WELLBEING IN EDUCATION

Making time for wellbeing in NZ schools

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'WE'D LOVE TO do more for wellbeing – but where will we find the time or money?' Principals and teachers are increasingly concerned about staff and student wellbeing. A growing number of schools have decided that despite the challenges, wellbeing must come to the top of their list.

The recent upsurge of interest, particularly within education, is fuelled by two trends. We have increasing numbers of students suffering from anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues, and, on the other, robust evidence accumulating to show that wellbeing facilitates learning and 'protects' mental health. The latest Pisa[1] and UNICEF[2] reports in June 2017 identified NZ as having the highest level of youth suicide in the OECD and second highest proportion of students reporting feeling unsafe at school. Mental health issues are expected to be the biggest health burden in the developed world within the next twenty years. Anecdotally, schools report increasing student anxiety, depression, and behaviour disorders and staff stretched to deal with them.

Encouragingly, a growing body of research demonstrates that high wellbeing can protect against many of the mental health challenges facing young people. Furthermore, student wellbeing predicts classroom engagement and academic achievement. One leading Australian researcher, Dr Donna Cross, describes wellbeing as 'the oil of learning'. Importantly, research demonstrates our wellbeing is not fixed and can be increased. Programmes to build staff and student wellbeing have been successfully applied in New Zealand and Australian schools.

Although programmes to build specific aspects of wellbeing have existed for several decades (e.g. social and emotional skills, and resilience), attention has turned more recently to whole school wellbeing. One approach, known as Positive Education combines wellbeing science with best education practice. A broader remit than pastoral care, Positive Education considers how the whole school system contributes to staff, student and school community wellbeing. Wellbeing becomes a lens through which decision relating to curriculum, pedagogy, relationship management, and policies and practices are evaluated.

Positive Education emerged from positive psychology, the branch of psychology dedicated to the study of what enables human flourishing, and aims to support individual, school and community flourishing. Contrary to sceptics' fears, it's not self-indulgent navel gazing. Wellbeing in Positive Education is about 'feeling good and functioning well'. High wellbeing is associated with greater social contribution and volunteering as well as improved learning and achievement. Australian researcher Lindsay Oades points out that Positive Education equips students with the knowledge and skills they need 'to develop their own and others' wellbeing.'

Whole school wellbeing programmes typically adopt a model of wellbeing, align teaching and learning to support wellbeing, and implement changes to ensure policies build, rather than diminish, wellbeing. Models of wellbeing adopted in New Zealand include Mason Durie's Te Whare Tapa Wha, adaptations of Martin Seligman's PERMA model, the Mental Health Foundation's Five Ways to Wellbeing, or the UK-based Wheel of Wellbeing (See table/sidebar).

A quick glance at these models reminds us that as leading positive psychology researcher, Dr Chris Peterson, used to say, 'wellbeing is plural'. Wellbeing is not one thing but many practices. For some people, fun and amusement (positive emotions) are essential for their wellbeing. For others, it's pursuing meaningful activities or helping others (meaning and purpose). For most of us, across the life span, relationships are the single biggest contributor to wellbeing. Knowing their 'go to' wellbeing practices must surely feature on the list of skills parents and teachers want for school leavers as they face challenging new

environments. This knowledge, often described as wellbeing literacy, is not just what parents want their children to know. It is also part of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC), featuring in the vision, key competencies, and Health and Physical Education learning area of the NZC (NZC, 2007, L7 HPE: 'students will assess their health needs and identify strategies to ensure personal wellbeing across the lifespan').

Although the name 'Positive Education' is new, the content is familiar to educators as it provides scientific evidence for what excellent teachers have always done. Positive Education offers frameworks and strategies that help educators get to know the student's strengths, passions, challenges; to value the student's experiences outside the classroom; and to use this knowledge to engage and motivate the student for learning and their future.

As part of whole school wellbeing students and staff learn evidence-based scientifically validated strategies and tools for resilient thinking, wellbeing literacy, building self-efficacy and mindsets that foster learning and growth. Staff learn and teach practices that support inclusion and connection, feeling safe and valued, and build supportive relationships throughout the school for students and staff.

One of these practices is adopting a strengths focus. For many schools, this is a valuable first step in developing a school culture that supports wellbeing. Based on the notion that 'what's right with us is as real and as important as what goes wrong with us', a strengths focus requires deliberately placing attention on the positive character and attributes of students, staff and the school. Many schools adopt a specific list of strengths – there are at least three popular classifications – and develop a shared language of strengths. Staff and students are encouraged to identify and develop their own strengths, practices shown to build engagement and achievement. When students are encouraged to notice strengths in others (strengths spotting) the benefits are even greater.

Research I have conducted with New Zealand primary and intermediate schools found increases in student relatedness and class climate, as well as classroom engagement and wellbeing after a strengths programme. Teachers who took part in the study said the strengths classification gave them a common language for valuing each other and they found it easier to notice what was right with their students. One teacher noted that it gave students from very challenging backgrounds 'something to be proud of'. I hadn't appreciated how significant that could be for a student until a Year 7 boy told me, 'I used to think I was just a bundle of trouble walking around. Now I know I have strengths'. A number of teachers noticed more caring in the classroom; a student who was previously teased was now accepted by classmates and protected in the wider school environment.

Happily, strengths are often taken to heart by those who most need them. A Year 8 boy described by all his teachers as a 'born trouble maker' replied immediately to my question 'What do you think your strengths are?' 'I'm really good at raising the energy of a group', he said. Absolutely! A natural leader without a positive outlet for his strengths. When we identify the strengths in the person or behaviour we can more easily offer positive acknowledgement or channel those strengths constructively. My hope for this student is that his future teachers are as skilled as he is at strengths spotting.

The first national conference in Positive Education was held in Christchurch in April 2017. With speakers from the USA and Australia, the conference attracted over 250 educators from around New Zealand, all looking to build wellbeing in their schools. Speakers, including this writer, emphasised that whole school wellbeing is not a programme to tick off. Rather, it is a philosophy and an approach to education that puts wellbeing of staff and students at the heart of learning and takes several

Wellbeing Models	
Te Whare Tapa Whā.	Developed by Sir Mason Durie, the whare represents holistic wellbeing or hauora. The whare's walls represent emotional and mental (te taha hinengaro), physical (te taha tinana), social (te taha whānau), and spiritual (te taha wairua) wellbeing.
PERMA-V	**[https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/learn/wellbeing]** Martin Seligman's PERMA model proposes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose, and accomplishment as pathways to wellbeing. This model adds vitality (built through 'eat, sleep, move') as an essential component of wellbeing.
Five Ways to Wellbeing	**[https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/assets/Five-Ways-downloads/mentalhealth-5waysBP-web-single-2015.pdf]** The UK's New Economics Foundation distilled over 4,000 research articles on wellbeing onto a postcard advocating five effective wellbeing strategies: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, and Give.
Wheel of Wellbeing	**[https://www.wheelofwellbeing.org/]** This UK-based health promotion initiative builds wellbeing through practices that look after body, mind, spirit, people, place and planet.

years to fully implement. There is widespread agreement that staff (and leader) wellbeing must be on the agenda given that teacher wellbeing impacts student learning [ref] as well as being a worthwhile goal in its own right. Australian teacher, Sophie Fenton, speaking of the need to address teacher wellbeing in education states, 'the whole person is in the learning space – we need to pay attention to the social and emotional dimension of teaching for teachers as well as students'.

Whole school wellbeing involves a culture change for most schools that takes time and is developed at multiple levels: schools must 'learn, live, embed, and teach' wellbeing. Schools can build wellbeing on a budget but need to allocate staff time to learning about wellbeing so they can 'live it' and 'teach it'. Most schools take about three years to embed wellbeing practices and develop a shared language of wellbeing and strengths. Part of this process involves training for staff in the scientific evidence, practices and tools that enhance school wellbeing.

How and where to begin? It's OK to start small and build slowly if that's what your school can manage. What works for most schools is: begin by acknowledging and celebrating your existing wellbeing work. A Wellbeing Audit captures the good work already done across the school to support wellbeing by staff, students, community, or Board. It includes the 'thank you' morning tea the Board of Trustees throw for staff each year, the teachers versus students touch rugby game, and the art project making 'happy hats' that tell stories of what makes students happy. The Wellbeing Audit respects the people and the work of your school, builds buy-in for future wellbeing work, and identifies areas of strength on which you can build.

Conduct a Wellbeing Inquiry (using the technique of Appreciative Inquiry developed by Dr David Cooperrider) where your school community shares stories of times your school has been at its very best supporting wellbeing. Notice the themes: the positive qualities and strengths that your school can acknowledge and build on. As part of this process, participants identify their vision for the school's wellbeing future, and the next steps that will move them closer to that goal. Sharing stories of your school at its best offers a balance to time spent focused on challenges and setbacks, and generates excitement and enthusiasm. Many teachers comment that they have never shared these stories before and describe the process as reinvigorating.

On a practical note, the process of building wellbeing in your school should add to wellbeing rather than detract from it. If wellbeing feels like another overwhelming burden, stop and find a different way to approach it. Each school will need to chart its own specific course, appropriate for your context and priorities.

If you begin by noticing what is right in your school and how you could build on it, you have implemented a strengths focus and are underway.

FOOTNOTES

1. PISA Report (2015). http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/pisa-2015-results-volume-iii_9789264273856-en#.WPemLvmGMUE#page5.
2. UNICEF Report Card. https://www.unicef.org.nz/learn/advocacy/global-report-card

BIO

Dr Denise Quinlan researches and teaches the science of well-being. She has published in international journals on positive psychology, resilience and well-being. The developer of a successful classroom-based strengths programme that positively influences student well-being, engagement for learning, relatedness, and class climate, Denise is committed to building wellbeing knowledge in NZ education. Denise works with schools in New Zealand, Australia and the UK, researches university student well-being, and lectures in strengths-based team development. Denise has a Masters of Applied Positive Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania, USA, where she studied and subsequently worked alongside positive psychology thought leaders Professor Martin Seligman and Dr Karen Reivich. As part of the UPenn team she delivered resilience and well-being programmes to educators in the UK and Australia (including Geelong Grammar and St Peters Adelaide in Australia, and Wellington College in England). Her PhD from the University of Otago, Dunedin, broke new ground in development and understanding of strengths-based approaches in schools. Denise is a Research Fellow at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, a lecturer on the Executive Masters of Positive Leadership and Strategy at IE University Business School, Madrid, Spain, and delivers an ASQA accredited Diploma of Positive Psychology for LGI in Australia.