

Fostering Supportive, Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments: Enablers and Barriers for Student Wellbeing

Focus of Review

This review aims to synthesise peer-reviewed literature on student wellbeing with a focus on psychological safety and relational safety as foundational linked conditions. It aims to critically review the literature on enablers and barriers for student wellbeing in learning environments. The importance of teacher awareness, information accessibility and the need for succinct practical knowledge translation on these topics is also proposed through the construction of a teacher-facing webpage.

Introduction

The multidimensional construct of student wellbeing in school settings has become a priority in international and Australian educational policy, with frameworks for its definition and concepts abounding. Hossain et al. (2023) propose that student wellbeing encompasses emotions, relationships, engagement, accomplishment, intrapersonal resources, purpose and supports, and that it is also context dependent. This wide scope, when partnered with other frameworks drawn from a variety of fields including positive psychology (Waters et al., 2019), public health and social-ecological theories (Coulombe et al., 2021) has resulted in schools attempting to improve student wellbeing at a narrow individual level without fully considering the relational, organisational, cultural or ecological aspects (Murray et al., 2024).

Critically reviewing the literature for both enablers and barriers is essential to identify how teachers can move forward with practical implementation of central themes to improve student wellbeing. Many adult-designed wellbeing frameworks emphasise individual emotional and cognitive skill development whilst this scoping review identified students experience wellbeing contextually and relationally (Hossain et al., 2023), indicating a balanced perspective is warranted.

Psychological safety, as a linked construct with wellbeing, is a distinct term that on review appears to be used less often in school-based research. Edmondson and Bransby (2023) conceptualise psychological safety as a perception of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in a given context. Translated into classrooms, psychological safety looks like students who can ask questions, seek help, contribute ideas freely, and make mistakes without fear of criticism or social penalty. Relational safety, as described in Graham et al. (2023) is noted as the experience of feeling respected, valued and protected within interpersonal relationships. Whilst the effects of peer relationships in this domain are vital, the teacher-student relationship sets the scene for safety within any learning environment. Together, psychological safety and relational safety function as a foundation on which the wellbeing domains as identified by Hossain et al. (2023) can flourish. In practical terms: we anticipate students will be more able to engage, seek support and persist when their learning environment is both psychologically safe and dependable relationally.

The potential significance of this is that wellbeing cannot be reliably improved through curriculum or information-only programs no matter their excellent design, if the relational and psychological safety of the classroom is overlooked. Graham et al. (2023) found that children find it difficult to learn unless they experience environments in which emotional safety is paramount. Charteris et al. (2024) extend this safety to pedagogical and physical design. They show that learning environments - even if regarded as inclusive- can create conditions that have a negative impact on psychological safety for students with a disability. Tu (2021) links psychological safety and classroom culture with engagement, and Han et al. (2022) identify psychological safety supports empowerment, creativity and contribution in learning. The use of psychological and relational safety lenses within an ecological context provides useful information when evaluating wellbeing enablers and barriers for practical application. Within this review, psychological safety and relational safety are treated as

foundational conditions through which broader contributing factors shape student wellbeing in school environments.

Key Enablers of Student Wellbeing

Teacher-Student Relationships and Belonging

The most consistent finding across the reviewed literature is that teacher-student relationships are the primary enabler of student wellbeing. The sense of classroom and school belonging, as noted in Allen et al. (2018), is shaped strongly by teacher support and relationships at school. Similarly, Graham et al. (2023) found that students' felt sense of safety was influenced directly by their experience of attuned, fair and respectful teacher relationships. The flow-on effect from these felt experiences of relationships and belonging is motivation, academic engagement, help-seeking behaviour and psychological health. Han et al. (2022) found that psychological safety mediated the relationship between teacher support and students' belonging and freedom to contribute.

Framing student wellbeing ecologically results in consideration of school and classroom climate as the overarching construct borne from positive teacher-student relationships and belonging. Aldridge and McChesney (2018) identify school climate as strongly associated with adolescent wellbeing and mental health, and name relationship quality, connectedness, support and fairness as conduits for this to occur. Similarly, Wang et al. (2020) demonstrate the link between psychological wellbeing and classroom climate, pointing to better engagement and lower distress. Hossain et al. (2023) reiterate relationships as one of the core domains of student wellbeing and extends that wellbeing is diminished if students feel unrecognised, or relationally unsafe. These studies are suggestive of increased likelihood of students interpreting classrooms as psychologically and relationally safe when their everyday experience in school as one defined by predictable fairness, respect, warmth and attunement.

Classroom predictability, structure and dignity-preserving communication

A second enabler of student wellbeing and felt safety is classroom predictability, consistent structure and communication that preserves student dignity. The significance of this enabler increases when we consider students with disability, students with anxiety or other diagnoses, students with complex trauma or disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds: unpredictability in the classroom can become an independent stressor (Charteris et al., 2024). Shaming communication towards students and their behaviour such as exclusionary consequences are barriers to the relational safety on which learning and wellbeing are fostered (Graham et al., 2023). It is important to note that classroom structure that supports wellbeing and increases wellbeing is not one in which challenges are removed completely. Rather, it is one in which organisation, fair expectations and predictable adults who deal with difficulties in a non-shaming way enhance accountability and clarity (Wang et al., 2020).

Student Voice and Agency

Student voice and agency are reliably identified enablers of student wellbeing in the literature. Along the same lines, participation with recognition is also named as an important enhancer of wellbeing for students. A critical distinction between performative and genuine voice is also revealed in the literature. Graham et al. (2023) found that token voice-consultation with no influence- undermined students' sense of agency and dignity. Anderson et al. (2022) similarly show that when accompanied by recognition, authentic student participation has a positive link to wellbeing. This is reinforced by students' perspectives in Hossain et al. (2023), where agency and purposeful participation were identified as key factors. As reviewed in Ryan et al. (2023), the theoretical grounding of self-determination theory is important in schools: autonomy, competence and relatedness are three basic psychological needs that when attained, directly support motivation and psychological wellbeing. This also means school structures that undermine these needs may compromise

wellbeing. Further, Ryan et al. (2023) proposes student agency has an effect on their teachers' support for this autonomy- having a flow-on effect to student factors linked to increased wellbeing. They state that "in being agentic, students speak up more, express their preferences and ideas, and give their teachers something meaningful to work with. By working with their teachers in this collaborative way... students render learning activities more interesting and more personally relevant for themselves, which allows them to experience more need satisfactions, more intrinsic motivation, and more purpose . . ." (Ryan et al., 2023, p.600).

Inclusion, Cultural Responsiveness and Identity Safety

The fourth enabler of student wellbeing reviewed is inclusion, cultural responsiveness and identity safety. Graham et al. (2023) identify inclusive school culture that is child-centred as a significant enabler of student safety. This is particularly important for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability, learners for whom English is an additional language, LGBTIQ+ and gender-diverse students. The specific wellbeing experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students appears to be underrepresented in peer-reviewed literature, though emerging research like Prehn et al. (2025) emphasise that inclusion, belonging, and cultural responsiveness at school positively impacts students' identity. Ullman (2022) highlights that wellbeing for trans and gender-diverse students was enhanced by supportive school climates as well as perceived teacher concern. Charteris et al. (2024) is again relevant here and reminds us of the environmental considerations of accessibility in sensory, social and structural domains for the wellbeing of students with disability.

Key Barriers

Punitive responses to errors or behaviour

Student wellbeing can be affected negatively if students experience shame or embarrassment as responses to their mistakes or behaviour. Zakszeski and Rutherford (2021)

and Lodi et al. (2022) report promising effects in their literature reviews in relation to restorative approaches, but overall the results are not consistent in quality and there remain individual school factors in implementation approaches. A Western Australian study found that students perceived effective classroom management with teachers who maintained authority through caring relationships and fostering student responsibility (Egeberg & McConney, 2018). In psychological terms, once a student experiences shame from a negative teacher communication, a self-protective defensive response may emerge which limits engagement and learning. Jones et al. (2023) and Moensted (2022) suggest that when students experience school responses as humiliating or misrecognising, feelings of shame and unbelonging may be intensified - creating wellbeing and engagement barriers.

Inconsistent or superficial interventions

Upon review, there appears to be gaps in what the literature and wellbeing policy frameworks recommend and how these are translated practically into schools. Svane et al. (2019) found that wellbeing interventions in schools often experience disconnect between rhetoric and what is practically delivered. The key relational enablers of wellbeing outlined in this paper from relevant literature are often left unconsidered in preference to individual-based programs. Such programs or curricula items indeed have value for increasing student's awareness or vocabulary, but durable positive outcomes are more likely to emerge from longer-term approaches (Vella-Brodrick et al., 2025), and with attention to the wider ecological and relational frame.

Tokenistic participation and exclusion

Corresponding to agentic voice and inclusion being positive contributors to student wellbeing, the concepts of tokenistic participation and unnoticed or unaddressed exclusion are barriers. Graham et al. (2023) outlines that ethical school practice depends on genuine inclusion and fairness. The positive effect of genuine participation and students having their

voices heard is reflected in models of self-actualisation and self-development, which Gill et al. (2021) report is associated with higher psychological wellbeing. Exclusionary experiences at school like ableism, racism, language barriers, homophobia or repeated invalidation can affect the students' sense of connectedness and belonging, which has been associated with poorer mental health outcomes over time (Allen et al., 2024). Such experiences may serve to communicate to students their identities are of less value, undermining wellbeing.

Framing Teacher Wellbeing as a Condition for Implementation

A consistent finding across the reviewed literature is that teacher wellbeing should be considered a condition for the enactment of supportive school environments. Whilst the focus of this review is student wellbeing, framing teacher wellbeing as an enabling condition is also vital. Vo et al. (2024) conducted an analysis of Australian teachers' conceptualisation of wellbeing at work and found that central elements included feeling safe, supported, and trusted within their school. Lemon and Turner (2024) identify workload, respect, leadership, a sense of community and relationships as important influences on teacher wellbeing. Congruent with the research on student wellbeing, these studies position teacher wellbeing as not just being reflective of individual attributes but of the wider environment.

The consequences of poor teacher wellbeing include an impact on their ability to deliver the relational and pedagogical work that student wellbeing requires. Fleming et al. (2024) examined psychological safety amongst educators and revealed associations with reduced burnout, job satisfaction and improved organisational engagement. Lemon and Turner (2024) reveal significant workload pressures on Australian teachers, with insufficient time for deep engagement with academic literature. It is also recognised in this review and by the ongoing broad, and at times blurry, conceptualisations of student wellbeing that navigating translatable wellbeing information is complex. This then has implications for the delivery of wellbeing knowledge to teachers- not to add further overload to their work lives, but as an

opportunity to improve teacher awareness and practical reflection on their part in enhancing student wellbeing.

Gaps, implications and recommendations

It is evident from the review of research that limitations exist in wellbeing practice. Hossain et al. (2023) clearly show the fragmented nature of conceptualising student wellbeing and there are many references in the literature on constructs that overlap such as belonging, support, engagement and safety. It's imperative that these concepts are considered both as their own entities but also as interdependent.

As this review considered psychological safety and relational safety as linked conditions for student wellbeing, it is noted that these exact terms are under-represented in school-based research compared with workplace research or higher education research. Sources referred to in this review such as Edmondson and Bransby (2023) give us some guiding information about this condition, but as they are not explicitly school-based research it is imperative that the other wellbeing enablers mentioned remain adjacent in our thinking.

In terms of implications, the literature reviewed here suggests that increased positive impact is achieved by considering student wellbeing as core attributes of everyday classrooms and school structure, rather than as supplementary initiatives. Across reviewed studies, this means teachers prioritising relational safety, classroom predictability, non-shaming communication, student voice and participation and accessible inclusion as key enablers to student wellbeing. Further, teacher wellbeing is inseparable from student wellbeing and schools that pay visible attention to this provide the organisational structure and climate for teachers to influence student wellbeing.

The gap identified in the literature of practical translation for teachers without overwhelm is proposed to be locally addressed by providing a concise teacher-facing webpage that summarises this critical review. It would aim to provide a wellbeing overview, more

information on psychological and relational safety, move to enablers and barriers, then translate these themes into a brief usable classroom audit that can then be printed for reference. It is vital in the aforementioned current culture of workload stressors for teachers, that the webpage be easy to navigate, helpful, usable and respect their time.

Conclusion

Overall, the literature supports the concept that student wellbeing is shaped by relational, inclusive and structural conditions as opposed to individually based wellbeing activities in isolation. Within the multidimensional construct of student wellbeing, psychological safety and relational safety were considered as linked conditions as they support help-seeking, trust, and risk-taking and student voice. The integration of these enablers becoming part of everyday practice is vital, and the review outlined that barriers such as punitive responses to errors and unaddressed exclusion need to be addressed to create climates conducive to wellbeing. The development of classroom and schoolwide wellbeing frameworks should involve genuine student consultation, including specific cohorts such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability, learners for whom English is an additional language, LGBTIQ+ and gender-diverse students. Finally, a teacher-facing resource that translates the complexity of the wellbeing literature base into accessible, succinct information may represent one practical step to supporting a more responsive approach to student wellbeing.

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