

Working towards wellbeing

LUCY HONE AND DENISE QUINLAN WITH JOSIE ROBERTS

The website of the New Zealand Institute of Wellbeing & Resilience (NZIWR) states that it is dedicated to increasing wellbeing for communities and organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand. Within education, its mission is to build whole-school wellbeing. *Set* contacted NZIWR to help give our readers insight into the research underpinning its activities. Co-directors Denise Quinlan and Lucy Hone put forward their recommendations for how schools and individual teachers can work to improve levels of wellbeing across staff and students.

Q: What is the New Zealand Institute of Wellbeing & Resilience?

The Institute was established in 2017 when a few of us pracademics (practising academic researchers) noticed the growing interest from a range of organisations in building wellbeing and resilience. As scientists, with PhDs in wellbeing, we wanted to ensure wellbeing promotion was backed by solid evidence and informed by best practice. Dr Denise Quinlan, at the University of Otago at the time, and Dr Lucy Hone, research associate at AUT University, therefore set up the Institute to offer training, consultancy, coaching, and resources. Very quickly it became apparent that the greatest demand came from schools wanting to put strategies in place to promote and protect hauora/wellbeing among their young people, and also concerned by the levels of stress and burnout among educators and principals too.

Since we set up the Institute we have been joined by educators, coaches, and academics across New Zealand wanting to support whole-school wellbeing,

and are lucky enough to have quickly built up a team of 12 regional trainers. One of the aspects of our work we value most is the collaboration it brings with other organisations working in the fields of restorative practice, change leadership, mindfulness, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Improving population wellbeing in Aotearoa NZ is a big challenge and we need everyone working together.

Q: How have you worked with schools or Communities of Learning (CoLs)?

We offer a range of programmes to schools, created in response to their needs and adapted to their context. Some schools have formed 3-year partnerships with us, some just one year, others ask us to run PLD for their teacher-only days, and others have sought advice on measurement and programme evaluation. Each school is different, and while we can definitely discern patterns in the process of taking a whole-school approach to wellbeing, the trick to long term sustainable meaningful change is to embed these strategies into each school or CoL's individual culture and context.

In 2017 we launched an annual wellbeing in education conference, Positive Education New Zealand (PENZ). Positive education is about applying the theories and practice from wellbeing science in educational contexts. Two hundred and seventy-five educators attended that first conference in Christchurch and we had to shut the April 2019 conference registrations off at 600.

We're also part of a Wellbeing Community of Practice with Grow Waitaha involving all 33 secondary schools across Greater Christchurch. Members of schools' hauora/wellbeing teams attend termly hui to increase knowledge and capacity in three key areas: wellbeing, change management, and cultural responsiveness. Each school works on their own identified wellbeing focus project; for some it may be the very beginning of their school's "wellbeing journey", while others bring considerable experience with programmes already in place—but all benefit from the sharing of practice. Evaluation from the 2018 Community of Practice has been used to further develop the programme. Priorities for schools in 2019 included themes of embedding wellbeing, adopting a culturally responsive lens for their wellbeing frameworks, ensuring wellbeing initiatives are sustainable, and underscoring the importance of support for those leading wellbeing in their schools. Feedback that the Community of Practice included only adults despite its focus being staff and student wellbeing, has been acted on. The 2019 Secondary Community of Practice brings staff and students from each participating school together to work on wellbeing with 70 teachers and 70 students attending the first hui in March. We believe this represents important progress in the way that school wellbeing is conceived, planned, and delivered. We are also partnering with Grow Waitaha in 2019 on a new initiative called the Wellbeing Activator, which provides termly PLD and the sharing of best practice for all education sectors, including primary and early childhood educators.

Tracking whole-school wellbeing progress is important. However, many schools find the prospect of measurement daunting. Many of the schools we are working with are at the start of their wellbeing journey and have conducted some baseline measurement but not follow-up. Other schools have established a wellbeing focus project, and are tracking progress made in that area. How schools choose to assess wellbeing varies widely. A comprehensive approach to wellbeing measurement will include assessment of whole-school wellbeing, individual staff and student wellbeing and wellbeing literacy, and evaluation of programmes/approaches undertaken. All of these assessments can include quantitative and qualitative data. In addition to encouraging schools to undertake some form of wellbeing assessment, we also remind them that

they can make effective use of the extensive, relevant data already held—including sick days, stand downs, existing climate surveys etc.

Q: What recent research has particularly influenced what you recommend to teachers?

We know that all humans benefit from having our innate psychological needs for autonomy, connectedness and competence met (Ryan and Deci, 2000). We always advocate that schools start with staff when working on wellbeing. It makes sense for a number of reasons: teachers need to understand the wellbeing strategies they may be asked to role model or teach; teacher wellbeing affects students too; and building educator wellbeing may help to address mental distress and attrition among educators. Research now shows that teacher wellbeing influences student wellbeing and student learning. Several studies have demonstrated positive effects on student wellbeing and/or performance associated with increasing educator wellbeing (Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011; Briner and Dewberry, 2007; Roffey, 2012).

Much of the work we do focuses on building strong supportive relationships and a sense of belonging within schools, drawing on the work of Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodick, Hattie, & Waters (2018), which identified that students' sense of teacher support was the strongest predictor of school belonging out of ten contributing variables (academic motivation, emotional stability, personal characteristics, parent support, peer support, teacher support, gender, race and ethnicity, extracurricular activities and environmental/school safety).

We also adhere to the strong evidence that encourages the explicit teaching of wellbeing skills to students (and staff). For example, a randomised controlled trial involving very large samples of students in three different countries found that explicitly training young people in certain wellbeing skills was significantly associated with increased wellbeing and improved academic results (Adler, 2016). The students had received a 15-month wellbeing curriculum that included tuition on mindfulness, empathy and altruism, self-awareness, coping with emotions, resilience, critical thinking, decision-making, communication, and creative thinking skills.

Several decades of cultural responsiveness research has shown that having one's identity acknowledged and valued in the learning environment supports learning and achievement (e.g. Bishop, 2008; Macfarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh, & Bateman, 2007; Macfarlane, Webber, McRae, & Cookson-Cox, 2014; Macfarlane, 2017; Webber, 2012). This work speaks directly to wellbeing

and underpins our approach to whole-school wellbeing. All humans want to be understood, valued, and cared for, and that includes being known and valued for our cultural identity. A strong sense of identity, belonging, and acceptance are fundamental precursors of wellbeing, as well as learning. We are grateful for the work of Sir Mason Durie whose whare tapa whā model of wellbeing is now part of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) and widely used in Aotearoa New Zealand. This work opens conversations in schools about the different dimensions of wellbeing (tinana/physical, hinengaro/mental, whānau/social, and wairua/spiritual), and demonstrates that culturally responsive models can be successfully used to work with all students.

There is a lot of research on specific interventions or strategies that support wellbeing, but less evidence on how these can most effectively be implemented in a school setting. We maintain close contact with our colleagues in New Zealand and Australia doing this work in schools and share our learning on what is effective and what is not.

Q: How do you recommend schools get started in building whole-school hauora/wellbeing?

We recommend schools take a strengths-based approach beginning with a wellbeing inquiry and audit focusing on what's currently being done to promote hauora/wellbeing. Schools already do much to promote student wellbeing—often without it being labelled as such—so it's vital to notice, value, and record what's already there. We've encouraged some COLs to use the ERO Wellbeing Indicators (2013) as a benchmark evaluation of current wellbeing practice. This can be done quite easily by creating a Google sheet: each of the nine Indicators occupies the rows, while the different school teams are represented in columns. Staff can build a picture of school-wide wellbeing practices by populating the sheet's cells in just ten minutes at a staff meeting and they can begin to spot strengths, gaps, or inconsistencies in wellbeing practice.

We often run Wellbeing Inquiries with schools (based on David Cooperrider's work in Appreciative Inquiry) to support them to identify their wellbeing strengths and opportunities from the outset—it helps staff to notice what's working well, what matters to them, and where they want to focus their change strategy. We also encourage schools to foster community engagement and grow knowledge and capacity for wellbeing among whānau, hapu, and iwi, as well as boards of trustees. Our evening sessions on resilience and wellbeing for parents and whānau are often used by schools as an opportunity to dig deeper into what wellbeing/hauora means for

their community and to strengthen school–whānau connections.

Just this year we've been commissioned by Taylor and Francis to write *The Educators' Guide to Whole-school Wellbeing: A Practical Guide to Getting Started, Best Practice Process, and Effective Implementation*. We hope to pack it full of useful case-studies sourced from New Zealand schools and lay it out as a workbook for SLTs to help them navigate wellbeing change in manageable chunks, driven by the needs of their individual context.

Q. What daily practice do you suggest teachers adopt to benefit their students and/or themselves?

Australian researcher and lecturer in teacher education, Kerri Howells, has demonstrated that when teachers practice gratitude in their teaching it increases job satisfaction and reduces burnout. Finding gratitude is about being able to shift our attention from what's wrong with our day to focus on what we are grateful for in our students, our classroom, or our teaching practice.

Another strategy that can substantially change a teacher's practice [and wellbeing] is to look for strengths in their students. Similar to gratitude, when we look for strengths we are shifting our attention away from what's wrong with a student and paying attention to what they do well and enjoy. We know that effective teacher–student relationships support student learning but we don't often discuss strategies to build connection with students, particularly the ones we find more challenging. Noticing strengths in a student can help foster respect for the student and make it easier to connect with the student as a person.

Our own published research, conducted with New Zealand primary and intermediate schools, demonstrated that, when teachers and students learned about strengths and “strengths spotting”, it led to enhanced student relatedness and class climate, as well as classroom engagement and wellbeing (Quinlan, Swain, Cameron, & Vella-Brodrick, 2015). Teachers who took part in our study said using a strengths classification gave them a common language for valuing students and they found it easier to notice what was right with their students. Subsequent work also established the importance of teacher “strengths spotting” (Quinlan, Swain, Gray, & Vella-Brodrick, 2018). A significant proportion of the benefits students received through the strengths programme were driven by teacher strengths spotting. In other words, having your teacher notice what is good and right about you, and tell you what they have noticed, made a significant difference to student engagement, wellbeing, and sense of relatedness in the classroom.

Sharing “good news” is another easy daily practice. We also often share the work from Shelly Gable and colleagues (2004) on Active Constructive Responding, which has been shown to build relationship and wellbeing. Gable’s studies demonstrated there were beneficial consequences for both parties from sharing good news (referred to as “capitalization” in psychology) where that good news is responded to in an active and constructive (as opposed to passive or destructive) way. That can be as simple as paying attention to the person sharing their good news with you, asking more about it, and acknowledging how they are feeling. Having active and constructive conversations is a really easy way to build educator-educator and student-educator relationships.

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▶ Dr **Denise Quinlan** delivered wellbeing and resilience training around the world with Prof. Martin Seligman and Dr Karen Reivich of the University of Pennsylvania (the international home of wellbeing and resilience science), before conducting her doctoral research on strengths and wellbeing with New Zealand schools.

▶ Dr **Lucy Hone** is committed to increasing population wellbeing in New Zealand and has researched models and measurement of wellbeing. She contributes regularly to New Zealand media on resilience and wellbeing. She is also the convenor and driving force behind the successful Positive Education New Zealand conference, now in its third year..