



## **Improving wellbeing through student participation at school. Phase 4, Survey results: summary of research findings**

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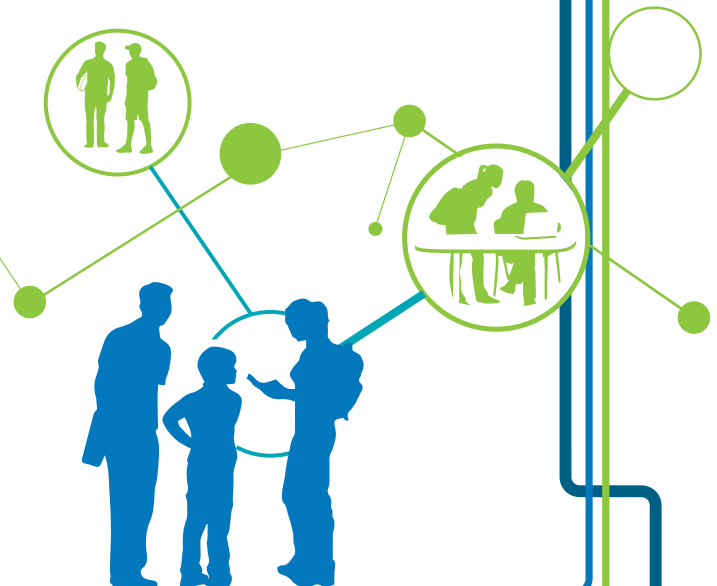
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# IMPROVING WELLBEING THROUGH STUDENT PARTICIPATION AT SCHOOL

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS:

## PHASE 4 SURVEY RESULTS



This Summary presents the findings from **Phase 4** of a major research project funded through the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage scheme



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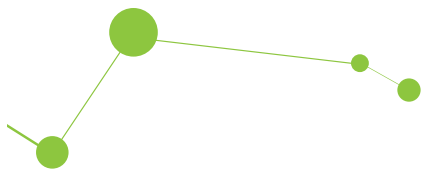
Education  
Public Schools



Australian  
National  
University



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY



**The research was led by the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University** in partnership with the NSW Department of Education, the Catholic Schools Office (Diocese of Lismore), the Office of the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People, the Australian National University, University of Sydney and University of Central Lancashire.

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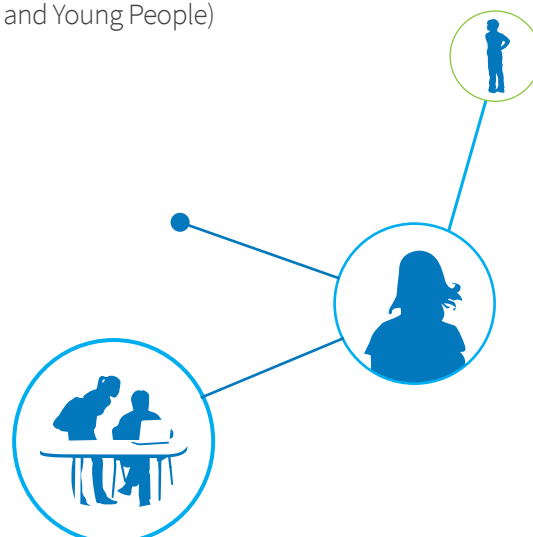
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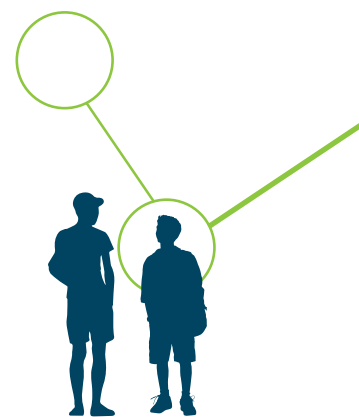
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# PHASE 4 SUMMARY



## BACKGROUND

This research, funded by the Australian Research Council (LP140100540)<sup>1</sup>, explored how student participation is understood and practised at school.

The project specifically aimed to find out if there is a connection between student participation and social and emotional wellbeing at school and, if so, which elements of participation are most closely associated with wellbeing.

The findings will help improve the ways in which student participation and wellbeing are understood, supported and measured in schools.

## WHAT DID THE RESEARCH INVOLVE?

The study involved four phases:

### Phase 1:

An extensive policy analysis to identify what current NSW and Commonwealth education policy and other related guidelines say about student participation.

### Phase 2:

Focus groups with students (Years 7-10) and interviews with teachers, Principals and education policymakers.

### Phase 3:

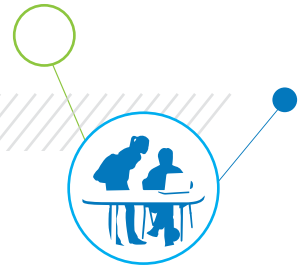
The development of a reliable and valid on-line survey to measure the elements of student participation and wellbeing at school using two samples of Year 7-10 students from NSW high schools.

### Phase 4:

**Administering the on-line survey, developed in Phase 3, to Year 7-10 students from high schools across NSW to test the links between the elements of student participation, student wellbeing and student recognition.**

This document provides a summary of the findings from Phase 4.

<sup>1</sup> The Australian Research Council Linkage Program is a competitive research funding scheme offered by the Commonwealth Government for projects that also have support from industry partners. The partners for this ARC Linkage project were: Catholic Schools Office Lismore, NSW Department of Education, and Office of the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People.



## WHO WAS INVOLVED IN PHASE 4 OF THE RESEARCH?

Sixteen high schools from across regional and metropolitan NSW were involved in Phase 4. Some were government schools and others were Catholic schools:

- Northern regional NSW: 5 Catholic schools and 3 government schools
- Southern regional NSW: 1 Catholic school and 1 government school
- Western regional NSW: 2 Catholic schools and 1 government school
- Metropolitan NSW: 1 Catholic school and 2 government schools

In total **1,435 students took part in the survey**. At each school, one class from each of the Years 7-10 participated in the online survey during class time. At some schools, whole year groups took part in the survey. On average, it took participants around 12 minutes to complete the survey.

## WHAT DID WE ASK?

The online survey consisted of **91 questions**. The survey measured demographic characteristics, and multi-item scales to measure six elements of participation, wellbeing at school, recognition and student engagement with school.

### DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

Students were first asked a few questions about themselves – such as their Year level, their gender, their age, if they were members of the School Representative Council, their cultural background and whether they had a disability.

### STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION EXPERIENCES

The survey asked students to reflect on the different opportunities they get to participate actively at school – such as in the classroom, in activities outside of the classroom, in student representative councils, and in situations where they need individual support from teachers.

The six elements of participation found in Phase 3 were measured using 38 survey questions in total:

1. **Working together with teachers and peers** - 9 questions
2. **Having voice about schooling** - 9 questions
3. **Having a say with influential people at school** - 5 questions
4. **Having influence on decisions that are made** - 7 questions
5. **Having voice about activities** - 3 questions
6. **Having choice** - 5 questions

## WELLBEING AT SCHOOL

Students' current social and emotional wellbeing at school was measured using eight survey questions, which included the extent to which students felt:

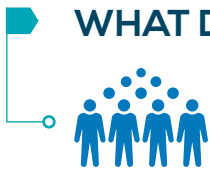
- happy at school;
- satisfied with their life;
- safe from bullying;
- that their mental health and wellbeing was great at school;
- a sense of purpose at school;
- connected to school as a place;
- connected to people at school; and
- like they belong at school.



## RECOGNITION

The six recognition survey questions were about students' experiences of being cared for, respected and valued by others at school, as well as offering care, respect and a feeling of being valued to others.

## WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?



### SELECTED DEMOGRAPHICS

#### AGE

The students who completed the survey were aged between 11 and 17 years.

#### YEAR

Approximately 60% of students who completed the survey were in Years 7 and 8 and 40% were in Years 9 and 10.

#### DISABILITY STATUS

Approximately 78% of students said they did not have any form of disability (such as physical, intellectual, social or learning disability, or a visual or hearing impairment). Approximately 6.8% (97) students said they did have a disability, while 13.6% (196) students said they were 'not sure', and 3.1% (45) students said 'I'd rather not say right now'.

#### STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE COUNCILS (SRCs)

Approximately 90% of students said their school had a SRC, (this means 1297 students who did the survey) and approximately 8% of students said they were a member of their school's SRC (this means 110 students who did the survey).



### STUDENT WELLBEING

The survey found that students in Year 10 reported significantly lower wellbeing than students in earlier years (Years 7, 8 and 9). Year 9 students also reported significantly lower wellbeing than Year 7 students.

Students **with disability** also **reported lower wellbeing at school** than their peers without disability. However, there were no differences in wellbeing at school between males and females, or between different cultural groups.

These results tell us that students' Year at school and disability status need to be taken into account when designing and implementing wellbeing policies and processes for schools.

## WHICH OF THE SIX ELEMENTS OF PARTICIPATION PREDICT STUDENT WELLBEING?

The results showed that participation is positively associated with wellbeing at school.

The element of participation that most strongly predicted student wellbeing at school was:

1. **WORKING TOGETHER** with other students and with teachers.

This was followed by:

2. **HAVING CHOICE**
3. **HAVING INFLUENCE**, and
4. **HAVING A SAY WITH PEOPLE WHO MAKE DECISIONS AT SCHOOL**

The survey results clearly showed that opportunities to merely **express views** –captured in the elements - **having a voice about schooling** (classroom rules, homework etc.) or **having a voice about activities** at school (such as excursions, fundraising etc.) did not significantly predict student wellbeing after the other four elements of participation were taken into account.

These results tell us that students **just being able to express opinions at school without these opinions being taken into consideration in decisions made at school, is not sufficient to be associated with student wellbeing at school.**

### IN SUM:

- Students and staff working together at school was the most important element of participation associated with student wellbeing.
- Student wellbeing was also associated with students having choice and influence.

## WHY IS PARTICIPATION ASSOCIATED WITH WELLBEING AT SCHOOL?

The research also looked into why there is a connection between participation and wellbeing. In particular, the researchers tried to find out whether having greater participatory opportunities predicted that students would also report better wellbeing, and how far this could be attributed to students experiencing increased recognition (that is, feeling cared for, respected and valued at school and giving care, respect and value to others).

In sum, the results showed that there are significant strong and positive links between participation, wellbeing and recognition at school.

More specifically, the results showed that providing students with greater participation experiences at school was directly and positively associated with greater wellbeing at school. This association could be partly accounted for by students giving and receiving greater recognition at school.



However, the opposite pathway was also significant. This means that higher wellbeing at school also predicted greater participation, and this was partly explained by students experiencing greater recognition.



It can be seen from these results that participation, recognition and wellbeing at school are closely linked.

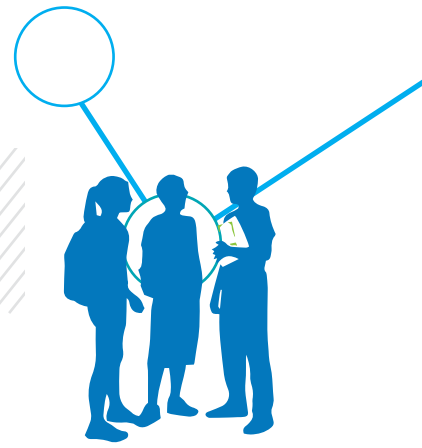
**The results suggest that schools seeking to improve student wellbeing would benefit from introducing, monitoring and increasing aspects of student participation.**

IN SUM MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IS KEY TO FACILITATING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF RECOGNITION AND THEIR WELLBEING AT SCHOOL.



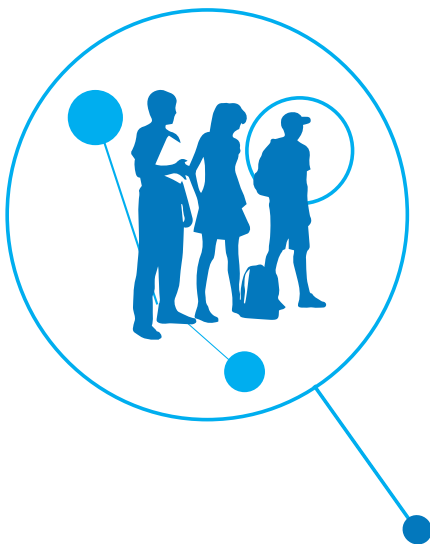


# WHERE TO NEXT?



○ A range of practical resources have been developed from the project to assist schools with embedding and monitoring effective approaches to student participation. These include:

- A *Good Practice Guide* to support student participation;
- A survey tool and information pack for schools to measure and monitor student participation and wellbeing;
- Video vignettes on participation at school;
- Professional learning resources for school staff.



**The above resources and documents will be available at:** [bit.ly/ParticipationStudy](https://bit.ly/ParticipationStudy)

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