



Closing the Rhetoric Reality Gap: Effectively implementing engagement and wellbeing policies in Queensland State Secondary Schools

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Prescribed national curricula, state-wide implementation strategies and region specific mandated pedagogies may achieve consistency in Queensland secondary schools but to the detriment of student engagement and wellbeing. With such minimal focus on pastoral care, more students experience alienation, loneliness, low self-esteem and stress, resulting in challenging behaviour, disengagement and elevated student expulsion and dropout rates. This paper discusses the major findings from qualitative study that examined the rhetoric-reality gap that exists when implementing engagement and wellbeing policies in Queensland state secondary schools. This research attributes the rhetoric-reality gap to idealistic policy rhetoric, broad policy aims without actionable steps and generalised implementation that dissociates from policy objectives. This paper concludes that engagement and wellbeing needs to be foregrounded in state wide policies, engagement programs need to be implemented and teachers and students need to achieve agency in policy making if we are to bridge the rhetoric-reality gap.

Key words: student, engagement, wellbeing, education, policy, autoethnography, document analysis



INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) measured half-a million 15-year-old students' knowledge and skill application in 65 countries across the world. Within Australia, 14481 students participated in the questionnaire and were asked about their attitudes towards school, work ethic, sense of belonging and absenteeism. This questionnaire was compared with data collected in 2003 to examine shifts in attitudes over time. Not only did the results reveal that 25% of students thought their education had not prepared them for life after school, 10% believed that school had been a complete waste of time (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014; Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). Additionally, Australian students recorded a decline in their sense of belonging at school to be less than the OECD average. The result indicated 20% of Australian students did not feel engaged at school (Angus et al., 2009; OECD, 2012).

Students who are disengaged find their school work uninteresting, give up on tasks, become easily distracted and opt out of class and extracurricular activities. These students are prone to truancy, suspensions or expulsions, which increase feelings of social isolation and decrease commitment and belief in the value of schooling (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Stein, Kintz, & Miness, 2016). Thus, a cumulative cycle begins: frustration, low self-efficacy and low self-esteem lead to disengagement from schooling activities, eventually reducing students' willingness to complete school (Ream & Rumberger, 2008).

Engagement and wellbeing predict later achievement and attainment beyond high school and mitigates the effects of status and academic risk factors; therefore, creating a worthwhile area of research (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Finn and Zimmer's (2012) 13-year longitudinal study of 2728 American students concluded students who are academically and socially engaged in school are more likely to have higher achievement and feel a sense of belonging. This positive engagement and wellbeing experienced throughout high school maintained habits of engagement leading to school completion (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Therefore, understanding student engagement and wellbeing is crucial for educators.

Engagement and wellbeing are widely celebrated terms in education documents but they have limited practical direction. Policies position educators as implementers; however, they are offered limited agency in policy development (Carl, 2005; Klenowski, 2009; Rust & Meyers, 2006). Therefore, a significant gap in knowledge about promoting and supporting engagement and wellbeing in schools exists (Lendrum, Humphrey & Wigelsworth, 2013; Redmond et al., 2016) As a result, schools, leadership and educators



reinterpret policy intentions liberally and often implement policies that are incoherent with the policy aims; thus, a rhetoric-reality gap occurs (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Lendrum et al., 2013; Pak Tee, 2008; Webb, 2014).

While there is a wealth of research regarding the importance of engagement and wellbeing to learning (Finn, Pannoazzo & Voelkl, 1995; Goodenow, 1993; Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004; Voelkl, 2012), as predictors of later achievement (Alexander et al., 1997; Finn, 2006; Ou, Mersky, Reynolds, & Kohler, 2007) and as a mediator to the effects of status and academic risk (de Bruyn, 2005; Finn & Rock, 1997; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, & Abbott, 2001), research is not always current and there is a significant gap in practical strategies to enhance engagement and wellbeing in schools (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Lendrum et al., 2013; Redmond et al., 2016). In addition, engagement and wellbeing as concepts are rarely interconnected in research; however, positive engagement reinforces wellbeing and vice versa (Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011; Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2014). Lewis et al. (2011) determine a bidirectional relationship between student engagement and wellbeing, concluding that students who experience positive wellbeing broaden their thinking; thus, engaging in their education and perceiving schooling as relevant to their future goals. Similarly, students who value and engage in their education experience positive wellbeing (Lewis et al., 2011). Therefore, as student engagement and wellbeing are mutually reinforcing, the two concepts will be combined in their definition and use for this study.

This study identified, analysed and reviewed student engagement and wellbeing policies in Queensland state schools in their formative years, ensuring a significant opportunity for analysis and review was embraced. This research used qualitative methods to answer the research question: How can we bridge the rhetoric reality gap that exists in Queensland state secondary schools to successfully implement practical strategies that enhance student engagement and wellbeing? Qualitative research is often used in the education and health and wellbeing field (see Haug & Sands, 2013; Powell & Graham, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2014; Testa, 2014) as it offers real world insight into experiences and perspectives. It focuses on human interactions and actions rather than generalized demographic information (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2014). Combining document analysis and autoethnography allowed me to frame my every day experiences as a teacher within the rhetoric reality gap, which developed a rigorous response to the research question.

This study was limited to the impact of engagement and wellbeing policies and programs to students in a Queensland secondary schools as education documents vary across states and territories in Australia.



In addition, limiting the study to outcomes in school setting only, rather than extending to demographic factors, allowed the study to be completed within an acceptable timeframe and provided an improved knowledge base that contributes to the education community. Finally, as this research relied on autoethnography, this study was limited in temporal scope to the period 2013-2016.

THE RHETORIC REALITY GAP

The gap between policy intention and policy implementation has been researched broadly (see Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Pak Tee, 2008; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Greenberg, Domitrovich, Graczyk, & Zins, 2005) and affirms the findings of this paper. This study found that the rhetoric-reality gap exists due to:

- Idealistic policy rhetoric
- Broad policy aims without actionable steps
- Generalized implementation within a policy laden institution

Idealistic policy rhetoric

Rhetoric is ambiguous in education documents. Most notably the terms “engagement” and “wellbeing” were poorly defined despite their strong social appeal (Amerijckz & Humblet, 2014; Gillett-Swan, 2014). This incomplete understanding of engagement and wellbeing in education is intertwined with idealistic and inspiring rhetoric duplicated across all documents: “community partnerships”, “high expectations”, “fostering a safe and supportive learning environment”, “lifelong learning”, “high quality, world class schooling system”, “community of equity and excellence”. While this rhetoric is rich in connotative power, it is malleable and ambiguous in meaning when applied to a real life context (Gillies, 2007). The rhetoric “stands for something ideal and hopefully inspiring. It can be translated into actionable steps, but none of which, even on completion, will match up to its lofty aims” (Pak Tee, 2008, p. 596).

Broad policy aims without actionable steps

Policy aims highlight the benefits of implementing engagement and wellbeing; however, documents generalise application, ignoring the local context. (Pak Tee, 2008). Teachers are expected to provide engaging curriculum and learning experiences while fostering wellbeing but most policies, guidelines and frameworks fail to support teachers in suggesting practical strategies, such as programs, for implementation. “At present there are limited commercial programs that articulate explicit links between



the [social and emotional] program and Queensland curriculum” (Department of Education Training and the Arts, 2008). The potential for practical strategies to extend the school community’s understanding of engagement and wellbeing and develop skills to manage student complexities provides a powerful incentive to educators. However, where programs are available, they are introduced specifically to support wellbeing within the realm of mental health as opposed to engagement and wellbeing. These programs are often not adequately resourced, monitored and evaluated to ensure they are delivered to achieve the intended outcomes (Powell & Graham, 2017).

Generalised implementation within a policy laden institution

Multiple competing initiatives and unsupportive leadership act as barriers to effective implementation of engagement and wellbeing strategies within an overstretched curriculum. Teachers’ uncertainty about how to implement engagement and wellbeing reforms resulted in erosion of trust, frustration and reform avoidance. Their understanding of the benefits of reform were compromised due to lack of professional development opportunities that offer explanations and support in practice. As a result, teacher ownership of the reform did not occur, resulting in ineffective reform (Noack, 2011). “The adaptation process depends on the agency of local actors and the sense they make of the policy as they engage with it, interpret it and redefine it” (Pak Tee, 2008, p. 598). This disparity between rhetoric and the reality of implementing engagement and wellbeing effectively in schools is problematic as asymmetries are already manifested between students and the wider community (Haug & Sands, 2013; Mitra, 2007; Stein et al., 2016; Sullivan et al., 2014).

CLOSING THE RHETORIC-REALITY GAP

Improving engagement and wellbeing in schools requires improving curriculum, pedagogy, policies and procedures (Davis & McPartland, 2012; Department of Education, Training and Employment [DETE], 2012). Engagement and wellbeing needs to be foregrounded in curriculum; engagement and wellbeing programs need to be implemented; and teachers and students need to achieve agency in policy making if we are to bridge the rhetoric-reality gap. “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 to improve the quality of learning and teaching” (Ohi, 2008, p. 107).



Increasing Intrinsic Interest of Curriculum.

Students actively engage in their classroom through personal, relevant, appropriate and authentic learning experiences (Gregory et al., 2014; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; McKenna et al., 2013). These relevant and personal learning experiences have a positive, lasting effect on students. In his passionate address, 13-year-old Logan Laplante stood on stage in front of hundreds and coined the term 'Hackschooling.' He said, "I don't use any one curriculum, and I am not dedicated to any one particular approach. I hack my education" (Laplante, 2013).

In his talk viewed by 9 million viewers, Laplante identifies himself as a Generation Z student, growing up disengaged and struggling with mental and physical health. Laplante (2013) states,

Creativity is as important as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status... I didn't used to like to write because my teachers made me write about butterflies and rainbows, and I wanted to write about skiing. It was a relief when... I started at the Squaw Valley Kids Institute, where I got to write through my experiences and my interests...and that sparked my love of writing.

Laplante learns about the science of snow, the geography of avalanches and the business of selling skis, allowing him to attain his self-appointed goals (Bundick, Quaglia, Corso & Haywood, 2014).

As students become more fluid, adaptable, self-aware and open to experimentation, they are deterred from learning through regimented instruction geared towards memorization and standardized tests (Charlton, 2012; McKenna et al., 2013; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Instead, students critically reflect on and learn from their experiences, allowing generalized knowledge to be used continuously in future circumstances (Charlton, 2012). Teachers achieve authentic curriculum through active opportunities for learning, such as group projects, high order thinking and meaningful problem solving experiences (Cooper, 2014; Stein et al., 2016). Therefore, teachers need to create an autonomous environment to improve behavioural engagement (participation and work involvement) as well as emotional engagement (interest and happiness) in school (Bundick et al., 2014; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). The challenge is for teachers to have the pedagogical and social skills to deliver content knowledge across a range of interests, where we act as experts.

Increased professional development for teachers.

Staff within Queensland state secondary schools lack empirically supported professional development (PD) programs that focus on student engagement and wellbeing (Gregory et al., 2014). According to the



University of South Australia's Punish Them or Engage Them report (Sullivan et al., 2014), 81% of teachers indicated that student disengagement could improve by providing more PD and staff training. "Moving the focus from controlling discipline policies to ways of engaging students offers opportunities for teachers to prevent unproductive student behavior and reduce a reliance on intervention strategies" (Sullivan et al., 2014, p. 53). This shift in focus is echoed internationally.

In America, Haug and Sands' (2014) research indicated increased student engagement and wellbeing following teacher participation in the Literacy Lab Professional Development (LLPD) program. The mixed methods research conducted with 42 secondary teachers in two schools revealed features critical for student engagement and wellbeing PD: creating a learning community founded on similar beliefs; ongoing collaborative learning through readings and discussions; large group observations and debriefs of PD sessions; one-on-one coaching for teachers; and government support for PD resources (Haug & Sands, 2013). A second American study affirmed Haug and Sands' findings. The study conducted with 87 teachers in 12 schools across Virginia tested the efficacy of the My Teaching Partner-Secondary program to increase behavioural engagement (Gregory et al., 2014). The program offered teachers personalised coaching and feedback on their interactions with students. The qualitative study concluded that teachers who used the My Teacher Partner-Secondary program improved teacher-student interactions, consequently leading to increased behavioural engagement in the classroom within a year (Gregory et al., 2014).

These PD programs provided formal training, collaborative planning, personalized coaching and systematic feedback to improve engagement and wellbeing in classrooms (Stein et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2014; Klem & Connell, 2004). Results from these studies found positive differences between teachers who do and do not engage with PD in terms of their instruction, nature of tasks, expectations and tone (Haug & Sands, 2013; Gregory et al., 2014).

Quality teachers and their professional development do make a difference. It is not so much what students bring with them that really matters, but what they experience on a day-to-day basis in interaction with teachers and other students in classrooms. While it may be difficult to legislate quality teaching into existence, the fact that teachers and schools make a difference should provide impetus and encouragement to those concerned with the crucial issues of educational effectiveness to at least invest in quality teacher recruitment, initial training and their on-going professional development. (Rowe, 2007, p.15-16)



Engagement and wellbeing programs

Engagement and wellbeing programs enhance learning outcomes through curriculum, ethos, environment, partnerships and services (Khan, Bedford & Williams, 2011; Clarke, Sixsmith & Barry, 2015; Dufour, Denoncourt, & Mishara, 2011). Students who are taught to apply cooperative skills build social capacity. They accept, support and trust each other; thus, producing a higher quality and quantity of work, demonstrating on-task behaviour and providing detailed explanations and assistance to each other (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). A preventive engagement and wellbeing program enables students to effectively participate as active citizens in the school community, making positive contributions to the progress of society and creating social change (Sharma & Monteiro, 2016). A whole school program to improve student engagement and wellbeing uses data to guide decision making and emphasizes knowledge and skills that are valued by the wider school community (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Data based decision making is applied across contexts with multiple individuals resulting in multiple outcomes. “Data must be collected to evaluate the effectiveness and quality of implementation of current practices, characterize and understand a situation, guide the development of new or modification of current practices, and monitor student or program progress” (Sugai & Horner, 2002, p. 31). Teachers provide feedback on social interactions, confirming or revising students’ attitudes, values and beliefs as they interpret and respond to social change (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). These trusted alliances serve as a resource in challenging times, allowing students to display self-reliance and tenacity; thus, improving engagement and wellbeing (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Programs like PBL offer a practical strategy to bridge the rhetoric-reality gap that exists in enhancing engagement and wellbeing in Queensland secondary schools; however, these programs require effective implementation.

Developing programs involves “direct attention to all aspects of the school environment to ensure that policies, procedures and activities throughout the school are consistent with the aims of creating a setting that promotes the mental health and wellbeing of young people” (Khan et al., 2011, p.47). Studies show positive outcomes of implementing programs that promote secondary school students’ mental health (Holen, Waaktaar, Lervåg, & Ystgaard, 2012; Khan et al., 2011); however, engagement and wellbeing programs have not been evaluated and effective program implementation is challenging to accomplish due to the lack of training, time and resources (Powell & Graham, 2017). Additionally, most evidence supporting the effectiveness of engagement and wellbeing programs omit the views of students as active agents in their own wellbeing (Clarke, Sixsmith, & Barry, 2015, Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005; Simovska, 2013). Therefore, student and teacher voice in enhancing student engagement and wellbeing also needs to improve for programs to be successful.



Improving student and teacher agency in education policies.

Providing students with opportunities to participate in school decision-making offers an opportunity to reengage students in the school community (Mitra, 2009). Contemporary research highlights the benefits of students' participation in curriculum, school culture and governance, and engagement with members of the community (Simmons et al., 2014; Simovska, 2013).

Much of this literature positions participation in terms of: an enlightenment rationale (children have something important to tell us that can lead to better outcomes for children); the promise of empowerment (a rights-based approach acknowledging children's competence/ capacity); its potential for citizenship (children's participation is about their 'place' in society, located somewhere between their current and future status as citizens) as well as its relational possibilities (participation is inherently social). (Simmons et al., 2014, p. 131)

Student voice provides a rich, nuanced account of student experience that informs pedagogy, school improvement agendas and improvements in relationships; thus, student engagement and wellbeing improves (Simmons et al., 2014). Students become active citizens, expressing their opinions and making decisions as an expression of their civic responsibility (Phillips, 2011).

Simmons et al. released their 2014 'Wellbeing in Schools' study, which asked 606, 6-17-year-old Australian students to imagine an ideal school. The results determined that students yearn for improved pedagogy, socio-emotional and physical environment, relationships and opportunities for community membership. These fictitious ideal schools incorporated communal values including respect, cooperation and equality as well as resources embedded within the curriculum to support students' wellbeing needs (Simmons et al., 2014). According to this study, students want their schools to nurture equality and respect (Simmons et al., 2014). Research confirms a sense of connectedness and belonging stimulates positive behaviour, cognition and emotions and improves student attitudes (Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Spratt, 2016).

When students believe they are encouraged to know, interact with, and help classmates during lessons; when they view their classroom as one where students and their ideas are respected and not belittled; when students perceive their teacher as understanding and supportive; and when they feel their teacher does not publicly identify students' relative performance, they tend to engage in more adaptive patterns of learning. (Ryan & Patrick, 2001, p. 456)



When effective pedagogy caters for diverse student culture, students demonstrate greater self-perception, improved relationships and a holistic view of the social world, which leads to authentic achievement in the classroom (Goodenow, 1993; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Students demonstrate effort, participation, interest and persistence in the face of challenges and avoid negative emotions, such as anxiety and boredom, which indicates changes in engagement and wellbeing (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Goodenow, 1993; Klem & Connell, 2004; Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

This student development relies on teachers as ethical agents to interpret, adapt and implement policies within their context that will ultimately influence the engagement and wellbeing of students (Campbell, 2016). “It is imperative for teacher educators, the experts in this sector, to be at the forefront of conversations about policy and practice to ensure that they are active members in creating and implementing policy” (Coffman, 2015, p.324). Teachers have more insight into their students and can therefore make sense of policies that are relevant to students and can be applied to their individual classroom setting. Making sense of policies allows teachers to interpret external demands and make formal and informal decisions about how a school collectively responds to educational reforms (Coffman, 2015). Sense making is dependent on the school culture, leadership, collegial support, available resources and time (Ketelaar, Beijaard, den Brok & Boshuizen, 2013; Pak Tee, 2008). Where sense making exists, teachers are enabled to become active agents in bridging the rhetoric-reality gap to effectively support student engagement and wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

The advent of engagement and wellbeing policies in Queensland provided the catalyst for this research. Student engagement and wellbeing has been surpassed by academic targets and accountability reforms for years; therefore, introducing engagement and wellbeing policies was a significant education reform. However, rhetoric was idealistic and ambiguous and failed to provide necessary information to teachers that penetrated pre-existing belief systems and framed actionable steps (Stein et al., 2016). Thus, a rhetoric-reality gap exists. As such, it was deemed important to investigate a number of issues surrounding implementation of engagement and wellbeing policies.

Schools play a vital role in providing all students with the opportunity to engage and learn effectively in an increasingly complex world (DETE, 2012). However, actionable steps to support this opportunity are not explicit in the documents. The rhetoric was “characterized by definitional ambiguity, competing discourses that blur policy intentions, conflicting priorities and lack of implementation frameworks”



(Graham & Powell, 2017). Thus, as engagement and wellbeing policy intentions are unclear, teachers struggle to provide authentic, engaging learning experiences while fostering wellbeing. Curriculum and pedagogical demands within a plethora of policies and procedures for students who are challenging old pedagogies, which limits effectiveness of practical strategies and policy intent (Lendrum et al., 2013; Neal, 2013; Pak Tee, 2008; Webb, 2014). Thus, the rhetoric-reality gap was attributed to idealistic policy rhetoric, broad policy aims without actionable steps and generalised implementation within a policy laden institution that conflicts and dissociates from policy aims.

Implementing engagement and wellbeing programs effectively in schools requires increasing intrinsic interest in curriculum, improving professional development for teachers, implementing engagement and wellbeing programs and improving student and teacher agency to achieve success (Graham & Powell, 2016; Simmons et al., 2014). These findings have contributed to an understanding of the importance of implementing engagement and wellbeing policies effectively in schools. While these findings cannot be generalized to all students and teachers, future research will enable a more thorough review to bridge this rhetoric-reality gap in education. Allowing students and teachers the agency and capacity to take autonomous action to engage, interpret, evaluate and redefine these policies would provide students with the resources to thrive in an environment of change and unpredictability (Clarke et al., 2015).

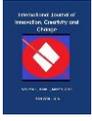


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