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 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 countries showed that student wellbeing is an explicit aim for 72% of countries national. 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
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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 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 wellbeing 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.

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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 had 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 then feeds into the cycle again where teacher’s observe case wellbeing) related to instruction.

is 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).


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.

Further reading


**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.