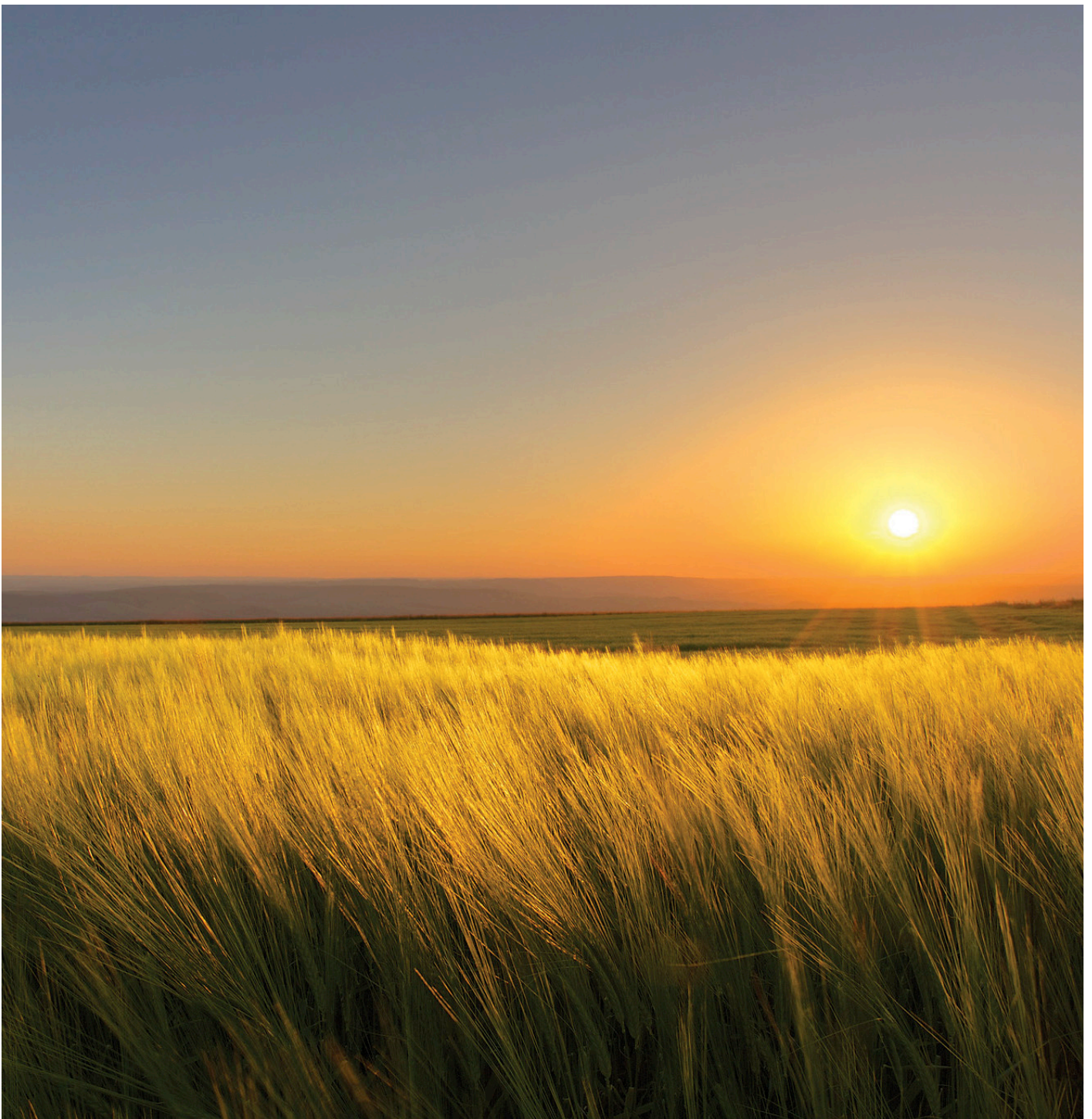


Visible Wellbeing™ in schools: The powerful role of instructional leadership

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Instructional leadership

It has been well established that effective school leadership extends beyond traditional leadership responsibilities (for example, policy implementation, staff management, budgeting) to also include a committed involvement in leading instructional practice. Indeed, an analysis of 280 studies by Vivienne Robinson and her team found that “*leading teacher learning and development*” is twice as powerful as any other leadership factor in affecting student outcomes.

Instructional leadership, especially as a shared leadership model, is vital because teacher learning has a strong impact on student learning. High quality professional development on instructional practice leads to improved pedagogy. Training in how to consistently evaluate the impact of teaching practice then allows teachers to ‘know thy impact’ as convincingly argued by John Hattie.

While instructional leadership, over the past three decades, has focused on how teacher practice can improve academic outcomes, it can also be applied in assisting teachers to boost another equally important outcome for students – wellbeing.

Wellbeing is an important student outcome

Wellbeing may be simply defined as the combination of feeling good and functioning well. According to two decades of research, a student who has high levels of wellbeing is also likely to have better physical health, better social relationships, more optimism for the future and higher academic performance. Having high wellbeing at school also has a positive impact on a student’s life after graduation and well into adult life with longitudinal research showing that wellbeing in the teen years impacts employment, earning capacity, relationship satisfaction and likelihood of engaging in volunteer work in the community in one’s 30s and 40s.

Not surprisingly, boosting student wellbeing has become a key goal for many school leaders in Australia. This is, in part, a result of the growing awareness of the research outlined above, of benefits that are instilled by wellbeing. It is also, in part, a reaction to the distressing youth mental illness trends in Australia, where approximately one quarter of Australian teenagers are experiencing symptoms of mental distress, and children as young

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as four are being diagnosed with mental illness. Schools see the direct effect that mental illness has on students learning and behaviour and are keen to be part of the solution.

The rising interest from schools in student wellbeing has been guided by a number of key policy approaches that have been put forward in Australian education in the past decade. For example, the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, a declaration made by all Australian Education Ministers, advocates that wellbeing should be a central outcome of schooling aiming to produce successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. Furthermore, the Australian Curriculum lists ‘personal and social development’ as one of the seven general capabilities that need to be developed by schools. Stepping outside of education to broader Government policies, the Australian Government’s institute of Health and Welfare lists improving mental health a national health priority

It’s not just in Australia that this is happening. Student wellbeing has become a focus of international education policy for global organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). For example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child proposes that education should seek to develop each child’s personality and character as much as it develops numeracy and literacy. The Learning Metrics Task Force (2013), a joint initiative between UNESCO and the Center for Universal Education, proposed that children across the world should universally learn about (and learn in ways that develop) wellbeing, social values, and community values. Finally, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (2015b) states that “*Perhaps the ultimate goal of education policy makers, teachers, and parents is to help children achieve the highest level of wellbeing possible*” (p. 32).

Calls from these high-profile international bodies have had an impact on

Governments across the globe who are now using National Curriculum Frameworks as a means to prioritise student wellbeing. Indeed, the OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation’s (OECD, 2015b) recent analysis of National Curriculum Frameworks across 37 OECD countries¹ showed that student wellbeing is an explicit aim for 72% of countries national.² Many OECD countries are now aiming to systematically foster both academic outcomes *and* student wellbeing outcomes.

Linking instructional leadership to student wellbeing outcomes

How do schools translate wellbeing policy into teacher practice? What teacher practices work to improve student wellbeing and how does a teacher know when he/she has been successful in boosting a student’s wellbeing? What resources and training do school leaders need to provide in order to build a culture of instructional practice that boosts both academic outcomes *and* student wellbeing?

My work with thousands of teachers across Australia and Asia has shown me that while teachers are committed to student wellbeing, they feel unsure of themselves when it comes to knowing which practices are effective. “It’s an implicit curriculum” teachers tell me “You don’t learn about this in your teacher training and there’s very little PD on this, but if wellbeing is absent, you can say goodbye to any hope of academic learning.” Others explain “In the early stages of my teaching, student wellbeing and behaviour management was a guessing game. Over time I found ways to connect with my students and make them feel safe with me so they could learn. I wish I had known this earlier in my career.”

In the absence of focused pedagogical training on student wellbeing, teachers are left to learn through their own trial and error. Sometimes they get it right and sometimes they don’t. Speaking anecdotally, most of you will have had the experience at school of certain teachers who fostered your wellbeing, made you feel confident and optimistic, encouraged you to be a good person, and did this while they also imparted the academic content of their discipline. These teachers had

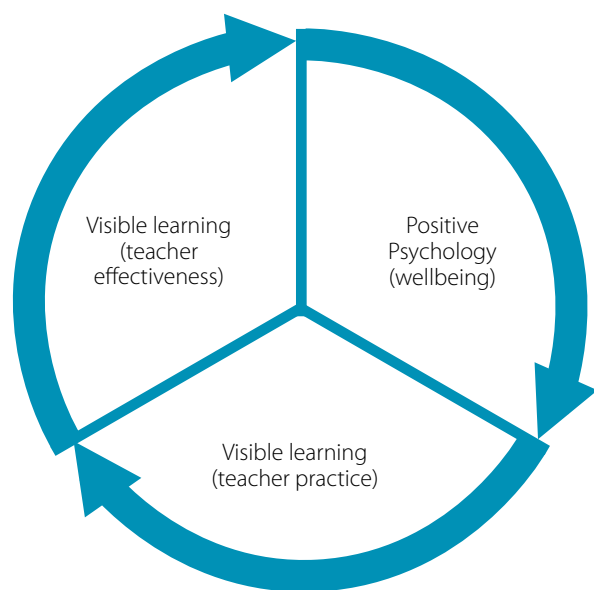


Figure 1: Three Elements of Visible Wellbeing™

instructional practices that built both your academic learning and your wellbeing. On the flip side, you're likely to also have had teachers who may (or may not) have been skilled in getting across the academic content but did so in a way that drained your wellbeing and zapped you of confidence. It's clear that teacher practice impacts student wellbeing, for better or for worse. It's also clear that many teachers use their own intuition to find out what works and what doesn't when it comes to student wellbeing. What I argue is that instructional leadership can be used to help teachers systematically build a suite of evidence-based practices that allow them to more deliberately and intentionally build student wellbeing through the teaching process.

It is certainly in the interest of teachers to know how their practice is, or is not, impacting upon student wellbeing given Barbara Frederickson's Broaden and Build theory which shows how positive emotions support many of the key cognitive processes a student needs to learn. Research has established a strong link between cognition (e.g., attention, memory, and decision-making) and emotion at the neural level. This neural connectivity underpins Helen Immordino-Yang's eloquent quote: "We feel, therefore we learn."

There are many ways a teacher can enhance wellbeing while also teaching academic content. For example, consider the maths teacher who strategically uses a challenging maths problem to help students understand their emotions (e.g. fear, uncertainty, excitement, curiosity), to help them bounce back when they make a mistake (e.g. resilience), and/or to encourage the student to understand how their mindset (e.g. growth or fixed) determines whether they believe that they can work through the problem or give up. Next consider the drama teacher who helps students find moments of flow on stage, to experience the satisfaction of mastering a difficult line, to develop oration skills and self-confidence. By training teachers to use instructional practices that work to enhance academic learning *and* wellbeing, schools are much better placed to meet the needs of students and meet the policy goals in the Melbourne Declaration and the Australian Curriculum.

To do this though we need high quality instructional

leadership, coaching and professional development so as to help teachers to consistently improve their pedagogy and learn ways to evaluate the impact of their teaching practices on student wellbeing.

Andrew, Bascom, and Bascom (1991) defined four strategies that instructional leaders use to enhance student achievement.

- 1 *Resource provider*: provision of resources to attain learning goals
- 2 *Instructional resource*: provision of strategies and skills to achieve better teaching practice, opportunities for professional development, and assessment for school performance related to instruction
- 3 *Communicator*: promoting discussion among school members about school vision, goals, and culture for successful learning
- 4 *Visible presence*: showing up through face-to-face interaction as well as through informal exchanges in day-to-day activities.

All four of these instructional leadership strategies can be applied to enhancing student wellbeing. Prioritising student wellbeing as an explicit goal of the school's vision and mission is key. Also required is the provision of wellbeing resources (e.g. mindfulness Apps; positive education curriculums), opportunities for high-quality professional development opportunities and tools to use in classroom observation to assess the impact of teacher practice on student wellbeing. Finally, making the importance of wellbeing present in the leader's interactions through explicit conversations and through implicit actions such as role modelling and culture building is needed.

Visible Wellbeing™

I have recently put forward an evidence-based organised approach to positive teacher practice called "Visible Wellbeing™" (VWB) that integrates the three separate fields of positive education, visible thinking and visible learning. Visible Wellbeing™ is not a program or a set curriculum about wellbeing, rather, it is a flexible approach for integrating student wellbeing into the learning process in any subject matter and at all year levels (early learning, elementary, middle and secondary). Visible Wellbeing™ provides a way for instructional leaders to help teachers adopt pedagogical practices that enhance student wellbeing.

As shown in Figure 1, Visible Wellbeing™ consists of three mutually reinforcing elements that gives teachers a process for ensuring they teach in ways that foster wellbeing. Positive education brings in teacher *knowledge* of wellbeing, visible thinking brings in teacher *practice* and visible learning brings in teacher *effectiveness*. Let's unpack each of these three elements in more detail.

The first requirement of fostering a Visible Wellbeing™ approach in class is to instil teachers with a well-defined body of positive education knowledge. This maps on to Andrew, Bascom, and Bascom's instructional leadership strategies of providing opportunities for professional development in positive education and providing positive education resources.

Once the teachers have knowledge of wellbeing, they are then encouraged to use various evidence-informed teacher practices that have been shown to have a positive impact on student wellbeing. These practices include activities that have come from the field of positive education such as studying the strengths of the main character of a novel in English class, or starting class with a brief mindfulness exercise (Shankland, Rosset, 2016, for a list

of brief positive education teachers practices). Student-centered teaching practices that place emphasis on a student's interests and provide autonomous and team-based learning opportunities can also be used by teachers across a range of disciplines to build student wellbeing. This maps on to Andrew, Bascom, and Bascom's instructional leadership strategies of coaching teachers to find a range of strategies and skills to achieve more effective teaching practice.

In the third phase of VWB, teachers use data and evidence to routinely evaluate the effectiveness of their practice on student wellbeing. The most effective way for teachers to confidently see if wellbeing moves forward (or backwards) based on their teaching practices is by examining data. Teachers can run regular focus groups with their classes as ways to assess shifts in the student wellbeing. Teachers can also use a teacher rubric to record the teaching practices they used against the presence of key elements of wellbeing in class such as emotional management, goal-driven behaviour and relationship skills. The same rubric can be used by instructional leaders as a classroom observation tool. This maps on to Andrew, Bascom, and Bascom's instructional leadership strategies of providing means for assessing performance (in this case wellbeing) related to instruction.

Using data to assess teacher effectiveness when it comes to wellbeing then feeds into the cycle again where teacher's observe student wellbeing (based on their positive education knowledge), change their teacher practice and re-evaluate their effectiveness. This becomes a self-sustaining process that teachers can cycle through in all of their classes over the year.

Does Visible Wellbeing™ Work?

Pilot testing of VWB at Kambrya College, a state secondary school in Victoria, revealed that students who had classes with teachers who'd been trained in VWB had improved wellbeing compared to students in other classes. Specifically, VWB students had higher optimism, self-esteem and life satisfaction as well as lower stress. Of VWB students, 82% said they had more confidence about taking care of their own wellbeing as a result of being taught by VWB teachers.

To build on the pilot test, VWB is currently being implemented in ten Australian schools across Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania (60% State school/40% Independent schools). The schools consist of a blend of primary, secondary and K-12 schools as well as a blend of co-ed and single sex schools. These schools are working with me in a one year partnership to adopt a whole-school, instructional leadership approach to VWB. They are being provided with an implementation framework, staff professional development, students lessons, a resource bank of wellbeing activities that can be run in class and evaluation tools (e.g., survey, rubric and focus group framework) for the school and teachers to evaluate student wellbeing. The success of VWB will be tracked in these schools over 2017.

Conclusion

Instructional leadership has been shown to be a vital contributor to student success, particularly academic achievement. However, most school leaders recognise that success is not only measured by the academic results of a student but also by the student's levels of wellbeing and their ability to graduate from school and go on to become a productive and positive person. Instructional

leadership provides a time-tested approach via which leaders can tap into the growing movement in wellbeing education and provide tangible and effective ways to lead teacher learning, in ways that successfully build student wellbeing.

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Lea's upcoming book

The Strength Switch: How the new science of strength-based parenting can help your child and your teen to flourish (Penguin Press).

Order on Booktopia: http://www.booktopia.com.au/the-strength-switch-lea-waters/prod9781925324426.html?source=pla&gclid=CM2p5p-L_tECFYaYvAodiXYCaQ

Footnotes

- 1 Australia, Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the Russian Federation, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom (England and Northern Ireland), and the United States.
- 2 The wellbeing curriculum goals are typically taught in subjects such as physical and health education, civic and citizenship education, moral education and/or religious education.

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About the author

Professor Lea Waters is a psychologist, researcher, speaker and author. She holds the Gerry Higgins Chair in Positive Psychology, is the founding Director of the Centre for Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne and the President Elect of the International Positive Psychology Association.

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