

Wellbeing in schools: Examining the policy–practice nexus

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Abstract National concern regarding the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people is now strongly reflected in a wide range of Australian policy initiatives. A considerable number of these target schools and point firmly to the role education is perceived to play in promoting student wellbeing. Given that wellbeing can be difficult to define and complex to measure, closer attention needs to be paid to whether and how the current wellbeing policy environment provides conceptual clarity and intelligible implementation pathways. This article explores some of the current policy ambiguity by drawing on findings from a large-scale, mixed methods study exploring student wellbeing at school. These findings emerged from an extensive analysis of wellbeing-related policy, together with policy-related data from in-depth interviews with teachers and principals. They suggest that approaches to supporting student wellbeing are constrained by an ad hoc policy environment characterised by competing discourses and a consequential lack of clarity regarding how wellbeing is understood and best facilitated within the context of schools. The implications of these findings are discussed with particular attention to the interface between policy and practice with regard to student wellbeing in schools in Australia.

Keywords Student wellbeing · Social and emotional wellbeing · Schools · Education policy · Pastoral care

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Introduction

The social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people in Australia attracts considerable community and political interest (Hamilton and Redmond 2010; Redmond et al. 2013). Increasingly, schools are recognised as having a key role in supporting and promoting the wellbeing of their students (Gray and Hackling 2009; Noble et al. 2008; Urbis 2011). This is particularly visible in regard to mental health aspects of wellbeing, as reflected in key Australian documents (such as the Roadmap for National Mental Health Reform 2012–2022 and the Fourth National Mental Health Plan 2009), and the view that schools are ideal settings for effective early interventions (Lendrum et al. 2013; Slee et al. 2011). Wellbeing now sits within schooling, alongside other socially valued goals, such as academic achievement, equity, citizenship, economic prosperity and social cohesion, despite there being little critical analysis of wellbeing as an educational aim (Chapman 2015).

While schools have been identified as appropriate places for addressing and promoting wellbeing, school systems across Australia grapple with how best to embed wellbeing within the policies, cultures, practices and resourcing of schools and the approach remains fragmented and ad hoc (ASPA 2008; Victorian Auditor-General 2010). Such efforts are hampered by the ambiguous nature of the term ‘wellbeing’, which is generally poorly defined and under-theorised despite its strong social and political appeal (Amerijckx and Humblet 2014; Gillett-Swan 2014; McAuley and Rose 2010; McLeod and Wright 2015). This leaves the wellbeing agenda widely celebrated but with little practical direction, creating likely tension at the policy–practice juncture and giving rise to a number of important questions, including the following: What role does policy play in addressing wellbeing in schools? How is such policy framed, interpreted and applied? What potential exists to strengthen links between policy and practice?

Webb (2014) argues that there is a “pervasive logic that maintains educational problems can be solved in, with or through policy” (p. 364). Given that the meaning of wellbeing is often assumed to be self-evident (Chapman 2015), it is critically important, in addressing the kinds of questions raised above, to problematise notions of wellbeing within policy. In doing so, it is essential to look closely at how wellbeing policy is enacted; that is, to look at the ways policy interacts with thinking and practice (Webb 2014).

There are persistent challenges associated with the transmission of knowledge from research to the worlds of social policy and human service delivery (Gale 2006; Shonkoff 2000). As Ohi (2008) argues, “rather than a one-way flow of information down a conduit, the nexus between research, policy and praxis needs to be communicative and ever evolving, allowing for change and innovation in order to improve the quality of learning and teaching” (p. 107). This article contributes to understanding this more dynamic, nuanced process of knowledge transmission by drawing upon findings from a large-scale mixed methods research study. Specifically, it reports findings generated through a policy review and interviews with teachers and principals from 18 Catholic primary and secondary schools within

Australia, to explore the interface between policy and practice with regard to student wellbeing.

Background

Decision-making around priorities for education cannot be separated from the broader political context (Garrick 2011). Constitutionally, education has primarily been the responsibility of individual Australian states and territories, but recent years have witnessed a raft of reforms and a shift in fiscal responsibility toward Federal government (Gorur and Koyama 2013; Pitman 2012). Student wellbeing is one key area for which both state and Commonwealth governments now have policy claim (Redmond et al. 2013).

Australian educational policies are largely oriented toward preparing human capital for the labour market (Chapman 2015), with an instrumental, vocationalist model of learning aimed at serving the economy (Wyn 2007). This orientation is reflected in the persistent emphasis upon raising literacy and numeracy outcomes, and the framing of school accountability through national and international ranking initiatives, such as PISA, NAPLAN and ‘like-school’ comparisons (Gorur and Koyama 2013; Klenowski 2009; Lingard 2011). Whilst such initiatives lend themselves to the comparative evidence sought by governments, the economic context leads us to question how ‘wellbeing’ is constituted (Chapman 2015) and suggests that the status afforded to a relatively narrow suite of educational outcomes marginalises learning that might promote other conceptualisations of wellbeing (Wyn 2007).

While poorly defined, the concept of wellbeing is frequently coupled in contemporary education policy, and thus aligned, with mental health (Wright 2015). Wright further notes that the nature of the focus on mental health and wellbeing has shifted over the course of the 20th Century, from “a narrow focus on interventions for “problem children” to universal interventions and programs with the aim of improving social and emotional skills—and psychological health more broadly—for the entire population of young people” (p. 214).

In addition, there is a significant gap in knowledge regarding *how* to best promote and support wellbeing in schools (Lendrum et al. 2013; Skattebol et al. 2013). Educational policy is generally characterised by a ‘top-down’ approach, whereby teachers, acting on the assumption that policies and programmes advocated by government are evidence based (Ohi 2008), are positioned as the implementers with little involvement in policy development (Carl 2005; Klenowski 2009; Rust and Meyers 2006; Thomas 2005). When wellbeing policy is imposed from above and is perceived to be conflicted, incoherent or unclear with respect to implementation, the policy–practice nexus can be fraught with difficulties (Lendrum et al. 2013). This further contributes to a conflicted ‘vision’ about where and how wellbeing is situated within current educational discourse, something little helped by the considerable lack of clarity concerning the meaning of the concept itself (Ereaut and Whiting 2008; Noble et al. 2008; Rose and Rowlands 2010).

The Wellbeing in Schools research study, which this article draws on, sought to gain a clearer understanding of how student wellbeing is understood and approached in schools, and to generate new knowledge about how educational policy, programmes and practices in schools could more positively impact on student wellbeing (see Graham et al. 2016a, b). Of particular interest to this article is the policy–practice nexus; how wellbeing is situated within educational policy and teachers’ perspectives and experiences of such policy. While an extensive amount of data were generated, this article focuses specifically on the findings related to wellbeing policy, focusing first on an analysis of the policy before turning to qualitative data collected from teachers.

The Wellbeing in Schools study

The Wellbeing in Schools project was a large Australian study, which employed a mixed methods approach, involving four phases: (1) policy analysis, (2) qualitative interviews, (3) quantitative surveys and (4) professional development for schools. This paper focuses solely on data generated during Phases 1 and 2 in relation to policy.

In Phase 1, policy documentation from Australian Commonwealth, state government and Catholic education sources relevant to student wellbeing was collected for review. Phase 2 involved data collection from students and school staff across three Australian Catholic school regions (one each from regional New South Wales, metropolitan Victoria and regional Queensland). These regions were intentionally selected on the basis that they did not share a uniform approach to wellbeing policy and programmes in schools and were willing to commit for the duration of the study. Our research team was assisted by an active and committed advisory group, comprising primary and secondary school students, teachers, principals and project partners. Below we briefly outline the methods used in these phases before presenting the findings that emerged in relation to wellbeing-related policy specifically.

Methods

Phase 1

Phase 1 involved online searches to identify policy and policy-related documentation on the websites of Commonwealth, state and territory government departments and Catholic Education Offices. The policy analysis reported in this article is limited to government and Catholic *education* documents. The extensive policy review conducted in the research study identified documents pertaining to wellbeing in other sectors, including health, child care and child protection (for details, see Graham et al. 2014). However, given word limit constraints, this article focuses on the education documents *only* as these are most likely to have compliance requirements or otherwise directly inform, influence and guide practice in schools.

The keywords used in online searches were *wellbeing*, *well-being*, *welfare* and *pastoral care*. The latter two were included because of the frequent and interchangeable use of these terms with notions of wellbeing in schools (Catholic Education Office Melbourne 2006). An initial website search was conducted in July 2012. Subsequently, in November 2012, the research team contacted all state government education departments and Catholic Education Offices by telephone and/or email to request access to any relevant documentation that may not have been evident or accessible online. Follow-up searches were conducted in June 2013, 2015 and 2016. This article focuses on the analysis of 35 documents—seven national government education documents, 21 state and territory education documents and seven from Catholic education systems.

Qualitative document analysis was used to categorise and classify the material. This combines elements of content analysis, organising information into categories related to the central research questions (concerning the role policy plays in addressing wellbeing in schools), and thematic analysis, a form of pattern recognition, with emerging themes becoming the categories for analysis (Bowen 2009). An iterative process of reading and interpretation was used to identify the key emergent themes and discourses. Throughout the analysis, a critical approach was taken, in which the concept of wellbeing was problematised, and policies were perceived as actively constituting the problems to which they seem to respond (Wright 2015). Specifically, we were interested in exploring the implicit representations of the ‘problems’ that wellbeing policy intends to solve (Bacchi 2012) and the means by which policy enactment might achieve this. Within the documentation analysed, we looked closely at the contexts in which wellbeing was conceptualised and identified the key policy emphases in each document. The themes identified centred on risk and safety, and by contrast, multidimensional, strengths-based conceptualisations. The key policy emphases for wellbeing identified in the documentation and details regarding the documents included in the analysis are depicted in Tables 1, 2 and 3 in the Findings section.

Phase 2

Phase 2 involved qualitative interviews with teachers, principals and students. Given the aim of this article, we focus here solely on data relevant to policy collected from individual interviews with 71 teachers and 18 principals. The data collected from student focus groups pertained to conceptualisations of wellbeing and recognition theory, not policy use or development, and therefore are not included in this article.

Staff were based across 18 primary and secondary schools in the three participating regions. Schools were identified in consultation with the research partners and regional Directors of Education and purposively selected to offer a diverse range of school sizes and socioeconomic, geographic and cultural characteristics. Researchers invited the principals at these schools to participate by letter. In schools that consented to be involved, potential teacher participants were identified by principals or other school contacts (such as wellbeing co-ordinators), using criteria provided by the researchers seeking diversity of

experience, attributes, role and views. Letters of invitation outlining the research aims, process, methods and ethical considerations, together with consent forms, were then distributed to identified teachers.

An initial pilot study was undertaken, with one principal and two teachers from each of four schools, to refine the interview schedule and approach. The interviews, which were audio-recorded with participants' consent, lasted on average 45 min and took a semi-structured approach, relying on dialogic methods that combine observation and interviewing to foster conversation and reflection. This assisted with the questioning of deeper assumptions, values, attitudes and beliefs about wellbeing in schools.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and the transcripts uploaded into the software program NVivo, which was used to aid organisation of the information into categories based on similar features or themes. The interviews involved three key areas (broadly, understandings of wellbeing, influences on student wellbeing and the salience of recognition theory), which served to guide the initial categorisation and node choice for the data analysis. Coding involved deconstructing the data, breaking it down and reconceptualising it (Liamputtong 2009), looking first at the meanings and relationships within the data for individual participants, then within the data for the collective participant group. Each node was analysed by members of the research team, which included four interviewers and two non-interviewing researchers, for recurring themes and patterns, in a cyclical process of further coding, discussion and recoding. Triangulation of data sources, from teacher and principal participants across different regions, contributed to the formation of a complex and nuanced picture. Through constant comparison, comprehensive data treatment and an ongoing revision process, emergent frameworks and ideas arose which helped make sense of the various themes and capture the key messages in the data. These emergent ideas were tested for robustness, by researchers within the team, project partners and the project advisory group, checking that interpretations and conclusions were accurate reflections of what participants had said.

Ethics approval was gained from each of the three participating school regions, prior to recruitment and data collection, and from Southern Cross University's Human Research Ethics Committee for each of the Phases and the survey pilot.¹

Findings

Phase 1: policy analysis

Wellbeing policy: competing discourses

The wellbeing policy search identified specific *policies*, focused largely on compliance in relation to specified obligations, requirements and/or procedures. In addition, a range of other policy-related documentation was also identified, including *guidelines* and *frameworks*, as listed in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

¹ Southern Cross University HREC approval numbers: ECN-12-072, ECN-13-096, ECN-13-138).

National government education documentation—A key finding from the analysis of the seven policies identified (see Table 1) was that there was *no* education policy or related documentation *specifically focussed* on wellbeing at a national level. However, four of the documents identified have particular relevance, emphasising the key role assigned to schools in promoting and supporting wellbeing. Across differing education policy contexts, wellbeing is integrally linked with educational outcomes (Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians 2008), safe learning environments (National Safe Schools Framework 2011), health (National Framework for Health Promoting Schools 2000) and spiritual, social and emotional welfare (National School Chaplaincy Programme 2013). Both the role of schools and the multidimensional conceptualisation of wellbeing are explicitly articulated in the frequently cited assertion, from the Melbourne Declaration, that:

Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians...

The pervasive influence of these documents in informing wellbeing policy is evident in the multiple references made to them in state and territory government and Catholic education wellbeing-related documentation.

State and territory education documentation—There was considerable variation between states and territories in the amount, focus and scope of reference to wellbeing in education policy-related documentation. This variation is evident in Tables 2 and 3, which detail the documentation analysed in state government and Catholic education contexts, respectively. The tables are organised in accordance with the type of documentation and indicate the state and department, along with the key policy emphasis for wellbeing evident in each document. As the tables indicate,

Table 1 National government educational documentation included in analysis

Document type	Date	Title	Department acronym	Key policy emphasis
National Framework	2000	National Framework for Health Promoting Schools	DHFS	Health—physical, mental, emotional
Framework	2004	Principles for School Drug Education	DEST	Health and safety
National Framework	2005	National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools	DEST	Values promotion
National Framework	2011	National Safe Schools Framework	MCEEC-DYA	Safety
National Framework	2011	My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia	DEST	Learner development and wellbeing
Declaration	2008	Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians	MCEET-YA	Educational goals
Guidelines	2013	National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program Guidelines	DEC	Welfare—spiritual, social, emotional wellbeing

Table 2 State government education documentation included in analysis

Document type	Date	State	Department acronym	Title	Key policy emphasis
Policy	2010	NT	DET	Safeguarding the Wellbeing of Children—Obligations for the Mandatory Reporting of Harm and Exploitation	Safety—from abuse and harm
Policy	2012	TAS	DEC	Learner Wellbeing and Behaviour Policy	Safety—student behaviour
Policy	n.d.	QLD	DETE	Supporting Student Health and Wellbeing Policy Statement	Health and safety
Policy Framework	1996	NSW	DSESW	School Welfare, Good Discipline and Effective Learning—Student Welfare Policy	Welfare
Policy Guidelines	2009	VIC	DEECD	Effective Schools are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines	Student behaviour—engagement
Policy Driver	2012	TAS	DEC	Health Care and Wellbeing Policy Driver	Health and safety
Policy Guidelines	n.d.	NT	DET	Safe Schools NT: Wellbeing and Behaviour Policy Guide	Student behaviour
Framework	1998	VIC	DEC	Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools	Welfare—mental health
Framework	2007	SA	DECS	DECS Learner Wellbeing Framework for Birth to Year 12	Student/Learner wellbeing
Framework	2010	VIC	DEECD	Health and Wellbeing Service Framework	Health, mental health and welfare
Framework	2012	QLD	DETE	Learning and Wellbeing Framework	Student/Learner wellbeing
Framework	2014	VIC	DEECD	Principles for Health and Wellbeing	Health and development
Framework	2015	NSW	DEC	The Wellbeing Framework for Schools	Student/Learner wellbeing
Guidelines	2008	QLD	DETA	Guide to Social and Emotional Learning in Queensland State Schools	Social and emotional learning
Charter	2008	VIC	DEECD	Dardee Boorai: Victorian Charter of Safety and Wellbeing for Aboriginal Children and Young People	Health, development, safety, learning, wellbeing
Initiative	2010	NSW	DH & DECT	NSW School-Link Initiative Memorandum of Understanding	Mental health
Protocol	2010	VIC	DEECD & DHS	Protecting the Safety and Wellbeing of Children and Young People	Safety—from abuse and neglect
Procedure	2012	QLD	DETE	Supporting Students' Mental Health and Wellbeing	Mental health
Procedure	2012	SA	DECS	Student Mental Health and Wellbeing	Mental health

Table 2 continued

Document type	Date	State	Department acronym	Title	Key policy emphasis
Guidelines	2012	VIC	DEECD	Student Support Services Guidelines	Health, development, wellbeing
Project model	n.d.	NT	DEET	Building Relationships and School Wellbeing	Behaviour management

ACT Australian Capital Territory, NSW New South Wales, NT Northern Territory, QLD Queensland, SA South Australia, TAS Tasmania, VIC Victoria, WA Western Australia

Bold type is used to indicate frameworks that exemplify a comprehensive strategic approach

Table 3 State Catholic education documentation included in analysis

Document type	Date	State Catholic Education Office	Title	Key policy emphasis
Policy	2008	SA CCS	Pastoral Care in Catholic School Communities: A Vision 2008	Pastoral care
Policy	2011	SA CCS	Policy for the Care, Wellbeing and Protection of Children and Young People	Safety—from abuse and neglect
Policy	2013	VIC CEOM	Policy 2.26 Pastoral Care of Students in Catholic Schools	Pastoral care
Policy	2014	TAS CEC	Policy: Pastoral Care and Well-Being	Pastoral care
Framework	2007	CEO WA	Framework for the Development of Pastoral Care in Catholic Schools	Pastoral care
Strategy	2010	VIC CEOM	Student Wellbeing Strategy 2011–2015	Student/Learner wellbeing
Guidelines	2003	CEC NSW	Guidelines for Pastoral Care in Catholic Schools	Pastoral care

Bold type is used to indicate frameworks that exemplify a comprehensive strategic approach

specific wellbeing-focused documentation was not identified in all states and territories.

Across government and Catholic education sources, there were just five specifically titled *wellbeing policies* at a state level, requiring compliance from schools. Within four of these, the discursive emphasis was on safety and protection, in terms of either student behaviour (TAS DEC), safeguarding children by mandatory reporting of harm and exploitation (NT DET and SA CCS) or health (QLD DETE). This safety focus was also evident in the guidelines aimed at supporting policy development in the states of NSW, NT, TAS and VIC (refer to Table 2). The fifth identified policy (TAS CEC) explicitly linked pastoral care with positive wellbeing, with a more holistic and strength-based emphasis, underpinning a broader, multidimensional, whole-person and whole-school approach.

The searches also identified two pastoral care policies, one each in SA and VIC Catholic Education. The latter policy, Policy 2.26, linked pastoral care to wellbeing and, while it included reference to safety discourses, it stated that “the key elements

of student wellbeing are positive self-regard, respect for others, positive relationships, responsible behaviours and personal resilience” (para 2). Here the focus moves beyond safety, with pastoral care conceptualised as a means of achieving the outcome of enhanced wellbeing in the context of relationships.

Despite the paucity of wellbeing-specific policy outlining what teachers and other members of the school community *have* to do, other policy-related documentation was identified, as listed in Tables 1, 2 and 3. These documents offer a broader view of wellbeing in the education landscape and reflect different discursive emphases. Several *frameworks* provide a comprehensive strategic approach, straddling policy, procedures and programmes, thus providing regulatory guidance and implementation strategies. This is exemplified by three frameworks in the state government education sector that link *learning* and *wellbeing* in school contexts (NSW, SA and QLD), and one from the Catholic Education Office in Melbourne.² These conceptualise wellbeing as multidimensional, and take a whole-school approach to student wellbeing. Emphasis is placed on a collaborative and relationship-based approach to promoting wellbeing and the development of a strong school culture of wellbeing. Other frameworks have similar conceptual emphases, while focusing on principles, services and practices linking health and wellbeing (VIC).

The framing of wellbeing in other policy-related documentation is less comprehensive than the frameworks identified above, with themes around safety and risk more apparent and wellbeing primarily contextualised in relation to health (particularly mental health), learning and/or safety. Indeed, a number of initiatives identified were undertaken jointly by education and health or child protection departments (refer to Table 2). Across all documentation, wellbeing was referred to in conjunction with other terms, for example, ‘health and wellbeing’ or ‘safety and wellbeing’, with the accompanying terms tending to be the primary context.

Within the documentation, a distinction was evident between the strength-based discourses, reflecting notions of agency, apparent in the more recent, comprehensive learner wellbeing *frameworks*, and discourses of risk and safety in compliance-driven wellbeing *policies* and other *policy-related* documentation. An implication of the latter is the perception that student wellbeing is potentially under threat from various sources, and that policy and practice responses are required to protect children from risk and harm. These discourses of risk and harm were also apparent on education wellbeing webpages specifically dedicated to student ‘wellbeing’, which were identified on all Government and two Catholic state and territory education websites. Webpages varied considerably, with most (10 out of 15 identified) containing content related to risk management in a range of areas, such as headlice, bullying, drug use, school attendance and exclusion.

The language of wellbeing is increasingly replacing the use of terms such as welfare and pastoral care. This is exemplified in word prevalence in the student support services documentation from the Victorian state government from 1998 to 2012. In 1998, the term ‘welfare’ appeared 41 times in 24 pages and there was just one reference to ‘well being’. In 2012, ‘welfare’ arose only in ten instances across 120 pages, but there were 98 instances of the term ‘wellbeing’.

² These frameworks are marked in bold typeface in Tables 2 and 3.

Key policy analysis findings

Several important points emerge from the policy analysis findings presented here. First, the approach to ‘wellbeing’ is not consistent across government or Catholic education in terms of the existence, nature and scope of policy-related documentation. Second, *policies* and most other documentation tend to conceptualise wellbeing in relation to issues of risk and harm, in specific areas of student behaviour, child protection or health, which are considered a threat to student wellbeing and therefore a problem to be solved by policy. Third, an emerging discursive shift is evident from a risk and harm focus toward a strength-based emphasis in more recent wellbeing *frameworks*.

Phase 2: interviews with teachers and principals

The findings from the policy analysis, summarised above, underlined the need to explore within the interviews how policy was understood and applied in *practice*. The interviews first established how teachers and principals conceptualised wellbeing, which then provided a platform for exploring their perceptions, expectations and aspirations regarding how wellbeing is best addressed in schools, including the role that policy plays.

Teachers and principals tended to conceptualise wellbeing as multidimensional, consisting of physical, social, emotional, psychological and spiritual interests. They emphasised the need to promote a positive atmosphere within the school community, in which wellbeing is embedded. While some teachers emphasised that policy in itself cannot achieve this, partly because it is often deployed to meet other political or funding requirements, others spoke of the importance of ensuring that policies are enacted to become part of the school’s culture. Teachers’ multidimensional conceptualisations of wellbeing emphasised relational contexts:

Wellbeing is more the whole education of the child and within that a connectedness ... which is meaningful relationships that children have—all types, within the school or within the community to help them and enable them to be able to learn better in a nutshell (C1T).³

However, despite the multidimensional conceptualisations of wellbeing, when teachers and principals spoke about specific wellbeing policies, they tended to identify aspects related to issues of risk and harm, such as behaviour management, safety and health:

I think in terms of the health and the safety I think they’re essentially policy-driven and as long as we have our policies right and our practices follow then there’s no reason not to have best practice (C5T).

We have a bullying policy here, referral steps, and if it’s resolved you stop, if it’s not resolved there are other steps you need to follow (A3T).

³ The codes indicate the region (first letter), school (number) and teacher or principal (T or P).

Teachers and principals provided views on the current policy environment and what they would potentially find helpful in supporting students' multidimensional wellbeing. Awareness of existing policy varied, as some teachers perceived wellbeing to be governed by a network of policy interests, rather than a single, standalone policy, whilst others indicated that they were not aware of any wellbeing policy. A lack of clarity was evident, with some teachers citing particular wellbeing programmes rather than policy, questioning the relationship between pastoral care and wellbeing policy, or noting the ambiguous nature of wellbeing or the indistinct nature of wellbeing policy:

There are so many things now that have to be taken into account it's quite overwhelming, the amount of different things that would come under wellbeing policy... (B2T).

I think the problem with policy—especially of things regarding “wellbeing”—the problem is it's vagueness; it's vague, it's too non-specific, it's too much education-speak, and it doesn't have enough detail (C5T).

We talk about policies—are we talking about all the legal requirements, mandatory reporting? There's a whole raft of those sorts of things that you constantly have to go back and refer to. Are there vagaries, is there ambiguity in those documents? Absolutely (A2P).

Connections between wellbeing policy and practices were articulated with some teachers perceiving that policies developed with a whole-school approach are much more likely to be effective, rather than policies based on solely individual- or interpersonal-focused perspectives. However, teachers also pointed to the difficulties in finding the time required to meaningfully engage in whole-school change. Some emphasised the potential of *pastoral care* policy, highlighting the tensions in developing written policy in this area that simultaneously considers social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

A persistent tension in the policy–practice nexus was evident, as teachers and principals spoke of practice not being as clear as sometimes depicted in policy and also, conversely, of the ambiguity that can exist in policy documents. They emphasised the need for policy that offers flexibility in terms of implementation, while also providing explicit, practical information and direction. On the one hand, participants called for tangible strategies to support student wellbeing. On the other, they stressed the importance of policy playing a guiding role and being flexible, emphasising that policy should allow them to “use initiative” and not be overly prescriptive and compliance driven:

I think that's where a lot of schools would differ in policy because they have to often tailor something that suits their cohort of children and I think that's important. You have to know your own kids and what works for some kids may not work for others (B2T).

In terms of policy give us the policy that is specific to unique categories of “wellbeing” for students, based on their own social and educational need; it's not a one-size-fits-all (C5T).

Engaging with policy was identified as a professional requirement, regardless of how helpful teachers perceive them to actually be. The important role of teachers was recognised, in terms of the personal commitment they have to putting the policy into practice, as well as the relationships they establish with students. The need for an explicit wellbeing policy environment was emphasised, with clearly articulated definitions and understandings. Overall, the need for policy that recognises current realities in schools, makes explicit what teachers already do, conveys simply and clearly to teachers what is required, and is tailored to meet students' needs:

So okay, I understand that these are my set of expectations but how do I live that? How do I actually act that out? (A5T).

If there's only one thing that I would say would be to allow schools to be more organic in addressing the needs of their community ... top-down policy just doesn't work if it's not applicable at the coal face, if it doesn't have a present need (A1T).

Further difficulties were reported when changes are continually made to policy. Teachers commented on the lack of follow-through on policy intentions, influenced by the rapid, successive changes of government in Australia recently. While there is recognition that policies can help provide direction with practical problems, teachers indicated a need for balance in the number of policies in place. The relevance of policies is thus critically important. Teachers and principals spoke of the challenges in trying to apply policy when it does not appear authentic, practical or important.

Policy can sometimes be left on the shelf; it needs to be a practical framework—it needs to be “If you follow this and you do these things, all will be good” (C4P).

I just feel the government keeps making decisions based on what they think is best and they're not actually listening to the people that it directly affects (C4T).

To this end, teachers' involvement in developing, revising and planning policy implementation was seen as important.

Key interview findings

Evident tensions in the policy–practice nexus emerged, with current wellbeing-related policy perceived as somewhat 'hit and miss' in terms of applicability—teachers' conceptualisations of wellbeing in multidimensional, holistic terms did not necessarily match the focus of wellbeing policies identified and concerns were evident over whether compliance with policy necessarily addresses wellbeing issues. Attention was drawn to ensuring that wellbeing policy is not too prescriptive, but should be sufficiently detailed to provide useful guidance, flexible enough to adapt to local needs, and readily applicable to practice. Teachers clearly indicated that such policy development would benefit greatly from more input from teachers and principals.

Discussion

The findings reported above indicate some of the possibilities and limitations of enacting policies with regard to effecting change in relation to wellbeing. The policy analysis points to perceived risks to children, related to concerns such as safeguarding children from abuse, behaviour management and health, as being the kind of problems that wellbeing policy seeks to resolve. In doing so, it reflects the prevailing political priorities with which schools have to comply, currently mostly around addressing concerns of risk and harm, although there are indications that this is shifting. The teachers' interviews offered alternative and competing priorities, concerning what teachers believe needs to be done to progress student wellbeing in schools, and therefore what they perceive to be the problem wellbeing policy is to solve. Looking critically at wellbeing policy and how it is enacted by teachers reveals the "simultaneity of contradicting thoughts and practices in education" (Webb 2014, p. 373) and opens it up for further discussion and greater understanding. This highlights the importance of a flow of information in alternate directions between research, policy and practice (Klenowski 2009; Ohi 2008; Rust and Meyers 2006; Villegas-Reimers and Reimers 1996).

The findings from both the policy analysis and the interviews point to evident limitations concerning the potential of current policy to guide and inform wellbeing practices in schools. Specifically, the findings affirm that inherent and well-documented policy–practice tensions (Thomas 2005) limit policy effectiveness in improving student wellbeing. In this context, a number of factors have been identified as constraining policy effectiveness, including the following: the ad hoc nature of the wellbeing policy environment; a lack of clarity regarding how wellbeing is conceptualised within policy and a misalignment of priority interests between policy and practice in relation to wellbeing.

The variation and inconsistency apparent throughout Australian states and territories in the amount, focus and scope of student wellbeing policy-related documentation, provide a picture of an ad hoc, rather than purposefully planned and strategic, policy environment. This is simultaneously both masked and confused by the ubiquitous use of the term 'wellbeing'. While the terminology of wellbeing is well integrated in education policy lexicon, definitional ambiguity contributes to gaps in knowledge about how it is best facilitated (Ereaut and Whiting 2008; Rose and Rowlands 2010), and its meaning is further obscured by the different foci and competing discourses evident throughout the documentation analysed. The uncertainty conveyed by teachers regarding their knowledge of existing policy may, in part, reflect the ambiguous use and varied application of wellbeing in the policy realm.

Within the policy documentation, wellbeing tends to be linked with safety, behaviour management and health (in particular, mental health). The most evident discourses in relation to this were those of risk and harm, which functioned to construct wellbeing approaches as largely problem focused. Student wellbeing initiatives on education webpages are also characteristically concerned with risk management, for example, in relation to anti-bullying, sun protection and healthy

canteen food, with the implication that children can be protected from such risks through procedural application of regulatory systems and structures. Implicit within this is the understanding that addressing such risks is an appropriate role for schools. By contrast, teachers' and principals' considerations of student wellbeing included health and safety components, but also incorporated multiple dimensions, with less focus on risk management and greater emphasis on holistic approaches promoting a positive culture.

The discursive shift identified in policy-related documentation, towards strength-based discourses and holistic approaches that incorporate social, emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual dimensions, aligns with literature about what is most likely to be effective in realising the key determinants of children's wellbeing (see, for example, Noble et al. 2008; Urbis 2011). These strive to ensure that the needs, rights and interests of children and young people are taken into account by fostering a broad, conception of wellbeing that lends itself to a universal approach to student wellbeing rather than solely targeted toward a particular group of children or 'problem' issue. The language of *wellbeing* is increasingly replacing the use of terms such as *welfare* and *pastoral care*, indicating a shift away from a welfare mentality emphasising targeted mental health intervention and postvention, toward more universal, preventive and health-promoting wellbeing approaches (Catholic Education Office Melbourne 2006; Wright 2015). Such a policy emphasis is more closely aligned with the reported aspirations of teachers and principals around wellbeing.

Relationships featured strongly in teachers' and principals' interview data, reflective of their everyday practice within schools. The recently introduced National Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL 2011) point to some important possibilities for a more explicit emphasis on relationships in professional learning and practice. While the Standards are not specifically wellbeing related (and hence did not meet the selection criteria for inclusion in our policy analysis), there are features within all three of the Standard domains that align with approaches to supporting wellbeing and the emphasis placed by teachers on relationships.⁴ The Standards also allow for tailoring responses to students' wellbeing needs and concerns by focusing attention and grounding approaches in situated professional practice.

One critical aspect of teacher professionalism is recognition of teachers as authoritative voices in the policy-making processes (Carl 2005; Rust and Meyers 2006; Thomas 2005; Villegas-Reimers and Reimers 1996). In the interviews, teachers and principals clearly highlighted the importance of policy makers consulting with and drawing on the experience of teachers in developing policy. Teachers were well aware of the limitations of current policy, as well as what is needed within their particular environs and the challenges in application. The overall misalignment between the predominant framing of wellbeing in policy, in terms of risk and harm, and that privileged by teachers, in terms of holistic, strength-

⁴ Specifically relevant are Standards 1: Know students and how they learn; 4: Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments; and 7: Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community.

based accounts, not only reflects differing discursive emphases but also contributes to a persistent practice–policy disconnect that merits close attention.

Limitations

This article is limited to *education* documentation that was accessible at the times searches were undertaken. Whilst every care was taken to locate all relevant documentation, it is inevitable that some may not have been accessed, as inclusion was contingent on it being available online, locatable with the search terms used or known to the respondents participating in the telephone audit.

A further limitation of the research is the educational context being Catholic schools. While Catholic schools comply with national government education policy standards and requirements, they have an explicit values base that may influence understandings and approaches to wellbeing. Similar research conducted in government schools may therefore produce findings that vary from those reported here.

While schools were provided with inclusion criteria for the teacher interviews, it is possible that principals (or their delegates) may have invited students and teachers they perceived could otherwise contribute most appropriately to the research.

Conclusion

The rapidly changing landscape of education governance in Australia, with responsibility increasingly shifting between the state and Commonwealth governments, has contributed to a broad and diffuse policy environment. This is nowhere more evident than in relation to policy governance concerning wellbeing in schools, which is characterised by definitional ambiguity, competing discourses that blur policy intentions, conflicting priorities and lack of implementation frameworks. Policy guidance requires clear definitions, priorities for implementation and links to related policy imperatives. Importantly, for policy to impact positively on student wellbeing it must be intelligible, relevant and applicable for students, teachers, principals and others using it in school contexts.

The identified tensions in the policy–practice nexus suggest the need for multi-faceted, holistic approaches that underline the central role of relationships in all aspects of school life. Such approaches could be provided in an overarching national framework that incorporates the multiple dimensions of wellbeing evident in the literature and interview data, spans universal as well as targeted approaches to support students and promote wellbeing, and involves teachers in generating policy. This could potentially go some way toward addressing the policy–practice tensions, reducing uncertainty for teachers and improving wellbeing outcomes for students, as well as providing a more unified basis for the development of policy guidance and resources.

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