

Co-curricular activity

Building values through drama and dance with a wellbeing focus

The ACT MindMatters Wellbeing Festival of Drama and Dance (formerly the MindMatters Drama Festival) is a mental health drama and dance festival organised by the Australian Capital Territory arm of MindMatters. MindMatters is a national resource and professional development initiative funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing to support Australian secondary schools in promoting and protecting the social and emotional wellbeing of members of school communities. The wellbeing festival engages students in exploring relevant aspects of student wellbeing and communicating their findings through drama and dance to peers, families and the wider school community.

The festival's aims are aligned with key elements of values education as outlined in the *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* in several ways: students are encouraged to explore their own values around issues of mental health and wellbeing; the process of researching and developing a performance piece on mental health occurs in a safe, supportive environment and helps students develop social skills; the knowledge and skills gained enhance the resilience of the participants; through active participation, students address issues such as disconnectedness and alienation, student health, improved relationships and wellbeing; and through articulating these issues they develop responsibility and are empowered to take part in a positive school culture.

Year levels

Early adolescence - Later adolescence (15–18 years)

Explicit values focus

- Care and compassion
- Understanding, tolerance and inclusion
- Respect
- Responsibility

Key Learning Areas

- Cross-curricular – students develop social skills, resilience and tolerance of diversity, as well as communication and research skills
- The Arts: Drama; Dance
- Health and Physical Education

School profile

The ACT secondary system of government schools is divided into two discrete sections: high schools (Years 7–10) and colleges (Years 11–12). A cross-section of Canberra schools has taken part in the ACT Wellbeing Festival of Drama and Dance. These range from large, single sex independent schools to coeducational and single sex Catholic schools to coeducational government high schools and colleges from all areas of the ACT. A New South Wales school has also taken part.

Reason for co-curricular activity

The ACT MindMatters Wellbeing Festival of Drama and Dance was developed as a way to promote mental health and wellbeing in young people by encouraging them to develop, with their teachers, a short performance piece on any of the topics related to the themes of the MindMatters resource. These themes include: respect and understanding of the wellbeing needs of self and others; tolerance and valuing of diversity; responsibility to deal with conflict in peaceful and constructive ways; and care and compassion for all people.

Prior to its inception, there was no co-curricular activity of this type available to ACT schools, although other organisations offered students an opportunity to take part in arts-based activities. Drama was thought to be an excellent way of involving students in engaging and relevant research and experiential work; building their knowledge and positive attitudes in the area of mental health; enhancing their respect for people experiencing high mental health needs; increasing their understanding and tolerance of others with mental health issues; and promoting the inclusion of 'different' others in school life. Through developing care and compassion for others students are also more likely to seek help for themselves if in need.

Dance was included in the festival in 2009 and the name changed to the MindMatters Wellbeing Festival of Drama and Dance to reflect wellbeing as the major focus of the festival.

Implementation and development

The first ACT MindMatters Drama Festival was held in 2001. The festival was inspired by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health's Mind Play, a competitive drama festival with a mental health promotion theme, held annually for schools in the Hunter region of NSW. In the spirit of promoting wellbeing, it was decided to run the ACT festival as a non-competitive event where the focus was a collegial approach among schools, with the host-school being rotated each year. A cross-sectoral subcommittee was formed, with school counsellors and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) clinicians working to support school groups with the research and development of their work.

Initially the event targeted colleges (Years 11–12), as a way to promote MindMatters themes to the senior section. In 2005, it was expanded to senior high school groups (Years 9–10). The increased numbers of schools taking part necessitated the performances being extended across a day and evening program. Day performing schools are requested to invite a class of same-age peers. A preparation session is offered to these students as well as in-school follow up by members of the subcommittee. The evening performances are open to peers, family and friends.

Schools register to participate and are asked to choose a topic that relates to the themes of MindMatters and explore it, with teacher support and guidance, through discussion, community engagement and research. Drama and dance teachers are reminded that it is important for students to choose the topic as this increases the relevance of the activity and enhances student engagement. Deciding on a topic, roles and tasks also offers opportunities for students to take responsibility and develop compassion and tolerance. MindMatters is in discussion with ACT health and physical education teachers to encourage greater collaboration with drama and dance colleagues by allowing students time to further explore their chosen theme in health and physical education classes.

In the beginning stage of exploring ideas and developing their topic, students are encouraged to contact the school counsellor, or community organisations like Mental Illness Education ACT (MIEACT) for further information. It is impressed upon teachers and students alike that the process is as important as the final performance piece, and given that the topics may touch participants' lives personally, there is a need for respect, understanding, care and compassion when exploring the issues so that everyone involved feels safe and supported.

Students are asked to prepare a 10-minute performance piece, and be ready to stay on stage afterwards for five minutes to take audience questions. Students and teachers are given free rein, from a dramatic point of view, to develop the piece. They are encouraged to work collaboratively and build their social skills and resilience through solving artistic conflicts in peaceful and respectful ways.

Performing groups have ranged in size from four to twenty-five students, and genres chosen have varied from musical comedy to dance, to multimedia shows. Students have grappled with serious topics in humorous but respectful ways. The focus is not on a 'big-budget' production. Costuming and props are minimal with music and lighting often used strikingly to create mood and set scenes. Audiences have been enthusiastic and have demonstrated their understanding with pertinent and thoughtful questions ranging from how the piece was developed, to what students have learnt from their exploration of the topic, to what course of action they might recommend to their peers.

The following examples of performance titles indicate the relevance of topics to the lives of young people.

- The Daughter (about caring for a depressed parent)
- Inside My Head (about changing negative self-talk)
- Labels Are for Jars (about recognising the damage labelling does to self-image)
- The Adventures of Self-Esteem Man (about finding and valuing one's unique strengths)
- Self-Isolation (about connecting and help-seeking)
- Cause and Effect (about coping with the pressure to conform)
- Grappling with Grief (about ways to cope through loss and change)

In the early years, many of the pieces chosen by schools focused on depictions of mental illness. Now themes more clearly reflect the MindMatters approach to wellbeing, which focuses on building school connectedness and coping skills, expanding understanding of mental health needs and encouraging help-seeking. The festival subcommittee has supported this approach through visits to participating schools to outline the importance of maintaining a resilience focus and through providing professional development for the participating drama teachers. In 2006, in collaboration with the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA), MindMatters ACT held a well-received, day-long workshop for drama teachers on building resilience through drama.

Outcomes

The long-term aim of MindMatters is to increase positive attitudes and improve the mental health status of young people by increasing their knowledge and understanding of mental health and mental illness and help-seeking. Qualitative feedback from teachers, parents and students suggests that the wellbeing festival helps achieve this aim. Our goal is to eventually have the festival evaluated qualitatively with the support of one of the research institutions in Canberra.

The questions asked by audiences, and particularly the responses given by the students, indicated that the performances sent out powerful messages to all concerned. Students in the audience have actively sought information and assistance from school counsellors as a result of issues raised in performance pieces. Teachers have reported gaining deeper knowledge and understanding of mental health, and some participating schools have changed their practice to focus more on the wellbeing needs of all students.

The ACT MindMatters Wellbeing Festival of Drama and Dance has encouraged:

- increased understanding by students that they are responsible for looking after their own mental health
- greater knowledge about specific mental illnesses
- improved understanding and empathy for those with high mental health support needs and encouragement of help-seeking
- awareness about the need for respectful treatment of personal subjects in performance
- improved links to community mental health agencies
- the ability to articulate mental health needs to others
- enthusiasm about developing a performance piece on a topic relevant to them
- a sense of achievement as a result of performing creative pieces of work for peers and public.