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Student wellbeing

Wellbeing is a topic very close to our hearts at Tikipunga High School. When I learned that I was fortunate enough to be awarded a Teach NZ Principals Sabbatical for Term 1 2019, I knew that I wanted to spend that time visiting schools, educational institutions and education professionals in the United States of America to discuss student wellbeing. During my sabbatical, I wanted to inquire into how Tikipunga High School and other kura could proactively and explicitly implement “upstream” measures to promote student wellbeing.

Why student wellbeing?

Our kura has been touched by tragedy over the past 24 months. Mental health and how we support those with challenges is an area which we, Aotearoa, is struggling. The wellbeing of our young people is an area that urgently needs addressing. There appears to be few “upstream” measures being implemented effectively and sustainably.

At times of tragedy and trauma, mental health resources become readily available from a number of areas and agencies. While these resources, in my experience, are essential, their accessibility is offered as a finite and short-term measure. I understand government and government agencies have key performance indicators and work on time frames often as little as one to three years. I sincerely believe, however, that foresight, which requires significant “upstream” investment, is necessary. This investment is a long-term strategy, the rewards of which are likely to be reaped many years after the initial investment.

Resourcing and student needs are near the top of most hui agenda for educators. I am of the belief that we have two options in this space. Option one: resource the need. Option two: resource the result of not resourcing the need. The first option is future-focused, sensible and student centred. The latter, not so. Unfortunately the latter is what plays out all too often. Examples of this are as wide as they are varied. Disproportional representation of cohorts of students who have been underserved in current systems serves as “exhibit A” of this kaupapa.

For optimal benefit, I believe that the time frame educators could and should be focusing on for introducing resources and measures for wellbeing is the 15 years from Early Childhood Education to the year after leaving Secondary School.

Locally, our community is not without challenge. It is a sad reflection on our society today that the children of the poor have been seemingly allowed to become the collateral damage for the pursuit of an economic agenda predicated on individualism and greed.

As communities become marginalised and disempowered, it falls on kura, such as ours, to take the lead on student wellbeing. This often requires partnering with other organisations to ensure that children receive the awhi (support) they need. While the ability to reach out in partnership has obvious benefits and has the undeniable potential to add value to our students, I am concerned that this support is beyond the control and its sustainability is out of the reach of the school. This lack of control and accessibility precludes the ability to sustain and strategically plan.

Recently, our whanau have fallen on challenging times. Over the last 24 months, we have buried four of our taonga. Three of these losses were the result of suspected self-inflicted death (SSID) and one was the result of a mindless and random act of violence.

As a school, we have conducted a review of our responses, as well as those of the Ministry of Education (MoE) and other agencies. I am incredibly proud that we have been a proponent for a proposed memorandum of understanding for a region-wide kaupapa of care around SSID including kura, MoE, District Health Boards, Police and media.

It is my hope that the lessons born from these tragedies will benefit our kura, community and Te Tai Tokerau. Through all of this trauma, our tamariki continue to demonstrate resilience that is both astonishing and inspiring. Like in all schools, our students are wonderful and through no fault of their own, many carry the scars and trauma of events beyond their control. Supporting their wellbeing in a mana-enhancing approach is a priority.

"You ask any parent what they want for their children and they'll say health, happiness and resilience. Yet we don't teach them that at school," states Dr Lucy Hone (2017). This statement rings true. My sabbatical investigated how we can explicitly teach these assets in order to support and enhance wellbeing.

Most programmes and practices to support students in this area have been reactive. Furthermore, much of our support of wellbeing has been a "by product" of other initiatives, coincidental or a "delightful accident," lacking strategic focus and resourcing.

In my time in education, I have seen a focus on programmes as opposed to practices. We need to seek and invest in quality practices - practices that enhance and add value to our student bodies. These practices should provide the ability to shape, customise and "Tikipungarise" to meet the needs of our students and community. I have seen too many quality practices gift-wrapped in programmes

which have been rolled out in kura only to lack the flexibility to meet a local need/context or to be withdrawn as funding is no longer secured.

Benefits of the sabbatical:

My proposal linked well to our Mission Statement of "Successful Learners - the Only Option" and our strategic priorities of Achieve, Connect and Celebrate. We are a decile two school who are proud to be in excess of 85% Maori. As a school, we look to support our tamariki in and outside of the classroom. We have implemented several strategic programmes to enhance wellbeing, most notably Tiki High Kai (a programme where students assist in the preparation and serving of kai for our student body), William Pike Challenge award and values based behaviours. My interest focused on learning how student wellbeing can be further fostered and enhanced.

Our concern regarding the rising prevalence of mental illness and stress is alarming and seemingly so common it is mainstream, as highlighted in the recent Youth 2000 Survey undertaken by the University of Auckland on behalf of the Ministry of Health (MoH) (as cited in Hone 2017) .

- One quarter of NZ children are likely to experience some kind of significant mental health problem before adolescence (MoH).
- Youth 2000 survey 2012, found that in the previous 12 months:
 - 21% (F), 10% (M) seriously considered suicide
 - 29% (F), 18% (M) deliberate self harm
 - 38% (F), 23% (M) reported feeling down or depressed most of the day for at least two weeks in a row over last year.

There is a massive body of evidence indicating positive benefits associated with improvements in wellbeing, such as:

- Increased ability to cope with stress
 - Lower incidence of cancer
 - Faster recovery from surgery
 - Greater immunity from colds and flu
 - More resilient to trauma
 - Reduced incidence of heart attacks
 - Greater job satisfaction and productivity
 - Increased life expectancy
 - More creative thinking
 - Improved ability to make decisions
 - Fewer marriage break ups
- (Robinson, 2016, as cited in Hone, 2017).

Studies show improved levels of wellbeing (in an educational setting) such as:

- Fewer symptoms of depression
- Less hopelessness
- Lower clinical levels of depression/anxiety
- Less procrastination
- Less conduct problems
- Better academic results
- Greater levels of participation
- Stronger social and emotional skills
- Higher levels of optimism
- Greater levels of self control
- More academic engagement

(Hone, 2017)

There has been a shift, both nationally and internationally, in the field of wellbeing. Internationally, the most notable movement coincided with the election of Martin Seligman to President of the American Psychological Association.

“Traditional psychology wasn’t designed to produce wellbeing, just to curtail misery. Same goes for Prozac: it may lift your depression but it won’t make you happy. Wellbeing is a process over and above the absence of depression, anxiety and anger” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Seligman was tasked with developing an upstream training programme for the United States of America military to improve wellbeing and resilience. While the success of this is debated amongst academics (some suggesting a detrimental effect from this intervention), what cannot be debated is the identified need and motivation to implement upstream measures to meet this.

Closer to home, there have been isolated silos of shift in the pursuit of wellbeing. Sparklers, a crown identity which comes under the umbrella of the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand identifies *Five Ways to wellbeing*:

Connect, me whakawhanaunga: With your friends, whānau and the people around you.

Be active, me kori tonu: Move your body, get outside, do physical activity you enjoy. Even a little counts a lot.

Take notice, me aro tonu: Enjoy the moment, notice the world around you, cultivate mindfulness.

Learn, me ako tonu: Be curious and seek out new experiences. Literally exercise your brain.

Give, tukua: Practice kindness; give your time, words and actions.

It is with this lens that I looked to how we at Tikipunga High School could better meet the needs of students and community.

Denver Public Schools recently received a financial gift in excess of one million dollars to implement trauma-informed practices throughout the district. This was in response to an exponential rise in the concerns of student mental wellbeing and students who have first hand experience with trauma. The timing of this investment was particularly pertinent as Denver Public Schools were rocked by the suicide of a 9-year-old boy who was a fourth-grader at a Denver elementary school, and the unrelated, non-fatal shooting of a teenage boy outside of his middle school.

I had the pleasure of spending time with Hallett Academy Principal Dominique Jefferson, where this kaupapa was launched. Dominique spoke passionately about the culture shift needed in education.

“We give children the grace to make mistakes and try again,” she said.

When those mistakes happen, Jefferson said, “we love children back into learning. We restore them back to a place where they feel safe and included and seen and heard.”

During the time that I had the privilege to spend at Hallett Academy, five key points have stuck with me. They are as follows:

*There is no need for children to be **consequenced overly harshly**. These children, more than any, need to be shown love.*

*Our students mistakes must be seen as an **opportunity to learn**.*

*Our students must know we **see them, hear them, and know them**.*

*School leaders and teachers must **be intentional about the language we use**.*

Kids know how to and are prepared to respond to mistreatment

This last point left an indelible mark on me. “*Our students know and are prepared to respond to mistreatment.*” How many of our behaviour challenges in schools are the reaction to perceived mistreatment?

Dominique has made simple but very effective changes aesthetically throughout the kura. Gone are all and any of the previous dark colour schemes. Scattered strategically throughout are empowering slogans and catchphrases designed to uplift and affirm students.

Throughout the vast majority of schools I visited, there were affirmations and slogans. These had pride of prominence throughout the kura. These were simply unmissable. Any student or visitor would know exactly where they were and of what they were a part. This could be dismissed as American propaganda, however, it serves a much deeper need. Students are greeted by welcoming and affirming messages from the start of their school day until the final bell. The students I spoke with absolutely knew that they were part of a community. There was a sense of belonging amongst all the students with whom I spoke and a sense of pride from the masses. This sense of community often extended beyond the school gates. Signage connecting students and schools were explicit and numerous. Everywhere you looked, the sense of connection and belonging was evident. Connection is a well understood protective factor for our tamariki.

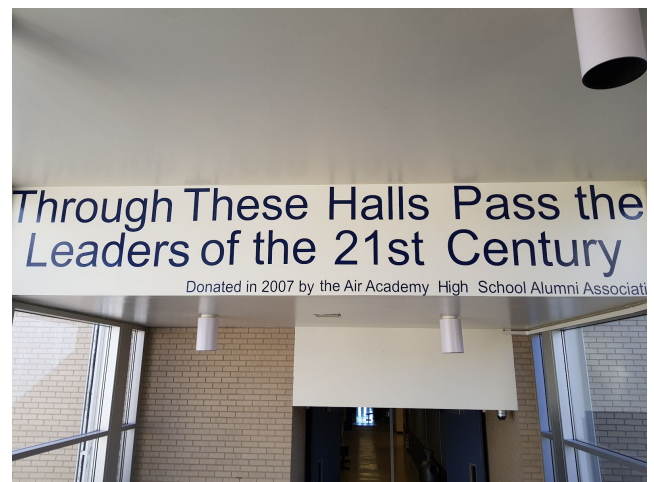
I had the pleasure of attending the Denver Broncos last home game of the 2018/19 season with my family. My two children have grown up with the Denver Broncos. They are a team I have supported for over two decades, through triumph and despair. What my children have not grown up with was a connection between my old High School, Air Academy High School and the Broncos. There was no obvious connection between the two. Yes, they shared the same state and a love of the oval shaped ball, yet any connection was, at best, marginal. To my surprise, there was yet another example of connection and belonging for students of Colorado. The football helmets of every high school team in the state of Colorado were proudly displayed under the banner “The Denver Broncos salute High School Football”. While this can be dismissed as “pomp and ceremony” or marketing and good PR, the protective factor of connection cannot be denied. The thrill and connection that my children experienced seeing the helmet I had worn many, many years earlier was profound. I can only imagine the affirmation of those who currently belong to those schools.



Interestingly, there seemed to be an inversely proportional relationship between the amount of affirmations and the socio-economic status of one's community. This made me question whether this was by design or by coincidence. Have school leaders in low socio-economic areas recognised a need and acted upon it with these

explicit images? Do those who come from greater means not require the same explicit need to belong and connect?

The affluent schools I did visit simply said “ It’s not what we do here.” There seemed to be little reason behind this kaupapa beyond this being seen as unnecessary and a preference of plain cream walls. The response in the lower decile schools could not have been more different. School leaders I spoke to there had set out to explicitly develop and encourage a sense of community. They spoke passionately that this was critical and went beyond the beauty and aesthetics of the art work. “Students need to see themselves in our school”. “They need to know they belong here”. From what I witnessed, they did.



Riverdale Country College is located in the Bronx, New York. It is a private, fee-paying school widely acknowledged as very successful. Although situated in the Bronx, the majority of its students are not local. It strives to empower lifelong learners, individuals who know how to ask good questions, solve problems, collaborate with others, and adapt to change.

Student wellbeing has been discussed and invested in heavily at Riverdale. Interestingly, the kura has embraced the “growth mindset” coined by Carol Dweck (2006). Upon entry, students undertake an online character assessment. This is designed to identify the strengths of each student. This kaupapa is to be two fold, firstly to enable students to identify their character strengths and secondly for these strengths to be leveraged in their schooling. Of the 24 character strengths identified in the assessment, Riverdale emphasise seven: grit, optimism, self-control, curiosity, zest, gratitude and social intelligence.

By the schools own admission, this kaupapa has yet to reach the impact or potential envisaged. I applaud the kura for their motivation to embrace a strength-based approach. The kura have also embraced the learnings of Angela Duckworth, a

psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania and co-founder of the Character Lab. Riverdale aims to explicitly teach and build character within their student body. Riverdale's approach to character education also is based on evidence that character strengths can be identified, nurtured and deepened over time. By developing these qualities, students improve their performance, relationships and overall quality of life.

Riverdale is currently reviewing this programme. It was launched with fanfare and genuine excitement from all stakeholders. There was a generally agreed desire from staff that this was a worthwhile and noble cause. The implementation of the “how” proved challenging. Recently, the school has pulled back from their character education programme. It is interesting to note that Angela Duckworth has recently been seen to clarify and soften her stance on “Grit”.

Implications for Tikipunga High School

As Maori, connection and belonging is inherent in our Whakapapa. Whakapapa is core to traditional matauranga Maori (Maori knowledge). Whakapapa is our genealogy. We proclaim our identity, place ourselves in a wider context, link ourselves to whenua (land) and iwi, and the mana of these when we recite our whakapapa. It is not new to view cultural connections as a protective factor for Maori.

As Maori, we have strong spiritual bonds with the land - Papatuanuku (the Earth mother). We regard land, soil and water as taonga (treasure). We see ourselves as kaitiaki (guardians) of this taonga, which provides a source of unity and identity for tangata whenua (our people).

A study by Massey University researcher Dr Nicole Coupe (2008) outlined the protective factor of connection with Maori (as cited in Todd, 2010).

“Studies had shown Maori were more likely to have a number of risk factors that contributed to suicide rates, such as social disadvantage, family breakdown, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness and exposure to suicide. The problems were magnified by cultural alienation. Coupe said those disconnected from Maori culture included people who did not know te reo, did not go to their marae, did not have connections with whanau, or did not know their whakapapa (genealogy). She said not knowing who they were or where they were from affected people's sense of belonging and identity, and increased feelings of loneliness.”

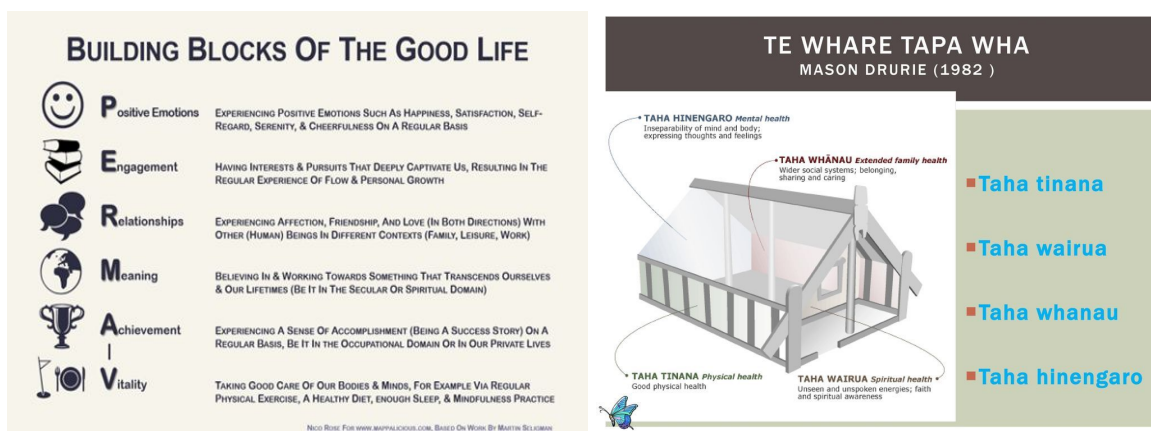
Throughout all of my travels, visits, thinking and korero, I believe the greatest priority for us to empower and embrace the growth of wellbeing is through the power of connection.

The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand emphasise “Connect” as one of the five evidence-based actions which can improve wellbeing in everyday. *“Talk and listen. Be there. Feel connected. Feeling close to other people and valued by them is a fundamental human need. Across all ages, relationships and participation in a social life are critical for mental wellbeing and effective buffers against mental disorder. Strong social relationships are supportive, encouraging, and meaningful, and a wider social network is also important for feelings of connectedness and self worth. The key message of Connect is that giving time and space to both strengthen and broaden social networks is important, if not critical for wellbeing. The wellbeing of individuals is bound up in the wellbeing of one’s community, so actions that focus solely on individual, inward-looking benefits will not be as effective as those that stress the importance of fostering relationships with others.”*

As educational leaders we need to take heed of the wellbeing of our school communities. Communities absolutely impact on the wellbeing of the individual. Interestingly, wellbeing responses are often targeted to the individual.

Models of wellbeing

There are two models of wellbeing that I used as a blueprint during my sabbatical. The first is an adaptation from Martin Seligman (2011) and the second, Mason Durie’s Whare Tapa Wha developed in 1982. Both models share obvious similarities. Threads of positive relationships, purpose and physical health weave throughout both. As educators, a significant shift has been made in relationships at school. Most notably, staff-student relationships.



To meet the needs of Maori akonga, educators have widely adopted culturally responsive and relational pedagogy. It is widely agreed that what works for Maori works for all. The shift from “teaching maths to teaching Matthew” has, albeit been slow, however, the inertia has for the most part been overcome.

Restorative practices has infiltrated the psyche of many kura, often lead by Deputy Principals and student support. I have seen a need for restorative practices to move to restorative practises. That is from a noun to a verb, from what we do to who we are. The Hallet Academy in Denver are on this journey. The challenge they face is moving from two restorative experts to a shared understanding from their collective staff - a move from “best practice” to “common practice”.

In an age when there can be pressure seemingly from all angles; Ministry of Education, Education Review Office, parents, school leaders; for better student achievement, I question the allocation of school resources to Vitality/Taha Tinana. Too often, this can fall under the umbrella of Physical Education and Health, which some will argue does not share the mana of subjects deemed academic. Schools may have to reflect on the status given in terms of resources, such as timetable allocation.

Conclusion

Whakapapa is at the core of mātauranga Māori. Whakapapa is our truth. It is our reminder of whence we came, our heritage and lineage. It links us to the knowledge and wisdom of those who have gone before us. We muster the strength and mana from our tupuna through whakapapa.

We are privileged that our culture weaves and thrives on connection. We as a kura are challenged with the task of embracing this connection. This authentic connection can only serve as a protective factor and catalyst to the wellbeing of our student body.

Our challenge is to ensure that connections between kura and akoanga are mana and wellbeing enhancing. I have no doubt that a strong connection to place will be a strong protective factor for our tamariki. When connection to place is accompanied with a genuine connection to purpose the potential is endless.

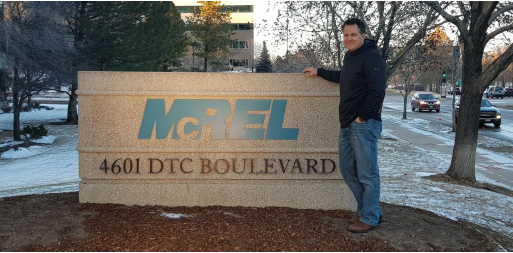
Acknowledgements

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A huge thanks to the education professionals, staff, students and principals with whom I visited. Your whakawhanaungatanga and manaakitanga was humbling. It was incredibly gratifying to see the outstanding work that is taking place in kura and the commitment to student well being and educational needs of our taonga.



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