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Introduction

In the best tradition of education bureaucracies my title has changed since the conference program was printed! I now head up a new Directorate within the Western Australian Department of Education and Training called Student Behaviour and Wellbeing. The establishment of this new Directorate is symbolic of the profile the Department is giving to issues of student behaviour and wellbeing. It's a sign of the times.

The perspective I will be presenting this afternoon is that of a senior bureaucrat in a state system with all the messiness and the rough and tumble and the daily crises that characterize life in that world. The truth is that the origins of many initiatives are explained by a whole variety of internal forces and the current zeitgeist rather than a sober consideration of research and the kind of initiatives that might suggest. So the view that I will be presenting is from the real life action end of things where research findings struggle to get a look in. This despite the rhetoric of all school systems about the need for more evidence based decision making.

I plan to tell you a few Western Australian stories about what we are doing to have our improvement efforts in the area of student wellbeing better informed by research. The detail of the stories themselves will probably be of only limited interest to researchers or to people working in other systems but hopefully they will stimulate some thinking about how research might be better used by those of us in state school systems who are trying to assist schools to improve what they do. I hope the presentation might also give some insight into the factors that influence decision making at system level to improve student wellbeing across 800 government schools.

One thing I have learned as a bureaucrat trying to initiate change in schools is that timing is everything. I'd like to mention a few of the defining features of the current climate we are working in because these certainly influence what is possible in terms of initiatives in the area of student behaviour and wellbeing.

1. A public mood for toughness
Politicians are recognizing and responding to a public mood for toughness. State governments know there future depends on how convincingly they tackle the law and order issues. The public seem to be saying: if people won't behave in a socially acceptable way we need to come down really hard on them.

Our advice as professional educators needs to take account of the public sentiment but we also need to give advice based on our professional expertise as educators and from a basis of evidence. We can't morally provide advice about, for instance, adopting zero tolerance policies for school discipline if we know the evidence is against it. So there is

the dilemma: How do we promote policies and programs that are based on the best evidence of what is likely to be effective if these things sound unacceptably soft in the current climate?

2. An epidemic of immediacy

We now have a society which has become caught up in an 'epidemic of immediacy'. Everything is expected to happen fast, like now. This is probably partly fed by technology, the internet, etc. It's caused us to abandon change that requires more time, change for the long run. For those who are interested in real change, in sustained change this is a problem. The book, *The Clock of the Long Now* talks about this. Bill Gates does too. He believes that because of technology we are losing sight of long-range planning. This has particular relevance for us in education because with the work that we do – results don't turn around quickly. So here is another dilemma for us: How can we deal with the expediency that the public demands, when the work that we do really requires a lot of time?

3. A yearning for simplicity

There is a yearning for simple answers combined with a nostalgia for the past. People hanker after a time when things were simpler, when there was not as much violence, when people had manners, when traditional values were held. People want a packaged solution that's simple but generally the human problems we are dealing with are not amenable to that kind of solution. We want to change things in the classroom but the classroom is one of the most complex social situations on earth with the teacher making a non-trivial decision every two minutes.

Oliver Wendell Holmes said 'We need to get to the simplicity on the other side of complexity.' This is a very different idea to treating things superficially. For us who work in public policy it involves designing a complex solution and being able to present it simply. This is not something at which bureaucrats naturally excel!

What do we mean by student wellbeing?

Steve Marshall has canvassed this in his paper so I will simply describe the pragmatic approach that we have taken to defining the territory. Using various words, schools' statements of purpose or mission will usually say something about wanting to turn out students who are 'privately happy and publicly useful'. It is the privately happy part that we are on about here. Additionally, schools have always been about socializing students to be able to function effectively as a member of a group. You can't have a democratic, indeed civilized community life unless people have learned to participate in a disciplined way as part of a group.

So we are talking here about the personal and social development of students. This is not a new agenda for schools but addressing it well in a changing social context does demand new approaches.

Rationale for the Western Australian approach

So why are we pushing the student wellbeing agenda so hard in the government school system in Western Australia. There are four reasons.

1. There has been a deterioration in the social environment around schools. The changes to families and communities mean that children are coming to school with a range of psychological/social/emotional/behavioural issues in greater numbers and with greater complexity now than previously. Teachers tell us consistently that it's getting harder. Students are more unruly, have shorter attention spans and are less respecting of teachers' authority; they seem acutely aware of their rights but not so keen on their responsibilities.

   While teachers know about the changing social environment, I believe it is helpful to put some evidence of it in front of them. This has the effect of both validating their felt experience and also of focusing their attention on the need for schools to play a part in responding to this situation. The evidence is not hard to find.

   Some commentators say if you want to know how a society is faring, take a look at the young. They are our miner's canaries, our early warning signals.

   Professor Fiona Stanley has made it clear that from her epidemiological studies a whole range of developmental indicators of health and wellbeing in children and adolescents are showing adverse trends.

   'Rising rates are being observed for low birth weight, neurodevelopmental disorders, asthma, type 1 diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease, autism, mental health morbidities, child abuse and neglect, adolescent suicide, obesity, eating disorders, learning disabilities, aggressive behaviours and violence, illicit drug and alcohol abuse and teenage births.'

   She says these adverse trends are linked to the' dramatic social changes for families and communities over the past 30 years'.

   Richard Eckersley, in his analysis of youth suicide quotes these statistics:
   - 0.02% of young people take their own lives each year, 10% will attempt suicide.
   - There are 20 000 hospitalisations each year for pharmaceutical poisoning (a large proportion of which is self-inflicted).
   - A quarter of adolescents will suffer a major depression by the age of 18 and one third of those with a diagnosed depressive disorder will go on to attempt suicide in the following 20 years.

He also draws attention to surveys of youth attitudes that suggest 'that many are mistrustful, cynical and fatalistic; wary of commitment; outwardly confident but inwardly insecure; alienated and disconnected from society. They believe that life should be fast and fun; that they are on their own, options should be kept open; governments are incapable of solving our problems; and they themselves are powerless to change things.'

A recent Victorian study found that 40% of 13-15 year olds felt that they didn't have anyone who knew them very well. A quarter of them said they had no-one that they could trust and no-one they could depend on. This seems to tally with a 1996

'Teenmood' survey that concluded that 'teenagers don't trust adults, they don't trust the government and they suspect that everyone has their own agenda.'

1   When put in front of teachers this kind of evidence confirms what they know intuitively and leads to the inevitable question: What can schools do about this? I'll say some more about the answer to this question later in this presentation, but the key point to make here is that one reason for school systems like mine placing particular emphasis on student wellbeing is that the deteriorating social environment demands that they do.

2   An acknowledgement of the evidence of what makes for success in life. We now know that personal qualities like perseverance, persistence and being able to manage your own emotions are vital to future success. And so are interpersonal skills such as empathy and being able to communicate persuasively. Daniel Goleman has done more to popularize this than anyone and many parents are now concerned about their children's 'emotional intelligence'.

    If our schools are about preparing kids for future success then we need to be sure that they are consciously developing these attributes in their students.

3   The choice agenda. Our survey evidence tells us that the drift away from government schools is partly explained by parents' perceptions of how well the school is promoting their children's personal and social development. It sometimes gets talked about as 'values'. The perception is that the non-government schools are better at this stuff. We need to convince parents that our schools are good at building resilience, fostering optimism and developing social skills. A school environment that is seen as unable to do this because of its circumstances, or unwilling to because its focus is elsewhere will have a battle convincing parents that the school is acting in the best long term interests of their children. On the other hand if parents thought that government schools were able to deliver outcomes for students like self-discipline, resilience, optimism, self confidence and the ability to get along with others, this would be a major plus because these are outcomes that parents really value. Can we turn what is perceived by parents as a negative into a positive?

4   Schools put a lot of effort into promoting student well being and we need to make sure that there is a good return for that effort. If we could cost the time spent in schools dealing with student behaviour and wellbeing we would find that it is a very costly item in the education budget. Schools have pastoral care programs, behaviour management programs, mental health promotion programs, values initiatives and student services teams as well as the stuff in their curriculum learning area programs. A lot of teacher time and goodwill is spent in pursuit of these social outcomes. The big question is: How effective is all this activity?

A major issue that has to be addressed in terms of the way schools tackle student wellbeing is the tendency to 'do' a student wellbeing program. I believe our primary aim should not be to get schools to adopt such programs but rather to get school staff to stop and think about what they are currently doing everyday in their interactions with students and to ask whether that is enhancing or diminishing students' wellbeing.

If schools were serious about enhancing student wellbeing they would be examining how students are spoken to, the opportunities that are provided to them for participation, the way feedback is given to them when they make a mistake, how positive the teacher student relationships are, the messages teachers give when students are about to give up rather than persist, and so on. It is not about adding on a student wellbeing program and leaving current practice unexamined. That is often the easiest thing to do but is likely to have only transitory effects.

One example to illustrate the point is in the way schools act to raise students' self-esteem. Increasing self-esteem in students is commonly found amongst school goals. Indeed, a few years back when we analysed the priorities our primary schools set in their school plans, the top three were literacy, numeracy and self-esteem.

And there is plenty of evidence that there is a strong relationship between self-esteem and achievement. Hundreds of studies report correlations between self-esteem and how children do: low achievers have low self-esteem, high achievers have high self-esteem, depressed people have low self-esteem, good athletes have high self-esteem, and so on. The question is: Does the high self-esteem cause the higher achievement or does high achievement cause higher self-esteem? The evidence on this is pretty clear: self-esteem is a consequence of success and failure, not its cause.

Unfortunately, since the eighties there has been a lot of educational activity around the idea of intervening directly to raise a child's self-esteem by making the child 'feel better' about themselves. This is based on the belief that once the child feels positively about themselves, they will learn better. Indeed in our own documents are statements like 'low self-esteem causes school failure, teenage pregnancy, dependence on welfare and a whole host of other social problems.'

This has led to the thousands of self-esteem building exercises like 'Ten reasons why I'm special', the IALAC program, the 'secret friend' exercise, and so on. Unfortunately, as Martin Seligman has pointed out compellingly 'there is no evidence that raising a child's self-esteem (in the sense of feeling good) causes anything else to happen. Rather, self-esteem is caused by the whole panoply of successes or failures in the world.'

There is good evidence to support the view that if you increase the child's ability to do well, to succeed better in their commerce with the world (in their academic work, in sport, in their social relationships), their self-esteem will increase. This is the 'doing well' version of self-esteem as opposed to the 'feeling good' version.

'Feel good' self-esteem activities are misguided activity. Better to teach the child to have some success at reading or math or sport or making friends rather than trying to directly impact on their self-esteem.

Another influential belief in schools which has become part of the dogma which doesn't stand up to the test of evidence is the idea that no child should ever fail; that it will damage their self-esteem. In fact we know that it is very important for children to be able to view failure as something which requires them to persist in order to succeed. Persistence being a key attribute for success at most things that are important. By not allowing children to fail at anything robs them of the opportunity to learn what it takes to gain mastery.

So a very good reason for central office to act on this evidence is to ensure that teachers get a better return in terms of student wellbeing for the effort they put in. An important part of our strategy is to have our student services staff who are interacting with schools on a regular basis, challenge school staff with this kind of evidence and assist them to re-think their approaches to achieving the outcomes they want.

Three Western Australian Stories
To give you a feel for some of the specific initiatives we are taking in WA let me describe three initiatives.

The first is an effort to improve the measurement of the system's performance in achieving high levels of student wellbeing. The second is using research to develop a resource for teachers to reflect on and improve their practice in promoting student wellbeing. The third is a research partnership with a university to get a better handle on what is happening in our schools and what might be required to improve things.

1. Measuring Students' Social Outcomes
We made a commitment some years ago to try and broaden the accountability agenda to include more explicitly that dimension of schools 'performance related to the wellbeing of students. The more the accountability agenda for schools focuses on a relatively narrow range of cognitive skills, the more school staff feel that what they try to do for students every day in their work is misunderstood or unrecognized. The question we asked was: can we sensibly include the measurement of the social outcomes in the performance measurement and reporting agenda of the Department. Or are we going to continue to depend on a relatively narrow set of measures of those outcomes that are easier to get at.

One is reminded here of the story of the drunk who is looking for his car keys under the lamppost. He knew that wasn't where he dropped them but he was looking there because that was where the light was good! We shouldn't be measuring only those outcomes where the light is good.

In WA we have had a strong track record in system level measurement of student performance. Since 1990 we have had the Monitoring Standards in Education (MSE) program. This is a random sample testing program that gives us a read out of student achievement in all learning areas across the system. Each year students in years 3, 7 and 10 are tested in either one or two of the eight learning areas. As part of its assessment regime MSE had assessed the interpersonal skills component of the Health and Physical Education learning area and the active citizenship component of the Society and Environment learning area.

In addition to our random sample testing program we also have our Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA) population testing program that measures literacy and numeracy achievement at years 3, 5 and 7.

As well as collecting system-level information MSE produces assessment materials for school use. The MSE materials released to schools provide models of good assessment practice and also allow schools to compare the performance of their students with the performance of other students across the state.

In 2001 MSE extended the assessment program beyond the eight learning areas to initiate a pilot study into the assessment of the social outcomes of schooling. While these outcomes do not comprise a distinct and separate learning area, they are implicit in all eight learning areas and are articulated in the Overarching Learning Outcomes of the State's Curriculum Framework.

The first stage of the work was to trawl through the curriculum statements to extract and categorise the social outcomes. These were categorized broadly into three categories:
- Interpersonal Skills
- Autonomy, Independence and Enterprise
- Social, Moral and Ethical Behaviour.

These three clusters of outcomes were used as the basis for a small-scale study into the assessment of the social outcomes of schooling. The pilot study was conducted over two years. In the first year social outcomes associated with the cluster of interpersonal skills was assessed. In the second year social outcomes associated with the cluster of social, ethical and moral development was assessed.

A tender was let to the ACER to undertake the pilot study.

Three types of tasks were used to assess student's social, moral and ethical development. These were
- scenarios,
- self-reporting questionnaires and
- a teacher-observed task.

The scenarios were designed to assess students' cognitive understandings in relation to respecting and valuing others, and were couched in the third person to assess what students know rather than what they would actually do.

The self-reporting questionnaire was used to measure student behaviour and attitudes as opposed to cognitive understandings assessed by the scenarios.

Three different activities were trialed for the teacher-observed task
- Group discussions
- Planning and creating something
- An initiative challenge

All of the tasks were designed to get students to talk to each other and result in some sort of consensus product.

Now schools order the materials from central office in large numbers to undertake their own assessments. It is not only improving teachers' assessment of the social outcomes, it is also having the effect of focusing staff on what some of these social outcomes actually mean rather than the vagueness of some of the outcome statements in the learning areas.

My assessment of this work is that it shows promise. As a Fremantle Dockers supporter these are words that roll of the tongue! We will continue to work on this because of the benefits at both a system and school level.

For those who want to find out more details about this work contact Jocelyn Cook Manager, Educational Measurement in the Western Australian Department.

2. Pathways to Social Emotional Development (P2SED)
This story starts with research to underpin a social-emotional developmental continuum undertaken for us by the WA Institute for Child Health Research.

It has resulted in a resource package for schools that shows teachers the developmental progression of students' social-emotional development through the years of schooling and provides them with a resource to draw on to move children further along the continuum.

The key themes that underpin social-emotional development are:
- Attachment and Connectedness
- Emotional Regulation
- Autonomy and Independence
- Values and Attitudes or Moral Development

It provides a practical framework for teachers to explore each theme and to integrate this understanding into their class planning.

Use of P2SED has not been mandated for schools and so currently it is the interested and motivated schools that are picking up on it. These schools are using the resource to shape their school level curriculum planning, to base their data collection demonstrating student progress in the social-emotional outcomes, to inform the individual behaviour plans for those students whose behaviour demands it, to run parent workshops to build greater parental understanding of their children's progress and to report to parents in a more consistent way.

If you want more information about P2SED Elizabeth Roberts from the WA Department is available at the poster display in the foyer.

3. A research partnership with Edith Cowan University
A team headed by Professor Max Angus at Edith Cowan University will be working in partnership with the Department on a new research project. The project will be called the Pipeline Project. The aim of the project is to track the progression of different cohorts of students who are in trouble in terms of their behaviour and their learning. It will track these students over a four year period from the early years of primary school to the later years and from the later years of primary school through to high school.

The project will provide an evidence base for our system's behaviour management policies and strategies that does not currently exist.

The Pipeline Project will make an important contribution to undertaking a sophisticated analysis of the problem of student misbehaviour and its relationship with poor achievement and using the information to tackle the serious problems facing government school systems.

There is no doubt that part of the problem is the depletion of social capital within the government school system and especially within particular communities. Social capital is the ability of people to work together for common purposes in groups and organizations. The flight of the professional class, and the concentration of children from dysfunctional families in government schools leave such schools with a limited capacity to address the problem. The helplessness infects staff and the broader community.

One objective of the project is to work with the community to rebuild the social capital in such schools by linking the school to community support networks, and providing the schools with the educational and social wherewithal to restore norms and educational performance.

Conclusion
Staff in government schools generally make great efforts to promote the wellbeing of their students. It is likely, however, that much of this effort is not based on what we know is likely to produce the outcomes they want. A key part of the strategy to improve student wellbeing in Western Australian government schools is to have the staff that exist to support schools assist teachers to adopt more evidence based strategies. This is predicated on the understanding that the wellbeing of students is more likely to be enhanced by having teachers re-think their everyday interactions with teachers rather than adopt some particular student wellbeing program.

At the system level, the Department is sending a strong signal to schools of the importance of student wellbeing by including the measurement of social outcomes in its system performance measurement regime. This is also having the effect of improving the capacity of schools to monitor the performance of these student outcomes.

The Department is also assisting schools to adopt more evidence based practice through its promotion of a system resource to increase teacher understanding of the social-emotional development of students.

A research partnership between Edith Cowan University and the Department will ensure that the system's policies and strategies are underpinned by evidence of the nature of behaviour problems in our schools and the type of interventions that will be needed to shift students off a trajectory of poor behaviour and low achievement.

There is good reason to think that of the issues that will shape the future of public school systems, the issue of the behaviour and wellbeing of students is at the top of the list. That is why in Western Australia we want our teachers to understand its importance, and to feel that they have the support that they need to put in place the most effective strategies to achieve their goals.