



Peer-reviewed paper

The notion of well-being in the New Zealand education system

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This article engages with the notion of well-being in two ways: it explores how well-being is constructed and used in the two New Zealand national curriculum documents, *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga Mō nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa/Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996) and the *New Zealand Curriculum for English-medium Teaching and Learning in Years 1-13* (MoE, 2007); and how well-being is considered more broadly in the field of education and in relation to historical, philosophical traditions. This article aims not to make claims and statements about the role of well-being in (early childhood) education, but to encourage the reader to consider the importance of students' well-being for educational theory and practice and to reflect on one's own practice and role as educator to this end.

Introduction

To strive for well-being and happiness can be seen as a fundamental desire of human beings. Aristotle argued in the *Nichomachean Ethics* for *eudaimonia* – a state of happiness that serves no other purpose than itself – to be the utmost goal for human beings. Although the notion of *well-being* is not the same as what Aristotle described in his notion of *eudaimonia*, to pursue the latter, it cannot be denied that well-being has its role to play. However, the meaning and understanding of the term *well-being* is not used consistently but is rather diverse in definition and application. This holds true not only between disciplines, but also within disciplines, such as education, psychology or sociology (Mashford-Scott, Church, & Tayler, 2012; Soutter, Gilmore, & O'Steen, 2010).

In education, well-being seems often to be addressed more implicitly rather than explicitly, despite its significance for children, youth and human beings in general. In the daily routine of teaching and learning reading, writing and maths, of engaging with physics, chemistry, foreign languages and other subject matters, the question of how personal well-being, in all its aspects, can be achieved and *eudaimonia* pursued is not often explicitly addressed. This is also reflected in the degree to which importance is given to well-being in core curriculum documents. This is surprising, as living a good life, positive emotions and being well is not only important on a fundamental level for human beings, but it has been shown that students who experience well-being show increased resilience and perform better in their studies (Eryilmaz, 2015).



In the New Zealand context, the notion of well-being is incorporated in the two main curriculum documents: the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* and the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) for years 1-13. Both documents have been developed deliberately under consideration of the bi-cultural heritage of *Aotearoa*/New Zealand and, according to Mutch and Trim (2013), express insights into the principles and values New Zealanders desire to see in curriculum and pedagogy. Mutch and Trim state that both documents, “[a]lthough they are the products of their time, . . . have captured many concepts that are timeless and, in the case of *Te Whāriki*, have stood the test of time” (p. 87). *Te Whāriki* can be literally translated as ‘woven flax mat,’ which expresses the understanding of how its four core principles (*whakamana* – empowerment, *kotahitanga* – holistic development, *whānau tangata* – family and community, and *ngā hononga* – relationships) are interlocked with its five strands of well-being (*mana atua*), belonging (*mana whenua*), contribution (*mana tangata*), communication (*mana reo*), and exploration (*mana Aotūroa*). According to Mutch and Trim, it also “represents the curriculum (or course of learning) that each child will undertake – not as a linear and structured progression, but as a complex interweaving of experiences and developments” (p. 81). *Te Whāriki* is designed as an open “philosophical, sociocultural, holistic and ‘bicultural’” (Richie, 2012, p. 9) guiding document for early childhood centres and teachers, rather than a prescriptive curriculum. In contrast, the New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2007) provides

not only a set of learning areas underpinned by a vision and guiding principles, but also include[s] guidance on effective pedagogy by reframing teaching as an ongoing inquiry. This inquiry process has three stages. *Focusing inquiry* establishes the baseline and direction. Teachers ask the question: What is important (and therefore worth spending more time on) given where my students are? *Teaching inquiry* uses evidence from research and practice to design teaching and learning opportunities and asks the question: What evidence-based strategies are most likely to help my students learn this? *Learning inquiry* investigates the success of the teaching in terms of the prioritised direction by asking the question: What happened as a result of the teaching, and what are the implications for further teaching? (Mutch & Trim, 2013, p. 82)

Therefore, the New Zealand Curriculum provides more structure for teaching practice than *Te Whāriki*, but it still sits on the open ended side of the curriculum spectrum (ranging from strictly prescriptive to non-prescriptive).

Although both curriculum documents are aligned to each other in their underlying concepts (Mutch & Trim, 2013), discrepancies in the scope and importance of well-being are noticeable by comparison. In this article, we will (a) explore the notion of well-being, the way well-being may be interpreted and some key characteristics in relation to well-being in education contexts, and (b) compare the use and understanding of well-being between the two curriculum documents. We hope that this contemplation will help practitioners, academics and policymakers to reflect on the importance and relevance of students’ well-being in education and how it is incorporated in curricula and policy documents as well as in teaching practice.



Understandings and aspects of well-being

Following the introduction above, it becomes apparent that the notion of well-being is understood differently in different contexts, even within a single domain, such as education. In this section, we endeavour to unpack conceptual understandings of well-being and discuss implications for early childhood education. To gain a better understanding of different perspectives, it is helpful to review traditional philosophical approaches to well-being. Soutter, Gilmore and O'Steen (2010) summarise that the well-being literature follows two main philosophical perspectives: "the *hedonistic* tradition . . . and the *eudaimonic* tradition" (p. 593).

The hedonistic traditional understanding reaches back to the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus who proclaimed pleasures as the way to happiness and well-being. This tradition has been critiqued significantly in the public and academic arena over the centuries; however, Feldman (2004) argues that most of the critique is targeted towards a misinterpretation of the Epicurean model. Feldman explains that the majority of the critique has targeted and condemned a focus on bodily, sensual pleasures and a perceived neglect of higher emotions and aspects of well-being. However, the Epicurean hedonistic model emphasises moderation, balance, and the enjoyment of simple pleasures, such as a stroll through the park, a lively discussion with friends, or the pleasure of experiencing art in the form of paintings or music. Hence, the hedonistic perspective on well-being can be understood, for the course of this article, as the "balance of pleasure over pain" (Soutter et al., 2010, p. 593), or the balance of positive experiences and emotions over negative affect. In current research and literature, the hedonistic tradition can be found in positive psychology, such as research in regard to positive emotions or happiness, as well as educational concepts of well-being that focus on the display of positive emotions and developmental aspects often present in the domain of ECE research (Mashford-Scott, Church, & Tayler, 2012; Soutter et al., 2010).

The eudaimonic tradition is based on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and, in contrast to pleasures and positive emotions, emphasises an overall life quality, the development of living a good life. The notion of well-being from an eudaimonic perspective includes a way of living that points towards "meaning, purpose, and virtue" (Soutter et al., 2010, p. 593). One example of research in relation to well-being would be Nussbaum and Sen's (1993) capability approach.

Nussbaum (2000) draws upon the Aristotelian notion of the good life to specify ten universal elements of well-being: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; control over one's environment (political and material). (Soutter et al., p. 593)

Comparing Nussbaum's list of well-being elements with the discussion below of how well-being is constructed in *Te Whāriki* and the New Zealand Curriculum, it becomes clear that curriculum documents have their limits and cannot per se enable all aspects of students' well-being in their lives. However, sensible steps can be taken through curricula and teaching practice to address various areas and topics in (pre-)schools to help students grow in significant ways in relation to Nussbaum's capability approach and to become aware of the importance of these universal elements of well-being. The evaluation in the next section also



indicates that the notion of well-being in *Te Whāriki* is closer aligned with Nussbaum's capabilities approach than in the New Zealand Curriculum.

Another example for an eudaimonic approach would be Schmid's (2000) philosophical concept of an art of living, which moves beyond well-being towards the idea of a good and beautiful life in which each person becomes the artist of his or her own life through actively taking responsibility for one's own life and trying to shape it into a work of art. It has been discussed elsewhere (Teschers, 2013) how Schmid's art of living concept and education can link together to support students of all ages towards becoming artists of their own lives and developing their own art of living. Further examples of research related to the eudaimonic tradition include the examination of concepts such as life satisfaction, motives and goals.

A critique point to well-being research from an educational perspective, especially in the area of early childhood education, is raised by Mashford-Scott et al. (2012), who argue that research undertaken in relation to young children is rather descriptive and often does not include children's perceived experiences of well-being. Therefore, it could be argued that measurements of well-being in ECE are mainly focused on developmental aspects and the display of positive emotions (Farquhar, 2012; Mashrode-Scott et al., 2012), which links closely to the hedonistic tradition of well-being rather than taking a more holistic approach as in the eudaimonic tradition. As argued by Biesta (2010), in the current 'age of measurement' and accountability the feasibility of what can be measured is likely to influence the focus of research endeavours and politics alike. Therefore, the limitations of how to measure well-being might affect the presence and relevance of well-being in more recent educational policy and curriculum documents, such as the New Zealand Curriculum. However, it needs to be pointed out here that *Te Whāriki* takes a more holistic approach to early childhood well-being and can be said to follow the eudaimonic tradition in this regard (Farquahr, 2012). One example of research undertaken in New Zealand that does take a more holistic approach to young children's well-being has been conducted by Sandy Farquahr. Farquahr (2012) draws on Ricoeur's theory of *narrative identity* to explore children's well-being through personal narratives in which she links children's sense of identity with well-being. This allows for insights into what is important for individual children in relation to a developing sense of identity and well-being, such as taking pleasure in what they do and "an intrinsic desire to do well" (p. 30).

One important aspect of well-being discussed by Cardinal, Lambert and Lamouche (2015) is the role of culture and belonging in educational contexts. Cardinal et al. discuss their experiences of culture in relation to education and well-being from three different perspectives: a Francophone heritage perspective from within a dominant Francophone educational setting, an indigenous (Canadian First Nations) perspective in a dominant English educational setting, and an indigenous experience as a migrant in a predominantly mixed cultural expat educational setting. Understandably, the range of experiences and the roles of culture and belonging have been quite diverse due to the different settings and backgrounds of the authors. However, Cardinal et al. highlight a number of insights that are relevant to the discussion at hand, especially in New Zealand's bicultural heritage and multicultural educational context. Cardinal et al. come to the conclusion that cultural experiences and belonging play a role for the development of resilience and



well-being in youths, and educational settings that incorporate the culture/s of their students in a meaningful way can support students' feelings of belonging, safety and well-being. This resonates with the strand of well-being in *Te Whāriki*, which is also linked to the strand of belonging (see Ritchie, 2013; Ritchie & Rau, 2006; 2008). However, not surprisingly, tokenism is often not enough to make a real difference in this context, and it is important that the tensions that are "inherent to cultural negations" (p. 18) are acknowledged when culture is incorporated in curriculum and teaching.

In the New Zealand context, this would suggest to incorporate Māori culture and heritage in meaningful ways in the everyday experience of curriculum and teaching. In addition, due to the multicultural environment that New Zealand mostly is, building on bicultural practice and cultural sensitivity to create opportunities to incorporate all students' cultures in meaningful ways would allow students from other minority cultures, such as Pasifika, Asian ancestry and non-English *Pākehā* heritage, to develop stronger ties and experiences of belonging towards their (pre-)school setting. Cardinal et al. draw on Steeves, Clandinin and Caine (2013) to propose one example of how this could be done by the creation of spaces in the daily routine where children and youth can "share stories of who they are and are becoming, stories that include their understanding of the intergenerational cultural narratives that live in their skin and bodies and is embedded in the geographic places they were born" (Cardinal et al, 2015, p. 18).

Another insight shared by Cardinal et al. is that the incorporation of aboriginal culture and knowledge can be beneficial for non-aboriginal students as well "as it is based on human experience and emotion; it can create cross-cultural understanding and acceptance, and healthy relationships across cultures" (p. 18). Cardinal et al. are referring to Canadian First Nation cultures, but this most likely applies to the incorporation of other aboriginal cultures and knowledge, such as *te āo* Māori, as well. In this context, Ritchie (2012) indicates that the implementation of *kaupapa* Māori in New Zealand ECE centres has led to an increased awareness for cultural diversity in general and a stronger incorporation of other cultures in daily centre activities, which is helpful for children's sense of belonging, identity and well-being.

In the following section we will compare how the notion of well-being is understood and incorporated into New Zealand's two main curriculum documents.

The construction of well-being in Te Whāriki and the New Zealand Curriculum

How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control (Bernstein, 1971, p. 47).

The contested nature of the notion of well-being is clearly evidenced in the official national curricula documents within *Aotearoa*/New Zealand. As discussed above, and according to La Placa, McNaught and Knight (2013), "extensive, if contradictory, literature on the concept of wellbeing [... exists, which] has defied



a simple definition, because of its inherent complexity” (p. 116). This inconsistency of definitions of well-being is clearly visible in the way it is used in *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga Mō nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa/Early childhood Curriculum* (MoE, 1996) and the *New Zealand Curriculum for English-medium Teaching and Learning in Years 1-13* (MoE, 2007) education documents.

The tools of Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) assist in understanding the dominant discourses prevalent in both the national curriculum documents in respect to the concept of well-being (Schreier, 2012). QCA is a systematic method for classifying initial material into categories, or in this case discourses, and then, using this coding frame on the remainder of the text accordingly. This is a useful tool for understanding large amounts of qualitative material (Schreier, 2012).

It will be argued in this section that through discourse analysis of the well-being concept, evidence emerges that clearly signifies the philosophical gulf between national curriculum documents that were intended to align with each other.

Definitions

Each curriculum document provides a glossary of definitions. In reference to well-being the following is included:

Te Whāriki:

Well-being: a state of physical, social, or emotional comfort, progress, and sound condition. (p. 99)

The New Zealand Curriculum for English-medium Teaching and Learning in Years 1-13 [NZC]:

Hauora: In health and physical education, the use of the word *hauora* is based on Mason Durie’s *Te Whare Tapa Wha* model (Durie, 1994). *Hauora* and well-being, though not synonymous share much common ground. *Taha wairua* relates to spiritual well-being, *taha hinengaro* to mental and emotional well-being, *taha tinana* to physical well-being and *taha whanau* to social well-being. (p. 22)

The definitions alone demonstrate that well-being is being represented in different ways. *Te Whāriki* presents an all-encompassing holistic worldview that reflects a subjective assessment of well-being. Beyond this definition, well-being is present throughout the curriculum and interwoven with other strands and the underlying principles. It seems that an attempt to do the same in the NZC is made by adopting the Māori concept of health, *Hauora* through Durie’s *Whare Tapa Wha* model, and by making references to spiritual, mental and emotional well-being. But rather than extending these to all learning areas, it loses a holistic approach as it seems limited to the Health and Physical Education area only, as will be discussed below. This raises questions as to the authenticity of its inclusion within the NZC framework.



Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga Mō nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa/Early Childhood Curriculum (1996)

The introduction of the national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, in 1996 was predicated by a government agenda to align it with the then newly developed national school curriculum, the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (May, 2002). According to Helen May, one of the co-developers of *Te Whāriki*:

we were contracted to co-ordinate the development of a curriculum that could embrace a diverse range of early childhood services and cultural perspectives, articulate a philosophy of quality early childhood practice and make connections with a new national curriculum for schools. (MoE, 1996, p. 30)

A key principle that was to become foundational to the early childhood curriculum and be an integral theme was that of “empowering children to learn and grow” through the concept of empowerment. This was strongly linked to Māori aspirations of "*Toko Rangatiratanga na te mana-matauranga* - knowledge and power set me free" (Reedy, 1995, p. 6, as cited in May, 2002, p. 31). Furthermore, a set of strands to reflect the key domains of empowerment were developed in both Māori and English as a way of representing both cultures (May, 2002). These strands are, as mentioned above, well-being (*mana atua*), belonging (*mana whenua*), contribution (*mana tangata*), communication (*mana reo*) and exploration (*mana aotūroa*).

Closer content analysis of the early childhood curriculum text provides the reader with a strong sense that a well-being discourse is of particular focus in this curriculum document. Well-being is integrated throughout and referred to explicitly in each of the four strands, with a specific strand dedicated to this concept. Consistent with the holistic intentions of the curriculum document and the well-being definition provided in the glossary, well-being development extends beyond the individual to the wider family and community.

Te Whāriki utilises Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory to locate the child into the wider early childhood context. Strong links are made to the well-being concept, not only for the child but also for those adults that support the child and the wider community:

Children’s learning and development are fostered if the well-being of their family and community is supported; if their family, culture, knowledge and community are respected; and if there is a strong connection and consistency among all the aspects of the child’s world. (MoE, 1996, p. 42)

This theme continues across the other principles of the curriculum through making it the responsibility of the educator to provide the context and environment that fosters well-being in order to create a holistic experience for the child. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological approach is mirrored through the concept of well-being across the four strands of the curriculum, starting with the child, shifting to significant others and the home, community groups and finally to a societal level.



A whole strand within the document is dedicated to well-being located under the *Empowerment* principle that focuses on the emotional needs of the child, adopting a subjective well-being discourse. It states:

The goals of this strand recognise the principle of Holistic Development in promoting well-being through consistent, warm relationships which connect the various aspects of the child's world. (MoE, 1996, p. 46)

Prominence is given to the child's health and an environment in which their emotional well-being is nurtured and they are kept safe from harm. Links are also made to the well-being of others, which links to *Belonging*, the second strand, recognising the importance of feeling safe and the importance of significant others for gaining a sense of security and identity. This sense of belonging "contributes to inner well-being, security, and identity" (p. 54). The third strand, *Contribution*, makes a shift to children developing a sense of well-being for the group/community through the following learning outcomes:

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a sense of responsibility and respect for the needs and *well-being* of the group, including taking responsibility for group decisions; an appreciation of the ways in which they can make contributions to groups and to group well-being. (p. 70)

Exploration, the fourth and final strand, captures a broader context, making strong links to the wider society. Goal four within this strand, for example, presents the following learning outcome: "respect and a developing sense of responsibility for the well-being of both the living and the non-living environment" (p. 90).

To summarise this section, it has been shown that well-being is woven throughout *Te Whāriki*, forming an integral and fundamental concept for early childhood education in New Zealand.

New Zealand Curriculum (2007)

In contrast to the holistic and integrated nature of the strands of *Te Whāriki*, the NZC is represented by eight distinct and separate learning areas. Within the document, the well-being concept is situated as just one of the elements within a wider health framework, suggesting a more traditional positivist discourse



(Placa, McNaught & Knight, 2013). Content analysis demonstrates that of the eight learning areas in the NZC, the only focus given to well-being can be found in the health and physical education learning area as follows:

In health and physical education, the focus is on the well-being of the students themselves, of other people, and of society through learning in health-related and movement contexts. (MoE, 2007, p. 22)

Within the physical and health learning area are four strands, with only one – personal health and physical development – making explicit links to well-being:

Personal Health and Physical Development, in which students develop the knowledge, understandings, skills, and attitudes that they need in order to maintain and enhance their personal well-being and physical development. (p. 22)

On reading the rationale provided to the reader for the inclusion of well-being in this learning area in the framework, it starts to become clear that a government policy discourse is being promoted with a shift from the health and physical dimensions of the individual to a business discourse underpinned by neo-liberal terminology. This is evidenced by the inclusion of statements that expect the individual to take ‘social responsibility’ to “contribute to the wellbeing of those around them, of their communities, of their environments (including natural environments), and of the wider society” (p. 42), as well as the alignment of well-being with business and the economy:

New Zealand needs its young people to be skilled and educated, able to contribute fully to its well-being, and able to meet the changing needs of the workplace and the economy. (p. 42)

The evaluation of well-being in *Te Whāriki* and the NZC has shown a shift from a holistic perspective of child development towards a physical and mental health definition of well-being. In the NZC, well-being, although set out as an underlying value informing the curriculum as a whole, seems to be limited mostly to a small domain (health and physical education) and further impacted by neoliberal terminology towards business, economy, and the well-being of the country, leading further away from the well-being of each student.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that the notion of students’ well-being is understood and applied differently in the two main curriculum documents in New Zealand. We have contemplated on different aspects and interpretations of well-being, as well as on some limitations in terms of measurability and current paradigms of accountability and neoliberal terminology. We have contemplated aspects of how culture and belonging can play a role for well-being and hinted at ways of how students’ cultural background could be incorporated in meaningful ways in daily teaching practice. Instead of making pointed suggestions on how students’ well-being should be treated in education on policy and practitioner levels, we hope that this article prompts further reflection and discussion on



what can be done differently to further strengthen the well-being of students in and through educational settings.

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