Envisaging a Whole-School Approach to Wellbeing: The 'Wellbeing Tree'

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Schools have a key role to play in promoting healthy wellbeing and in teaching the skills important in protecting against mental illness. However, navigating the array of wellbeing practices, initiatives, and programs with a view to deciding which of these are appropriate in any school setting is a challenge. Although current best practice is to adopt a whole-school approach to wellbeing, what this means in context can also be unclear within the complex, multi-faceted school environment. Taking inspiration from a systems-informed perspective of school wellbeing, this article describes an organisational tool to assist school staff in understanding and capturing the elements of a whole-school approach in their own context. Using the analogy of a tree, the key components of a whole-school approach to wellbeing are outlined with examples drawn from current research literature and existing wellbeing conceptual frameworks. Through the use of this wellbeing tree tool it may be possible to appreciate the 'bigger picture' of a whole-school approach to wellbeing that links current practices to the overall vision and mission of the school. The article concludes with a reflection on the extent to which this tool is fit for purpose, its limitations, and how it could be extended.

Introduction

Australian youth mental health and wellbeing is in decline due to "… a blend of socio-economic and generational changes, rising adversity and inequality, and unforeseen consequences of technological advances" (McGorry et al., 2023, p.247). National data sources indicate that in 2022 young people aged 15-19 years old reported feeling less positive about their futures than in the previous two years (Leung et al., 2022). Only half of young people who responded to the recent headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey felt confident about succeeding in the next

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stage of their lives (headspace National, 2022). Furthermore, higher levels of psychological distress are experienced by young people than in other age groups (AIHW, 2022). In the most recent national study of mental health and wellbeing, 38.8% of 16–24-year-olds reported a mental disorder between 2020 and 2022 (ABS, 2023). This represents a 47% increase in the prevalence of mental health disorders over a 15-year period. Concerningly, 1 in 7 school students aged 4-17 years are also affected by mental disorders (Goodsell et al., 2017). Of these mental health conditions, around half have an onset before the age of 14 years when young people are still in secondary school (Kessler et al., 2005). This places schools on the frontline as communities attempt to address the emerging youth mental health crisis (Quinlan & Hone, 2020). However, despite a wealth of research to indicate that the skills associated with mental health can be both explicitly taught and implicitly enabled in the school environment (Greenberg, 2023), and that school leaders see the merit of providing wellbeing and mental health initiatives (Quinlan & Hone, 2020), it could be argued that in many schools approaches to mental health promotion are, "…haphazard, ad hoc, and opportunistic and therefore are fragmented and not sustained." (Cross & Lester, 2023, p. 195). Unfortunately, as a psychologist working in schools, to an extent I share this perspective about how wellbeing practices are adopted in school settings. So, to support a group of school wellbeing staff as they sought to develop a coordinated and sustainable approach to wellbeing in their own schools, I designed a method of envisaging a whole-school approach to wellbeing in the form of a coherent, connected, and context-specific organisational tool that is described in this article, the 'wellbeing tree'.

The article starts by outlining the rationale that underpins wellbeing promotion in schools and how the key principles of positive psychology and positive education are translated into various conceptual frameworks to provide direction to schools as they plan proactive wellbeing approaches. Next, I introduce what has come to be known as the 'whole-school approach' to wellbeing and a case is made for embedding whole-school initiatives into the context of the school for them to be effective and relevant. I conclude by suggesting that implementing initiatives to promote wellbeing and mental health within a complex and interrelated

school system represents a challenge for some schools that is likely still to be resolved. Furthermore, I argue that assistance in gaining a 'bigger' picture perspective is warranted if individual schools are to articulate all that is currently being done in fostering wellbeing within their own school context. Consequently, the main purpose of this article is to offer a new organisational tool to enable school staff to visualise the myriad of wellbeing practices within their own unique setting. Use of this tool represents a visual, practical, action-oriented, and growth-focussed way for schools to, firstly, encompass all the important work they do in promoting students' wellbeing and mental health, and secondly, to use as a starting point to set priorities and to plan for the future.

How do Schools Support Student Wellbeing?

As the only near-universal institution in young people's lives, schools have a key role to play in promoting a positive wellbeing culture to assist students in building the capacity to cope with life's challenges (National Mental Health Commission, 2021). Indeed, promoting the mental health and wellbeing of students is a prevalent theme in school vision and mission statements (Allen et al., 2017). However, it could be argued that there remains a lack of clarity and understanding of what is meant by wellbeing in schools (Svane et al., 2019), and that defining a whole-school approach to wellbeing is important in providing a focus and direction to decisions made in schools. Therefore, the whole-school approach to wellbeing in this article is based upon the definitions by Cross and Lester (2023) and UNESCO (2023) that foreground the importance of the school environment in fostering student wellbeing. A whole-school approach is defined here as the aim to create a safe, inclusive, and accepting environment that enables students to feel connected with others, to make positive choices about their learning, and to participate in activities that promote functioning well, now and in the future.

Positive education

In planning to support the wellbeing of their student population Australian schools draw from a range of wellbeing and mental health

services, programs, and curricula. Underpinning much of these resources is the science of positive psychology, a branch of psychology that shifts the focus from identifying and treating poor mental health to promoting and maintaining optimal mental health. As such, positive psychology practices place the emphasis on recognising and building positive personal qualities necessary for living meaningfully and for flourishing in life – strengths such as courage, resilience, perseverance, optimism, tolerance, and future mindedness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The principles of positive psychology have been translated into evidence-based methods and best-practices embraced in schools under the umbrella term of 'positive education'. Since its inception the growing field of positive education has come to encompass a range of approaches, in addition to an ever-expanding array of resources. Some of the most prominent approaches are grounded in conceptual models such as the PERMA model that describes five measurable elements important for wellbeing and flourishing, specifically: positive emotions; engagement; relationships; meaning; and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). A further well-established model that addresses the learning of social and emotional skills is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, a model on which the Personal and Social Capability Australian curriculum is largely based. The CASEL framework includes five interrelated areas of personal competence which are, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2023). While some schools may utilise these models to frame their approach to wellbeing, they may also introduce stand-alone initiatives directed towards specific groups of students on topics such as mindfulness and growth mindset. Consequently, it is fair to say that varying practices are utilised across schools and that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to positive education (Slemp et al., 2017). However, while there is growing evidence to indicate that educational approaches based on positive education are generally effective (Allen, et al., 2022), the challenge for school staff is to decide how to coordinate an overall approach to wellbeing across the school, as well as what is suitable to implement in their school context.

Wellbeing frameworks

To assist Australian schools in navigating the burgeoning array of wellbeing programs and practices available two government initiatives have been developed, 'Be You', and the 'Australian Student Wellbeing Framework' (ASWF). Growing out of the need to consolidate multiple government funded programs, Be You is a national program launched in 2017 aimed at promoting mental health and wellbeing in educational settings (Australian Government, 2023). Be You provides professional learning for school staff in the five domains of: mentally healthy communities; family partnerships; learning resilience; early support; and responding together. Evolving from the National Safe Schools Framework, the updated ASWF is accessed via the Student Wellbeing Hub (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). The Hub provides resources, professional learning, advice, and strategies related to the five ASWF elements in: leadership; partnerships; inclusion; student voice; and support. The purpose of each of these initiatives is to build an understanding of student wellbeing promotion in schools facilitated by conceptual frameworks, to provide support mechanisms and resources, and to provide best-practice advice for schools in developing wellbeing policies.

Additional wellbeing frameworks for use in schools have been developed by educational sectors, such as the New South Wales public school 'Wellbeing framework for schools' based on the elements of connect, succeed, and thrive (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2015), the South Australian public schools 'Wellbeing framework for learning and life framework' with three elements: inspire; engage; and empower (Government of South Australia, 2022), and the Catholic Education Western Australia 'Strategic wellbeing framework' (Allison et al., 2021) including the five visible dimensions of wellbeing, specifically, relationships, flexibility, communication, engagement, and mastery. The elements or dimensions in each of these frameworks are expanded upon in a series of practices to guide school staff in developing curricula and resources, as well as to create enabling environments for students to flourish. However, the number of wellbeing frameworks available to schools, over 15 models as cited in Quinlan and Hone (2020), may

represent a further challenge to school staff in selecting and developing a way to structure the school's approach to promoting student wellbeing. Finally, a recent 'meta-framework' has been developed in Australia based on core aspects of wellbeing derived from extensive research. Using the acronym, SEARCH (Waters & Loton, 2019), this framework includes six higher-order constructs as pathways to wellbeing that can be modified through a range of interventions, these are: strengths; emotional management; attention and awareness; relationships; coping; and habits and goals. Importantly, this framework is embedded within in a comprehensive program that incorporates a clear set of actions, such as staff professional learning, tools and strategies, student activities, and partnerships with schools (Waters, 2019). This type of program, underscores the importance of considering what is necessary for the successful implementation of wellbeing initiatives in schools. Therefore, it could be argued that the focus of promoting wellbeing in schools is widening to encompass not only an understanding the components of wellbeing, but to identifying what is needed to implement an approach that makes a difference in students' lives and that can be sustained in the future. As such, this shifts the perspective from individual student wellbeing, curriculum and content, to a 'whole-school' process of change where wellbeing promotion is planned and embedded into school life.

A 'whole-school approach' to wellbeing

Whole-school approaches to wellbeing are described as coordinated school-wide initiatives, actions, and processes that involve all members of the school community (Runions et al., 2021) This means that a consideration of wellbeing informs the entire school system and every level of the school's operation, from pedagogy, curriculum, and policies to classroom climate, school culture, and the nature of relationships between various members of the school community. Put simply, a whole-school approach involves everyone in the school community working in partnership in their commitment to creating a mentally healthy school (Mentally Healthy Schools, UK, 2023).

One benefit of viewing wellbeing promotion as fundamental to everything that happens in school is that it enables an action-oriented

approach that specifies what changes or additions need to be made to prioritise wellbeing and mental health across the school. Consequently, guidelines in implementing whole-school approaches often include practical recommendations for driving systemic change. For example, one often cited recommendation is that schools establish a wellbeing team to coordinate school-wide initiatives to ensure that efforts to enhance wellbeing are implemented and sustained (Runions et al., 2021). A further recommendation is that whole-school approaches are multi-tiered in that they include both universal activities for all students (Tier 1), targeted support designed for individual students considered to be 'at-risk' of poor wellbeing (Tier 2), and actions to help students who require a higher degree of intervention intensity due to poor wellbeing (Tier 3: Runions & Cross, 2022). Importantly, it is argued that these initiatives are informed by a robust evidence-base, as noted in the Be You website, and linked directly to student needs identified using appropriate measures of wellbeing and mental health (Productivity Commission, 2020). Finally, whole-school approaches that include community components, such as community agencies to support students at risk of poor mental health, as well as family-focused components have been found to be more effective than those that did not include such multi-component approaches (Mertens et al., 2020). Taken together, decisions made by schools that take a whole-school perspective on wellbeing increase the likelihood that the wellbeing of students is prioritised and that actions to foster mental health across the school community are sustained. However, to fully embed all these initiatives in the life of the school current authoritative advice suggests that greater attention is also warranted into how individual schools develop positive, supportive, and inclusive environments where students can thrive (Street, 2018). In short, context matters.

The Importance of School Context within a Whole-school Approach

The successful uptake of wellbeing action plans, initiatives, and frameworks in any school is largely determined by aspects of the school context that enable or constrain the change process. Defined as, "… all aspects of the school's identity and expression that impact on student

life." (Street, 2017, p. 40), school context encompasses the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours deemed as socially acceptable or desirable in that school. Such social norms or expectations are often articulated within the school's philosophy and values. However, on the ground, students learn about school expectations through social interactions with staff and peers. Hence, the social environment gives rise to understandings about how to communicate with others, how to act in different situations, and what is important in that unique school context. School context contributes towards student wellbeing in that aspects of context and culture infuse what has been described as the 'school climate'. A somewhat nebulous concept, school climate has been characterised as the personality and psychosocial atmosphere of the school evidenced by the type and quality of interactions between school community members (Maxwell et al., 2017). This notion of school climate influences the quality and consistency of interpersonal relationships, as well as what is accepted and endorsed in student behaviour, both of which are likely to impact students' mental health outcomes. If a sense of wellbeing in school stems directly from such social connections, it follows that a nurturing environment that prioritises the development of positive and supportive relationships is important if wellbeing initiatives are to be successful (Street, 2017).

A consideration of the unique social context of a school should be central to a whole-school approach to wellbeing, however, in practice, embedding wellbeing in school culture and policies, has been described by Powell and Graham (2017) as fragmented and ad hoc. This may be partly attributed to the fact that schools are complex places consisting of, "…a multitude of ever-changing elements" (Quinlan & Hone, 2020, p.51). These elements include multiple groups subject to various rules and expectations, a range of learning areas and curricula, and the complexities of timetabling. While many of these elements are common in schools, all schools have features that make them unique and that only add to the complexities of each school environment, such as differences in school facilities, geographical location, physical environment, and support services available. While it could be claimed that the field of psychology has taken some time to recognise this 'messy reality' of the school environment (Quinlan & Hone, 2020), more recent approaches to

wellbeing are moving towards viewing the school as a complex and multi-faceted system of interconnected parts. How to infuse wellbeing across these multiple interrelated elements is becoming an imperative for schools considering the increasing prevalence of mental health concerns in students. One way of addressing this problem is to conceptualise the school as a complete system of dynamic interconnected elements with a shared purpose (Kern et al., 2020). Viewing the school as a system in this way shifts the focus of attention from the specific elements, such as the people or the programs, to the school as a whole.

A systems-informed approach to wellbeing in schools

This article has highlighted several well-established wellbeing frameworks for use by schools, however, it could be argued that work still needs to be done for these encompass whole-school wellbeing initiatives unique to each school as an integrated system. Taking a systems-informed approach to wellbeing is relevant to the school context as it acknowledges the complexities inherent in the multiple structures, layers, and relationships that exist within any school (Lomas et al., 2021). One of the practices widely utilised in systems-based approaches to understand and communicate complexities is to represent these as a model (Kern et al., 2020). Simplifying the key components and processes of a complex system into a model facilitates the use of a shared language to build common understandings. Hence, a model in the form of a tool that captures an overview of wellbeing in action, while also capable of incorporating the realities and complexities of wellbeing work unique to each school, is likely to be useful for school staff as they navigate the range of wellbeing guidelines, programs, and initiatives available.

In attempting to create a tool to model whole-school wellbeing that adequately reflects the reality of wellbeing work in any school, it is proposed here that four key features should be prominent. Firstly, and most importantly, an organisational tool needs to be sufficiently comprehensive to capture not only all the initiatives adopted, but also aspects of the school climate that promote a wellbeing culture. Secondly, it needs to have the capacity to integrate specifics of the school context, including beliefs, routines, and policies, as well as positive education

practices, and the inclusion of wellbeing frameworks, if utilised. Next, the tool should be capable of being adapted to different school contexts and accessible for students, staff, and community members of these schools to understand. Finally, the tool should be strength-based focussing on the recognition of positive practices across the school, but also optimistic in that, taken as a whole, it presents the view that change and growth are not only desirable, but inevitable in any school environment. The aim, therefore, is to develop an organisational tool that assembles all the components of a whole-school approach that can be used by schools to represent their own unique system.

An Organisational Tool – The 'Wellbeing Tree'

The proposed tool to encapsulate a whole-school approach to wellbeing that is comprehensive and easily adaptable was influenced by a depiction of schools as a living community where students can flourish (Quinlan and Hone, 2020). Hence, an organic analogy that portrayed growth and strength was sought with that of a tree considered to be the most appropriate. Although several tree analogies have been used by others to represent the participation of young people in community life (Shier, 2009), as a metaphor for youth-adult partnerships in the 2021 International Summit on Student Voice (Student Voice Inc., 2021), and to represent the state of community wellbeing in an area (Pennington et al., 2021), to my knowledge a tree analogy has not been used previously to capture wellbeing practices that can be applied to multiple school contexts.

The idea of using a tree as an analogy to represent a whole-school approach to wellbeing has appeal because trees have several interconnected features, such as roots, a trunk, branches, and leaves that fulfill specific functions as part of one living organism. The roots of a sapling grow first providing stability and nutrition to the growing tree. Over time the sapling stem forms a woody trunk that provides structure to the growing tree and connects the roots with the branches and leaves. The main branches support smaller branches and the leaves, while the leaves fuel the tree via photosynthesis. In this analogy, the roots of the 'wellbeing tree' represent the principles, beliefs, and purpose that anchor

each school, such as the school's vision, mission statement, strategic intent, values, and philosophy. The trunk is the overall school approach to wellbeing captured in a unique context-specific definition that links the school's roots directly to how wellbeing promotion is structured through a framework of branches. From the branches grow a range of wellbeing initiatives, or leaves, that each represent actions that 'fuel' the wellbeing of the tree as a whole. Each of these components in this tool are expanded upon in the section below.

Roots

As roots anchor a tree to the ground, a school's unique vision and mission statements reveal the main purpose of the school, as well as what the school stands for. Vision and mission statements explain the core business of the school, they guide policy and operations, and they reflect the key objectives and aims of the school. While it is acknowledged that intentions stated in vision and mission statements may not necessarily be translated into school practices, when well considered, these statements can reflect what the school aspires to become (Allen et al., 2017). Increasingly, school vision and mission statements include a recognition of the importance of fostering mental health in students and of enhancing their sense of belonging in school. This would suggest that wellbeing enhancement is emerging as a significant part of the purpose that schools set for themselves (Allen et al., 2018). Given this, it could be argued that a whole-school approach to wellbeing needs to grow from these statements of bigger purpose that provide context to decision-making and a framework for actions, hence their inclusion in this organisational tool. School vision and mission statements are often enacted through strategic plans. These are multi-year plans for school improvement created in consultation with the school community in regular review cycles (Chiong & Pearson, 2023). In these plans priorities for the future are identified, goals are set to address these priorities, and practices are identified to realise these goals. If wellbeing is placed as a priority within a school's current strategic plan, then this strategic plan also represents a further root that nourishes the wellbeing tree. In addition, some schools specify a set of values that serve as guides for desirable behaviour in the school, such as integrity, honesty, cooperation, and striving for personal

excellence and, if actively adopted in the school community, these also represent wellbeing tree roots. Furthermore, additional deep seated school traditions, such as a school song including lyrics reinforcing the importance of school affiliation and belonging could be considered as roots, as these traditions serve to illustrate what is important in the school.

Some schools' wellbeing roots may be religious or philosophical affiliations that drive school practices, pedagogy, and curriculum, for example faith-based and educational philosophy-based schools such as Christian schools and those following the Montessori method of education. Consequently, embedding faith-based beliefs and practices, or following an educational philosophy and pedagogy, represent an important purpose for the existence of these schools. Therefore, it is likely that the worldview central to these schools will form a framework for wellbeing practices. For example, faith-based schools often aim to develop spiritual qualities in students including love, forgiveness, and care for others. However, in expanding the analogy to suggest that the roots of some schools may be 'fed' from the same water source, such as a religion or an educational pedagogy, how this worldview is enacted across schools is likely to vary based on the unique context of each school.

To conclude, when wellbeing actions and intentions are included in a school's roots, the use of this organisational tool makes explicit that wellbeing is part of the school's core purpose and that wellbeing initiatives represent ways in which the school is achieving its purpose. This provides a rationale to explain why schools allocate time to wellbeing actions as it makes clear the connection between what the school stands for and what the school does. For example, if promoting a sense of belonging is one of a school's stated missions, then it follows that activities to enhance students' sense of belonging in school are important ways that the school accomplishes one of its main purposes. By clearly identifying a school's wellbeing roots this tool illuminates these links between purpose and practice.

Trunk

A tree trunk performs two main functions. The first is to support the growing tree by connecting the roots with the canopy of branches and leaves. The second is to transport water and nutrients between the roots and the leaves. Taking these functions in turn, in the analogy presented here the trunk in the wellbeing tree supports a whole-school approach to wellbeing by representing what wellbeing means in any given school. Therefore, in this organisational tool the trunk represents a clear, context-specific and meaningful definition of wellbeing necessary if the school is to address wellbeing promotion effectively. As stated by Svane et al. (2019), "Enabling schools to successfully address wellbeing requires a definition which is shared across the whole school community. School communities cannot be expected to address a problem which lacks a shared definition." (p. 218-219). In this tool a clear definition of wellbeing may include the school's unique view of wellbeing drawn from the roots, as well as the actions and initiatives carried out to foster wellbeing (i.e., the leaves), in addition to what the school aims to achieve in doing this.

The second function of a tree trunk is to facilitate the transfer of nutrients between different parts of the tree. Similarly, the trunk of the wellbeing tree performs the essential function of linking the roots with the leaves. By using this tree analogy, it is possible to illustrate the two-way interaction between the purpose of the school and the wellbeing practices and activities. As the school's roots provide meaning and direction to operations and practices, the leaves in turn enrich the tree and the roots with energy. Therefore, changes in practices and attitudes towards mental health over time may lead to a re-examination of school vision and mission statements to reflect a more up to date view of the purpose of the school.

Branches and leaves

Growing from the trunk, the main function of branches is to support foliage growth. Branches hold up the leaves that, in turn, do the important work of providing energy to the tree. In the wellbeing tree the branches

provide structure and organisation from which leaves can grow. The proposed six branches in the wellbeing tree presented here are drawn from the research literature and the existing frameworks for wellbeing available to schools outlined previously. Active descriptive language is used for each of the branches to facilitate an understanding of what is meant by wellbeing in schools. Hence in this tool a whole-school approach to wellbeing is described as: coordinated; multi-tiered; informed; multi-component; integrated; and connected or relational. Each of these branches are expanded upon in the sections below.

Leaves are the powerhouses of trees. As previously stated, they fuel the tree through the process of photosynthesis, similarly, the leaves in the wellbeing tree represent what is done in schools to foster wellbeing and mental health. While leaves are held up by the rest of the tree, it is the leaves that perform the vital work in feeding the tree. Therefore, only actions, initiatives or programs that positively impact the wellbeing of members of the school are shown as leaves on the wellbeing tree. Other actions not featured as leaves on the wellbeing tree may be important in the daily life of a school, such as examinations, but they serve a different purpose and are less likely to enhance a sense of wellbeing per se. In the sections below each of the branches is expanded upon including sub-branches and examples of leaves. While the practices used as illustration in these sections are largely drawn from the literature as positive approaches to fostering wellbeing, they are not fully comprehensive, and it should be noted that each school will develop their own unique set of leaves suitable for their own context. Furthermore, unlike a typical tree where leaves on different branches appear to be very similar, in this analogy the leaves on one branch represent different actions or initiatives from those on other branches, although some of the same leaves may grow on more than one branch.

Coordinated. A key component of effective whole-school approaches to wellbeing is visible leadership to coordinate and oversee the work aimed at optimising mental health in the school community (Cross & Lester, 2023). Hence, the coordinated branch of the tree includes sub-branches to reflect the people who drive wellbeing approaches across the school. These include a staff wellbeing team lead by a wellbeing coordinator,

executive staff, and members of the school board. The leaves on each of these sub-branches make clear what is likely to be required for these key people to perform their roles effectively.

The main role of a wellbeing coordinator, as supported by a wellbeing team, is to drive implementation. A coordinator who is dedicated, approachable and capable of interacting easily with all members of the school community is most likely to be able to reflect on current school wellbeing practices, to consider school readiness for new initiatives, and to suggest appropriate implementation processes (Runions et al., 2021). School wellbeing staff need time to meet regularly to review practices and to make recommendations, they need the opportunity to network with staff performing similar functions in other schools, and they require professional learning and the support of outside agencies to keep up to date with new developments. Each of these actions can be represented by leaves on the wellbeing coordinator and on the wellbeing team 'sub-branches'.

Leadership is one of the six components of the ASWF, previously described, and is a further sub-branch that grows from the coordinated branch. Ideally, Principals and school leaders seek the views of students about wellbeing needs, communicate school wellbeing priorities, develop wellbeing plans, and review the school's capacity to address wellbeing over time (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020), consequently, "School leaders have a critical influence on the whole school's wellbeing." (Cross & Lester, 2023, p. 17). Given this, attention to both the professional learning needs, as well as the personal wellbeing of school leaders is important. Leaves on this sub-branch may be: mentoring; professional networking; high-quality professional learning; skilled administration support; and access to sabbatical leave (Cross & Falconer, 2021). A further group of people that have an important role in endorsing and sustaining wellbeing strategies in accordance with the overall purpose and values of the school is the school board. In putting together governance mechanisms to monitor the implementation and progress of wellbeing initiatives, members of the school board will require effective briefing from the leadership team and presentations on who is responsible for wellbeing initiatives beyond school leaders, how

these initiatives are resourced, and how to measure their effectiveness (White, 2024).

Multi-tiered. A well-established model to illustrate recommended actions carried out in schools aligned with varying levels of student wellbeing needs is the three tiered, 'iceberg model of prevention and intervention' proposed by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2004). Therefore, each of these tiers is represented as a sub-branch on the multi-tiered branch of the tree, with the leaves on each sub- branch providing examples of school practices related to each tier. As previously outlined, Tier 1 universal approaches are aimed at all students. These may include mental health curriculum in the Australian Health and Physical Education course, drugs and alcohol awareness programs, and programs aimed at whole cohorts at a time when they may need some additional support, such as Year 6 to Year 7 transition programs. While these initiatives may well be useful in fostering student wellbeing, the results of extensive meta-analyses indicate that one of the most effective universal approaches to building social and emotional competencies in students is the adoption of an evidence-based social and emotional (SEL) program (Greenberg, 2023). The introduction of SEL programs based on research evidence have been associated with building positive relationships and learning engagement in students (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011), therefore, a SEL program is an essential leaf on the universal sub-branch of the tree. Importantly, the positive education approaches outlined that aim to promote flourishing in all students offer some protection from school-based risks to mental health, as well as prevention from developing mental illness (Runions & Cross, 2022).

Some students require a higher level of support and intervention than others if they are to avoid poor wellbeing. Tier 2 approaches to supporting students at-risk of developing poor wellbeing are captured on a second sub-branch and shown as leaves, such as group counselling and mentoring. Tier 2 actions in schools may also include staff training in youth mental health first aid, or in suicide prevention programs to help staff identify students at risk and to assist students in accessing mental health services. The final sub-branch, Tier 3, shows possible actions taken by the school to help students already experiencing ill health. These

may include one-to-one counselling, collaboration with outside agencies, and special arrangements articulated in individual education plans. By depicting each of these tiers within a multi-tiered branch on the school wellbeing tree makes it clear that a range of approaches are required to meet the diverse wellbeing needs of the student body.

Informed. To be effective it is important that the selection of wellbeing initiatives and programs are based upon reliable information from a range of sources. Hence, whole-school approaches are 'informed' by, first, the students for whom the initiative is aimed at, second by educational research on the effectiveness of the initiative in context, and third by school staff who will implement the initiative. Each of these sources are represented as sub-branches on the informed branch to address the following three questions, 'What do we need'? 'Will this work?' and 'Can we do it?'.

Measuring the wellbeing of different members of the school community is an essential component of a whole-school approach to wellbeing (Quinlan & Hone, 2020). By carrying out surveys, it is possible to establish how students are functioning across a range of wellbeing indicators, such as connectedness, resilience, engagement, and motivation. This information may then be used to set priorities for curricula and skills teaching, to assess the needs of different school cohorts to inform targeted practices, to identify which students require Tier 2 and 3 interventions, or to gain a regular 'snap-shot' of how students are feeling to guide support decisions. Therefore, deciding the reason for measurement is an important first step to take as this will largely inform which instruments to use. It is proposed that the leaves on each of the sub-branches that represent students, staff, and parents could include the instruments selected to measure wellbeing with that particular group in any given school.

Evidence of effectiveness is a crucial consideration when weighing up a range of wellbeing programs for suitability in a school setting (Runions et al., 2021). It could be argued, therefore, that school staff would benefit from acquiring the capacity to evaluate the quality of evidence associated with a program, and to be able to compare the stated evidence of

programs. Resources to assist staff represented as leaves on this sub-branch are available from the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO, 2023) and Evidence for Learning (E4L, 2023). AERO sets out standards for evidence according to four levels of confidence and provides tools to help school staff use evidence to decide on the effectiveness of a program. Similarly, E4L summarises research evidence in the form of toolkits, reviews, and guidance reports in a range of topics, including student health and wellbeing. Staff may also access evidence evaluations in relation to specific SEL programs through the Programs Directory on the Be You website and via the CASEL website in the US.

The final sub-branch here is that of information received by practitioners regarding the implementation of initiatives. Practice knowledge of school staff is invaluable in deciding between programs. Teachers are best placed to know which pedagogical practices will work in their own classrooms and which content and curricula will appeal to their students. Leaves on this sub-branch represent what staff would require to make implementation decisions about a program's acceptability and to deliver these programs effectively, such as professional learning, further training and support.

Multi-component. Wellbeing initiatives that incorporate student, staff, and community structural components are more likely to be effective than those that do not include these components (Runions et al., 2021). Therefore, each of these groups are shown as multi-component sub-branches. Much of the evidence to show the value of initiatives that incorporate student and community (e.g., parent) components, are based on findings specific to individual programs. For example, Goldberg et al. (2019) reported that interventions to enhance social and emotional development that included a community component were more effective than those that did not. However, it is proposed here that a broader view of the involvement of members of the school community in wellbeing initiatives more generally is also worthy of capture in this tool. This is because of the potential impact of staff, families, and other community groups on student wellbeing.

Staff wellbeing is a 'critical determinant' of student wellbeing (Cross & Lester, 2023). However, attrition due to poor mental health associated with work-related stress, or 'burnout', is a significant problem for the teachers affected, but also for the students. Teacher burnout can negatively impact teacher/student relationships (Richards et al., 2018) and students' mental health (Harding et al, 2019). Therefore, the leaves on the staff sub-branch indicate preventative and supportive actions by school leaders and staff to address staff wellbeing. These include identifying common sources of stress in the work environment (e.g., workloads and workplace conditions), as well as establishing a staff wellbeing team and creating a staff wellbeing plan (Cross & Lester, 2023), staff mentoring, and the provision of counselling via an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

The student sub-branch in this section relates specifically to opportunities for students to contribute towards wellbeing planning by the inclusion of 'student voice'. Here student voice is defined as the active and authentic participation of school students in making choices about what matters to them (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). The inclusion of student voice has been associated with students' building connections and a sense of belonging in school and for students showing care towards others (Cross & Lester, 2023). Student voice is one of the five main components of the ASWF in which recommendations for actions include providing opportunities for active participation in authentic decision-making over matters that concern students, and collaborating with students in developing strategies to enhance student wellbeing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020).

The final sub-branch in this section encompasses the inclusion of members of the wider community in wellbeing approaches in schools. Strong teacher-family partnerships are important in implementing wellbeing programs (Clancy et al., 2019) and partnerships with families and the community are key components of the ASWF and the Be You framework. Effective practices from the ASWF represented here as leaves are developing shared understandings with families about wellbeing based on culturally respectful practices, actively engaging

community organisations to assist in identifying and supporting students who require targeted support, and working with organisations to review the school's capacity to respond to critical safety issues (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). Other communities, such as religious communities for faith-based schools, and networks of like-minded schools may also be resources for schools to access in developing a whole-school approach to wellbeing and mental health.

Integrated. This branch has two sub-branches, the first of these represents the importance of an integrated approach to wellbeing policies and practices. The other branch serves to raise an awareness of the need to align wellbeing practices with the needs of all groups within the student body.

Wellbeing practices in schools are guided by a range of policies, most of which take the perspective of risk or harm minimisation, such as policies around bullying, behaviour, and safety (Street, 2018). However, there is evidence to suggest that school staff see the value in a holistic and explicit whole-school wellbeing policy with clear definitions and understandings, that reflects the reality of schools, and that is designed to meet student needs (Powell and Graham, 2017). It is argued here that such a comprehensive, strength-based school wellbeing policy focussed on promoting positive mental health across the school system is as important as having several different policies that conceptualise wellbeing in relation to specific risks of harm. However, given that most schools have a range of such policies, as shown as leaves on this sub-branch, it is suggested that these should be reviewed to ensure that they promote wellbeing (Runions & Cross, 2022), and align with the intentions and language of a whole-school wellbeing policy, if one is in place. As policies provide rules for behaviour (Street, 2018), then it follows that a consistent and unified approach to wellbeing policies will facilitate how wellbeing is understood and facilitated in schools (Powell and Graham, 2017).

Turning to the need to integrate wellbeing practices with the needs of the student body, it is likely that a diverse range of developmental, social and emotional, and cultural needs are represented in most schools and so it

cannot be assumed that practices that prove to be effective with one group will be equally effective with another group. For example, Yeager et al. (2015) reported that an intervention to address bullying designed for a younger age group proved to be counter-productive when used with an older age-group of students. Some groups of students are more at risk of developing poor mental health than others, such as students with a disability (Dickinson et al., 2023), and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning and asexual (LGBTIQA+) students (Smith et al., 2014). Representing these groups as leaves on this sub-branch makes it clear that specific approaches are required to support these students. In addition, providing professional learning for school staff on culturally safe and appropriate practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and culturally and linguistically diverse students should also be incorporated into a whole-school wellbeing approach. Hence, respecting diversity and integrating strategies to build a school that is culturally safe, such as inclusive education and trauma-informed education practices, is important in an approach that addresses the needs of all the students in a school, as recognised in the inclusion component of the ASWF (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020) and the mentally healthy communities domain in the Be You framework.

Connected (relational). Having strong relationships and feeling connected to school is a key aspect of the mentally healthy domain in the Be You framework, and an important predictor of wellbeing (Runions & Cross, 2022) likely to influence students' perceptions of the school climate being warm and accepting. Students who experience their relationships with teachers and peers as being respectful and supportive are more likely to feel connected to others and to feel as if they belong in the school environment than other students whose personal relationships are not perceived to be as positive. As the development of supportive relationships is a critical component of a sense of belonging in school, each of the sub-branches here represent relationships, first between students and teachers, second between students, and third between students and other members of the wider community. Alongside adults and peers, a further sub-branch here describes the influence on students of the physical school environment, referred to by Cross & Lester (2023) as the 'third teacher'.

Supportive teacher-student relationships are characterised by, "…caring, productive, and respectful teacher-student interactions, a warm and close personal connection, and both the teacher and student having more positive (and less negative) perceptions of the teacher-student relationship". (Robinson, 2022, p. 2063). Relationships between teachers and students most often develop in the classroom context and are influenced by classroom management strategies and by how feedback from teachers to students is handled. Hence the classroom climate is an important leaf on this sub-branch. Therefore, examining how teachers typically interact with students in the classroom to identify strategies that serve to build relationships is warranted and represents an important leaf on this sub-branch, as is providing mentoring and professional learning to staff who require more support in fostering rewarding connections with students. Outside the classroom, many teachers are involved in co-curricula and extra-curricula activities with students (i.e., sports and clubs) that enable teachers and students to engage with each other in a more informal environment. There is evidence to suggest that taking part in additional activities positively impacts the relationship between teachers and students and that these positive feelings can carry over into the classroom environment (Sutton, 2015). For this reason, the connections that can be built between teachers and students within co-curricula and extra-curricula activities, and how these are potentially facilitated, are also included as a leaf on this sub-branch.
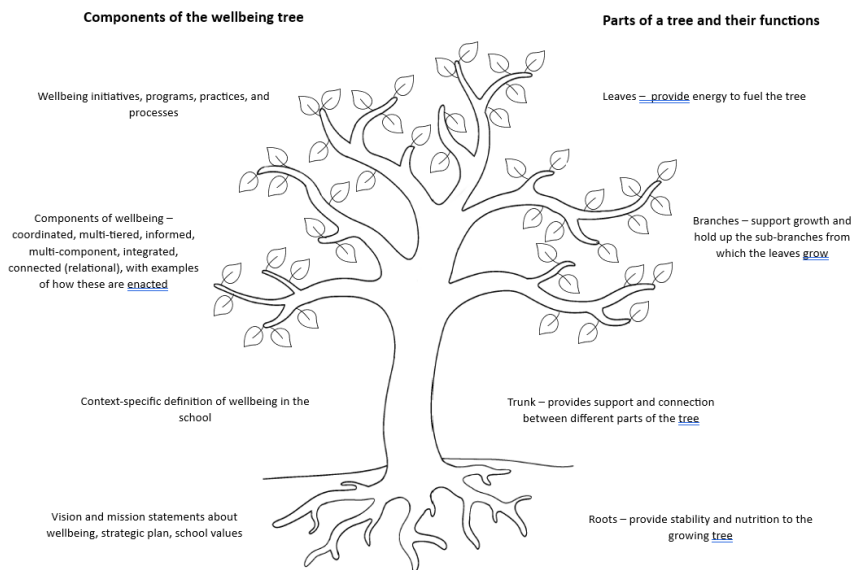
In a recent survey to discover what helped students to feel part of a school, participants expressed that they needed help from teachers in connecting with a cross-section of peers, as well as in taking part in whole-school activities (Allen, 2022). Hence, both these types of connections are shown as sub-branches in this part of the tree. Opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with peers and students of different ages can be formal, such as in leadership programs, peer mentoring, and inter-class 'buddy' relationships. However, having the teacher facilitate discussions across friendship groups in the classroom is also important in assisting students to develop more, and better, connections with others (Allen, 2022). Importantly, restorative practices that support students in managing when relationships become challenging are also key in maintaining a school environment that is

grounded in respect, trust, and support for others. Strategies that deal with conflict between students by addressing wrongdoing, repairing harm, and restoring relationships are likely to influence positively students' happiness and engagement in school (Weber & Vereenooghe, 2020). Finally, events that bring the whole school together like celebrations, dress up days, and sporting events have the potential to foster a sense of belonging in students and enable them to meet others informally. However, it is important to note that some students may feel excluded from these activities if they have little interest in the event, and so it is worthwhile to apply a wellbeing lens to these events to look for opportunities where everyone can feel valued and included.

Often overlooked when considering wellbeing practices, the physical environment is an additional component in students feeling connected to the school (Cross & Lester, 2023). Being shaped by social processes, the physical environment of the school reveals what is valued in the school context. Practices to build positive connections between students and the school through the internal and external physical environment include student artwork being displayed, attractive and comfortable play spaces that encourage interaction, areas designed to provide sensory stimulation, as well as natural environments, such as a school garden. Reviewing areas in the school where problems between students tend to occur and providing areas where students can connect with others positively are important ways that the school can adapt the physical environment to foster student wellbeing.

To conclude, this tool depicts the relationship between the key components of a whole-school approach to wellbeing as analogous to the function of the different parts of a tree, as shown in Figure 1. The wellbeing tree may be used to assist school staff in conceptualising a context-specific approach towards promoting student mental health and wellbeing that addresses actions that take place across the whole school system. In doing so, this tool offers some promise for staff endeavouring to capture the complexities of how wellbeing is addressed in their own school.

Figure 1

Components of the wellbeing tree tool as related to parts of a tree and their functions

Components of the wellbeing tree

Wellbeing initiatives, programs, practices, and processes

Components of wellbeing – coordinated, multi-tiered, informed, multi-component, integrated, connected (relational), with examples of how these are enacted

Context-specific definition of wellbeing in the school

Vision and mission statements about wellbeing, strategic plan, school values

Parts of a tree and their functions

Leaves – provide energy to fuel the tree

Branches – support growth and hold up the sub-branches from which the leaves grow

Trunk – provides support and connection between different parts of the tree

Roots – provide stability and nutrition to the growing tree

Reflection on the use of the wellbeing tree

In the introduction to this article several key features were proposed as important in creating a tool capable of capturing and presenting visually a whole-school approach to wellbeing. These were that it should be capable of comprehensively capturing both skills building initiatives and how to encourage a climate where students flourish. To be truly effective each school's unique context needs to be represented, and as such, the tool should be adaptable to a range of educational settings. Finally, the organisational tool should focus on strengths and positive practices, as well as be readily understandable if it is to be accepted and utilised by members of a school community. Taking each of these requirements in

turn, it could be stated that most, if not all, aspects of the school wellbeing environment can be represented using the tree analogy. For example, the tool has the capacity to incorporate: the people involved in wellbeing coordination; programs and practices to address a range of student needs from flourishing to targeted intervention; wellbeing measurement to assess progress; the integration of wellbeing policies; and the creation of a positive school climate through relationship building. Furthermore, this comprehensive picture is depicted as directly linked to a clear context-specific identification of the purpose of each school and a definitive understanding of what is meant by wellbeing in each school. Using this organic analogy highlights how each of the components of a whole-school approach could be linked to form one coordinated approach, as opposed to wellbeing initiatives being implemented as separate and fragmented actions. It could be argued that supporting this understanding is where the tool offers most value to schools, and this has been the feedback from the small group of schools introduced to using it by the author in her professional practice. However, further evaluation is warranted to assess the usefulness of this tool in a range of different school contexts.

A further feature identified as important in this tool was that it could be adapted to different school settings, and this is certainly the case as schools generate their own tree roots, trunk, and leaves. The only seemingly prescribed component of the tree is the branches that provide structural support to the whole-school approach, yet these too can be customisable to represent the important components decided upon by a school, or the branches could even reflect the components in existing conceptual frameworks adopted by the school. For example, a school could design wellbeing tree branches utilising the five domains from the Be You framework, or the five elements from the ASWF, or from components of any other conceptual framework, as deemed to be appropriate and meaningful in their context. It follows then that sub-branches would unpack further each of these components from which actions in the form of leaves could still grow. Therefore, as no two trees are exactly the same, each wellbeing tree would be unique to each school.

Inevitably there are some limitations in attempting to simplify a complex process and structure into a visual model and this is so with the wellbeing tree tool. In practical terms capturing all the details as suggested from roots to individual leaves may be difficult within one image, hence the facility for school community members to 'zoom in' on different branches may be a solution. In the current configuration the tool does not depict the important barriers and enablers to a whole-school approach that are likely to influence implementation success. However, the analogy could be extended to include environmental conditions, such as the notion of drought to represent stunted growth when the tree needs more nurturing (i.e., in the form of staff professional development), or a storm where the tree is under threat and staff need to mitigate against the nature of the threat (i.e., wellbeing leaders identify any misconceptions about wellbeing or mental health). In extending the analogy to include the 'weather' wellbeing leaders may be reminded of the importance of monitoring the ongoing health of the tree and taking the necessary actions to sustain it. A further limitation of this tool is that, being context-specific and strength-based, it does not show where the school has 'gaps' in wellbeing provision. In short, it cannot depict a leaf that has not grown yet. Other tools, such school wellbeing readiness surveys may more adequately address the need to identify areas in which the school could put in place further actions. Finally, some schools may find the wellbeing tree relatively informal, preferring to operationalise their approach using a flow chart, for example. However, it is argued that the tree could easily be inverted with the roots at the top and the other components stemming from them in a standard flow chart format. In addition, this inverted format may prove to be a useful approach to creating a whole-school written wellbeing plan.

In popular culture trees are often thought to symbolise strength, growth, individuality, and interconnectedness. Each of these qualities exemplifies aspirations for an approach to student wellbeing that brings together what wellbeing means in any school, what the school does to promote wellbeing, and why. The tree analogy creates an image of a wellbeing approach that is sufficiently established and strong enough to bend in the wind, but not to break when faced with environmental challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or local emergencies.

Importantly, by firstly envisaging a 'bigger picture' to describe a whole-school approach to wellbeing, school staff are freed to continue the important work in sourcing, delivering, and enabling sustainable wellbeing approaches that promote flourishing for all students.

Conclusion

School staff face the realities of the increasing youth mental health crisis on a regular basis. Equipping them with the skills to integrate high quality wellbeing initiatives and practices into their work is a priority for school leaders. However, the range of advice, programs, and frameworks designed to support schools in promoting student wellbeing may be challenging for school staff to navigate. It is not surprising, therefore, that school wellbeing practice has been characterised as adopting more of a scattergun approach to wellbeing promotion (White, 2024) that is unlikely to maximise student wellbeing outcomes in the long term. Consequently, there is a need for structure in the operationalisation of whole-school wellbeing approaches that are cohesively integrated into a school's culture and climate. Based on the structural components of a tree, the tool described in this article presents one method to address this problem by enabling staff to condense the main components of a context-specific approach towards wellbeing in their own schools, to articulate actions in the school that promote student wellbeing, and to create a shared language based on common understandings. As such, the tool presented here could be considered a starting point in envisaging a process that addresses wellbeing in schools as, "…everyday business and everyone's business" (Cross & Lester, 2023, p. 213). The choice to view student flourishing as central to what happens in schools is an ambitious goal, but the first step in transforming a learning community to one that prioritises the wellbeing and mental health of all students.

Brief Author Biography

Jane Kirkham is an Educational and Developmental Psychologist employed as a Senior Psychologist at the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA) consulting in schools on topics related to student wellbeing, engagement, and learning. She has over 30

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