Welcome to Issue Twelve of this occasional papers series.

- Lesley Harrison, Hunter Institute of Mental Health

Welcome to the winter 2008 issue of Education Connect.

In recent months we have been visiting universities across the country primarily to disseminate and demonstrate the new Response Ability early childhood and primary resources for teacher educators. These new materials have been very well received by lecturers and tutors across Australia.

We have also continued to support teacher educators in their use of the secondary resources and the inclusion of social and emotional wellbeing issues in teacher education.

During our travel we have been overwhelmed with the positive feedback relating to Education Connect. It seems to be a unanimous view that this publication continues to be useful, readable and relevant for teacher educators and students.

Since our last edition, team members have represented the ResponseAbility initiative at two conferences. Delegates attended the ATEA Conference in Maroochydore and the World Education Forum in Adelaide where we enjoyed meeting with many of our regular contacts, meeting new people, networking and sharing ideas. We are also sending members of the team to the Margins to Mainstream mental health conference in Melbourne in September.

This issue presents the work of four authors. Dr Martin Seligman, well known lecturer and author on wellbeing matters from the University of Pennsylvania, is spending 2008 in Australia, hosted by Geelong Grammar School. The school has recently opened its Wellbeing Centre and has adopted a new approach to teaching and learning using Positive Psychology. In his article, Dr Seligman explains how and why wellbeing should be taught in schools and explains what we mean by happiness in an educational context, with specific reference to the Geelong Grammar initiative.

Dr Michael Nagel from the University of the Sunshine Coast addresses the scientific indicators of stress. He categorises stress and stressors and examines how they evoke different responses.

Wellbeing Centre and has adopted a new approach to teaching and learning using Positive Psychology.

Shelley Thornton from Southern Cross University introduces us to her research project which involves the tracking of teacher attitudes, values and beliefs regarding children’s social and emotional wellbeing. At this early stage in her research, Shelley’s work unearths some of the barriers that teachers face when addressing social and emotional wellbeing. At the same time, however, she proposes some of the potential positive outcomes.

Mr Paul Williams, Principal of St Catherine’s School at Singleton NSW describes the strategies being implemented to address wellbeing issues in this K-12 setting. Like Geelong’s program, this one considers the overall wellness of students and staff with a strong emphasis on achieving balance and a recognition of social and emotional wellbeing in the school community.

As always, our aim is to generate discussion among teacher educators and their students.

Articles from lecturers and educators that are relevant to social and emotional wellbeing in education are always welcome for submission. Our next edition is due for publication in November.
Introduction

There is a growing awareness and realisation that the development of social and emotional wellbeing must be part of the wider agenda of educating students, pre-service teachers and teachers alike. One of the most compelling arguments for this sort of endeavour is a concurrent growth of research identifying the worrying connection between stress and cognitive impairment. Moreover, overall physical health is also influenced by emotional wellbeing and current estimates suggest that by 2020, stress related deaths will be second only to cardio-vascular disease in most western countries (Lupien, 2008). Arguably, stress may also have links to cardio-vascular illness. Paradoxically, emotional wellbeing and the development of emotional intelligence are often placed on the periphery of educational and institutional agendas. This article lays out a neuroscientific foundation for developing, advocating and promoting programs that focus on emotional wellbeing as a cornerstone to any educational endeavour. The focus of evidence centres primarily on the interplay of stress, cognition and cognitive development.

What is stress?

Stress is a difficult concept to define given the individual variation in what one might experience as being stressful. From a neurobiological perspective stress is an adaptive response to some environmental stimuli triggering the brain into action. As advances in scientific research continue, the picture being painted in relation to the consequences of stress on the brain is not a pretty one. The emotional and physical responses an individual has to stress are set in motion by a series of chemical releases and reactions. Therein lies a significant problem. Too much stress, or more worryingly a chronic overreaction to stress, overloads the brain with powerful hormones that evolution designed for short-term duty in emergency situations only. The cumulative effects of these hormones have been shown to damage parts of the brain and kill certain brain cells (McEwen, 2006). Moreover, the day-to-day cumulative realities of life can evolve into stressors resulting in the brain activating the stress response.

All people deal with various stressors throughout their lives and develop coping mechanisms for dealing with stress as part of growth and maturation. Arguably, most adults believe that they suffer the effects of stress to a greater degree than children or the elderly. After all, what does a ‘carefree’ child without adult responsibilities, or a senior citizen who has left many responsibilities behind, have to be stressed about? The reality, however, is that stress can occur throughout the lifespan. Popular definitions of stress do not always take into account the scientific literature on how the mind and body determine a stressful event and how stress impacts on young and old brains. All too often the view of stress is narrowly focussed on certain life pressures, with little regard for how stress actually affects different age groups.

Life is busy! How many times have you defined how you are or how life is going with the word ‘busy’? Many people define stress as dealing with the busyness of life or ‘time pressure’, yet research tells us that time pressure is a consequence of stress and not its cause (Lupien et al., 2007). In reality, stress is a highly individual experience that depends on specific psychological determinants to ignite a stress response in the brain and throughout the body (Lupien et al., 2007). Physiologically speaking, a stress response is triggered when individuals face situations that are threatening, novel, unpredictable, or where an individual feels like they do not have control over the situation (Mason, 1968; McEwen, 2002; Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004; Lupien et al., 2007). While responses can be similar for children and adults alike, the trigger might be entirely different. For example, while the ‘downsizing’ of a company engages a stress reaction in an adult, a similar stress reaction can happen to a child on their first day of school. In fact, because the nervous system continues to mature throughout childhood and adolescence, young people’s brains may be more vulnerable to the impact of stress than mature adult brains.
Children and Stress

In order to understand how stress can be very detrimental to children and students, it is important to have some understanding of what happens to the body when the brain triggers a stress response. It is equally important to bear in mind that full maturation of the brain does not happen until the second decade of life and the developing brain may be far more sensitive to the chemical processes involved while mediating a stressful event.

In itself, stress and stressors can be characterised as falling into two categories: **absolute** and **relative**. Absolute stressors are ‘real’ threats to all while relative stressors are events or situations interpreted as being threatening, novel, unpredictable or out of one’s control (Lupien et al., 2007). An earthquake is a good example of an absolute stressor while a transit strike could be characterised as a relative stressor; those who rely on public transport would have to deal with the unpredictability and loss of control they might experience in trying to get to work. Importantly, absolute stressors evoke the greatest physiological response but are rare. Relative stressors, on the other hand, will have variations in physiological responses, given that such responses are dependent on the individual and the mechanisms individuals have in place to help them cope with any situation. However, when relative stressors do engage a physiological response, the effects of this can be very problematic given what happens to the body and mind.

When a situation is interpreted as stressful, it triggers a system in the brain that tells the hypothalamus to release chemicals that initiate a series of reactions. These reactions signal the fight or flight response which results in an increased flow of oxygen to the muscles, requiring the heart and respiratory system to work harder. Furthermore, during the fight or flight response, blood vessels in the skin may constrict to diminish any bleeding in case of injury, stored carbohydrates in the body are liquidated to provide sufficient fuel for any measure of response and the immune system may become enhanced in preparation for whatever part of the body is injured (McEwen, 2002). Given the reactive nature of the brain to stress it should be apparent that a prolonged or continuous stress response to the relative stressors around us may have negative impacts over the long term. Now consider the impact of stress on those whose brain is still developing and maturing.

There is a large body of research that tells us that children who live in chronically stressful environments may be at greater risk of developing a variety of disorders throughout their lifetime (see for example Shore, 1997). There is also a growing body of neuro-scientific research telling us that the powerful chemicals designed for our survival in stressful situations can actually
impact on the normal growth and development of very important regions of the brain, especially during the early stages of life and through adolescence (McEwen, 2006; Lupien et al., 2007). In some ways children live in a less stable, more stressful environment than decades ago with higher divorce rates, variations in family structures, increased family mobility, pressure from society to perform and look good, access to globalisation and increasingly easier access to drugs and alcohol (Bhindi & Hough, 2006).

To that end, it could be argued that the relative stressors of childhood and adolescence today may be of greater frequency and more pronounced than any other time in modern history. That’s the bad news… the good news is that there are things we can do to help children and adults alike manage the responses to stressful situations.

**Reducing Stress and Enhancing Emotional Wellbeing**

One of the first things educators and those interested in emotional wellbeing need to do is be able to identify sources of relative stress and perhaps the greatest conduit for such information would be to look at what children and students identify as stressful. Remember, relative stressors are individualistic in nature and as such require some measure of scrutiny and differentiation. At times, much of what might be contributing to student stress in any educational environment is either misread or neglected by educationalists. In a world of ever increasing educational accountability coupled with ambiguous notions of preparing for the future, ‘schooling’ has become increasingly competitive, assessment oriented and task and test driven. Empirically and anecdotally, it appears that education’s growing preoccupation with ‘academic’ success has marginalised many, diminished creativity and contributed to stress and anxiety related disorders (Goleman, 1995; Kohn, 1999; Robinson, 2001). Unfortunately, the children who experience stress and anxiety disorders are reliant on school in order to learn and feel safe.

It is also important to remember that many sources of stress exist outside of the boundaries of educational institutions and are beyond the day-to-day interactions of teachers, administrators and students. This is arguably all the more reason why programs focussing on emotional wellbeing and emotional literacy should be at the cornerstone of educational endeavour. Students of all ages need the information and skills to understand the power of the emotional part of their psyche and how to deal with stress. Teachers and administrators alike could also learn a great deal about how emotions impact on cognition and learning as well as developing greater insight into their own emotions and relative stressors. Parents would also benefit from knowing how to create emotional environments that foster growth and enhance wellbeing.

Given the growth in our understanding of the human brain, stress and learning, educational institutions and professionals will need to embrace new findings about emotion and work to develop and enhance wellbeing. As we continue to learn how the mind and body work together we must also continue to rethink what we do and how we do it. Perhaps Daniel Goleman (1995, p.287) articulates this most eloquently by asking, “*shouldn’t we be teaching these most essential skills for life to every child – now more than ever? And if not now, when?*”

**References**

Recently, I had the opportunity to spend three weeks in South Korea as a member of an Australian delegation representing the Asia Education Foundation (AEF). The program was sponsored and promoted by the Korea Foundation, Korea University and the AEF. Our work included lectures and workshops at Korea University in Seoul, time in schools, teaching, visits to places of cultural and historical significance, exposure to industry and engagement with South Korean people.

Prominent on the South Korean flag is the symbol of balance, the Yin and the Yang. This reminded me of our own situation in the Hunter Valley and the need to address some ‘balance’ issues.

At St Catherine’s in Singleton NSW the central focus of our wellbeing program across the school is the importance of balance. We recognise some of the significant psychological, physiological and sociological conditions and issues confronting our young people. In response we are implementing several programs that address the balance across these three areas.

**Physiological Issues**

There is a great deal of concern in Australia regarding obesity in children and young people. While there is some opinion that opposes this view it would seem to us in the local context that many young people and parents are struggling with issues of food selection, a lack of exercise and sedentary lifestyles.

We frequently hear the claim of being ‘time poor’. Is one response to this to make up time by indulging in fast food, at a considerable physical cost?

The potential impact of obesity is alarming with an increase in the risks of Type 2 Diabetes, heart disease and respiratory conditions. Poor physical health also impacts on mental health.

**How we address this:**

We ensure, through the curriculum, that students are well informed of the need to nurture and safeguard a healthy mind, body and spirit. Most obviously this is achieved through Personal Development, Health and Physical Education lessons, but also through the following:

- We promote involvement in activities such as the 10,000 Steps program for staff and senior students and enter into the annual City to Surf in Sydney each August.
- Staff are encouraged to seek a balanced lifestyle and to be positive role models to our students.
- The school is working in partnership with Dr Phil Morgan from the University of Newcastle on the agriculture program which promotes the appreciation of natural foods. Known as The Edible Schoolyard Project, it promotes knowledge and understanding of food through practical implementation.

As teachers we are aware of what seems to be an increase in diagnosed and suspected cases of depression among our youth. Five years ago our concerns would have been mostly with senior students yet now we seem to witness increasingly younger cases.

Peer conformity is a perennial issue. The culture of ‘acceptance’ is not easily understood by many young people, nor their parents, especially when the values and expectations of peer conformity are often in direct contrast to those of home and school. Intrinsic to this concept are issues relating to self-esteem, respect, feeling valued, goal setting and social acceptance.

Our staff are aware that bullying and victimisation, particularly cyber bullying, are becoming more common. Harassment is no longer restricted to the playground but can now be expressed through technology to a much broader audience.

Many of our students experience genuine hardship as they attempt to understand the adjustments needed to live in a home where there is a parent with a mental health condition. We see young people in our region living with the demands of such home situations, and this issue is also reflected in national programs and statistics. Australian surveys have found that between 29% and 35% of mental health services clients are female parents.
of dependant children under the age of 18 (COPMI: Children of Parents with a Mental Illness website www.copmi.net.au).

**How we address this:**

We ensure that psychological wellbeing programs in our school are well resourced and that staff are provided with the necessary professional development to assist students to build resilience, confidence and self-esteem.

We use elements of programs such as *You Can Do It*, *Real Justice*, *Rock and Water* and *MindMatters*.

Our staff are well informed about how our Welfare Team is working together to provide a co-ordinated approach to dealing with issues relating to mental health. This includes recent professional development provided by Dr Roger Peters on *Building Resilience* within the school community.

We aim to actively promote our College motto, *For Harmony, Faith and Integrity*. This speaks of inclusivity, acceptance, recognising individual difference and supporting those who can be or are marginalised.

Opportunities are provided for students to make amends when there has been hurt. We endeavour to develop and enhance a genuine sense of partnership with parents. This has been and continues to be an essential foundation of the *Real Justice* program.

The staff induction and performance evaluation processes give us the opportunity to remind staff of their professional responsibilities and the established lines of communication.

**Sociological Issues**

In our community we are witnessing issues surrounding problematic attitudes to alcohol, including alcohol abuse by children as young as 14.

Some of us are asking if we have lost a sense of working for ‘the common good’. Has our desire for self-improvement come at a cost of improving the quality of life for our neighbours and community?

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Students from St Catherine’s College Singleton work on The Edible Schoolyard Project. Photograph courtesy of Robert Whiteman of Whiteman Photography.

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I often reflect that the most important priority for some of our senior students seems to be their part time job (of up to 20 hours per week) with the goal to buy a car and sustain an ‘active’ social life.

As a staff we are witnessing the ‘me’ mentality more and more. Our response is that we feel the need to address this issue with young people and demonstrate to them that we cannot always have what we want (and now).

**How we address this:**

Professional development for parents is provided through presentations such as *Assertive Parenting* with Michael Grose.

Information evenings and seminars are offered for our parent community with reference to strategies for working with young people where access to alcohol is prevalent and accepted. Most recently such workshops have been delivered by *Hunter Life Education*.

We work collaboratively with others in the community including Singleton High School in a joint *Health and Well Being* program which involves staff and students from both schools. Elements of this include workshops on a variety of issues such as substance use, drink driving, decision-making, goal setting, exercise and relaxation strategies.

Engagement with civic leaders and our Police Liaison Officer is undertaken to make our students more aware of the dangers of driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol. To complement this each year we offer students access to the *Motivational Media* presentation – a large screen film presentation brought to schools all over the country that aims to inspire and motivate students regarding their goals for the future.

The Commonwealth Government’s *Values Education Framework* is actively adopted in all school programs from Kindergarten through to Year 12.

We have initiated and encouraged programs to engage our students in social justice. This includes opportunities that enhance student knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced by our Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people. We explore the plight of those who are marginalised in our local and wider communities and adopt programs that promote a greater awareness of Australia as a multicultural community.

To complement this focus on diversity and inclusion we select electives from the core Human Society and its Environment curriculum that expand our students’ knowledge and understanding of neighbouring countries.

All of these measures mark a starting point. There is still room for improvement and some of the future considerations we have are:

**Future Directions**

We would like to hold more parent forums on healthy canteens, *The Edible Schoolyard Project* and Health and Wellbeing classes. We would also like to further enhance the resilience of young people in our community.

We aim to further explore opportunities for relevant and appropriate professional development of our staff in order to provide a deeper knowledge and understanding of how to address concerns when working with our young people.

We intend to network more effectively with mental health professionals to promote a more collaborative community approach.

We would like to continue to build a community perspective in response to issues surrounding young people and drink driving. This would involve all key stakeholders: parents, students, civic leaders, police, publicans and legal personnel.

Another goal is to promote and see extended through the school the concept of Service Learning and ensure its alignment to the curriculum. The aim is to nurture a belief that it is through connections and service that we can build a more sustainable and energised community.

Finally our goal is to initiate an annual student ‘Youth Forum’ whereby students from all of the regional school communities have the opportunity to present their views and ideas on topics of significance. Action plans would then be developed to address these concerns.

**Conclusion**

In summary, we see that a focus on wellbeing across the school is an important issue in promoting positive outcomes for our children and young people and encourage other schools do likewise.
In two words or less, what do you most want for your children?
If you are like the hundreds of Australian parents I have asked, you responded, “Happiness,” “Confidence,” “Contentment,” “Balance,” “Good Stuff,” “Kindness,” “Health,” “Satisfaction,” and the like. In short, well being.

In two words or less, what do schools teach? If you are like other Australians, you responded, “Achievement,” “Thinking Skills,” “Success,” “Conformity,” “Literacy,” “Math,” “Discipline” and the like. In short, accomplishment.

Notice that there is no overlap between the two lists. The schooling of children has, for more than century, been about accomplishment, the avenue into the world of adult work. I am all for accomplishment, success, literacy, and discipline, but imagine if schools could, without compromising either, teach both the skills of well being and the skills of achievement. Imagine Positive Education.

Should Wellbeing be Taught in School?

Australia, like every wealthy nation on the planet, is in the middle of an epidemic of depression. Depression is about ten times more common now than it was fifty years ago. It now ravages teenage: fifty years ago the average age of first onset was about thirty. Now the first onset is below age fifteen. Suicide, particularly among young men in Australia, is alarmingly common.

This is a paradox, particularly for those of you who believe that well being is environmental. You have to be blinded by ideology not to see that almost everything is better now than it was fifty years ago: there is about three times more actual purchasing power, houses are much bigger, there are many more cars, and clothes are more attractive.

Progress has not been limited to the material: there is more education, more music, more women’s rights, less racism, less pollution, fewer tyrants, more entertainment, more books and fewer soldiers dying on the battlefield.

Everything is better, that is, everything except human morale. There is much more depression, much younger, and average individual and average national happiness, which has been measured competently for half a century, has gone up very little, if at all. The average Australian is no more satisfied with life than he was before Australia’s fifteen unbroken years of increasing prosperity.

Why this is is a matter of contention. It is certainly not biological or genetic. Nor is it ecological (the Old Order Amish who live thirty miles down the road from me in Philadelphia have only one-tenth our rate of depression, even though they breathe the same air, drink the same water, and make the food we eat). It has something to do with modernity and perhaps with what we call “prosperity.”

What is Happiness?

“Happiness” is too worn and too weary a term to be of much scientific use, and my discipline, Positive Psychology, divides it into three very different realms, each of which is measurable and most importantly, each of which is skill-based and can be taught. The first is hedonic: positive emotion. A life led around having as much of this good stuff as possible, is the “Pleasant Life.” The second, much closer to what Thomas Jefferson and Aristotle were after, is the state of flow, and a life led around it is the “Engaged Life.” Flow consists in a loss of self-consciousness, time stopping for you, being “one with the music.” Importantly it seems to be the opposite of positive emotion: when one is totally absorbed, no thoughts or feelings are present—even though one says afterward “that was fun.” And while there are shortcuts to positive emotion—you can take drugs, masturbate, watch television, or go shopping—there are no shortcuts to flow. Flow only occurs when you deploy your highest strengths and talents to meet the challenges that come your way.

The third realm that Positive Psychology studies is the one with the best intellectual provenance, the Meaningful Life. Flow and positive emotion can be had in individual pursuits, but not meaning or purpose. Meaning consists in knowing what your highest strengths are, and then using them to belong to and serve something you believe is larger than the self.
Positive Psychology, I want to emphasize, is an empirical research endeavor and not mere grandmotherly common sense. Among its surprising recent findings:

- Optimistic people are much less likely to die of heart attacks than pessimists, controlling for all known physical risk factors.
- Women who display genuine (Duchenne) smiles to the photographer at age eighteen go on to have fewer divorces and more marital satisfaction than those who display fake smiles.
- Externalities (e.g., weather, money, health, marriage, religion) totalled together account for no more than 15% of the variance in life satisfaction.
- The pursuit of meaning and engagement are much more predictive of life satisfaction than the pursuit of pleasure.
- Economically flourishing corporate teams have a ratio of at least 2.9 to 1 of positive statements to negative statements in business meetings, whereas stagnating teams have a much lower ratio; flourishing marriages, however, require a ratio of at least 5:1.
- Self-discipline is twice as good a predictor of high school grades as IQ.

- Happy teenagers go on to earn very substantially more income fifteen years later than less happy teenagers, equating for income, grades, and other obvious factors.
- How you celebrate good events that happen to your spouse is a better predictor of future love and commitment than how you respond to bad events.
- People experience more “flow” at work than at home.

So we have learned a fair amount about positive emotion, engagement, and meaning. These states are valuable in their own right and they fight the epidemic of depression. So I conclude that they should be taught in school. But can they?

**Can Well Being Be Taught in School?**

I spent much of my academic career working on misery: depression, suicide, trauma, anger, and anxiety. I was particularly interested in how to relieve these states and whenever I could I used the gold standard for deciding if a treatment, such as cognitive therapy or Prozac, actually works: random assignment placebo controlled testing is that gold standard. When I turned to Positive Psychology ten years ago, I wondered what treatments actually make people lastingly happier.

From the Buddha to modern Pop Psychology there have been more than a hundred suggestions about how to do this, but most I suspected were placebos. It occurred to me that the very same gold standard could be applied to the question of what makes people lastingly happier.

One thousand new people register at my free website www.authentichappiness.org every day and take the validated questionnaires about their positive emotion, engagement, and meaning.

(Where, for example, do you rank on the strength of kindness relative to Australian women?)

I would occasionally put up an “exercises” link, and people who went there were given one exercise to do for a week and then probed once a month for happiness and depression. From these studies, involving more than a thousand people from all over the world, we got a good idea of what worked and what did not work to raise happiness and lower depression nontransiently. About a dozen exercises have proven, by the gold standard, to work.

Two examples, each of which compared to placebo, raise happiness and lower depression for at least six months:
**Three Good Things:**

Every night for one week, set aside 10 minutes before you go to bed. Use that time to write down three things that went really well on that day and why they went well. The three things you list can be relatively small in importance (“My husband picked up my favorite ice cream for dessert on the way home from work today”) or relatively large in importance (“My sister just gave birth to a healthy baby boy”). Next to each positive event in your list, answer the question, “Why did this good thing happen?”

**Using Signature Strengths in a New Way:**

Honesty. Loyalty. Perseverance. Creativity. Kindness. Wisdom. Courage. Fairness. These and about 16 other character strengths are valued in almost every culture in the world. We believe that people can get more satisfaction out of life if they learn to identify which of these character strengths they possess in abundance and then use them as much as possible whether working, loving, or playing. So take the VIA Signature Strengths test (www.authentichappiness.org) and during the next week try to use your signature strengths more often.

In parallel with testing of individual happiness-raising and depression-lowering exercises on the web, we have spent more than ten years testing these in the flesh with school children. We teach teachers to first use the exercises in their own lives and then to teach them to middle school children. In thirteen replications around the world, researchers find that these resilience exercises halve the rate of depression as the children go through puberty and they lower the rate of conduct problems as well.

So I conclude that well being **should be taught and can be taught** in school.

**Australia’s Edge**

If anything comes of the notion of Positive Education—education for both well being and for accomplishment—it will rightly be said that it began in Australia. The Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania has been training teachers in these techniques for a decade. But we never before had an entire school - from the classrooms to the playing fields to the houses to the counseling center - to infuse. A year ago, one of Australia’s great schools, Geelong Grammar, invited us to do exactly this. So my wife, Mandy, four of our seven children, and I have been living at Geelong Grammar School since January.

We brought with us Dr. Karen Reivich, author of the Resilience Factor, and fifteen of my faculty for an intensive two-week training of one hundred of Geelong Grammar’s staff - who gave up their summer holiday to study with us. We taught them the principles of positive psychology, of resilience, and how to use the validated interventions in their own lives and the lives of their students. Because the Geelong Grammar staff has many master teachers, we did not presume to set out rigid curricula for them. Rather it became their job to create courses which bring positive psychology to the teaching of history or literature, to the cricket pitch, and to pastoral counseling. Stand-alone courses for year ten and for Timbertop (year nine) have begun. Over the course of 2008 another dozen of the world’s leading researchers in Positive Psychology are visiting the school to teach faculty and students. 2009 will see the teaching of Positive Psychology along the full spectrum of Geelong Grammar’s activities.

Our hope is that this will be the seed crystal of Positive Education worldwide, and we aim in January 2009 to train a large cohort of selected Australian state and private school teachers.

**Why Now?**

When nations are at war, poor, in famine, or in civil turmoil, it is natural that their institutions should be about defense and damage, about minimizing the disabling conditions of life. When nations are wealthy, at peace, and in relative harmony, however, they, like Florence of the fifteenth century, turn to what makes life worth living, to building the enabling conditions of life.

What is all Australia’s wealth for? Surely not just to produce more wealth. Gross domestic product (GDP) was, one hundred years ago, a good first approximation to how well a nation was doing. Now, however, every time Australia builds a prison, every time there is a divorce or a suicide, the GDP goes up. The aim of wealth should be to produce more well being. General well being - how much positive emotion, how much engagement at work, how much meaning in life our citizens have - is validly quantifiable and it complements GDP. Public policy can be aimed at increasing general well being and the successes or failures of policy can be measured against this standard. Prosperity-as-usual has been equated with wealth. The time has come for a new prosperity, a prosperity that combines wellbeing with wealth. Learning to value this new prosperity must start early - in the formative years of schooling - and it is this new prosperity, kindled by positive education that Australia can now choose.
Introduction

An action research project is being facilitated that looks into teachers’ attitudes, values and beliefs regarding children’s social and emotional wellbeing across three schools located in northern New South Wales. This project seeks to identify how teachers presently support children’s mental wellbeing and then, through action research processes, examine the changes that occur in primary classroom practices when teachers focus on developing social and emotional competencies in children. This story began in 2007 when a small group of teachers were recruited who wanted to make a difference by engaging collaboratively and actively around this issue.

In early discussions with this small group of teachers they expressed concerns regarding children’s mental wellbeing issues and the way they manifest in their classrooms, commenting on issues such as child anxiety; lack of resilience; parental neglect and support; students’ lack of motivation to learn; ADHD; and bullying.

When asked about the kinds of social and emotional skills they hope to see in children these teachers mentioned: ‘knowing when they have a problem’; ‘taking on board positive comments’; ‘being realistic and knowing they are not great at everything’; and ‘giving appropriate understanding and listening to themselves and to others’.

Teachers tentatively acknowledge having some understandings of mental wellbeing issues, and having experimented with different strategies. However, there is evidently a considerable need to improve the capacity for teachers to engage more confidently in promoting mental wellbeing in children.

This article focuses on the initial phase of the research and particularly the concerns expressed by teachers in relation to promoting and improving children’s mental wellbeing.

Foundations of the Research

The research includes both interpretative and critical theoretical approaches and has been informed by a social and emotional learning lens which focuses on self awareness and awareness of others (empathy); positive attitudes and values (managing their emotions); responsible decision making (motivation) and social interaction skills (Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, & Seigle, 2004; Payton et al., 2000). Discourse around teachers’ concerns is intended to raise consciousness of the topic and develop a common language amongst the staff.

The social and emotional learning framework (see Fig 1) has been developed from the work of Zins et al., (2004) and England’s Primary National Strategy called Excellence and Enjoyment: Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning. It provides a way of supporting teachers to think about the skills and actions that children call on to communicate and build relationships. It explains what these skills look like for teachers and children, providing a means of identifying mental wellbeing in children.

Through meetings, focus group discussions and a questionnaire, the study has identified a number of concerns that underpin the way teachers participating in the study view the topic of children’s mental wellbeing.

Childhood and Behaviour

Firstly, teachers openly discussed what children’s behaviour should encompass and what childhood should be about. Teachers expressed the view that children should have a social conscience; should have independent thinking and action; should focus on self acceptance versus peer opinion and should feel self worth and know they are valued when they come to school.

The concept of children’s mental wellbeing was thought of as a dynamic state with characteristics described by teachers grouped in two interrelated areas, a child’s inner world eg. ‘use of emotional self talk as a monitoring device’ and a child’s outer world eg. ‘ability to cope with everyday things rationally’. As one teacher so aptly put it, ‘a child’s behaviour or ways of managing emotion does not necessarily indicate a mental wellbeing issue’. This comment, I believe, is acknowledging that teacher judgment may disadvantage the child and precipitate
unnecessary confrontation and intervention.

The view from one participant that ‘as teachers we can help children to develop skills to enhance their mental wellbeing but we can’t give them their wellbeing’ reflects the new sociology of childhood premise (Christiansen & James, 2001; Matthews, 2007) that children are born with the competencies they need to become social actors and to manage emotion.

In one school the teachers identified empathy as the hidden curriculum and this aspect was highly valued for its importance in classroom practices and problem solving. As one teacher commented, ‘if they have empathy towards others this will help prevent bullying’.

Roles of the Teacher

Secondly, teachers recognised they were in a position to have a significant impact on children and yet teachers need to support their own mental wellbeing. Participants in this study felt classroom teachers spend a substantial amount of time with children and therefore play a major role in identifying children with mental wellbeing issues, noticing changes and gaining insights about children. They also expressed a view that teachers are often called upon to be the counsellors; to have an impartial but consistent approach whilst being true to the child; and to model positive attitudes and relationships in our classrooms. Sharing teacher feelings with children regarding classroom behaviour was considered by some to be a way of naming the behaviour and providing the language of expectations in order to provide ‘a level playing field’. This comment suggests that both children and teachers can have the same feelings and problems.

A teacher’s mental wellbeing, as stated by one participant,
can be observed through ‘my own reactions, feelings and responses which often prevent me from engaging in children’s social and emotional difficulties’. One teacher felt ‘when teachers are supported by their family, their peers and their administration they can survive periods of uncertainty’, whilst another participant commented on what I believe is a significant stressor for teachers, ‘if an intervention provided by the teacher fails to have an impact on the child, the teacher’s mental wellbeing can suffer’.

Capacity

Thirdly, teachers in this study expressed the concern that schools are limited in their capacity to support children’s mental wellbeing. In some cases teachers were apologetic in their responses when they named time as the greatest factor, ‘it sounds terrible … this year has been incredibly busy, and I have so many ideas of things I’d like to do but have not done them’.

The nature of schools has changed; where ‘once upon a time children used to gather around the desk and the teacher would listen to their stories’, now listening and talking with children has been replaced with busyness.

Several teachers in this study have asked questions and raised issues about their role and level of involvement; ‘sometimes it is not our place; sometimes you open up a bigger can of worms, sometimes you have to get on with the lesson’. This kind of professional struggle regarding responsibility reflects a polarised view and caution over possible consequences of getting involved in managing difficult mental wellbeing issues.

Teachers in the study identified the lack of expertise and the possible legal implications of intervention as the causes of their caution and reticence.

The above comments also suggest that teacher confidence and teacher efficacy are barriers to supporting wellbeing. Having the knowledge and strategies to deal with problems and ‘having to cope with the whole class at one time where curriculum expectations create pressures in allowing the teacher to monitor individual needs and wellbeing closely’, were typical of the types of concerns raised by teachers in relation to efficacy.

Responsibility

Lastly, as mentioned above, teachers articulated differing views about who is responsible for children’s mental wellbeing. Where most participants believe a child’s family plays the main role in developing children’s mental wellbeing, and many said parents have a major role to play as they are the primary educators, one participant said that mental wellbeing in children depends on the child and their resilience, stress levels, personality, confidence and social acceptance.

For significant numbers of children in this study home is not happy and supportive and often without one, let alone two, loving parents. As one teacher participant stated ‘School must be a safe haven; school for some students is a sanctuary’. Whilst some teachers strongly felt the child’s mental wellbeing is solely the family’s responsibility, most participants acknowledged that there is a case for responsibility belonging to all stakeholders: the school, the family or home, the classroom teacher and the child.

Ideas into Practice

During the following months after this phase of ascertaining attitudes, values and beliefs, teachers were invited to focus on a particular area of practice in their classrooms or schools so that we could track interactions, events and new insights through a social and emotional lens. These focus areas or projects cover a range of interventions such as a whole of school strategy, classroom practices, self reflection by teachers and individuals or small group activities.

Action learning sets participating in the study include principals engaging in a process of focussing on teachers; principals and teachers focussing
on themselves through self reflection; teachers focussing on classroom learning strategies; teachers focussing on individual children by implementing changes to classroom environment and children helping children to relate more positively to each other. This multi-faceted approach to professional learning suggests that children’s mental wellbeing is to be understood from many levels. It is intended that the teachers recognise their roles in the research as co-researchers and become engaged in monitoring their own learning and ongoing conversations about this topic in their respective schools. Data from this part of the research suggests children’s mental wellbeing in this study is being approached from a variety of levels of intervention and ways of perceiving mental wellbeing issues.

In Conclusion
The research, thus far, has identified several underlying beliefs and attitudes which influence teachers’ involvement in children’s mental wellbeing and their decisions about how they would engage in future research activities. Teachers recognised the importance of understanding differences in children’s approach to social situations and believe children can develop the competencies, particularly empathy, to be a positive social member of a group.

Whilst some teachers are hesitant to take responsibility for children’s mental wellbeing, most believe they have a role to play in building relationships and in the identification of mental wellbeing issues. Overcoming limitations such as listening to children and their stories and teacher efficacy in supporting children’s mental wellbeing were common themes across schools.

My ongoing research activities will include interviewing participants after a single term of implementing their individual projects to classroom or school practices. The details of how teachers create this altered environment; and their understanding of various mental wellbeing issues will make up the next part of the journey.

References
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**Contributions to Education Connect are welcomed and will be subject to editorial approval and editing for space and clarity.**

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This publication is intended primarily for teacher educators in Australian higher education settings, but will also be of interest to other educators, administrators and tertiary students. It is available as a PDF document on the *Response Ability* website.

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