Title: **Positive links between student participation, recognition and wellbeing at school**

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Positive links between student participation, recognition and wellbeing at school

Highlights

- Student participation was measured using a newly validated, multidimensional scale
- Student participation was positively and strongly related with wellbeing at school
- Simply having 'voice' did not significantly predict wellbeing
- More authentic forms of participation significantly predicted wellbeing
- Recognition mediated the participation-wellbeing relationship

Abstract

Recent years have seen increased attention paid to both student participation and wellbeing at school. Little research to date has investigated the extent to which participation is associated with wellbeing, let alone which specific elements of participation may predict wellbeing. This paper reports the quantitative phase of a mixed-methods study investigating these associations. Students (N = 1,435) from Government and Catholic high schools in New South Wales, Australia, completed an online survey. Hierarchical regression analyses showed that having a say with influential people, having choice, having influence, and working together significantly and positively predicted wellbeing. Simply having 'voice' did not significantly predict wellbeing. Mediation analyses showed that student participation fostered recognition – giving and receiving care, respect and valuing others – which in turn fostered wellbeing. The results suggest schools endeavouring to strengthen student wellbeing would benefit from identifying whether and how participation initiatives create the conditions for recognition to occur.

Key words: recognition, relationships, student-centred schools, student participation; student voice; student wellbeing

Introduction

The recent shift in policy rhetoric in Australian school systems towards more 'student-centred' cultures and practices in schools (Black, 2011; Mayes et al., 2018; Mayes, 2013; Quinn & Owen, 2016) provides a rich space for research that explores connections between student participation, wellbeing and the kinds of relationships that foster mutual recognition. The current COVID-19 context is challenging and to some extent recasting the notion of student-centred schools as education systems around the world have grappled with what it is that students know and need in order to learn well and live well in an online or blended learning environment (Kaden, 2020; Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020). Recent research with 2,373 primary and secondary teachers in Australia and New Zealand, seeking their views about the impacts of online teaching during the COVID-19 schools' shutdown (Flack, et al., 2020), identified that teachers are more concerned about their students' emotional wellbeing than about their learning, that increased opportunities for relationship building using virtual strategies for reducing isolation were critically important, and that a more "concerted effort to provide avenues for student voice and feedback" will help provide a more accurate picture of "what is working for the group that matters most: students" (p.5). While online learning of the scale implemented in 2020 in response to COVID-19 might be unprecedented, the concerns about participation, wellbeing, and the critical importance of relationships are not to be ignored.

This paper reports the findings of the quantitative phase of a large scale, mixed methods study conducted in 2016 which investigated the extent to which participation at school is associated with students' social and emotional wellbeing, and which *specific* elements of participation are core predictors of wellbeing. While the data was collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic where many schools shifted to blended and online learning, the findings from the study are proving prescient for education during- and post-pandemic. The

findings emphasise the importance of relationships and students' authentic participation in their learning, and they provide empirical evidence of the strong connection between participation, relationships, and student wellbeing, which has implications for online and blended learning scenarios. In pursuing this focus, the study addresses dual educational policy priorities in Australia – progressing participation and improving wellbeing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). Previous studies by the authors have identified *potential* links between participation and wellbeing at school (Anderson et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2017; Powell et al., 2018; Simmons et al., 2016). This earlier research found that intersubjective recognition as defined by Honneth (1995, 2001, 2004) was positively associated with wellbeing. Honneth's is an overarching theory of society founded on the concept of intersubjective recognition as a fundamental element in human interaction and individual and group identity. In using it as a theoretical framework for research into school wellbeing, the paper draws, in particular, on Honneth's identification of three distinctive modes of recognition, as explained in the subsequent section on Relationships. The researchers were also guided by other research and theorising which suggests that interpersonal relationships are fundamental to wellbeing (e.g., see Watson et al., 2012.) The present study therefore sought to build on the previous research by examining whether recognition, as defined by Honneth, can help explain any relationship between participation and wellbeing. Evidence of the currency and unfolding policy relevance of this research is reflected in recent policy documents in at least four NSW education systems (one government, three non-government).

Many studies to date have been small-scale and qualitative in approach, generating rich insights into the experience and benefits of participation at school. However, very little is known about the measurable links between such participation and student wellbeing. While there has been some quantitative research on the favourable academic outcomes, such as

increased engagement, and psychosocial outcomes of student participation (John-Akinola & Nic-Gabhainn, 2014), a noted limitation is the need for a larger and more heterogeneous study sample.

Student participation

The evolving focus over recent decades on children's participation has ostensibly been motivated by many factors, not the least of these being Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which states that children have the right to express a view when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions taken into account (UNCRC, 1989). This has been extended by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in their General Comment 12, which expands on the definition in Article 12 to note that the term participation "has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes" (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009, p. 3). This definition coheres with the conceptualisation of participation in the present study.

However, as others have also noted (Sargeant, 2018; Wyness, 2012) schools, as sites where most children live out the majority of their childhoods, have been slower to engage with the implications and possibilities of Article 12 in the UNCRC and its mandates. Parallel developments linked to the scholarship of childhood studies (Smith, 2007; Woodhead, 2009) have also challenged deeply held conceptions and assumptions about children as primarily innocent, vulnerable, at risk and/or incapable of knowing what is in their own best interests, making space for a more enlightened view that sees children as social agents capable of forming and expressing views and contributing to key decisions impacting on their lives (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2011; Horgan et al., 2016; Lansdown, 2005; Lundy, 2007; Mannion

2010). These changes have gradually led the way to policies and practices in schools that signal the importance of students having stronger 'voice' and to challenging the traditional Student Representative Council type structure as the main 'go to' evidence of participation being active in schools (Brasof, 2015; Graham et al., 2019; Mayes, 2017; Powell, et al., 2017; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Various typologies of participation have emerged over the years (see for example, Fielding, 2006; Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2007; Mitra 2005; Shier, 2001; Toshalis & Nakula, 2012) which have often implicitly or explicitly informed operational definitions of student participation and the development of tools with which to measure such participation. These definitions explain various elements and mechanisms that can hinder or promote meaningful participation opportunities for students, such as students leading and collaborating with staff on a project (Fielding, 2006; Hart, 1992). Participation tools derived from these definitions support multiple item and multifactorial measurement scales, as adopted in the study reported in this paper.

Wellbeing as an outcome of participation

Earlier approaches to wellbeing in schools were largely shaped by a predominance of deficit understandings of children's mental health, and often framed as a 'triage' process (Askell-Williams et al., 2012). This focus expanded over time to reflect strengths-based approaches emerging from movements like positive psychology (Norrish et al., 2013; Seligman et al., 2009), with its interests in resilience, belonging, connectedness and growth mind-sets that constituted what are generally known as 'whole-school' approaches (see; Langford et al., 2017; Macnab et al., 2014; Rowe et al., 2007; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). With increased political and social expectations that schools would play a key role in supporting and monitoring wellbeing (Barry et al., 2017; Bonell et al., 2014), attention turned to universal as well as targeted approaches that would better address the social and emotional wellbeing needs of *all* students (Street, 2017; Wright, 2015). Broadly, social and emotional

wellbeing refers to the way a person thinks and feels about themselves and others and includes adapting to daily challenges and having a fulfilling life (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). While there has subsequently been a proliferation of program interventions to address the diversity of wellbeing needs and issues, attention has also turned to the role that student participation potentially plays in addressing social and emotional wellbeing, which is the key focus of the present study (Anderson et al., 2016; Bergmark, & Kostenius, 2018; Halliday et al., 2019; John-Akinola & Nic-Gabhainn, 2014; Kuurme & Carlsson, 2010; Lloyd & Emerson, 2017; Simmons et al., 2016).

Such literature has focussed attention on the ways in which participation impacts positively on children's and young people's wellbeing and self-esteem. These include findings that support favourable links between student participation and self-efficacy, self-esteem, engagement with school, and improving school cultures and health (Hall, 2010; Hammerin et al., 2018; Mannion, 2010; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Pineada-Baez et al., 2019; Sprague Martinez et al., 2020). A promising study using a large scale stratified sample of students (N = 10,334) aged 10 -17 years in Ireland (de Róiste et al., 2012) found that student participation at school was positively associated with three indicators of social and emotional wellbeing: self-rated health, life satisfaction and happiness. Whilst this is a valuable empirical contribution, the three aspects of participation were measured using only one survey item each, limiting the measurement reliability and validity. In Northern Ireland, Lloyd and Emerson (2017) reported survey findings from 3800 primary school children and found a significant, positive association between self-reported wellbeing and views that participation rights were respected at school and in the community. As discussed next, the mechanism underpinning the link between wellbeing and participation appears to be relational.

Relationships

An emerging and significant dimension of such studies to date is the intersection between student participation, wellbeing and relationships. There is developing evidence that participation in decision-making at school provides a foundation for respectful relationships between children/young people and adults within the school setting (Bessell & Gal, 2009; Fitzgerald et al., 2009; Lloyd & Emerson, 2017; Powell, et al., 2018; Ruzek et al, 2016; Simmons et al., 2016; Thomas, 2012). Further, Mannion et al.'s (2015) qualitative study in Scotland highlighted the importance of pupil-pupil and pupil-teacher relationships, identifying that student participation was facilitated by shared power with adults and caring, respectful, trusting relationships. Lloyd and Emerson's (2017) report on survey data from Northern Ireland supports social relationships as central to the connection between wellbeing and student participation at school.

Previous mixed-methods large scale research in Australian secondary schools (Graham et al., 2014) showed students' relationships with peers and school staff were important for facilitating student wellbeing. In particular, Honneth's modes of interpersonal recognition were strongly related to student wellbeing. Honneth (1995) identifies these as *love*, or primary relationships of affection and care, respect for the other as a person with *rights*, and *solidarity* based on reciprocal esteem. For the purposes of research in schools, these modes of recognition were expressed as giving and receiving 'care', 'respect' and 'value' within relationships (Graham et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2016) Therefore, given the common findings in previous studies that relationships play key roles in facilitating both student participation and student wellbeing, it appears likely that relationships of interpersonal recognition may play a role in explaining any connection between student participation and student wellbeing at school.

Despite the promise of connections between the three constructs of student participation, wellbeing and relationships, there remains little evidence on the existence of

such an association, and less still on its precise nature. Gray and Hackling's (2009) mixed methods study supported the importance of relationships and mutual respect (a core component of recognition) between students and their teachers and peers for promoting wellbeing in schools. Further, they found that students having responsibility for their own learning, and being active decision makers in their learning, were associated with wellbeing at school. Gray and Hackling's operationalisation of wellbeing was narrow and focussed on academic engagement, perceived support for studies, and sense of belonging at school, but nevertheless hints at possible links between participation, recognition and wellbeing. A relatively more recent survey of 231 school students from nine primary schools in Ireland (John-Akinola & Nic-Gabhainn, 2014) measured participation with four multi-item sub-scales (participation in school decisions and rules, participation in school activities, participation in school events, and positive perception of school participation). Their results showed significant positive associations between all aspects of school participation and wellbeing. Additionally, the study found all four sub-scales of school participation were positively related with the students' perceptions of class relationships and relationships with their teacher. These findings are again an important contribution to the field, but they do not yet explain why student participation and wellbeing may be favourably related, nor examine the role of interpersonal relationships within this association.

The Present Study

Given the evidence gaps identified above, this major Australian mixed-method study set out to strengthen knowledge, policy and practice concerning student participation in schools by identifying whether and how such participation may be related to students' social and emotional wellbeing. The setting for the research was Government and Catholic high schools (Years 7-10) across the state of New South Wales (NSW). Data was collected in the second half of 2016.

The study was guided by the following research questions, each addressed by a phase of the study as described below:

RQ1: How is student participation currently articulated in education policy in Australia?

RQ2: How do students, teachers, principals and policy stakeholders understand and experience participation in NSW schools?

RQ3: To what extent is participation at school associated with student wellbeing, and which specific elements of participation are core predictors of student wellbeing?

RQ4: Do Honneth's modes of recognition mediate the relationship between participation and wellbeing?

The mixed method study had four phases: Phase 1, policy review addressing RQ1; Phase 2, qualitative phase addressing RQ2; Phase 3, quantitative scale development phase and addressing RQ3; and Phase 4, quantitative survey addressing RQ3 and RQ4. This article reports key findings from Phase 4 only. Elsewhere the authors report in detail (Anderson et al., 2019) the approach taken for the quantitative work in Phase 3 which involved developing a multi-dimensional scale to measure six elements of student participation. These six elements were: 1) voice about schooling, 2) voice about activities, 3) having a say with influential people, 4) having choice, 5) having influence, and 6) working together. In Phase 3, factor analyses showed that the element 'working together' accounted for the largest amount of variance in the measure of participation, suggesting that relationships between students and their peers and with adults play a critical role in successful student participation practices characterised by collaboration.

The exploratory analyses in Phase 4 of the study address RQs 3 and 4 by investigating whether student participation is related to student wellbeing at school, the extent to which the

different elements of student participation predict student wellbeing, and whether recognition experienced within relationships with peers and school staff can help to explain the extent of any association found between participation and wellbeing (see Figure 1).

[Please place Figure 1 about here]

Method

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit a diverse range of schools to take part in the project. Potential schools were identified via the My Schools website (https://www.myschool.edu.au/) which provides details of each Australian school's demographic and academic performance characteristics. Diversity was sought in terms of school size, socioeconomic status, geographic and cultural characteristics, whether schools were single sex or co-educational, and also schools taking differing approaches to student participation. Some schools identified as 'lighthouse schools' for their leadership in the area of student participation were also invited to participate. While purposive sampling may omit invitation to some schools, it afforded recruitment of a diverse sample reflecting a wide range of participatory practices, thereby preventing restricted variability of scores in the survey and promoting ability to detect potential associations between participation and wellbeing if such existed.

The sample was recruited from 16 secondary schools (nine Catholic schools and seven government schools) from regional and metropolitan NSW, ranging in size from 379 to 1,065 students. In total, 1,481 participants started the survey, and 1,435 completed it. Approximately 64 classes participated in the survey in total, with four classes on average from each school taking part (one each from Year 7 to Year 10). Participant ages ranged from 11 to 17 years with a median age of 14 years (M = 13.88, SD = 1.26). Table 1 reports the frequencies and percentages of the participants in demographic categories.

[Please place Table 1 about here]

Materials

Participants responded to 91 survey items in total, with self-reported demographic items listed in Table 1 first, followed by measures of wellbeing at school, measures of recognition at school, the student participation scale and validity items. All scale items described below were responded to using 5-point Likert scales, where 1 indicated 'strongly disagree', 2 indicated 'disagree', 3 indicated 'neither agree nor disagree', 4 indicated' agree' and 5 indicated 'strongly agree'. Relevant scale items were summed and averaged to form mean total overall scores for wellbeing, recognition and participation, as well as mean total sub-scale scores for the elements of student participation. Higher scores represented greater wellbeing, recognition, and student participation, respectively.

Wellbeing at School

The Wellbeing at School Scale (Anderson, 2018) measures students' social-emotional wellbeing within school settings and was developed using empirical data from an earlier large-scale mixed methods study specifically designed for Australian secondary school students (Graham et al., 2014). The scale contains eight items that measure happiness, satisfaction, safety, mental health, sense of purpose, connection to people and place, and sense of belonging at school (e.g., "Most days being at school makes me feel happy"). The Wellbeing at School scale demonstrated convergent validity with measures of student engagement (Anderson, 2018) and with Tennant et al.'s (2007) Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (Mitchell, 2019). Internal consistency in the present study was excellent, with Cronbach's alpha of .92, and the items formed a single factor.

Recognition at School Scale

Recognition was measured using six items from Graham et al., (2014) and derived from Honneth as outlined above. Three items measured to what extent participants felt cared

for, respected and valued at school, and another three items measured to what extent students cared for, respected and valued others at school (e.g., "I feel very respected by other people at my school" and "I show respect to everyone that I have contact with at my school"). Factor analysis of the structure of the recognition scale supported one overall dimension, rather than the three-dimensional structure theorised as cared for, respected and valued. The recognition scale showed excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .87) and therefore a total overall score was formed for analyses reported in the Results section.

Student Participation Scale (SPS)

The SPS was developed in an earlier phase of the present study (see Anderson et al., 2019). The SPS consisted of 38 items measuring six elements of student participation: working together (9 items; e.g., "Students work with teachers to find a positive way forward"); voice about schooling (9 items; e.g., "At school, I usually get to say what I think about what I learn"); having a say with influential people (5 items; e.g., "At my school my views inform the work of the SRC or school leaders"); voice about activities outside the classroom (3 items; e.g., "In school activities, such as sporting teams, clubs, excursions, camps, fundraising and socials, I usually get to say what I think about which activities are offered"); having influence (7 items; e.g., "At my school staff take students opinions seriously"); and having choice (5 items; e.g., "At my school I usually get a lot of choice about how I present my school work (e.g., as an essay or poster)"). The psychometric properties of the scale were excellent and the elements of participation showed invariance across self-reported demographic categories of gender, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, cultural and linguistic status, disability status, and year at school. Internal consistency was excellent for all six elements as shown by strong Cronbach's alpha values (working together, .91; voice about schooling, .95; having a say with influential people, .89; voice about activities outside the classroom, .92; having influence, .92; and having choice, .81). The SPS

showed convergent validity with a psychometrically sound measure of student engagement by Fredericks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, and Paris (2005), and significantly discriminated students with greater participatory experience as members of their school's Student Representative Council.

Procedure

After obtaining ethics approval from the university and all relevant school systems, school principals were telephoned by relevant research partners from either the Government or Catholic school system. If principals verbally agreed that their school could take part in the study, an email invitation was then formally issued. The principal or their designated staff member recruited teachers to facilitate administration of the survey in their classes. Facilitating teachers received an instruction page which introduced the survey process and provided the link to the survey. Opt-out consent for participation in the survey was used in the present study because this process aligned with the existing practices for gaining consent in the participating schools. Teachers provided each student in their class with opt-out parent and student consent forms and information letters. Only students who did not return any opt-out form took part in the study. All participation was voluntary, anonymous and confidential. Students completed the online survey in a classroom setting where privacy was emphasised. Submission of survey responses was deemed consent to participate. On average, the survey took participants 12 minutes to complete. Once complete, participating schools were sent a summary of key results.

Results

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Version 25 (2017). Mediation analyses were conducted using Hayes' (2017) PROCESS version 3.

Descriptive statistics

Means and standard deviations for all continuously scaled variables, that is, the six elements of participation, overall participation, recognition and wellbeing in schools are reported in Table 2.

[Please place Table 2 about here]

Links between student participation, recognition, and wellbeing at school

To answer RQ 3, Pearson's correlations were employed to investigate the associations between student participation, recognition, and wellbeing at school (see Table 3). Strengths of correlations were interpreted following Cohen (1988, pp. 79-81). Wellbeing had strong, positive and significant associations with participation overall and all elements of participation, except voice about activities, which was moderate-to-strong. Greater participation was associated with greater wellbeing at school and vice versa. The association between recognition and wellbeing at school was very strong, positive and significant, meaning greater recognition was associated with greater wellbeing at school, and vice versa. Each element of participation was significantly and positively correlated with interpersonal recognition, with correlations ranging from moderate (e.g., voice about activities) to strong (e.g., working together and having influence), whereby greater recognition was associated with greater wellbeing at school, and vice versa.

[Please place Table 3 about here]

The elements of participation as predictors of student wellbeing at school

To answer the RQ 3 regarding which elements of participation are core predictors of student wellbeing, hierarchical multiple regression analysis with two steps was conducted. The criterion variable was the wellbeing mean total scores. To control for the significant association between wellbeing and disability status ($r = .19$, $N = 1189$, $p < .001$) or year at school ($r = .21$, $N = 1427$, $p < .001$), these two variables were included at Step 1. The six sub-scale mean total scores for the elements of participation were added at Step 2.

Inspection of scatterplots of the predictor variables with wellbeing at school identified seven bivariate outliers, which were removed, leaving a sample size of 1427. Assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, normality and multicollinearity were satisfied. Table 4 reports the correlations between the predictors.

[Please place Table 4 about here]

The hierarchical regression analysis showed that together the two variables added in Step 1 (disability status and year at school) significantly but weakly predicted wellbeing mean total scores and accounted for just under 9% of variance in wellbeing, $R = .30$, $R^2 = .09$, $F(2, 1186) = 57.55$, $p < .001$. Addition of the six participation variables in Step 2 significantly increased the prediction of wellbeing, $\Delta R^2 = .40$, $F(6, 1180) = 151.41$, $p < .001$. The eight items together significantly and strongly predicted wellbeing, $R = .70$, $R^2 = .49$, $F(8, 1180) = 138.89$, $p < .001$. These results show that together the elements of participation were significantly related to wellbeing, after controlling for disability and year at school.

The impact of each predictor separately on wellbeing is reported in Table 5. Disability status and year at school both significantly predicted wellbeing at Step 1 and Step 2. However, they contributed very small amounts of variance to wellbeing. With regard to the elements of participation, working together, having influence, having choice, and having a say with influential people, all predicted wellbeing significantly at $p < .001$. Based on the standardised regression coefficients (β) the order of significant predictors of wellbeing and their unique contribution to variance in wellbeing as shown by the semi-partial correlations squared (sr^2) were: 1) working together, 2) having choice 3) having influence, and 4) having a say with influential people. Voice about schooling and voice about activities did not significantly predict wellbeing. The sum of the unique contributions of the eight predictors was only 8.8% variance. Given that the model as a whole predicted 48.5% of variance in

wellbeing, this means that approximately 39.7% of variability was shared between the predictor variables.

[Please place Table 5 about here]

Mediation analyses

To answer RQ 4, as to whether Honneth's modes of recognition mediate the relationship between participation and wellbeing, two mediation analyses were conducted. The first analysis tested whether the recognition mean total score mediated the relationship between the overall participation mean total and the wellbeing mean total score. Given that it was conceptually plausible that students reporting greater wellbeing at school may engage to a greater extent with participation activities, the second mediation analysis tested the reverse order, with wellbeing mean total scores as the antecedent variable and the overall participation mean total score as the criterion. Recognition mean total was the mediator variable in both analyses. To control for the effects of demographic characteristics, disability status, year at school CALD status, gender, and ATSI status were included as covariates in the mediation analyses. All significance tests were based on 5000 bias corrected bootstrapped standard errors (Hayes, 2017).

Model 1: Recognition mediates the participation –wellbeing relationship

The results of the first mediation analysis are reported in Figure 2. The indirect effect of participation on wellbeing via recognition was significant with the bias corrected bootstrapped confidence interval entirely above zero, $B = .34$, $SE = .02$, (95% CI bc: 0.29 - 0.38. The positive value of the regression coefficient (*B*) indicates that students who reported greater extent of participation also report greater wellbeing. Results show that recognition mediated the student participation – wellbeing relationship, however the direct path from participation to wellbeing also remained significant. The mediation model explained 64% of

variance in wellbeing, an increase of 18% from 46% of variance explained without the mediator in the model.

[Please place Figure 2 about here]

The results for the covariates (see Table 6) showed that gender, CALD, disability and year at school significantly predicted recognition. Males, students who speak a language other than English, students with a disability and those in later years at school reported lower recognition. Year at school and gender significantly predicted wellbeing, such that later years and females reported lower wellbeing at school.

[Please place Table 6 about here]

Model 2: Recognition mediates the wellbeing – participation relationship

Model 2 results are reported in Figure 3. The indirect effect of wellbeing via recognition on participation was significant with the bias corrected bootstrapped confidence interval entirely above zero, $B = .11$, $SE = .03$, (95% CI bc: 0.07 - 0.16). The positive value of the regression coefficient (*B*) indicates that students who report greater wellbeing also report greater participation. The path from wellbeing to student participation remained significant after including the mediator variable, recognition. The mediation model explained 45% of variance in student participation, an increase of only 1% from 44% of variance explained without the mediator in the model. The 1% difference between the regression coefficients before and after adding the mediator variable in Model 2, is much smaller than the 18% additional variance added in Model 1. Also, the percentage of variance explained in the criterion is less in Model 2 compared to Model 1.

[Please place Figure 3 about here]

The results for the covariates (see Table 7) showed that gender and disability status significantly predicted recognition. Males and students with a disability reported receiving and

giving less recognition. Only CALD status was a significant predictor of student participation, such that students who spoke only English reported lower extent of student participation.

[Please place Table 7 about here]

Discussion

The findings detailed above provide important empirical evidence that student participation is positively associated with wellbeing and recognition at school; that student voice does not in itself predict wellbeing once higher level participation (such as working together, having influence, having a say with influential people, and having choice) is taken into account; and that recognition partially explained the link between student participation and wellbeing. These findings are potentially ground-breaking for schools and other educational settings, given there has been no other quantitative research to date using validated measures that has identified the positive association between participation, wellbeing and recognition at school. Furthermore, this is timely and significant especially for schools and school systems grappling to address the wellbeing of students during a period of considerable uncertainty from the COVID-19 pandemic, while also endeavouring to engage more fully with notions of 'student voice' and ways to support their meaningful participation in online and remote learning contexts. In essence, the findings point to a range of possibilities whereby everyday routine educational activities (e.g., inquiry based learning, collaborative approaches to pedagogy whether in face-to-face *or* virtual classrooms) potentially provide the vehicles for students to experience opportunities to have voice, experience choice, exercise influence over their education and to work together to drive changes at school. These important findings and their implications are discussed in turn below.

The positive association between student participation and wellbeing

The present study's Australian findings, that show strong significant positive associations between all the elements of participation and wellbeing, support de Róiste et al.'s, (2012) and Lloyd and Emerson's (2017) studies using different measures of both participation and wellbeing. The present study's findings add important empirical evidence to inform policies and practices in schools that can facilitate both student participation and wellbeing. Furthermore, the finding that the strongest predictor of wellbeing at school was students working together with their peers and with teaching staff to seek and implement changes at school resonates with Lloyd and Emerson's (2017) finding that relationships were common to both participation and wellbeing, as well as several influential models of participation, such as Fielding (2006), Hart (1992), Mitra (2005), and Toshalis and Nakula (2012), that position student collaboration with peers and adults as high on the continuum of meaningful participation. This key finding emphasises the relational basis of participation explored in these models.

Perhaps one of the most thought-provoking findings was the non-significant results for voice about schooling and voice about activities in predicting wellbeing at school, after taking into account higher levels of participation on the continuum (working together, having choice, having influence, and having a say with influential people). These results imply that merely allowing students to express their opinions without having any impact on decisions and choices that are made is not enough to promote their wellbeing at school. In short, if students express their opinions and then perceive that their opinions are not listened to or seriously considered when making decisions, then their wellbeing is not improved. Based on these results, the opportunity to have impact and choice at school is what really matters for improving student wellbeing. Such results also align well with key models of participation which posit multiple elements of participation, from tokenistic (voice) to meaningful (influence, choice and working together) participation (e.g., Fielding, 2006; Hart, 1997;

Holdsworth, 2000; Lundy, 2007; Mitra, 2005; Shier, 2001). To the authors' knowledge, the present study is the first to measure student participation using a validated multidimensional scale aligned with these typologies of participation, thereby offering researchers in the field of student participation a refined and psychometrically sound way to examine the role of participation in predicting outcomes such as wellbeing. The present study provides evidence for the differential role of student voice and its varying level of impact compared to other higher-level dimensions of participation that underscore the importance of intergenerational dialogue, thereby supporting a multidimensional approach to research on student participation. Such refinement carries implications for practice in schools, as it details the likely outcomes of specific aspects of participation and will foster the development of targeted strategies that will promote participation, recognition and wellbeing.

Recognition mediates the student participation – wellbeing relationship

Another highlight of the findings pertains to explaining why student participation is linked with wellbeing at school. The results of the mediation analyses supported interpersonal recognition as a mediator of the association between student participation and wellbeing, and vice versa, suggesting that a key reason why participation links to wellbeing is through students experiencing recognition at school. Recognition explained an extra 18% of variance in wellbeing (Model 1), but only an extra 1% of variance in student participation (Model 2), therefore more strongly supporting the pathway from participation to wellbeing than from wellbeing to participation. These significant directional effects were found regardless of gender, year at school, indigenous, cultural, and disability status, indicating that facilitation of student voice in schools is beneficial for a wide range of the student population and is not limited to benefitting only certain privileged sub-groups, a common critique regarding Student Representative Councils (Brasof, 2015; Forde et al., 2018; Mayes, 2017).

These mediation model results extend a previous large-scale mixed methods study by Graham et al., (2014) which found that recognition facilitated student wellbeing. The present findings support student participation as one way of evoking recognition in the school community, which then in turn promotes student wellbeing. The present findings also resonate with and extend the work of previous authors (Gray & Hackling, 2009; John-Akinola & Nic-Gabhainn, 2014; Lloyd & Emerson, 2017), who found connections between student participation and wellbeing and relationships with peers and teachers. Moreover, the findings provide clear evidence of the link between student participation and wellbeing, and the core relational processes (care, value, and respect) between staff and students that are needed in schools to strengthen this connection. In sum, when students have a say and are recognised they are more likely to have optimal wellbeing at school.

Limitations and implications for future research

The current study had a cross-sectional design, and thus causal relationships cannot be concluded. Testing the mediation analyses in either direction acknowledged the non-directional status of the findings. It would be of considerable benefit to researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to have evidence of a causal relationship between participation, recognition, and wellbeing, and therefore both longitudinal and wait-list control experimental designs would be useful in future. Additionally, given that the direct relationship between student participation and wellbeing remained significant in the mediation analyses over and above the indirect pathways through recognition, future studies may find it fruitful to explore other mediator variables, such as self-efficacy, which are likely to also mediate the student participation – wellbeing relationship (Gray & Hackling, 2009). Opt-out consent was used for recruitment, participation was confidential and voluntary, and participants were able to skip any or all questions in the survey. A very large percentage of students who began the

survey completed it (96.9 %), suggesting that the design of the survey was engaging and accessible for participants.

Conclusion

This paper has presented empirical evidence that greater student participation is associated with greater wellbeing at school, while also pointing to the critical role of relationships of recognition in students' experiences of participation. The study utilised a reliable and validated customised multidimensional scale to measure student participation, which resonated with several well-known typologies of children and young peoples' participation. This strong conceptual framing produced empirical evidence prioritising higher levels of participation, such as working together, as having significant predictive value for student wellbeing at school, over lower-level participation, such as student voice, involving expressing opinions about the classroom or extra-curricular activities. Further, and as also discussed above, the mediation results show that a key reason why student participation is linked with wellbeing is via recognition. That is, the results highlight that greater student participation fosters greater recognition – giving and receiving care and respect, and valuing others whilst also being valued by others – which in turn fosters greater wellbeing at school. These results contribute to building a theory of how student participation, recognition and wellbeing are interrelated at school. As shown, this key finding underlines the critical importance of schools exploring participatory opportunities that foster meaningful respectful and caring relationships where students feel recognised (Graham et al., 2018; Honneth, 1995; Thomas, 2012). The evidence suggests that schools endeavouring to strengthen student wellbeing would benefit from taking stock of current 'student voice' initiatives and, where necessary, recasting these in terms of an emphasis on students having choice, having their views heard, having influence, and having experiences of working collaboratively with staff and other students, made possible by meaningful respectful relationships. At a time when the

challenges facing school communities are greater than ever, this may be especially important learning. As schools continue to move between online, blended, and face-to-face learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the present study's findings provide empirical evidence to guide and support pedagogies that are student-centred, relational, and inclusive of all students having opportunities to participate in meaningful ways in their education.

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors have no financial or non-financial competing interest to report.

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Table 1

Frequencies and Percentage of the Sample in Demographic Categories

	N	**% of sample**
Gender		
Male	624	43.5
Female	742	51.7
I describe my gender in a different way	47	3.3
I'd rather not say right now	22	1.5
Year		
7	455	31.7
8	418	29.1
9	276	19.2
10	286	19.9
Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CALD) status		
English only	1205	84.0
English + other language	186	12.9
Other language only	13	0.9
I'd rather not say right now	31	2.2
Australian Indigenous status		
Aboriginal	123	8.6
Torres Strait Islander	15	1.0
Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	11	0.8
Neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander	1225	85.4
I'd rather not say right now	61	4.3
Disability status		
Has a disability	97	6.8
Does not have a disability	1098	76.5
Not sure	195	13.6
I'd rather not say right now	45	3.1

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for All Continuous Variables (Mean Totals), N = 1427

	M	*SD*
Working together	3.08	0.77
Voice about schooling	2.81	0.95
Having a say with influential people	3.08	0.91
Voice about activities	2.93	0.98
Having influence	3.05	0.81
Having choice	3.35	0.84
Overall participation	3.03	0.72
Recognition	3.60	0.71
Wellbeing at school	3.32	0.85

Table 3

Wellbeing in School and Recognition Correlated with the Six Elements of Participation, Overall Participation, Recognition (all Mean Total Scores)

	Wellbeing		**Recognition**	
	r	***N***	***R***	***N***
Working together	.60***	1434	.58***	1427
Voice about schooling	.50***	1434	.42***	1427
Having a say with influential people	.52***	1434	.47***	1427
Voice about activities	.43***	1434	.36***	1427
Having influence	.58***	1434	.54***	1427
Having choice	.51***	1434	.46***	1427
Overall participation	.67***	1427	.58***	1427
Recognition	.75***	1427	--	

Note. ***$p < .001$

Table 4

Correlations between the Eight Predictors of Wellbeing at School

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Disability status	--	.00	.15	.10	.14	.10	.15	.12
2	Year at school		--	-.16	-.18	-.12	-.14	-.19	-.12
3	Working together			--	.65	.62	.59	.74	.56
4	Voice about schooling				--	.61	.71	.65	.53
5	Having a say with influential people					--	.56	.66	.52
6	Voice about activities						--	.58	.50
7	Having influence							--	.59
8	Having choice								--

Note. All correlations employed Pearson's *r*, except for year at school which used Spearman's r_s, and disability status which used point-biserial *r*. All correlations were significant at $p < .001$, except for the relationship between year at school and disability status, which were not significantly associated.

Table 5

Hierarchical Multiple Regression: Predictors of Wellbeing in Schools

Step	**Predictor**	***B***	***SEB***	**95% CI**	**β**	***p***	***sr²***
1	Constant	2.71	0.17	2.38, 3.05	--	.000	--
	Disability status	0.56	0.08	0.39, 0.72	0.18	.000	.03
	Year at school	-0.17	0.02	-0.21, -0.13	-0.23	.000	.05
2	Constant	0.60	0.15	0.31, 0.89	--	.000	--
	Disability status	0.26	0.07	0.13, 0.38	0.09	.000	<.01
	Year at school	-0.08	0.02	-0.11,-0.05	-0.10	.000	.01
	Working together	0.32	0.04	0.25, 0.39	0.29	.000	.03
	Voice about schooling	0.04	0.03	-0.02, 0.10	0.04	.211	<.01
	Having a say with influential people	0.11	0.03	0.06, 0.16	0.12	.000	<.01
	Voice about activities	-0.03	0.03	-0.08, 0.02	-0.03	.290	< .01
	Having influence	0.14	0.03	0.08, 0.21	0.15	.000	< .01
	Having choice	0.20	0.03	0.14, 0.25	0.20	.000	.02

Table 6

Effect of Covariates on the Mediation Model 1

Covariate	**Recognition**				**Wellbeing at School**			
	B	***SE***	**95% CI**	***p***	***B***	***SE***	**95% CI**	***p***
Gender	-0.17	0.03	-0.23, -0.11	.000	0.14	0.03	0.08, 0.19	.000
ATSI	0.08	0.05	-0.03, 0.18	.150	0.06	0.05	-0.04, 0.16	.212
CALD	-0.14	0.05	-0.23, -0.04	.003	-0.04	0.04	-0.12, 0.05	.374
Disability	0.38	0.07	0.26, 0.51	.000	0.09	0.06	-0.03, 0.21	.123
Year	-0.05	0.01	-0.08, -0.02	.001	-0.05	0.01	-0.07, -0.02	.001

Note: Coding of categorical variables: Gender: 0 = Female, 1 = Male; ATSI status: 0 = ATSI, 1 = Not ATSI; CALD status: 0 = speaks English only, 1 = Speaks another language other than English (either with English or without English); Disability status: 0 = has a disability, 1 = does not have a disability.

Table 7

Effect of Covariates on Mediation Model 2 Pathways

Covariate	**Recognition**				**Student Participation**			
	B	***SE***	**95% CI**	***p***	***B***	***SE***	**95% CI**	***p***
Gender	-0.18	0.03	-0.23, -0.13	.000	0.05	0.03	-0.01, 0.11	.122
ATSI	0.01	0.04	-0.08, -0.10	.831	-0.07	0.05	-0.18, 0.02	.148
CALD	-0.05	0.04	-0.18, 0.10	.116	0.15	0.05	0.06, 0.24	<.001
Disability	0.19	0.05	0.09, 0.30	<.001	-0.11	0.06	-0.23, 0.02	.098
Year	-0.01	0.01	-0.03, -0.01	.391	-0.02	0.01	-0.05, -0.00	.103

Note. Coding of categorical variables: Gender: 0 = Female, 1 = Male; ATSI status: 0 = ATSI, 1 = Not ATSI; CALD status: 0 = speaks English only, 1 = Speaks another language other than English (either with English or without English); Disability status: 0 = has a disability, 1 = does not have a disability.

Figure 1

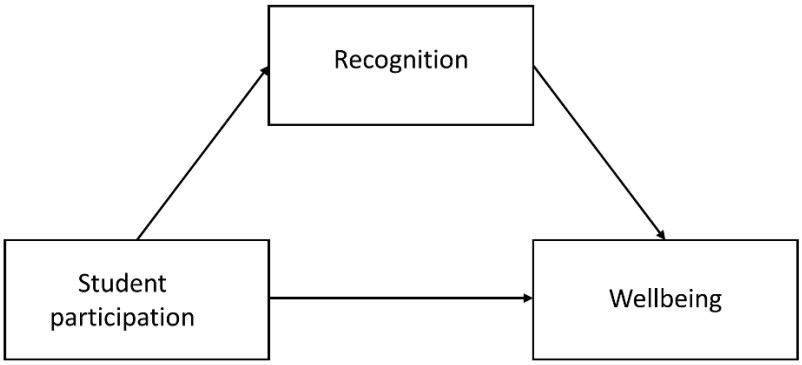

Figure 2

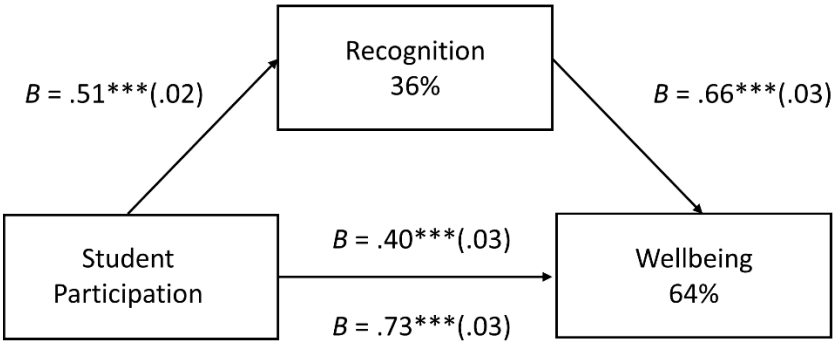
Recognition
36%
B = .51***(.02)
B = .66***(.03)
Student
Participation
B = .40***(.03)
B = .73***(.03)
Wellbeing
64%

Figure 3

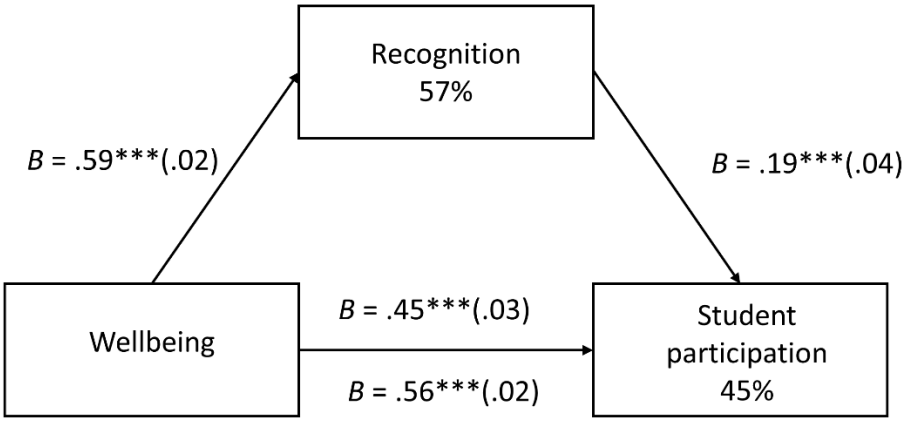
Recognition
57%
B = .59***(.02)
B = .19***(.04)
Wellbeing
B = .45***(.03)
B = .56***(.02)
Student
participation
45%

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the relationship between student participation and student wellbeing accounted for by recognition. The indirect, or mediated, relationship is depicted by the pathways from student participation to recognition, and then to wellbeing.

Figure 2. Mediation model 1: Recognition mediates the relationship between student participation - wellbeing at school. *B* = Unstandardised regression coefficients. Numbers inside brackets are bootstrapped standard errors. $p < .001$***

Figure 3. Mediation model 2: Recognition partially mediates the wellbeing-participation relationship. *B* = Unstandardised regression coefficients. Numbers inside brackets are bootstrapped standard errors. $p < .001$***