Implementing a Whole-School Approach to Student Wellbeing: A Study Examining the Implementation Experiences of Bhutanese and Australian Teachers in Wellbeing Leadership Roles

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Abstract

Schools are ideal sites for the promotion of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enhance personal as well as collective wellbeing. Schools engage in numerous programmes and activities for the wellbeing of students, including those that are identified as an integral aspect of learning in schools, and those which are seen as peripheral activities used to address distractions to the central aim of academic and intellectual development. This study explored the perceptions and experiences of key implementers in implementing a whole-school approach to student wellbeing promotion in secondary schools in Bhutan and Australia.

A whole-school approach to student wellbeing promotion calls for student wellbeing promotion that is embedded in a school’s policies, curriculum, structures, and practices, and as a shared responsibility of all stakeholders. Programmes that addressed the whole school have reported positive effects. However, implementation in schools has been reported to be very challenging as these programmes typically require fundamental changes in the ways in which schools operate and are organized. Very little research has been conducted investigating the experiences and the challenges that middle level leaders face at the school level when working towards a whole-school approach to wellbeing.

This study contributes to this gap in knowledge by drawing on the experiences of key implementers, whilst discussing their experiences in the context of research literature about student wellbeing and educational change. This study used a qualitative approach, conducting in-depth interviews to explore the experiences of people who were directly involved in implementation of student wellbeing programmes in schools. It involved participant groups from two very socio-economically and culturally different settings in Bhutan and Australia.

Findings suggest that key implementers in schools face numerous interconnected challenges in implementing a whole-school approach to student wellbeing. These challenges revolve around the three themes of meaning, culture, and time. The meaning ascribed to ‘wellbeing’ differed between the two settings with Bhutanese educators favouring an ‘inside-out’
understanding of wellbeing as developed through internal control, and the Australian educators favouring an ‘outside-in’ understanding of wellbeing as something fostered through the relational environment. Key aspects of school organizational culture such as leadership, strategic and policy direction, organizational structure, and competing views and beliefs influenced the implementation of student wellbeing promotion. School cultures in relation to student wellbeing comprised of three themes of control, care, and wellbeing as integral to learning. Both parties favoured positioning wellbeing promotion as integral to education, however they identified that time constraints and lack of consensus about the importance of school-based efforts mean that schools defaulted to the use of reactive approaches. This was seen to be due in part to a lack of a shared valuing of wellbeing promotion as central to the school’s business. Despite variations in the ways in which they manifest in the two school systems, the themes are found to be common across schools. While time constraint is expressed as a key concern, deeper analysis revealed more fundamental concerns relating to the issues of meaning and culture.

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