

Teacher Staffroom Episode 4: Mental health research

Dominique Russell

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Thanks for downloading this episode of *Teacher* Staffroom – where we catch you up on the latest evidence, insight and action. I'm Dominique Russell.

We're going to be delving into a lot of recent research in today's episode. That's because a lot of interesting studies have been published recently, and quite a few point to the importance and impact of mental health in a school setting.

And, don't forget, I'll be posing some questions about this content throughout the next 10 or so minutes, so if you're listening along with colleagues, that'd be a great time to discuss your thoughts and ideas, because this a topic that affects each and every one of us. So let's dive in.

Two new episodes of The Research Files dropped recently. Firstly, you might've heard that we spoke with the Chief Investigator of the annual [Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey](#), Associate Professor Philip Riley. He speaks in this episode about the working conditions of principals around the country, and how they don't really seem to be improving at all. The report found that they're dealing with physical violence, bullying and offensive behaviour pretty regularly, and he made the important point of the community's role in improving conditions for school leaders, which I found particularly interesting.

But I think if we don't as a society take some decisions that we do want to look after our local schools and we do want them to really flourish, whether your children go there or not, it would be good for every community to have a highly successful and well-functioning school around the corner. And there could be all kinds of ways that communities can help make that happen. By providing resources, or just being around, just supporting people. We've got a fairly strong blame culture in Australia which I think we need to kind of set aside a bit and start saying “how can I help?” Rather than, what somebody else ought to be doing.

That was Philip Riley there. Now, as expected, in this episode he also touched on the fact that school leaders are usually working pretty long hours. And, if principals are spending most of their time at school, that's definitely going to impact on their overall wellbeing, but also their personal life and the time they're spending with their family. So, I'd like to pose a question to you here.

If you're a school leader, are you regularly setting aside some time to focus on your own health and wellbeing? And if you are, are you also looking at what impact the time you're putting into work could have on your family and your friendships?

Our second episode of the Research Files is on a completely different note. It takes a deep dive into the [concept of game-based learning](#). Rachel Bolstad joined us to talk about the benefits of long-term integration of game-based learning practices in primary and in secondary classes. Here's Rachel:

Yeah, and I think that's a really important message too is that through game-based learning, students' knowledge becomes a really useful resource in the classroom. And particularly game knowledge, which isn't always considered to be, let's say, valuable knowledge, or worthwhile learning knowledge, actually with an

experienced teacher who knows how to make those connections, drawing out that existing knowledge resource that students have got and then finding ways to build on that opens up again, opens up so many new pathways.

It's an interesting point there, and she went on in the episode to speak about how many teachers in this study were wondering why it is that children spend hours trying to overcome a particular challenge in a game, but that same persistence and motivation isn't always seen in a learning setting.

So, that brings up something else to think about. What strategies have you implemented to increase learner engagement in your classroom? What's worked well? And what hasn't? How do you think your students would respond to game implementation?

But let's get back to our mental health focus. [A new study is](#) giving us a clearer picture of the impact of mental disorders on attendance at school in Australia. The results of this report show that students in Year 11 and 12 with a diagnosed mental disorder missed an average of 25.9 days of school in one year. That's over five weeks. For students in the same grades who didn't have a diagnosed mental disorder, the average days absent was about 12.

So, I'd like to offer something to think about here. How do you ensure students are supported when they're unable to attend school? Do you work with parents and carers? It'd be great to hear your thoughts on this, and what different strategies might be out there. There's a lot of interesting and quite confronting statistics in that report, so I'll put a link to our in-depth article on the research in the transcript of this podcast.

Now, of course, poor attendance would have an impact student outcomes. And there were a few articles that we published this month that looked at how some school leaders have worked towards improving student outcomes at their own schools.

[Lorraine Evans](#) – who you might have heard of, because she's a Commonwealth Bank Teaching Fellow this year – is Principal at Malak Primary School in the Northern Territory. In 2016, more than 30 per cent of students were below Foundation year standard in their reading; but in 2019 – just three years later – this percentage dropped to less than 10 per cent.

It all happened because of their strong focus on the individual learner, and there was one particular strategy that sounded quite powerful to me. Each teacher at Malak Primary School chose five students in their class to focus on and aimed to make a difference in their learning within one year. Usually this involved creating individual learning plans for them.

Lorraine said that by having each teacher in the school create individualised learning plans for five students of their choice, the needs of other students in their classrooms were addressed. So, how do you go about meeting the learning needs of all students in your classroom?

And, just on that Commonwealth Bank Teaching Award, we also spoke with [Jessica Colleu Terradas](#). She's based at Como Secondary College in Perth, and is a special education teacher. She works in an Intensive Learning Team that caters for 50-60 students in Years 7-10 each year. The nine classes target reading, writing and mathematics with the overall goal of having students re-join regular classrooms once they've got the basics in place. She had this to say:

So what we do is we have that constant monitoring of progress and our main focus is on progress, not academic [achievement]. I work with my students about how they can track their progress and how they can visually and explicitly see how they're progressing because I think that's very important to shift that into learning.

So, I'd like to pose another question considering what Jessica said just there. How do you help students to see the progress that they're making and the next steps in their learning?

Now, transitioning from primary to secondary school is a huge step for students and [a new report](#) is looking at how schools can ensure the needs of each child are met during this transition period. The report suggests schools look to the principles of universal design for learning – that's an architectural concept of universal access for all and it's a particularly useful approach for the inclusion of students living with a disability.

One interesting point to come out of this report, I found, was the concept of a traffic light system. It suggests providing students different coloured cue cards while they undertake different activities as part of their transition program. It can help students express anxiety or stress during the activity. So, if a student uses a green card, that would mean that they're doing okay, an orange card would be used to express that they are feeling a little bit nervous, and a red card would indicate that they're not coping.

But, finally, back to our overarching theme for this episode – another bit of research that points to mental health is a [sleep education study](#) that was conducted in the UK. I caught up with Dr Chris Harvey, who has been looking into strategies to improve the sleep habits of adolescents. His most recent research report found that by having teachers teach students about healthy sleep habits, some students experienced improved sleep. He had this to say about the study:

So, I think what we demonstrated is that through sleep education, we can improve sleep in adolescents who are struggling with their sleep. Now, what we need to look at going forward, is what impact that has on their mental health.

We know that sleep is a predictor of good mental health. So I think the biggest implication is that we have an education intervention which is ... feasible for teachers to learn ... which does seem to have an impact on sleep.

That's all from me today and you're all caught up on the latest evidence, insight and action in education. So, if you want to access anything I've mentioned in this episode, you'll find all the links at our website – that's teachermagazine.com.au. That's where you'll also find the sign up form for our email bulletin, which delivers our new content directly to your inbox each week.

And, remember, we'd love to hear from you, so don't forget to get in touch with any questions or reflections on this episode.

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