

# Changing the way schools support social and emotional wellbeing

## Evaluating the impact of MindMatters at the school level

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### **Abstract**

The successful adoption of new health promotion programs in secondary schools takes time and perseverance, even more so when they address an issue such as mental health. A fifteen-school case study design has been used to determine the impact of secondary schools' adoption of MindMatters. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods have been used. Schools were studied over a three-year period to allow schools adequate time to implement the program and for any impacts of the program to emerge.

This paper will describe the research methods and present evidence of the impact of MindMatters on students, staff and on the school itself. Factors that characterise more successful adoption will be identified.

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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.

## **The evaluation of the impact 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 late in 2001. The group consisted of representatives of the secondary school system, the mental health sector, mental health researchers, the funding body and the administrators of the program.

The complexity of the process of 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 about the direction of the evaluation, reflecting perhaps the importance of the initiative and the diverse interests and needs of representatives of different sectors (Hazell, Vincent, Waring, & Lewin, 2002).

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. This paper focuses only on the second area of study, and in particular on the impact of school adoption of the MindMatters program.

### **Methods**

To examine the process and impact of adoption of MindMatters, a fifteen-school case study design was used. The schools were selected randomly from a list of schools that had expressed early interest in MindMatters by sending at least one staff member to the MindMatters' professional development training.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The original design was to visit the schools at baseline and on two subsequent annual occasions. This was later extended by a further year, but only twelve of the fifteen schools participated in the extended evaluation. During the visits, interviews and focus groups were conducted with school executive members, teachers, other school staff, students, and sometimes with parents and community members. Questionnaires were administered to consenting students at baseline and then again annually throughout the period of the evaluation, although only ten of the schools completed the questionnaires on all occasions.

This report will focus mainly on what was learned from the qualitative methods.

### **Sample**

The fifteen schools comprised 7 government schools, 4 independent schools, 3 Catholic schools and 1 community-run, Indigenous school. The selected schools represented all states and territories and all school systems. Schools were recruited between August 2001 and May 2002, reflecting that the rollout of MindMatters occurred earlier in some states than in others. Sampling was done in such a way as to avoid selection bias and to allow generalisation of results.

The following table, in which the schools are given fictitious names, shows that the actual period of evaluation varied from school to school as it was not always possible to arrange follow-up interviews on the exact anniversary of the baseline visit.

**Table 1: List of Case Study Schools, dates of first and last visit and number of visits**

School	First Visit	Last Visit (number of visits)
Coombes HS	November 2001	December 2004 4
Windermere HS	February 2002	April 2005 4
Oxford College	February 2002	March 2005 4
St Cuthbert's HS	June 2002	July 2005 4
Martinsville HS	June 2002	June 2005 4
Waterview HS	November 2001	June 2005 4
Kerry Bay Girls HS	November 2001	November 2003 4
Hermitage Boys HS	March 2002	August 2005 4
Kalimna Koori School	February 2002	July 2005 5
Glastonbury HS	August 2001	October 2004 4
William's Plains HS	February 2002	July 2005 4
Highlands HS	April 2002	August 2005 4
Phoenix HS	November 2001	November 2004 4
Clifford HS	October 2001	November 2003 3
St Mathews College	March 2002	July 2003

Five visits were made to Kalimna Koori school as the principal resigned late in 2003 and it was considered that a visit to collect her views at this time would be critical to understanding any changes that might be attributed to a changeover of school leaders.

Two schools dropped out of the evaluation. Clifford High initially adopted MindMatters but utilisation effectively stopped during the second year of the evaluation after both the school principal and the main advocate for MindMatters both left the school. At St Matthews, some initial extensive planning for adoption took place but, when the main advocate for MindMatters resigned early in the second year of the adoption, no further activity took place. The school did not consider that a third evaluation visit would be fruitful.

In all 52 school visits were made and a very large number of interviews were conducted. Multiple sources were interviewed at each visit, and repeat visits allowed confirmation of earlier findings to be confirmed. All conclusions drawn about both the process of adoption and the impact of MindMatters are based then on those data which are consistent across data sources and across multiple time points.

Based on what was learned about the characteristics of the schools at baseline, the reasons given for the schools' adoption of MindMatters and the actual process of adoption of MindMatters, a pattern has emerged that has allowed the schools to be grouped into three types as follows:

Type A: Prior to taking on the program, these schools had an ethos that fitted well with the MindMatters project, and generally gave a great deal of importance to issues related to student wellbeing. However, these schools identified the need to increase commitment to these ideas through curriculum and other more structural and policy changes.

MindMatters curriculum resources and 'whole school' approach was appealing for these schools.

Type B: Prior to taking on the MindMatters program, these schools had an ethos that fitted well with the MindMatters project, and generally gave a great deal of importance to issues related to student wellbeing. However, these schools identified the need to increase commitment to these ideas through curriculum and other more structural and policy changes. MindMatters curriculum resources and 'whole school' approach was appealing for these schools.

Type C: Prior to implementing the MindMatters project, these schools had identified that the school community had many problems, necessitating a reorientation of the school towards providing more support for student wellbeing. These schools were 'ready' for whole-school change and saw MindMatters as providing a framework for assisting the school in its process of change.

Two of the Type A schools were Catholic and three others were Christian independent schools of different denominations.

Three of the Type B schools were government schools, with one a Catholic girls high school.

Three of the Type C schools were government schools, with one an independent Christian school.

### **Implementation**

With the exception of Waterview and St Mathews, the Type A schools formally adopted the MindMatters curriculum in most if not all grades. Although not without its detractors, MindMatters was seen by staff as an extension of the range of ways in which their school demonstrated a concern for the welfare of students. While there were staff who criticised the way in which MindMatters was introduced into the school, there was more or less universal support for the idea of MindMatters. Critics were more likely to suggest changes to the method of adoption rather than the adoption itself. MindMatters is typically seen to be used across curriculum areas in most of these schools.

Only a few of these schools made changes in areas other than curriculum. Three of the schools actually altered the timetable to enable MindMatters to be included quite comprehensively in a pastoral care classroom setting.

In four of these seven schools, MindMatters is well established and embedded within formal structures of the school. In St Mathews, the program never really got off the ground and in two other schools, ongoing use is not formally embedded but there is interest among a number of staff to continue using the program.

In the Type B schools, adoption of the MindMatters curriculum did occur but, overall, was much less comprehensive than in the Type A schools. Nevertheless, in two of the schools, Windermere and Kerry Bay, structural

changes were made to timetable and subject design to incorporate a level of formal adoption. At Clifford, a form of cross-subject implementation was designed but not wholeheartedly implemented outside of the health faculty due to a perception that the staff had not been consulted and that MindMatters was being imposed on them. This school was the only school where no person involved in the implementation of MindMatters had attended the professional development training.

Type B schools, apart from William's Plains, all attempted successfully to introduce changes other than curriculum. At Windermere, the changes made were specifically designed to increase connection to school for a school population that derives from a very low socio-economic area. At Kerry Bay, changes were designed to extend the range of supports available to students both within the school and in the community. Even at William's Plains, however, a great deal of planning was undertaken in the third year of the evaluation and, in the year following, a number of structural changes were made to enable a new compulsory health curriculum to be adopted. MindMatters was also written into the school's charter and forward plans, with the intention that MindMatters should influence teaching across the curriculum.

Apart from Clifford High, where use of MindMatters was discontinued after the first twelve months, the adoption of MindMatters was sustained over the three years of the evaluation and in two schools, the school even had plans to further extend its commitment to the wellbeing of students.

In Type C schools, there was noticeably less focus on the adoption of new curriculum and more on the adoption of, in most cases, widespread structural changes. One exception was at Glastonbury where, despite three years of struggle within the school to find a place for MindMatters in the curriculum, it was formally incorporated into a new subject strand. This occurred due to the necessity of the school completely reworking its curriculum as a requirement of a state-wide curriculum initiative.

Of the four Type C schools, Hermitage is the only one which does not service a largely disadvantaged community. This independent school found itself in need of a transformation from an old-style boys private school into a modern educational facility. Inspirational new school leaders introduced a new vision for the school in which pastoral care and support for social and emotional growth were given as much emphasis as support for academic and sporting achievement. MindMatters served as a convenient resource set for embedding this new school ethos.

At Kalimna, a small community school, we see an example of how another inspirational school leader used MindMatters as the basis for reorienting all aspects of school towards supporting the wellbeing of students. For this school, the Community Matters resource was particularly important resource for the principal to use to engage discussions between staff and community about the importance of the whole school having this direction and all working together to support the direction. This was the only school in which it was possible for all the staff and members of the community to participate as a group in MindMatters training.

At the remaining Type C schools, the extent of whole-school change was considerable during the three years of the evaluation. These changes focussed on such areas as timetable changes, new pastoral care arrangements, and changes in behaviour management.

Each of these schools independently explored and some implemented the Restorative Justice program.

In all four schools the extent of structural school change was such that MindMatters remains implicitly if not explicitly embedded with the school and should continue to have a positive impact into the future.

### **Impacts on Students**

At the third and fourth visits to schools, the issue of the impact of the changes made in the school was raised with the school informants. The changes identified in the following tables, represent those changes for which there was corroborative evidence from more than one source and where there was consistency over time.

To further corroborate the conclusions in relation to impacts, an individual report was written on each school. This report was sent back to the school for review. Commentators were asked to identify any unjustified claims (in their view) and also any impacts that had been missed. Modifications were then made prior to undertaking the cross-school analysis presented here.

Clearly, the school informants felt that their school's adoption of MindMatters had been instrumental in bringing about a range of positive benefits for the student body.

All types of school reported outcomes related to the management of bullying and improved help-seeking behaviours.

Apart from this, the types of changes seem to be related to the type of implementation. So for Type A schools, we see impacts in the areas of learning new knowledge and resultant attitude change, particularly relating to bullying and mental illness, the two most commonly used curriculum-based resources used by these schools. Type B and C schools were more likely to report impacts on difficult behaviour and other risk factors.

**Table 2: Impacts on students by type of school  
(No. schools reporting impact)**

Impacts Identified by School	Type of School		
	A (7 schools)	B (4 schools)	C (4 schools)
Awareness and understanding of bullying	6	2	
Better management of bullying	5	2	3
Reduction in bullying			2
Better management of difficult behaviours		2	2
Improvement in attendance		1	2
Improved peer support		1	1
Improved help-seeking	5	2	3
Improved understanding of mental illness	4	2	
Improved attitudes to the mentally ill	4	1	
Reduction in drug and alcohol			1
Improved communication, social skills			2
Improved school attachment			2

Table 3 shows those impacts reported which are outcomes for the staff themselves. There was a much greater similarity between different types of schools and the impacts that they reported. Most commonly reported was the impact of MindMatters on the staff's understanding of mental illness and mental health issues

It is interesting to note that in 10 schools, staff reported that involvement with MindMatters had resulted in them changing their teaching practice in some way. Examples given included, more inclusive teaching practices, team teaching, more interactivity and open-ended lesson planning, changed reactions to difficult behaviours, and greater listening to students. In over half of the schools, teachers reported the together with changes in their teaching, they felt a greater sense of job satisfaction as they have become more student-oriented in their teaching.

It is interesting to note that greater understanding of mental illness and mental health issues was reported as an outcome in all types of school but only in type A schools did teachers claim to have developed a greater ability to identify and respond to students with mental health problems.



**Table 3: Impacts on staff by type of school  
(No. schools reporting impact)**

Impacts Identified by School	Type of School		
	A (7 schools)	B (4 schools)	C (4 schools)
Staff understanding of mental illness, mental health issues	5	1	4
Ability to identify and respond to mental health problems	5		
Changes in teaching practice	3	3	4
Improved job satisfaction	2	3	3

In a small number of schools the introduction of MindMatters was also reported to have caused some negative impacts on staff. In type A schools where a comprehensive curriculum was attempted and in type C schools where pastoral care teachers were required to teach certain units (at least in the first year or so of implementation) there were complaints of discomfort with having to teach certain units, with the 'Loss and Grief' unit being most commonly named. Schools needed to develop some flexibility in terms of which staff were allocated to teach these units. Not all schools were flexible and complaints persisted in these schools.

In the schools with a comprehensive new curriculum there were some complains about increased workload, while in type C schools, comprehensive school change caused discomfort for some staff members.

**Table 4: Impacts on schools by type of school  
(No. schools reporting impact)**

Impacts Identified by School	Type of School		
	A (7 schools)	B (4 schools)	C (4 schools)
Increased focus on social and emotional wellbeing	4	2	4
New, shared language to discuss wellbeing	4	3	1
Improved overall climate	1	1	2
Improved image of school	1	1	4

Table 4 shows those impacts on the schools themselves, with improvement in the focus of the school on social and emotional wellbeing issues being the one most commonly mentioned. For some, especially those which invested more in professional development, informants reported that staff had learned and were using a new language to express this focus on wellbeing and to debate individual wellbeing issues. "We have to do this because its MindMatters".



For mainly type B and C schools, the MindMatters experience resulted in improvements in the climate of the school and in the image of the school in the community.

### **Discussion**

MindMatters is useful to schools who want to increase the level of support that they provided to students and/or who want to enhance protective factors against mental health problems.

Those schools who were more successful in implementing their plans attribute the usefulness of MindMatters to the high-quality, and easy-to-use curriculum resources, the access to highly rated professional development, and to the enabling of a new language about student wellbeing to develop within the school, with which the staff could develop new ideas and share strategies.

Looking at those schools who had a greater level of implementation or who had more success in implementing their initial plans, the following factors emerge as critical success factors:

- a pre-existing concern for addressing student welfare issues;
- active support and leadership from school executive;
- a match between MindMatters and existing school directions;
- adequate investment in professional development;
- allocation of adequate resources (mainly time) to support planning, preparation and review;
- a formal adoption process.
- a process of accountability for implementation.

Adoption of MindMatters is less effective or more difficult when:

- there are competing demands on staff time prevent adequate planning and preparation for adoption;
- there is a high staff turnover;
- the school has concurrent industrial issues;
- the school is large and located over multiple campuses.

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Hazell, T., Vincent, K., Waring, T., & Lewin, T. (2002). The challenges of evaluating national mental health promotion programs in schools: A case study using the evaluation of MindMatters. *The International Journal of Mental Health Promotion*, 4(4), 21-27.