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Balancing the Curriculum: Teaching gratitude, hope and resilience



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To learn more about Visible Wellbeing, visit <http://www.visiblewellbeing.org/>

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Why should we teach wellbeing in schools?

Today's youth face many challenges, including pressures from school, peer groups, parents, marketing, and incessant 'digital connectedness' promoted by social media. Current research shows that many Australian adolescents suffer from sleep deprivation, drug and alcohol abuse, insecurity, poor diets, insufficient exercise and family upheaval.¹ According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, one quarter of young Australians are suffering from symptoms of mental illness. Now more than ever, it is critical that we equip our young people with the skills and mindsets that counteract mental illness and prepare them for a 'life well lived'.

What is the role of today's schools in helping young people cope with life's pressures so that they can feel good, function well and contribute to society in a positive way? For well over a century, education has aimed to equip children with the three Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic. Yet wellbeing experts are now calling for a 4th R to be added to education, the R of resilience. In this way, just as it is considered normal for all students to learn reading, writing and arithmetic, it will be considered normal to learn about wellbeing. After all, although we now consider reading, writing and arithmetic to be basic functions of schooling, this was not

always the case. In fact, prior to the Industrial Revolution, when these skills were not universally taught, the idea of teaching the three Rs to all children was considered revolutionary and required a paradigm shift about the purpose of schools in society. I believe that a similar paradigm shift is occurring with respect to wellbeing, so that what seems unusual now – to explicitly teach a subject on wellbeing – will one day be a normal part of the curriculum.

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. To consider another benefit of teaching wellbeing, do you remember that time you discussed your wellbeing in class? For many of us schooled in earlier generations, that probably did not happen. Yet, normalising conversations and self-inquiry about wellbeing and mental health at a young age will prompt long-term benefits for children as they grow into adulthood with greater self-awareness and emotional intelligence.

As a psychologist, over the past 20 years I have worked with many adults to teach them how to support their own wellbeing. Time and time again these adults ask me, 'Why didn't I learn these skills earlier?' Therefore, on a more fundamental level, teaching wellbeing offers an upstream, prevention approach to wellbeing which will, hopefully, reduce the alarming rates of mental illness in Australia and ease the downstream pressure on health care systems that have to react to illness.

What approach to wellbeing should schools adopt?

If we want to successfully teach wellbeing in schools then we need to decide on the most effective approaches. I believe that positive psychology is an important approach that needs to be incorporated into wellbeing curriculum. Traditionally, the field of psychology has focused on practices that reduce or remove mental illness (for example, anti-depression treatments, anxiety reduction techniques, anger management programs). However, the new field of positive psychology argues that illness reduction only takes you halfway towards a full state of wellbeing. Consistent with this idea, the World Health Organisation states that mental health is not merely the absence of mental illness, but 'a state of wellbeing in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community'.²

¹ R Eckersley, 'A new narrative of young people's health and wellbeing', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 14, 2011, pp. 627–638.

² World Health Organization, 'Mental health: strengthening our response' (Fact Sheet No. 220), retrieved from <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs220/en/>

Moreover, research in positive psychology has shown that the factors that reduce illness are different to the factors that promote wellness. Consider gardening as a metaphor. If we want to create a flourishing garden, we don't just remove weeds, we also add in good quality soil, sunlight, water and fertiliser. Similarly, if we want to cultivate flourishing young people then we need to show them how to remove their 'psychological weeds' (for example, low self-esteem) and how to bring in good quality 'psychological fertiliser' (for example, optimistic explanatory styles). Thus, I argue that wellbeing curriculums will need to incorporate a positive psychology approach as well as techniques that assist students to reduce ill-being. For example, when teaching students to identify and reduce symptoms of depression, schools can also teach students how to actively promote hope. In addition to implementing anti-bullying programs at school, students can be encouraged to foster positive, respectful and prosocial relationships.

The application of positive psychology interventions in educational settings, coined by Professor Martin Seligman as 'Positive Education',³ has been shown to successfully foster resilience, hope, gratitude, mindfulness, character strengths, growth mindsets, optimism and empathy.⁴ However, at this stage, the majority of positive education programs are pilot initiatives and more research is needed to validate the findings.

How can we promote a positive education approach in schools?

The promise of positive education is exciting, but a few things need to happen for it to become a widespread and sustainable educational approach. These include more research, teacher training, learning from the lighthouse schools who are leading the way, making the most of our existing positive education associations and conferences, infusing it into educational systems and changing the way we evaluate the success of schools. We need a greater body of research to evaluate the effectiveness of positive psychology programs with students of various ethnicities, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds; students with learning difficulties; students across primary, middle and senior schools; across different school systems (for example, public schools and private schools); and in co-ed versus single sex environments. From this research, we can then identify what aspects of wellbeing curriculum can be universally applied and what aspects need to be tailored for specific student groups and specific contexts. This requires funding to ensure that high quality, large-scale research projects can be designed and implemented.

Now that the National Curriculum requires all teachers across disciplines to incorporate 'personal and social capability' into their lessons, it is likely that more students will be exposed to wellbeing teaching. Wellbeing curriculum can be incorporated into subjects such as health, physical education, civics and citizenship as well as psychology. Wellbeing also has a central role to play in pastoral care classes in schools, homeroom, tutorial systems and house systems.

To support the implementation of evidence-based wellbeing curriculum however, we need adequate training for teachers and other professionals. Thankfully, training options are expanding, as a number of Australian universities now offer various postgraduate positive psychology courses. Australian teachers can also learn from a number of lighthouse schools who have led the way in this field. Associations and conferences will also aid the growth of positive education.

However, if we want to realise the transformative potential of positive education, we need to act at the system level and ensure that research, curriculum design, training and professional development is coordinated within and across our government, independent and Catholic education systems. The potential for positive education to transform schooling depends on the ability of educationalists to 'scale-up' positive education so that it reaches large numbers of students across all school systems by adopting universal or tailored approaches. The universal approach involves implementing a chosen wellbeing curriculum and framework across a system, or a cohort of schools. This approach has been used with Australian programs such as MindMatters, KidsMatter, Bounce Back!, YouCanDoit!, and SensAbility.

Alternatively, the tailored approach trains teachers in the core principles of positive education to provide a common framework that enables them to create tailored positive education initiatives to suit the context and needs of their own school.

Education systems should also support the shift towards positive schooling in the 21st century by expanding the metrics upon which they evaluate school performance. While judgments about school success typically focus on academic performance, wellbeing should also be an accepted indicator of school success. Indeed, Huebner argues that a key indicator of schools is 'one in which a preponderance of students experienced predominantly positive emotions and a strong sense of overall wellbeing' (p. 1).⁵ This systemic reconceptualisation of school success would reinforce the view that wellbeing is an integral mission of education.

Conclusions

Student wellbeing has become a key agenda for schools and many now consider emotional-social learning to be of equal importance to academic learning. This article has outlined some reasons why we need to increase wellbeing curriculum in Australia, has highlighted some of the existing evidence for its benefits and has suggested what needs to happen for wellbeing curriculum to be spread through Australian schools.

Imagine a future where all young Australians graduate from school with academic skills and wellbeing skills. Imagine a future where all young Australians contribute their intellectual capital and social-emotional capital towards building a flourishing society. This vision, combined with good science and quality practice, can allow our imagination to become a reality and I am excited to see this future.

³ M Seligman et al., 'Positive education: positive psychology and classroom interventions', *Oxford Review of Education*, vol. 35, 2009, pp. 293–311.

⁴ L Waters, 'A review of school-based positive psychology interventions', *The Australian Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2011, pp. 75–90.

⁵ S Huebner et al., 'Positive schools', in SJ Lopez & CR Snyder (eds), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, pp. 651–658.