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# Conceptualising and Researching Student Wellbeing

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# Conceptualising and researching student wellbeing



**Geoff Masters**

*Australian Council for Educational Research*

Geoff Masters is Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). Professor Masters is an international authority in educational measurement and student assessment and has published extensively in these fields. Early in his career he developed the widely-used partial credit model for the statistical analysis of rating scales and professional judgements. Although much of his research has been focused on questions of validity and reliability in large-scale tests and surveys, Professor Masters has a special interest in using developments in modern measurement theory to construct improved tools for professional practitioners.

Schools have always seen it as part of their role to support and encourage children's all-round development, including their cognitive, interpersonal, social, aesthetic, physical, and moral/spiritual growth. Beyond the academic, schools have been committed to children's general 'wellbeing': in seeing children develop into well-rounded, healthy individuals who can take their place as informed, principled and engaged members of society. In fulfilling this role, schools have worked alongside and complemented families, churches and other institutions in the community.

In recent years Australian schools and education systems have made efforts to clarify the broad purposes of schooling and to introduce ways of better evaluating success in achieving those purposes. Statements of the intended outcomes of schooling invariably emphasise not only the development of knowledge, skills and understandings, but also children's social-emotional development and the development of

attitudes (e.g. towards others and towards civic institutions) and values (such as tolerance, justice and fairness).

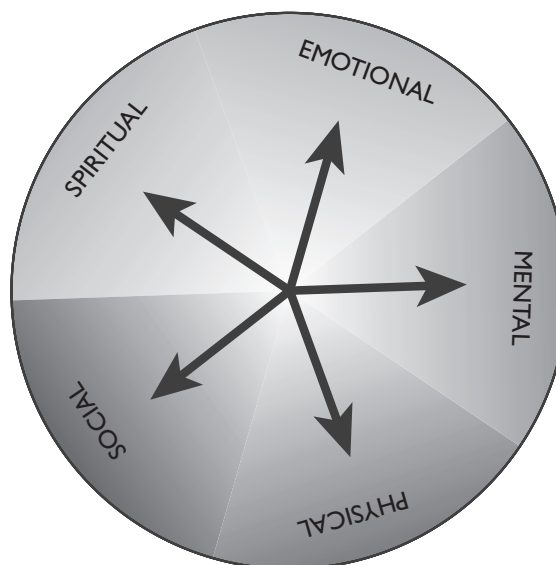
Various writers (e.g. Hettler, 1984) have identified aspects or 'dimensions' of general wellbeing. It is common in the literature to refer to 'health' and 'wellbeing'—usually distinguishing physical health from other aspects of students' wellbeing. For the purposes of this conference it is useful to identify five aspects of wellbeing.

Figure 1 is intended to communicate that:

- there are *multiple aspects* to general 'wellbeing';
- these aspects work together as part of a *balanced whole*; and
- a well-rounded individual will be *growing/developing* on all these fronts.

Although Figure 1 shows these five aspects as separate dimensions, they are in reality closely related. The development of student wellbeing depends on growth in all these areas, as well as on their increasing integration into a balanced whole:

**Figure 1** Five aspects of wellbeing



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*Wellness implies a lifestyle with a sense of balance. This sense of balance arises from a balance, or harmony, within each aspect or 'dimension' of life... Realistically, perfect harmony is almost impossible to achieve. However, the individual challenge is to seek this balance, calmly and constantly; it is the state which we continually move towards.*

(Lowdon et al., 1995, 6)

In his paper for this conference, Brian Hill observes that the word 'wellbeing' connotes a *state* of wellness: that 'wellbeing' could be interpreted as the absence of illness. In contrast, Figure 1 uses arrows to suggest that ongoing growth and development are possible in all aspects of a student's wellbeing. This feature of Figure 1 is consistent with Ryan and Travis's (1988) notion of a *wellness continuum* developed to emphasise that 'being well' is more than 'not being sick'. This point is made in a number of papers at this conference and is a key observation underlying Margaret Forster's paper on the measurement of students' social development at school. On any continuum of wellbeing it is possible to identify a level below which a student might be considered 'sick/unwell', but where such a level should be set is always a matter of judgement and may change over time and with context. As educators, our main interest is in establishing what can be done to support each child's further growth and development in all areas of their wellbeing.

Figure 1 also provides a framework for locating the various papers presented at this conference. Papers have been selected to address all five aspects of wellbeing. But the conference program does not pretend to provide coverage of the five aspects. Each paper is more

appropriately seen as a sample of research and/or thinking in one or more of the five areas: a point of light in a constellation of ongoing research into all aspects of student wellbeing.

## **Mental wellbeing**

Michael Sawyer reviews the results of a national survey conducted to identify and understand mental health problems among Australian children and adolescents, including Depressive Disorder, Conduct Disorder and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. This survey follows recent evidence of a decline in the mental health of adolescents in Great Britain since the 1970s. Fourteen percent of Australian children and adolescents display some kind of mental health problem. In his paper, Sawyer emphasises the key role that school-based services play in providing help for children with mental health disorders, and the importance of close cooperation between staff in health and education services.

John Toumbourou, Elizabeth Douglas and Alison Shortt investigate the role of parent social networks within the high school environment in influencing student health and wellbeing. Their study follows earlier research showing that health and behaviour problems such as depression and substance abuse are influenced by individual-level risk factors (e.g. temperament) and social-environmental factors operating at the level of schools, families, communities and peer groups. The study reveals small but potentially beneficial associations between parent interactions and student reported social environmental protection factors.

Ann Sanson and Diana Smart review some of the findings from the

Australian Temperament Project (ATP), a longitudinal study involving a large cohort of children in Victoria since their infancy in 1983. In the study, the term resilience refers to good adjustment despite risk. They identified a group who had a high number of risk factors at 11-12 years but did not become antisocial, and compared them to a group at equal risk but who were persistently antisocial, as well as a low-risk comparison group. Family factors (e.g. greater parental monitoring and improving parent-adolescent relationships), school experiences (e.g. relationships with teachers and perceived relevance of school) and other aspects of their peer relationships (e.g. more involvement in structured activities) appeared to help protect the resilient group.

## **Emotional wellbeing**

Michael Bernard reviews the results of a study that investigated the association between six social-emotional capabilities (work confidence, social confidence, persistence, organisation, getting along, emotional resilience) and the reading achievement and social-emotional wellbeing of five-year old children. His review concludes that kindergarten children who are 'at risk' of reading failure demonstrate delays not only in their academic skills, but also in their social-emotional development. There is a need for the development of sound pedagogies and curricula to assist early childhood educators in accelerating social-emotional capabilities, especially for 'at risk' children who enter pre-school one or more years delayed in development.

Judith Harackiewicz reports on an investigation of the importance of students' goals and interests in

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motivating their involvement in education. Her study concludes that the development of student interest is critical to long-term success in any academic endeavour. Students who are motivated by an interest in mastering subject matter are more likely to develop a long-term interest in an area of study. Students whose primary motivation is to demonstrate competence relative to others are more likely to achieve high results. Only students who adopt both goals are likely to achieve both outcomes.

Michael Carr-Gregg examines the state of Australian parenting in 2004 and suggests that there is a growing crisis which is adversely impacting upon the normal psychological growth and development of young people. The paper suggests some of the reasons for this and suggests some solutions.

Julie McMillan and Kylie Hillman use data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth to investigate the relationship between young people's post-school experiences (education, training, labour market) and their levels of emotional wellbeing. Their study identifies significantly lower levels of wellbeing among young people who are unemployed or not in the labour force.

## **Spiritual wellbeing**

Brian Hill explores the role of values in wellbeing. If a person's framework of meaning disintegrates—in the face of neglect, abuse or despair—then self-harm can be a result. Because moral principles derive their justifications from larger frameworks of meaning, it is important to build into the school curriculum opportunities for students to encounter and examine such frameworks. Australian state schools have been encouraged to factor the

religious variable out of the curriculum, thereby leaving values education in free fall. If a balanced education is our goal, then this is counter-productive.

## **Physical wellbeing**

Kathy Rowe, Ken Rowe and Jan Pollard observe that approximately nine per cent of school children have both literacy and externalizing behaviour problems. Many of these children are referred to paediatricians and psychologists. Some also are referred to audiologists in the belief that children's difficulties in listening and following instructions may be due to hearing problems. Although most of these children return normal audiograms, they continue to experience functional auditory processing (AP) difficulties in terms of reduced ability to hold, sequence and process accurately what is heard. This paper makes clear the importance of AP screening and teacher professional development in addressing auditory processing difficulties.

## **Social wellbeing**

John Ainley explores the notion of interdependence and the role of individual and school influences in building healthy relationships with other individuals, groups and institutions. The development of appropriate ways of relating to others is a central feature of policy statements and school documents, and an important component of social wellbeing. Ainley reports the results of a national survey of Year 5 and Year 10 students that investigated three aspects of social wellbeing: relating to others; commitment to community wellbeing; and adherence to rules and conventions. The study reveals

substantial disengagement from social concerns by boys between Year 5 and Year 10. The paper considers how schools, through the kinds of climates they provide, can shape the social development of students.

Ramon Lewis explores levels of responsibility in students and the impact of different kinds of discipline styles in developing an increased sense of responsibility. The development of responsible behaviour in children is important in preparing students to become responsible citizens. Lewis's study concludes that more responsible classes are associated with teachers who are less abusive and punishment oriented and who are seen as more likely to discuss misbehaviour with their students, involve students in decision-making, hint when students misbehave and recognise appropriate student behaviour.

Margaret Forster outlines challenges in measuring and monitoring the social development of young people. Drawing on a range of ACER studies in recent years, she identifies three major challenges. These include the challenge of deciding what to measure: should social and emotional growth be conceptualised as increasing understanding of, and insight into, social issues, or should it be conceptualised as increasingly appropriate and acceptable social behaviours and responses? The paper reviews recent work to assess both understandings and behaviours and discusses the need for caution in drawing inferences about one from the other.

## **Summary**

There are multiple aspects or dimensions to general wellbeing. For the purposes of this conference it is convenient to identify five areas of wellbeing: mental,

emotional, spiritual, physical, and social. These five areas are overlapping and inter-related, but together provide a useful framework for thinking about students' growth and development as healthy, well-rounded individuals. Although it is sometimes useful to identify a level below which students can be considered sick/unwell, the dimensions of wellbeing addressed at this conference are probably best thought of as continua along which ongoing growth and development are possible.

The papers presented at this year's Research Conference provide insight into what is being learnt from research about effective ways of supporting student wellbeing. The papers are drawn from a range of fields and use a variety of methodologies appropriate to the multi-faceted nature of general wellbeing. There are many lessons for schools in the research reported here, including suggestions that greater attention be given to:

- early screening and detection of problems;
- better professional training, especially for teachers in the early years of school;
- greater collaboration among agencies (across health and education);
- greater parental involvement and support;
- school curricula that address all areas of wellbeing; and
- classroom and school climates that are more supportive of social development;

Research evidence of the kind reported at this conference is capable of informing and enhancing efforts to raise levels of general wellbeing and learning in our schools.

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