

Editorial

Special issue: Promoting Wellbeing in Schools

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Second only to the family, schools provide the most important learning and social environments for children and adolescents. Typically beginning at age five and continuing for more than a decade, children spend nearly as much of their waking time at school as they do at home (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1982). As one of the most central and thus formative environments in child development, schools have the unique potential – and arguably the responsibility - to actively promote the socio-emotional development and wellbeing of children and adolescents.

Despite increased interest in exploring the role of schools in student emotional wellbeing (e.g., CASEL 2003; 2007), and evidence suggesting that schools and school-based programs can indeed play an important role in student emotional and mental health (e.g., Rutter et al, 1982; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994), a number of fundamental questions remain about how schools can best address the social and emotional needs of their students. The current special issue was developed to provide an opportunity to bring together current research on a number of topics in the area of child and adolescent wellbeing in schools. The following four articles begin to address a number of pressing questions currently facing the field of social and emotional education such as: 1) What teaching behaviors, both positive and negative, are associated with emotional health in the classroom? 2) Given the potential importance of teacher behavior for student emotional health and wellbeing, how can we begin to equip teachers and future educators with the necessary skills to meet the socio-emotional needs of their students? 3) How can schools begin to take advantage of the existing evidence base on emotional and mental health practices more broadly to enhance their counseling staff's skills, and in turn improve wellbeing outcomes for their students? And finally, 4) What school-based programs have been shown to improve emotional wellbeing in students? While no journal issue can fully address any one of these questions, we hope this issue provides our readers with the opportunity to engage critically with the challenges of addressing socio-emotional wellbeing in schools, and to learn more about

exciting work currently underway.

In the first paper in this issue, Pössel and colleagues begin to address the challenge of assessing teacher behaviors, and then go on to explore which behaviors may be important for student emotional health. While observational measures of teaching behavior represent the “gold-standard” in the field, the costs, effort, and time necessary to use these measures are often prohibitive. Pössel and colleagues’ newly developed Teaching Behavior Questionnaire (TBQ) provides a cost- and time-effective alternative for measuring teaching behaviors – an essential step in furthering the literature on the links between teaching behaviors and student wellbeing. Their paper reports on the development of TBQ. The paper also examines its validation in two independent samples and explores the TBQs relations to students’ positive and negative affect. Findings suggest that the TBQ has a four factor structure (i.e., Instructional Behavior, Organizational Behavior, Socio-Emotional Behavior, and Negative Teaching Behavior), and that each of the four scales is significantly related to students’ positive and/or negative affect. Their study not only provides a new measurement option for assessing teacher behavior, but also provides initial evidence that a wide range of teaching behaviors may be important for student emotional wellbeing.

Given the evidence that teaching behavior is important for student emotional wellbeing, a natural follow-up question is how can we begin to prepare our future educators for the socio-emotional needs of their students? In the second paper in this issue, Waajid and colleagues describe an undergraduate course that is designed to provide future educators with foundational socio-emotional knowledge to better prepare them for their role in the classroom. Within the context of a course on curriculum development, Waajid and colleagues provided preservice teachers with background on socio-emotional development, and assigned their students the task of developing socio-emotional curricula for preschool and elementary school students. Their paper describes qualitative analysis of feedback from participating preservice teachers. Findings suggest that participants felt they had gained a greater understanding of the connection between social emotional competence and academic learning, recognized the importance of a taking a student-centered approach to teaching, and indicated that they were eager for additional education and training in the role of social and emotional factors in the classroom. This study poignantly highlights the need for training of preservice teachers in socio-emotional issues, and provides one model for incorporating this training into existing undergraduate curricula.

The third paper in this special issue shifts in focus from teachers, to other school staff that play an integral role in student emotional wellbeing – school counselors. Creed and colleagues describe an exciting new initiative for disseminating evidence based emotional and mental health practices into community settings by training school-based therapists in cognitive therapy. The manuscript describes the initiative, the training model, and provides examples of how cognitive therapy was adapted for the school setting (e.g., co-creating and delivering interventions with teachers). It also provides preliminary evidence that the training program was effective in increasing school-based therapists’ knowledge of cognitive therapy principles and interventions, and in improving the therapists’ cognitive therapy skills as assessed by observation of audio

recorded sessions with school students. Through their partnership with schools, Creed and colleagues provide an exciting and promising model for enhancing evidence-based practices that can promote students' emotional and mental health.

In the fourth and final paper in this issue, Cutuli and colleagues present yet another approach to enhancing wellbeing in schools – the delivery of an evidence-based curriculum directly targeting student wellbeing. In this article, the authors evaluate the effectiveness of the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP), an after-school group cognitive behavioral intervention program designed to promote emotional and behavioral health in adolescents. PRP has reduced depressive symptoms in several studies. Cutuli and colleagues' examined its effects on a broader range of internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Results indicated that PRP's effects on young adolescents' internalizing and externalizing symptoms differed by reporter. Compared to a no intervention control condition, PRP significantly reduced students' internalizing and externalizing problems as reported by parents. However, it had no significant effects on self- or teacher-reported symptoms. Of particular interest for this special issue is that the majority of intervention groups in this study were led by current school staff (e.g., teachers, school counselors) rather than the researchers, lending greater support for the feasibility of PRP and similar programs to serve as a mechanism for improving wellbeing in schools. While PRP may need revision to achieve stronger and more consistent effects, this paper suggests that curricula that directly address emotional and behavioral issues may be an important approach to promoting students' wellbeing.

Taken together, the articles in this issue begin to address some of the current challenges related to understanding and promoting emotional well-being in the classroom. These papers identify potential pathways forward for schools interested in improving emotional health practices in the classroom, in guidance offices, and during after-school programming. The papers in this special issue also identify a number of directions for future work. While the Pössel paper identifies teacher behavior as important for student wellbeing, and the Waajid paper provides one example of relevant coursework to improve teachers' knowledge and socio-emotional behavior, many questions still remain regarding how we can best train teachers to support the emotional health and development of their students. While Creed and colleagues provided data that their initiative successfully trained counselors in cognitive therapy, it will be important to examine whether counselors' skill development in cognitive therapy leads to better emotional health in students, and to see how improved emotional health relates to other key school factors (e.g., academic progress, school climate, classroom engagement). Finally, Cutuli and colleagues' work with PRP provides evidence that the implementation of universal interventions in schools (i.e., interventions that can be delivered to all students) is another promising avenue for promoting wellbeing in students. Universal programs that teach a range of wellbeing skills have the potential to promote the socio-emotional wellbeing of students on a wide scale.

We hope that the readers find this collection of articles on the very timely issue of promoting emotional wellbeing in schools to be informative and engaging. By informing and enhancing efforts

targeting socio-emotional factors in one of the most important developmental contexts for young people – schools – researchers have the opportunity to support educators in finding the most effective ways to help their students thrive. We hope that this special issue encourages further research into what factors promote student wellbeing in the classroom, and into how schools can intervene to facilitate the socio-emotional development of their students.

References

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