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# What Is Professional Development For Mental Health Promotion In Schools Like? Perspectives From School Leaders And Teachers In 100 Australian Kidsmatter Primary Schools

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## ABSTRACT

*Mental health promotion is a very new area of learning for many school staff. Using data from questionnaires, written reports and focussed interviews, this paper reports school leaders' and teachers' perspectives about the professional development program that accompanied the KidsMatter Primary Mental Health Promotion (KidsMatter) pilot initiative in 100 Australian schools. Findings include that 50 to 60 per cent of staff strongly agreed that the professional development program had improved their knowledge and capabilities. Thematic analysis indicated that the professional development confirmed existing good practices, provided opportunities for raising staff awareness of mental health strengths and difficulties, reduced stigma, provided a common language, and provided a mechanism for including all staff in processes of school renewal. In particular, the enthusiasm and expertise of the KidsMatter Project Officers was highly valued by staff. The thematic analysis also indicated ways for continued improvements in school-based professional development including, assessing relevance to local contexts, sufficiency, timetabling, and accommodating staff turnover. Conceptualising professional development as professional learning for school renewal, managing the sequencing of learning activities to accommodate initial and sustained learning, drawing from the distributed expertise of inter-disciplinary teams, and exploiting on-line technologies are suggested as ways of sustaining professional learning for mental health promotion in schools.*

**Keywords:** mental health promotion; professional learning; professional development; instructional design

## INTRODUCTION

Policy statements identify schools as settings for mental health promotion. For example, the World Health Organisation (2011) recommends mental health promotion activities in schools; the United Kingdom Department for Education (DCSF, 2009) National Strategies document states that social, emotional and behavioural skills are fundamental to school improvement; and in the United States of America, the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2009 embeds social and emotional education in schools (CASEL, 2011). In Australia, the Federal Government's commitment of \$18.4 million to enable KidsMatter to be expanded to 2100 primary schools by 2014, confirms support at a policy level for mental health promotion in schools (KidsMatter, 2010a).

Reviews by Greenberg, Domitrovich and Bumbarger (2001) and Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor and Schellinger (2011) indicated that childhood mental health disorders are amenable to treatment in school and community based settings, and supported the view that mental health promotion in schools can lead to improvements in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance.

The critical role of teachers in influencing the success of any school-based initiative (e.g., see Darling-Hammond, 2006; Fullan, 2007) draws attention to teachers' capabilities for enacting mental health promotion initiatives.

## **TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE AND CONFIDENCE FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION**

Mental health promotion in schools requires new ways of thinking about the roles of teachers, who may need to develop knowledge and skills in areas such as:

- increasing adolescents' knowledge about mental health difficulties, such as depression and anxiety disorders (MindMatters, 2010),
- developing students' social and emotional capabilities (CASEL, 2011; DCSF, 2009),
- recognising and responding to students demonstrating early signs of mental health difficulties and providing parenting information and support (KidsMatter, 2010a; KMEC, 2011),
- working collaboratively in multi-disciplinary case management teams (Borg, 2009), and
- promoting student-teacher relationships to foster students' psychological health and wellbeing (Murray-Harvey, 2010).

It is unlikely that teachers will have addressed, in their pre-service teacher education, all of the different types of knowledge suggested by Shulman (1986a; 1986b; 1987) and others (e.g., Borko & Putnam, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Grossman, 1995), such as subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, required for teaching in the domain of mental health promotion. For many teachers, knowledge in this domain will need to be developed through professional learning. Teachers involved in mental health promotion also need to be self-efficacious and have a sense of agency in that domain (Bandura, 1997; 2001). However, Bandura's proposed sources of self-efficacy, such as mastery experiences, observation of valued role models and verbal persuasion, may be limited in this relatively new field. For example, Slee, Lawson, Russell, Askill-Williams and Dix et al. (2009) reported that, at the first point of data collection in KidsMatter schools, (prior to the implementation of KidsMatter), about 50 to 60 per cent of teachers in the KidsMatter pilot initiative strongly agreed that they possessed knowledge and pedagogies to equip them to undertake mental health promotion in their schools. For self-efficacy, 58 per cent of teachers strongly agreed that they could promote a positive school community, but less than 50 per cent gave high self-efficacy ratings for more specific tasks related to mental health promotion. These initial statistics suggest that a substantial number of the teachers in that sample needed support, such as opportunities for in-service professional learning, to enact mental health promotion initiatives at their schools.

New curriculum initiatives typically rely upon in-service professional development programs. Little's (1993) insightful review of professional development philosophies and designs highlighted the affordances and constraints of different approaches to professional development, such as technical training versus teacher-led inquiry approaches; organisational structures that permit time to investigate, reflect and discuss; recognition of existing personal, social and political contexts; emotional investments in teaching; and financial and human costs.

With a view to standardising evaluations of professional development, Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman and Yoon (2001) proposed a framework containing three core features and three structural features that impact upon the quality of teacher professional development. Core features include (a) focus on content knowledge; (b) opportunities for active learning; and (c) coherence with other learning activities. The core features are enacted through the structural features of (a) the form of the activity (e.g., workshop vs. study group); (b) collective participation of teachers from the same school, grade, or subject; and (c) the duration of the activity.

The first of Garet et al's (2001) core features, 'focus on content knowledge', is particularly pertinent, for as noted above, mental health promotion may be a completely new subject-matter for many teachers, rather than an enhancement of their previously studied domains of teaching expertise. Mental health promotion requires subject-matter knowledge to teach about mental health strengths and difficulties, subject-matter knowledge for developing students' social and emotional capabilities, and approaches to teaching and collaborating with other stakeholders that promote mental health in school settings.

Thus, mental health promotion by teachers is not just a new approach to teaching a traditional subject, such as complementing traditional teacher-delivered talks with guided student inquiry in science. Furthermore, the primary source of expert knowledge about mental health may be seen to belong to other professionals, such as psychologists, especially if the term ‘mental health’ is interpreted as mental health difficulties, rather than mental health strengths (Rowling, 2007). In some respects, learning for mental health promotion can be compared to learning to use information and communication technologies for supporting student learning: In both fields, much of the knowledge needed by teachers may be seen to be complex, and only deeply understood by specialists external to teaching. In addition, mental health is a topic that has been associated with stigma and misconceptions in the broader community, and may not be considered by some teachers to be part of their role.

This implies an imperative to target professional learning programs to a diverse range of teachers’ prior conceptions, knowledge, frameworks of practice, beliefs, and situations (Borko, 2004; Little, 1993). It is, therefore, important for teacher educators and for the designers of mental health promotion initiatives to develop a more detailed understanding of the status of professional learning of teachers involved in this growing field. Developing such an understanding is the focus of this paper.

## **THE KIDSMATTER PILOT INITIATIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

A major component of the pilot phase of the abovementioned KidsMatter initiative (2010b) was to provide teacher professional development programs to participating schools. The programs were designed by the KidsMatter management team and delivered over a period of one year by KidsMatter Project Officers, one in each Australian State or Territory, who were each responsible for a cluster of schools, similar in development and design to Phase 2 professional development described by Borko (2004). An evaluation study by Slee et al. (2009) reported findings about a range of processes and outcomes of the KidsMatter pilot initiative. This paper extends the Slee et al. evaluation by presenting additional analysis of KidsMatter school leaders’ and teachers’ perspectives about the affordances and constraints of the KidsMatter professional development.

### **Method**

**Ethics approvals:** Ethics approvals were received from the Flinders University Research Ethics Committee, and also from all participating schools, jurisdictions and government departments.

**School Sample:** Following a request for participation, 101 Australian Primary schools were selected to achieve representation from all Australian States and Territories, locations (metropolitan, rural or remote), size (small, medium, large) and school sector types (public, independent, catholic). The schools contained from 11 students with one staff member, to 1085 students with 100 staff. One school did not contribute data to this study, leaving a final sample of 100 schools.

### **Data**

The following three forms of data were collected from KidsMatter schools near the end of the pilot initiative:

**Questionnaires:** Questionnaires were delivered to the teachers of 76 randomly selected students (some small schools had less than 76 students) in each of the 100 schools. The questionnaires contained items about a range of processes and outcomes associated with KidsMatter, including four items designed to investigate teachers’ perceptions about improvements in their knowledge, practices, and attitudes resulting from the KidsMatter professional development. Responses were on a Likert scale, with anchors of ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’.

**Leaders’ executive summaries:** School principals and other leaders in each of the 100 schools were asked to contribute a written ‘executive summary’ of the processes and progress of KidsMatter in their school.

**Interviews with teachers:** Interviews were conducted with staff in schools that were purposefully selected to represent different geographical areas and schools that, on preliminary analysis of questionnaire data, appeared

either to be going well or were finding difficulties with mental health promotion. Interviewees were asked to respond to a range of focus questions, including questions about professional development. Interviewees were not constrained to speak only to the focus questions, but were encouraged to add any additional information they considered relevant.

**Results**

Response rates for the three types of data were as follows:

- 716 questionnaires from teachers in 100 schools,
- 62 schools provided executive summaries from school leaders
- 37 audio-taped interviews with principals and staff in 10 schools.

Teachers showed typical characteristics of the Australian teaching workforce, with 85 per cent female and an average of 15 years teaching experience.

**Quantitative Findings**

From the questionnaire responses, Table 1 shows that 52 to 65 per cent of teachers ‘strongly agreed’ (scores 6 and 7) that the professional development had assisted their knowledge and practices. Around 33 to 46 per cent selected scores in the middle range (scores 4 and 5) and small percentages of teachers (<1 to 4%) selected scores below neutral.

**Table 1: Percentage Of Teachers Selecting ‘Strongly Agree’ (Scores 6 Or 7) To Items About Professional Development**

<b>The professional development related to KidsMatter has:</b>	<b>Strongly Agree %</b>
Enhanced my knowledge about student mental health	61
Improved the ways I interact with students	52
Increased my level of commitment to promoting student wellbeing	65
Helped me to foster student wellbeing through my practices as a teacher	63

Satisfaction or dis-satisfaction with professional development opportunities can stem from different sources, including the characteristics of the participating teachers, school contextual influences, and from the nature of the delivered programs themselves. The qualitative data that follows allows a more in-depth perspective of the affordances and constraints of the professional development delivered to multiple school settings.

**Qualitative Findings**

Working from a central text database, the authors and their research colleagues conducted repeated readings of the transcripts from the executive summaries and interviews. Participants’ statements were coded to themes. The six features proposed by Garet et al. (2001) provided an initial framework for the thematic analysis, supplemented by themes that emerged from the data. Extracts from salient themes are presented in the following section.

**CORE FEATURE A: FOCUS ON CONTENT KNOWLEDGE**

**Acquiring new knowledge:** A clear indication from the qualitative data was that school staff gained new knowledge about aspects of mental health promotion.

*The staff identified that they weren’t strong in social-emotional learning and that some of the things that they wanted up-skilling in were in the KidsMatter program (Principal Interview; School 5).*

*The professional development has given staff additional tools for identifying and supporting students with social, behavioural and emotional problems (Executive summary; School 97).*

*It was beneficial to have in-service training about specific issues; for understanding and evaluation of our schools specific needs and ways to achieve our objectives (Executive summary; School 36).*

**Confirming existing views:** As well as acquiring new knowledge, staff confirmed the usefulness of having their existing knowledge validated, to know that their ways of thinking, and their practices, were in accord with the best available knowledge.

*Useful to have an outside perspective, to ensure that what we were doing was on track and that we had not overlooked any important area (Executive summary; School 85).*

**Need for additional support:** The provided professional development sessions needed to be supported by ongoing contact with the provider to support teachers' early attempts with enacting new ideas and curricula.

*The support of the State Project Officer has been invaluable. The assistance with professional learning for all staff, assistance with planning and problem solving and general support has all helped the KidsMatter implementation at our school. The training provided to the KidsMatter Action team was excellent but it was just as vital to have the State Project Officer for further support while implementing the project (Executive summary; School 97).*

## **CORE FEATURE B: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTIVE LEARNING**

The emerging evidence is that the predominant method of formal delivery of the professional development was lectures or workshops given by Project Officers (see Structural feature B below). However, distributed throughout the data are comments that indicate that the initial workshops were also followed by less structured experiences that did engage teachers in active learning, such as discussions.

*Talk to other schools and get chalk-face information about what works and what doesn't. (Executive summary; School 46).*

*I think it's demystifying and de-stigmatising mental health, because I think mental health – it's mental – you know mental it's got a bad label. Mental! But it was never talked about. It's like fitness or a cold. It's OK to talk about it and I really am enjoying being in a school where that is so open. (Teacher Interview; School 9)*

*We do, just talk about it all the time and parents do talk about it, even socially. I think the fact that it isn't a taboo subject does make it so much easier for people... Well, it's certainly given us a common language across the school (Principal Interview; School 5)*

*Now we have discussions quite often based on mental health, rather than based on a child struggling in a learning area because of learning difficulties (Principal Interview; School 6)*

## **CORE FEATURE C: COHERENCE WITH OTHER LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

**Integration:** There were indications that some schools took steps to integrate the KidsMatter professional development with other programs, thus finding some coherence with other learning activities.

*Whole days of professional development, lead by the state KidsMatter Project Officer, alongside the development of the SELF, which was lead by the Head of Department and Year 6 classroom teacher. This process enabled all teachers to then see how it all fits together and isn't something different or to the side, but integral to everything (Executive summary; School 25).*

However, other participants indicated the difficulty of combining all of the various curriculum requirements, such as

*Programming issues for teachers – fitting it in to a crowded curriculum and looking for ways to integrate it (Executive summary; School 78).*

*The social and emotional learning program we thought we might implement, was not supported by the staff and once again the crowded curriculum played a big role in that decision. This was one area I was really hoping we would get a whole school focus on, and I was keen to implement something, but I think it was bad timing with the Child Protection Curriculum coming on in the same year...It has not been a whole school focus (Executive summary; School 77).*

**Perceived Relevance:** Teachers are faced with extreme time challenges, and therefore express needs for professional development to be relevant to their immediate practical teaching. This can sometimes conflict with the aims of program developers, who may wish to provide some background theory and justification, before moving straight into classroom teaching resources.

*I didn't feel that the actual content of that professional development was as relevant to our needs as it could've been. I think we would have been better served by ... and that's maybe the way I work ... by moving more quickly to choose the program that we wanted and then having more time and support to develop the skills to deliver the actual program (Principal interview: School 4).*

**Suitability to each school's contexts:** Some feedback indicated that a nationwide program of professional development that traveled from school to school was not sufficiently tailored to individual school needs. For example, where schools already delivered strong social and emotional education programs, the standard professional development could have been re-designed or re-allocated to another topic:

*Professional Development needs to be tailored more to the direct needs of the school community. Social and emotional learning professional developments have always been promoted within our school community (Executive summary; School 41).*

*Adapt program where necessary to the needs of your school (Executive summary; School 38).*

## **STRUCTURAL FEATURE A: THE FORM OF THE ACTIVITY**

**Methods of delivery:** There is substantial evidence in the instructional design literature supporting designs that allow students to be active learners, engaged in construction of knowledge through discussion, questioning and guided-inquiry based approaches (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Little, 1993). Although lectures are one extremely useful pedagogical strategy, the quotes below highlight the need for balanced instructional approaches.

*The workshop that they found one of the most valuable, was around the early intervention stuff around identifying ... and what a teacher in all honesty, is capable of doing is when to say "no, that's not my job. I need to talk to someone else about this and refer this on". So that empowered teachers to be a bit more proactive and just even the knowledge around ADHD or Asperger [syndrome] or anxiety disorders and all those kinds of things ... just skilling teachers in that ... because where else are they going to get it? They hadn't got it anywhere (Principal Interview; School 10).*

*It almost became death by powerpoint (Teacher Interview; 08 BT).*

*Initially the professional development workshops for staff were a barrier. The delivery was dry and boring. We addressed this to make these sessions for staff interesting and enjoyable (Executive summary; School 21).*

**The expertise of the Project Officers:** A substantial amount of feedback confirmed appreciation of the support provided by the KidsMatter Project Officers.

*Great Project Officer who really earned the staff's respect for her knowledge and passion (Executive summary; School 13).*

*Establish a strong relationship with the Project Officer and make the best use of her/his expertise and enthusiasm (Executive summary; School 46).*

## **STRUCTURAL FEATURE B: COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF TEACHERS**

**Gaining staff involvement with the program:** Feedback from participants indicated that professional development sessions provided the opportunity to achieve staff agreement on the adoption of curricula resources and for broader opportunities for discussion.

*The professional development undertaken prior to the selection of [the teaching resource] was extremely valuable in gaining a commitment from staff in a large school to teach social and emotional learning (Executive summary; School 54).*

*Working through the professional development for the four components of the KidsMatter program has provided a wonderful avenue for professional dialogue between teachers and with parents (Executive summary; School 2).*

**Involvement of all staff:** A number of responses indicated that it was necessary to ensure that all staff had the opportunity to be involved in the professional development activities.

*Involve all staff in professional development and make sure that new staff are inducted into the philosophy and processes (Executive summary; School 46).*

*Professional development for all staff and incoming staff will create barriers as we seek to keep everyone informed and focused (Executive summary; School 53).*

These perspectives from school leaders' are confirmed by the following responses from some teachers.

*There was something to do with play, which I didn't go to....staff were asked to ... feed back to their teams about that professional learning and share that with their staff members. Again that was supposed to take place as part of a staff meeting but because of our 'work to rule' that hasn't happened (Teacher Interview; 03BT).*

*We've had a staff turnover of 15 this year and the 3 people that went down to the KidsMatter conference were P (principal), L (vice principal) and K (pastoral carer) and L and K left. ... Because a new school, 15 new people – just that-- we've got graduates, we've got all these new people – not a clue ... it's a hole when you lose 14-15 staff. There's a hole and to fill that up with all the knowledge that they need to have, that we have, is a mammoth task (Teacher Interview; 17LSELC).*

*I would have done the training. That would've helped... my biggest stumbling block, was the fact that I came in 9 months later....I took the manuals home and I read them. I flicked through them and looked at the survey results and looked at the implementation process and went "Ok, I think I can do this" and went from there.... The training would have been nice. Getting in at the beginning would have been probably what I'd do differently (Teacher Interview; 10BTAP).*

## **STRUCTURAL FEATURE C: THE DURATION OF THE ACTIVITY**

**Time and cost:** Organisational conditions in schools are highly influential in the development of sustained and effective professional development (Pedder, Opfer, McCormick, & Storey, 2010). Finding time for the KidsMatter professional development was difficult for some schools. Associated with time allocation, was the cost of replacing teachers in classes that still needed to be staffed.

*The biggest barrier to implementing the project has been time. The ability to release people to do the training has been challenging. We are also competing for time from other areas of priority in the school. At times finding the time to meet as an Action Team has proved challenging (Executive summary; School 79).*

*It was a big commitment to complete two days of professional development on KidsMatter but it was an excellent way to ensure whole school support and understanding of all that KidsMatter involved. (Executive summary; School 85).*



*Time – fitting into a very crowded curriculum. Time for teacher professional development. (Executive summary; School 63).*

*The major impost on us has been the expense of training a large staff. We have spent a fortune in TRS release to train staff, however, we believed that a commitment [to KidsMatter] meant commitment at a financial and resource level as well as anything else (Executive summary; School 24).*

**Scope and sequence:** A fundamental component of good instructional design is to provide learners with the opportunity for repetition and practice (Bransford et al., 2000). However, this does not translate easily into programs for professional development, which are typically constrained to short and infrequent modules of instruction. Here, repetition can be viewed as wasteful.

*Probably some of the professional development that we did initially with [the Project Officer], staff would have said well there was repetition in that and so I think [the Project Officer] has since modified that (Principal Interview; School 5).*

*A lot of the stuff that we did was sort of the issues based stuff ... and that was interesting, but for a lot of us it was stuff we already knew and I think that could've come out (Principal Interview; School 4).*

Compare the above responses, however, to the following response, which indicates that reminders are useful:

*A lot of the staff ... and I mean they've been doing KidsMatter for a while now, I think we just need a reminder. To have Project Officer come in and say "okay now, these are our four components, let's have a look at this (Principal Interview; School 2).*

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study has reported that 50 to 60 per cent of staff strongly agreed that the professional development associated with KidsMatter led to positive outcomes for their knowledge and capabilities. The analysis of the qualitative data indicates that the contextual needs of different schools and personal needs of individual teachers modified the capabilities of professional development programs to reach and have an influence on teachers' knowledge.

The key themes that emerged from school leaders and teachers indicated that in-service professional development could be a valuable source of knowledge for teaching in a new curriculum domain, providing its design and delivery attended to:

- flexibility of the content to meet local contexts, existing staff knowledge, and staff perceived needs, and
- efficiency of design and delivery to meet extreme time pressures.

The literature on teacher learning designs highlights the imperative for opportunities for teachers' self-directed active cognitive engagement, opportunities to talk to experts and colleagues, opportunities to observe and be observed, multiple exposures to develop complex and rich knowledge representations, and spaces to interrogate their own beliefs and practices (e.g., see Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Garet et al., 2001; Lawson, Askill-Williams, & Murray-Harvey, 2009; Little, 1993; Mitchell, Riley, & Loughran, 2010; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007). At one level, this requires re-thinking typical approaches, such as lecture-based, powerpoint driven approaches to instruction. However, the data presented in this paper confirmed that although lectures could be boring, it was also apparent that the initial professional development workshops could be very useful preliminary components of a continuum of learning. The workshops provided base-knowledge that could be used to support on-going active learning, such as providing a common language to support discussions with other staff and parents.

The further development of time-sequenced frameworks for professional learning that explicitly recognise and facilitate different stages in learning about mental health would be useful for the sustainability of the professional development program. For example, the initial information-based workshops could be followed by

active establishment and support of the subject-matter collectives and long-term partnerships suggested by Little (1993). For mental health promotion, these collectives and partnerships could be formed by cross-disciplinary teams, with a view to embedding mental health promotion across the curriculum areas, and in the professional, social and emotional life of the school. One way of facilitating the work of these collectives would be to exploit the capabilities of new technologies, such as asynchronous, non-linear, two-way instructional designs to alleviate some of the perceived difficulties with timetabling, distance, staff turn-over, and meeting teachers' and schools' individual learning needs.

Readers may have noted that many respondents used the word 'training' when referring to the KidsMatter professional development. This could simply be a loose use of language, or a symbol of the way that professional development for those teachers was perceived. Gaining new knowledge and capabilities to enable mental health promotion might be better characterised by the newer language and concepts of professional learning, suggesting a broader intellectual approach, teacher autonomy and responsibility, than implied by the technical flavour of traditional professional development (Mitchell et al., 2010). The language and approach of professional development providers, whether 'training-flavoured' or 'teacher professional learning-flavoured', will influence how school staff perceive, and subsequently engage with, the programs.

Mental health promotion in schools also requires a broad conceptualisation of the role of schools in promoting the social, emotional and academic development of students, thus reflecting certain values and world views (Little, 1993). This requires teacher development and school development to progress hand-in-hand, as discussed by Hargreaves (1994) in the sense of school renewal. The present study shows that the will of the staff of KidsMatter schools to engage with school renewal for developing positive mental health was clearly apparent. Moreover, the strength of the provided professional development for transmitting essential information was applauded in many cases, and regretted when not received. In particular, the information and support provided by the Project Officers, especially beyond workshops, was highly valued. As the bank of knowledge about mental health promotion grows within school staff, there will be more potential for staff to drive the learning experiences necessary for their schools' renewal to incorporate and sustain mental health promotion.

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