



Special Issue on Fostering Positive Mental Health in Australian Schools: Perspectives from the Field

Introduction to the Special Issue

Special Issue Editor: Jane Kirkham, Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA)

It is my pleasure to introduce you to this special issue of *Education Research and Perspectives* that focusses on the perspectives of school practitioners about mental health promotion within Western Australian schools. At a time when school leaders and teachers are at the forefront of the youth mental health crisis it is vital that they are both encouraged

and supported to integrate evidence-informed wellbeing approaches and practices in their everyday work. As experienced teachers within the Western Australian independent and public school sectors, each of the authors contributing to this special issue have furthered their knowledge and skills by successfully completing an MEd in Education with a specialism in mental health and wellbeing at the University of Western Australia. Based upon final dissertations, their views on salient topics in wellbeing relevant to their current professional practice are presented in a series of articles that incorporate recommendations for their peers. A further article within the set was written by me as an Educational and Developmental Psychologist working to support a group of school staff from independent schools in developing a whole-school approach to wellbeing. As such, each of the articles represent voices from the field on topics of importance to teachers that highlight practical suggestions for effective practices in schools.

The series of seven articles by teachers in this special issue fall loosely into two groups. Four explore ways to improve school community wellbeing, while the remaining three articles focus on practices aimed at addressing the needs of students whose wellbeing may be at-risk. Finally, my article presents a method of capturing and structuring wellbeing practices within a school. Starting with the first group, the article by Angela Hurley (Wellbeing Coordinator at Guildford Grammar School), provides a thorough examination of a key component of wellbeing in schools, that is sense of belonging. Considering the association between feeling connected in the school environment with learning engagement, motivation, academic achievement, and optimal wellbeing, the clear and detailed explanation of belonging by Angela provides meaning and direction to classroom practices. One of the strengths of this article is that it expands upon a review of the literature with evidence-informed strategies to enhance sense of belonging in the primary classroom presented in a useful format for practising teachers and concluding with six recommendations for schools.

Two articles emphasise the importance of teacher attitudes about mental health and wellbeing as critical to the success of school-based initiatives, although in different ways. Eloise Griffin, a teacher at Aubin Grove Primary School, cogently argues that the success of wellbeing initiatives in schools is impacted by teachers' attitudes towards mental health promotion, often

influenced by an appraisal of their own capacity to support student wellbeing in the school environment. Eloise outlines key barriers and enablers that impact on teachers' practice, highlighting essential contributors to the successful implementation of wellbeing programs and practice, namely staff professional learning, the creation of a positive school climate, and whole-school strength-based approaches suited to each school context. Jarrod Kayler-Thomson also foregrounds the attitudes of teachers in his article that comments on the effectiveness of a wellbeing initiative that has been implemented at Christ Church Grammar School over several years. Jarrod's article represents an interesting inclusion in this special issue as it presents a context-specific wellbeing program based upon the Rites of Passage framework. In his article we hear the voices of staff members on the value of this program for students, but also staff perspectives on factors that have contributed to this success and how the program may be improved in the future. Jarrod's article reminds us of the importance of reviewing how effectively wellbeing initiatives achieve aims set by the school, as well as what is needed for programs to be sustained into the future. Each of the articles by Eloise and Jarrod provide a useful backdrop to the contribution by Joanne Dixon that shifts the emphasis from teachers' attitudes towards mental health initiatives, to how staff wellbeing is critical to student mental health and wellbeing. As a Deputy Principal in a primary school, Joanne is well placed to reflect on the concerning levels of teacher stress and burnout and its impact on staff attrition and retention, as well as on student wellbeing. Her article traces the main causes of teacher stress and, importantly, outlines ways to support teachers utilising conceptual frameworks that place caring for others at the heart of a whole-school approach to wellbeing.

The second group of articles focusses on how to assist students who require some additional support in maintaining their wellbeing at school. Kim Luk from Geraldton Grammar School makes the case that classroom teachers are not well equipped to identify mental health disorders in students, providing an outline of the features of several common childhood disorders. She goes on to underscore the value of evidence-informed social and emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools to assist in skills building for these populations of students, and to contribute towards preventative actions for others at risk of developing these disorders. Like Eloise, Kim also emphasises the importance of teacher professional learning in delivering wellbeing initiatives with integrity, although Kim argues that training in supporting students' mental health should also be prioritised in pre-service teaching programs. Lorrena Duce also writes about the challenges of assisting children with mental health disorders, placing a spotlight on one of the most prevalent disorders, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Employed as the Health and Wellbeing Coordinator at a Western Australian primary school Lorrena outlines the typical features of students with ADHD and the challenges associated with teaching these students in a busy primary school classroom. Her main contribution to this special issue is a detailed description of a range of non-pharmaceutical supportive practices that teachers can put in place irrespective of whether the student is medicated. Importantly, it could be argued that all these practices (such as SEL, executive functioning, and positive behaviour programs), represent useful strategies to enhance both the wellbeing of students diagnosed with ADHD, as well as their peers without this diagnosis. The final article in this group is by the Director of Pastoral Care and Wellbeing in the secondary school at Peter Carnley Anglican Community School, Rebecca Weddikara. In this article Rebecca focusses on a time when students' wellbeing may be more at risk than at other times in their school life, that is when they are making the transition from primary to secondary school. She argues that enhancing a sense of belonging in students and creating a positive

school climate serve as protective factors for students in this transition phase. The article concludes with detailed practical suggestions for schools based on relationship and skills building framed within a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Although appearing as the first article in the special issue, my own article is introduced here last. In this article I pose a way to envisage school wellbeing practices based upon a systems-informed conceptualisation of the complex school environment utilising the analogy of a tree. Referred to as the ‘wellbeing tree’, this organisational tool incorporates the main ideas for wellbeing promotion made by all my co-authors in this special issue, such as sense of belonging, staff professional learning, SEL programs, staff wellbeing, school climate, and a tiered approach to meeting the needs of vulnerable student groups. However, I would argue that one of the main strengths of the wellbeing tree is its capacity to link school priorities and values with wellbeing practices, and to provide structure and clarity to a whole-school approach to wellbeing.

Taken together, the articles in this issue go some way towards bridging the gap between the research community and practitioners who have hands-on experience in schools. Each of the authors translates the research in wellbeing topics to practical recommendations for school staff. As such, this set of articles underscores the importance of involving practitioners in research with the aim of forging stronger links between researchers, school staff and those who support them. In conclusion, I concur with the recent statement by Mathew White, Associate Professor of Education at the University of Adelaide, “For the future growth of wellbeing education research internationally, there needs to be far more interdisciplinary approaches to research and professional practice that identify teacher research-informed decisions and enable students to flourish.” (White, 2024, p. 165). I hope that you find these articles interesting and informative, and I thank Associate Professor Elaine Chapman and my co-authors for their work in bringing this special issue to fruition.

Reference

White, M. (2024). *Integrating wellbeing and learning in schools: Evidence-informed approaches for leaders and teachers*. Routledge.

Brief Author Biography

Jane Kirkham is an Educational and Developmental Psychologist employed as a Senior Psychologist at the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA) consulting in schools on topics related to student wellbeing, engagement, and learning. She has over 30 years’ experience in educational settings as a teacher, specialist teacher, and as a psychologist, in Australia, South Africa and the UK. Jane received the Western Australian Institute for Educational Research (WAIER) Fogarty Foundation Postgraduate Student Research Prize in 2021, and she has recently completed her PhD at the University of Western Australia. Jane is passionate about working alongside school staff as they develop their knowledge and skills to support students.