Principal's Study Sabbatical

Report

Research girls' wellbeing and programmes that build resilience and enhance wellbeing for young women.

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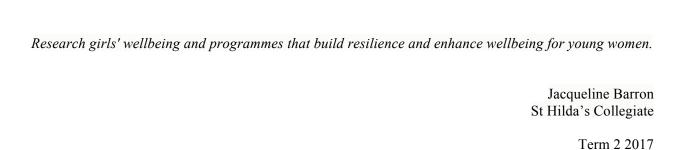
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"We want more for our children than healthy bodies. We want our children to have lives filled with friendship and love and high deeds. We want them to be eager to learn and to confront challenges…..we want them to grow up with confidence in the future, a love of adventure, a sense of justice and courage enough to act on that sense of justice. We want them to be resilient in the face of the real setbacks and failures that growing up always brings."

- Martin Seligman, The Optimistic Child

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Executive Summary

My sabbatical study was based on researching best practice and published articles on developing and enhancing the wellbeing of girls in high decile/integrated/state/independent single sex girls' schools. I visited several schools and attended an international conference for girls' schools, while also undertaking research and a University paper in Gender Studies.

While wellbeing has become a widely used term in modern lexicon, I was most interested in investigating practices that enabled girls to self manage, be resilient in the face of challenges and to enjoy, and learn from the daily successes, challenges and failures that combine for a rich and rewarding life. There is no doubt that the wellbeing of many secondary school girls is at risk and they need help to build resilience, perseverance and grit, so they can be effective and optimistic members of our communities in a world where rapid change is the new normal and their roles now and in the future, are more pressured and less clear.

Schools that are systematically, purposefully and carefully building a cohesive and positive culture that gives girls the opportunities to build skills and dispositions that enhance their wellbeing are making the difference to girls' wellbeing.

For a successful cultural change, programmes and initiatives need to be internally driven, school wide, have a strong student voice, a common language that is widely shared and understood, be able to adapt to the needs to their individual communities, have buy in from staff who are well trained and committed, and be shared with, and supported by parents and the wider community. The ability to measure effectiveness, review progress and actions, and report to the school community and Boards is growing in importance and the next step for many schools.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the St Hilda's Board of Trustees and Board of Proprietors who supported my application for this Study Sabbatical and who have been very encouraging and supportive of this professional development opportunity.

My thanks to Judy Maw who stepped into the role of Acting Principal while I was away, and to the members of the Senior Leadership Team, Hazel Dey, Geraldine Corkery and Donna Smith (Acting Assistant Principal), who were so effective in leading and managing the school in my absence.

I would also like to recognize and give thanks to the many staff and Principals who I met with for their generosity of time, expertise and experience. The opportunity to talk about mutual concerns and discuss strategies, programmes and philosophies was hugely enlightening and valuable and I was grateful for the support offered, and the contacts made, that I hope will continue to be a benefit to all of us.

Thanks too, to the University of Otago staff, Dr Rebecca Stringer and Dr Melanie Beres, who so generously facilitated my attendance of, and participation in, the Stage 3 Gender Studies paper.

Introduction

The area of focus for my sabbatical was exploring programmes and initiatives in girls' schools that develop, support and enhance girls' wellbeing, an issue that is becoming of increasing importance as statistics show a deterioration in students "general well being", and especially in girls, a rise in self harm and suicide attempts (the Youth 2000 National Youth Health and Wellbeing Survey series 2013). I wanted to identify best practice that enabled girls to self manage, be resilient in the face of challenges and to enjoy, and learn from the daily successes, challenges and failures that combine for a rich and rewarding life.

Wright (2015) asks *"What does the contemporary focus on youth wellbeing as a key aspiration say about our society today and perhaps more importantly, what does it say about the enduring anxieties that we face in relation to young people?"*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines wellbeing as "the state of being or doing well in life", a "happy, healthy or prosperous condition", and as "moral or physical welfare (of a person or a community)". It is noted that the understanding of 'wellbeing' has changed in recent decades, and the use of the term has become a lot more common, often being represented as a solution to student disengagement and unhappiness, a technique to fix problems in students and something of which all young people should simply have more (Wright & Macleod 2015). Manderson (2005) asserts that wellbeing is different to, but may well overlap, states such as happiness, satisfaction, contentment, self actualization and personal safety.

Throughout my research I have referred to the definition of wellbeing as outlined in the Education Review Office (ERO) document "Wellbeing for Success: A Resource for Schools" (2016).

"A student's level of wellbeing at school is indicated by their satisfaction with life at school, their engagement with learning and their social emotional behaviour…. Optimal student wellbeing is a sustainable state, characterised by predominantly positive feelings and attitude, positive relationships at school, resilience, self-optimism and a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences. (ERO 2016)"

It is clear from the research that 'wellbeing' is not about being 'happy', but rather about self managing emotions, being self aware, being able to handle disappointment and persevere with optimism. I was looking for ways and strategies to develop these skills in our students when I conducted my research. It is also evident that in this period of rapid social change and uncertainty, wellbeing is increasingly precarious (Wright & Macleod 2015) and in education policy contexts, the emphasis has been placed on the social and emotional dimensions of wellbeing.

For the purposes of my sabbatical I investigated initiatives in schools similar to St Hilda's Collegiate, high decile integrated/state/independent girls' schools and/or with special character. I recognize that the issues for girls in other types of schools may well be different, however I believe there is considerable commonality across the geographic, socio-economic and cultural spheres.

Methodology

I wanted to have an understanding of the issues that girls are facing regarding their mental health and wellbeing, how these issues have arisen, i.e. the historical and social context, and then explore best practice and programmes that were being effective and how key learnings could then be used to inform our practice at St Hilda's Collegiate.

I used the time of my sabbatical to:

- Attend lectures and tutorials, and complete assigned readings for the Otago University paper GEND309 Critical Victimology
- Visit schools in New Zealand and Australia including:
    o Epsom Girls Grammar School – state girls school – Auckland
    o Strathcona Baptist Girls Grammar School – independent, secular girls school – Melbourne
    o Brisbane Girls Grammar School – independent, secular girls school – Brisbane
    o St Margaret's Anglican Girls School – independent, Anglican girls school – Brisbane
    o Loretto College – independent, Catholic girls school – Brisbane
- Attend the Alliance of Girls' Schools Australasia Masterclass presentation by Professor Erica McWilliams
- Meet with Principals of girls' schools to discuss common issues. This included Principals leading schools in NZ, Australia and USA
- Attend the National Coalition of Girls' Schools Conference – Washington DC, June 25-27
- Research and read widely on issues in youth mental health, understand research conducted on wellbeing, consider established and reviewed programmes and initiatives supporting young peoples' wellbeing and mental health.

Section One: Overview of social context/issues/developments

The quality of young people's wellbeing is an indication of the social, political and economic conditions that surround them (Wyn 2015). In a rapidly changing world, where employment options are increasingly unpredictable, the use of social media has exacerbated bullying and friendships conflict issues, and the sexualisation of young women and the normalization of pornography are all warping the way young women view their relationships with others, the world and their place in it, it is becoming increasingly obvious that these global issues are negatively affecting the mental health, self belief and resilience of many young women

Also raised by Principals and staff at several schools was the relentless nature and perceived inequities of NCEA assessment, and the pressure it places on girls' time and work loads, as well as the competition for scholarships, monetary university bursaries and places at universities.

Discussing the current landscape with other Principals and through my visits to schools, it is clear that we are all concerned about the same issues for girls, being:

- The rise of anxiety, depression and poor mental health amongst girls predominantly caused by striving for academic excellence, trying to measure up to their own and others expectations, and not managing disappointment and fearing failure.
- The associated "toxic perfectionism" and the widespread belief that girls have to be 'perfect' at everything and the consequent poor ability to take on board feedback and guidance
- The issues of comparison – girls comparing themselves to 'perfection', and each other - either physical/sporting/social/academic
- The way social media is exacerbating the problems for girls, with the relentless exposure to cyber bullying, celebrity, and manipulated images
- The sexualisation of girls' images, the consequent shaping of how girls see themselves physically and socially, and the normalization of pornography that again manipulates how girls think they are expected to look and behave.
- Parents wanting to 'protect' their daughters from negative experiences, stop them from feeling disappointed, frustrated and sad, leading to 'over-parenting', high parent involvement in school assessment and results, and students not feeling they can experiment, risk mistakes or 'fail'.

Because of the issues as listed above it is becoming increasingly important for schools to give due consideration to the mental health and wellbeing of their students. While many of the necessary life skills have been developed through school systems, the unofficial rules through which students learn behaviours, values, beliefs and attitudes (Halstead and Xiao, 2010 in Wright & MacLeod 2015), it is no longer enough to hope that girls generally 'do okay' and it is critical that schools purposefully, meaningfully and in a structured way, teach young people the skills and dispositions that they need to take responsibility for their wellbeing, during and after they have left school.

From their research, ERO found five vital aspects in schools that successfully promoted and responded to student wellbeing (2016).

In these schools:

- *agreed values and vision underpin the actions in the school to promote students' wellbeing*

- *the school's curriculum is designed and monitored for valued goals*
- *students are a powerful force in wellbeing and other decisions*
- *all students' wellbeing is actively monitored*
- *systems are in place and followed to respond to wellbeing issues*

For my sabbatical, I concentrated on the areas of curriculum design, student involvement and student led programmes and how wellbeing is monitored within the school.

Section Two: Programmes

It is reasonable to say that all the schools I visited and Principals I talked to are dealing with similar issues, and generally there is a pattern to the support being offered to girls, centering around giving them the skills to better understand and self manage emotions and be resilient. Some key initiatives were common across many of the schools and it was interesting to note that regardless of which country a school was in, the commitment to upskilling staff, and having consistent programmes that were internally developed and led was important. Student devised and led programmes were also seen as key to making any cultural and sustainable change to general wellbeing.

"Schools cannot simply rely on their positive culture and respectful relationships to promote wellbeing but need to provide opportunities for students to make decisions about their wellbeing and to be active in leading their learning." (ERO 2016)

It is worth mentioning that most of the schools I spoke with were very aware that while they had positive anecdotal feedback on their programmes and initiatives, most had no hard evidence that the strategies they had implemented were actually making a difference. Some schools were starting down the path of reviewing and surveying using a variety of assessment tools available, and this does require further investigation.

As a result of the research, visits and interviews undertaken, some common threads and key aspects of successful programmes became evident and a summary is below:

- The development of a "growth mind set' amongst students, using Carole Dweck's work. Lessons for younger students (years 7/8) were structured around the growth mind set, skills taught and discussed regularly as part of a learning skills/ethics programme, which was developed as students progressed through the school. This gave staff and students a common language with which to discuss and share learning and social challenges.
- Developing opportunities for student led and driven groups on wellbeing issues. These might be based on a range of issues and topics (student generated) such as diversity, inclusion, rainbow groups, wellbeing committees, cyber bullying. The key was that students led the groups, chose the topics of interest from student consultation and surveys etc, and then led initiatives within the schools.
- Understanding the benefits and science of mindfulness, practicing mindfulness and helping students to practice the self management skills of responding, rather than reacting, being able to recognize their own emotions, and self regulate. Again, this was a school wide initiative in several schools that gave the school community a common language and understanding.
- Developing a Health programme that was shaped by the student's needs, agile and adaptable, and relevant to students.
- Strong pastoral care network – most were vertical groups, but also had year level Deans and leaders, meetings etc in the bigger schools. I think the critical success criteria, was that there was set time each week/day for the groups to come together, shared purpose, students identified as belonging to that group and had a sense of belonging. Again, the relationships between staff and students were key, as then common language was embedded, staff were trusted, mindfulness etc, was authentically used for the benefit of everyone.
- Developing staff skills in restorative practices as taught and led by Carol Thorsburn. Restorative practices gave students another opportunity to take responsibility for their actions, assess and analyse

their actions and emotions, and the philosophy sat well with programmes of mindfulness and growth mindset.

- A number of schools have tapped into the very good work of Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, around positive psychology. He has written two books – "The Optimistic Child, and "Flourish", and both are great reads, with excellent resources and research on developing well-being which he identifies as being founded in optimism (Seligman 2007).

- Schools were aware that they needed to embed a sustainable approach to well-being that was 'not another programme', that staff then had to implement. Staff PLD around wellbeing and such initiatives as Mindfulness or growth mindset was absolutely critical to the success of any actions. The schools that felt their programmes were the most successful, had an integrated approach that included staff PLD, student led groups, health programme tied to other curriculum areas, and a strong pastoral care system, that cohesively pulled together the key messages. They also identified that upskilling staff was preferable to 'buying' in' expertise, guest speakers etc, which was often expensive, and not sustainable. Programmes that were delivered by outside providers also tended to leave staff outside the sphere of influence, with a limited understanding of the benefits of any initiative or less committed to the programmes, and not confident, or interested to keep initiatives going.

- Having the wider school community involved in the wellbeing initiatives and educating parents were also seen as key criteria to the success of any programmes. Hosting parent workshops and seminars and working with parents to understand the negative influence of high pressure/high expectations, comparisons and 'toxic perfectionism', were especially important in some of the big independent schools I visited, where anxiety and fear of failure were very prevalent in the student body.

- Some schools had formed alliances with Universities to tap into the knowledge and research available, that supported their programmes. Having the assistance of outside expertise to provide PLD for staff, lead research and assist with implementation was a real benefit to the schools that had access to such resources.

- Schools are starting to think about measuring the effectiveness of the programmes they have in place, and to gather evidence about best practice. Schools referred to different methods of collating data – there is no one solution, but some of the tools being used include:
  - o Wellbeing Profiler – Melbourne University
  - o On line testing for grit/perseverance - University of Pennsylvania – Centre of Positive Psychology
  - o Character Strength Survey – Somerville House, Brisbane (survey modified from "Authentic happiness" by Martin Seligman 2002).
  - o EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Wellbeing (Kern et al 2016)

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the wellbeing of many secondary school girls is at risk and they need help to build resilience, perseverance and grit, so they can be effective and optimistic members of our communities in a world where rapid change is the new normal and their roles now and in the future are more pressured and less clear. While McLeod (2015) states that the movement for permanent praise and feel good feedback associated with self esteem has given rise to an epidemic of narcissism and the constant need for affirmation and celebration, an opinion shared by McWilliams (2017), the concept of wellbeing is much deeper than just trying to ensure everyone is happy and feels valued, but rather to assist girls to manage themselves optimistically in the times when they are not.

Schools that are systematically, purposefully and carefully building a cohesive and positive culture that gives girls the opportunities to build skills and dispositions that enable them to self manage, be resilient in the face of challenges and to enjoy, and learn from the daily successes, challenges and failures that combine for a rich and rewarding life, are making the difference to girls' wellbeing.

Programmes and initiatives need to be internally driven, school wide, have a strong student voice, a common language that is widely shared and understood, be able to adapt to the needs to their individual communities, have buy in from staff who are well trained and committed, and be shared with, and supported by parents and the wider community. The ability to measure effectiveness, review progress and actions, and report to the school community and Boards is growing in importance and the next step for many schools.

"The ethical responsibility of teachers, leaders and trustees is to consider, promote, balance and respond to all aspects of the student, including their physical, social, emotional, academic and spiritual needs. These considerations require deliberate expression and action across all curriculum areas, pastoral care, strategic priorities and teaching practices. To maximise the role that schools have in promoting and responding to student wellbeing, these systems, people and initiatives require a high level of school-wide coordination and cohesion." (ERO 2016)

While the schools I visited and Principal's I talked to all had individual situations and issues they were dealing with, there were a lot of common philosophies, strategies and programmes that were successful as listed above. There was also a total commitment to the wellbeing of young women, an awareness of the role and responsibility of the school in developing that wellbeing, and a dedication to building strong and capable young women for the future.

While there is much to be concerned about and much to do, there is also a lot happening that bodes well for the future.

"If parents want to give their children a gift, the best thing they can do is to teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort, and keep on learning. That way, their children don't have to be slaves of praise. They will have a lifelong way to build and repair their own confidence."

- Carol S. Dweck

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