

# No more silos: learning and wellbeing as one

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In Australia, we are blessed with a diverse selection of very high quality schools. Across this diversity two core areas of commonality exist. Every school is committed to providing high quality learning and wellbeing for each and every student. In our Australian schools learning and wellbeing are the very foundations upon which our education systems are built. This article asks if these are intertwined or estranged from each other in your learning community. Most likely the answer will be that they exist somewhere on the continuum between these two extremes. Whatever the answer, are you, as an Educational Leader content with that position?

## Why am I the person writing this article?

### *The privilege of starting from scratch*

Over the past four years I have had the privilege of leading the development of a totally new learning community. It has been, and continues daily to be, an incredible journey. In beginning a new learning community I was committed to not recreating current schooling. I quickly realised that this required my own mindset to change. I have developed a greater appreciation in the importance of asking and reflecting upon questions rather than simply moving forward on current knowledge.

Starting with a large paddock, our team has been able to question why any particular element is introduced into our new learning community. Nothing comes into our community without undergoing scrutiny. The core questions seem simple enough. Is this essential for student learning? As it evolves how will it keep the student at the centre? It has been an enormous amount of work for us as a team. A significant cause of this high workload has been due to our commitment to not simply take on old practices that we have known, and perhaps loved, in our previous places. Having no traditions and practices can be very liberating but it can also be very challenging and even scary.

### *Wanting to change a change resistant culture*

Education in Australia is built around solid structures and processes which have ensured our provision of education is reliable and predictable. A school has key philosophy statements which lead into core policies. These policies then determine structures, processes and a unique terminology which ensure the



culture is authentic to its mission. It has stood the test of time. However, in a time of need for drastic changes in education, it may well be that it is these very structures, processes and language which are actually hindering our ability to respond to the new challenges we wish to address. Herein lies an inherent challenge for leaders in schools: How do we change culture that is structured to resist fundamental change?

### *Visitors to Marist*

In recent months, many leadership teams in education have come to look at what we are doing. In every visit, I see a common experience unfold. It begins with a search for new ways. They would not visit another school if not seeking new ideas. They want to change/improve what they are currently doing. As they experience a visit at Marist each leader finds one or two elements of our learning community which they would like to 'take home' or 'bring in'. When they talk amongst their team this is inevitably followed by the realisation that such a change would be too difficult at their school. When we tease this out the view that change will be difficult comes back to the structures and languages engrained in their culture. It has become apparent to me that my role to any visitors is to provide them with new questions to ask on their return home. At Marist we certainly do not profess to have all the answers but perhaps our contribution to education today is to offer some questions for educational leaders to ask. The answers in

each environment will be different and that is a positive result. The courage lies in asking the questions and listening to the answers.

## Learning and wellbeing

The intended purpose of this article is to provide the reader with some questions in relation to student wellbeing in your school. It is my intention to provide some provocations around how their work is intrinsically connected to student learning. I invite you then to explore some questions in relation to student wellbeing in your current learning community.

## What do you call 'it'?

There are so many names across our education establishments which aim to address the pastoral care element of a learning community. No one is necessarily better than another. However, any one school benefits from having only one specific terminology. Do you have a clear consistent name for 'it' in your school? Do you have different terms that refer to different elements of pastoral care or have they evolved from different groups? Do all your staff use the same name for 'it'? Do your parents use the same terminology as your staff and as each other? Most importantly what do your students call 'it'?

The process of creating consistency in your language can have a number of benefits other than the obvious one of removing confusion. The discussions amongst staff, parents and students will no doubt lead to a clarification of what this area seeks to provide for the young people in your community. It may also bring to the fore whether this area also provides for staff and parents or whether it is solely there to provide support for students. In the end, you will have a clearer understanding of what 'it' is and what 'it' is not and why 'it' is called whatever you, as a community, decide to call 'it'. I hope you manage to include 'learning' in the name.

## How is it connected to student learning?

Proactive work developed and led by Wellbeing Teams is some of the most powerful work in our schools. In education we are well aware of the benefits of preventing through knowledge rather than intervening after the fact. Our schools provide wonderful opportunities for students on social issues such as bullying, cyber safety, depression and many, many more. If the Wellbeing Team is running these in your school,

then how is it directly linked to learning? The Victorian Curriculum provides many areas for such work to be included. How can we help Wellbeing Team members make these connections?

There is also the area of individual and small group work which members of Wellbeing Teams provide for students. Counselling is sought for a growing diversity of reasons. Whilst many schools embrace the whole school programs as part of student learning I feel it is a much smaller group who are willing to intrinsically link this latter work to student learning. Do you believe individual student wellbeing should be directly and completely connected to student learning? How do your current structures support your answer? What is the direct involvement of a classroom teacher in relation to the wellbeing of student X? How is information passed around the staff? When deciding who needs to know what, how is the learning of the child at the centre? These are all difficult questions and today's privacy laws must be known and respected. It is perhaps the most challenging interface between student wellbeing and learning.

#### How is it disconnected from learning?

This is not simply a different way of asking question 2. Perhaps the area which creates the greatest angst is the most difficult to uncover and measure. If you believe that student wellbeing should be directly and completely connected to student learning then these set of questions are best answered by your classroom teachers and students. It is in their daily living that the reality will be discovered.

Your school may have structures and processes on paper but the reality may be different. No doubt teachers are regularly challenged by the perennial question: "How well do you know your students?" Have we asked the same teachers: "Have we, as a school, given you access to all you may need to know about each child?" This is a difficult question but important about which to have conversations with teachers and students. As a learning community do teachers know what they will and won't be told about an individual student? How is the decision made? What level of sensitive material should a teacher be given? Why is some information not shared? If information is not shared is some level of information given? When student X storms out of class who knew what? If the issue(s) a child is working through effect his / her learning why would a teacher likely to interact with that child not be informed?

#### Let's go even deeper

Now that we are in the swimming pool let's venture down the deep end and ask some real core questions about your view and the view of your Leadership Team on student wellbeing.

Why do you have a student Wellbeing Team in your school? Is the core purpose of the Team to help students cope with life's challenges or is



it to help the students maximise their learning? The answer to this question is fundamental to student wellbeing. Do all the members of your Leadership Team have the same answer? In your school who decides who is told what in relation to student wellbeing issues? I imagine schools will have different viewpoints on this very sensitive, but growing area. I encourage each and every school to be able to say we have a clear and well known approach to this area. I would dream further and say I would love to see schools clearly decide on these issues based on the learning needs of the child.

#### Some structural challenges

Hopefully the questions above may help you determine if your philosophy and reality around the connections to student wellbeing and learning are in harmony. I encourage you, as a leader and as a Leadership Team, to focus on two key areas: structure and language. Ultimately a culture will not change unless it has structures and languages to be the vehicles for this change. Many schools have very senior leadership positions with singular responsibility for learning or wellbeing. What does this say about the connection between the two? If a school has learning co-ordinators and wellbeing co-ordinators then how does the school have a true seamless interface between the wellbeing of a student and the learning of a student? Many wellbeing teams are chaired by a professionally trained person in the social sciences. Why? How does this provide connection to learning? What if the Team were to be chaired by a teacher who is a member of the Leadership Team? Would that help keep the learning at the forefront? Wellbeing Teams are doing great work in our schools but may be in a situation where they are denied a strong connection to the learning of students. In essence, the learning teams and the wellbeing teams are working to the very best of their abilities. However, because "it has always been like this" or "No-one has really questioned

it" they do their great work in silos. If this is the case then I suggest the learning of the child is being compromised.

#### How can we move forward?

Wellbeing professionals are vital in our schools. They bring skills which the classroom teacher cannot provide. It is not my aim to discredit these very important professionals in our schools. Quite the opposite, I wish to see their skills fully impacting on improving the learning of students. My challenge is to ask if their work is being allowed to directly connect to the learning of students. I have asked many questions in this article. For those of us who are Mathematics teachers we are expecting the answers at the back of the book. My apologies they are not here.

Everything we do in schools needs to relate to, and enhance learning. The structures and languages we use will dictate the reality above and beyond whatever philosophy we hold. Are you using the great skills of your Wellbeing people to enhance learning? Is it time to free them from their silos?

If we could start from scratch . . .  
 . . . what are the non-negotiables?  
 . . . what terminology would we use?  
 Why can't we start from scratch?

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**Darren McGregor** is the Foundation Principal of Marist College Bendigo a position he began in April 2014. In this role, he is leading the development of a new learning community that will become Foundation – Year 12 in 2019. Prior to this role, he was Principal of Catholic College Bendigo for 10 years. He has worked in Catholic secondary education for 25 years and has spent almost half of this time as a Principal.