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STUDENT WELLBEING AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT ARE INSEPARABLE

Too often, mental health and academic outcomes are siloed off as separate issues, or even treated as conflicting priorities. So how can school leaders and educators promote a holistic approach to learning and wellbeing?

Schools have come a long way towards being nurturing environments for learning since days gone past. No longer is it common to speak, as George Orwell once did, of the merciless rules, “irrational terrors and lunatic misunderstandings” of one’s school years.

In spite of educators’ persistent efforts though, many Australian students still struggle with mental health, bullying, and isolation, and educators often feel a tension between their duties to manage classrooms, to help students perform academically, and to look after their wellbeing.

Associate Professor Andrea Reupert is Director of Professional Psychology programs in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. She is presently writing a book – *Supporting mental health and academic learning in schools* – and her research suggests these issues must be addressed in tandem.

“Children spend an inordinate amount of time at school, making schools more influential on children’s development than any other social institution, besides their family,” she says.

“It’s relatively normal for young people to experience some form of mental distress. One US study found that by 21 years of age, 82.5% of 1,420 participants had met criteria for a psychiatric disorder.

“However, we also know that only around a third of these young people receive any form of formal support. Students with mental health problems are present in every school, regardless of their socio-economic background.”

While schools and teachers cannot do everything for their students, Associate Professor Reupert emphasises that schools’ universality puts them in a unique position to address students’ mental health needs without stigmatising them.

“Schools are an ideal place to identify children who may present with mental health difficulties but also to support children more broadly,” she says.

“Schools can either promote wellbeing or, in some cases, neglect students’ health or even actively harm it through excessive learning demands, repeated academic failure or by exposing children to bullying or isolation.”

In her view, part of what makes it difficult for schools to promote wellbeing is the idea that mental health and academic achievement are conflicting priorities.

“Schools often feel that they have to decide between supporting young people’s mental health or academic learning but the two domains are inseparable,” she says.

“We know that children with greater wellbeing and lower levels of mental health problems achieve higher achievement scores, better attendance, and drop out of school less often.”

She says that “a program for problem approach” to such issues – such as separate programs for bullying, for healthy eating, for respectful relationships, for literacy and so on are not the answer, and often place unnecessary pressure on educators.

“This can be overwhelming and time consuming, and is, in the end, not very efficient. We need a unified, holistic approach for supporting children’s needs”

With this in mind, she suggests measures that can be taken by schools committed to a holistic approach:

- a comprehensive, quality curriculum that is engaging, relevant and where children are challenged but also experience success;
- accommodations made as required to make instruction accessible to all students;
- strong and evidence-based instructional strategies;
- teachers caring for students and knowing something about them, but also establishing clear boundaries and guidelines for behaviour;
- non-stigmatising strategies for identifying and supporting students who are experiencing academic, behavioural and/or social and emotional difficulties;
- dedicated lessons on mental health issues so children learn about the signs of mental health, and what to do if they or others experience these; and
- opportunities for children to learn various social and emotional skills – including but not limited to problem solving, conflict resolution, perseverance, how to manage stress, how to make friends, asking for help and so on. These skills help students get on with others but are also applicable for academic learning. All teachers can do this, regardless of what year level or subject area they teach.

She says it is important to provide staff with:

- systematic staff development opportunities (including induction) to understand and effectively implement a wide range of strategies (pedagogy and curriculum and relationship building strategies);
- a collegial environment which promotes their own wellbeing; and
- active, engaged, supportive leadership

School systems and environment should aspire to the following:

- a physically safe environment that promotes respect for cultural diversity and inclusion;
- an environment that encourages and supports positive relationships between a range of stakeholders;
- positive, supportive and prevention-based school systems and strategies for managing student (mis)behaviour, that aim to promote motivation and engagement rather than punish or isolate students;
- connections are made with families and the wider community including specialist services; and
- a data-driven approach to assess student, class and school needs, identify appropriate interventions or programs at the different levels and monitor progress.

“No single institution or discipline has all the tools to understand or intervene in the course of a child’s development,” says Associate Professor Reupert. “But schools do play a major role in supporting young children’s mental health and academic learning.”

You can find further resources on dovetailing student wellbeing and academic learning here:

Andrea Reupert & Stuart Woodcock. ‘Creating engaging and motivating learning environments.’ Ed. Jeanne Allen and Simone White. [*Learning to teach in a new era*](#), Cambridge University Press 2018.

[Mind Matters website](#)

[Kids Matter website](#)
