

Changing the Perceptions of a Principal



TREVOR BUCHANAN

Principal,

Agnes Water State School

To contact Trevor Buchanan,
email: tbuch15@eq.edu.au

About the Author

Trevor Buchanan has been a principal for over a decade in various locations and contexts in Queensland, and is an experienced classroom teacher from Prep through to Year 7. With a focus on supportive school practices driven around staff wellbeing and relationship development, he leads a targeted school improvement agenda that is underpinned by research-based practices.

I have always been very active, taking care of myself physically, exercising regularly and considering what I put into my body, however the conversation and deliberate action to focus on my mental wellbeing is something that I have avoided. Coming from a military family, with almost regimental structure and a strong patriarchal influence, the step into the world of mental wellbeing was like taking a step towards the dark side. I perceived activities associated with wellbeing as way too alternative for my upbringing and just another passing trend for the ultra-hipsters.

For me, the media has a lot to do with this perception. Conduct a google search on wellbeing or walk into your local newsagent looking for a magazine on wellbeing and the images you are greeted with are more often than not, a mid-20 year old female, dressed in fitness gear, perched gracefully in a yoga pose in some secluded, amazingly beautiful location. This image, that stereotypifies wellbeing, automatically excludes people like me. Yes ... yoga is exceptionally good for your mental wellbeing, but there is more ... and less to mental wellbeing than the image that is often portrayed.

In 2015, the Primary Health Network (PHN) released a needs assessment of the Miriam Vale, Rosedale and Agnes Water area and surrounding localities. This painted a pretty grim picture around mental health and mental illness in the area. As a local principal, I was also confronted with discussions around youth suicide in the primary school sector for the first time. My focus, like much of the health sector at this point, was reactive and responsive to the needs. I undertook Advanced Suicide Intervention Training (ASIT) and invested in relationships with health practitioners locally and through web-based services. The reality was that I was spending huge amounts of money and time and only scratching the surface of the

needs of students in my school. I needed to look at a different way to support the children of our community.

Earlier this year, an invitation from the Queensland Mental Health Commission (QMHC) was distributed to education and health workers to be trained as facilitators of the Wheel of Wellbeing. After this opportunity was handballed around our school cluster a few times, I resigned myself to take a further step into the world of focusing upon wellbeing, but I was adamant I wasn't doing this alone. The head of curriculum at Agnes Water State School, Leigh Tankey, already had a strong personal focus on wellbeing and had slowly been chipping away at my barriers for the last three years. Leigh's personal interest and passion towards mental wellbeing made her a natural selection to help lead wellbeing initiatives.

What is the Wheel of Wellbeing?

The Wheel of Wellbeing (WOW) framework has been in operation for over a decade and is the result of a six-year design collaboration. In 2001, the South London and Maudsley (SLaM) NHS Foundation Trust shifted a 750 year old approach to mental health to be more holistic, rather than just the treatment of mental illness. The framework implemented by SLaM, Uscreates and Maudsley Charity, is based on the Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project (2008). The framework is broken into six domains that contribute to positive mental wellbeing: body, mind, spirit, people, place, and planet (see Figure 1). WOW relies on current medical and scientific research to create a knowledge base for which personal actions and activities can be undertaken to strengthen the wellbeing of individuals and the community. Its primary purpose is to move people from a position of languishing to flourishing in their lives.

Figure 1: Wheel of Wellbeing



Source: South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Why the Wheel of Wellbeing?

Having a proactive approach to wellbeing is not only good for the individual but adds significant value to the outcomes of any workforce and makes economic sense. Comcare (2011) identified that for every dollar invested into wellbeing there is a decrease in costs to health services of \$5.81. It also identified that employee engagement increases by 55%, creativity and innovation increases up to 72% and sick leave absenteeism decreases by 25.3%. For schools, the increase in engagement and attendance of teachers contributes significantly to the academic outcomes of our students.

The Wheel of Wellbeing is one proactive framework that is endorsed by QMHC and aligns strongly with the QMHC Action Plan of 2015-2017. This action plan outlines the interconnected responsibilities of all systems of government and the importance of sustaining a strong relationship between the health and education sectors. This framework is well established in many of the mental health hubs in Queensland to help build community wellbeing and is used by mental health coaches working for Education Queensland. While the Department of Education and Training has many responsibilities in the QMHC Action Plan of 2015-2017, from my perspective there are three standout agendas for schools:

- Increase the capability of workplaces and schools to develop and manage best practice wellbeing programs.
- Promote and develop universal strategies that promote health and wellbeing for all students.
- Promote schoolwide universal social and emotional frameworks and initiatives such as KidsMatter, MindMatters and PBL.

WOW Training was instigated as a world first activity that began in 2016 through a partnership between DET and QMHC. DET mental health coaches were initially trained as advanced practitioners to support Queensland state schools in developing wellbeing practices. Staff from non-government organisations were also trained and engaged to create community health hubs throughout Queensland.

In 2017 several of the original advanced practitioners worked with WOW consultant Tony Coggins to develop and participate in a train the trainer model, with an additional 22 education and community participants trained in the WOW advanced practitioner program.

Figure 2: WOW at Agnes Water State School

Body: be active <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily fitness • Sport electives (surfing, SUP, Tennis, Gymnastics, Golf, Yoga, Lawn Bowls) • HPE Curriculum • Aquathlon • Athletics Prep to Year 6 inclusion • Cross Country • Walk-a-thon • Camp 	Mind: keep learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australian curriculum (school developed, context related units) • Academic Olympiad • Readers Cup • Chess club • Science fair • Optiminds • Indonesian (Prep to Year 6) 	Spirit: give <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student council fundraising programs. • Community participation (ANZAC Day) • Happy notes board • Dwarves and Giants
People: connect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chaplaincy programs • Staff wellbeing sessions • Staff social club 	Place: take notice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily meditation practices and mindfulness development in class • Community based excursions 	Planet: care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edible garden • Composting programs • Partnerships with CVA, GRC, AW Enviro Group • Beach clean ups • Reef Guardian School

My Learnings and Applications for Schools

Apart from learning some amazing medical facts about our bodies including heart-congruence and the virtuous circle, and some useful strategies for personal wellbeing (especially how to ground myself when dealing with stressful situations and conflict), there were several messages that resonated with me:

Schools are already doing lots of great things around wellbeing.

At Agnes Water State School, Leigh and I are beginning to use WOW to build the wellbeing of our staff through small practices of mindfulness, meditation and connection at our staff meetings. The resources and strategies we have acquired are being used to inform classroom practices, leading to significant changes in student behaviour and readiness for learning. This is well supported by international research where a deliberate focus on wellbeing programs lead to an increase in academic outcomes of 11% to 18% (Durlak et.al 2011; Sklad et.al 2012).

A proactive approach to wellbeing is not only good for the individual but adds significant value to outcomes.

WOW is also being used as a tool to reflect upon our strengths, areas for review and for significant development in our school programs. In our school it is identified that we still have some development in the areas of people and spirit and have strengths in body and mind. (See Figure 2).

Find your own Flow. While there are many activities that enhance wellbeing, each of us is different in our needs. Your Flow is the activities that you do where you find time slips by. Finding the activities that recharge your energy, that do not add on to your already hectic life, is important. For some of us, that Flow can be work.

Gratitude is so important. Teaching our students and staff about gratitude and modelling these behaviours goes a long way to enhancing the relationships and culture within our workplaces and enhancing the resiliency of staff and students. I would recommend exploring the resources at www.heartmath.org and www.pursuit-of-happiness.org.

On a personal note, for someone who was very closed to the idea of

mental wellbeing, my perceptions and attitude to its importance have significantly shifted. While yoga and kombucha are still not for me, a deliberate and intentional focus on the activities that enhance my mental wellbeing and those of the children in my school is definitely now a high priority.

For a list of references, contact the Editor.

For more information about the Wheel of Wellbeing visit www.wheelofwellbeing.org, or for other initiatives around mental health talk to the mental health coach in your region or visit www.qmhc.qld.gov.au.