

The importance of teacher wellbeing



School resources

Discussions about teacher wellbeing are often dominated by ideas related to negative mental health such as stress or burnout. This is also often the case with the academic research into teacher wellbeing, which tends to focus on the negatives such as stress, burnout, and attrition. However, it is important to think about and promote teacher wellbeing in a far more holistic way in order to achieve better outcomes for students and teachers.

What do we mean when we talk about teacher wellbeing?

Wellbeing is about more than coping with negative situations – it also includes ideas about what it means to live a good life. Perspectives on wellbeing are often divided in their approach. For example, subjective wellbeing encompasses ideas such as life satisfaction and the presence of positive emotion more frequently than negative emotion, while psychological wellbeing is concerned with ideas such as purpose in life and positive relationships with others. The understanding of wellbeing is further complicated by the fact that terms such as life satisfaction are sometimes used synonymously with wellbeing in the research.

There is no single agreed-upon definition of wellbeing in the literature, but most definitions agree that wellbeing is multidimensional, comprising physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects. This resource defines wellbeing in terms of the broad concept of 'feeling good and functioning well'¹: in other words, a state where teachers perceive job satisfaction, experience positive emotions more frequently than negative emotions, and function well both as a teacher and in their other roles in life (as a parent, spouse, family member, friend and so on). Functioning well includes supportive professional relationships, professional growth and a feeling of self-efficacy.

Models of wellbeing

There are several models that are useful in order to understand the complex concept of wellbeing. These definitions and models demonstrate varied interpretations of wellbeing. Individuals may interpret wellbeing differently depending on their culture, their character and their situation. Increasingly schools are adopting wellbeing models as part of their strategy to enhance school-wide wellbeing, and the models are often chosen or developed to suit their particular school character. School wide conversations can be an important start to understand what teacher wellbeing means to individuals, and for the school as a whole.

The PERMA model

The PERMA model derives from the field of positive psychology, which seeks to understand and build the ways in which individuals, communities, and societies flourish by possessing high levels of wellbeing. It comprises the five elements that are the foundation of wellbeing:

Positive Emotions

Engagement

Relationships

Meaning

Accomplishments



The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand: Five Ways to Wellbeing

This is a well-known model within New Zealand and comprises five elements:

1. Connect - me whakawhanaunga
2. Give - tukua
3. Take notice - me aro tonu
4. Keep learning - me ako tonu
5. Be active - me kori tonu

Te Whare Tapa Whā

The te whare tapa whā model is based on the work of Mason Durie and is used in the NZ curriculum. Te whare tapa whā compares health to the four walls of a house, where all are necessary for the strength of the house, and each represents a different dimension:

- taha wairua (the spiritual side)
- taha hinengaro (thoughts and feelings)
- taha tinana (the physical side)
- taha whānau (family)²

Why is it important to prioritise teacher wellbeing in schools?

Teacher wellbeing has a significant impact on schools, teachers and students. Many of the negative effects of low wellbeing are well publicised, with stress or burnout being linked to attrition and the resulting teacher shortages worldwide and in New Zealand. This has led to calls for teacher wellbeing to be taken seriously for the long-term sustainability of the profession. It is not only teacher attrition that is a concern - low teacher wellbeing can negatively affect students. Stressed or burnt-out teachers have poorer relationships with students and the quality of their teaching decreases.

When schools prioritise teacher wellbeing and help to ensure teachers can flourish, this can promote better classroom climates and enable high quality teaching that leads to success for students. Teacher wellbeing is also linked to student wellbeing, and addressing teacher wellbeing is an important first step in school-wide wellbeing programs to promote student wellbeing.

Evidence about wellbeing

As there is no one agreed upon definition of wellbeing, and it can encompass a range of ideas from positive emotions to purpose in life, the research evidence about teacher wellbeing is diverse. The research evidence about teacher wellbeing, the factors that contribute to it, and implications for schools and students are discussed below.

Stress, coping and resilience

Research in New Zealand shows that teachers have higher burnout scores than the average for workers in the human services sector³, consistent with other research globally indicating teachers experience higher stress than many other professions⁴. When teachers suffer from poor mental health, burnout, or depression, this has been linked to poor performance, absenteeism and attrition. Stressed or burnt-out teachers also negatively affect students due to diminished relationships with students, a lack of empathy, poorer preparation for lessons, and low-quality teaching. In order to cope with stress teachers may use 'adaptive' coping strategies such as exercise and social support that promote wellbeing, or 'maladaptive' coping strategies such as excessive alcohol consumption or withdrawal that, whilst helping to alleviate stress in the short term, are not good for long term wellbeing and have been linked

to increased teacher burnout. Resilience involves the capacity to effectively manage stress, and teacher resilience has been linked to retention and quality, and also to higher student achievement. A review of the research shows that personal characteristics such as motivation and self-efficacy are important factors in determining teacher resilience⁵.

Teacher emotional intelligence

A review of almost 100 studies concluded that teacher emotions have significant effects on job satisfaction, morale, stress, and teacher engagement⁶. Emotional intelligence (EQ) has been defined as knowing and managing one's emotions, recognising emotions in others, motivating oneself, and managing relationships, and is linked to increased wellbeing. Studies show that teachers with higher EQ experience less burnout⁷. The concept of social and emotional competence is closely related to EQ, and teachers' social and emotional competence has been identified as a key influence on students' social, emotional and academic outcomes.

Workload

Teacher workload is often cited as a main cause of stress, due to the volume and complexity of the workload, perceived fairness of the workload, increased workload due to taking on management responsibilities, and challenges due to work-life balance. However, in a study of pre-service teachers on practicum, the more hours that they spent on lesson planning, the less stress they reported⁸. There is also empirical evidence that teacher burnout is not correlated to workload but to other factors such as whether leaders employ a transformational leadership style⁹. It is worth considering how the allocation of time to different tasks correlates to stress; for example, when teachers take on extra tasks in an area of work they value, stress may not increase and job satisfaction may improve. Workload issues are more complex than simply the amount of work: the nature of the work also needs to be considered, and professional development may help to increase the meaning of work and teacher job satisfaction.

Teacher learning, self-efficacy and identity

Teacher learning and development has a positive impact on teachers' engagement and their feeling of being supported in school, as well as contributing to an improvement in student outcomes. Promoting teacher learning may also help to reduce teacher attrition, as research has found that early career teachers are less likely to leave schools where leaders focus on creating the culture and conditions that encourage teacher learning¹⁰. Teacher learning is also implicated in building self-efficacy (people's belief that they can reach their goals or achieve tasks) and teacher identity (teachers' beliefs about themselves as professionals). Teacher-self-efficacy has been linked to wellbeing, teacher performance, and student outcomes, and can be influenced by leadership practices such as a shared sense of direction, modelling behavior, and rewarding good work. A positive sense of identity is also an important factor in preserving self-efficacy and is linked to wellbeing. A teacher's identity comprises both their professional and personal selves, and maintaining a balance between these is important: for example, it has been shown that levels of wellbeing are reduced when school demands dominate a teacher's identity.

Positive, supportive and trusting relationships

Warm, trusting, and supportive relationships are essential for wellbeing, and schools with a positive climate and good social support help to reduce teacher stress. Building trust helps to foster positive relationships which are important because, when teachers feel cared for and appreciated, it leads to better interactions with students which can positively impact student learning. Support from leadership and workplace social support have also been shown to reduce teacher burnout. Beginning teachers in particular experience higher levels of job satisfaction when schools effectively support them. The mentor teacher has been identified as one of the most important factors in enhancing beginning teachers' self-efficacy and reducing their stress levels. There is also evidence that support groups for new teachers

reduce feeling of isolation and help teachers explore and develop their teaching identity. Unfortunately, one study looking at new teachers entering the profession in New Zealand found that 45% of them described their induction program as minimal or unsupportive¹¹. Ongoing support as teachers progress into leadership roles is also important. Teachers who feel pushed into management roles often report less engagement in their work and extra responsibilities can cause many teachers to struggle to manage their workload.

What can schools do to support and promote teacher wellbeing?

Schools can support teacher wellbeing by considering how the organisational climate, social interactions, and teachers' individual actions all contribute to teacher wellbeing. The approach that schools take to promoting teacher wellbeing will differ between schools, and different teachers within a school will have different needs when it comes to improving wellbeing. A school-wide discussion about what wellbeing means to people, and how to promote it, can be a useful starting point for developing a school strategy to enhance teacher wellbeing. Some useful questions to ask include:

- How do teachers define or describe wellbeing?
- How do teachers rate their current level of wellbeing?
- What do teachers do to cope with stress?
- How do teachers rate their work/life balance?
- What can leaders do to ease workload pressures?
- Do teachers feel a sense of professional growth?
- Do teachers feel their professional development is supported?
- How often do teachers collaborate? How effective is the collaboration?
- Do teachers feel appreciated? Do they feel that good work is rewarded?
- Do teachers feel supported? What extra support do they say they need?
- Is there a sense of trust among teachers and between teachers and leaders?
- Does everyone know, and feel committed to, our school goals?
- Do teachers have agency in how they teach? Do teachers have agency in school wide decision making?

The research also indicates some actions that schools can take to increase teacher wellbeing:

- Where possible, address issues around the volume, complexity, and perceived fairness of teachers' workload, and talk with teachers about how to achieve a work/life balance
- Promote teacher learning
- Ensure teachers feel cared for and appreciated, and reward good work
- Ensure good social support for teachers – for example support groups for beginning teachers
- Provide quality mentoring for beginning teachers
- Consider how best to support teachers as they move into leadership roles
- Talk with teachers when dealing with student behavioral issues
- Encourage teachers to use healthy coping strategies
- Implement social and emotional training programs

Other useful resources for schools are available on the Teaching Council of New Zealand's website.

How can teachers promote their own wellbeing?

In addition to the whole-school approach to improving wellbeing, individual teachers need to take charge of their own wellbeing in order to flourish. For example, some schools have run mindfulness courses which have been shown to enhance wellbeing, but this also depends on commitment from individual teachers. There will be variations in the wellbeing strategies that are the most appropriate, or most effective, for different teachers at different times. Teachers can also support each other to enhance their wellbeing: for example, performing random acts of kindness has been shown to be beneficial to the giver's wellbeing as well as the receiver's.

Some ideas for teachers to promote their own wellbeing include:

- Being active in building your professional support network
- Being proactive about your professional development – seek out people you can learn from, or courses you can attend
- Teaming up with another teacher to become 'wellbeing buddies' and discussing how you can support each other - for example, having regular check-ins or going for a short walk together at lunchtime
- Trying to balance your teacher identity with your out of school identity – can you make time once a week for a hobby or sport that you value? How can you put boundaries around the time you spend working in the evenings and/or weekends?
- Utilising one of the many positive psychology-based interventions, such as gratitude journaling or using your key strengths
- Using Kelly McGonigal's 'Rethink Stress Intervention' if feeling stressed is an issue for you
- Ensuring you have healthy coping skills can help in times of stress
- Making relaxation exercises a regular part of your routine by practising mindfulness or yoga
- Reading more about how to improve your wellbeing on the New Zealand-based 5 Ways to Wellbeing website, or checking out the UK-based initiative #teacher5aday on twitter for ideas

Finally, it is important to ask for help and support when you need it – this could be from colleagues or leaders, or you can reach out to agencies outside of school who provide support. The following phone helplines are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week:

- Mental Health Crisis 0800 800 717 - Ministry of Health Crisis assessment team for Auckland
- Lifeline 0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE) - for counselling and support
- Samaritans 0800 726 666 - for confidential support for anyone who is lonely or in emotional distress
- Depression Helpline 0800 111 757 or free text 4206 - to talk to a trained counsellor about how you are feeling or to ask any questions
- Healthline 0800 611 116 - for advice from trained registered nurses

In addition to these services you might consider:

- Consulting www.depression.org.nz, which includes The Journal free online self-help tool
- Discussing your concerns with your GP
- Contacting EAP services on 0800 327 669 for a wide range of support (if your school subscribes), or see their website for details

Recommended reading

Cherkowski, S., & Walker, K. (2018). *Teacher wellbeing: Noticing, nurturing, sustaining and flourishing in schools*. Ontario, Canada: Word & Deed Publishing.

Endnotes

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- ⁴ Kyriacou, C. (2001). Teacher stress: Directions for future research. *Educational Review*, 53(1), 27–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910120033628>
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- ⁶ Leithwood. (2006). *Teacher working conditions that matter: Evidence for change*. Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario.
- ⁷ Mérida-López, S., & Extremera, N. (2017). Emotional intelligence and teacher burnout: A systematic review. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 85, 121–130. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2017.07.006>
- ⁸ Geng, G., Midford, R., & Buckworth, J. (2015). Investigating the stress levels of early childhood, primary and secondary pre-service teachers during teaching practicum. *Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability*, 17(1), 35–47. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jtes-2015-0003>
- ⁹ Heidmets, M., & Liik, K. (2014). School principals' leadership style and teachers' subjective well-being at school. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 62, 40–50.
- ¹⁰ Cameron, M., Berger, J. G., Lovett, S., & Baker, R. (2007, September 7). Early career teachers' opportunities for professional learning: Impacts on teaching practice, job satisfaction, motivation, and career decisions. BERA annual conference, London, 2007. Wellington, New Zealand: NZCER Press.
- ¹¹ Cameron et al. (2007).

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