Turning Tables On Mainstream Education

Dr Helen Street

It is time to turn the tables on our education system.

We may love the new resilience program in year one of our son’s primary school, but is it really doing anything to constructively support resilience in students? We may think that the year nine’s in our daughter’s class are learning a lot about social values, but are they motivated to act on this knowledge? *We may want our kids to all feel equally important, but do they?*

In 2015 it appears that the majority of traditional western schools are keen to acknowledge the important role they can play in nurturing wellbeing in staff and students. Wellbeing is defined as positive mental health. This does not mean that those with a strong sense of wellbeing always feel happy or life always goes their way. Rather, wellbeing embraces the ability to enjoy life’s successes and also cope effectively with life’s setbacks. Having wellbeing means embracing the good and bad times in life with resilience, mindfulness and with social and emotional competency. Most schools and colleges boast at least one wellbeing initiative. Many make explicit statements about the importance of social and emotional learning, key ingredients of wellbeing, within their school community framework.

On the face of it, these findings suggest that tables are already being positively turned within the education system. However, many school based practices surrounding the delivery of wellbeing initiatives and programs remain embedded in a misconceived, deeply ingrained belief system. As such, programs and initiatives do not always deliver what they claim to deliver. For example, beliefs about the effectiveness of homework, the benefit of early structured education and reward based systems for reinforcement, all continue to have a strong hold, despite research repeatedly questioning their effectiveness.

It is vital we spend more time understanding the distinction between ‘wanting to nurture students’ and ‘what we actually do’. *It is vital that we don’t drown our growing interest in wellbeing within an outdated system of educational delivery.*

As with many ingrained beliefs, those in education are often entrenched to the point of confusion with ‘fact’. They are rarely challenged and very resistant to change. This has resulted in many questionable outcomes for school based wellbeing programs and frequent confusion over program delivery. For example, many schools are keen to encourage positive social behaviour among students and staff (signifying increased wellbeing awareness). Yet, they do this with the use of reward systems such as stickers, certificates or prizes. Extrinsic reward systems such as this encourage students to focus on getting the prize rather than developing an awareness of the intrinsic benefits of positive social behaviour. Rewards for positive social behaviour may lead to short term compliance but, in the long term, they encourage a more narcissistic and less empathetic student.
Similarly, many schools now realize that mental health is a primary concern in young people (wellbeing awareness) but still choose to highlight the long term dangers of poor health rather than support the immediate benefits of good health (unhelpful ingrained practice).

The misconceived self-esteem movement of the early 1970s wrongly assumed that self-esteem was paramount for good grades and good social behaviour (inaccurate wellbeing awareness). Moreover, it resulted in teachers everywhere attempting to increase their students’ self-esteem with uncritical praise; to the point where no-one could fail, or possibly succeed (unhelpful practice). We need to learn from the mistakes of this time and ensure that we understand both the ingredients of wellbeing and the best method for creating a positive education recipe.

To ensure that we continue to build an effective platform for social and emotional learning in schools, we need to make sure we ask the ‘gritty questions’ about every idea and initiative we so painstakingly introduce. Otherwise we may well end up laminating the poster but ignoring the contents.

Next time you discuss that great new wellbeing program or initiative happening in your school ask:

What are the key aims of this program/idea?

Does the program actually deliver these aims within our own school community?

What evidence do we have to support anecdotal feedback?

How are we making sure we deliver this idea/program in an effective way?

How does this program or initiative fit in with the rest of our school practices?

And perhaps most importantly…

…Are we all on the same page?

This article first appeared in The Western Teacher, July 2015 and on The Positive Times (www.positivetimes.com.au)

Helen is one of the original creators of The National Australian Positive Schools Initiative (NAPSI), The Positive Schools conferences and The Positive Times; in addition to being the conference chair and a regular host and presenter at the events. She is available for talks to staff and parents on a range of topics.