

Visible Wellbeing: A Critical Resource for Leadership and Learning in Schools

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Wellbeing is more than just a good feeling. Wellbeing. What would you say if I asked you to define it?

As a psychologist and researcher, I have asked thousands of students and staff from schools across the world this simple question and the common answer is that wellbeing is the state of feeling good.

If that's your answer, you are correct—but you're only partly correct.

Wellbeing is a state of feeling good, that's true, but it's more than that. Wellbeing is also a resource that you can draw upon to thrive in the good times and to bounce back from the bad times.

The benefits of wellbeing have been studied over many decades in fields such as medicine, psychology, social work, sport science, business and, more recently, education. Research consistently shows that high wellbeing is linked to better physical health, happier relationships, greater resilience and more effective brain functioning (Algoe, Fredrickson & Gable, 2013; Howell, Kern & Lyubomirsky, 2007; Fredrickson, 2004; Mikels et al. 2008; Seligman 2011; Van Cappellen et al., 2017).

For example, in a classic illustration of the mind-body connection, scientists have shown that people with high levels of wellbeing are less likely to catch the common cold (Cohen et al., 2006) and are more likely to bounce back faster from serious illness (Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2006). On top of that, the way we feel impacts the way we think, and research shows that positive emotions help us to learn more effectively, think more creatively and solve problems more effectively (Fredrickson, 2004). Meta-analytic results show that students who complete social-emotional learning programs demonstrate an 11-percentile-point increase in academic

achievement relative to students in control groups (Durlak et al., 2011)

The evidence above helps us to see that wellbeing is not simply a state of feeling good in the moment but can also be built up to be an enduring resource—an inner asset that helps our students stay healthy, build good relationships, cope with stress and learn successfully.

It's no surprise then that more and more schools are seeking to find ways to support the wellbeing of their students. In fact, wellbeing has become a growing focus of education policy across the world with international bodies such as WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank and OCED all calling on schools to educate for both academic outcomes and wellbeing outcomes.

Zooming in from the world stage to Victoria, the Department of Education and Training's Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) has identified a whole-school approach to health, wellbeing, inclusion and engagement together with student voice, leadership and agency as essential elements needed to support school improvement.

I have the good fortune to be working with principals, teachers, learning specialists and teaching support staff in the Victorian system, and their commitment to supporting student wellbeing is second to none. While these educators understand that wellbeing is a key resource, they also tell me that they find it difficult to see this resource clearly. In other words, they tell me that wellbeing is an important, yet invisible, resource, thus making it hard to work with.

Making wellbeing visible

It's true, to a degree, that wellbeing is invisible given that it sits inside a student's inner landscape. As a teacher, it may be hard to know the state of wellbeing of each of your students. Yet, given that wellbeing so deeply affects your students' ability to engage and learn, it seems fruitful for us to find ways to take the invisible and make it more visible.

The good news is that there are some basic, easy to learn techniques that help us get better at reading another person's state of wellbeing. Most teachers are already doing this at an intuitive level. Think about how often you walk into a classroom, or indeed the staff room, and get an instinctive sense of the energy levels or emotions of the group? Or maybe you find yourself paying particular attention to one student—this is your innate 'wellbeing radar' communicating with you. Neuroscientists have shown us how sensitively and expertly our brains pick up on the emotional states of others through our mirror neurons and the 'empathy centre' located deep in the brain. The trick then is to take what we are doing instinctively in schools and do it more intentionally so we can see wellbeing more clearly and utilise it more consistently.

Finding ways to make wellbeing more visible in schools allows us to see when wellbeing is low, and hence intervene earlier to support the individual student, or the class, the sport team, the theatre crew or the friendship group before the problems spiral downwards. Importantly, it also allows teachers to see when wellbeing is high and use this as the time for extended learning, growth, risk-taking and engagement. To strike while the wellbeing iron is hot, so to speak.

The theme of visibility in teaching has gained a lot of traction over the past decade with movements such as Visible Thinking, Visible Learning and Visible Classrooms. All three movements are aligned in the call for teachers to more clearly see how their pedagogy impacts student learning and in their call for students to more clearly see how their own thinking and learning impacts their academic achievement.

In my research I have applied the theme of visibility with teachers to help them more clearly see how their pedagogy impacts wellbeing and to provide classroom practises they can use to help

their students to more clearly see how their wellbeing impacts their thinking, learning and academic achievement (Waters, 2015; Waters & Allison, 2016; Waters, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Waters et al. 2017).

Findings from the new field of Positive Education (Waters, 2011, 2017a), combined with existing education movements such as student-centred learning and relational learning, have revealed a variety of teaching practices that can be used to make wellbeing more visible in the classroom (Suldo et al. 2009). This 'positive education pedagogy' helps teachers to see and build wellbeing as a resource for individual students and at the classroom level. Simple techniques like reading body language, the physical layout of the room, circle time, starting the class with a brief breathing exercise, using mindfulness before a test, or setting explicit wellbeing goals alongside the learning goals, are all ways that wellbeing can be made more visible in class. The Visible Wellbeing Partnership (to be described later in this article) has now amassed over 250 classroom practices and activities that can be used to see and build wellbeing.

As with the Visible Thinking, Visible Learning and Visible Classrooms, an important part of Visible Wellbeing is helping teachers to evaluate and reflect upon the effect that their teaching practices are having on student wellbeing (Waters, 2015). In other words, adopting a Visible Wellbeing approach is not only about using teaching practices that make wellbeing more visible, but also about becoming evaluators of our own practice so that we know 'thy impact' when it comes to how our teaching is influencing student wellbeing. Teachers are shown how to use success criteria, student feedback and a wellbeing rubric to reflect on the degree to which their class is showing various aspects of wellbeing. Student voice is also included through the Visible Wellbeing rubric, focus groups, surveys and student-teacher feedback.

Key principles of Visible Wellbeing

The Visible Wellbeing Partnership with schools is guided by the three principles outlined in Figure 1.

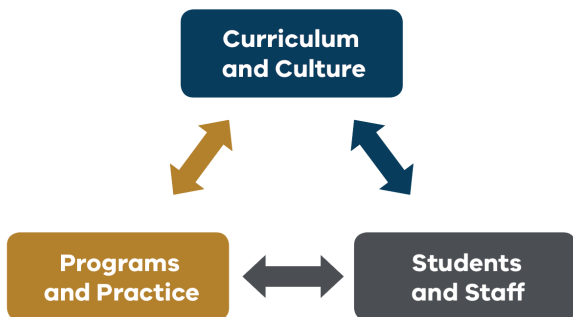


Figure 1: Three key principles of Visible Wellbeing

Principle 1: Wellbeing is as much about cultural change as it is about curriculum change

According to the OECD, the traditional approach for bringing wellbeing into schools has been by introducing a wellbeing curriculum that educates students about wellbeing.

While these curriculums are effective, they have also been criticised for being acontextual, one-size-fits-all solutions that put too much onus on the individual student to manage their own wellbeing without recognising the effect of the environment.

If you have the good fortune to be working at a school that has a wellbeing-enhancing culture, then the curriculum and culture create synergistic effects to build wellbeing.

However, when students go through a wellbeing curriculum but are still part of a broader culture that causes stress and pressure, it can backfire. For wellbeing to be truly seen and built in sustainable ways across all areas of the school, leaders need to consider how the science of positive psychology can be infused into the broader culture of the school, the vision and mission, the behavioural management policy, extracurricular activities, the staff room culture and so on.

Principle 2: Promoting wellbeing in staff is as important as promoting wellbeing in students

Linking to the first Visible Wellbeing principle, it follows that if wellbeing is built through school culture, and not just student curriculum, then boosting the wellbeing of staff in the school is vitally important and must be given strategic attention. A staff-focus for wellbeing requires professional learning opportunities that help staff to see and build their own wellbeing more clearly. Peer reviewed research has shown that when school staff are provided with professional learning about wellbeing it boosts their own mental health, strengthens their relationships with students, helps them better cope with stress and promotes higher commitment to the school (Brandan & Nakamura, 2017; Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2016).

Principle 3: Widespread impact of wellbeing comes from wellbeing programs and practice

There are hundreds of wellbeing programs on the market, most are aimed at students but there are also some for staff. Taking a programmatic approach to wellbeing has several advantages including the fact that programs are developed for age-appropriate learning and offer consistency regardless of who delivers the program. Moreover, by using an explicit approach to teaching, programs ensure that there are clear goals for learning. For example, the Penn Resiliency Program is one of the most widely used depression prevention programs in schools and aims to explicitly teach students cognitive-behavioural skills through scenarios, class discussion and games.

However, programs also have disadvantages; one major hurdle being the need to find room in the timetable. By extending wellbeing beyond program delivery to also bring it in through practice, teachers can be helped to find ways to absorb and transfer wellbeing into everyday class experiences. For example, consider the secondary mathematics teacher who uses emotional management practices to help students work their way through a challenging maths problem. Add to that the primary art teacher who encourages a growth mindset in the students so that they learn that their ability can improve with effort and, due to this belief, find moments of flow in class as their skills develop enough to meet the artistic challenge. How about the homeroom or mentor group teacher who uses mindfulness to

help students get focused for learning at the start of the day, or the school principal who plays upbeat music as students enter the hall for assembly? Making wellbeing practices visible allows wellbeing to be implicitly built throughout the school.

The Visible Wellbeing Partnership

The Visible Wellbeing Partnership is a two-year cultural change approach involving whole-school training, coaching and measurement designed drawing on the latest wellbeing and learning science. It was first implemented in 2015 at Kambrya College, Victoria, and was showcased on the ABC documentary series *Revolution School*, thus receiving national and international attention. In the past three years, Visible Wellbeing Partnerships have begun in 40 schools across Australia as well as schools in Hong Kong and Canada. In 2019, Visible Wellbeing is spreading to New Zealand. The training has reached over 6,400 staff and close to 26,000 students. Fifty-six per cent of all Visible Wellbeing Partnerships are with state schools.

Over the two-year partnership the school is taken through three steps of cultural change. Visible Wellbeing starts by measuring the wellbeing of staff and students and then running professional learning for staff in order to help them build their own wellbeing. As the wellbeing of the staff improves, Visible Wellbeing moves to step two. This step is about changing the practice of staff across the school to act in evidence-based ways that proactively bring wellbeing activities and practices into all areas of the school (e.g., classroom, staffroom, schoolyard, extracurricular activities, parents and community). As staff wellbeing is raised and practice is changed to make wellbeing more visible for others, this is when the third stage of cultural change occurs—the raising of student wellbeing. Although these are presented as three steps, they occur in rapid time and have a constant feedback loop. For example, as students see improvements in staff and faculty wellbeing this also boosts their own wellbeing through effects such as role modelling and emotional contagion; as teachers use Visible Wellbeing practices in class and see the wellbeing of students lift, this enhances their sense of professional confidence and thus boosts their wellbeing.



Figure 2: Three key stages for creating a Visible Wellbeing culture

Evaluations of Visible Wellbeing across 10 schools (six state government schools; four independent schools) show that it builds staff wellbeing, changes teacher practice, builds student wellbeing and adds positively to the culture of the school. The Visible Wellbeing project team are continuing our research into this new approach and evaluating ways to help students and staff make wellbeing visible so that it can be used as a resource for better health and learning at schools.

For further information visit
www.visiblewellbeing.org

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