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Objectives

• School staff understand that positive relationships, a sense of belonging and inclusion are important for a positive school community.

• Relationships, belonging and inclusion are addressed in school planning, policies and practice.

• School leadership identify and implement specific strategies to strengthen relationships, belonging and inclusion including opportunities for students, staff, families to be involved in a range of school activities and contribute to school planning.

• The diversity within the school community is reflected in school communication and environment.

Outcomes

• Understand the elements of a positive school community (belonging, inclusion and active student participation) and how they support mental health and wellbeing.

• Be aware of the factors that enhance or inhibit a sense of community at school and how to improve it.

• Recognise the importance of relationships in a positive school community in order to build a sense of belonging and inclusion and promote active and meaningful participation.

• Explore practical ways to invest in relationships with students to promote their sense of belonging, inclusion and participation.

• Develop practical ways to ensure that diversity is acknowledged and reflected within the school environment.
Key messages

- The features of a positive school community promote positive mental health and wellbeing for all community members.
- Respectful relationships are the glue that holds a positive school community together.
- Relationships promote a sense of belonging for students, staff and families which in turn supports positive mental health and wellbeing.
- When students feel included and connected to school they will be more likely to participate in the school community and achieve academic success.
- Schools, through their policies and practices, can create a positive environment where all community members feel included, valued and supported.

From the research

Schools are places of learning and socialisation for young people. Increasingly, the links between learning and students’ mental health and wellbeing have also been recognised.

The value of positive day-to-day interactions across the whole school cannot be underestimated – including school staff with students, staff with staff, students with students and staff with families. These interactions as well as a whole school approach to developing positive relationships and connectedness to school are now well documented in the literature and reported anecdotally. Research is now clear that these benefits not only promote positive mental health but also improve educational outcomes, including increased school attendance, staying at school longer and higher grades.

Worth reading:

Why is this important?

Connectedness — the sense of caring for others and being cared for — is one of the most powerful protective factors in mental health, and is at the heart of the MindMatters framework.

In school, we can develop connectedness by focusing on four areas:

- relationships
- belonging
- inclusion
- active participation.

While there is a lot of overlap between these areas, each also has its own distinct flavour and focus.

By adopting habits, strategies and policies across these four areas, schools can create a positive school community that helps each student fulfill their potential both academically and as whole human beings.

From the research

Research focusing on school leadership has shown that when collective leadership is used and decisions are made collaboratively, improvements in teacher motivation and work setting are observed.

The researchers also attributed higher student achievement to improvements in teacher motivation and found that “the influence of parents and students [in decision making] is significantly related to student achievement”.

The four elements of connectedness covered in this module

**Relationships**
For this module, relationships can be defined as the connection with other individuals based on warmth, empathy, respect, positive regard and interest. Respectful relationships are the glue that holds a positive school community together.

**Belonging**
Belonging is the sense of connection with a group or institution, for example a group of peers, family or school. Students and staff need to feel like they belong to a social group as well as belong to the school itself.

**Inclusion**
Inclusion is the willingness to form relationships with people who are different from you and the ability to make them feel like they also belong. Schools can promote inclusion by valuing diversity as a strength, treating everyone as a unique individual, teaching about culture and modelling positive attitudes to diversity.

**Active participation**
Active participation is the ability for individuals to take part in community life and contribute in meaningful, ongoing ways that have a positive impact on the individual as well as the community itself. Both staff and students benefit from a real sense of participation and contribution.
Relationships

Trusting and caring relationships promote open communication among administrators, teaching and non-teaching staff, students, families and communities. Respect is the foundation of positive relationships. A respectful relationship values a person’s strengths and, in a school setting, every individual will have strengths and can be valued.

Relationships between school staff and students

Positive relationships between students and school staff can lead to the school community becoming a source of security, stability and support for all students. This is likely to be even more important for those students who are exposed to a number of risk factors in their home, school and in the broader community.

The quality of relationships between students and teachers influences the relationships between students. For example, in one French study of 18,000 secondary students, student-teacher relationships was identified as one of the strongest predictors (along with school security) of bullying in schools (Richard, Schneider, & Mallet., 2011).

It is important that every student has at least one significant adult with whom they have a caring relationship – someone who knows them well, knows their strengths, can ‘check in’ with them regularly and act as an advocate if necessary.

Relationships between students

The role of friendships is well known during adolescence. Research suggests that young people who feel valued and comfortable with their peer groups have fewer behavioural problems.

Peer social support is a protective factor for young people’s mental health, buffering young people from feelings of anxiety and alienation. Peers can provide advice and understanding during times of change and help young people feel valued.
Simple steps for positive relationships

Smile, talk, show an interest, respect, express curiosity, make the effort and spend the time getting to know your students. Show empathy and kindness, and model your own pro-social behaviour.

Find more in the Relationships and belonging Simple steps guide.

Relationships between school staff

Collegiality, group belonging and peer support are also important between staff members, contributing to a sense of worth and helping maintain mental health. Leaders can explicitly develop professional environments that are open, honest and respectful, allowing ideas to be challenged. Colleagues can provide suggestions and support, professionally and personally. Healthy relationships between school staff members can have a flow-on effect to students as they observe a vibrant and positive staff culture.
Incorporating social technology

Technology has become an intrinsic part of young people’s lives inseparable from other important aspects and has changed the ways young people interact with each other and the world around them. Young people are able to engage with online communities to build networks, seek help and access information. On the other hand, young people can also experience problems associated with overuse of technology, access to inappropriate or inaccurate information, exposure to sexting and cyberbullying, all of which can have damaging effects.

As schools recognise the value of technology in helping young people feel connected to each other, efforts are being made to incorporate technology as part of mental health promotion strategies. For example, incorporating links to help sites onto the school intranet and in enewsletters, keeping in touch with students who are absent from school, using the various connections students have beyond the school gate to extend support and in engaging with families via text and Facebook.

Relationships between school staff and families

School staff may come from different backgrounds to their school community members and they may not agree with some of the decisions parents and family members make in relation to students. In order to form positive relationships with families, the staff member’s judgements about families need to be suspended. While staff are not expected to agree with the values of the families, they will be best able to communicate respectfully if they can set aside their own values and be open-minded.

Sometimes a staff member may need to get to know a student’s family, understand what is important to them and to discover what values they have in common. It can be useful for staff to reflect on their own values and judgements and consider how they may or may not be helpful in communicating with parents. This can be facilitated by school leaders through their own language and behaviours modelled to staff as well as through discussions that encourage open views and respect for difference.
Belonging

A sense of belonging provides young people with a sense of purpose, meaning, worth and social control, all of which are contributors to positive mental health.

Students with a sense of belonging and supportive relationships with teachers and classmates are more motivated to participate actively in the life of the classroom than those students who do not have this kind of experience. Conversely, the feeling of not belonging or social isolation can lead to a range of negative, and under some circumstances, long-term consequences, both physical and psychological.

Simple steps for belonging

Find ways to value everyone, both from your individual point of view but also as a school. Explicitly reinforce that each person is welcomed and valued in the school community, that they have a place. Encourage belonging within other social groups in the school. Encourage breadth of friendship circles.

Find more in the Relationships and belonging Simple steps guide.

The risks of alienation

Schools can be experienced as places where students don’t feel like they belong. Research [Bergin and Bergin, 2009] has shown there are two areas of challenge for secondary schools to support a sense of belonging:

- In secondary schools, there tends to be more emphasis on teacher control and discipline, with less emphasis on student choice and self-management. Time is spent on maintaining order rather than teaching, yet young people at this age are seeking more autonomy.

- Teacher-student relationships are less personal and positive. Young people see teachers as less friendly and teachers see young people as less trustworthy.

These areas highlight the value of efforts to develop supportive and respectful relationships between staff and students including finding opportunities for students to participate and engage with staff in ways that make school more meaningful to them.
Finding value, maintaining standards

A key to belonging is students feeling like they are valued by the school as an institution. For many students, this sense of belonging might come from their friends and peers, and from the positive regard of teachers. Academically successful students gain validation from their achievements in school work. Other students may not feel valued socially or academically, and therefore feel like they don’t belong at school.

The ideal situation is that every student has the sense that they are valued in some way, and that they genuinely have a place in the school community. To achieve this, school staff actively seek out and highlight things of value in individual students, however small – whether it’s the student’s ability to hold down a part-time job, their compassion for animals, or their devotion to a particular hobby or interest.

Valuing students on their own terms does not mean that schools should disregard their own institutional standards. In fact, research has shown that high standards and expectations give students the sense that school staff care about them (Bergin and Bergin, 2009). The challenge is then to maintain a continuous balance between high but achievable expectations, and students having the assurance that failure will not mean withdrawal of acceptance.

From the research

Research involving over 4,000 10-18 year-old students in 134 schools in Italy found that some of the factors related to individual sense of community were within classroom and school characteristics, which could be amenable to change.

At all three levels of individual, classroom and school, democratic school climate was a moderate to strong predictor. This suggests that increasing active student participation in making rules and organising events, encouraging greater freedom of expression and addressing fairness of rules may increase school sense of community.

Inclusive schools are those that welcome all school staff, students and their families. Inclusion involves embracing the diversity that exists within a community – respecting, celebrating and honouring the differences between people. This diversity includes, but is not limited to, beliefs, religion, cultural heritage, education level, language, socioeconomic circumstances, family arrangements, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle, personality, interests, learning style, abilities and disabilities.

Schools are well placed to develop inclusive practices through:

- identification, and removal, of physical and socio-cultural barriers
- encouraging the presence and participation of all students
- paying special attention to those groups of students who may be at risk of exclusion
- using explicit teaching strategies that are inclusive as well as explicit teaching about inclusion.
Celebrating cultural diversity

It’s important that all families feel valued by and significant to the school and that their contribution to the school community is appreciated.

Working to build shared understandings about each other’s needs can go a long way towards helping people feel respected, engaged and connected to the school community. Consulting with community members can help the school to become informed about their cultural beliefs and encourage discussions with families that are respectful of these beliefs.

Sometimes small actions can be significant. For example, a school playing music from the country of origin of its families shows a respect for the diverse backgrounds of community members, while engaging a local community member to translate the school newsletter can help to make content relevant and accessible to families.

As families from various cultural backgrounds participate more fully in school events and develop relationships with both school staff and each other, it is less likely that racism, discrimination and prejudice will occur.

It will be through open and honest communication and respectful relationships that assumptions can be challenged, stereotypes broken down and greater understandings developed.

Myth: We are limited by the community

“Our students come from a neighbourhood that has a lot of conflict and their families don’t always have good relationships. There’s nothing we can do at the school to change that.”

Students spend a lot of time at the school and research is clear that school-specific factors play a significant role in developing the school culture of climate regardless of neighbourhood and family factors. There are lots of things that school staff can do to build a positive school community.
Why are some students at greater risk of exclusion?

Racism

It’s important to explicitly acknowledge and explore the damaging effects of racism. Research exploring the extent and impact of racism in Australian schools has found that racist behaviour is prevalent amongst Australian young people from all cultural backgrounds to different degrees.

Benefits to all students

Support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersex (LGBTI) students appears to create a more positive school community over time for all students. Schools with explicit anti-homophobia interventions such as gay-straight alliances were found in Canada to have a lower incidence of discrimination, students’ suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts.

Schools can play an important role in developing culturally respectful attitudes. Compulsory classroom programs about racism, stereotyping and cultural issues are shown to reduce ignorance about cultural issues or racist attitudes towards people with diverse backgrounds.

In culturally diverse communities efforts to reduce conflicts between different cultural groups will be important in order to promote harmonious and safe school communities.
Homophobia and transphobia

One area for further work in schools is the needs of LGBTI students. Schools can be places in which homophobia and transphobia prevail.

A recent study found that almost two thirds of the young people who completed the survey experienced some form of homophobia or transphobia, including verbal and physical abuse, with some experiencing multiple forms of abuse (Hillier, et al., 2010).

Research has also found that schools that have policies in place to support LGBTI students help protect them from harm. Schools perceived by students to be supportive have a significant positive influence on the mental health and safety of the LGBTI young people who attend.

From the research

In exploring what helped young people in particular to feel a sense of community, Evans (2007) highlighted environments “in which they experience voice and resonance, some power and influence, and adequate adult support and challenge”.

Young people reported opportunities to voice opinions and have their opinions heard and valued as the kind of actions which helped them to feel like contributing members of a community.

Evans noted that, despite this, young people are usually recipients of influence and power of adults with almost nonexistent opportunities to return the influence. He noted that young people’s global sense of community decreases as they move through school, apparently due to the mismatch between their increasing need to exert influence and the lack of meaningful roles afforded them.

Active participation refers to individuals taking part in school life and contributing meaningfully to the school community.

MindMatters schools are student-centred learning environments with students actively engaged in discussions and activities to explore what is most important to them, what works and doesn’t, and how to make the school the best it can be.

**Simple steps for active participation**

Provide opportunities for students to participate. Set or negotiate individual, rigorous and realistic goals for each person and hold them accountable. For example, for one student just turning up to school may be an achievement. Encourage self-determination.

Find more in the Relationships and belonging Simple steps guide.

Staff are mindful of their own assumptions about what students need, or of doing things in a certain way because that’s always how they were done.

Students may require support to engage in this way, and discussions and decision-making processes may need scaffolding so that students learn how to be involved. Be aware of those students who are not participating and check directly if they have ideas or would like to be involved – this avoids the students with the loudest voices or most engaged with school being the sole representatives of the students.
Finally, for efforts to be seen as genuine and not tokenistic, the school and students need a shared expectation that discussions will be followed up. If student and staff ideas are followed up, responses provided, action taken where appropriate and discussed further, then staff and student needs are more likely to be met. This gives them a sense of importance and the feeling they are respected by the school. This can flow on to improved attitudes to school and increased engagement.

Levels of participation

Active student participation enables all students to be involved in activities and provided with opportunities to contribute to the level they are comfortable with. For some students this involvement may be minimal, but having the opportunity will be important.
A group of year 10 students worked with their student welfare coordinator to explore ways to support the student group at the school. Having heard about a peer drug education initiative operating at another school, they asked the staff member to find out more about it. The staff member contacted a local agency working on a prevention strategy around drug use, and organised a meeting to explore developing a project together.

Over the course of a year the school worked with the agency worker to train students in drug education (cigarettes and alcohol use) and to then run classes with younger students replacing some of the health classes.

The following year the group of students worked with the agency worker to train another group of students to then run classes. The coordinator arranged the health classes, and met with the students facilitating the classes to debrief and problem solve.

The school was invited to present at a youth drug and alcohol conference and a small group of students, supported by the coordinator and agency worker, made a presentation.

The project was closely monitored by the coordinator and agency worker and built into the school’s drug education plan to complement the school’s existing programs.

**Results**

Students reported benefits in having a greater voice within the school, feeling more valued as school community members, a greater sense of purpose and more responsibility.

They also spoke of feeling empowered as their suggestion had been taken up and supported. This resulted in improved school attendance for some students, enhanced relationships between students and staff and across year levels between students, and opportunities for recognition both inside and outside of the school.

Anecdotal feedback from the younger students suggested that they were very engaged in this model, reporting that they enjoyed the classes more than their usual health classes as they appreciated hearing the messages from someone closer to their age.
Seeing results

Although research is now supporting the benefits of a whole school approach, it can sometimes be difficult to measure the benefits of a positive school community — although it can be described as a ‘felt’ experience.

Programs and policies continue to be divided between proactive ways to support students’ mental health (such as a whole school approach to developing relationships) and reactive ways (such as individualised focus on responding to young people’s mental health needs).

It can be much easier to notice these reactive responses. For example, when there are behavioural concerns then suspensions or expulsions can be seen and send a message that action is taken (regardless of the evidence which now highlights the negative effect of these responses). Efforts to build relationships are less tangible and can take time.

Get the Simple steps guide

There are many ways to develop connectedness, so we have produced a simple steps guide that is full of suggestions. It contains ideas to improve student-staff relationships, establish collaborative decision-making processes, engage families and help staff develop professionally.

You can download this guide right now.

MindMatters is a national mental health initiative for secondary schools developed by beyondblue with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health.

See more MindMatters resources at www.mindmatters.edu.au
References


