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Teacher professional learning: Towards a shared understanding about student mental health

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Increasingly in Australia and overseas, attention has been given to the possibility of working through schools to improve the mental health of children. KidsMatter Primary, the Australian mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention initiative, is one such possibility but places growing expectations on teachers about their capacity to promote wellbeing and to recognise and support children with mental health difficulties. Discussion highlights issues related to professional learning, particularly for teachers since they are positioned as key facilitators of classroom participation in the national mental health agenda that will ultimately drive the sustainability of initiatives like KidsMatter.

Introduction

This chapter addresses issues of professional learning that relate to the attitudes, skills and knowledge needed by school communities to effectively implement a whole-school approach to student mental health and wellbeing. The term ‘health promoting schools’ is used commonly in Australia and internationally with reference to schools

who adopt a whole-school and community approach to improving student health and wellbeing across its many dimensions (Mukoma & Flisher, 2004). It is now well accepted that education is positively related to health, and that schools are ideal sites for implementing educational programs by playing a key role in promoting healthy behaviours and attitudes. As Murray-Harvey and Slee (2010) have noted "...it is important that schools provide an environment that makes it possible for their students to thrive and to achieve, not only academically but in all ways that relate to their overall wellbeing" (p.271). It is also widely reported that most mental health problems develop during childhood (Rickwood, 2005) and that with appropriate early intervention, mental health difficulties are significantly reduced. KidsMatter, as a whole-school intervention, acts to make the relationship between education and health explicit. KidsMatter provides an educative framework to promote mental health and wellbeing, which further facilitates a cycle of improved educational and health outcomes for students, their parents and teachers. The significant and positive outcomes from the pilot evaluation of KidsMatter during 2007-08 in 100 Australian primary schools (Slee et al., 2009) have led to federal government support for more extensive national dissemination. As part of managing the broader reach of KidsMatter, attention is being given to the challenges, one of which is delivering the professional learning needed to implement KidsMatter effectively and sustainably.

The issue is an important one, and recognised as such, in the recommendations of a recent *Inquiry into the Potential for Developing Opportunities for Schools to become a focus for Promoting Healthy Community Living* (Parliamentary Education and Training Committee, 2011),

...that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [in Victoria, Australia] establish a comprehensive professional development program for teachers and school leaders to develop the advanced knowledge and skills required to plan, implement and evaluate school-based health promotion initiatives. (Recommendation E, p.6)

Context

Central to any whole-school approach to improving mental health and wellbeing outcomes for students, is that the school explicitly addresses, not only through the curriculum, but also through its ethos and learning environment, the needs of all students, staff and the wider community. Figure 12.1 captures these central ideas as a tripartite framework, based on the Australian Health Promoting School Association website

(www.ahpsa.org.au), and highlights this broader conceptualisation of the holistic approach of a health promoting school. This requires a commitment by all members of a school's staff, beyond the few already invested with expert knowledge and skills. In relation to KidsMatter, this holistic approach relies as much on the personal perceptions (attitudes), knowledge and confidence (self-efficacy) of staff around their mental health and wellbeing classroom and school practice, as it does on contextual factors such as policies and procedures (Askill-Williams, Lawson & Dix, 2011; Jourdan, Stirling, McNamara & Pommier, 2011).



Figure 12.1. A health promoting school framework

The Australian education system is in the process of systematic reform of national curriculum, and assessment and teaching standards related to wellbeing and social emotional learning are now included. Accompanying this change, the discourse about wellbeing and social emotional learning is beginning to filter into broader discussions about pedagogical quality (Ingvarson & Rowe, 2008). Nevertheless, gaps clearly exist in graduate and in-service teacher preparedness to be knowledgeable and competent in social-emotional learning, mental health promotion, and early identification. The nature of those gaps, their implications, and how to overcome them, are increasingly the focus of debate.

Key Issues

Learning about mental health and mental illness

A key issue for professional learning in the area of mental health, a core feature of KidsMatter, is, as with any new learning, how best to address core content around social and emotional health and wellbeing, and for teachers particularly, to connect the positive interrelationship of these dimensions with improving academic learning. Alongside the

need for staff to embrace an inclusive, holistic model of wellbeing as integral to their practice, is how to address learning around the ‘hidden’ disabilities related to mental health. The significant level of unidentified and untreated children with mental health problems represents a service gap between whole-school mental health intervention and external mental health service providers. Fealy and Story (2006) report that “at any given time as many as 10 per cent of the school-aged population have untreated and possibly unidentified mental health problems” (p.3). Because teachers are uniquely placed to promote wellbeing and to identify at-risk students in the school context, enabling earlier intervention, they are also uniquely placed to address these gaps but require improved pre-service training and in-service professional learning. Mental Health professional learning for teachers is not about learning the specifics of mental health conditions or their symptoms and treatments – that is the domain of health professionals. As Clark (2010, p.2) states

It is about developing awareness and understanding of mental health issues and their impact on learning and achievement...because our mental health impacts on everything we do, including our ability to learn and work.

In order for professional learning around the mental health-illness continuum to be enacted, it will require KidsMatter, or any other school-based initiative with a focus on mental health, to address staff attitudes, perceptions and beliefs. Consistent with any model of effective implementation, staff will need to feel motivated (committed) to adopt new practices, to be convinced of the benefits of the changed practice, and to feel confident and supported to implement the practice (Askill-Williams et al., 2011; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Jourdan et al., 2011).

Proliferation of programs

The increasing evidence (e.g. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger 2011; Murray-Harvey, 2010) that positive mental health is clearly linked to positive learning, has recruited teachers into providing a pivotal role in its active promotion and delivery. In Australia, there are over 70 school-based programs¹ that include not only knowledge-based curricula to promote students’ social-emotional awareness, but also process-based programs to foster the development of students’ social-emotional skills. Identifying and selecting the appropriate programs for schools has been a challenging and unstructured process

¹ Based on the KidsMatter listing as of April 2011
www.kidsmatterprimary.edu.au/programs-guide/programs-in-the-guide

for teachers, done by-and-large on the basis of bottom-up assumptions about implementation that rely on individual teachers using their own skills, knowledge and resources. This is evidenced by the responses from school wellbeing coordinators in 58 KidsMatter pilot schools, that 74 per cent of these schools had adopted one or more programs prior to commencing KidsMatter.

Social and Emotional Learning: A Teacher's Guide, has been disseminated by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health as “particularly useful for students in their final years of study and will prove a handy reference in their early years of teaching” (ResponseAbility, 2010). *MindMatters*, now in its tenth year, has been implemented by approximately 40 per cent of secondary schools in Australia and claims awareness of their resources across 98 per cent of schools nationally. Schools are provided with 12 hours of professional learning to improve staff knowledge of mental health in each of the four components of KidsMatter, in addition to introductory and implementation professional learning events. However, none of these professional learning actions has assessment or feedback systems that assess the quality of what teachers *know* and are able *do*, following the professional learning. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (2007) refer to this as a ‘black box’ in the professional learning (PL) literature where “little is known about how teachers interpret the available understanding and utilise the particular skills offered during PL opportunities, or the consequent impact of these on teaching practice and student outcomes” (p.xxiii). This professional learning into practice issue is likely to be exacerbated when schools feel overwhelmed by the number of programs and frameworks being promoted to them (Askill-Williams et al., 2011; Askill-Williams, Lawson & Murray-Harvey, 2007; Jourdan et al., 2011).

Essential elements of professional learning

Consistent with a whole-school approach, staff involvement is required at the planning, implementation and evaluation phases of embarking on initiatives like KidsMatter, a point discussed later in the chapter. There is consensus in the literature (see Timperley et al., 2007) on a number of elements that are essential to meaningful professional learning:

- providing time;
- engaging external expertise;
- engaging teachers in learning;
- challenging problematic discourses;
- establishing a community of practice;

- ensuring content is consistent with policy; and
- active involvement of leaders in the professional learning.

Importantly, the issue of note emerging from this literature is that any one attribute or action will not, in itself, be the catalyst for changing practice. The issue of time allocation for professional learning is a case in point. While extended time is necessary for extensive learning, how time is used is more important than the amount of time, with extended (sometimes costly) opportunities to learn not necessarily proving more effective than shorter events. Notwithstanding the lack of clarity about optimum exposure to professional learning, the evidence is clear that teachers who engage in professional learning relevant to their classroom practice are more likely to implement a program or initiative in line with its intentions (fidelity).

Educational Implications

Understanding about the key stages and processes that are integral to successful whole-school and whole-system reform needs to be part of professional learning. According to Fullan and Levin (2009) “The basic premise is respect for teachers and for professional knowledge, but this is accompanied by intensive development of the profession to a high standard of practice based on evidence” (p.30). Learning for teachers needs to address diversity and inclusivity in the same way as it applies to the students they teach. Teachers are self-regulating professionals who construct their own learning experiences and who need that learning to be meaningful in the context of their teaching practice. In order for professional learning activities and resources to have impact, they must be appropriately paced and matched to the phases that a school proceeds along when implementing a whole-school program.

A review of the literature indicated a number of phases along a path or trajectory that a school would typically take when implementing a whole-school initiative. Successful implementation at each phase relies on professional learning. Stith et al. (2006) recommended that effective school-based prevention programming should consider the issue of school readiness. Durlak and DuPre (2008) discussed phases that involved dissemination, adoption, implementation and sustainability. The literature also mentioned additional important factors for success, including ongoing monitoring and feedback (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman & Wallace, 2005; Fullan & Levin, 2009; Greenhalgh et al., 2005), and an incentives system responsive to implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan & Levin, 2009). Accordingly, the proposed

trajectory of a school implementing KidsMatter involves seven phases as presented in Figure 12.2.

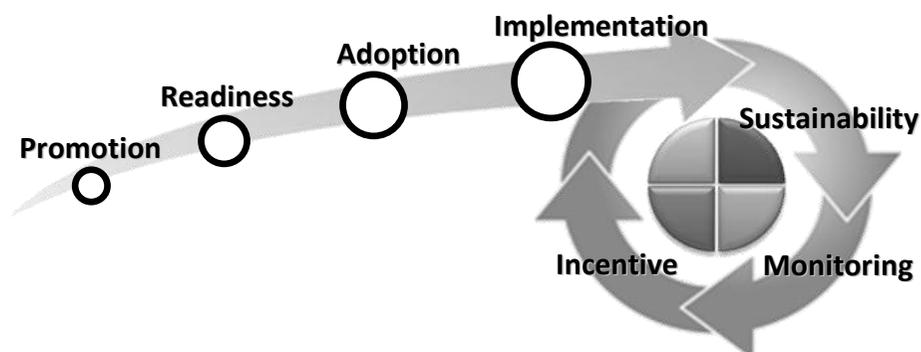


Figure 12.2. KidsMatter phases of implementation

Brief discussion is made of the importance of professional learning at some of these phases.

1. Promotion considers how school leaders or other education and health professionals in a community hear about the program and have access to initial information.

2. Readiness for a school to undertake a program is reported in the literature as an important phase to assess. It refers to the extent to which the school recognises there is a problem to be addressed, is willing to address it and, importantly, has the capacity to do so. While it is likely that a school will drive this stage, in some cases it may be community agencies that perceive the need and approach their local school to implement the program. Either way, the school principal must understand the time and resources involved in implementing the program and assess whether the school is ready.

3. Adoption: The literature indicates that a key person, such as the school principal, may take the initiative to drive the adoption of an intervention. This may be undertaken through a whole-school decision-making process and may also be informed by community and external agency input.

Since one of the characteristics of high quality professional learning is that it aligns with school goals, school leaders need to engage with their staff at each of the preparatory phases of a new program or initiative. Professional learning may be needed to explicate the compatibility of a program with the school's strategic goals, with teachers' roles, and with current practices (Jourdan et al., 2011).

4. Implementation considers how well the program is conducted during the start-up period. The initiative must meet the local needs of the community in which the intervention is taking place and must be responsive to local conditions. Central to this stage is the establishment and resourcing of a school action team that plans and drives the implementation of the program, supported by local parenting and mental health professionals, online resources and a regional program coordinator. Durlak and DuPre (2008) are emphatic that “Effective leadership is crucial to implementation” (p.338), and Timperley et al. (2007) point to evidence that ‘effective’ leadership includes active support for the professional learning of staff, including themselves.

5. Sustainability considers whether the fidelity, dosage and quality of the program are maintained over time in the manner intended. Follow up to the KidsMatter pilot suggests that when there are changes to leadership or other staff invested with responsibility for driving the initiative, threats to sustainability arise when knowledge (through professional learning) has not been distributed widely enough across the school and its wider community.

6. Monitoring: An accurate monitoring and feedback system should be integrated into the operation of the program.

7. Incentive: Infrastructure that provides incentives or recognition to schools and individuals within schools for achieving implementation milestones feed into a cycle of continual improvement.

The proposed delivery of professional learning in KidsMatter, as it is disseminated to 2100 schools nation-wide by 2014, is based on a train-the-trainer model that comprises a staged process of professional learning events underpinned by a planned strategic whole-school approach. The staged process is designed to guide a school along a path of whole-school awareness about KidsMatter through to sustainability for the longer term. Table 12.1 maps the first five phases of implementation onto the professional learning events.

However, because professional learning in school is generally conducted by a trained member of staff using a set of specific resources the opportunity to assess the quality of delivery and the improved knowledge of staff, in the traditional sense, is not possible. Inability to assess standards of delivery and standards of learning does provide a challenge to ensuring that quality of implementation is maintained during the national expansion of KidsMatter. For KidsMatter to be sustainable and continue to have improved outcomes for students to the

extent experienced in the pilot evaluation (Slee et al., 2009), solutions to this issue need to be found as KidsMatter expands.

Table 12.1. KidsMatter Professional Learning Events mapped to the phases of whole-school implementation

Phase	Event	Description
Promotion; Readiness	<i>KidsMatter Briefing</i> for School leaders and other school, education and health personnel	Provides preliminary information about KidsMatter and how it can support the work of school leaders, school, education and health personnel
Adoption; Sustainability	<i>Overview of KidsMatter</i> for School Action Teams, new staff, and education, health and community personnel	Provides a deeper understanding of the KidsMatter framework, its underpinning mental health concepts and what it can mean for various roles within the school.
Implementation	<i>Getting Started: Professional Learning for Action Team Members</i> for Staff within schools taking a lead role implementing KidsMatter in their school	This session provides information about the content of KidsMatter, its underpinning mental health concepts and processes and tools for aiding implementation of KidsMatter while supporting school priorities and strategic planning.
Implementation; Sustainability	<i>Implementation support and network meeting</i> for Action Teams from other schools and community agency personnel working with KidsMatter schools	These workshops provide an opportunity for sharing of experiences in implementing KidsMatter. In addition to building networks and collegial support, these workshops also provide additional professional learning and support from KidsMatter staff to enhance the implementation process.
Implementation; Sustainability	<i>Facilitating Component 1: A positive school community</i> <i>Facilitating Component 2: Social and emotional learning for students</i> <i>Facilitating Component 3: Working with parents and carers</i> <i>Facilitating Component 4: Helping students experiencing mental health difficulties</i> for the School Staff Trainer	Each event familiarises the trainer (school staff or external education or health agency person) with the content of each of the four component areas and the whole-school staff processes of the professional learning. It also prepares the trainer to deliver effectively the 3-4 hours per component of professional learning to school staff.

Future Directions

As KidsMatter expands over the coming years and infrastructure to support national implementation and quality assurance is developed, there is, for the first time in Australia, an opportunity to also develop a systemic and quality assured approach to improving pre-service and in-service teachers' knowledge, competence and confidence in the area of student mental health and wellbeing. Even with the development of high quality resources and programs in Australia, mental health and

wellbeing initiatives will continue to rely on teachers' accepting, implementing and evaluating them. Providing teachers with the expertise and confidence to undertake these complex tasks can only be achieved by supporting their ongoing professional learning needs.

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