

2018 Primary Principals' Sabbatical Research

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How can current educational practices help build sustainable wellbeing in our learning communities

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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

My sabbatical study was based on researching current practice and related theories on developing and enhancing the wellbeing of learners, staff and our school communities. I visited several schools, both nationally and internationally and attended some professional learning opportunities focused on wellbeing. While wellbeing has become a widely used term, often being highlighted in the media in all aspects of modern life, I was most interested in investigating practices that promoted self-management, resilience, a growth mindset, that could be used both in schools and life in general.

There is no doubt that the wellbeing of our global population has been highlighted as the second biggest health issue of this century and an area of extreme importance. Our schools need help to build resilience, perseverance and a growth mindset, to assist our learners to be effective and optimistic members of communities in a world where rapid change is the new normal and future roles are unclear and more pressured.

Schools that are strategically and purposefully building a strong positive culture that promotes and enhances wellbeing will make a difference both to their learners and their wider community. For a successful cultural change, programmes and initiatives need to be school-wide, internally driven, have a strong learner voice and a common language that is widely shared and understood. This, in turn, needs to be valued by all staff and supported by parents all stakeholders. The ability to measure effectiveness, review progress and actions, and report to the school community and Boards is imperative and the next step for many schools.

Introduction

The focus for my sabbatical was exploring the development, support and enhancement of learner wellbeing through initiatives and programmes in schools. This is an issue that is becoming of increasing importance as statistics show a deterioration in students "general well being". *"Emotional wellbeing is a critical component of health. Learners who feel happy and able to cope with problems generally have a greater capacity to do well at school, to enjoy life and to contribute to their families and communities". (The Youth 2000 National Youth Health and Wellbeing Survey series 2013).*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines wellbeing as "*The state of being comfortable, healthy and happy*", and the World Health Organisation (2014) develops this further by adding "***Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.***" It is clear that the understanding of wellbeing has changed in recent times, with the term becoming much broader and more complex in the area of mental health.

Throughout my research I have referred to the definition of wellbeing as outlined in the Education Review Office (ERO) document "*Wellbeing for Success: A Resource for Schools*" (2016). "*A student's level of wellbeing at school is indicated by their satisfaction with life at school, their engagement with learning and their social emotional behaviour.... Optimal student wellbeing is a sustainable state, characterised by predominantly positive feelings and attitude, positive relationships at school, resilience, self-optimism and a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences. "*

It is evident from the research that **wellbeing** is not about being 'happy and healthy', but rather about people, communities and creating the conditions for us to survive and flourish. My research was based around finding strategies to develop these skills and positive education in our communities. Positive education is an approach that blends academic learning with a focus on building character & well-being. Positive education is based on the science of well-being and happiness invested in preparing students with life skills such as: grit, optimism, resilience, growth mindset, engagement, and mindfulness amongst others.

For the purposes of my sabbatical I investigated initiatives at both school and education board level in schools similar to Takapuna Normal Intermediate School.

Visit schools in New Zealand, Australia and Canada including:

- Northcross Intermediate, Murrays Bay Intermediate,
- Brighton Primary School, Wesley College, Royal Children's Hospital,
- Sir Adam Beck Public School, Parkway Public School,

I also used my sabbatical to undertake professional learning and research :

Attend professional learning opportunities

- Pupuke Kahui Ako (CoL) - The Why and How of School Wellbeing, Denise Quinlan,
- NZAIMS - High functioning Teams, Trust and Work Life Balance, Steve Francis
- The Resilience Institute (NZ) - Declan Scott series

Attend international professional learning opportunities

- National FutureSchools Conference, Melbourne, Australia.
- The Resilience Project Public Talk Programme for Educators, Melbourne, Australia.

Discussions with affiliated organisations

- NZ Institute of Wellbeing and Resilience
- Resilience Institute (NZ)
- Plasticity (CA) -HERO GEM
- Waterloo Region District School Board (Ontario, CA)

Issues

Throughout discussions with other educators and visits to schools, it is clear that we all have escalating concerns about the same issues:

- The significant rise of anxiety, depression and poor mental health amongst learners.
- The issues of comparison - learners comparing themselves, either academically, physically, socially or sportswise to each other or 'media models'.
- The way social media is exacerbating social problems with the relentless exposure to cyber bullying, celebrity, and manipulated images
- Parents wanting to 'protect' their children from negative experiences, disappointments, frustrations and failure

Subsequently, it is becoming increasingly important for schools to strongly focus on the mental health and wellbeing of their learners, staff and communities. As highlighted in many studies of wellbeing it is paramount to remember that "*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*" Sophie Fenton, Ballarat Grammar, Australia.

Findings

The purpose of my research was to identify models of best practice that enabled learners to self manage, be resilient and act with a positive mindset to all learning experiences. Within all of educationally linked organizations that I collaborated with the issues were similar, regardless of location.

Generally there is a connectedness of the support being offered to learners, staff and communities focused primarily on the development of skills to self manage emotions and

be resilient. Key initiatives had common strengths, with consistent programmes that were internally developed through staff professional learning opportunities. Student led initiatives were also seen as key to making any cultural and sustainable change to general wellbeing. *"Schools cannot simply rely on their positive culture and respectful relationships to promote wellbeing but need to provide opportunities for students to make decisions about their wellbeing and to be active in leading their learning."* (ERO 2016).

As a result of visits, discussions and research some key aspects and similarities of successful Wellbeing programmes became apparent. They are summarised below:

- Incorporating current research in Wellbeing to all aspects of learning
- Collaboration on a school model of Wellbeing
- Understanding the science and implementation of mindfulness
- Generating opportunities for student led groups on a range of wellbeing issues.
- Development of a common understanding and language
- Investigating positive psychology and positive education. "The Optimistic Child, and "Flourish", are great resources based on the development of Wellbeing (Seligman 2007).
- Strong pastoral care network and support
- Staff professional learning development around wellbeing initiatives was absolutely critical to the success of any actions.
- Wellbeing initiatives for the wider school community through hosting parent workshops and seminars with key messages for parents and whanau.

Programmes

There are many well structured models that individual schools have based their programmes on. During my research I found that the reflection and discussions on these programmes with other educators was very informative. *The fundamental goal of positive education is to promote flourishing or positive mental health within the school community, (Norrish et. al., 2013)*

I have highlighted some of the most successful and widely used programmes and models that support the importance and development of wellbeing below:

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand - Five Ways to Wellbeing at Work

They are made up of five principles that build, support and increase wellbeing:

- **Give** - Your time, your words, your presence
- **Be active** - Do what you can, Enjoy what you do, Move your mood
- **Keep learning** - Embrace new experiences, see opportunities, surprise yourself
- **Connect** - Talk & Listen, Be there, Feel connected
- **Take notice** - Remember the simple things that give you joy.

Mindfulness in Schools Project - Smiling Minds

Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the

present moment, non-judgmentally. More and more evidence is showing how mindfulness education can support and improve both student and teacher wellbeing.

The Resilience Project - Australia

The Resilience Project delivers emotionally engaging programs to schools, providing practical, evidence-based, positive mental health strategies to build resilience and happiness with the whole school community including teachers, students and parents.

Learners will be prompted to identify their emotions, record moments of gratitude and practice mindfulness. The aim is to develop emotional literacy, engage with the positive things in life and be actively present.

Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) NZ

PB4L helps to foster positive behaviour, strengthen relationships, and increase student well-being by creating caring, inclusive learning environments. Research shows that such environments have positive effects on children's and students' behaviour, resilience, learning, and achievement.

PERMA Model - Positive Psychology Programme - Martin Seligman, USA

PERMA makes up five important building blocks of well-being and happiness:

Positive emotions - feeling good

Engagement - being completely absorbed in activities

Relationships - being authentically connected to others

Meaning - purposeful existence

Achievement - a sense of accomplishment and success

HERO Generation - Ontario, Canada

The HERO Generation Framework has been designed by educators and researchers to align with the Learning Skills from the Ontario Ministry of Education's Growing Success. It has identified seven evidenced-based traits which have been found to improve mental health, personal well-being, and academic performance. The framework has been designed to foster social-emotional learning (SEL).

The HEROGEM Traits are:

- **Hope** - knowing how to reach your goals and believing you will get there,
- **Efficacy** - Believing in yourself and your skills to achieve
- **Resilience** - Face challenges and keep going,
- **Optimism** - Seeing the best in yourself, others and your surroundings,
- **Gratitude** - Noticing, acknowledging and appreciating things in your life,
- **Empathy** - Thinking about how others' may be feeling,

- **Mindfulness** - Being purposefully aware of what is happening.

Geelong Grammar School have developed a programme of Positive Education that aims to build a positive culture that places wellbeing at the heart of education through focusing on positive relationships, positive emotions, positive health, positive engagement, positive accomplishment and positive purpose.

Avonside Girls High School programme is based on learning skills that support mindfulness, growth mindset, and developing habits to be successful and self-directed learners.

A large number of schools are turning their energy towards the importance of positive education and wellbeing. It is timely to note that the next step for schools will be to review the success of the implementation of initiatives and programmes by collecting data from a variety of sources as they continue to move forward.

Conclusion

Recently there has been an overwhelming surge of local and global concerns around the wellbeing of individuals in all aspects of modern life. Without question the wellbeing of many learners are at risk, with an increasing proportion needing help to build positive emotions, enhance personal resilience, promote mindfulness and encourage a healthy lifestyle. Achieving this will ensure that they can be positive, effective community members in our constantly changing world.

Schools that are purposefully building a positive and connected culture that gives learners the opportunities to build self management skills and be resilient when faced with challenges and successes, are making a significant difference to wellbeing.

Positive education based programmes and initiatives need to be adaptive with a common understanding, that promotes and values student agency and voice. Another key aspect to the improvement of wellbeing is strong knowledge, collaboration and support from staff, parents and the extended community. Of growing importance for many schools is reviewing the progress and effectiveness of wellbeing initiatives in schools.

"The ethical responsibility of teachers, leaders and trustees is to consider, promote, balance and respond to all aspects of the student, including their physical, social, emotional, academic and spiritual needs. These considerations require deliberate expression and action across all curriculum areas, pastoral care, strategic priorities and teaching practices. To maximise the role that schools have in promoting and responding to student wellbeing, these systems, people and initiatives require a high level of school-wide coordination and cohesion." (ERO 2016)

Although most schools have individual situations, there were many sound visions, strategies and initiatives that were common and sustainable. Clearly highlighted was

the extreme importance of the wellbeing of our young people, an awareness of the role and responsibility of the school in developing a positive culture, and a dedication to building strong and capable learners. While there is much for schools to focus on, there is a strong proactive movement to offer a foundation of wellbeing on which our learners can build a happy, successful and active life.

A school curriculum that incorporates wellbeing will ideally prevent depression, increase life satisfaction, encourage social responsibility, promote creativity, foster learning and even enhance academic achievement.”(Waters, 2014)

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