‘Next practice’ for pastoral care and student wellbeing in schools

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The school environment plays a major role in the social and emotional wellbeing of children. Increasing national and international attention has therefore been directed towards the development of Health Promoting Schools [1], with efforts made to assess how curriculum and pastoral practice can best contribute to students’ health and wellbeing.

In Australia, the National Safe Schools Framework [2] sets as a key priority the need for a shared vision of physical and emotional wellbeing for all students in Australian schools, as well as identifying guiding principles and standards to inform practice and assist school communities to build safe and supportive environments. Increasing interest in the emotional health and pastoral care of children in schools has resulted in research to examine how curriculum and pastoral practice can contribute to students’ social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing [3]. This article reviews the definition of pastoral care and successful practice models for pastoral care, offering recommendations for Australian schools.

Defining pastoral care

Within the Australian literature there are few concise definitions of pastoral care in schools [4]. This is likely due to the complexity and wide scope of areas classified as pastoral care, often known by differing labels. For example, ‘guidance’ has long been referred to in curriculum programmes in some states, while other parts of Australia use terms like ‘career education’, ‘life path’, or ‘pastoral curriculum’, and schools in England and Wales often refer to ‘personal and social education’ (PSE), or ‘personal, social and health education’ (PSHE) [5]. Nevertheless, defining pastoral care is important to delineate the boundaries of what pastoral care does and does not involve [4].

Early definitions of pastoral care in Australia, influenced by Christian philosophy, focused on personal development and in particular the “general and moral welfare” of students [6]. From this perspective, pastoral care aimed to foster “values”, particularly those of “mutual respect, responsibility and service within the community” to provide students with “every opportunity to value themselves and to experience well-being” [7, p. 3-4].

While these traditional approaches to pastoral care are associated with the fostering of children’s moral welfare and values of mutual respect through extra-curricular activities, today the health and wellbeing of students is increasingly attributed to school conditions, school relationships, means of fulfilment, and health status [8]. Pastoral care has taken on a more inclusive function, being seen as inextricably linked with the academic curriculum and structural organisation of the school. Effective pastoral care within the context of learning requires that students become competent and confident to discuss and make decisions
“based on their home life and what is learned at school” [9, p. 9]. Pastoral care therefore involves promoting and supporting “knowledge of self, self-efficacy, healthy risk taking, goal setting, negotiation, reflection and empowerment” to provide optimal learning and development outcomes [10, p. 30].

The impact of pastoral care on learning outcomes

In the past two decades, there has been an overarching focus on ensuring high student academic performance within schools [11]. As a result of this focus on outcomes, it is sometimes argued that teachers, particularly at the secondary school level, view teaching subject disciplines as their primary function, and that the notion of caring is outside of their teaching domain [9, 12].

However, considerable research demonstrates that emotions and relationships with teachers can facilitate or impede children’s academic engagement, work ethic, commitment to learning, and ultimately their school success [13]. This is because relationships and emotional processes affect how and why young people learn. The effective mastery of social and emotional competencies is associated not only with greater wellbeing, but also better school performance [14]. Indeed, one child development study found that improvements in the psychosocial environment of a school mediated almost all observed positive student outcomes [15].

The evidence therefore strongly supports the need for effective pastoral care policy and practices, fully integrated in the curriculum and structural organisation of the school to meet students’ personal, social and academic needs [9]. The School Wellbeing Model developed and tested by Konu and Rimpela [16] shows how wellbeing in schools is closely inter-connected with teaching/education, achievements and learning, and that student wellbeing is closely related to school conditions; school relationships; students’ means of self-fulfilment; and health status [16].

Four core outcomes of pastoral care

When reviewing the evidence, four factors continually emerge as core outcomes of pastoral care:

1) Promoting health and wellbeing

The promotion of students’ health and wellbeing is a key challenge for schools, with issues of health and wellbeing frequently separated from other aspects of school life. The impact of the school environment on students’ health has been increasingly recognised, and the Australian Department of Education incorporated a health and wellbeing policy in its model of academic care and education in 2001 [12]. Supporting students’ health and wellbeing – whether physical, mental, emotional or relational - is now seen as vital for facilitating individual development, increasing positive interaction with others, easing the pathway to goal achievement, and enhancing recovery from adversity [17].

2) Building resilience
Promoting resiliency in schools is a key protective factor in learning as well as in social and emotional development. Resiliency (the ability to successfully cope with or overcome risk and develop competence and protective factors [18, 19]), is increasingly discussed within the context of pastoral care’s goal to promoting mental health and wellbeing in children. Large-scale longitudinal studies in the field of resiliency have identified internal and external protective factors [18] and the role schools can play in enhancing the protective nature of learning environments [18, 20-22]. Factors which enable students to become resilient to adversity include supportive relationships with teachers and staff, links with ‘pro-social’ organisations and access to receptive, ‘high quality’ schools [18, 23, 24]. Resiliency strategies include a combination of the following: “increase bonding; set clear and consistent boundaries; teach life skills; provide caring and support; set and communicate high expectations; provide opportunities for meaningful participation” [25, p. 16].

3) Enhancing academic care

The concept of academic care has been defined as: “assisting adolescents to develop positive self-esteem, and feelings of well-being and self-efficacy through the school’s academic and organizational structures, and through adults’ relationships with students. It involves positive interactions/relationships with students and the promotion of students’ well-being by ensuring that academic structures and interactions are sympathetic to adolescent needs”[26, p. 30]. Both pastoral and academic care are inextricably linked, focusing on positive learning and developmental outcomes, with “academic care having the capacity to strengthen the pastoral work of schools by enhancing protective processes, particularly resilience”[26, p. 29]. This however, requires developing an integrated whole school approach to build a supportive and protective school culture [26] which can be characterised by the presence of caring relationships, high expectation messages and opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution [27] and clarifying what students need from the curriculum, their teachers, their learning experiences, and the school community [28]. Teachers need a basic understanding of how their own actions, their relationships with students, and the learning environment which they create, can enhance or harm the wellbeing of students, particularly in relation to the development of protective factors [26].

4) Building human and social capital

Building human and social capital is crucially important to improve the health, wellbeing and resiliency of children [29, 30]. Defined as “the social cohesion of a community, and a sense of belonging” that individuals feel [31], social capital involves “levels of trust, mutual responsibility and reciprocity within a community” [32]. This social cohesion is empowering and involves creating opportunities for students to establish strong community networks and supportive environments in schools, families, and peer groups [29, 30]. Social capital can be built by school environments where students feel they are treated fairly, can develop close relationships, can seek help, are encouraged and challenged to do their best, can set realistic standards, and feel empowered to take part in and contribute to their communities.
Successful practice models for pastoral care

A number of Australian national frameworks have been instrumental in laying the foundation for a whole school approach to pastoral care through the development of principles, guidelines, and standards for the promotion of children’s emotional health and wellbeing, resilience, and academic care [2, 17]. The Model for Effective Practice in Schools [17] builds on the National Safe Schools Framework, drawing attention to the need for pastoral care to be emphasised at the levels of: curriculum, teaching and learning; school organisation, ethos and environment; and partnerships and services. The model acknowledges the need for different levels of support, including the importance of targeted approaches for specific needs as well as for individual needs in addition to a general whole school approach in line with the research of Best [33]. Figure 2 illustrates the model developed to facilitate effective pastoral care in schools and stresses that any comprehensive standard needs to include components of promotion and universal prevention; selective prevention; indicated prevention; and case work [17].

Figure 2: Model for Effective Practice in Schools [17]

Recommendations for Australian schools

To protect and encourage students’ social, emotional, and physical wellbeing, it is necessary for schools to provide a standard of pastoral care in education that delivers safe and supportive environments for students. This involves clearly defining pastoral care in schools and implementing whole school policies and practices that are evidence-based and use a socio-ecological framework [34]. There is an urgent need to evaluate the pastoral care models in different school settings, gathering information from different groups within the school community to obtain more reliable evidence for school improvement [35].
Often schools have collected (but often under-utilised) different types of pastoral care data which can be used to assess the effectiveness of their pastoral care practices and policies. Comprehensive analyses of these data can also help to guide decisions about what actions the school needs to take to enhance its pastoral care efforts. For example, these data (and other purposefully collected data) can determine what aspects of school’s pastoral care activities are working well, what could be reduced due to limited effectiveness, and what’s missing. This kind of review is essential for schools that often adopt a variety of ‘pastoral care’ programs without a clear understanding of what outcomes these programs offer their individual school. The goal of this review would be to help schools ‘do more with less effort’ by creating a more efficient and parsimonious outcomes-focused approach to pastoral care. An important first step of this review process however, as mentioned previously, is the need to clearly define pastoral care and its outcomes for the school, so that these in turn can be evaluated to determine their effectiveness.

Pastoral care can be mapped against five main school-level tasks for each year level.

1. **Proactive, preventative pastoral care**: Activities and educational processes that anticipate ‘critical incidents’ in children’s lives and aim to prevent and reduce the need for reactive casework.

2. **Developmental pastoral curricula**: Curricula developed to promote personal, social, moral, spiritual and cultural development and wellbeing through distinctive programmes, tutorial work and extracurricular activities.

3. **The promotion and maintenance of an orderly and supportive / collaborative environment**: Building a community within the school, creating supportive systems and positive relations between all members of the community, and promoting a strong ethos of mutual care and concern.

4. **Reactive pastoral casework**: ‘Open door’ guidance and counselling, peer support and mentoring, welfare network (link between school, home and external agencies such as social services).

5. **The management and administration of pastoral care**: The process of planning, resourcing, monitoring, evaluating, encouraging and facilitating all of the above.

The challenge always exists for schools with limited resources to deliver these school-level tasks with parity across each year level. School staff can feel pressured to focus pastoral care efforts on certain groups of students or certain year levels, such as those transitioning to secondary school, perhaps at the expense of pastoral care efforts for other groups of students and/or year levels. Finding a balance between proactive and reactive pastoral care delivery is essential, but requires schools to consider their current pastoral care organisation and structures and the school community’s roles and responsibilities.

As discussed, a clear definition of what is and isn’t pastoral care within the school is important to manage the school community’s expectations of the five school level pastoral care tasks. This clarity also helps the school community to better understand their roles, responsibilities and expectations, which in turn will help to reduce the inordinately high workloads of staff with formal pastoral care roles. The limited time for pastoral care can result in staff focussing more on problems or crises than proactive practices. While all
school staff have a pastoral care responsibility, this often isn’t clearly delineated, which may mean some staff don’t engage in pastoral care actions but instead ‘pass this up the line’ to other pastoral care positions of responsibility, such as heads of house or heads of year levels. A more distributed model of pastoral care delivery where all staff (including external service providers to the school) know the actions they are required to take both proactively and reactively is most likely to be effective. The tutor group/home room or similar structures in a secondary school, for example, where teachers remain with a group of students over a number of years and are responsible for getting to know (well) a small number of students, is key to this process. These staff can become the first line of action and indeed are often in the best position to take proactive or reactive action, as they should know and be able to talk with these students almost better than anyone else in the school. This approach is most effective when all staff understand what is required of them within their pastoral/teaching role, and as such these actions can be implemented in an appropriately tailored and timely fashion, and consistently across the school.

“Next” practice for pastoral care

As part of the push for whole school change, the authors have conducted many reviews of pastoral care activity in schools, using as a framework the school-level tasks defined previously. These reviews have identified a number of key areas of importance for ‘next practice’ for pastoral care in schools. Two of these trends (one proactive and one reactive) involve a) the importance of relationships to learning; and b) changes in young people’s help seeking behaviours, and are outlined below.

The need to build relationships and a sense of belonging

Of most importance in whole school reviews of policy and practice is the prevailing school ethos and climate, as described by the school community. School ethos and climate is closely related to the quality of the relationships between members of the school community. It is said that relationships are the ‘oil of learning’, but relationships are also the ‘oil of wellbeing’. Students learn better if they like their teacher and if their teacher is perceived to respect and like them, and simultaneously through positive relationships both teachers and students experience greater wellbeing.

Pastoral care structures such as home room / tutor group, peer leaders and other activities such as co-curricular activities, are essential to purposefully build positive peer to peer student relationships (with same age as well as also older and younger peers) and student to teacher relationships. While these relationships can be built in classrooms, they should also develop during informal contact with students. School staff, for example, can be encouraged to use each yard duty time or co-curricular activity supervision to get to know at least two students and to ‘bank quality time’ with all the students with whom they come into contact. Later this ‘credit’ is available and may be drawn upon to engage or support these students in times of need.

Similarly, the quality (and quantity) of these school relationships helps students to feel a sense of belonging to school which in turn encourages their attendance and engagement. This sense of belonging can be enhanced not just through the social environment, but also
through the school’s physical environment. Schools should consider questions such as: How does your school’s physical environment feel as you enter, is it welcoming? Would different cultural groups feel welcome? Does the school feel like it belongs to the students? Do walls in the school display student art and achievements or notices? Are the outdoor areas appealing with a variety of activities for students to engage in? Is pleasant seating provided to encourage students to interact positively? Much can be done at low cost and with the active involvement of students and staff to create both positive social and physical environments, which in turn support the quality of the academic environment.

The need to enhance help seeking and provision

Increasingly, research is showing that students are more likely to talk to their peers or engage in self-help (mostly using online sources) if they are experiencing any difficulties, rather than approach their teachers or even parents. Friendly Schools’ Data from the Friendly Schools Project shows that of the small percentage of students (25% of girls and less than 10% of boys) who do approach teachers for help, less than 50% report things getting better as a result of making this contact [36].

Hence, it is important for staff to improve their responses to students who are seeking help. The LATE Model [37] (based on the work of Michael Tunnecliffe [38]) provides an effective structure to help adults to talk with young people about difficulties they may be experiencing. This model can be used by adults and peers to show young people who are experiencing difficulties that they are being listened to and that they are in control of the situation and what happens next. The LATE model comprises four actions linked to the acronym: a) **Listen** (Thank the student for sharing the information with you, ask open ended questions, use non-invasive communication options such as walk and talk); b) **Acknowledge the young person’s concerns** (using reassuring statements such as ‘It sounds like you are having a tough time’); c) **Talk about options** so that students feel in control of their own problems. Ask the student what they have tried already and if it has worked for them and what they would like you to do to help them; and d) **End with encouragement** to give the student a feeling of hope and that they could come back and talk some more if needed. It may also be beneficial to follow-up with students at a later date, to ensure the problem has been resolved or to offer further assistance.

Because young people are more likely to approach their peers than adults for assistance, it will also be important to help young people understand and effectively prepare for their own pastoral care roles in the school community. A truly distributed model of pastoral care delivery involves staff, students and families together providing skilled support to enhance student wellbeing. Student voice is key to this process. Talking to students about what is working well and not so well in their school’s delivery of pastoral care and particularly what they could contribute to the school’s pastoral care, is essential to ensuring the school’s efforts in this area meet the needs of the students.

Importantly however, for both teachers and students alike, both need to understand the limitations of the support they can provide and fully recognise when they need to be encouraging those seeking help to engage with professional counsellors such as those
available through the school. However, given that students may find it difficult to approach a school counsellor they don’t know, the school needs to implement strategies to increase the profile of the counsellor(s), and encourage students to help or support friends or peers who would benefit from seeing a counsellor. Similarly, online approaches to counsellors have worked in some schools as part of the early trust building phase of counselling. This online contact aims to build student confidence to meet the counsellor face to face. This appears to be particularly helpful for boys.

The online environment presents some interesting new opportunities and challenges for pastoral care providers and this will no doubt continue as students find and use this space both to enhance and harm their own and other’s wellbeing. As this paper suggests, the best way forward is ongoing monitoring of the strengths and needs of the students in our care, to be sure that the limited resources we can access are applied effectively to actions that make the most difference to students’ engagement, learning and wellbeing.

References