Evaluating Constructive Solutions

Implementation of MindMatters and evaluation of the professional development component

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Abstract

MindMatters is a national resource and professional development program for secondary schools. The program is founded on a whole school approach to building social and emotional wellbeing, for all members of the school community. A comprehensive strategy is encouraged, embracing curriculum change, school environment and ethos and partnerships with parents, external agencies and the broader community. MindMatters also provides professional development opportunities for school staff, in all states and territories. The Hunter Institute of Mental Health is an external evaluator, collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data from case study schools and feedback from those who attend the professional development. The results to date show that MindMatters is implemented in many different ways, according to each school's context and priorities. The program has the capacity to support school change in policy, structure and culture as well as in the curriculum. This paper will also report on the evaluation of the professional development program and its capacity to support changes in schools and individuals. Information from the evaluation to date shows that comprehensive school change can occur following the implementation of school-based wellbeing programs and that staff professional development is an important factor in that change.

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Introduction

The Australian Government has adopted innovative approaches to addressing the problem of mental illness in Australia by encouraging the promotion of mental health in school settings. This paper will describe the MindMatters program which is the main plank of the government’s national strategy. It will briefly describe the evaluation of this program and report key findings in terms of the types of changes that have occurred in schools that implement MindMatters and the impact of these changes on teachers.

Background on MindMatters

Firstly, a brief description of MindMatters is necessary. MindMatters is a national mental health promotion initiative of the Commonwealth Department of Health
and Ageing. In essence it has two components: a Kit of resources (booklets and a video) and a professional development program. Its aim is to encourage schools to become more aware of mental health issues in schools and to promote the development of positive mental health of students and staff.

MindMatters was developed by a consortium involving the Faculties of Education at Sydney, Melbourne and Deakin Universities and the Australian Council of Health, Physical Education and Recreation. It was developed in 1997/1998 and was piloted in 1998 and 1999 in 24 schools across Australia. Following the pilot, the resources were mass produced and a different consortium, comprising the Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council (APAPDC) and the Curriculum Corporation, was contracted to actively disseminate the MindMatters resources to schools with a secondary enrolment across Australia, and to support the dissemination with a program of accessible professional development in all states and territories. State-based training staff were recruited, with national coordination of training being supported from the APAPDC head office in Adelaide. Later a website was also developed, which allowed additional resources, not initially included in the Kit to be disseminated. The website also served as an accessible way in which schools and teachers could find out about the availability of training in their area.

MindMatters is conceptually based on the well-known holistic model of health promotion, best known as the Health Promoting School’s Model and the Comprehensive School Mental Health Model (Sheehan et al., 2002) with the wellbeing of students being the central objective of changes in curriculum, policies, structures and partnerships. Often this is abbreviated to the term ‘whole-school approaches’ however we have found that schools use this term is used very widely and it can embrace a wealth of meanings. In this paper, the term will be used as synonymous with health promoting school approaches.

The evidence basis for the content and approach of MindMatters encompasses:

- Evidence that ‘whole school’ approaches are most effective in MH promotion;
- Evidence from education and health research on prevention of harmful behaviours;
- Evidence from resilience literature on risk and protective factors;
- Evidence about the effects of bullying;
- Evidence about risks associated with addressing the issue of youth suicide in curriculum; and
- Evidence about mental health literacy of young Australians

The MindMatters Kit that was distributed to secondary schools contains a range of resources.

The book entitled ‘School Matters’ consists of an explanation of the framework and provides planning tools to assist schools with possible structures, strategies, partnerships and curriculum programs to promote and protect the mental health of all members of the school community.

‘Educating for Life’ outlines policies, processes and practices that contribute to a comprehensive and safe approach to suicide prevention, including how teachers should handle this topic if it is raised in the classroom.
‘Community Matters’ explores the relationships between community, culture and identity, analyses the social and cultural issues that tend to marginalise particular groups of students, and presents strategies for working in community partnerships.

The remaining booklets provide a range of mainly curriculum ideas that can be used in pastoral care setting and in other classroom settings.

These descriptions are taken from the MindMatters website [http://cms.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters/](http://cms.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters/) and descriptions of other books in the Kit can be obtained from the site.

A national model of Professional Development was developed in 2000 and was piloted in Tasmania, the ACT and the Northern Territory before being rolled out in other states. A Professional Development committee was established in each state and territory and state-based Professional Development officers were employed. The standard model of training used from 2001 to 2003 is two days. It covers an introduction to MindMatters’ theoretical underpinnings as well as in-depth examination of each of the resources in the Kit. Participants have the opportunity to think about and develop early plans for how their school could implement MindMatters. Following further Commonwealth funding being made available in 2004 and 2005, this model of training has continued, but new models have also evolved including: a one-day refresher training course for staff from schools who are already implementing MindMatters, and an intensive in-school approach for schools who want assistance with taking MindMatters to a deeper level.

By the end of 2005, over 80% of schools with a secondary enrolment have sent staff to MindMatters PD training.

**The evaluation of MindMatters**

The Hunter Institute of Mental Health was appointed as the external evaluator of the MindMatters program in December 2001. An Evaluation Reference Group was appointed by the APAPDC late in 2001. The group consisted of representatives of the secondary school system, the mental health sector, mental health researchers, and the administrators of the program, has determined the direction of the evaluation and the for the evaluation. The brief for the evaluation was twofold: to examine the effectiveness of the professional development program; and to examine the experiences of schools that adopt MindMatters including any impacts and outcomes that might emerge from the schools' adoption of MindMatters. The complexity of the process on deciding the focus of the evaluation is evidenced by the fact that the committee met four times over a six month period to make final decisions, reflecting perhaps the importance of the initiative and the diverse interests and needs of representatives of different sectors (Hazell, Vincent, Waring, & Lewin, 2002).

The main methods used include a survey of participants in the MindMatters Professional Development workshops in each state and territory in 2002 and 2003; interviews with key informants in the three education sectors and a representative of the health sector in each state; and a fifteen-school case study involving student questionnaires and field visits.
For the Professional Development survey, a stratified random sampling method was used to ensure participants in all workshops were represented in the final sample. In all 534 participants completed this survey. For the case study, schools were randomly selected from lists of those schools who had attended the early Professional Development workshops in each state and territory. This type of selection was used in order to avoid bias and to maximise the extent to which the results of the study could be generalised to other schools. Schools were visited at baseline and at annual follow-up for two further years. In 2004 the evaluation was extended and twelve of the fifteen schools were visited a further time.

**Broad Conclusions**

Data collected from all methods of enquiry indicate strongly that the MindMatters Professional Development Workshops are conducted by highly qualified staff and reflect a very high standard of quality adult education. Key informants from states and territories were generally of the view that the rollout of MindMatters has been equitable, with some dissenting views coming from the independent school sector in two states. It was acknowledged that rurality and the level of school resources were barriers to schools attending training.

A large majority of respondents (88%) indicated that their school was already implementing MindMatters or was likely to make the decision to adopt the program in the near future.

Of those who were already implementing MindMatters, 66% indicated that they thought their school would still be using the MindMatters program in three years time.

The following quote illustrates the general impressions of most teachers who were interviewed about their PD experience. Informants in almost all schools were very positive about the training. It must be acknowledged, however, that PD was not always perfect, and informants in two schools were less complimentary in their comments.

“I’ve been to probably hundreds of dead, boring training courses and it was one of the most exciting things I’ve ever done because we were up out of our seats all the time, we were playing games, we were interacting, we were busy, we were focused, we were always changing and doing different things and it was teaching us to be active learners, the way we want children to be.”

Other broad conclusions about the impact of professional development include:

- Training was effective in increasing understanding of mental health issues and of the importance of school’s promoting the resilience of students;
- Two days of training is more effective than one in giving school staff a comprehensive understanding of the MindMatters resources;
- Staff who attended training well after their school first commenced using MindMatters needed a different model than the standard;
- The more staff that are trained the more likely that adoption will fit the comprehensive ‘whole-school’ model on which MindMatters is based; and
- Implementation with Professional Development is richer and more effective than implementation with the Kit alone.

This last point is well illustrated by the following quote. This teacher recognises that training is necessary to communicate the importance of the concept of student mental health and wellbeing, and creates a deeper awareness and understanding of how the concepts can be applied in schools.

“… we get untold amounts of kits delivered to us each year. If we don’t have training with those kits, they collect dust on the shelf. But apart from that, I think a lot of the training does get forgotten or whatever, but it’s still important in that cultural shift, you know. Teachers are aware and deep down in their psyche know that this is an important thing. So it does leave some… training gives the concepts some credence.”

Some appreciation of the sustainability of the MindMatters resources can be gained from the case study in which just two of the original fifteen schools (13%) stopped using MindMatters during the three-year period of the evaluation. In both cases, the main reason that MindMatters was not continued was that the key supporter of MindMatters in each school left the school before implementation and training had progressed to the point where it could survive without their advocacy and leadership. All of the remaining schools are continuing to implement MindMatters at some level and all expect to continue to do so into the future.

Taking the original fifteen schools as the denominator:
- 40% are still using MindMatters at the same level after three yrs;
- 27% are expanding their use of MindMatters; and
- 20% are using MindMatters but at a reduced level.

Changes to schools

(a) Curriculum
Seven schools altered their timetables to create a specific period in which MindMatters curriculum resources could be used (usually by home room or pastoral care teachers), while four others already had a sufficiently long pastoral care period in which the resources could be used. Apart from this model MindMatters was used most commonly in a health or personal development subject. Some schools attempted to introduce MindMatters into other curriculum areas with varying level of success. One school has been quite successful in integrating MindMatters into all teaching and learning areas. Many teachers report that they have generalised the concepts and teaching methods that they use during a ‘MindMatters’ period, into their normal subject teaching.

Case study schools varied greatly in the way they implemented the MindMatters program, reflecting very different baseline conditions. Six schools who had well-established pastoral care policies and structures in place, tended to use MindMatters as an educational resource for both staff and students. In these schools, MindMatters curriculum resources were complementary to their pastoral
care ethos. Such schools, by adopting MindMatters curriculum moved towards a more ideal model of school change according to the health promoting school’s paradigm. It was one of these schools that did not continue with MindMatters, perhaps reflecting that the relative need for the program was low.

A further six schools had some existing policies and structures that were supportive of student wellbeing but were able to define ways in which these needed to be improved. These schools implemented a range of curriculum changes and other changes as well.

Three schools defined themselves at the outset as having a significant need to reorient the school towards the wellbeing of students both because the school lacked a specific ethos of care and support and because the student population were exhibiting high levels of social, emotional and behavioural problems. Two of these schools implemented significant structural change as a result of their implementation of MindMatters. In both cases the schools invested in training a significant proportion (more than one third) of the school staff.

(b) Structures
As indicated, a number of the schools have made structural changes as a result of their planning and implementation of MindMatters. Some examples are:
- the introduction of a specific period in the timetable for pastoral care;
- reorganisation of behavioural management structures;
- reorganisation of pastoral arrangements (e.g. horizontal rather than vertical structures);
- reorganising timetables to reduce stress and increase attendance; and
- the introduction of a website on the intranet to support students and reduce bullying.

(c) Policies
Schools have also reviewed policies and procedures to make them more supportive of student wellbeing. Some examples are:
- bullying and harassment policies;
- behaviour management policies and procedures;
- drug and alcohol policies;
- uniform policies;
- critical incident policies; and
- access to counselling services

**Impacts on teachers**

While all these changes are designed to impact directly on the students’ knowledge, attitudes, skills and experiences of care and support, it is not surprising that the school’s implementation of MindMatters would also impact significantly on the teachers who are being asked to interact with a new curriculum about wellbeing issues, and to play a more overt role in supporting the wellbeing of students. Commonly reported impacts include:

- Teachers seeing the value of fostering connections with students. This teacher illustrates that her skills in building rapport had improved.
“This MindMatters kit I suppose…it helped me to develop a rapport with the students, and it allowed me to see another side apart from just a facilitator of teaching and learning, of just teaching them whatever it is I have to teach”.

- Teachers seeing wellbeing as a prerequisite for teaching and learning, reflecting one of the basic principles we have learned from Maslow, of the pre-eminent need for safety above that of knowledge.

  “I like to make sure that all of my students are feeling safe within themselves, secure, emotionally stable – because they won’t learn anything if they don’t feel that way”.

  “You get the student wellbeing right, the curriculum starts looking after itself”.

- Teachers understanding behaviour as a marker of mental health status; positive classroom demeanour and active participation perhaps reflecting positive mental health; while disruptive, moody or withdrawn behaviour perhaps indicates that a student may need more support.

  “Like I develop more of an empathy towards the students in terms of that, like I will stop and check myself… instead of coming down on a kid like a ton of bricks - like I will think, ‘is it something else going on here?’ So my awareness of mental health issues has affected my teaching”.

- Teachers referring students who they are worried about. Schools report referrals from teachers who have not previously done so, and more appropriate referrals from other teachers.

  “I’m always talking to the counsellor and saying I’m noticing changes in so and so’s behaviour. It wouldn’t be a bad idea if you tried to touch base with certain students”.

- Teachers talking positively about teaching emotion-laden topics. In MindMatters two of the topics are ‘Loss and Grief’ and ‘Understanding Mental Illness’. Some teachers found extra knowledge gained from MindMatters increased their confidence in teaching this content.

  “It was helpful for me to know all the things to do. If a parent dies in your class ‘I don’t know how to respond’ and (the MindMatters resource) was helpful for me as well. What to say and what not to say. I found that very beneficial right at the particular time”.

- Teachers talking negatively about teaching emotion-laden topics. Other teachers reported that they felt considerable stress, particularly if they were asked to teach the topics without training.

  “We haven’t been given the next sort of instalment of MindMatters which I’ve been told is supposed to be ‘Loss and Grief’ and I’m very uncomfortable about the prospect of me having to teach ‘Loss and Grief’”.

Teachers experience of teaching is more rewarding. Some teachers indicate a renewed interest in and commitment to teaching.
“It (MindMatters) gave me an opportunity to see the other side of it and how to take a more compassionate role and sort of look inside students’ feelings and you know what I mean. That was really rewarding.

You walk away feeling these kids really liked that, they really got into it and they really told me stuff, or told the class stuff that I didn’t think they would. So that’s fantastic”.

- Adoption of a new set of language tools about wellbeing. This particularly occurred when a sizeable number of school staff are trained.

  “The other thing that having shared training and development does, it means that you have a shared language to talk about mental health issues. So the word resilience – people don’t scorn it that much, and actually that it talks about staff wellbeing”.

Teachers reports reflect knowledge and awareness gains in a number of areas including:
- Nature of mental health;
- Mental health problems; definitions, symptoms, prevalence, myths, treatments;
- Risk factors such as drug and alcohol use, family problems, child abuse, relationship problems;
- Protective factors such as self esteem, autonomy, school attachment, physical health;
- Impact of mental health problems on learning and behaviour;
- Role of teachers in promoting good mental health;
- Role of teachers in preventing mental health problems.

Teachers also report that they have developed new skills related to ways in which they can support the wellbeing of students and respond better to students with mental health problems. Frequently mentioned skills gains include:
- Recognition of students’ mental health problems;
- Increased support for students with problems;
- Different ways of handling behavioural disturbances;
- Recognition of mental health problems in self and other staff;
- Increased support for other teachers.

General conclusions

MindMatters has proved itself to be an important resource for secondary schools. The MindMatters Kit contains valuable resources but it is the experience of the accompanying professional development that appears to add a positive impetus to a school’s implementation.

Most school that adopt MindMatters will sustain their use of the program over at least three years and professional development again is a key ingredient in helping schools to maintain commitment and focus on the principles of the program.

Teachers find the training very helpful in coping with the considerable adaptations that they need to make in terms of their teaching content and methodologies and their broader roles as supporters of student wellbeing.
When a critical number of teachers are trained, the resultant collegiality can result in powerful changes in school ethos, classroom climate and student–teacher relationships.