

Sabbatical Report

Maria Potter, Sacred Heart College Lower Hutt

Term 3/4 2019

“Investigation into Pasifika Girl’s Wellbeing and Personal Resilience”

Introduction

The wellbeing of our students is increasingly a focus at Sacred Heart College and has certainly become a focus for other schools in New Zealand. Nationally, statistics show a decrease in students general wellbeing and a rise in self harm, suicide ideation and suicide attempts.

Over the last few years our school too, has seen an increase in statistics similar to the national trends and these increases have not dissipated despite interventions. Our students identify a range of stressors and anxieties that they encounter; the anxieties most prevalent include learning and achievement, family, relationships, body image and bullying. The mental health of our young women is a growing concern, and this concern is increased with our Pasifika and Maori students who can show a reluctance to access the conventional supports we have in place, such as guidance counsellors. There remains a stigma surrounding mental health issues, and this is more prevalent among Pasifika and Maori.

Sacred Heart Colleges vision statement specifically refers to resilience and the education of the whole student;

“Sacred Heart College students are compassionate, confident and resilient young women, who live gospel values, challenge themselves, have a thirst for knowledge and are ready to serve others”.

Our mission statement states how we will realise this vision;

“Sacred Heart College inspires each student to reach her full potential through an education built on Gospel values, while providing opportunities for leadership and continuing excellence in her chosen pursuits”.

There is a commitment, therefore, from the board of trustees and staff to prioritise student wellbeing and academic achievement.

Scope

The scope of my research changed as I started the initial research phase. It became very apparent that I needed to narrow my brief from investigating both Maori and Pasifika students to just one of these groups. I decided to focus on Pasifika students.

Wellbeing is very much a buzzword in the current climate and is one that people often confuse with “happiness”. Whilst being happy is what we want for our students, wellbeing is so much more than that. Wellbeing is vital for student success and wellbeing is strongly linked to learning.

According to EROs report “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. It is enhanced when evidence-informed practices are adopted by schools in partnership with families and community. 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.

For Pasifika youth wellbeing is achieved through balancing financial security, people relationships, connections with family and community, their faith and natural resources.

At Sacred Heart College we use a wide range of measures to monitor and track our students progress and wellbeing. Achievement data, attendance data, suspension and stand down data, counselling data and anecdotal information gained from the pastoral system are all used to ensure we know our students well and know where they are at any given point in time.

We also have a number of programmes and initiatives that are aimed specifically at Pasifika students. These programmes either address needs and/or celebrate our Pasifika cultures;

Big sister

Poly fest

Language week celebrations

Cultural week

Cultural student leader

Incorporation of the language in assemblies, liturgies and masses

Pasifika prizegiving/graduation

Research design

Most of my investigation was centred on visiting schools to meet and discuss with other school leaders about how they approach some of the challenges we face. By visiting other schools and speaking to staff, a range of dialogue could assist in developing ideas in how Sacred Heart College could develop in these areas. I want to know what evidence-informed practices they are using and how they engaged with both their students and wider community to develop these practices. The main purpose being to identify best practice that would allow our girls to be successful learners, self-managing and resilient in the face of challenges. Despite that other schools having different contexts and issues that they are dealing with, I believe that there will be commonalities and ideas that could be used, after adaptation, in our setting.

I asked 4 key questions:

1. How do you measure student wellbeing, and do you specifically measure Pasifika wellbeing?
2. What are the main issues/concerns facing our students today?
3. What programmes or interventions do you have that are specifically focussed on Pasifika students?
4. What do you consider to be the key barriers to Pasifika wellbeing?

The other major part of my research was reading, and it was great to be able to read several articles, journals, bulletins and books that were related to the topic. I was grateful to be able to have the time and energy to do this research.

Findings

I have summarised the responses;

1. How do you measure student wellbeing, and do you specifically measure Pasifika wellbeing?

Achievement, attendance, suspension and stand down, counselling data, anecdotal information gained from the pastoral system, Wellbeing in Schools Survey, internal faculty review mechanisms, PB4L SET data, student voice, meetings with families, fono.

2. What are the main issues/concerns facing our students today?

Anxiety, fear of failure, self-image, inability to get to school, family pressures and responsibilities, fear of standing out, relationships with peers, relationships with family members, financial stresses, poor nutrition, lack of resourcing.

3. What programmes or interventions do you have that are specifically focussed on Pasifika students?

Wahine Toa (goal setting) Revised pastoral care system, consistent lead pastoral carers, Big Sister Little Sister Programme, GEMS programme with internal programme and external providers, Health education & RST/Manawa Mission, Poutama programme(goal setting), So'otanga programme, Individual Development Plans, Dream Weaver programme, Pasifika group, led and encouraged by Pasifika teachers, Samoan and Tongan language classes

The key to these programmes is that most of them involved 3-way communication with caregivers, students and often a form or tutor teacher. Time and resourcing was given by the schools involved (this varied) to stress the importance of these programmes and to ensure that staff involved were fully supported in the implementation.

Some schools had a whole day or days focus whilst others had part days. Preparation time and the appropriate targeted support for reluctant or less confident staff were also key to the success of the programmes.

4. What do you consider to be the key barriers to Pasifika wellbeing?

Barriers included; poverty, pressures from family, negotiation of boundaries and tension between family and cultural expectations and external expectations especially those depicted on social media

Getting families involved in a regular and positive way. Giving them the ability to have a positive impact on their students learning outcomes.

Family situation/being caregivers to others/diet/counter-cultural norms in predominantly whitestream environment.

In further discussions and readings there were some clear, reoccurring key themes for Pasifika students. The things that they felt were important to them and hence important to their wellbeing were;

Faith

Family

Identity – culture and language

Relationships

Any initiative or programme that has one or more of these elements specifically and explicitly incorporated into it will assist in promoting wellbeing amongst our Pasifika students.

Other points to consider when developing a programme or response to our concerns is the need to develop student ownership of the learning process and its outcomes. This is greatly empowering for students but challenging to achieve — with particular implications for teacher practice. Our students cannot be bystanders in their own learning if they are to become confident, resilient young women who continue to challenge themselves. We must gather student voice and we must listen and action based on this.

We have some work to do with our staff and there is a need to challenge some of our ideas, thinking and practices. Deficit thinking is still an issue for staff at most schools, including ours. It is clear that some staff still hold beliefs that a whole host of external factors — such as habitual lateness, poor nutrition, frequent absence due to family events and travel to the Pacific nations — are to blame for poor academic achievement. There are still staff members who don't see their potential to make changes and therefore don't attribute poor Pasifika outcomes to teaching and classroom practices. Reflection and ongoing improvement by all teachers is important.

As identity has been identified as a key factor in Pasifika wellbeing it is important to recognise and respond to the diversity amongst the Pasifika student population at Sacred Heart College. We need to know our students and their stories. For example, not all Samoan students have the same story; there are some who are new to New Zealand, some born and raised here, some second generation and some of mixed ethnicity.

There remains a stigma surrounding mental health issues among Pasifika people, which is a barrier to good wellbeing. Some of our students don't know where to get help from or don't want to access our conventional supports. Our pastoral team is increasingly aware of this and the need to look at alternative approaches and ongoing upskilling in the Pasifika space.

There is a need to ensure more time for one to one mentoring and careers advice and develop a more coherent school wide approach to preparing students for life beyond school. These discussions need to include the family.

Possible next steps

1. Investigate a new approach to parent/teacher interviews.

A form of conferencing/mentoring which includes goal setting and career planning and pathways should be fully investigated and involve staff PD. Any programme that is designed must be a sustainable and useful tool that not only establishes and reinforces relationships between the school and home but is useful for students to take ownership of their learning and future beyond school.

Key aspects would include:

Approach needs to be developmentally appropriate – will look different for different year levels

Flexible - not a one size fits all

Integration with our general classroom programmes and curriculum

Include teachers, parents and students in its construction and development.

Consistent implementation so will require teacher professional development and clear student and parent communication

Have a Catholic basis and clearly and explicitly incorporate our school values.

Ongoing and regular engagement of our Pasifika parents, families and communities with the school in supporting their student's learning

2. Raise expectations of Pasifika achievement – set high standards and expectations.

Staff professional development would include understanding the barriers to Pasifika achievement and the keys to their success. Staff would actively support girls to form — and achieve — their own goals, informed by ongoing and personalised assessment, monitoring and tracking. Staff to have a strong sense of accountability to every student in their care.

Take a good look at the data we have and analyse it carefully and honestly. Sharing this data with caregivers and students can be very powerful and an incentive to do things differently with different results.

3. Staffing, identity – culture and language.

Investigate the idea of a Pasifika Dean who would have responsibility for the oversight of programmes and initiatives (both current and new) that are aimed at Pasifika students. This person would need to be supported by a team of teachers dedicated to making a difference to Pasifika learning. These staff could also make this a focus of their appreciative inquiry.

Look to actively recruit Pasifika staff, especially as teachers.

Investigate the use of past pupils to further enhance current programmes including Poly group.

Look at the make-up of our governing group and investigate the secondment of a Pasifika representative to our BOT.

We would, of course, keep those things that are working well currently and enhance them with the appropriate support and resourcing, such as Cultural weeks, Poly group and regular fono with the wider community.

Conclusion

Sacred Heart College recognises the need to work differently with our Pasifika students in order to improve their educational outcomes.

We need to carefully consider next steps in this process and work smarter (not harder) in this area. Current programmes can be enhanced and added to based on best practice that has been learned from other schools. Our own setting and our individual students need to be considered carefully in any programme or initiative that is implemented.

A team of staff with this portfolio need to have the resourcing and time to be able to lead the school in our next steps.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Ministry of Education and Teach NZ for allowing me to take this sabbatical. I am appreciative to the Board of Sacred Heart College for their support of my application as well as the Senior Leadership Team and other senior staff who stood in during my absence. I also wish to thank my colleagues for their contributions to this sabbatical and report, and for their willingness to share so openly and honestly. I feel blessed to have had this opportunity and am grateful.

References

Education Review Office (2016). Wellbeing for success: A resource for schools. Wellington, New Zealand.

ERO (February 2015). Wellbeing for Young People's Success at Secondary School

Health Promotion Agency (2018). Mental Health and Wellbeing of Pacific Peoples

Ministry of Health (2000). Kia Piki Te Ora O Te Taitamariki: Strengthening Youth Wellbeing.

Ministry of Education (2018). Tapasa: Cultural Competencies Framework for Teachers of Pasific Learners

Wright K, and McLeod J, Ed. (2015). Rethinking Youth Wellbeing: Critical Perspectives.