

Pupil wellbeing – Teacher wellbeing: Two sides of the same coin?

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There is now a strong body of evidence (e.g. Hattie, 2009; Roorda et al., 2011) that confirms the value of positive teacher-student relationships for learning and behaviour. The quality of relationships in a school, however, also impacts on teacher wellbeing and their ability to cope well with the many and varied stresses that are the hallmarks of the profession. Teacher attrition is a major concern in the Western world – how teachers feel makes a difference to their ability to respond effectively to the challenges they face.

This article explores issues of social capital within the learning environment and how this impacts on all stakeholders within an ecological framework. It examines how teacher resilience might be enhanced by specific actions that promote positive feelings of belonging, respect, value, and trust. The article examines international research on these issues, including a specific qualitative study in six schools in Australia. Findings are confirmed and illustrated by an online survey on student wellbeing.

Keywords: *Teacher wellbeing; relationships; social capital; school ecology; respect; positive psychology.*

SCHOOLS are not identical functional institutions that deliver a package of knowledge and skills to a homogenous group of students. They are diverse communities with a wide range of physical capital (buildings, books and other resources), human capital (knowledge and skills) and social capital (relationships and connections between people). There is now a strong body of evidence (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Plagens, 2011) to support the notion that social capital – defined here as expectations and interactions that promote trust, respect, value, and collaboration – impacts significantly on the quality of the learning environment and specifically the wellbeing of both students and staff.

A survey by Wellbeing Australia (December, 2011) found that of 466 respondents, 85.9 per cent, strongly agreed and a further 12.1 per cent agreed that a focus on student wellbeing enhanced an effective learning environment and 74.5 per cent strongly agreed and a further 21.9 per cent agreed that a focus on teacher wellbeing also promotes student wellbeing. 73.9 per cent of respondents were teachers of whom 20.5 per cent were school principals. These educators

considered wellbeing issues critical to academic outcomes as well as promoting mental health (97.6 per cent) and pro-social behaviour (98.5 per cent) – combining ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’.

These views on links between teacher wellbeing and student outcomes are supported by other evidence. Three dimensions of teacher wellbeing: feeling valued and cared for, feeling overloaded, and job stimulation and enjoyment were measured in a major study involving 24,100 staff in 246 primary schools and 182 secondary schools in the UK (Briner & Dewberry, 2007). These were analysed to explore relationships between teacher wellbeing and pupil performance. Although many factors impacted on Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs), eight per cent of variation in both primary and secondary schools were attributable to teacher wellbeing. Surprisingly, SATs scores in all subjects were associated with average teacher wellbeing scores. The authors advise caution in the interpretation of their findings as how teachers feel about their work may be bi-directional – improved student performance is likely to also increase their feelings of efficacy and wellbeing.

Feelings of self-efficacy were highlighted by Gibbs (2011) as a hallmark of resilience in teachers and he also suggests this is subject to social and cultural influences – in other words, what is actually happening within a school to impact on self-belief, attribution and motivation. He cited work by Goddard, Hoy and Woolfolk (2004) on the influence of senior management actively endorsing and supporting inclusive practices on the perception of both personal and collective efficacy of teachers. The outcomes include both positive effects for children's knowledge and attainment and also teachers' professional commitment, knowledge and satisfaction. This further exemplifies an ecological, bi-directional framework in conceptualising and promoting cultural change for wellbeing.

There are strong arguments for exploring what wellbeing in school means in practice and the ways in which this can be developed at all levels of the institution.

Student wellbeing

Student wellbeing (SW) is a pro-active and universal approach to pupil experiences in school. It is the responsibility of all staff to promote SW, whereas a welfare focus is reactive to identified concerns for individuals and often the province of senior and specialist staff.

The following definition of student wellbeing synthesises an international literature review carried out for the Australian Federal Government (Noble et al., 2008).

Student wellbeing is strongly linked to learning. A student's level of wellbeing at school is indicated by their satisfaction with life at school, their engagement with learning and their social-emotional behaviour. It is enhanced when evidence-informed practices are adopted by schools in partnership with families and community. Optimal student wellbeing is a sustainable state, characterised by predominantly positive feelings and attitude, positive relationships at school, resilience, self-optimisation and a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences. (p.30)

The report goes on to outline seven pathways to wellbeing in a school:

- Building a respectful and supportive school community.
- Developing pro-social values.
- Providing a safe learning environment.
- Enhancing social-emotional learning.
- Using strengths based approaches.
- Fostering a sense of meaning and purpose.
- Encouraging a healthy lifestyle.

The focus of this paper is on the relational aspects of wellbeing, including building a respectful and supportive school community, developing pro-social values and providing a safe learning environment.

Teacher wellbeing

Mindmatters (secondary schools) and Kids-matter (primary schools) are Federally-funded mental health promotion programmes in Australia. Not only are teacher wellbeing and values seen as critical to effective implementation (Mason & Rowling, 2005) but teachers themselves have valued the opportunity to reflect on their own personal wellbeing during professional training.

Teacher wellbeing in the literature is often described in deficit terms – how stress is impacting on teacher burn-out and problems with retention. It is estimated that over 20 per cent of teachers leave education in their first three years and up to 50 per cent within five years (House of Commons, 2004), with Australian, American, British and many other European figures mirroring each other. Teacher stress and retention is clearly a major concern in many countries (Galton & McBeath, 2008; Johnson, Berg & Donaldson, 2005; Stoel & Thant, 2002;).

Teacher wellbeing is, therefore, not only critically relevant for whole school wellbeing, specifically a stable environment for students, but also for financial considerations. Training teachers who then leave because their lives are unfulfilled at best and miserable at worst is not only devastating to those individuals and damaging to students but also expensive on the public purse.

It is commonly accepted that stress overload leads to poorer performance but the way it affects the brain may be less obvious. Michie and Cockcroft (1996) found that exposure to chronic work stress over time leads to degradation of the hippocampus – the part of the brain most active in memory. If students are going to be in an effective learning environment they need teachers who have optimal access to their knowledge base and also be open to learning themselves. The authors also found, however, that more serious dangers to health, such as cardiovascular disease and gastro-intestinal disorders were moderated by psycho-social factors – strong social networks and support.

Social capital

There are several theoretical constructions of social capital with the main proponents being Bourdieu (1993), Coleman (1990) and Putnam (2000). According to Bourdieu, membership of formal and informal groups gives access to opportunities and resources. As such, social capital can be a vehicle for the reproduction of privilege. Coleman, however, has a more positive view and sees social capital as making possible the achievement of otherwise unattainable goals. In communities with high levels of social trust individuals are more likely to openly exchange information and be caring towards each other. There is also more confidence that colleagues will be reliable and competent. Putnam has added to the concept by identifying within-group connections, such as between teachers, as ‘bonding social capital’ and across-group connections, such as between staff and the parent community as ‘bridging social capital’. Bridging social capital is seen as particularly useful in building resources and opportunities. This can be mirrored in the difference between ‘inclusive’ belonging that reaches out to others and ‘exclusive’ belonging which can be superior and self-protecting (Roffey, 2011a). It is inclusive belonging that promotes safety and wellbeing for all stakeholders within a school (Wike & Fraser, 2009).

For some the size and functionality of networks is seen as most important. The broad but thin spread of social media might suggest that this is not what really matters when it comes to authentic wellbeing. Social capital in the context of school life is more about the quality of connections – the ways in which people relate to each other, both as individuals and as groups. When many in a community feel positively connected with each other, this can lead to a level of social capital in which trust and reciprocity predominate and there is a greater chance of defining and attaining shared goals (Pretty & Ward, 2001). Our focus is with the process of social capital – how we build positive connections with others.

According to Holmes (2005) teachers are involved in about a thousand interpersonal contacts every day. It is the quality of these contacts that either foster a sense of wellbeing or sustain a toxic working environment. Although she does not refer to social capital as such Holmes’ summary of a positive working environment is useful and includes the following:

- high expectations to create strong communal identity;
- respectful and dignified treatment as professionals;
- participation by teachers in decisions affecting their work;
- regular opportunities for interaction and sharing with colleagues;
- recognition and rewards for effort and achievement.

When teachers are able to build such an environment how does this impact on their own wellbeing and what are the outcomes for pupils?

Research study

The qualitative research that supports the theme of this paper took place in six schools identified as actively developing emotional literacy: four primary and two high schools. Five schools were in New South Wales and one in Victoria, two in the Catholic system and the others in the public system. Pupils

were from varied backgrounds, both ethically and socially.

In four schools teachers, students, school counsellors and principals participated in semi-structured interviews. Student groups were usually student representative councils and, therefore, cross age. Teachers were invited to participate in focus groups. These groups were between five and nine participants. Student counsellors and principals were interviewed individually, apart from one small group of counsellors. In two further schools, for logistical reasons, the principal only was interviewed. Open-ended questions explored the experiences of staff and students in these schools and the processes by which the current culture had been developed.

Data was transcribed and entered into HyperResearch software to facilitate analysis. Using a grounded theory approach the aim was not to test out any hypothesis but explore and analyse themes that emerged from the data. The papers that have been published to date from this research emphasise the role, vision and skills of school leadership in creating an emotionally literate learning environment (Roffey, 2007), and the ecological nature of this endeavour (Roffey, 2008) – how different levels of the system impact on each other.

This specific paper explores commonalities in the factors that support the relational wellbeing of both staff and pupils together with a possibility for conflict. The themes and sub-themes below are illustrated by selected quotes from the study and also by those from the Wellbeing Australia Student Wellbeing Survey in response to the question: *What has made the most difference in promoting and supporting student wellbeing in your setting?* There were multiple interactions between the themes and sub-themes but these have been separated here for clarity.

Emphasising pro-social values

The overriding focus in this study was the value and wellbeing of the whole child. But in order for this to be effective in practice the relational values of respect, acceptance

and care had to extend both from and to all staff. Everyone needed to feel positive about being in the school and this was everyone's responsibility.

It is a group of people working together to achieve good outcomes, especially for kids... but good outcomes for the teachers too.

(High School Principal)

In all schools these relational values were not left to chance. They were discussed, promoted and practiced across all levels of the school. For one primary and one high school this stemmed from their Christian ethos, others saw themselves as doing their best for disadvantaged communities.

We really needed to be explicit about the values we teach – the values that we have, by the very nature of being a government school, where everyone's included... they encourage and promote the idea that it's OK to be different, and celebrating people's differences. (Primary School Principal)

I talk about the fact that (new teachers) are going to be working in a particular place where the way that we interact with each other is important, that we have a set of values, that we insist on standing by those values.

(High School Principal)

Fostering a sense of belonging

The importance of feeling connected to school, that you feel it matters that you are there, is increasingly seen as vital for both health and academic outcomes (Blum, 2005; Rowe, Stewart & Patterson, 2007). Solomon et al. (1996) explored factors that enhanced primary students' perceptions of belonging to a class community. They found that co-operative learning strategies, the promotion of democratic and pro-social values, student autonomy and a child centred approach heightened students' sense of community. This led to a greater willingness to abide by the norms and values of that community.

Participants in the study appeared proud of their school and felt that they had a say in what happened there. Teachers said they felt part of a professional learning community and principals commented that their schools

were viewed positively within the local community.

We encourage kids to think through respect for the feelings of others, respect for the property of others, keep the respect of the school. People ring us and give feedback – we get told how good they are, how proud we are of them.

(Primary School Principal)

Catalano et al. (2004) defined school connectedness as two interrelated components, affective, supportive relationships, and commitment. Both students and staff need to perceive themselves as doing well and have an investment in being there. These issues in the study were addressed as follows.

Acknowledging strengths: With the growing influence of positive psychology in schools the value of a strengths based model is re-emerging (Noble & McGrath, 2012; Roffey, 2011b), Most of the literature refers to the importance of acknowledging student diversity but this research shows that teachers too respond positively to having their strengths recognised, especially by school leaders.

We have an acceptance of teachers as well. I could pick what's very good about each teacher. (Primary School Principal)

The big thing with the (weekly) bulletin... the very first thing that ever gets mentioned are the thank-you's... individual staff are mentioned for the effort that they've put in the previous week. (Primary School Teachers)

Being and feeling included: This emphasises how both staff and students need to feel comfortable in school to thrive and suggests ways in which this might happen.

I go to schools where I know where somebody sits and where I shouldn't sit [in the staffroom]. That isn't the thing at this school – everybody sits with everybody, everybody interacts. (Primary School Counsellor)

At one high school there was an awareness of the difference it made to have someone just acknowledge your presence. One teacher spoke of the few members of staff who did not do this and how this was being actively addressed in the school

There's a conscious decision, to include new staff more... and make them feel comfortable, because I know what it's like – it's not easy.

(High School Teacher)

Feelings at this school definitely matter... because there's not much point if somebody's uncomfortable in school, they're not going to approach with the right attitude and perhaps they're really not going to learn anything if they're just 'I'm coming here, I don't really want to be here'. (High School Student)

Feeling valued, respected and cared for:

Throughout the responses there was an awareness that the way the senior management team treated staff was reflected in the way the staff interacted with each other and then down the line with the students.

There's more feeling of equality and comfort with staff, not only on a professional level but a personal one... and just like it's feeling, like a deeper level of respect from the leadership team. (High School Counsellor)

When a student comes back after absence you let them know you miss them. Also with staff. I make it my business to know about the staff – have they been having enough sleep. Birthday cards, etc. Making them feel valued. If they are noticed and acknowledged it will flow through to the kids. (High School Principal)

Creating a safe learning environment

Creating a positive safe (supportive) environment for staff helps to ensure students receive the same benefits. (WB survey)

Bullying issues: Teachers, lecturers and employees in education are the largest group of callers to the UK National Workplace Bullying Advice Line. Teachers are also the largest group who email Bully OnLine (Holmes, 2005).

Much of the literature on bullying focuses on the students – the bullies, the bullied and the bystanders. Physical and psychological safety in a school can only exist, however, where bullying behaviour is pro-actively addressed across the whole school. There is increasing evidence that it is school culture

that either limits or sustains bullying behaviours (James et al., 2008; Skiba et al., 2006).

In a safe and supportive school, the risk from all types of harm is minimised, diversity is valued and all members of the school community feel respected and included. (Education Services Australia (2010). The National Safe Schools Framework (revised, p.2)

This research explored what was happening in schools where the culture was safe and supportive for everyone.

We've got a system... basically, a year six or a year five and a kindergartener will become buddies and the year six will show them around, and spend certain recesses and lunchtimes with them, so that basically makes them feel a lot safer. (Primary School Pupil)

In one school pupils said that there 'isn't really any bullying because of this no put down thing we've got here' – in each classroom, the staffroom, the front office and the principal's room there is a laminated poster saying 'This is a no put down zone'. This had clearly been the focus on many conversations at all levels within the school. Staff were also aware of the models their own collegial relationships were providing to students.

When (students) see staff interact, it's always polite, it's positive, there's no negativity, bawling out of somebody, or shouting, or anything like that, and I think that that sort of gives them the example of how to interact with another person. (Primary School Teacher)

Making mistakes: Hattie (2009) in his meta-analysis of effective education concluded that making mistakes needs to be welcomed as part of learning. Schools need to foster an environment where people are not scared to admit they could have done something differently. This also promotes positive and trusting relationships.

People are prepared to say sorry, too, if they think they've genuinely done something wrong, or said something that unintentionally offended someone. (High School Teacher)

We all make mistakes is modelled by the staff. Once you have made a mistake, once you have

talked about it, [it's] over. (High School Principal)

Positive communication within relationships

De Nobile (2008) summarised research on supportive communication as a way of increasing job satisfaction for teachers. This includes horizontal support between colleagues and downward positive communication from managers (Dinham & Scott, 2000; De Nobile & McCormick, 2008). There is also some evidence of the positive effects of upward communication (De Nobile, 2008).

Collegial relationships: Positive communication is easier if you know something about a colleague outside their work role. Some schools had actively encouraged staff to simply get to know each other. The school below had developed a social programme to do just this.

We've broken down a lot of barriers... people used to be reluctant to come into the staff room – unless you have groups of friends to associate with... it is actually really nice to get to know other aspects of people. (High School Teachers)

The biggest, most effective thing (in developing emotional literacy) is probably just the personal relationships among the staff... that kind of a bonding and a joining... there's more adult discussion, more give and take... they are listening to each other more. (High School Counsellor)

Teacher-student relationships: Research on the importance of the quality of teacher student relationships is burgeoning in an environment in which they are under threat.

The additional stress on teachers working in this unrealistic performance-driven environment has a negative impact on them which in turn must impact [on the] health and wellbeing of the students in their classrooms. (WB Survey)

Martin and Dowson (2009) claimed that 'positive relationships with significant others are cornerstones of young people's capacity to function effectively in social, affective and academic domains' (p.351).

Murray-Harvey (2010) found that both academic outcomes and social and emotional wellbeing in school were 'unambiguously influenced' by the quality of relationships between teachers and students. She concludes that schools need to give less prominence to issues of control and more to the skills needed to connect meaningfully with students.

There were comments by all students interviewed about their relationships with staff. Although some teachers were clearly more favoured than others, the general view was that most staff cared, were available and interacted positively.

You can talk to them openly if you are having problems. (High School Student)

Most teachers here have a good personality. They are not too strict and some are funny... teachers here are focused on your life – so you don't bring home stress to school... they really care for us. (Primary School Students)

What is less obvious is that teachers' wellbeing is also generated in several directions by more positive relationships with students. Marzano (2003) found that, on average, teachers who had high-quality relationships with their students had 31 per cent fewer discipline and related problems than their colleagues. Friendly professional interactions with pupils can simply make teachers feel good about their job.

Positive feelings and resilience

The importance of positive feelings in schools is only just being recognised. Not only do these promote more positive behaviours but also creativity, problem solving and coping skills (Fredrickson, 2009). Positive emotions are critical for resilience and wellbeing.

As well as the importance of feeling acknowledged, valued and included, this study also illustrates the power of fun and laughter to support wellbeing and learning. There were many examples of teachers actively enjoying each other's company, teachers and students having a laugh together and teachers who made learning fun.

If you're having a very hard day at work, (the teacher) comes out with some jokes just randomly and it makes you feel better about it, like then you're not so stressed. (Primary School Student)

I'd have to say that, as being one of the new members of staff, that it comes from the staff first – you can see the staff getting on, and having a bit of fun, a bit of a muck-around so (students) know that we're all friends, and that's an example of good behaviour. (Primary School Teacher)

Behavioural issues

This is the one area where student wellbeing and teacher wellbeing are potentially in conflict. Some educators believe their wellbeing is under threat when they have to deal with difficult and even abusive students in their classes. When pupils are sent to senior staff for disciplinary issues the classroom teachers expect that punishment will ensue and can be angry or otherwise distressed when it doesn't. This was a dilemma for school leaders who had to work hard to change how behaviour and responses were construed within their schools.

Most teachers when they send someone to the principal are wanting you to chastise them... I wanted to get away from that idea of someone being in trouble, and more a focus on, OK, how are you feeling, what's happening, how can we not have this happen again? And have the children leaving feeling better about themselves, and knowing how to avoid that sort of thing. But I found that the teachers were annoyed – they want a child to come back crying, at least some of them. (Primary School Principal)

Changing teacher perceptions was necessary to enhance the relationships that supported both student and teacher.

What we did was... introduce a system of positive reinforcement, where the minute someone was doing the right thing there was recognition for that, and putting the children in charge... give them that idea they're in charge of their behaviour... Gradually, that changed the tone, out in the playground, in the

classrooms, less and less incidents, much more focused, able to work. You had children who hadn't even been able to share an activity able to work together... teachers who might not have had much patience or tolerance for a child, would then start to focus on the positive of what happened: 'they're doing this well, now'. (High School Principal)

Summary

We also need to look after our teachers – they are the critical and pivotal force in providing an environment where students can feel safe, happy, healthy and, therefore, learn! (WB Survey)

If you have a happy staff, then I think that leads to you being happy in your own classroom, and leads to happy relationships with the children, and the children with each other. (Primary School Teacher)

Research on what actively promotes teacher wellbeing is less easy to find than factors that lead to stress. Although not all the myriad factors that undermine or promote teacher wellbeing are addressed here the outcomes of this investigation support findings elsewhere that confirm that relational quality and social capital is a major factor in resilience and wellbeing throughout a school. What is in students' best interests is also likely to be in the interests of teacher wellbeing.

Developing the positive wellbeing of staff has made a huge difference. When teaching staff feel appreciated and empowered, they are much more likely to show patience and empathy for their students; to go the 'extra mile' for the students in their care. They are also more likely to share and work with others in order to support their students and promote wellbeing. (WB Survey)

Spratt et al. (2006) found that schools attempt to address a range of issues related to wellbeing by bolting 'fragmented initiatives onto existing systems' (p.14). They argued that schools need to undertake a more fundamental review of values, policies and practices. Taking the social and emotional aspects of school into account,

strengthening relationship skills and giving people a say in what happens is more likely to create a learning environment that promotes academic outcomes (Zins et al., 2003), wellbeing (Cohen, 2006) and pro-social behaviour (Roffey, 2011b). This is what the schools in this study were trying to do – and the outcomes for stakeholders are evident throughout. Several participants, however, acknowledged that teacher wellbeing needed a higher focus in this endeavour.

We have only just started to look at the wellbeing of staff and I think there's a big way to go about that. We usually deal with students really well but maybe we still have along way to go with supporting staff.

What this means for educational psychologists

Educational psychologists (EPs) are increasingly at risk of becoming primarily a reactive statutory service – assessing individual deficit and planning intervention for those at risk and with identified special needs. Although a legitimate and important role, this limits the scope of the profession and the high level skills of many EPs to work at a preventative and systemic level. They have a key role to play in promoting psychological wellbeing and are in an ideal position to support schools.

This paper has shown that promoting teacher wellbeing is a valid and appropriate activity for the profession as it enhances the capacity of schools to meet the needs of diverse populations. This is likely to reduce the numbers of students needing intensive and expensive support – especially for social and behavioural difficulties but also for learning needs. It is also clear that whole school work must support the wellbeing of teachers in order to promote wellbeing for pupils and that there are synergies between these strands of intervention.

EPs know what is effective for students with special educational needs but are also well versed in the factors that promote both learning and wellbeing for all pupils. How

can they put their knowledge and skills in this area to good use in schools? They can be agents of change in the conversations they have in schools to counter negative dominant discourses. They can share good practice and support emergent good practice. When teachers feel acknowledged for the work they do, it raises their sense of effectiveness and wellbeing, someone has noticed! EPs can and should model emotional literacy in all their relationships in schools – with teachers, managers, parents and pupils. EPs with high credibility in a school can also help school leaders identify their own vision for their school and support them in

working towards this. The school counsellors in the research study described above did just this and were acknowledged as allies, if not drivers, of positive change. It is easy for EPs to be despondent in the current climate but they can do more than they realise to keep the wellbeing focus in mind – for both students and teachers.

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