The challenges of measuring wellbeing in schools

A review prepared for the Ontario Teachers’ Federation

Dr. Arlo Kempf, PhD, University of Toronto
Introduction

Over the past decade, questions concerning student wellbeing have moved steadily to the centre of education policy in Ontario, in Canada, and internationally. In response to what might be termed a crisis in youth wellbeing, policy language and foci suggest a broad move to address questions of student physical, emotional, psychological, and socio-cultural wellbeing. The notion of health is thus multifaceted in the educational context and consistently linked by policymakers with questions of academic achievement. Concurrently, Canadian boards of education and ministries of education have increasingly turned their focus to student achievement (an idea often as broadly defined as it is narrowly measured). With little evidence of any crisis of public faith in the Ontario K-12 education system, the Ontario Ministry of Education has strived to provide measures of public accountability which have included increased standardization of curriculum, reporting, and measurement across the province.

Beyond numeracy and literacy, global competencies are increasingly promoted by policy as important areas which require better promotion and understanding by districts, schools, administrators, and teachers (CMEC, N.D. & 2017; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016b). With the current ministerial push to link accountability with measurement, questions about how to evaluate and/or assess student wellbeing are among the current ministerial priorities, and certainly promise to dominate the agendas of future policymakers at the provincial and board levels. This review investigates the challenges, limitations, and possibilities of the current policy conversation around measuring student wellbeing and investigates some of the related implications for teachers’ work in Ontario.
Climate and context

What do we mean by wellbeing?

Before moving on, a clarification of terms is needed. This review will focus on the notion of wellbeing, taken here to refer to mental, socio-emotional, and psychological health and wellness. Ontario’s Ministry of Education provides a useful, if not expansive, definition of wellbeing as follows: “Well-being is a positive sense of self, spirit and belonging that we feel when our cognitive, emotional, social and physical needs are being met. It is supported through equity and respect for our diverse identities and strengths” (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 3). Although difficult to define across a diverse student population, the integration of the notion of spirit is important here—alongside the cognitive, the emotional, and the social—as this has too often been excluded from conversations about wellbeing in education. The link to equity is also significant, as it offers the possibility of shifting away from individual pathologies and/or needs to a framework recognizing the rights of individuals and groups, as well as the responsibilities of the structures which serve these individuals and groups. For the purposes of this review, however, the term ‘wellbeing’ will specifically exclude the domains of physical health, but treat themes related to but distinct from mental, socio-emotional, and psychological health and wellness. This distinction, as illustrated in the next section, is useful for understanding the specific challenges and opportunities of measuring spiritual, cognitive, emotional, and social health and wellness.
The current policy context: Why this conversation and why now?

Rising and widespread levels of reported mental health issues or mental illness among young people in Ontario have become an increasingly significant topic and area of provincial policy across the education, children and youth services, health, and other policy domains (American College Health Association, 2016). Within education specifically, the Ontario Ministry of Education has placed wellbeing at the centre of its vision for the future of Ontario’s public education systems. The Ministry’s *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario* lists wellbeing among its four central goals, stating: “All children and students will develop enhanced mental and physical health, a positive sense of self and belonging, and the skills to make positive choices” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 3). Nestled within an overall ministerial vision of achievement and excellence, wellbeing is increasingly something to be accomplished within schools or, to put it another way, wellbeing may be a mark of school success. See also the Ontario Ministry of Education’s 2016c discussion paper, *Well-being in Our Schools, Strength in Our Society*, for more on the Ministry’s work in this area.

Linking wellbeing and global competencies

Student wellbeing and success are further linked within the Ontario Ministry’s document, *Towards Defining 21st Century Competencies for Ontario* (2016b), as well as within the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada’s (CMEC) *Pan-Canadian Global Competencies Descriptions* (N.D.). These works outline various frameworks for and articulations of competencies characterized by a focus on students becoming critical, creative, inquisitive, and resourceful problem-solvers. Among the important contributions of the 21st century competencies movement or global competencies movement (Marzano & Heflebower, 2012; Griffin, McGaw, & Care, 2012; National Research Council, 2012; Tough, 2012; Barell, 2010; Dede, 2010; Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; European Commission, 2007; and others) is the formal and insistent linking of key skills, with key dispositions to be developed in students. This is to say that what students should know is inextricably linked to how students should know, as well as to how students should be; namely, resilient, creative, inquisitive, and interpersonally proficient.

The Ontario Ministry of Education’s *Towards Defining 21st Century Competencies for Ontario* outlines three domains associated with these competencies: the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, and the cognitive (2016a, pp. 3-20). The Council of Ministers of Education of Canada’s *Pan-Canadian Global Competencies Descriptions* offers six categorical sets of domains: critical thinking and problem solving; innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship; learning to learn/self-awareness and self-direction; collaboration; communication; and global citizenship and sustainability (CMEC, N.D.). When taken
together, these competencies offer nothing short of a curriculum for personality including academic, social, moral, emotional, and physical elements of who and how children should be. The Ontario Ministry of Education argues, “Well-being in early years and school settings is about helping children and students become resilient, so that they can make positive and healthy choices to support learning and achievement both now and in the future” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 3).

Wellbeing, from a policy perspective, is thus at the heart of or at least inextricably linked to student success within these domains. In keeping with an international evolution of the literature, the recent Ontario Ministry of Education commitments (2017) appear in line with a broad trend in education, which links wellbeing to proficiency with global competencies (OECD, 2014a, 2014b, & 2003; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012; Saavedra & Opfer, 2012; P21, 2011; Rychen, 2003; Standards Council of Canada, 2013; and Singapore Ministry of Education, 2010).

Challenges and limitations
The push to measure wellbeing

The call for the promotion of wellbeing has, for Ontario’s Ministry of Education, been accompanied by a concurrent call for its measurement. On advancing and ultimately achieving student wellbeing, the Ministry explains, “To assess progress towards this goal, Ontario will [w]ork with our partners to identify the factors that support student wellbeing and then adopt ways to measure them” (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 16). The role of schools in this domain is thus likely to continue to evolve; a change characterized in part by an ever-blurrier line between the teaching of content and the teaching of competencies that include all aspects of personal development—two potentially
disparate domains. While non-subject-based learning, such as character education, has always been part of formal schooling, there have scarcely been measures of character on which the success of a system, a school, a teacher, or a student depends. If that which matters is to be measured, questions about who is responsible for student wellbeing will soon arise.

In Ontario, achievement drivers have been closely associated with standardization and measurability as well as simply or easily communicated outcomes. Among the more significant features of this policy direction was the creation of the Education Quality and Accountability Office in 1996 with the passage of the *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act*, 1996, S.O. 1996, c. 11, and the introduction of province-wide standardized test in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10. As an increasingly publicized culture of measuring of students, questions have arisen about whether schools are measuring the right things in order to best support students and student success. Amid a larger discourse of accountability and demonstrable outcomes, the issues of what precisely constitutes wellbeing and how wellbeing will be measured, by whom, with what instruments, and to what ends are thus pressing and timely concerns. In terms of the broader politics of assessment, we need to critically interrogate calls to broaden what gets measured. While standardized measures are indeed too narrow to tell us very much about children, the solution to this problem is not necessarily broader tests. Instead, we should be looking at different measures and specifically, teacher-led assessments to better understand what and how well children are learning. Good tests are not the only solution to bad tests.

The act of measuring does not, in and of itself or automatically, lead to improvements in the element(s) being measured. Before moving on to a discussion of the foreseeable challenges of the measurement of wellbeing, there is a first principle of sorts, which must be addressed. Somewhere at or near the centre of the conversation about the measurement of wellbeing, there must be a clear reason for this measurement in the first place and indeed, for our interest in student wellbeing. Why do we want to know if a
student is experiencing high or low levels of wellbeing? Is it simply because high levels of wellbeing assist in school-based learning? Such intentions are tested by a willingness to overlook student wellbeing when its promotion hinders academic performance; for example, the common practice of forcing students with test anxiety to write EQAO tests.

The act of measuring does not, in and of itself or automatically, lead to improvements in the element(s) being measured.

This is important as we grapple with ever-evolving understandings, not just of wellbeing but of what responsibilities schools should have to foster wellbeing. Is it so students are set on a good course in life, exhibiting behaviours related to or even predicting successful adult lives—understood in terms of social, professional, and other realms? Put simply, will we measure wellbeing to boost academic performance or to support lifelong wellbeing?

The wellbeing policy conversation often begins with the argument that greater wellbeing supports greater academic achievement and that the absence of wellbeing diminishes academic achievement (Ontario Ministry of Education 2016b, 2013, & 2012; Ferguson & Power, 2014; Slade, 2015; Wang, Harari, Hao, Zhou, & Campbell, 2015; Public Health England, 2014; Basch, 2011; Paulus, 2011; Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion, 2010; Burns & Rapee, 2006; Vessey & McGowan, 2006; and others). Other publications point to the promotion of wellbeing among students as an end in itself, with long term positive consequences into adulthood (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a; Layard, Clark, Cornaglia, Powdthavee, & Vernoit, 2014; Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zai & Hertzman, 2012; Gordon, 2005; and others). The Ontario Ministry of Education explains:

If our goal in Ontario is for all of our students to become active members of their communities, able to bring about positive change and to flourish in society, we must heighten our focus on wellbeing as a crucial prerequisite for long-term success. We must also acknowledge that the well-being of our children and youth is our priority as a society. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 2)

In this vision, we see wellbeing positioned as a goal which is worthy apart from any implications for academic achievement. We also see the wellbeing of young people as a common societal goal—central to socio-cultural success. This review shares the politics of this understanding of the value of wellbeing: all promotion of wellbeing in schools should be undertaken primarily for the good of the child, independent in its primary intent of
any particular academic or achievement goal. At a minimum, this separation is needed in recognition that achievement/success criteria change frequently and are subject to political concerns, while the goals and elements of wellbeing may be distinct from practices that improve academic success. Best practices in the promotion of wellbeing may as well evolve out of step with curricular and assessment practices in schools. Most of what schools do and demand is not necessarily designed to make students well. While acknowledging that being well may help students succeed in school, school success does not necessarily make students well.

... we see wellbeing positioned as a goal which is worthy apart from any implications for academic achievement.

The complicated mechanics of assessing wellbeing in schools: Measuring a moving (and far away) target

The promotion of wellbeing has a long history in education, with physical health education stretching back to ancient Greece and mental health increasingly seen as a priority by policymakers in the 20th century (Ferguson & Power, 2014). While physical education is frequently a subject unto itself—a discrete curriculum area often linked with teaching and learning about diet and human development—wellbeing is less established and less defined in schools, with its causes and effects woven into and out of the intellectual and emotional lives of students. Working across these related domains is the Comprehensive School Health (CSH) model. Established in the 1980s, the CSH approach takes a somewhat holistic approach to understanding wellbeing and suggests the need to understand and focus on whole-school health by intertwining considerations of the physical, cognitive, emotional, and psychological. A CSH model considers pedagogy, social and physical domains, school policy related to health, and community partnerships and services (Veugelers & Schwartz, 2010). In the Ontario context, given the integrated approach suggested by the Ministry of Education (2016a, 2016b), the promotion of wellbeing in Ontario schools will likely be undertaken within and across multiple domains simultaneously, embracing at least some of the CSH approach, toward a goal of overall health.

The jump from the promotion of wellbeing to the measurement of wellbeing is challenging and complicated. A measurement of overall wellbeing will inevitably require some disaggregation of its elements and results to understand various wellness
domains. Ferguson & Power (2014) offer a highly useful review of wellbeing measurement instruments including the Early Development Instrument (Janus & Offord, 2007; and Janus & Duku, 2007); the Middle Years Development Instrument (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012); and the “Tell Them From Me” initiative from thelearningbar.com. As Ferguson & Power (2014) suggest, these may be best suited for understanding student wellbeing in the aggregate, at the population level, and therefore may not offer a model for measuring the wellbeing of individual students. It is unclear whether feasible instruments currently exist to perform such measures in relation to and within schooling contexts.

The jump from the promotion of wellbeing to the measurement of wellbeing is challenging and complicated.

Measuring wellbeing: Questions of reliability

Putting aside for the moment questions surrounding the rationale and moving beyond the question of whether or not we should measure wellbeing, there may be much more work needed in order to develop valid and reliable instruments for measuring individual student wellbeing. That is to say, even if it were a good idea, it may not be possible at this time. Within the fields of measurement, psychology, and psychometrics, best practices and instruments for achieving accurate measurements of wellbeing are constantly evolving. The fundamental challenge of linking correlates of wellbeing to specific factors, while separating them from others, remains for now firmly in place. The psychology of those being measured affects the measure, while the measures can psychologically impact those being measured (Oishi, Schimmack, Diener, Kim-Prieto, Scollon, & Choi, 2007; Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, & Diener, 2003; and Thomas & Diener, 1990).

The challenge of isolating school community-specific impacts on wellbeing

In addition to the ongoing advances common to any field, in-school measurement comes with the unique challenges of adaptation, given the varied populations under study or being measured, e.g., age, location, socio-cultural diversity, thereby suggesting that good measurement might be adaptive, responsive, and varied. This poses a serious challenge to any sort of standardized measure. The Ministry of Education’s most recent (September, 2017) statement referring to the promotion of wellbeing suggests the current framework for academic measurement may be adapted in order to support the measurement of
wellbeing. The Ministry’s September 6 briefing reads, “[T]he province aims to… [u]pdate provincial assessment and reporting practices, including EQAO, to make sure they are culturally relevant, measure a wider range of learning, and better reflect student wellbeing and equity” (Ministry of Education, 2017). While it is uncertain precisely how this will unfold, it is clear that the measurement of wellbeing requires unique tools, specifically separate from those used to measure academic success.

Further, the measurement of student wellbeing in schools presents unique challenges, if the results, i.e., data on how well students are, are somehow used as proxy measures for school or teacher performance. This challenge stems from the irreducibility of the many situational factors which contribute to student wellbeing and student illness, including

There is no clear way to measure the precise impact of schools on student wellbeing.

the home, peer group, school environment, classroom, and additional structural and environmental factors.

There is no clear way to measure the precise impact of schools on student wellbeing. This is not to say that wellbeing is an impossible or misguided goal, but instead that its measurement cannot, at this time, determine schools’ distinct and discrete impact on overall student wellbeing.
With significant implications for schools, given the time and resource constraints presented by measuring large populations, the work of Schwarz & Strack, (1999) suggests that situational factors can be particularly difficult to account for on instruments which use self-reporting techniques, a common approach used in school wellbeing measurement instruments. In the previous section, this review considered the first principle of why we measure (and/or should measure) student wellbeing. Recognizing the challenges of valid and reliable measurement tools and techniques, a second fundamental question arises: can we accurately and reliably measure and interpret individual student wellbeing in schools? Scholar and psychologist, Ed Diener, a renowned expert on wellbeing and its measurement, suggests in his meta-analysis of the current state of the field of wellbeing measurement, that we may have a long way to go. While he notes a variety of promising measures, his comments are instructive in terms of where we are at the moment. He argues:

[W]e have initial knowledge of the psychological processes affecting some of the measures, but we do not yet have a complete and thorough theoretical model of these factors…. In sum, we have made much progress, but have much farther to go .... After all, even if we measure well-being well, we may not understand the processes leading to it. A major issue is causality. The majority of the studies in this field, virtually all, are conducted using cross-sectional correlational designs. Because of this tendency, we usually do not know whether the correlates we discover of wellbeing are causes of well-being, results of well-being, or that they both result from some common third variable such as personality. Until we begin understanding more about causality, we will not understand the true structures underlying what we study. (Diener, 2009, pp. 268-9)

The profound and substantive challenges of the measurement of wellbeing are widely recognized beyond Diener and his foundational work (White, Slemp, & Murray, 2017; Huppert, 2017 & 2014; Ralph, Palmer, & Olney, 2012; Bradshaw, Hoelscher, & Richardson,

... better understanding, better instruments, and better interpretation are needed in the measurement of wellbeing.
2007; Thomas, 2009; and others). While Diener and others see promise in many approaches (Diener et al., 1999), he makes it clear that better understanding, better instruments, and better interpretation are needed in the measurement of wellbeing.

To be clear, however, the scholars cited above who raise these cautions are often deeply invested in finding good measures and using them. So, for the purposes of understanding the implications for the work of teachers and other educators, this paper’s engagement with these scholars does not share the final goal of finding suitable in-school measurement. Rather, these works are highlighted simply to suggest that such measurement is likely impossible to do well at this time. For now—given the state of the field of measurement and given the resources available in schools—accurate and reliable measurement and interpretation of individual student wellbeing is not feasible. Even if we were to overcome these challenges with better instruments and increased resources, training, and support, it would still be impossible to measure individual wellbeing exclusively in relation to school and its effect on children. Recognizing that various situational factors impact wellbeing, a single ministry-level strategy is likely insufficient for tackling these issues. Ott, Hibbert, Rodger, & Leschied, (2017) suggest a comprehensive approach that is both intraprovincial (across multiple ministries) and interprovincial (a national strategy) may be needed in place of local education governance. In the case of next steps in Ontario schools, even seemingly pragmatic questions including what measurement is possible, given time, training, capacity, etc.; what measurement is useful; and what measurement is affordable are political and should be approached carefully.

None of these hurdles should hinder the promotion of wellbeing. However, we must avoid embracing wellbeing strategies based primarily on their measurability. With the... we must avoid embracing wellbeing strategies based primarily on their measurability.

‘tail wagging the dog,’ there may be a temptation to value a strategy not for its efficacy in promoting wellbeing, but for its ability to produce simple results that can be easily disseminated (Ott et al., 2017; Jones, Goldner, Butler, & McEwan, 2015). While this may be a seductive arrangement within a public accountability discourse, such an approach may not be the best for serving students. That which works best may not be easily measurable and may never be politically attractive. Rather, better measures may be far wider, messier, and complicated than anything proposed to date. They may need to look beyond just
the wellbeing of students and include the wellbeing of teachers and other educators, socio-economic factors, and a myriad of other considerations. Indeed, current climate and environmental surveys in use in many Ontario schools may offer useful data that could inform support wellbeing initiatives for all school community stakeholders.

Place of wellbeing in schools

The interdependence of student, staff and school wellbeing

Recognizing that wellbeing, as well as its successful promotion, is situated across and impacted by various domains and by questions of social location and equity, it may be impossible to think about student and staff wellness and/or wellbeing as separate from school wellbeing as a whole. Central to this concern are teachers, whose wellbeing is linked to factors associated with the wellbeing of their students (Milatz, Lüftenegger, & Schober, 2015; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oort, 2011; Schuengel, 2012; Baker, 2006; Davis, 2003; and others). In their comprehensive review of school-based mental health initiatives, Ott et al. argue for a holistic approach to wellbeing which includes multiple stakeholders within a given school community, including teachers. They suggest that “schools cannot be settings that promote mental fitness for students if they are not psychologically healthy settings for educators” (Ott et al., 2017, p. 13). This has powerful implications for both the promotion and the measurement of wellbeing, suggesting that not only should we consider teacher wellbeing as linked to, if not mutually dependent on, student wellbeing, but that, when trying to understand or measure wellbeing in a school context, teachers should be considered along with students.

While it is tempting to suggest the wellbeing of students should necessarily and always precede that of teachers and other educators, it may be irresponsible—if not ineffective—to ignore the ways in which wellbeing is fundamentally relational, as well as the ways that...

...when trying to understand or measure wellbeing in a school context, teachers should be considered along with students.
service to one group is dependent upon service to the other. The following analogy may be instructive: adults are advised to put on their oxygen masks before helping children with theirs during an airplane emergency. Likewise, teachers can only support students if they first have access to the wellness resources they need. Schools are shared spaces, used for work, learning, and play by children and adults. If teacher wellbeing as an end in itself or if its conflation with student wellbeing seems overly teacher-focused, we can consider the legal-, health-, and productivity-related benefits of promoting worker wellbeing in the workplace (Kunyk, Craig-Broadwith, Morris, Diaz, Reisdorfer, & Wang, 2015; Lamontagne et al., 2014; Standards Council of Canada, 2013). Insofar as healthy workers are better workers, if we understand teachers’ work to include the promotion of student wellbeing (to say nothing of becoming measurers of wellbeing), then school-wide strategies are a logical approach to promoting student wellbeing.

Although typically untrained to do so, many teachers and educators work daily to promote the wellbeing of their students. Interestingly, the interconnected vines of teacher and student wellbeing grow more tightly together when the source of teacher stress is a feeling of being unable to adequately support the wellbeing of their students, a phenomenon which research suggests is increasingly common (Marko, 2015; Rodger et al., 2014; Froese-Germain & Riel, 2012. Other scholars point to the “compassion fatigue” (Ott et al., 2017, p. 10) experienced by teachers who can become emotionally exhausted and less effective when they feel unable to meet the challenges and/or demands of student wellbeing (Koenig, Rodger, & Specht, 2017; Arens & Morin, 2016; Fernet, Guay, Senécal, & Austin, 2012; Hoffman, Palladino, & Barnett, 2007).

Doris Santoro’s work may broaden our understanding of teacher stress around supporting students. She draws an important distinction between demoralization and burnout, arguing that

burnout may be an appropriate diagnosis in some cases where individual teachers’ personal resources cannot meet the challenge of the difficulties presented by the work. However, the “burnout” explanation fails to account for situations where the conditions of teaching change so dramatically that the moral rewards, previously available in ever-
... we must take a relational approach to promoting and measuring wellbeing ....

**Teachers as clinicians**

Despite often having little or no clinical training, teachers are increasingly being asked or routinely expected to act as front-line clinicians in service of the wellbeing of children—a phenomenon best understood not as an unintended bi-product of under-resourced policies, but as the specific and intended aim of education policy in Canada and internationally (Ott et al., 2017; Morrison & Kirby, 2010; Santor, Short, & Ferguson, 2009; Jourdan, Samdal, Diagne, & Carvalho, 2008; Koller & Bertell, 2006). Rodger et al. argue teachers are “being asked to be the ‘caring adult’ on the front lines of student mental health, while at the same time being told that legally and procedurally only mental health professionals should be dealing with issues related to mental health” (Rodger et al., 2014, p. 20). This is a powerful recipe for role confusion as well as for the underservice of students. Further, much of this work operates outside of the legal and contractually obligated scope of teachers’ work.

While teachers’ work may typically encompass pedagogy (professional development, planning, delivery, revision, assessment, etc.) as well as interaction in the service of pedagogy and learning such as classroom management or supporting students with special needs; it also includes additional pieces which are not contractual obligations and
which are optional or extracurricular activities (although often expected by administration and parents) including coaching, sponsoring activities, academic enrichment activities, overnight trips, and countless other activities in service of students. Broadly conceived as curricular and extracurricular, although these domains intersect and interlock, these two categories of work encompass a great deal of what teachers do. In both domains, teachers’ commitments and professional judgements are informed by a myriad of personal inclinations, habits of mind, values, proclivities, policies, past personal and professional experiences as well as by administrators, students, parents, other educators, and other context-specific factors, influences, and pressures. These multiple domains are also mutually informative, as illustrated in figure 1.1 below. Recognizing the complex and multi-dimensional nature of teachers’ work, it is important to determine where and how wellbeing promotion can and should take place. Despite significant policy interest, promise, and commitment in Ontario, it is unclear where the promotion and measurement of wellbeing will fall within the multiple and intersecting domains of teachers’ work.

**Figure 1.1**

Wellbeing as curriculum

Part of the challenge of determining the place of wellbeing promotion and measurement stems from a persistent lack of clarity on what sort of artifact or object wellbeing is within education. Is it taught in the same way as a curriculum object is taught? Is it a method? A way of doing and being? Is it both a pedagogical and curricular concern? Are there wellness ‘truths’ to be imparted? If so, how might approaches to wellbeing take up holistic approaches to wellness including Indigenous knowledges and conceptions of sitting in a good relationship with self, community, and the natural world? A closer look at each of these questions necessarily precedes and silence on these questions necessarily precludes any worthwhile measure of the wellbeing of students and teachers in schools.

We can briefly explore the curriculum versus pedagogy/method question. If conceived of as curriculum, there are challenges of wellbeing as a subject which is taught by teachers.
and learned by students. Should schools and teachers be charged with knowing what wellbeing is? How to create it? How to maintain it? In students? In colleagues? In teachers themselves, individually? The uniqueness of wellbeing stems in part from the notion that, to date, it has fallen most often into a curricular space dominated by physical and health education teachers or in some cases, family studies teachers under a general category of health. With the implicit and explicit complexities of teaching about self, society, and healthy relations, such teaching may be better expected from mental health professionals than from in-service teachers.

While the notion that student self-awareness as well as awareness more generally of wellbeing issues, indicators, and related appropriate behaviors (including responses, actions, etc.) appear central to the wellbeing of students in K-12 schools, there is limited formal recognition of the content of these learnings as being important curriculum. Unlike the overall and specific expectations which guide teachers in the curricular domains, ideas concerning social, cognitive, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing have no distinct/discreet checklist within Ontario education policy. Concurrently understood as knowledge, practice, habit, being, and doing, it is difficult to imagine wellbeing as discrete curricular items. Similarly, teachers cannot be teachers of wellness in the same way they may be teachers of mathematics or social studies. To be clear, many teachers do incorporate techniques that may promote wellbeing, e.g., mindfulness practices, in service of teaching curriculum expectations.

However, such practices are typically optional, dependent on additional teacher training and interest and are sometimes the first activities to be cut when facing a time crunch. Until such practices are included in provincial curriculum; supported by required teacher training; guided primarily by a commitment to student wellbeing rather than academic improvement; and/or supported by additional time in the classroom; practices supporting wellbeing will be inconsistent and ad hoc.

If wellbeing is not a curriculum item (a what), then it may be a method item (a how). As the roll-out of wellbeing initiatives proceeds, it is realistic to suggest that wellbeing will be positioned by policymakers simultaneously as a way of doing what teachers and educators already do, as a series of integrations of wellbeing techniques into current practice, and/or as a set of specific practices which are stand-alone but not linked to particular curricular areas. An instructive example is the 2005 introduction of a daily physical activity (DPA)
requirement for students in elementary schools in Ontario. Each student was to have at least 20 minutes of daily moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. While clearly in service to a laudable goal, it is unclear where this artifact was to ultimately and realistically live. It was an add-on to the teacher day, with no space made for its inclusion. When something is supposed to be everywhere, it may, in fact, appear nowhere. In a large-scale 2016 study, only half of teachers reported implementing DPA, with 61.4% of principals reporting implementation (Allison, et al., p. 6). Although implementation rates are irreducible to a specific factor, the significance of time can scarcely be underestimated here.

Additions to teachers’ work, regardless of how well-designed, usually mean more work.

With teachers reporting policy itself as a source of stress (Ott et al., 2017, p. 5), teachers not only need the right tools, but the time and space in which to effectively use them. Additions to teachers’ work, regardless of how well-designed, usually mean more work. If the learning day is to remain the same length, adding a new piece means removing something else or at least a portion thereof. Even the very best policy directives often increase the number of curriculum items, activities, and approaches for which teachers are responsible in a given period, lesson, unit, and year. There is rarely a commensurate reduction in other expectations. Quite apart from the workplace justice issues this raises in terms of work intensification, it is simply unrealistic to continually increase what needs to be done, without a concomitant contraction of other duties or a significant change to the structure of the workday.

Where then will the promotion of wellbeing live in schools and in the work of teachers and other educators? Parallel to our current physical and health education classes, will we have wellbeing teachers, classes, and periods? Will we soon see a resilience grade and/or learning skill for each student on his/her provincial report card? Perhaps teachers will be assessed similarly. Will wellbeing be a watery add-on that is everyone’s responsibility but no one’s job? Will teachers be asked to act as clinicians, supporting students, cum patients, through activities typically reserved for different kinds of specialists? Might we see new
legal considerations as we move from en loco parentis to en loco parentis et medicus? Will our teachers be forced to navigate perpetually cloudy but demanding policy expectations within the existing parameters of their work time and space? How will questions of equity be addressed? How might commitments to wellbeing honour concomitant promises to recognize, engage, and honour Indigenous ontologies and health? While perhaps dramatic, these questions must be considered, not only ahead of any wellbeing measurement, but also ahead of any real sustainable implementation and promotion.

The role of teachers’ professional judgement

Even with clear answers to the questions above, one key concern remains with powerful implications for teachers’ work and indeed teachers’ wellbeing. What is the role of teachers’ professional judgement in the promotion and measurement of wellbeing? Amid increased provincial standardization of curriculum, reporting, and assessment in Ontario, teachers’ voices, experiences, expertise, and professional knowledges are, at times, excluded from major policy decisions. Teachers must be central players in education policy generally and within accountability-driven measures in particular. This is a central tenet of professional self-regulation which needs greater attention from Ontario’s teachers and professional education bodies, including the Ministry of Education. There is support among teachers for accountability, but not by virtue of standardized measures or top-down policy (Kempf, 2016). Rather, teachers must have a greater presence at policy tables, as well as in decisions about effective implementation and measurement.

Teachers often have unique knowledge about their students (Ott et al., 2017; Climie, 2015; Tolan & Dodge, 2005) which should not be excluded from policy understandings and articulations of wellbeing and its promotion. Ott et al. argue that

there is another kind of knowledge, not just about mental health but with those on a continuum of mental health, the knowledge of the caregiver. Educators as caregivers, not just pedagogues, have vital knowledge about the needs of the students in their care. (2017, p. 9, italics in original)

Research suggests teachers’ professional knowledge and judgement may be increasingly marginalized within and by education’s larger trend toward a concentration of decision making at the board and ministerial levels (Ott et al., 2017; Hibbert, 2015; Grimmett & Chinnery, 2009; Rose, 1999). The downplaying of teacher voice, experience, and expertise may substantively weaken our ability to promote and measure wellbeing in schools. Recognizing the firm links between student and teacher wellbeing, and further, that teachers face stress when they cannot serve their students to the best of their ability, sometimes with policy getting in the way, the inclusion of teachers and educational support workers in the wellbeing conversation is a natural place for next steps in the policy process to promote wellbeing.
Considerations going forward

This final section offers some brief and specific considerations, in an attempt to pull together the major themes of the review, before offering final comments in conclusion.

Policy should work from and reflect an explicit commitment to promote wellbeing as an end in itself, distinct from all related academic consequences, be they negative or positive. This means easy measurability must not alone lead to the adoption of any given approach or strategy. The strategies we need may be complex, long-term, expensive, and dependent upon the classroom work of trained clinicians.

The current policy and research emphases on the promotion and measurement of wellbeing should be broadened to consider whole school health and wellbeing which includes the wellbeing of teachers and other educators, other support staff, and administrators.

The complicated nature of wellbeing, as well as the measurement of wellbeing, should be further considered with special consideration of the context of schooling. Of specific concern are

- the difficulties in determining the effects of schools on students as distinct from other factors in students’ lives, including personality, home and peer effects, and socio-cultural or equity-related issues;
- the possible ways that a variety of frameworks, e.g., Indigenous approaches, might inform the work; and
- the limitations of extant instruments for measuring individual student wellbeing, which are not up to the job given the current resources available in and to schools.

Teachers cannot be expected to do the work of trained clinicians and other health practitioners and professionals.
Teachers’ professional judgement must be central to the promotion of wellbeing. For example, any major decisions to change province-wide assessment should be arrived at through an extensive consultative process and partnership among ministry, federations and teacher unions, school boards, teachers, and other educational stakeholders.

Based on consultation with a variety of stakeholders, the place of the promotion of wellbeing, as well as any subsequent measurement thereof, needs to be clearly identified within the current domains of the work of schools and within the formal curriculum and/or policy framework. If we consider school attention to emotional safety in contrast to the ways schools monitor and regulate physical safety, the neglect of the former is glaring. If left as a ubiquitous responsibility, wellbeing will be neither effectively nor sufficiently promoted.

Teachers cannot be expected to do the work of trained clinicians and other health practitioners and professionals. Requiring them to do so, explicitly or implicitly, can be harmful to both student and teacher wellbeing. Further, it may lead to teachers becoming ultimately responsible for success or failure on measures of wellbeing that are, in many cases, beyond their control and/or purview. As teachers’ work grows more complicated, intense, and multifaceted, teacher responsibility for their students’ and their own wellbeing must be commensurate with teacher training, teacher support, and teacher resources.

Any future measures must reflect an appreciation for the concerns raised above. To date, the Ministry has been unclear on whether it intends to seek snapshots in or over time, a system view, and/or individual assessment/diagnosis of students. Does it aim to take the temperature of the province, districts, schools, classes, students, and/or other groups? Each answer requires different tools and different use of tools. We are nowhere close to individual measures, but we may be able to look for trends in wellness across and within populations, as well as track system-wide and school indicators, conditions, and approaches that correlate with increases in wellness within these populations. Close consideration of environmental factors and other social indicators may provide crucial corollary data, alongside existing school climate data. Schools should neither be solely credited nor blamed for changes to the levels of wellbeing in schools—no matter how they are measured; however, schools and related policy decisions cannot shirk responsibility for working with the best approaches available as their resources allow. All this suggests that a tidy wellbeing destination may be elusive.
Conclusion

In closing, it may be important to raise one further comment, which falls beyond the scope of this work, but which may be germane to further education policy discussion. In the years ahead, we may see a blurring of content and method, of science and character education, of technology and teaching, and countless other new approaches which disrupt the way things are currently done. In terms of wellbeing specifically, we may learn how to successfully teach and learn aspects such as resilience and introduce informative and character-building practices of healthy failure—with kids embracing their own ability to fail forward. However, as a public service, school wellbeing strategies will need to reflect and be guided by an attention to equity. Just as we look for patterns of academic success or failure along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, income, language, ability, religion, and immigration, so too should we pay close attention to who is being asked to be resilient; for whom successful supports for wellbeing are being provided; and as well, the degree to which students equitably access the teaching and learning of global competencies. Which students need to learn to fail forward? What are the relevant social patterns and how might structural, environmental, and socio-cultural factors be relevant to student wellbeing? A blanket call for resilience for example or wellbeing generally, which ignores these pieces, risks heaping massive and inequitable responsibilities upon the hearts and minds of certain students and their teachers. Wellbeing, should it become truly valued and promoted in education, will necessarily rise and fall on a variety of factors in and out schools.
References


