

■ Special Issue: Mental Health Issues and Schools

THE Australian Guidance and Counselling Association is collaborating with the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and the Australian Principals Association Professional Development Council in the MindMatters Plus initiative. The initiative is funded under the National Mental Health Strategy and the National Suicide Prevention Strategy. One outcome of this partnership is this special edition of the AGCA journal which focuses on recent Australian research around mental health issues in children and young people.

It has become apparent in recent years that there are a significant number of young people in our schools who suffer from mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, psychoses and conduct disorders. MindMatters Plus aims to develop a good practice approach to increase the capacity of secondary schools to provide for students with high support needs in the areas of mental health and wellbeing. It builds on MindMatters, which is a national resource for secondary schools. MindMatters and MindMatters Plus are underpinned by the World Health Organization's health promoting schools model.

The articles in the special edition of the AGCA journal have focused on the importance of promotion, prevention and early intervention in dealing with mental health issues for young people in our schools. The key role community partnerships play in coordinating and delivering services to young people and their families has also been highlighted.

Current research has shown that many of these mental health problems can be prevented or managed effectively if they are identified early and the appropriate intervention is provided. The purpose of this special issue of this AGCA journal is to promote an awareness of mental health issues that are experienced by young people and to provide information from current research on how these conditions may be prevented or managed to minimise risk and promote general health and wellbeing among the young people affected.

The first paper by Paul Burnett describes the influential role that positive statements, made by teachers, has on students' self-perceptions and their satisfaction with their classroom environment in primary schools. The paper provides guidelines on how teachers can give feedback to students that acknowledges their efforts, recognises their preference for how this feedback can be given, and model positive self-talk statements that children can internalise to enhance their self-esteem and self-concept.

Louise Rowling in her paper, "School Mental Health Promotion", advances a preventative thesis and emphasises the importance of research that focuses on communities, groups, and individuals "at promise" — identifying those factors that contribute to positive mental health rather than studying risk or deficit. She argues research is needed with those young people who do cope with adversity because it

will strengthen investigations into such areas as resilience, social capital and risk conditions that may help redress the current imbalance.

Smith, Frydenberg, and Poole report on a school-based coping skills program that targeted all students, not just those at risk. The benefits obtained included raising awareness of different coping styles among adolescents, with males, in particular, learning to use more social support strategies than they had previously. The authors argue that such programs appear to enhance adolescents' resilience to stress, increase their competence, and educate them on how to avoid stress-related problems, all of which are essential skills for leading healthy lives. Cross, Pintabona, Hall, Hamilton, Erceg, and Roberts provide an overview of aspects of the Friendly Schools Project that was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of a whole-of-school program to reduce and prevent bullying. The outcomes indicate that when partnerships are established between parents, students, teachers and the wider school community, they can be effective in reducing and preventing bullying in schools.

Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent psychopathology in childhood and adolescence and if left untreated, can have serious consequences for academic, social, and family life. Marilyn Campbell argues that prevention and early intervention for anxiety disorders needs to be coordinated and integrated into the regular curriculum as well as into the life of the classroom and the school.

The following paper by Petrovski, Matthey, and Clarke discusses the findings of an action research project to address depression issues with Year 9 students in a school setting. The project involved specific skills training with a high proportion of the students reporting using the skills with positive outcomes.

Nadine Pelling discusses the importance of establishing the therapeutic alliance and knowing the behavioural strategies needed for basic addiction treatment so that school counsellors and psychologists can address addiction problems directly with their students. Pelling argues that what works in addiction treatment is what is being successfully used in more general mental health areas such as depression and anxiety. Hence, programs that enhance student motivation, hone their ability to resist use, promote active coping and goal setting, use social supports, and identify how to use community resources are beneficial to students with addiction problems.

Learning new behaviours and teaching students how to behave differently is the focus of the paper by Vicki Bitsika. It involves teachers placing more importance on specific behaviours exhibited by the student, developing an understanding of the student's difficult behaviour, and viewing the process of behaviour change as a planned attempt to build positive skills in the student rather than a reaction to a problem that is causing disruption in the classroom. At the foundation of this approach, Bitsika argues, is the belief that meaningful change can only result from teachers and other caregivers making the effort to understand the student's experiences of the world.

Finally, understanding the unique experiences of children who have parent with mental illness is the focus of a paper by Elizabeth Fudge. The Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) project aims to promote better mental health outcomes for children of parents with a mental illness by developing good practice principles and action guidelines for services and people working with children of parents with a mental illness. Many of these good practice principles are outlined in this paper.

This collection of articles presents a sample of the breadth of substantial research and reflection evident in Australia today. Schools are looking for successful, informed practice to improve the provisions for students with high support needs. These articles will make a significant contribution to the body of knowledge in the important area of mental health in young people.

Robyn Gillies PhD

Editor

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