

MindMatters Plus: INFO SHEET NO.4

STAFF VOICES: WHAT HELPS STUDENTS WITH SUPPORT NEEDS IN MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING CONNECT TO SCHOOL?

Use: Building a Whole School Approach

Audience: Executive Team and Student Support Services Teachers

Intent: Promotion/Prevention

“...the importance of relationships... that is the cement that keeps this place going...The actual relationship is the outcome which is under recognised I reckon.” - Ken

A young person’s connection to school has been identified as a protective factor for mental health and education. The MindMatters Plus initiative provided an opportunity for demonstration schools to focus their efforts on students with support needs in mental health and wellbeing for whom connection to school is vital and may be more difficult to achieve.

While the theory behind student connection to school has received significant attention in the education, health and crime prevention literature, not so much is known about how school staff understand the process of ‘students connecting to school’ and what they do to enable it.

Within the context of MindMatters Plus, a group of staff were interviewed in order to document their perspectives about how students connect to school to identify what implications this has for strengthening the connection of students with support needs.

A number of clear themes emerged which have practical implications for secondary school staff who are looking for ways to further enable student connection to school. Staff voices also add a complementary perspective to those of students as extrapolated in Holdsworth and Blanchard Unheard Voices (see Information Sheet No 3, and website http://mmpplus.agca.com.au/studeng_unheard_voices.php)

Connectedness and Wellbeing

An important factor in mental health is the degree to which someone feels that they are connected to or belong to some community (Blum & Rhinehart, 1997). For young people, school as a significant social environment plays a large role in providing this sense of connection. It is evident, that the impact of connectedness is far-reaching, as commented by Blum (2005); “there is something in that bond, in that connection to school that changes the life trajectory - at least for health and academic behaviour. It is very powerful”. As noted by Rowling (2003), “students’ sense of connection is a powerful resource to enhance young people’s coping behaviours”. When schools are successful in creating the conditions that enable students to make positive connections, they help to support the wellbeing of all students as well as mitigating against poor outcomes for those with support needs in mental health.

Staff beliefs about connection to school

“What I think is happening is the initial suss out period. I think with a kid that is functioning ok...the suss out time would be a lot greater- they are more resilient and aware of the rules and procedures and realize the student and teacher role. With (other) kids it is much smaller - sometimes you have almost got five minutes, with some kids you might have half a day. So when they first come in I see that as the most vital time because you have a window of an opportunity” Sandy.

- Connection to school is important for education and mental health. The staff interviewed indicated strong agreement about the importance of ‘connection to school’ for students as a platform for engagement in further activities and classroom learning.
- Students with support needs in mental health and wellbeing were seen as those who needed close monitoring and additional support because of their own functioning or because the prevailing culture of the school did not easily accommodate them.
- Students become connected to different aspects of school.

The staff emphasised students having a sense of belonging, feeling cared for, participating, identifying with something or someone and having a sense of achievement.

- School provides identity
- School as a physical place to be
- School as a place for personal and social relationships
- School as a place to contribute, to learn, and to be recognised
- School as a caring, safe place.



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• A positive school community invites everyone in. Staff had different perceptions about how connection to school seemed to occur for different students but all agreed that the presence of a positive, caring school community (which was described by some as representing ‘the heart’ of school) was seen to be an enabling factor for connection for all students. They talked about a positive school environment being one characterised by a sense of caring and mutual respect.

• Ingredients of a positive school community:

- Strong Leadership
- Diverse staff work well as a team and are supported
- The climate and curriculum is open and responsive to the real lives and aspirations of students
- Shared responsibility
- Pastoral care makes sure everyone is known
- Safety is a bottom line for everybody
- Many opportunities to shine and develop identity
- Valuing relationship building - especially through informal activities

• Reach out to your students with high support needs.

“I find that as long as they’ve got at least one person they can connect with, then that’s like a life preserver that keeps them afloat, and then we try to build from there. So it’s rare to find a kid who’s got no finger hold somewhere to the place, because that’s the beauty of multiple staff and the teachers’ aides and the people there’s usually bound to be somebody they can hang on to”. - Nick

1. Involve particular staff in the specific task of reaching out to students with high support needs

2. Nurture strong collegial support amongst these staff

3. Provide multiple points of contact for students with high mental health support needs

4. Actively seek to build bridges for these students from first contact.

5. Share these tips:

• Search for a hook to establish a connection

• Close the distance between staff and students - share the power- find shared activities that are fun for students and staff

• Help kids feel ‘normal’

• Add extra structure to help the students succeed

• Mediate and advocate for students to minimise ‘failure experiences’

• Promote a sense that school is home and family in some ways

• Be upfront about confidentiality:

• Be prepared to persist.

Enabling connections for these students may be a roller coaster ride of problem solving and negotiation for the staff, involving energy and commitment. It is important to manage school and personal resources so that support can be managed for the ‘long haul’.

Relevant learning MindMatters Plus initiative:

1. Less structured school activities can promote opportunities for engagement and connection

2. Students need to have a connecting relationship with at least one person

3. The greater the gap between the student’s current functioning and the school’s expectations of learning and behaviour, the more structured support will be needed for the student.

4. Students value informal relationships where they know teachers personally and are known by them

5. School can be alienating for students with high support needs.

http://mmplus.agca.com.au/key_learnings.php

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