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Facilitating student wellbeing: Relationships do matter

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Facilitating student wellbeing: Relationships do matter

Background: Alongside academic and vocational goals, schools are increasingly being called upon to address student wellbeing. Existing evidence suggests that strong relationships and a sense of connectedness in school communities are important for fostering subjective wellbeing. However, identifying the specific nature of such relational dynamics, and accommodating the ‘personal’ within school cultures increasingly dominated by ‘performance’ narratives, remains a problematic task.

Purpose: This paper draws on Honneth’s recognition theory (1995, 2001, 2004) to offer fresh insight into *how* relationships act to facilitate and limit the experience of wellbeing at school. We suggest that such an approach holds considerable potential for developing teachers’ understanding of the tacit and explicit ways they and their students experience being cared for, respected and valued, and the ways in which such actions impact on wellbeing.

Design and methods: The paper reports the qualitative findings from a large mixed-method study, involving students and staff across primary and secondary schools in three regions of Australia. The qualitative phase involved focus groups with 606 primary and secondary students and individual interviews with 89 teachers and principals.

Results: Across the focus groups and interviews, students and teachers placed considerable emphasis on the importance of relationships, while reporting differences in their views about *which* relationships support wellbeing. Alongside this, there were differences in the importance teachers and students

placed on each of the three strands of Honneth's recognition theory (translated for this study as being cared for, respected and valued) for influencing student wellbeing.

Conclusions: The findings affirm the critical role that relationships play in promoting wellbeing in the context of schools. Using recognition theory to analyse students' and teachers' views and experiences of wellbeing provides much greater insight into *how* these relationships are enacted – this being through the mutual experience of being cared for, respected and valued – within the context of schools.

Keywords: student wellbeing, relationships, recognition, care, respect

Introduction

While the health and happiness of children may be of paramount importance for parents, existing literature highlights that such aspirations have tended to be muted in schools, given the dominant emphasis on academic outcomes and workforce readiness (Cohen 2006; Sanderse, Walker, and Jones 2015). Recently, however, the discourse of 'wellbeing' has become more visible in education, health and child protection policy and practice, with its narrative linked to concerns over the pressures and complexities of growing up in contemporary consumer society and interest in preventative approaches to mental health (Currie et al. 2010; Eckersley, Wierenga, and Wyn 2005). While wellbeing is commonly connected to notions of health and happiness, the rapid adoption of the term, alongside its multidimensional, subjective nature, creates the risk that it becomes a much celebrated but little understood concept. We took a grounded approach to exploring wellbeing in our study. However,

the following definition offers useful clarification for the purposes of this paper: wellbeing ‘is about gaining the strength and capacity to lead a full and productive life, and having the resilience to deal with change and unpredictability’ (AIHW 2009, 60).

A compelling imperative influencing the wellbeing agenda within the school context is extensive evidence suggesting links between facilitating wellbeing and key educational concerns, such as behaviour, attitudes to school and academic achievement (Durlak et al. 2011). A persistent feature of this evidence is that strong relationships and a sense of connectedness at school are important mechanisms through which these multiple benefits are realised (Noble and McGrath 2012; Patton et al. 2000; Rowe, Stewart, and Patterson 2007). Explicating the links, Hodgson (2007, 59) writes:

‘within the kinds of relationships and experiences which students have with each other, with educators, and with the total logic of education...[is] the capacity (or not) to feel included, responded to, to have one's particular learning and educational needs understood and respectfully responded to, and to have a say in their educational experiences’.

While there have been numerous interventions designed to help schools develop students’ social and emotional competencies (Durlak et al. 2011), enabling the kinds of relational experiences Hodgson describes requires a cultural shift which can be difficult to mandate or effect.

In this paper, we draw upon the views of teachers and students, which were gathered as part of a large Australian study on wellbeing in schools. We discuss the

ways in which relationships are embedded in understandings and experiences of wellbeing. We examine the significance of this in light of Honneth's (1995, 2001, 2004) recognition theory, which places emphasis on the role played by reciprocal recognition in inter-personal relationships in underpinning an individual's self-confidence, self-esteem and sense of wellbeing (Graham and Fitzgerald 2010). This study represents the first time that Honneth's theory of recognition has been tested for its salience in understanding actors' conceptualisations of wellbeing.

Literature Review

Wellbeing at school

Schools are essentially relational places. Relationships in this context may directly affect student wellbeing, either positively or negatively, such as when teachers or friends are kind or supportive, or if children experience bullying, exclusion from friendship groups or conflict with teachers (Bernard, Stephanou, and Urbach 2007; Redmond, Skattebol, and Saunders 2013). As Patton et al. (2000, 587) highlight, 'young people spend close to half their waking hours in school and inevitably the quality of experiences with teachers and peers in that setting will affect emotional wellbeing'. This takes place within the broader educational context, which Hodgson (2007, 59) refers to as the 'total logic of education.'

Relationships, both within school and towards education, are often located in discourses of 'school connectedness.' Consistent evidence indicates that 'school connectedness' correlates with a positive sense of wellbeing (Rowe, Stewart, and Patterson 2007). However, it has been suggested that as many as half of all secondary school students have a contested sense of school connectedness (Sulkowski, Demary, and Lazarus 2012), largely as a result of dissonance with the prevailing 'logic of

education'. This can lead to student disengagement and resultant tension in relationships with teachers, reinforcing a lack of connectedness and impacting upon wellbeing (Patton et al. 2000). Since student retention is a key goal and persistent challenge for education, matters of *engagement* need to remain a high priority if academic performance and overall wellbeing outcomes are to be realised (Gray and Hackling 2009).

The link between school connectedness and relationships is further evidenced in children and young people's conceptualisations of their wellbeing at school, which emphasise the importance of social relations and activities over their educational experiences (Gristy 2012; Soutter 2011). The importance of a healthy socio-relational environment has been underlined by longitudinal evidence indicating social connectedness in adolescence is a better predictor of adult wellbeing than academic achievement (Olsson et al. 2013).

Facilitating wellbeing in school

Given the links identified above, it is not surprising that wellbeing at school is now increasingly aligned with debates and discussions around raising attainment and improving engagement: this is apparent, for example, in concepts such as creative teaching, relevant curriculum, democratic classrooms, caring teachers and participatory processes (de Róiste et al. 2012; Gray and Hackling 2009; Hamilton and Redmond 2010). While there is implied acknowledgement of the role and importance of relationships within these aspects of practice, the cultural shifts required within systems and schools to fully integrate these remain somewhat elusive. Further, teachers often report feeling constrained or unsupported in the socio-relational aspects

of their role (Kemp and Reupert 2012), leading to disillusionment, stress, and potential burnout (Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006).

A range of interventions have been designed to help schools support student wellbeing (Durlak et al. 2011). These tend to involve increased curriculum content in the area of social and emotional skills and learning, and/or advocating for a change towards a more relational, participatory pedagogy of the kind mentioned above. Clearly, changing the socio-relational culture and pedagogical approaches of schools to better facilitate wellbeing is more complex than allocating time to teach social and emotional skills (Cohen 2006). The risk, therefore, is that ‘wellbeing’ becomes a subject to be taught, rather than an embedded cultural understanding, and that the aspects of wellbeing developed through everyday relational experience, such as acknowledgment, identity, purpose and belonging (Honneth 1995), are subdued or marginalised. Given such concerns, it is both timely and important to look more closely at relationships in school – to better understand *how* they act to enhance or constrain student wellbeing and how best to embed an emphasis on relationships in both the culture and pedagogical practices of schools.

Background to the ‘Wellbeing in Schools’ study

This large-scale study aimed to generate new knowledge about wellbeing in schools, with a view to promoting improved outcomes for children and young people. The research objectives were to:

- (1) Develop a detailed understanding of how ‘wellbeing’ in schools is currently understood by students, teachers and educational policy makers;
- (2) Investigate the potential of recognition theory (Honneth 1995, 2001, 2005) for advancing understanding and improvements in relation to student wellbeing;

- (3) Generate new knowledge about how educational policy, programs and practices in schools that could more positively impact on student wellbeing.

The research was conducted in Catholic primary and secondary schools in three Australian regions (one each in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland). This study focused upon Catholic schools specifically as they have a long tradition of pastoral care, and as such have shown particular interest and innovation in Australia in seeking to embed the wellbeing agenda. Catholic Schools Offices in each state were key funding and research partners, and helped to identify schools with varied approaches to the implementation of wellbeing policy and programs, as well as demographic diversity across regional and metropolitan populations.

The research took a mixed method approach and was conducted in four phases, with each phase informed sequentially by findings from the previous stages:

Phase 1 – Policy Analysis: Analysis of key relevant local, state and Commonwealth policies regarding wellbeing ($N=80$ policies);

Phase 2 - Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews with principals and teachers ($N = 89$); focus groups with primary and secondary students ($N = 606$);

Phase 3 - Quantitative: On-line survey with primary students ($N = 3,906$), secondary students ($N = 5,362$) and staff ($N = 707$);

Phase 4: Analysis and presentation of findings and professional development for schools.

Throughout all phases of the project, the research team consulted regularly with a Wellbeing Advisory Group, comprising 12 stakeholders including project partners, primary and secondary school students, teachers, principals and a school counsellor. As mentioned above, this paper explores findings arising from Phase 2 only – ‘the qualitative phase’. Given the scale of this study, a considerable amount of qualitative data was generated, with the data collection comprising over 140 hours of student focus groups and teacher and principal interviews. In this paper, we take as the focus of our attention the central role of relationships and recognition for wellbeing. However, it is important to note that the qualitative data are rich and other aspects are, necessarily, outside the scope of what is reported here.

Theoretical Framework

Childhood Studies

The interdisciplinary field of Childhood Studies, in tandem with the near universal ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), have motivated new ways of looking at, researching and theorising children and childhood (James and James 2008). It provokes a conceptual shift from positioning children as the passive victims of life experiences to an alternative conceptualisation, with children as social actors with their own views and strategies for actively coping with challenges in their lives. Further, it recognises that children have both the capabilities and the right to participate in matters that affect them, such as research, offering insight into their own views and experiences.

Childhood Studies provided an important platform for the Wellbeing in Schools study, as notions of ‘child-centred’ scholarship accord well with research that locates children and young people’s agency as central to their wellbeing, including the way

this agency takes shape in and through their relationships. Given the subjective nature of what constitutes wellbeing, it is imperative that children and young people are included in efforts to better understand it, as well as how it can be better supported and monitored (Coombes et al. 2013). Hence, in this study, children's voices are given due consideration alongside those of teachers and policy-makers.

Recognition theory

Another distinctive element of this research is the use of recognition theory. Grounded in critical theory, the work of recognition scholars is largely interested in self-actualisation, social inequality and social justice. The Wellbeing in Schools research draws particularly on the work of Honneth (1995, 2001, 2004), who focused not only on societal recognition of a social group (for example, women, children) but also the role of recognition in the formation of individual identity. Honneth conceptualises recognition (and misrecognition) as being enacted in *relational* spaces, a characteristic also reflected in Bingham's definition of recognition as 'the act of acknowledging others, and coming to be acknowledged by others' (2001, 3). However, Honneth also proposes that recognition requires an element of 'struggle,' which is a core feature of identity formation. Given that identity formation is central to self-confidence, self-esteem and a sense of subjective wellbeing (Graham and Fitzgerald 2010), recognition theory was perceived as offering a potentially enlightening, alternative framework for considering how wellbeing can be facilitated in schools.

In explicating how human interaction is critical to recognition, Honneth (1995) draws attention to mutual, implicit and explicit attitudes involving judgements that affect the ways we encounter others. He argues that identity formation is linked to

three modes of recognition – *love, rights and solidarity* – and it is these that are critical to the development of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Here ‘love’ refers to emotional concern for the wellbeing and needs of another. ‘Rights’ reflects respect for others’ legal status as persons and citizens, and a sense of reciprocal moral accountability in this regard. Finally, ‘solidarity’ is used to refer to the valuing of an individual’s particular traits and abilities, and the distinctive contribution these bring to a community.

While Honneth has only relatively recently begun to apply recognition in the context of children’s lives (2012), there is strong resonance with the Childhood Studies paradigm, since in the latter children are also constructed as rights-bearers, and so entitled to respect, as well as being people with talents and capabilities who contribute to society and are deserving of esteem. Therefore, the three modes of recognition are just as relevant to understanding children’s lives and identity formation, as they are to adults (Thomas 2012). For this study, the language of recognition theory was adapted to be more intelligible within school settings – hence love, rights and solidarity were translated as ‘cared for,’ ‘respected,’ and ‘valued’ respectively.

Method

Our focus in this paper is on the issue of relationships, which emerged as foundational to student wellbeing across both Phases 2 and 3 of the study. In this paper, we focus specifically on the qualitative findings in Phase 2 and turn now to describing the method used for this phase of the study.

Ethical considerations

Close consideration was given to key ethical issues in each phase of the research design, including the qualitative component outlined below. Matters concerning informed consent, risk of harm, identifiable benefits (for example, summaries of findings for schools for use in professional development and planning), confidentiality (for schools and individual participants) and reimbursement (such as for teacher relief to attend interviews, along with gift vouchers for schools as a token of appreciation), were all approached and planned sensitively and reflexively. In particular we were mindful of limitations to any claim of a ‘representative’ voice – both for staff and students - given the complexity of maintaining authenticity when presenting a ‘collective’ voice (Mazzei and Jackson 2012; Spyrou 2011). Indeed, the overall approach taken throughout the study was guided by international research ethics resources simultaneously being developed by the researchers (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson and Fitzgerald 2013), which draw on the UNCRC and are premised on notions of reflexivity, rights and relationships, and an understanding that ethical considerations are ongoing throughout the research process. Ethical approval for the study was obtained via the school systems involved, and the University Ethics Committee (ECN-12-072).

Qualitative Research Design

Data collection

Participants

As outlined above, the qualitative phase was the second phase of the larger project. A letter was sent to the principal of potential schools across the three regions, inviting participation in the study. In total, 18 principals consented to their schools being involved. Researchers then worked with each of the consenting principals to identify

the sample of students and teachers to be recruited at their school. Given the range of subjective experiences of wellbeing, principals were asked to cooperate in ensuring invitations were sent to students with a range of experiences, attributes, skills and views. Likewise, principals were also requested to identify a range of teachers, including experienced and early career teachers, as well as those in leadership positions (such as curriculum or year coordinators in secondary schools). Following identification of potential student and teacher participants, letters of invitation outlining the research aims, process, methods and ethical considerations, together with consent forms, were prepared for schools and distributed to teachers, students and their parents or carers.

Procedure

The schedule for teacher and principal interviews and the protocol for student focus groups were refined during a pilot process involving four schools. The interviews and focus groups were then conducted in June and July 2012. In each school, the principal (total $n=18$) and three or four teachers (total $n=71$) were interviewed. Student focus groups were recruited from Years 1 and 2 (aged 6-7), Years 5 and 6 (aged 11-12), Year 8 (aged 14) and Year 11 (aged 17). In total, there were 67 focus groups with 606 students participating, distributed across the four age groups as follows: Year 1-2, $n = 139$; Year 5-6, $n = 150$, Year 8, $n = 160$, Year 11, $n = 157$. Focus group sizes varied depending upon student availability on the day, but the mode number was ten ($n = 28$; 28 focus groups had 10 participants).

x

The semi-structured principal and teacher interviews were arranged at a mutually convenient time and averaged 45 minutes duration. Participants were asked about how they understood ‘wellbeing’; whether and to what extent education policy

shaped their understandings and approach; how they perceived 'wellbeing' was facilitated in their schools; the impact of leadership on wellbeing in schools; the relationship between teacher and student wellbeing; and how the concept of 'recognition' was perceived in relation to wellbeing. The interviews relied on dialogic methods that combine observation and interviewing with semi-structured prompting to foster conversation and reflection. This assisted with necessary questioning of deeper assumptions, values, attitudes and beliefs about wellbeing in schools. With the participants' permission the interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder for later transcription and analysis.

The primary aim of student focus groups was on achieving rich conversation that encouraged joint-exploration of wellbeing. Hence the focus groups were also guided by a semi-structured process incorporating open-ended questions, but with related mind-mapping of the students' ideas on large sheets of paper by the researchers to help foster deeper engagement. The mind mapping was linked to four areas of interest central to the research: (a) how students defined wellbeing; (b) who they perceived as supporting wellbeing; and (c) what it felt like to be cared for, respected and valued (linking to the three strands of recognition theory). A student-led design activity was also included in which students (either individually or in groups) were invited to imagine and draw (or create a written description of) their ideal school for supporting student wellbeing. Collectively, the focus group methods generated verbal discussion (which was recorded via a digital recorder with the groups' permission), the written mind maps (which helped make sense of each group's recording), and the students' drawings of their 'imaginary school'. The combination of methods aimed to reduce the power dynamics inherent within adult-child relations in school settings, as well as provide means for less forthcoming students to

contribute. The focus group interviews took approximately 30 minutes for Year 1-2, and 60 minutes for Years 5-6, 8 and 11.

Data analyses

Once all of the recordings had been transcribed, the transcripts were uploaded into the software program NVivo, along with photographs of the mind-maps generated during the student focus groups. The conceptual approach to the interviews and focus groups was broadly similar - moving from understandings of wellbeing to the relevance of recognition concepts, as described above. Therefore, these key areas (broadly, understandings of wellbeing, what influences student wellbeing, and the salience of recognition theory) served to guide the initial categorisation and node choice for the data analysis. Each node was then analysed for recurring themes and patterns, in a cyclical process of further coding, recoding and discussion. The students' drawings and written contributions for the 'imaginary schools' activity were analysed manually for repeated images and words, while cross-referencing to the emergent themes in NVivo.

Through the process of coding, analysis and discussion, emergent frameworks and ideas arose that helped to make sense of the various themes and capture the key messages in the student and staff data. These emergent ideas were tested and retested for robustness, and discussed with the project partners and project advisory group. These emergent frameworks and concepts, alongside the theoretical lens of Honneth's recognition theory, helped to allow for sense and meaning to be derived from such a large volume of data.

Findings: Relationship and Recognition

Whilst the concept of ‘wellbeing’ has increasingly come to be considered ‘a good thing’ (Ereaut and Whiting, 2008, 5), with a range of proposed frameworks and quantitative measures (for example, Currie et al. 2010; Hamilton and Redmond 2010), it has remained elusive to define. In responding to this, we sought to identify, inductively, understandings of wellbeing by engaging participants from the outset in a participatory process of exploration and meaning making. The findings clearly indicated that students, teachers and principals conceptualised wellbeing in multi-dimensional ways and situated it within relational contexts (for details, see Graham, Powell, Thomas and Anderson 2016; Thomas, Graham, Powell and Fitzgerald 2016). Our intent in this paper is to explore more deeply the implications of these findings. Specifically, we consider here the evidence concerning *which* relationships are important for student wellbeing, and *how* and *why* such relationships act to support wellbeing in the school context. These interests are explored through the presentation of illustrative extracts drawn from the transcripts of staff interviews and student focus groups. The extracts have been drawn from across the range of schools involved in the study, but have been entirely anonymised for the presentation below.

Which relationships are important for student wellbeing?

In the focus groups and interviews, participants discussed a range of relationships that impact on student wellbeing, including those with parents, friends, peer group, teachers and wider community role-models, such as coaches, as well as a student’s relationship with self (see Graham, Powell, Thomas and Anderson 2016). A key finding warranting further consideration was the *difference in emphasis* between

student and staff cohorts on which *in-school*¹ relationships were of greatest importance.

Not surprisingly, students of all ages placed significant emphasis on the importance of friends for their wellbeing, identifying the benefits of having someone to ‘laugh with’ and to ‘have fun with,’ as well as to protect and ‘stand up’ for you. As one of the younger students summarised:

Friends make you happy when you do not feel good. They help you if you are in a fight with someone (Year 1-2 pupil).

Older students also discussed the support friends provide, finding them often easier to confide in and approach than adults:

You know that they’re not going to judge you. Like if you tell a teacher...you don’t know what they’re going to say, but with friends, you know they’re going to be there for you (Year 11 pupil).

They also pointed to the way support from friends could be affirming at times of uncertainty or self-doubt:

Even when you don’t really trust yourself your friend trusts you (Year 8 pupil).

Predictably, certain acts by friends and peers were identified by students as

¹ We acknowledge the key role that parents play in children’s wellbeing in the context of schools, but project funding constraints precluded involving parents in this research.

hindering wellbeing: being laughed at, put down, excluded, rejected, distracted, being encouraged to do 'wrong' acts and not being encouraged to be themselves. Particularly powerful language was used to describe the impact of bullies: 'they kill you'; 'they make you feel bad'; 'cranky'; and that '...you don't tell anyone because you know they'll do worse'. Yet, seemingly paradoxically, some students discussed the way interactions with bullies helped them in relation to resilience and wellbeing:

They help you to toughen up, they help you stand up for yourself. They raise your confidence (Year 5-6 pupil).

Learn how to deal with it. Helps you in the future (Year 8 pupil).

Overall, students emphasised the importance of reciprocity and constancy in friendship as a central feature of wellbeing. They identified negative consequences related to breaches of this, such as rumours, gossip, betrayal, dishonesty or not keeping confidences.

Students also perceived their relationships with teachers to be particularly critical to their wellbeing, describing different ways that teachers enhance student wellbeing, including listening to and comforting students, supporting their growth, helping them with difficulties, and teaching in creative and engaging ways:

One of my teachers sat down with me when I was crying one time and basically helped me, listened to me, gave me advice (Year 11 pupil).

Well there's only one kind of teacher that gives you the happiness you

*need for the day ... It's one that tries to make learning fun, not boring
(Year 8 pupil).*

Students also discussed teacher actions that negatively impact their wellbeing. For example, students noted:

*They yell ... [it makes] you feel small ... It scares you ... They put you
down ... Or you feel like you're going to cry ... Or you feel embarrassed
because everybody's there watching you, staring at you (Year 8pupil).*

*They don't give you a say and they think they're always right (Year 11
pupil).*

Overall, students appealed for schools to create more specific opportunities for relationship-building with peers and with adults. They felt this was an important dimension of learning often overlooked at school:

*...learning who you are and how you should treat people and how you
should go about your life. And if something goes wrong, what you do.
And if you don't get something that you want, how you keep going. So it's
not just learning academic stuff and getting good marks (Year 11pupil).*

In their interviews, both teachers and principals similarly discussed the prime importance of their relationship with students. A recurring theme was that positive relationships were the bedrock of school life:

If those relationships aren't there then...you're banging your head against a wall (Principal).

Teachers and principals indicated specific events, programs and mechanisms that were used to develop relationships, such as daily homeroom time (when a group of students gather in a classroom with the same teacher, before dispersing to other classes, primarily used for recording attendance, administrative purposes and, sometimes, informal pastoral care) or annual orientation events. Yet, they pointed out that relationship-building with students is not always a 'natural' occurrence, and that they needed specific strategies or practical ways of building and developing relationships with students:

It's all very well to say to people, "Build relationships with kids," but not everyone knows how to build a relationship and they'll go, "Well what do I do? How do I do it?" (Teacher).

However, both teachers and principals lamented that teachers' capacity to develop relationships was impacted by wider factors including teacher wellbeing, school culture, curricular pressures and leadership direction:

Well it's just competing for time and resources in a rapidly changing world (Teacher).

Unlike the student participants, the teachers and principals made very little

reference to students' relationships with their friends. In the few instances when students' friendships were mentioned the focus still tended to be on student-teacher relationships. For example, teachers expressed awareness that students may not feel comfortable directly approaching teachers and issues can sometimes be raised circuitously - by a student's friends seeking advice:

The kids share with their friends before me ... a lot of the time it is their friends that will say, "Look I think someone's struggling – they said this to me," and they'll bring it to my attention and I go from there. Very rarely will the child come to me personally and say, "I can't cope with this" (Teacher).

Further, there was some suggestion there are 'unwritten' rules (for students, their friends and teachers) about how and when to ask if everything is okay. For example, if a teacher notices a student is distressed, but clearly doesn't want to talk to the teacher about it, the teacher may 'circumvent' this by going to the student's friends, and casually inquiring if everything is okay with them.

How do relationships contribute to student wellbeing?

Recognition theory was investigated in this study in terms of its potential for helping identify *how* relationships facilitate wellbeing. The three modes of recognition - cared for, respected and valued - were explored with participants to gain insight into the enactment of these in school settings. To a large extent, the focus of both students and teachers in relation to notions of being cared for, respected and valued tended to be on the student-teacher relationship, and this emphasis is evident in the data presented below.

Being Cared For

In the focus groups, the notion of ‘being cared for’ was generally discussed by students in the context of the school culture or their relationships with teachers.

Sometimes the teachers make you feel safe, like when you walk through the gate you feel safe and welcome, yes welcomed, and the teachers make you feel at home, protected (Year 5-6 pupil).

Caring for students should be the school’s main priority – no matter what. The marks obviously reflect on the school so that’s why they want them so high. That should matter, but the care for students and how the students feel at school should be the main priority no matter what (Year 11 pupil).

Students described different ways they felt cared for at school, including being supported in their school work, helped to feel part of the school community and, particularly, when they felt individually ‘known’ and engaged in genuine conversation:

Well with special needs, I love how people talk to me...I feel like everyone cares about me and it would be nice if they talked to other people like that, instead of saying, “Oh he’s got [special need]; you’d better listen to him and be nice to him” or “He’s just normal, he won’t care” (Year 5-6 pupil).

If you're cared for you don't feel alone; you feel like you belong, you're healthy, you feel noticed, you feel visible (Year 5-6 pupil).

Students readily made connections to how being cared for impacted their wellbeing and, in turn, their academic learning:

It's such an important time in our lives. If you feel like you're getting looked after then it sort of increases your will to try in school and do things that you should be doing (Year 11 pupil).

However, students called for the care from school staff to be genuine:

Being "cared for" is actually them [schools] meaning it; "duty of care" is just them doing the basics of what they have to (Year 11 pupil).

There was an unambiguous emphasis on the importance of *authenticity* in relationships, with some students describing how it felt if they did not feel genuinely cared for :

That we're really replaceable; easily replaceable (Year 11 pupil).

The fundamental importance of students being cared for also emerged in the teacher and principal interviews, with staff appearing more comfortable and conversant with this dimension than either being respected or valued. Caring for

students was implicit in many of the teachers' narratives, including those that described noticing how students were doing:

I don't think we can have any clue about wellbeing... if you don't know a student well enough so that when they walk into your classroom and realise, "They're a bit down today" or "They're a bit flat" or "They're really excited"... (Teacher).

In general, teachers described the need to be proactive in such 'attentive noticing':

It's about observation and then acting on that and not letting it go (Teacher).

Simple gestures were frequently cited as meaning a lot to students, such as saying a student's name, or asking how they were and then listening carefully to the answer and asking follow-up questions at a later date. Such follow-up was identified as a particularly effective way of showing students that they care:

He has flourished in this new school...because his words are, "I'm not invisible; they really know I'm here" (Teacher).

Being Respected

Students of all ages tended to describe respect in conjunction with the notion of being cared for:

[When you are respected] you feel cared for. It makes you feel like an adult...that your choice is important... like you're equal, like you're part of the group ... it's special (Year 11pupil).

When you're not respected you feel like no-one really cares about you and you're invisible (Year 5-6 pupil).

This confluence between respect and care was also evident in the teacher narratives, with 'listening' frequently cited as the most effective means by which both can be simultaneously conveyed:

The most powerful way to show any individual that you care about them and you respect them is the listening and not just the listening – the hearing. I know I have to do this sometimes – force myself in class to stop (Teacher).

Overall, much less emphasis was placed by teachers on the importance of respect than that attributed by students. Students made many references to the role of respect in building self-respect and facilitating connection and belonging to school:

You feel a bit careless if you're not respected because what's the point of you putting in effort or caring if you're not respected by anyone else? (Year 11pupil).

It can make you feel really bad about yourself and feel like you don't

belong (Year 8 pupil).

Alongside such narratives was quite extensive consideration of whether respect should be conditional, reciprocal or extended to all. In general, students lamented that teachers often expected respect, but did not always respect students in return:

They want us to treat them with respect and then they kind of don't show it back (Year 11 pupil).

The negative impact of *not* being respected was readily identified:

It hurts a lot when a teacher doesn't respect you – I guess the most out of anyone that doesn't respect you (Year 11 pupil).

Students felt respect could be enhanced through teachers 'listening', giving them opportunities to 'have a say', treating them equally (although not all the same), and engaging them more collaboratively:

At school there's all these, "You do this, do this, do this" and there's not, "We want to do this and do it in a different way"... (Year 5-6 pupil).

Being Valued

Students described being valued in terms of feeling a sense of belonging, feeling personally recognised, and feeling as though they were making a contribution:

When someone realises something special about you (Year 8 pupil).

It's kind of like having something that's expensive and you care for it a lot (Year 5-6 pupil).

Again, implicit in students' perception of being valued was the importance of teachers listening and responding to students:

When teachers connect with students, involve you, understand you (Year 8 pupil).

Many students perceived that a critical aspect of *not* feeling or being valued was teachers who focus primarily on those who excel in a given academic or extra-curricular area and do not get to know the potential of each student:

*Last year in my English class, the teacher would focus only on the smart...
[other] individuals sit there and do nothing and learn nothing (Year 8 pupil).*

Sometimes they have really low expectations they think you are going to be the same as all the other students (Year 11 pupil).

Students described how being valued had implications for their sense of wellbeing:

If someone shows that they think highly of you, you feel important and

loved (Year 11 pupil).

Notably, many teachers found it difficult to articulate how being valued in relationships might influence student wellbeing. Indeed, this aspect of recognition resonated least for teachers. They tended to describe initiatives within the school where students were acknowledged, encouraged and supported in relation to their individual differences, abilities and skills, such as receiving awards and certificates at special assemblies.

Misrecognition

A critically important feature within the student narratives was experiences of *misrecognition*, whereby students identified *not* being cared for, respected and valued by teachers. While both students and staff expressed understandings about the importance of recognition for wellbeing, students readily identified the conditions for misrecognition to take hold, this being primarily the inconsistent and poor treatment of students. The most frequently cited negative experience was that of ‘being yelled at’. However, both students and teachers acknowledged there are various factors that shape the conditions for students to be respected, or conversely for misrecognition or non-recognition to result:

It’s pretty hard to come across a teacher that really respects and values your opinion; a lot of them they listen to you and they ask your opinion but they don’t do anything about it – they just leave it (Year 11 pupil).

Discussion

The ‘Wellbeing in Schools’ study aligns with other research identifying that relationships are integral to wellbeing at school, in that these help facilitate a felt sense of connectedness when positive (Patton et al. 2000; Rowe, Stewart and Patterson 2007; Soutter 2011). As the data presented here highlights, both students and teachers view relationships as having paramount importance for student wellbeing. However, some notable differences between students and teachers emerged in terms of *which* relationships *at school* are considered significant for student wellbeing.

Students placed major importance on their relationships with friends, along with their relationships with teachers, viewing these somewhat differently in terms of how they support their wellbeing. Teachers paid much less attention to students’ friendships, focusing instead on the student-teacher relationship. This may not necessarily signal a lack of understanding by teachers about the formative influence of peer dynamics on student wellbeing, but it may instead reflect an unselfconscious focus on their own strengths and limitations in building productive, caring and respectful relationships with their students. Such relationship-building, which some teachers described as not always coming ‘naturally’ to them, may well generate more reflection, and even anguish at times, for teachers personally (Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006; Kemp and Reupert 2012; Sanderse, Walker, and Jones 2015).

Whilst this finding about the differences in the way students and teachers view relationships offers important insight, it is vital to understand *how* this happens, in order to utilise this knowledge for education policy and practice. The application of recognition theory was very helpful in this regard. As described earlier, relationships are central to recognition, with acts of recognition and misrecognition, as well as

struggles over recognition, occurring in relational spaces. In analysing the data, we closely examined whether and how the three modes of intersubjective recognition identified by Honneth (1995, 2001, 2004) – (adapted for this research as *cared for*, *respected* and *valued*) – are present, distorted and/or absent in experiences of wellbeing at school.

The findings indicate that students and teachers placed different emphases on the three different aspects of recognition (teachers emphasising being cared for; students emphasising being respected, alongside being cared for). This suggests that teachers' relationships with students tend to focus primarily on caring. While caring for students is obviously important and offers direct benefits for wellbeing, it is arguably possible to care for another without extending respect or value (consider sympathy rather than empathy, or over-protectiveness which limits another's agency and sense of competency). When caring occurs in the absence of respect and value, it may feel less genuine, an attribute students expressed as being important for improving their relationships with teachers.

By contrast to the dominance of *caring* in student-teacher relationships, students' friendships are based upon reciprocal *respect* and *value* for who the student is, alongside caring. Hence, students perhaps experience a greater balance between the three dimensions of recognition in their student friendships than in their student-teacher relationships, which may go some way to account for the importance they place upon friends in relation to their sense of wellbeing. This interpretation is supported by the emphasis on the importance of listening, 'normal conversation' and being 'known' that students and teachers advocated for in strengthening student-teacher relationships. Therefore, a critical finding of this study is that it is through the *interplay* of the three modes of recognition that relationships foster holistic, subjective

wellbeing.

The way in which this nuanced interplay intersects with misrecognition – when the dimensions of recognition are not experienced – also warrants consideration. Discussion of misrecognition was much more prevalent in the student narratives than the teacher narratives. The students’ discussions encompassed ‘minor’ acts of misrecognition, arising from a subtle imbalance between caring and respect, for example, as well as more direct negative actions, such as ‘being yelled at’, when respect may be perceived to be contravened entirely. When this emphasis is considered through the lens of recognition theory, it is not surprising that it was more evident in the student narratives than those of the teachers, as issues of misrecognition tend to be felt more strongly by the individual or ‘unrecognised group’ seeking increased recognition. Importantly for this study though, the students generally framed their discussions in relation to the adverse impacts upon their wellbeing, with misrecognition by teachers in particular negatively impacting upon their self-respect and their broader sense of engagement and belonging in school.

While the relational aspects of education are often silenced or marginalised by performance imperatives (Cohen 2006; Sanderse, Walker, and Jones 2015), relational encounter, and the associated recognition or misrecognition, is omnipresent in schools. It is evident from the findings that, without clear direction, relationships are built and/or damaged in both tacit and explicit ways - through routine interaction with others, including friends, peers and teachers, and through a school environment or ethos that attends to healthy, productive, reciprocal relationships, or not. The compelling links between wellbeing, school connectedness and academic engagement suggest that more intentional support for relationships would benefit both student wellbeing and academic achievement (Christenson and Haysy 2004; Gray and

Hackling 2009; Noble and McGrath 2012; Patton et al. 2000; Rowe, Stewart, and Patterson 2007). The findings from this study suggest that placing emphasis on supporting student-peer relationships and consideration of the balance of the three modes of recognition in student-teacher relationships would be two clear objectives, to begin with.

The latter of these may be the more difficult to conceive of in practice, yet myriad opportunities for increasing recognition in this way do exist in schools. For instance, when teachers provide students with opportunities to participate more actively in learning such as through participatory approaches, this may increase the likelihood of activating all three modes of recognition: teachers demonstrate *care for* students, by ensuring that learning is meaningful to them; *respect* through the process of engaging with students and seeking their input; as well as signaling *value* of students' own learning styles and contributions. Therefore, commonly advocated notions of relational pedagogy, inquiry learning and democratic classrooms that actively involve students in decisions about learning, offer scope for enhancing student recognition (de Róiste et al. 2012; Gray and Hackling 2009; Hamilton and Redmond 2010; Patton et al. 2000). Indeed, beyond a basic connection between enjoyment, engagement and wellbeing, the three dimensions of recognition theory help to illuminate *how* such relational practices can act to support wellbeing. Ensuring teachers are informed about the key role of recognition may be beneficial, along with provision of support and guidance in implementing approaches that incorporate the three dimensions into their teaching practices.

Currently, teachers are required to navigate a complex educational environment characterised by competing priorities concerning student engagement, academic performance, social and emotional wellbeing, amongst others. It was clear from the

teacher data that performance imperatives were not their only priority; the vast majority of teachers did demonstrate a genuine care and concern for students. In the current climate, however, the attention given to relationships in educational discourse – including in teacher education, professional development and educational policy – is negligible (Kemp and Reupert 2012; Sanderse et al. 2015). Many teachers commented on this towards the end of interviews, having had the opportunity to reflect on both the tacit and explicit ways that student wellbeing is addressed within schools. Therefore, the challenge of ‘re-personalising’ schools was seen as a critically important element in repositioning wellbeing within education in the future.

Conclusion

The overall aim of the Wellbeing in Schools study was to increase understanding of how wellbeing is understood and experienced in schools, while identifying appropriate and sustainable means of improving this. Applying a recognition lens deepened insight into the nuanced ways relationships at school act to facilitate wellbeing. The findings reported in this paper signal potentially positive outcomes for both students and staff when the culture of schools fosters relations of recognition that result in a lived, dialogic experience of being cared for, respected and valued.

Teaching and learning is essentially a socio-relational activity, yet teachers receive very little professional development, challenge and guidance around the relational aspects of their role, including in their pre-service training (Kemp and Reupert 2012). This paper highlights the potential that a recognition lens brings to furthering this conversation in schools. In particular, we believe it offers an intelligible framework for progressing wellbeing that affirms, challenges and extends

the tacit and explicit ways that teachers can build warm, positive, reciprocal relationships with students.

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