

Blog Post

31
Aug
2016

Wellbeing as Core School Business - What it is and Why it Matters (blog-post.html)

By Nicola L Guest Posts, Education, Wellbeing at Work, 0 Comments

Guest post by Sue Roffey, as part of our wellbeing and education series

(<http://www.networkofwellbeing.org/index.php/blog/post/connecting-wellbeing-and-education-in-partnership-with-teacher5adayslowchat>)

There seems to be a lack of clarity around what wellbeing in school means and uncertainty about how you 'do' it. This article aims to untangle this confusing concept so that educators, parents and policy-makers know what we are talking about, why wellbeing in education is critical for both healthy development and learning, and how to begin to go about it. These are just the headlines! There is a raft of evidence in both educational and psychology literature supporting the value of this approach. Once you begin to put all of the strands together it becomes a no-brainer!

I start with what it isn't ...



Welfare is not wellbeing

Welfare or pastoral care is what happens when a pupil comes to the attention of staff. The trigger can be unacceptable behaviour, learning difficulties, mental health issues or problems with attendance. The response is often the province of senior staff who see families, put behavioural sanctions in place or perhaps refer to the school psychologist. There will always be children who need something extra but fewer of these individuals will get to this 'pointy end' if a wellbeing framework is already in place. We also know many young people fly under the radar - their needs are not addressed because they never come to anyone's attention.

Defining and building a wellbeing framework

Rather than being a reactive process for individuals, a focus on school and student wellbeing is a universal, pro-active, catch-all approach that applies to the whole child and every child within a whole school framework. It is everyone working together to enable each individual to flourish and become the best they can be. Every interaction is an opportunity to foster resilience, connectedness and learning in its broadest sense.

The whole child

In order to flourish we need to function well in all the contexts of our lives. Social and emotional dimensions of development are therefore as important as cognitive achievements. Some would also say spiritual and ethical dimensions - identifying values and what gives life meaning. You can be an A* student but be narcissistic, have rubbish relationships, poor mental health or behave irresponsibly. The four pillars of education defined by the Delors report for UNESCO are: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live



together. Teachers need to be acknowledged not just for achieving high academic goals but also for building relationships with students that enhance their self-concept as learners and worthwhile individuals. High expectations are about the person you are

becoming, not only the grades you are achieving. Education is not just about learning subjunctive verbs but what it means to be a kind and thoughtful human being. Social and emotional learning - with an appropriate and safe pedagogy - is one of the acknowledged pathways to student wellbeing. The research also says this strengthens academic outcomes.

Every child

Within a wellbeing framework every child in the school matters, regardless of ability or background. This means building a culture that values diversity, so that students who are in any way different are accepted and valued, and those with strengths in practical, creative or interpersonal abilities have opportunities to develop and demonstrate these. Highly competitive cultures create winners and losers. Students who don't rank highly can become de-motivated and there is evidence they may become targets of bullying. Others may find themselves under intolerable pressure to 'perform' and all teachers know students whose anxiety is through the roof. Using strengths-based language alongside personal learning targets ensures that every pupil perceives themselves as progressing. This often happens in independent and international schools but not so often in state education where it may be needed most. We do not need everyone to become a doctor, lawyer or banker - a well-functioning society needs a broad range of skills. Individuals who feel proud of taking on these roles are more likely to perform them well. People may say that it's a highly competitive world 'out there' but employers are also saying that they want well-rounded individuals who can work in teams, take initiative and use emotional literacy. You can't do this if you are either ego-driven or afraid of making mistakes.

Our most vulnerable young people, those experiencing the greatest adversity, are often quickly marginalised and excluded. A wellbeing framework promotes a sense of belonging where everyone's participation is actively sought. Connectedness is now acknowledged as one of the main pillars for resilience. This goes beyond wearing a school uniform or cheering on the footie team but having a voice and agency.

The whole school

When wellbeing is core school business it is threaded through everything that happens - everyday interactions, curriculum delivery, policies and expectations. Schools are ecologies, so what happens in one part of the school impacts on what happens elsewhere. Where there are high levels of social capital everyone feels psychologically and physically safe; trust and collaboration are actively developed and positive emotions are fostered. Without awareness of the power of micro-moments for high quality connections a toxic environment can become the default position where no-one can give their best. Positive emotions enhance creativity, collaboration and problem-solving. Most of us know all this anyway but it is now supported by burgeoning research in neuropsychology and epigenetics. We are each other's environments!

When every teacher is a teacher for wellbeing, teacher wellbeing itself is critical. If we want our children to thrive we must cherish our teachers. A burnt out and devalued profession harms children's learning.

So how do you go about it?

Positive education is often initiated by a school leader with a vision for their school that incorporates wellbeing alongside high aspirations for learning. But leaders alone do not construct culture - teachers also need to see that a wellbeing focus is in their interests and parents need to understand that it matters for their child and their future. Each school will begin in a different place to identify and build on what is already working well.

In the current UK socio-political climate, it takes a brave head teacher to commit to developing wellbeing as core school business. It takes determination and an ability to get others on board. In Australia wellbeing is now high on the national agenda and positive education being developed in the most prestigious schools in the country. I know from my own experience and research that it is more than worth the effort - not only for the pupils and how they see themselves, their potential and each other, but also for working in schools where passion for education is reignited and there is real joy in both learning and teaching.

Dr Sue Roffey FRSA (<http://www.sueroffey.com>) is A/Professor (adjunct) at Western Sydney University and affiliated to the Institute of Wellbeing at Cambridge. She was involved in the Australian Scoping Study on Student Wellbeing, is the founder of Wellbeing Australia and is a well-respected author. Sue is now based back in London and can be contacted at sue@sueroffey.com (<mailto:sue@sueroffey.com>).

Images used in this post have been shared via www.sueroffey.com (<http://www.sueroffey.com>).