

# Why Positive Education?



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For many of us when we meet a teacher we naturally ask ‘What do you teach?’ but as a psychologist I am more interested in the question ‘Why do you teach?’ When I ask teachers why they teach I get a remarkably consistent answer about the desire to make a difference in a young person’s life.

If I was to combine and paraphrase the thousands of responses I have received to my question ‘Why do you teach?’ the answer goes something like “*I teach to help a young person learn and feel good about themselves so they develop into a well-adjusted adult.*”

This answer highlights the fact that teachers see the importance of teaching academic knowledge *and* teaching to raise emotional capacity, resilience and wellbeing in students.

## *Positive education, wellbeing and achievement*

Advances in neuroscience and psychology research now shows what many teachers have anecdotally known for a long time – learning is profoundly affected by wellbeing. Research has found a difference between students in high- and low-implementing schools equivalent to a difference in academic performance of up to 6 months of schooling and on average, school students enrolled in a social and emotional learning program ranked 11 percentage points higher on achievement tests than school students who did not participate in such programs.

The field of positive education has gained much traction in Australia. There are a selection of Australian positive education programs such as KidsMatter, Mindmatters, Bounceback, YouCanDoit!, Senseability and MeditationCapsules. Teachers have access to professional development in positive education through numerous universities and private institutions. The Positive Education Schools Association has been formed and

has healthy membership numbers. There are multiple positive education conferences held each year across Australia.

## *Program to Practice*

Despite this progress, I feel the promise of positive education is falling short. Not all schools take up positive education programs and even within those schools that do, the programs are delivered only by certain teachers and only in certain year levels. If we continue to pursue positive education through a program approach, we are failing to have broad reach.

Wide scale impact will be achieved once effective positive education becomes infused into standard teacher practice. When the very act of teaching itself occurs in a way that builds the wellbeing of a student, this is when positive education reaches its full potential. As such I am calling for a shift in positive education from *programs* to *practice*. This shift is essential if wellbeing is to feature as a core aspect of education rather than a sideline endeavour. Importantly, it overcomes one of the biggest challenges I have faced in my role of bringing positive education to schools: the idea that wellbeing and learning are separate phenomenon that compete for room on the timetable, resources and teacher PD.

We all know that teachers try to teach their subject content - be it Physics or Physical Education - in a way that builds their students’ wellbeing. But given that student wellbeing is not

# ‘Research shows that student wellbeing enhances learning and academic performance’

taught as a core part of teacher training, teachers are ill-equipped to know which of their teaching and wellbeing interventions are the most effective for students. When a teacher can use data to know what practices impact on student learning and wellbeing over others, this is when they become successful in the ‘why’ question of education.

The intervention approach, sometimes referred to as clinical teaching, has been demonstrated to be successful for improving student learning and I believe it has great potential for improving student wellbeing. This approach can be used to train teachers about developmental wellbeing trajectories in early years, primary and secondary students. With this knowledge, teachers can be shown how to use data to identify the wellbeing needs of individual students in order to move wellbeing forward through teacher practice. Using wellbeing data to improve student wellbeing is an essential part of the learning process given the research finding that wellbeing is linked to learning and academic achievement.

## *The Visible Wellbeing Instructional Model*

I have developed an evidence-based instructional wellbeing model, The Visible Wellbeing Instructional Model to help teachers build student wellbeing in the classroom. It incorporates ideas from three evidence-based education movements: Positive Education (University of Pennsylvania), Visible Thinking (Harvard Graduate School of Education) and Visible Learning (Melbourne Graduate School of Education). Positive education brings in the teacher *knowledge* of wellbeing,

visible thinking brings in teacher *practice* and visible learning brings in teacher *effectiveness*. The Visible Wellbeing Instructional Model offers a flexible approach for integrating student wellbeing into the learning process across any subject matter and can be applied by teachers in all contexts (early learning, primary and secondary).

As shown in Figure 1, the three elements of wellbeing, teacher practice and teacher effectiveness are mutually reinforcing. The first requirement of the instructional model is to instil teachers with a well-defined body of positive education knowledge. Teachers are taught to use their clinical judgement to gain awareness of student wellbeing which is then used to inform the use of various evidence-informed teacher practices designed to have a positive impact on student wellbeing. These practices include lessons and activities that have come from the field of positive education and general teaching practice such as group work and circle time that have been shown to boost student wellbeing. In the third phase teachers use data and evidence to routinely evaluate the effectiveness of their practice on student wellbeing. Teachers can confidently see if wellbeing moves forward (or if it moves backwards) through examining data and this feeds into the cycle occurring again where teacher’s observe student wellbeing (based on their positive education knowledge), change their teacher practice and re-evaluate their effectiveness.

### *Element 1: Student wellbeing*

Given that wellbeing, like thinking, sits inside a person, we might think of it as being invisible and in my own work with



Figure 1: The three evidence-based elements of Visible Wellbeing Instructional Model

teachers, many say that are not confident about assessing the wellbeing of their students. However, there are ways of making wellbeing more visible and we can get clues about a student’s wellbeing by observing their behaviour, expressions, verbal language and body language. In this way, student wellbeing is visible to us if you consider the definition of ‘visible’ is something that is observable and something that can be perceived.

Positive education has helped students and teachers turn wellbeing from an internal phenomenon (i.e., something that students feel on the inside) to also be an external phenomenon (i.e., something that students can see and hear on the outside) by teaching students how to understand and manage their own emotions, how to think in resilient ways, how to understand their own mindsets, how to communicate effectively with others, how to find flow and how to set goals.

To date, the way in which positive

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education has made wellbeing visible is by delivering specific programs *about* wellbeing. The Visible Wellbeing approach seeks to make wellbeing visible through teacher practice by teaching in a way that builds wellbeing *through* the learning process itself. For example the Mathematics teacher can use the learning of a challenging Maths concept to help students understand their emotions (e.g. fear and uncertainty), to help them build their resilience by bouncing back if they make a mistake, to understand their own mindset if they continue to try or give up after a challenge, to communicate effectively by setting team challenges, to find moments of flow as the puzzle is being solved and to achieve the goal of mastering a difficult equation.

#### *Element 2: Teacher practice*

To develop wellbeing *through* the learning process, classes can start with a wellbeing goal and success criteria written up on the board. This way, students are supported in their academic learning and are also aware of learning about their wellbeing in class. Wellbeing learning goals for class could include:

- Maintain a positive mindset as I am challenged in today's lesson
- Control / manage my emotions in today's class
- Match my character strength to today's task
- Foster a positive relationship with someone in the class.

Teachers can check in with students at the end of the class to see if their wellbeing goal was met as evidence by the success criteria

In addition to wellbeing goals, teachers make use of mini (2-5 minute) wellbeing interventions that they run at the start, during, or at the end class (e.g., mood temperature check, 2 minute mindfulness exercise). Mini wellbeing interventions are based on the Visible Thinking program which advocates the use of practical and accessible mini-strategies in class to help students become aware of their own thinking. The Mini wellbeing activities are designed to help students become aware of their own wellbeing.

Teacher-student interactions can be used for instructional-academic support (e.g. skill explanation) but also for emotional support (e.g., teacher warmth and encouragement) and behaviour guidance (e.g., verbal encouragement that influences prosocial behaviour). Thus, in addition to wellbeing goals and mini wellbeing interventions, good teacher-student relationships can be used to raise the emotional capacity, resilience and wellbeing of students.

#### *Element 3: Teacher Effectiveness*

The visible learning approach encourages teachers and students to use data in ways that allow student learning to be tracked. Teachers can see if their teaching is improving student learning by analysing learning data. Data is the visible marker of the learning. Similar data collection methods can be used to see how teaching is impacting upon student wellbeing. Teachers can gain valuable data from self-report, wellbeing surveys completed by students such as the Wellbeing Profiler for schools which has been developed by the Centre for Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne (<http://www.wbprofiler.com.au>). Teachers can also run focus group with their classes as ways to assess the students understanding and views about their own wellbeing and the degree to which it is, or isn't, being supported in class. I have also developed a Visible Wellbeing rubric that is currently under trial with Kambrya Secondary College.



#### *Watch this space*

Research shows that student wellbeing enhances learning and academic performance. In this article, I have called for the field of positive education to extend its' focus from programs to practice so that student wellbeing is developed through teaching in *all* classes. It is only by infusing positive education into intervention-based teacher practice that we can truly reach all Australian students.

The Visible Wellbeing Instructional Model aims to shift wellbeing from a subjective, internal experience occurring within the student to a tangible, observable phenomenon that is visible to teachers and students alike. It has significant implications for teacher training, teacher practice and teacher effectiveness and this a priority project in the next 3 years at the Centre of Positive Psychology, Melbourne Graduate School of Research. I look forward to keeping you updated of our progress.

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#### *More*

A longer and fully referenced version of this paper is available from the TLN. Please email [mvictory@tln.org.au](mailto:mvictory@tln.org.au).

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