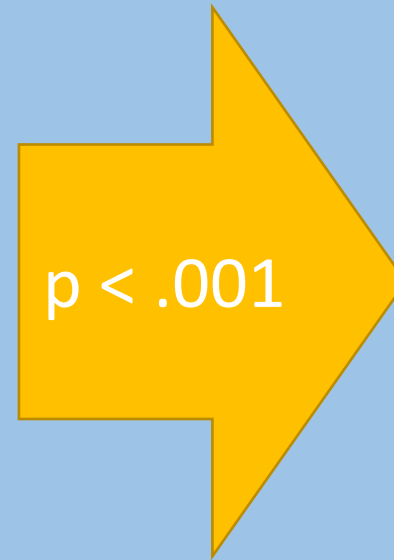| Voice about schooling	Voice about activities	Having choice	Having Influence	Having a say with influential people	Working together

Six elements of participation: 40 separate items

What did we find? Phase 4: Carrying out the survey

- Online survey: N = 1,435 Year 7-10 students
- Key findings
  - Working together (β = .27, SE = .27)
  - Having influence (β = .18, SE = .27)
  - Having choice (β = .17, SE = .20)
  - Having a say with influential people (β = .10, SE = .21)

p < .001 → Wellbeing 48.6%

Voice about schooling (β = .06, SE = .22, p = .07) NOT Significant
Voice about activities (β = -.04, SE = .20, p = .21) NOT Significant

Which elements of participation are most important for wellbeing?

The element of participation most strongly connected with student wellbeing at school was:

- **Working together** – with other students and with teachers

This was followed by:

- **Having influence**

- **Having choice**

- **Having a say with influential people**

- **Having a voice** did not significantly link with wellbeing after the other elements were taken into account.

What is the mechanism?
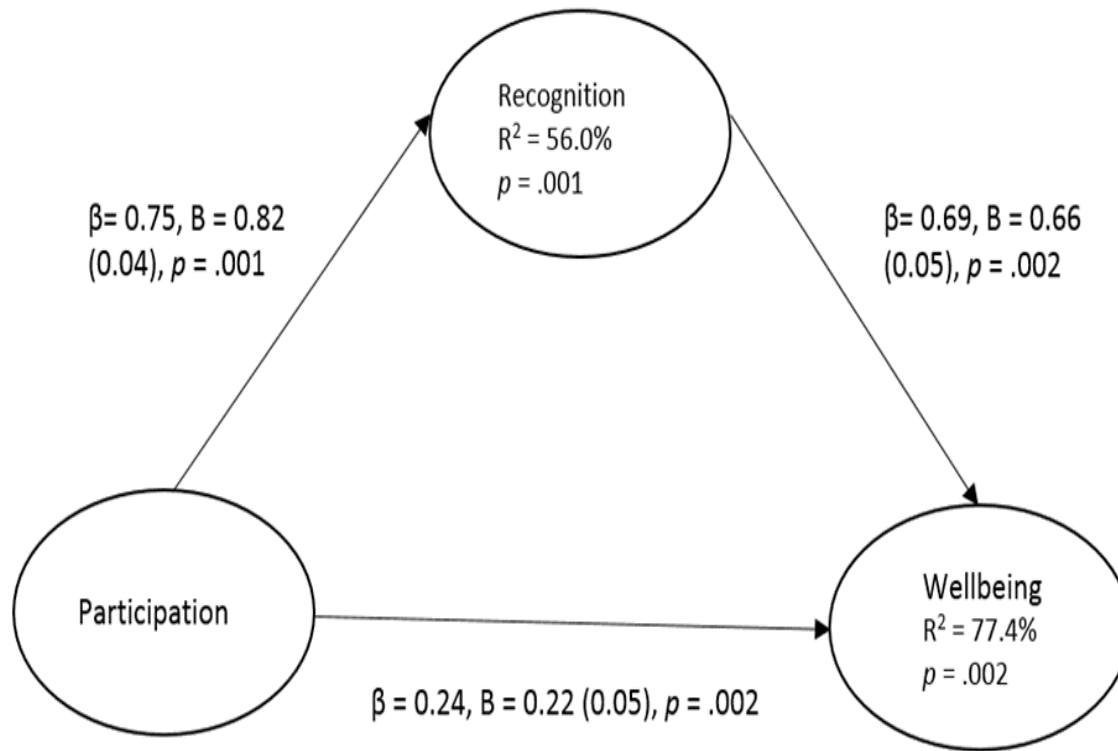

Student Participation
Recognising everyone

What is the connection between participation and wellbeing? What part if any does *recognition* play?

1. Students who experienced more opportunities for meaningful participation also received more recognition from others and gave more recognition to others.

2. Students who experienced more recognition also reported greater wellbeing.

3. There was also a **direct** link between participation and wellbeing.

These results were the same regardless of gender, cultural background, disability, and year group.
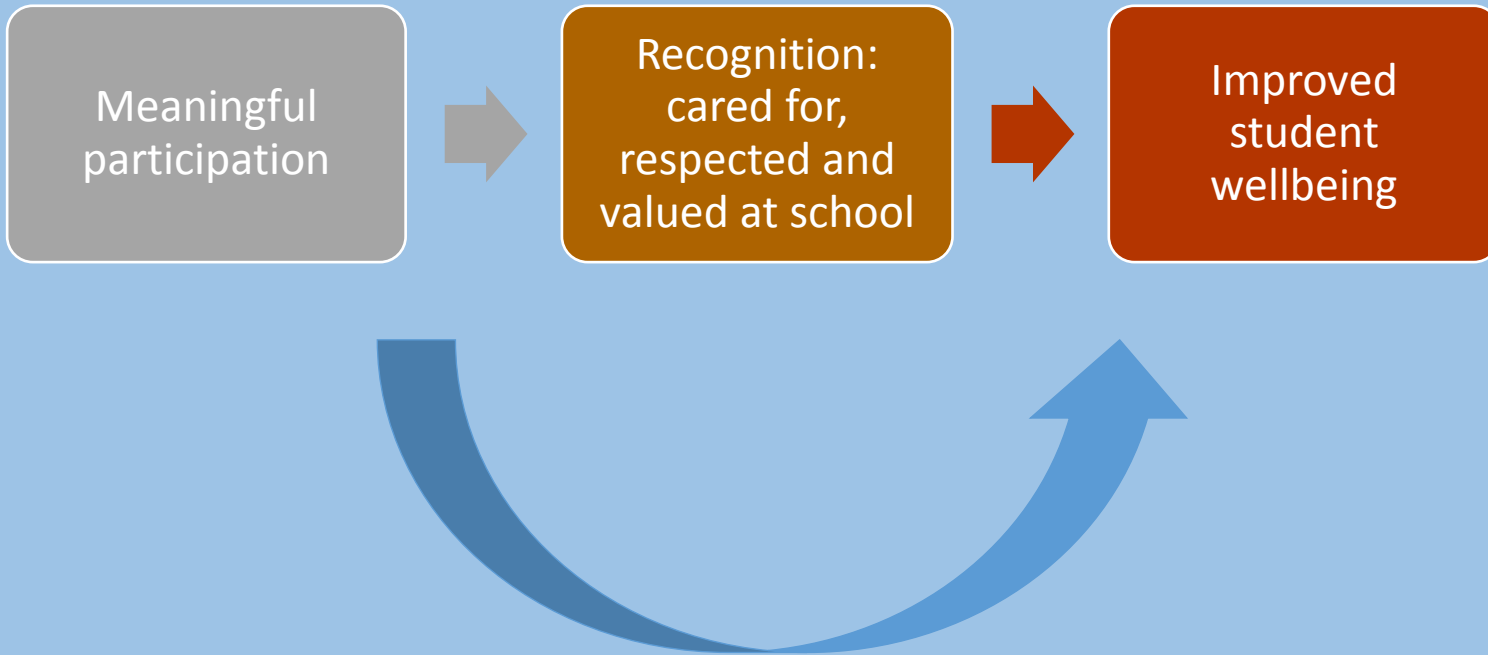
Adding a mediator…

Recognition
$R^2 = 56.0\%$
$p = .001$

$\beta = 0.75$, B = 0.82
(0.04), $p = .001$

$\beta = 0.69$, B = 0.66
(0.05), $p = .002$

Participation

Wellbeing
$R^2 = 77.4\%$
$p = .002$

$\beta = 0.24$, B = 0.22 (0.05), $p = .002$

Model fit statistics:
χ^2 (123, N = 1427) = 521.57, $p < .001$
GFI = .959, CFI = .976, RMSEA = .048,
SRMR = .028

Student Participation
Recognising everyone

Practical implications for schools

- Effective participation has a payoff in enhanced wellbeing

- This is in large measure due to improved relationships of recognition

- Mere voice is not enough – real choice, real influence and above all working together count for much more

- A challenge to instrumental approaches to education: 'Human beings need something from one another when they come to places like schools' (Bingham, 2001)

- *Summary for Schools*

- *Good Practice Guide for Schools*

- *Student Participation Scale (SPS) and Manual*

Further reading

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Summary of survey questions

Recognition

Recognition was measured using six items created for the purposes of this research:

- I feel very cared for by other people at my school
- I am very caring toward everyone that I have contact with at my school
- I feel very respected by other people at my school
- I show respect to everyone that I have contact with at my school
- I feel my contributions are valued by other people at my school
- I value other people's contributions at my school very much

Wellbeing

Wellbeing was measured using eight items:

- Most days being at school makes me feel happy
- When I'm at school I feel very satisfied with my life
- When I'm at school I feel very safe from bullying
- When I'm at school my mental health and wellbeing is great
- When I'm at school I feel a strong sense of purpose in my life
- I feel strongly connected to lots of people at my school
- I feel strongly connected to my school as a place
- I feel like I really belong at my school

Elements of Participation:

The six elements of participation that were identified in Phase 3 of the research project were measured using 40 items as follows:

Element 1: Influence

Most of the time in the classroom…
- My opinion is considered by teachers
- My opinion is listened to by teachers
- My opinion makes a difference and things change
- The teachers tell me how my opinion was used

Most of the time in school activities, such as sporting teams, clubs, excursions, camps, fundraising and socials…
- The teachers tell me how my opinion was used

At my school…
- Staff take students opinions seriously
- Staff take notice of what students say to them

Element 2: Voice about schooling

At school, I usually get to say what I think about...

- How my work is assessed
- Classroom rules
- Homework
- How I am taught
- What I learn
- How students are disciplined
- How the classroom space is organised
- What happens in home rooms or roll call groups
- How the school supports students

Element 3: Choice

At my school I usually get a lot of choice about...

- The type of school activities I do (such as sports, camps, socials, plays)
- How I present my school work (e.g., as an essay or poster)
- Who I sit near
- How much I get involved in school activities (such as sports, camps, socials, plays)
- How I look

Element 4: Voice about activities

In school activities, such as sporting teams, clubs, excursions, camps, fundraising and socials, I usually get to say what I think about…

- Which activities are offered

- How often the activities happen

- How the activities are organised

Element 5: Working together

At my school...

- Students work with teachers outside of class time to make things happen at school
- Students work together outside of class time to get things changed at school
- Students usually make decisions with teachers in meetings
- Students work with teachers to find a positive way forward

In school activities such as sporting teams, clubs, excursions, camps, fundraising and socials...

- Students sometimes contribute to the wider community (businesses, organisations, other schools etc.)
- My classmates and I often make decisions together
- My teachers and I often make decisions together

In the classroom...

- My classmates and I often make decisions together about our learning

Element 6: Having a say with peo[ple] have influence at school

Student Participation
Recognising everyone

At school, I get the chance to say what I think...

- To the Deputy
- To the Principal
- To the SRC and/or student leaders
- In Year group or house meetings
- To my teachers outside of class time (such as in the playground, or in the teacher's office)

At my school...

- My views inform the work of the SRC or school leaders
- The Principal or Deputy takes notice of what I say

Validation

Seven individual items from previous literature were included to check for convergent validity with the new measure of participation. These items were:

Overall at my school…

- I feel like I have a say about what happens to me (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006)

- Adults listen to the students (Appleton et al., 2006)

- Students take part in making the rules (de Roiste, Kelly, Molcho, Aoife, Nic Gabhainn, 2012)

- I am encouraged to express my views in my classes (de Roiste et al., 2012)

- Students get involved in organising school events (de Roiste et al., 2012)

- Students mostly do group work (Covell, 2010)

- Students decide what to work on (Covell, 2010)

Validation

- Engagement with school was measured using a pre-existing validated scale by Fredericks, Blumenfeld, Friedel and Paris (2005).

- This scale was added to provide an assessment of convergent validity of the participation scale, as improved engagement with school is often cited as one of the potential outcomes of increased participation.