

Positive psychology: a pathway to principal wellbeing and resilience

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Instructional leader, human resource manager, financial planner, strategic advisor, counsellor, staff and parent mediator, mentor, coach and keynote speaker; the role of the school principal is as challenging and emotionally demanding as it is rewarding.

The Australian Catholic University's 2015 Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey (PHWS) found that when compared to the general population, school principals experience more stress, have higher levels of burn-out, lower levels of physical and experience much greater levels of physical and verbal abuse (Riley, 2015). Surprisingly, the empirical research into principal health and wellbeing is relatively scant and if we are truly concerned about what happens in schools, more needs to be done.

Having spent the last three years studying and exploring the ways in which the principles of positive psychology can be effectively implemented into all facets of my life (personal and professional), I am convinced that positive psychology needs to be part of the solution to what is a very serious health and wellbeing issue for school principals and the communities that they are charged with leading. This article will explore the positive psychology research, theory and practice that has the capacity to transform

the ways in which we think about principal health, wellbeing and effectiveness.

Positive psychology: the science of human flourishing

Founded in 1998 by Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, positive psychology is committed to the scientific study of what enables individuals, communities or organisations to flourish. What then constitutes human flourishing? Seligman (2011) states that flourishing cannot be defined as one single thing; it is multi-dimensional and encompasses "happiness, flow, meaning, love, gratitude, accomplishment, growth and better relationships" (p. 2). Positive psychology aims to emulate the scientific method that gave cognitive psychology its credibility; its mission being to "map the domain of optimal human functioning" (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 108) while providing empirically tested, scientifically proven theory and interventions that positively impacts wellbeing.

Principal health and wellbeing – cause for concern

School principals are constantly required to cope with a broad range of external stressors, all while maintaining an internal state of emotional equilibrium. They are the figureheads and leaders of their school communities; role models and

symbols of all that we want staff, students and parents to strive for and be. Poirel and Yvon (2014) found that one of the major concerns and sources of stress for school principals is the maintenance of a positive school climate, which directly correlates to school effectiveness. Unfortunately, principals regularly compromise or deprioritise their own health and wellbeing as they are "constantly worried as to the repercussions of their decisions and actions which could have an impact on staff job satisfaction, on the school climate in general and, ultimately on student learning" (Poirel & Yvon, 2014, p. 16). Sadly, this common narrative of prioritising the needs of others while dealing with the external pressures of success in the role is one of the reasons that so many principals are languishing.

The results from the PHWS (Riley, 2015) present us with a grim view of the wellbeing challenges facing school principals. Social capital, identified as being so critical to wellbeing, declined over the four years of the survey. Self-reports of health were also in decline and when compared to the general population, principals experience high levels of emotional demands, which equates to increased levels of burnout and stress.

Anecdotally, principals of schools that have prior knowledge or practical experience with positive psychology, consistently report that the training is life changing and transformational in terms of their own and staff wellbeing. This is great for these principals but what about the schools that have not engaged with this important body of theory and practice? What about the schools that cannot afford to employ positive psychology consultants to work with and train their staff? As part of an *inclusive*, national strategy, there is a strong argument that wellbeing training should be funded and made compulsory for all school principals.

Principal efficacy and wellbeing theory

The impact that an effective school leader has on a school's vision, climate, morale and therefore achievement, highlights the critical need to address principal health and wellbeing. What makes a highly effective school principal? A highly effective school principal needs to be many things, to many different people; they need to be mindful – present, focussed and non-reactive – and have the ability to not only regulate their emotions but to effectively shift

their attention from one focus to the next (Hassed & Chambers, 2014). Results from the PHWS (Riley, 2015) also found that enhanced principal health and wellbeing was correlated with high levels of social capital (i.e. trust and relationships), a strong sense of autonomy, job satisfaction and confidence in one's ability to be effective. Riley (2015) further highlights the importance of social capital in terms of principal wellbeing by stating that, "Social capital is also correlated with decreased perceptions of quantitative and emotional demands, work-family conflict, stress, burnout, cognitive and somatic symptoms, sleeping difficulties and depressive symptoms" (p. 12).

Principals therefore need to be resilient; they need to be visionary and a beacon of hope and optimism for their school community (Day, 2014). They also need to be highly skilled in terms of their ability to mobilise, engage and relate to an incredibly diverse stakeholder group. Pillsbury (2014) found from his study into 'The Unique Aspects of High Performing Leaders' that a highly effective school principal "motivates and mobilizes stakeholders, through collaborative decision making, to take on the tough challenges and stays the course no matter how fierce the storm" (p. 142).

As noble as that sounds, what is the cost of persisting in the face of the fiercest storm? Do principals have the skills to be mindful, masters of their own emotions, resilient and optimistic? While the PHWS (Riley, 2015) demonstrates that some principals are thriving, the disturbing truth is that too many are languishing: at risk of burnout, depression, anxiety and in the most extreme cases, self-harm and suicide. There is no arguing the fact that the potential emotional cost for principals is great, but what about the cost to their family members and school community? School principals must be empowered with the knowledge and skills to build their wellbeing, cope during times of high stress and to thrive emotionally or flourish.

Positive psychology interventions: from theory to action

Positive psychology research and theory has provided the general population with a broad range of interventions that directly improve wellbeing and reduce the potentially debilitating and destructive symptoms of depression and anxiety. Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) found that positive psychology interventions such as the 'Signature Strengths' exercise, the 'Gratitude Visit' (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005) and mindfulness meditation have significant positive impacts on wellbeing. These interventions are also being presented and taught in schools under the umbrella of Positive Education. With schools like the Geelong Grammar School leading the way, positive psychology is now able to provide schools with a scientifically credible approach to improving wellbeing, mental health and learning outcomes.

When compared to the general population, principals experience:

- Lower than average self ratings of general health
- Higher levels of burnout and stress symptoms (i.e. loss of sleep, increased depressive symptoms)
- Far higher prevalence of offensive behaviour at work
- Significant increased incidences of adult-adult bullying and threats of violence
- Lower positive measures for wellbeing (happiness, mental health, coping, relationships, self worth)

2015 Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey (Phil Riley, ACU)

Strength building and resilience

It is widely recognised that people are at their best when they play to their strengths, the "potentials for excellence that can be cultivated through enhanced awareness, accessibility and effort" (Biswas-Diener, Kasjdan & Minhas, 2011, p. 106). In 2004, Seligman and Peterson published the Values in Action Classification of Strengths; a common language used to describe positive aspects of human character, which has been described as "the most comprehensive cross-culturally validated measure of psychological strengths" (Huta and Hawley, 2008, p. 73). With 24 strengths in total, there is also evidence to support the theory that particular character strengths may increase resilience and protect against mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Huta and Hawley (2008) found that the 'transcendence' strengths of hope, appreciation of beauty, gratitude, humour and spirituality play a significant role in recovery from depression. This is particularly important in terms of principal wellbeing as nurturing these strengths (i.e. hope and gratitude) can provide a buffer against the cognitive vulnerabilities that can increase the negative symptoms associated with depression and anxiety. Seligman (2011) proposes that we can build wellbeing by regularly finding new ways in which we can use and develop our 'signature strengths'. For school principals, nurturing and building the strengths of hope and gratitude will not only improve their wellbeing and resilience, it will make them more effective and support the development of a positive school climate.

The power of positive emotions – primed for success!

There is no doubt that school principals are prone to stress and highly stressful situations. Sadly, many principals simply do not have the resources (the knowledge, skills and experience) to handle these situations. As a school leader, the ability to be able to regulate your emotions is critical; students, parents and staff rely on you to not only be calm in a crisis but to maintain a level head during times of conflict and trauma. Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden and Build Theory (1998) explores the broadening impact that positive emotions have on our thought-action repertoires and how they

can build our physical, intellectual, social and psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001). Positive emotions and principal effectiveness are unavoidably interwoven with each other; put simply, people are generally at their best in terms of both wellbeing and performance when positive affect (the sum of subjective positive emotions), is high. Isen (2000) found that an increase in positive affect is correlated with improved decision making and increases in creative and flexible thinking; while increases in negative affect are associated with narrowed thinking patterns, being less open to new ideas, being more reactive and overall decreases in cognitive functioning.

With principal resilience critical in terms of wellbeing and effectiveness, Fredrickson (2001) also found that positive emotions, harnessed in the form of 'broad-minded coping strategies', can be used to shift negative emotional states through the use of past positive experiences. What Fredrickson and Joiner (2000) found was that the positive emotions associated with broadened thinking (as per the broaden and build theory) increased psychological resistance to adversity and improved emotional wellbeing. As a school principal, the ability to be able to cultivate the right emotional state when making decisions, solving problems or when navigating high stakes interactions is critical in terms of their effectiveness as a leader.

Gratitude check: what's working well?

Our brains are wired to tune into the negative; an evolutionary function designed to protect us from danger and to keep us alive. This *negativity bias*, while useful in the event of an impending threat to our safety, can take our attention away from the great things, the achievements, the positive moments (and emotions) that we experience every day. In the context of a school, the negative experiences aren't necessarily life threatening but the abusive parent, an upset colleague or the violent behaviour of a student "exerts considerable impact on the energy, time, resources and emotions of a school leader" (Waters & Stokes, 2015, p. 1). In many ways, gratitude, as a positive emotion or appreciative act, is a natural antidote to the negativity bias. Defined as "noticing and appreciating the positives" (Wood, Joseph & Maltby, 2009, p. 443), gratitude has been described as being

one of positive psychology's most effective interventions. Gratitude builds wellbeing; it directly targets and reduces symptoms of depression, anxiety and burnout while increasing positive affect, life satisfaction and social capital (Waters & Stokes, 2015).

In a relatively rare study into the potential benefits of positive psychology interventions for school leaders, Waters and Stokes (2015) found that those who participated in the 'three good things exercise' (the recording of three good things per day that you're grateful for) were inspired "to better balance the negative and positive aspects of work in a way that broadened their perspective of school" (p. 15). In addition to this, leaders that completed the 'gratitude letter' (the act of writing, delivering and reading a letter of gratitude to a significant other) experienced improved social capital which was in-turn reciprocated by others in the workplace. An effective leader is a grateful leader and gratitude, as either an act or a positive emotion, is a critical tool in the principal's wellbeing toolkit.

Mindfulness meditation: school principal's best friend?

Hassed and Chambers (2014) define mindfulness as "a mental discipline aimed at training attention" (p. 6); it has the capacity to enhance eudaimonic wellbeing (Garland *et al.*, 2015) while bringing together key elements of the previously discussed positive psychology theories and interventions. When we're present and focussed we are more likely to perform better, regulate our emotional responses, be less reactive and be more in-tune with what is working well.

The positive impact that mindfulness has on building and improving wellbeing is not a new phenomenon and has been proven in a large number of studies. Brown and Ryan (2002) set out to establish a positive correlation between enhanced wellbeing and mindfulness (as measured by the mindful attention awareness scale). With depression often associated with repeated thoughts of regret about past experiences (rumination) and anxiety related to concern about an unknown future, Brown and Ryan (2002) state that, "Mindfulness may be important in disengaging individuals from automatic thoughts, habits and unhealthy behaviour patterns and thus could play a key role in fostering informed and self-endorsed behavioural regulation" (p. 823). From this study, Brown and Ryan (2002) found that lower levels of mindfulness were "most strongly and inversely related to depression, self-consciousness and angry hostility" (p. 829). Higher scores of mindfulness on the other hand, were associated with increased self-esteem, self-actualisation, and increased ratings across the psychological needs of Deci and Ryan's Self-determination theory (1985). Mindfulness has the potential to become

a school principal's best friend; when practiced regularly it has the capacity to protect against unhealthy thought patterns and behaviours that leads toward feelings of depression, anxiety and stress while enhancing effectiveness through the enhancement of attention, focus and emotional regulation.

Positive psychology: a wellbeing solution

School principals cannot hide from the fact that there will always be stresses that invariably come with the role; abuse and bullying from staff and parents, loss of sleep, long hours and stress on family and social relationships. Positive psychology training has the depth of theory, research and intervention to allow principals to manage these stresses in an effective way. Mindfulness meditation facilitates enhanced present-focused and more effective emotional regulation; gratitude teaches us to tune into the things that work well in our worlds and to savour the positive; positive emotions allow us to broaden our resources and to cope during times of stress and; the nurturing of transcendence strengths such as hope can make us more resilient. This article, while written to highlight the potential benefits that positive psychology can bring to the issue of principal health and wellbeing, is also a call to arms; more research (and funding) is needed. School communities need leaders that have the knowledge, tools and experience to flourish and for this particular wellbeing issue, we must find a wellbeing solution.

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