

EPISODE 16 TRANSCRIPT

TALKING TEACHING WITH MAXINE MCKEW AND DAVID KOLPAK

- 0:00 **Maxine McKew** **I'm Maxine McKew and this is Talking Teaching**
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- 0:10 XX Our school psychologists have just become part of a team. There's no stigma around it, it's just part of what makes us human
- music -*
- 0:25 **Maxine McKew** **Hello again. Today's podcast considers a compelling field of interest, that of positive psychology. There would not be too many schools in the country that don't have concerns about the psychological wellbeing of their students. Over and over principals report that they feel they're dealing with almost an epidemic of stress, anxiety, even self harm among young people. It's exercising a lot of minds. An emerging response is to flip the problem to look at the ways schools and communities can intervene early and actively teach strategies around wellbeing. That's what the all boy school St Peter's in Adelaide has been doing for over seven years. Here's David Kolpak, one of two teachers in wellbeing describing his approach at St Peter's**
- 1.15 David Kolpak For a long time, boys were always told you know we didn't talk about emotions and we don't talk about our feelings. It didn't mean they weren't there. So what we have actually done, and we start these programmes with our three year olds so they learn degrees of emotion. A boy might have said I'm mad or I'm sad or I'm happy, but they know degrees. What is mad? You know am I just cranky, have a got a little bit cranky this morning or am I enraged? You know there's a huge variance between...
- 1:42 **Maxine McKew** **So they've got better at diagnosing their own feelings is that right?**
- 1:45 David Kolpak Yeah exactly and being able to articulate it and being able to explain the reasons behind those feelings. So I'm having this feeling because this has happened, and even then predicting – if I go into the yard this is how I'm feeling at the moment, I'm a

bit scared that that level of, you know maybe not their words, but that feeling that I'm feeling at the moment might escalate and I'm going to do something that's going to get me into trouble. So being able to learn self-regulation and acknowledge that these emotions are real, but not just that, what do I have to do to manage those emotions? Because we say, you know we grew up learning that anger was a wasted emotion, but we tell the boys now that anger's a real emotion, it's what you do with it, that it's okay to be mad, it's just not okay to disrespect someone or be mean to them.

2:23 **Maxine McKew**

So what have you noticed in terms of your students because as you know we hear a huge amount these days from principals in schools across the sector about kids who are self harming, kids who feel a huge sense of failure who don't know how to self regulate. So are you seeing differences given how long you've been doing this?

2:53 David Kolpak

The behaviours may not disappear, but the difference is a boy recognises that he may be at risk. So the boys will come and say I have just been to the toilets and I've done this, or I'm feeling like this and I'm worried that if I leave the school grounds I might do this. So to be able to acknowledge it and then seek help. To our families I call it a toolkit. What we're giving is a toolkit and we learn that there are different times when we need different tools and not every tool fits every purpose, but to know that this tool is something I can use and hope for the best. Our school psychologists have just become part of a team. We have boys that will say I need to see... and they'll ask to see one of the psychologists... there's no stigma around it. So to me the whole growth of the programme has just said our mental wellbeing, and we talk to the boys about the difference between wellbeing and ill-being, we don't use the whole wellbeing over the one spectrum, is no different from seeing somebody if we have a sore knee or if we have an upset tummy. Our brain is something or our heart is something that we might need to talk to somebody about how we're feeling. What are we processing in our mind? It's just part of what makes us human.

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- 4:14 **Maxine McKew** **You must hear some incredible stories though. What do you think is driving so much anxiety among young people?**
- 4:20 David Kolpak I think social media is a really easy one to blame. There are elements of it but there are also elements of I think busyness of life. I think media in itself portrays an image that our children may think is unattainable that level of perfectionism. So you know growing up, if I took a photo of someone, I took one photo, I had to wait two weeks to get it developed and it came back. You know we might take fifty photos 'til we get the photo that we think is perfect or near to being perfect and we'll use that, but no-one knows that it's taken fifty other photos to get there. We see an image that portrays perfection or portrays perhaps something that's not real because again we don't know what's going on behind the eyes of the person in the photo. We have lost the art of boredom. Growing up I remember parents saying to me, oh boredom's a state of mind, go and find something to do. Well no-one's bored anymore because they're all picking up a device.
- 5:22 **Maxine McKew** **They're all hyper-stimulated**
- 5:24 David Kolpak Exactly, it's the opposite
- 5:24 **Maxine McKew** **and expect to be**
- 5:25 David Kolpak That's right, and as an adult if we can't find something, so if I pick up my phone and I can't find something after three swipes or three clicks, I've probably forgotten and moved onto the next.
- 5:35 **Maxine McKew** **David Kolpak was one of hundreds of national and international speakers who came together in Melbourne recently for the Sixth World Congress on Positive Psychology. It's the first time this event has been held outside of the United States. The event partner was the University of Melbourne's Centre for Positive Psychology located in the Graduate School of Education. Now the Centre is rapidly developing a global reputation for its research and its wellbeing programmes and partnerships. Just ahead of the start of the conference I spoke with**

Director Professor Lindsay Oades and asked him first to explain what we mean by wellbeing.

- 6:13 Lindsay Oades Wellbeing, it can mean many things but to psychologists we obviously take a psychological approach to it. So how do our thoughts, emotions, behaviours all come together to create either a sense of wellbeing. And wellbeing... there are big debates about what wellbeing is, some of us can think of it more as pleasure and positive emotions which gets called the hedonic approach; other people like to think of wellbeing being a broader concept that includes our meaning and purpose, our values, and the sense of living a good life and being satisfied with the life we're living, which is a different concept of health by itself, and often it's a more of a subjective sense of is this life good? Am I feeling good? Am I doing well? Am I functioning well?
- 6:59 **Maxine McKew** **So what are the components that generally need to be in place for an individual to feel they have a sense of wellbeing?**
- 7:06 Lindsay Oades There are different views on that, but just to take some of the very common views, and I'll start with the one I think is a big and a very reliable view, and that's a sense of connectedness, a sense of positive relationships. We are social beings and so the quality of our relationships, both individual and interpersonal intimate relationships, or broader sense of connections, that's a big one. And I remember I originally trained as a clinical psychologist, I remember the old ward rounds we did in acute hospitals, psychiatric hospitals, time after time it was a seventeen or eighteen year old male, he's been admitted with a psychotic episode to a mental hospital because he's had a relationship breakup. So I've seen many, many times the strength and importance of relationships and relationship quality as one of the big ones.
- 7:52 **Maxine McKew** **So connection is one, what would be next?**
- 7:55 Lindsay Oades The other one is just emotions themselves. So the sense of positive emotions, do we have more positive emotions than negative emotions, or do we have more pleasure than pain? So

that matters because it's almost like an energy that keeps us going, keeps us sustained. But a lot of the debates will say no, that doesn't capture all of wellbeing, it captures happiness but it's not the whole deal. So to summarise that I'd say positive emotions or that sense of feeling good.

8:24 **Maxine McKew** **What about the need to have say some kind of purpose in life, a reason to get out of bed in the morning?**

8:29 Lindsay Oades So the other part is purpose and that often travels with meaning, so the idea of purpose and meaning, a meaningful life. Professor Mike Steger is actually presenting tonight exactly on that topic. So one of the topics in wellbeing science is how much is it about wellbeing and happiness and how much is it really simply about meaning? So meaning itself can mean several different things. It can actually be since my life has a sense of meaning, but also I'm contributing to something bigger than myself, so the sense of purpose for my own life but also how am I contributing to others and for others, and we see that developmentally. You often see as people age that becomes increasingly important about what's the meaning of life and what am I contributing and what legacy as I leaving as well? So that's another big part of the psychological factors of wellbeing. Probably I'll add another one while I'm going. A sense of meaningful activity or sense of engagement or purpose – am I keeping busy, am I doing something which is meaningful, or am I engaged? One way of thinking about engaged other than work is also hobbies. What do I get absorbed in? What keeps me energised? And then they can vary from gardening, gaming, there are many different ways we do that - does something capture me, am I engaged in something?

9:55 **Maxine McKew** **What about contentment because I mean that's a bit of a daggy word in some ways, but how important is this notion of you know I'm just content, not necessarily deliriously happy but content?**

10:07 Lindsay Oades You hear contentment and some people say they'll think of the Eastern traditions which really champion what we would call low arousal emotions or low arousal states. So it's I'm calm, I'm

content, I'm complete in myself or I'm satisfied, or I don't have any burning needs. And a lot of the Eastern traditions champion that as the optimal state, whereas part of the Western traditions, and particularly say American psychology, joy, high arousal, happy is seen as the valid state which is slightly different from contentment. So you will see some big cultural differences in how we understand contentment, but you also see individual differences. Some people will actually think of happiness and wellbeing as content, I'm okay, leave me alone, whereas other say particularly extroverts, they'll see happiness as a sort of more high activated state and they've got to be moving and doing things and having joy and having lots of positive emotions.

- 11L04 **Maxine McKew** **What you're describing Lindsay sounds to me like something that a mature, an emotionally mature individual might certainly get to at some point in their life, but for a lot of young people I imagine they're really struggling with this because they're probably chasing the next pleasure fix and all the rest of it. Does this explain why so many young people are either stressed, anxious, at the worst they're self harming? What's going on with this emerging generation?**
- 11:31 Lindsay Oades That's a really important question. If we look at ... you know if you take a day-to-day life of a young person, and I struggle with this myself as the parent of two teenagers and my son walks to school looking at his phone, and as we know, here in Victoria there is the debate about whether phones should be allowed in schools. So with the rise of technology and mobile devices, that's only part of what's going on in modern young people's lives.
- 11:57 **Maxine McKew** **But do you think that's adding to what we're seeing?**
- 11:59 Lindsay Oades Absolutely and fragmentation of attention I think is a big part of it.
- 12:03 **Maxine McKew** **Is it also the idea that because you're connected to a whole bunch of friends who might have liked you on Facebook, that is the same kind of connection you were talking about a couple of minutes ago, when in fact we know it's not?**

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- 12:16 Lindsay Oades I think it has. That type of connection can still have its advantages if it's well managed and my colleague, Associate Professor Peggy Kern actually does some of the social media related research on that type of work. But at the same time, the fragmentation that create to your attention, so you know you don't get that rested content state because you're distracted by the new light or the new buzz. So that sustained and focused attention, which of course is the opposite of things like Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. So can we pay attention; how long can we pay attention for; and also obviously we're hearing a lot more about mindfulness and meditation. If that's done well then that is attentional regulation, that's how to regulate your attention. Not just pay attention but how to regulate how you pay attention, which is a skill we can all benefit from and there are simple ways of doing that like... nothing new, you know watch your breath breathing exercises. All of these types of skills are good for everyone all of the time, and they have benefits such as being able to pay attention, being able to notice and regulate your emotions and anxiety. I notice myself as I get older I don't like getting on planes as much as I used to. I feel a bit claustrophobic, but I also know how very quickly to look at my thoughts and do breathing exercises. Those types of skills, if we can equip a whole generation of young people with them, that's what I would call wellbeing is everyone's business, it's that distribution of responsibility so they learn skills and capabilities – they being students and young people, rather than we need more services you know and referring everyone off for specialist services. It's actually equipping the whole population through the school system in time with that broader skillset. Some of it's common sense, some of it's not, but the challenge in my view is how do we do it at scale?
- 14:17 **Maxine McKew** **We know that one of the best predictors of individual wellbeing is the quality of relationships. So what is it that schools could do do you think to help foster richer relationships?**
- 14:28 Lindsay Oades I'll answer that in a few ways. There's several relationships going on there. There's the teacher/student relationship, there's

the peer to peer relationship and then there's the child or student to parent relationship, and as we know developmentally of course that changes and the peer to peer relationship becomes much more important in the secondary school than it is in the primary. So for example, some of the work we're doing, my colleague Professor Dianne Vella-Brodrick actually has a project where they do peer to peer mentoring, and so they're actually equipping the young people in how to mentor or coach each other. So rather than teacher for student, the teachers are equipping the young people in how to mentor each other. So that's the type of example of emphasising the role and leveraging the role of the peer to deliver or talk about what it means to be ...

- 15:21 **Maxine McKew** **And what are the early indicators of how that's working?**
- 15:23 Lindsay Oades The early indicators are that it's extremely well received and they enjoy working with both their peers, but they also enjoy the fact that they're being equipped with a new skill, and this is a transitions project which is helping young people transition out of secondary school either to work or further study. So the early indicators are that it's really well received and they are learning things. From a research perspective they are learning things that they might not otherwise learn because of the open language which is occurring between the age peers.
- 15:57 **Maxine McKew** **So if schools are to if you like embed this notion of wellbeing, what's it going to look like Lindsay?**
- 16:06 Lindsay Oades Multiple factors. So firstly there's the curriculum factor. So is it in the curriculum? So it isn't just...
- 16:13 **Maxine McKew** **An add on**
- 16:13 Lindsay Oades an add on, it isn't just referring. When I say just, it is more that because the things I'm talking about are important. So it's more than counselling services, it's more than a subject or an occasional unit, it's actually looking at the curriculum, and does the curriculum serve the development of wellbeing knowledge capability and skills? And part of both the Federal and State

curriculums, they do have aspects of this in them, but as you well know, teachers are very busy, the curriculums are a very contested full space. I think one of the magic parts is pedagogy. Teachers are skilled professionals, they're creative, and enabling teachers to actually build wellbeing enhancement things into their pedagogy, and they do do that in part, but different teachers will receive that differently. Then I would come to the school community. So the idea of whole of school or whole of community approaches to wellbeing, which of course is something we're seeing in a project we have out of Maroondah City Council in Victoria in Australia, a cluster of twenty-one, it's now twenty-seven schools who are implementing positive education. So what that means is teachers, students and parents being trained in things related to how to develop your wellbeing, positive education, so they're learning about things like strengths, mindfulness, how to self regulate, optimism and what I would call wellbeing literacy. They're learning the language of wellbeing, so not just what it is but how to communicate about it, which is something I'm personally very interested in in our research programme on wellbeing literacy. So not only do I know something but I have the capabilities to communicate about it, which is really important. If you look at some of the initiatives we have – Are You Okay Day – a lot of them are communication capabilities. It's can we actually not just express our feelings but talk about life, meaning, purpose, most of the things we care about, and can we actually communicate about them effectively?

18:23 **Maxine McKew**

Now if we get this right, does this approach have the capacity to really try and stem if not reverse some of these awful statistics we see? You know so many Australians now with mental illness, a very high rate of youth suicide, can we start to see some change in these awful statistics?

18:41 Lindsay Oades

My simple answer to that is we tend to be seeing the same statistics or in some ways worse, but I often hear... if you turn on the television you hear the statistics and then you hear the phrase we need more services, and what that usually means is we need more medical services. I think medical services are

wonderful, however they're one part of the solution to a much bigger system.

19:08 **Maxine McKew** **So in fact there's too much of a default position to if you like a drug based solution?**

19:12 Lindsay Oades
Yeah, it's a default... it's default to a medical drug-based solution, so what I would call medicalisation of distress and it's certainly there, and don't get me wrong because this can be misinterpreted, these services are definitely needed, medical professionals are doing great things but that's for a particular part of the population at a particular stage in where things might have wrong. I'm saying much earlier, and I mean much earlier as in early childhood, are we equipping young people with these skills, wellbeing literacy, these broader skills about how to communicate about and for wellbeing, and that's deliberately very general because it encapsulates a lot of things, and is that seen as a legitimate part of curriculum pedagogy and making wellbeing everyone's business because we equip a population with those skills from the outset and not rely and not blame medical services. Medical services cannot be responsible for the population of the whole society or community nor should they be. But negativity bias - if we talk about suicide we immediately think of distress, illness, then we go to symptoms and medical and then we start to build systems and narratives the way we even talk about this becomes the default. And wellbeing sits about education and medicine, it's broader, it's part of our lived experience.

20:43 **Maxine McKew** **I think you've got a nice phrase about this which is teach rather than treat**

20:47 Lindsay Oades
Yeah teach rather than treat, and it's not don't treat, it's teach rather than treat.

20:52 **Maxine McKew** **Nonetheless, would I be right in thinking there's certain tension then between if you like the psychologists and psychiatrists in this area?**

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- 20:58 Lindsay Oades There is a tension, however, a lot of psychology and clinical psychology has unwittingly taken a fairly individual deficit based approach which is exactly what positive psychology is trying to question or not remove but add another option or add more than. So I often take this back to my own child. My son's about to turn thirteen. If I was to ask him what he wants out of his life, or if you were to ask me what I want for him, I wouldn't say I don't want him to have mental illness... I might say that but that's not what I would hope for, that's not what his life or what we're trying to grow our young children into. If you have a mental illness, yeah you definitely don't want to have a mental illness, but it's not the starting point of how we should be thinking about our young people. We want capable, flexible, happy young people, and if they have to not have mental illness or treat mental illness to get that we do it, but it shouldn't be the overarching narrative of how we position how we think about wellbeing, mental health for young people. This is why I take a capability approach – what can our young people be and do? And if they are capable they're less likely to have mental illness, but we need to shift our discourse... well I won't say upstairs, and see the medical thing as only part of what we're doing. So if we take again Victoria in Australia, in Melbourne there's discussion of putting GPs in every school in every state school, which I think is a good thing, but at the same time I'm worried that that will further medicalise how we talk about wellbeing and our lived experience. If young people are learning new words and those words are all deficit based, if they're learning anxiety, depression, suicide, they're learning all this language
- 22:47 **Maxine McKew** **And we pathologise yet another issue**
- 22:48 Lindsay Oades That's right and that's how they'll interpret their experience.
- 22:51 **Maxine McKew** **Let's come back to the education side of things. Here we are at Melbourne Graduate School of Education, to what extent now is this being embedded in initial teacher training?**
- 23:00 Lindsay Oades I would say not enough yet, but it is coming and there is a significant demand and interest from teachers in how to do this.
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It's being embedded in teaching training more than it was but there's still a way to go for the very same reason I mentioned before – the crowded curriculum, teachers are held accountable to teach lots of things.

23:20 **Maxine McKew** **But if you think about, I mean if they are incorporating this in their practice it's going to actually not make their job easier, but certainly there may not be the problems down the track.**

23:29 Lindsay Oades That's the hope and teachers are asking for you it. You know as you become a more experienced and skill teacher and you're able to manage a classroom but you start to realise that your role is you know traditionally we would have called it pastoral, now it's a heavily student wellbeing focused, and if we start to understand the relationship between student wellbeing and academic performance, teachers really start to realise how important this is.

22:55 **Maxine McKew** **What does the evidence show us on that by the way?**

23:56 Lindsay Oades Without going into too much detail, there is evidence that you know if you're functioning better, by definition you'll also perform better academically. However it can tip. That's in if you're too focused on your academics, you know perfectionism anxiety, but there is a relationship. So one of the things I do deliberately as I talk about wellbeing and performance rather than wellbeing or performance, because some people try and think well you can either perform really well academically or you can be really happy and have a good time. Actually you can do and should do both, and the evidence is you know wellbeing involves good functioning, therefore it involves good academic functioning.

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24:39 **Maxine McKew** **Well that's it for another Talking Teaching. This has been a production of the University of Melbourne and recorded at the Hallworth. Our sound engineer is Gavin Nebauer who's also composed the theme music you hear at the start and conclusion of this podcast. Bye for now.**

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