25

Positive Education with Disadvantaged Students

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If anyone needs positive education, it is those young people who struggle with adversities in their lives and for whom school may be their only place of refuge, stability, and welcome. Although schools and teachers often do their best for their students, in many countries globally, educational systems, and government policies focus primarily on academic outcomes. For vulnerable students, such limited approaches to education are not only unsupportive, they may be making things far worse. Too often, vulnerable young people are handed a 'double whammy': young people who experience difficult and often ongoing life events at home or in the community do not always succeed or behave well at school, and as a consequence are punished or even excluded from the place that could otherwise provide refuge and support. 'Strong discipline' is seen by many as the way to handle challenging behaviour so that children 'learn' what is expected. But what pupils often learn is that they are unwanted, worthless, and bad. This is not only tragic for those individuals whose opportunities, mental health, and relationships all suffer directly, but also on what happens in our communities and societies in the future.

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This chapter outlines some of the issues that young people may face—both acute and on-going. We summarise what typically happens to these students in response; how they feel about themselves, others, and the world around them; their ability to focus and learn; their emotionally driven behaviours; and the social difficulties they may encounter. We next briefly outline the research on protective factors and the role that schools might play in fostering these. We then provide a series of case studies, which provide rich examples of action at school, city, and community levels to address the needs of disadvantaged students. From these, we identify some specific aspects of positive education that may help break the ongoing cycle of disadvantage.

What Do We Mean by Disadvantage?

Children do not start life on a level playing field. Many face challenges that are often multifaceted across multiple levels of a system (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), ranging from socio/political factors (macro-level) to direct interactions with family, carers, and teachers (micro-level). Many of these disadvantages create chronic adversity, which in turn are passed along to subsequent generations (chrono-level). Many students also experience acute adversity, times when they face issues that undermine their sense of self, feelings of safety, and wellbeing. Sometimes it is clear to schools which students are dealing with disadvantage, but not always. For instance, girls who experience family violence may not attract any attention in school, even though their anxiety level is high and self-esteem is low. Parents who start or end romantic relationships can be challenging for their children, who may express their anger and confusion in school rather than at home. Disadvantage also includes those with special educational needs, who often lack both learning support needs and struggle to experience inclusion and belonging at school. Special needs is a broad field and beyond the scope of this chapter, but is an area where positive education needs a more specific focus in the future.

Each level of the system is affected by other levels. For instance, a single racist comment is made more possible by a political culture that implicitly supports racism. A school that excludes a student for their behaviour reflects a system that values academic excellence over belonging as part of whole child education. School culture is also not static; effects of different factors within the system change dynamically over time (i.e., the chrono-level). While acknowledging these bidirectional influences, it is useful to consider specific experiences at different levels of this model, which we turn to now.

Micro-Level

At the micro-level, interactions between children and those in their immediate environment can either facilitate positive growth or actively damage a healthy sense of self. This begins at home. Inconsistent or poor parenting often arises from families who either do not know what is required to promote healthy child development, or whose lives and resources do not facilitate this (Gleeson, Hsieh, & Cryer-Coupet, 2016). The parenting style that has the best outcomes is *facilitative* or *authoritative*. Combining acceptance with positive interactions, consistent communication on social values and expectations, facilitative parenting promotes a positive sense of self alongside considerate behaviour towards others (Baumrind, 1989; Clark & Ladd, 2000; Wing Chan & Koo, 2011). Positive and secure early attachment, where carers are attuned to their infants is widely accepted as critical to the healthy development of the child and often through to adulthood (Bowlby, 1988; Gerhardt, 2015).

Secure attachments are at risk for infants in dysfunctional and/or isolated families and those with parents who struggle with mental health issues, resulting in a number of less adaptive parenting styles. For instance, permissive parenting is warm and loving but does not set clear boundaries or expectations for children, which can poorly impact independence, persistence, academic outcomes, and prosocial behaviour (Damon, 1995). Authoritarian parenting is harsh, with little warmth or flexibility. Some families believe their children's 'performance' reflects on their own status in the community. Consequently, parents pressure their children to attain high grades, sometimes to the exclusion of other activities and a more balanced childhood. Yet this often does not lead to higher achievement, but instead can increase depression and alienation (Kim, Wang, Orozco-Lapray, Shen, & Murtuza, 2013).

Although we cannot accurately ascertain figures for child abuse and neglect, figures from the National Society for the Prevention of Child Cruelty (NSPCC) in the U.K. indicate that cases of child cruelty and neglect more than doubled between 2012 and 2017. At the end of March 2019, over 52,000 children in England were the subject of a child protection plan (ONS, 2020). As of 2015, over 700,000 children were reported as being abused every year in the U.S. (National Children's Alliance, 2015). The most recent figures in Australia indicate that 1 in 35 children received child protection services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). These statistics are only the ones we know about—there are most likely many more unreported cases.

While parents and immediate family members play an important role, others also have a significant role in the day-to-day interactions with children

and young people. These include members of the wider family and other carers, people in the local community, and their teachers in school. The relationships that children have with educators depend both on the beliefs and skills of teachers and the context in which the school is operating. Whereas positive interactions with teachers can support those with disadvantage, the opposite can also be true. A quote by a young person captures this well (New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, 2009):

> It feels like you're like you are the only one that can't do it and you feel really sad and empty. And you yeah, you feel like you feel unhappy and you feel like you can't, you can't, you just can't do it. Sometimes you feel sick because you are like so unhappy. (p. 5)

Meso-Level

The meso-level concerns the relationships between those in the young person's micro-system that directly impact on them, including issues such as family breakdown, violence in the home, alcoholism, and other addictions. For instance, in the U.K., 1 in 20 children are reported to experience sexual abuse, with actual rates most likely much higher (Radford et al., 2011), and at least 130,000 children live in homes with high risk of domestic abuse (ONS, 2015; SafeLives, 2015a). Loss, especially unresolved grief such as in acrimonious parental separation, can lead to children being angry, confused, and/or conflicted. How they respond will depend on many factors, including their age (Dowling & Elliott, 2012). This issue is often poorly recognised or addressed in the school system. Reconstituted families also put pressure on young people, who may find themselves sharing a parent and home with people they barely know.

Within the school, the meso-level reflects how the school's culture and climate impacts upon the young person. Culture can be defined as 'the way we do things round here', the beliefs and values that influence action, whereas school climate usually refers to how people feel about being there. Students who feel marginalised and/or unworthy at school are often those whose psychological needs are not being addressed there. This may be the outcome, for instance, of a school culture that expects conformity rather than valuing the strengths and uniqueness of each student.

Exo-Level

The exo-level refers to what is happening that impacts on those around the child, such as the working lives of parents, community, and health facilities. For example, organisations that have flexible working hours enable parents to take more responsibility for their families. In environments where facilities for outdoor play are restricted, there is less opportunity for children to engage in regular exercise, often placing pressure on families with energetic children but nowhere to safely expend that energy. Workplace stress and job instability increase family stress, which in turn can impact upon how the parents treat the child, increasing risk for abuse, neglect, and other relational issues.

Macro-Level

The macro-level involves the broader sociopolitical framework and policies in which schools, families, and young people function, and can have a very significant impact on the opportunities and barriers faced by disadvantaged young people. For instance, in the U.K., years of austerity have meant that there are 4.1 million children living with poverty (Child Poverty Action Group, 2019), being educated in schools that have insufficient resources, located in areas that have experienced cuts to youth and social services. A governmental reward and punishment approach towards 'discipline' has led to an unprecedented number of exclusions from school, both formally and informally. Understanding of adverse childhood experiences is thin on the ground, as headteachers promote zero tolerance policies in order to get 'outstanding' ratings from government inspectors. Such approaches have been shown not only to be useless in raising ratings, but also cause significant harm to the young people (Skiba et al., 2006). Racism and homophobia have also increased in recent years as public figures denigrate those who are different (Booth, 2019). Regular and social media also have a role to play between the exo- and macro-levels—either giving credence to certain beliefs, behaviours, and policies, or challenging them and offering different perceptions. There appears to be little connection made between the rise in knife-crime and all the issues raised above.

The Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Education

All of the above can result in *adverse childhood experiences* (ACE)—everything that happens to children and young people that impacts negatively on their wellbeing (Giovanelli, Mondi Reynolds, & Ou, 2019). ACEs potentially impact upon learning outcomes. For instance, poverty can raise basal cortisol levels and chronic stress responses, resulting in physical and psychological changes, such as increased anxiety and depression, sleep and digestive impairments, lowered concentration, attention, and memory skills (Suor, Sturge-Apple, Davies, Cicchetti, & Manning, 2015). This will, of course, have further impacts on cognitive functioning, learning, and academic performance. Children with ongoing toxic stress live their lives in fight, flight, or freeze mode—unable to concentrate to learn, responding to the world as a place of constant danger, not trusting adults, and unable to develop healthy relationships with peers. Their concentration is affected, their learning suffers, they are often not compliant, may be looking to assert control, be hypervigilant, and not be able to make friends easily. Indeed, it is hard to be confident in yourself when significant adults put you down all the time.

ACEs are interactive and cumulative to create greater risk. For example, a study of 2100 students in Washington State in the U.S. found that the more stressors a child has, the more difficulties they encounter at school (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). Students with multiple adversities were three times more likely to fail academically, five times more likely to have attendance problems, six times more likely to have behavioural problems, and four times more likely to experience poor health.

Resilience and Positive Adaptation

While there are multiple definitions of resilience, here we refer to resilience as the ability to withstand and recover from challenge and adversity. It is a multidimensional construct where resilience may be evidenced in some domains but not others. Some individuals are socially resilient and good at making friends despite challenges that occur in their social relationships, others are resilient in their learning, quickly recovering from mistakes or lower test scores to have another go. Others are resilient to stress and hardship, maintaining a sense of optimism and hope despite challenges and struggles. For simple, acute stressors and challenges, resiliency represents the ability

to quickly recover and press on. For ongoing challenges and chronic adversity, resiliency represents positive adaptation, with the ability to draw on a series of internal and external supports to navigate, make sense of, and grow from those challenges (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). Importantly, resilience is now widely understood to be a capacity involving behaviours, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed (Cohen, 2013). Further, resilience is not only relevant for vulnerable young people, but also important for educator wellbeing (Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley, & Weatherby-Fell, 2016).

Numerous psychological and social factors across multiple system levels have been identified that support resilience and positive adaptation. For instance, Southwick, Vythilingam, and Charney (2005) found that stress resilience was supported by positive emotions, optimism, humour, mental flexibility, explanatory style, acceptance and reappraisal, spirituality, altruism, social support, and having positive role models. Other studies have identified factors such as self-awareness, optimism, mental agility, perspective taking, knowing and using strengths, and connection (e.g., Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011; Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Werner and colleagues (2013) identified the importance of having someone who thinks you are special. As Bronfenbrenner (2005) vividly put it, "Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her" (p. 262). This does not have to be the parent or primary caretaker—studies indicate that it can be a grandparent, an aunt, a sibling, or a teacher. A sense of school belonging also contributes to resilience (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018).

Importantly, schools can play an important role in supporting disadvantaged students and promoting resilience and positive adaptation. Positive education cannot just be about curriculum, pedagogy, and the learning environment, but needs to consider how wellbeing and positive adaptation can be supported across the school. Helen Street (2018) noted that you cannot 'do' wellbeing in silos; it needs to be embedded across perceptions, policies, and practices—all aspects of the whole school. There is growing awareness of the importance of embedding wellbeing in education as a long-term culture change, with attention to the processes involved and incorporating multiple stakeholders, include staff, students, families, and the broader community (Quinlan & Hone, 2020). These become even more important for vulnerable students, who can slip through the cracks, creating greater gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Importantly, this work requires practices from many fields contributing to wellbeing in education, including mindfulness, restorative practice, trauma-informed practices, and social and emotional learning (SEL). Factors such as student agency and voice, school belonging, self and social awareness, and supportive peer relationships can

support students living with disadvantage rather than further isolating them or compounding disadvantage by excluding them. School behaviour policies, connection with the community, support for educator as well as students, and cultural responsiveness can all have a positive impact on school climate and interactions with disadvantaged students and their families. This is all part of whole-school positive education.

Examples Across Multiple Contexts

Clearly, numerous factors place vulnerable and disadvantaged students at risk, while other factors can provide protection and restoration to the students who need it the most. To bring this to life, we consider a series of case studies that illustrate good practice across a range of contexts and levels, including primary and secondary schools, local communities, and broader cities.

Building Shared Humanity: Rozelle Public School

As society has become increasingly global, connections that children previously had within families, schools, and communities, along with a uniform set of social values and religious and cultural norms are no longer guaranteed. Educators are challenged to provide the time and space for students to learn about each other, develop trust, and enhance skills including building, maintaining, and repairing relationships. Rozelle Public School, a primary school in New South Wales, Australia, implemented and embedded restorative practice as a 'way of being and learning'. Lyn Doppler, Rozelle's Principal for nine years, documented the school's journey and how the whole community, including staff, students, and parents, learned to use restorative language and practice to relate, think, and learn together.

   At the school, the time and space for creating connection is provided by daily Circles, a time in the school day where students have a voice, share stories, and are engaged emotionally as well as cognitively. Proactive circles enable everyone to engage in affirmation of themselves and others, enhancing trust, communication, and collaboration. Circles deepen the dialogue about things that matter and bring out the best in everyone. Building community in this way provides the foundation for people to connect in an increasingly disconnected world. This is the basis of restorative practices. The restorative philosophy ensures that everyone has an equal voice regardless of age, ethnicity, religious and socio-economic status, disability, and cognitive ability.

The incorporation of restorative practice positively affected how staff worked with children and how the children related with one another and with their parents. For instance, at a birthday party where children were in a dispute, they were able to say, "*let's circle up and work it out*". As Lyn observed: "*At Rozelle everyone understood the vision of the school and could articulate what we stood for in their own words. Keeping the philosophy out there in the community was very important as the language across the school changed*". Casual teachers visiting the school often stated that the school had a wonderful, different feeling that they could not quite put their finger on. There was laughter and smiling in the welcoming staffroom, sharing of ideas, and working with each other rather than in silos. Two students (names changed for privacy) illustrate the impact that the school's approach had on disadvantaged students.

Adam, a boy with severe autism and physical disability. Adam has autism, a physical disability making walking difficult, and a speech impairment. The inclusive restorative philosophy of the school enabled Adam to be embraced not only by his peers and their parents, but also by students from all years who appreciated his keen sense of humour. There was not a dry eye on the field as Adam ran in his final Athletics Carnival at the school. The students realised by themselves that this might be Adam's last chance to earn a winner's blue ribbon. Providing a beautiful example of empathy, all the boys banded together to run in a line, linking arms as they ran through the finishing tape. Today, Adam is 19 years old. His best friend from primary school is now his mentor and companion, a school friendship flourishing into working life.

Kirra, a First Nations student. Australia is grappling with issues of reconciliation with First Nations people, but it is hard for that to occur when one side has no voice. When Kirra, an indigenous student, arrived in Kindergarten, she was very shy and quiet. By the time she reached Year 6, Kirra had been elected a leader in the school parliament. She was able to talk about the school's philosophy in an impromptu way for a video being made on our restorative culture. On the morning of then Prime Minister Rudd's *Apology to the Stolen Generation*, the First Nations students were leading the assembly of the live screening of the apology. Kirra was buzzing around organising things and Lyn asked her if she was excited about what was about to happen in Parliament House. She answered with a beaming smile, "*Oh yes, Mrs Doppler, this is the best day of my life!*".

Portchester Community School: Every Conversation Is an Investment

Hampshire is a county in the U.K. that has explored ways to enhance outcomes for disadvantaged learners (Hampshire County Council, 2018). They have considered the extent to which disadvantaged pupils play an active, visible role in the school, whether they feel like they belong at the school, and how they relate to adults at the school. Through their own and other research, they have identified several key ingredients:

- Leadership, culture, and values
- High expectations
- Understanding barriers and targeted, evidence-based activities
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Securing accountability

Portchester Community School is one of their research schools that has successfully brought these ingredients to life. The school is a smaller than average secondary school, driven by a desire to ensure that all students, irrespective of their starting points, are able to be successful learners, confident individuals, and responsible citizens, explicitly stating:

> Firmly grounded in the belief that 'one size does not fit all', our disadvantaged strategy focuses on students as individuals, with interventions being personalised to ensure they are meaningful.

They have three areas for intervention: teaching and learning, building cultural capacity, and self-confidence and productive partnerships. They recognise that every interaction, with both the student and their families can make a positive difference.

Within the teaching and learning area they have prioritised timely, personal feedback, aimed at both extending a student's understanding and challenging their thinking. To build cultural capital and self-confidence, disadvantaged students are encouraged to participate in student leadership opportunities, international visits, and extra-curricular activities. The school has invested heavily into building and maintaining positive partnerships with the families of disadvantaged students, with each teaching member of staff allocated three such students. Over the academic year they meet in person at least three times, as well as maintain regular parental contact. Meetings are focused on the student's individual learning and aspirations. These strategies have

seen improvements in attendance, academic outcomes, parental engagement, behaviour, and engagement in extra-curricular activities for these identified young people.

The Aboriginal Girls Circle: Cultivating Respect for Culture

The Productivity Commission in Australia has measured the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People since 2000. As of 2016, although there were indications of progress such as improved educational outcomes and early childhood health, there were declines in other areas, including increases in the rate of Indigenous children on care and protection orders, with rates more than nine times the rate of non-Indigenous children. While the rate of Indigenous juveniles in detention had dropped, it was still 24 times higher than for non-Indigenous youth. The proportion of Indigenous adults reporting high or very high psychological distress rose to 33% in 2014–15, more than triple that for other Australians. The levels of suicide across the community account for at least 5.1% and as many as 10% of Indigenous deaths. Many children are therefore living with trauma and loss as well as other challenging life experiences.

The Aboriginal Girls Circle (AGC) was developed in conjunction with the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect in Australia in response to a request from a regional high school in New South Wales for a program specifically for Aboriginal girl to address behavioural issues, develop confidence, and improve relationships within the school and community. Girls in Year 7 are invited to join the AGC. The program begins with an overnight camp and then continues in weekly Circles until Year 10, with a new cohort beginning every year. The AGC combines social and emotional learning with community-based projects in order to build social and emotional skills together with a sense of agency, leadership, and community connection.

The AGC is having an impact beyond the everyday. Girls are staying longer in school, with several Circles students going onto higher education. They are also more confident and active in their communities and it is hoped, like many strong women, they will become intergenerational agents of change. The program has achieved these outcomes by incorporating the ASPIRE principles (Roffey, 2017a) of Agency, Safety, Positivity, Inclusion, Respect, and Equity across the program.

Agency. Young people in schools are often given information, told what to do, what is right, how to think, and how to behave. They are rarely encouraged to reflect and engage with critical thinking, let alone make their own decisions. For indigenous people in Australia, colonisation has stripped away much of their traditional culture so this authoritarian approach mirrors a dark history. In the AGC, student voice and agency are privileged. This empowers the girls to collaboratively make decisions and also to take responsibility for actions. The support of teaching and Aboriginal liaison officers together with Elders from the community has been valuable, especially as the girls' choice of projects has included cultural awareness, anti-racism, 'friendship and fighting', and community health.

Safety. For many indigenous students, speaking up is associated with feelings of shame. Individual competition, typical of independently oriented classrooms, does not align with Indigenous cultural norms, which are collective in nature. Safety includes the right to stay silent. Everything in the Circle happens in pairs, small groups, or the large Circle, such that no student is ever singled out or left without support. As the girls gain trust in the process and confidence that their views will be accepted, they are more able to speak up. Safety is also indirectly supported through the ways in which issues are addressed, using games, role-play, stories, and creative activities.

Positivity. Girls are encouraged to identify what is working well in their communities and explore what needs to happen to resolve some of the issues, using a strengths-based and solution-focused approach. Positivity is also about experiencing positive emotions; in the AGC this includes a sense of belonging, feeling valued, comfortable, and cared for, as well as excitement and shared humour. One of the most frequent comments about Circles is that it is 'fun', and laughing together in a safe way makes people feel better and promotes resilience. (Hromek & Roffey, 2009). For instance, one girl noted: "*You can go to AGC sad and you'll leave it like really happy*".

Inclusion. Indigenous students comprise 6.8% of the student population but 26% of suspensions from school. Inclusion is critical to the AGC. Everyone works with everyone else and there are clear guidelines for ways to address difficult behaviour should it occur. This maximises agency, respect, inclusion, and chances to reconnect. A pilot evaluation indicated that learning to work effectively with others enhanced problem-solving, self-efficacy, empathy, and self-awareness (Dobia et al., 2013). It also showed a strong affiliation with others in the AGC together with an increase in a sense of cultural and community connectedness.

Respect. In the AGC girls are given opportunities to speak and the expectation is that others will listen. Putting others down is never acceptable.

Respect is multidimensional, applying to self-respect, how you think about yourself, who you are and who you are becoming, respect for others and respect for culture, where you are from, and your community values and protocols. The girls themselves sought to learn more about their Aboriginal culture and as a result increased their respect for where they came from, an aspect of the intervention that was highly valued by community Elders.

Equity. Considering the lack of equity experienced by many Indigenous people, equity is particularly important for helping young people value themselves and their culture. Equity is embedded in all the Circle processes, where everyone has the opportunity to participate and the facilitator(s) engage equally in activities. This changes perceptions and relationships beyond the actual Circle, benefitting the girls and their communities.

Promoting Holistic Wellbeing in South African Schools

According to World Bank data (World Bank, 2018), South Africa is the country with the highest level of inequality. As the majority of the population are between 5 and 16 years old, the biggest cohort of South Africans whose quality of life is compromised is of school age. Although many policies and innovative approaches have been developed with the aim of individuals reaching their potential in school, most focus on academic achievement. This can lead to the dehumanising of schools, where learners become performance machines who have to produce high test scores, often at the cost of their mental health and wellbeing (Fataar, 2016; Shaughnessy, Galligan, & Hurtardo de Vivas, 2008). It is apparent that, in many instances, schools in need of the most support are labelled as dysfunctional rather than being best placed for positive proactive intervention.

This case study took place in six schools, five of which were classified in the poorest category, and the sixth had many learners who experienced the same levels of financial and social disadvantage. All six schools operated in a social context that included unemployment, inadequate housing, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, and crime. Every school battled with learner absenteeism, limited parental involvement, lack of resources, and high teacher stress.

In initial conversations with staff at these schools, none saw wellbeing as part of their role. Their focus was consumed by the everyday seemingly insoluble problems, resulting in a sense of despondency and despair. Teachers were invited to participate in conversations that explored the small things that already enhanced their wellbeing. These included, for example, small acts of kindness and care, contact with parents who were concerned about their

children, acting as mentors, and pastoral and counselling services for learners with social and emotional needs.

Initial scepticism began to shift. In July 2014, a group of teachers agreed to form an initial wellbeing 'team' in each school, each electing a co-ordinator. Between July and November, these teams expanded to include parents and learners (the term for students/pupils in South Africa). In 2015, funding was obtained to conduct participatory learning and action research on the development of an integrated, multilevel process to facilitate holistic wellbeing. This methodology allows people to work together on complex issues which affect their lives, to learn from their experience and from one another, and to engage in a systematic inquiry into how to address and resolve these issues. The process was iterative and cyclical, including:

1. A 6-hour workshop for all six teams building relationships, sharing perspectives, and then co-constructing a vision for holistic wellbeing in their school. All six visions shifted to a more proactive approach in creating an enabling environment for learning.
2. Over the next two terms, each vision was communicated to others in a variety of ways, including assemblies, posters, and staff meetings. Monthly team meetings were also held. By the end of 2015, teams were focused on how initiatives might be sustained and developed in the next academic year.
3. The beginning of 2016 saw the wellbeing teams develop action plans. It was stressed that wellbeing is an integrative process and needed to be incorporated into existing everyday activities as well as new interventions.
4. A mid-term celebration was held in 2016 to reflect on what had been achieved and to inspire continuation. Participating schools reported back on their actions, activities, and interventions to an audience that included school management teams and members of the larger community. Learners were given an opportunity to present, which both gave them a voice and strengthened their inclusion in the project.
5. The beginning of 2017 saw greater independence for the wellbeing teams as they planned for maintenance and development in the coming year.

What happened? The outcomes for this initiative are reported at three different levels: individual, relational, and collective.

Individual. At the individual level, expanded opportunities for personal development were developed, such as participation in sports, outings, cultural events, and meetings with motivational speakers. For example, camps started included learners with low academic achievement, increasing understanding

and empathy between groups in the school. It became clear that more could be done in this area and outside agencies in the community became involved.

A three-hour session on wellbeing and life skills was offered to all learners between grades 4 and 12. Instead of learners only receiving recognition for academic achievements, they were given recognition for 'value-informed' behaviours such as kindness, care, and respect. This changed teacher focus from the negative to looking out for strengths in individuals. The recognition also motivated more positive behaviours overall.

Teachers became more aware of the everyday life challenges of many learners: "*I saw a lot of sadness and trauma here and it hit me terribly that young children at the age of 13 or 14 had to carry such tremendous responsibilities on their shoulders*". Support included the provision of sanitary wear for girls who would stay away from school when they had a period, and sexuality education to those who were badly in need of this.

Relational. A growing number of relational activities occurred, offering events for people in the school community to connect with each other, bringing teachers, learners, and parents together for a fun day. For instance, learners organised a games day, celebrating the end of exams. Games were available in the hall on Fridays to promote positive peer relationships. Special days such as Valentine's Day or Mother's Day were used to enhance an ethos of kindness, empathy, and care. Schools also developed their own events, such as *Happiness through Kindness day* and a *Kind Kids Month*. One school brought parents of challenging children together to reach out to understand their needs. The impact of promoting these values is summed up by one teacher: "*I can listen with more empathy to children, I have a better understanding of things that we don't understand, especially in the community where I teach*".

Collective. A variety of activities promoted collective wellbeing. Each teacher had a *Wheel of Wellbeing* poster in their classroom, which illustrated the New Economics Foundation's (year) five ways to wellbeing (Connect, Notice, Keep Learning, Give, and Stay Active), adding an additional way: Care for the Planet. Teachers often used this as a discussion tool with learners.

Engaging learners in the process was initially a cause for concern but the value of their involvement soon became apparent: "*The children initiate ideas, they come up with activities they think are important*". Although getting parents on board was a challenge, teachers began to change the conversation at parent's meetings to include a wellbeing focus as well as talking about academic achievement. The wellbeing teams also increasingly involved other members of staff.

The physical environment of the school was often a focus of change, with efforts to enhance a sense of value in education. This included painting the staff rooms and beginning a vegetable garden. The change of language was also critical, where language was explicitly shifted from deficit to wellbeing focused. One teacher reflected: "*Wellbeing, I believe for me is one of the best things that could have happened in our school. The reason being that you no longer think so negatively, you see the positive side of what is here at the school … it is not that all is well, but you have hope*".

Towards a Nurturing City: The Story of Glasgow

Glasgow, Scotland, has had a reputation as being one of the toughest cities in the world, hallmarked by disadvantage, poverty, and violent crime. But for the last ten years, under the leadership of Maureen McKenna, Director of Education, Glasgow has been working towards becoming 'A Nurturing City'. Much is changing, pointing to the possibilities for positive education on a city-wide scale.

Six Nurture Principles (Scottish Government, 2017) for early years 'nurture groups' have long been seen as a way of supporting children from disadvantaged families when they first come to school:

- Children's learning is understood developmentally
- The classroom/school offers a safe base
- Nurture is important for the development of self-esteem
- Language is understood as a vital means of communication
- All behaviour is communication
- Transitions are significant in the lives of children.

Nurture groups had been running in Glasgow for more than 15 years, so people knew this intervention made a difference. It was apparent, however, that there were many more children and young people who needed nurturing approaches beyond these small groups. For the Glasgow initiative, three more principles were added:

- All young people feel they belong
- Young people's lives and experiences are respected
- Permission for disagreements ensures that staff and children are both heard

The message aimed to be simple and clear—children and young people need care and consistency as provided by the nurture principles. A nurturing

approach includes a belief in the best of the child and having high aspirations for young people.

The initiative further emphasised a whole-school approach, driven by a consistent vision with leaders who walk their talk. Across the city, there is ongoing professional development to support this vision, comprising interactive workshops provided by the educational psychology and school improvement service, but also peer observations and the Education Scotland framework for self-evaluation. It is essential that staff not only understand the nurture principles but also to think through the issues that young people are facing and what this means for their behaviour and learning.

The initiative has changed perceptions, language, and interactions. Children are less likely to be blamed for their behaviour but rather are seen as expressing their distress. Teachers facing challenges are encouraged to think through what might have happened to that pupil, what is their role in ensuring they make things better, not worse, and the importance of relational warmth. More and more teachers see the value of this approach—and commitment to the Nurture Principles is now part of recruitment procedures.

As a result, Glasgow is a different place now than in 2007, with evidence of a 50% reduction in youth crime for children aged 10–16 and less violence. There have been no pupil referral units and an 80% reduction in exclusions from school since 2007, with no permanent exclusions within the last two years. Attendance is 90%. When young people are in crisis there is a solution-focused meeting with the family with the aim of finding a way forward. Exclusion is rarely repeated: over 70% of children are excluded just once. Glasgow has seen a doubling of young people getting 'highers'—the qualifications are taken at 18—with over two-thirds going onto higher education. As Maureen McKenna says, "*Happy children means happy learning*".

Key Elements for Supporting Vulnerable Young People

The case studies above illustrate ways that schools, communities, and cities are working to give disadvantaged young people a positive experience in education. In doing so, others in the community benefit, developing skills in relationships, perspective taking, and prosocial behaviours. There are consistent themes across the stories, as well as factors specific to the different contexts. Below, we discuss factors that emerge from these case studies and other research, with the goal of providing schools with guidance to effectively address disadvantage and support wellbeing.

Leadership

It takes someone with vision and compassion to get positive education established. This vision is about the needs and potential of whole educational community, with a particular focus on equity and inclusiveness. For students, this means going beyond academic performance, and the recognition that students who struggle to focus, learn, and/or be compliant have good reasons. To provide an even playing field where these young people have a fair chance of success, individual students' needs must be approached flexibly and with care. It means prioritising the wellbeing of teachers and other staff, who bear the brunt of the challenges exhibited by vulnerable students. And it means actively cultivating a culture of care, respect, and acceptance for all.

Good leaders also bring others on board with their vision (Rosenfield, Wall, & Jansen, 2017; Quinlan & Hone, 2020). This is particularly important for creating a school culture and community that feels safe for vulnerable children. Even if a leader is committed to creating a positive, inclusive environment, this will be undermined if others in the school are not committed to the same vision. Especially in a school with deficit-based disciplinary policies, significant shifts may be needed in both the explicit policies and strategies of the school, as well as more implicit expectations and norms, which are communicated by teachers and school leaders. Influential leaders get others on board by clearly communicating their vision, by their own example, by the professional development they endorse, and in every written policy and communication.

Teacher Wellbeing and Sense of Meaning

Teacher wellbeing predicts student learning and wellbeing (Briner & Dewberry, 2007; Roffey, 2012; Taylor et al., 2016). And yet especially with the behavioural problems that disadvantaged students might display, teachers can feel overwhelmed or cynical unless there is consideration also given to their needs (Roffey, 2012). Studies clearly point to the need for teachers to be well, for them to teach well, and embed wellbeing within their class (e.g., Hagenauer, Hascher, & Volet, 2015). We need teachers with a deep understanding of wellbeing, sensitivity to the needs of vulnerable students, self-awareness of their own reactions and triggers, appropriate coping strategies, and well-informed by educationally appropriate pedagogies and frameworks that are appropriate to the specific needs of their students. When this happens well, teachers describe their work as 'inspiring and revitalising' and that '*it reminded me why I came into teaching*'.

Student Agency and Belonging

Self-determination is a cornerstone to supporting student wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In the case studies, success arose when students felt empowered, having a say in the matters that concerned them. How can we expect young people to become effective leaders and citizens if at school they learn that their voice, ideas, and opinions do not matter? Disadvantaged students easily can become marginalised, reinforcing learned helpless patterns that they have little power of their lives.

Being listened to and having a sense of agency at school is also connected with developing a sense of belonging. As described above, feeling that you belong and the matter is critical to wellbeing. Especially for disadvantaged young people, a sense of belonging can buffer from the challenges and adversities experiences at home or in their community. The problem arises when schools promote an ethos of exclusive belonging, where only certain young people are seen as fit to belong. For students from minority ethnic and disadvantaged communities, it is hard to have a sense of belonging if you do not see yourself reflected in the school's structure, décor, signage, language, and customs. If none of the examples of successful students, leaders, or heroes in any field look like you, and if none of the stories or literature in your school reflects your culture, then it is difficult to feel like you fit into that world.

Culturally Responsive Work with Parents and Community

Belonging arises in part when schools are culturally responsive to the community (Habib, Densmore-James, & Macfarlane, 2013; Savage et al., 2011). There is a growing understanding that whole-school wellbeing includes students' extended families and community (Dobia & Roffey, 2017). This means working alongside them, respecting them, listening to how they would like to be treated, and what they want for their children. For instance, many countries have indigenous populations who continue to experience multiple and severe disadvantage. For these communities to feel part of their local school community, the school must learn to communicate and work with these populations in a way that honours their knowledge and respects their customs, values, and aspirations for their children (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Penetito, 2009).

Strengths and Solution-Focused Approaches

Adopting a strengths-based focus is at the heart of positive education (Norrish & Seligman, 2015). There is a significant body of research demonstrating the benefits for adults and children of being able to identify and develop their strengths, and having their strengths seen by those around them—particularly significant others like teachers and peers (e.g., Ghielen, van Woerkom, & Meyers, 2018; Quinlan, Swain, & Vella-Brodrick, 2012; Quinlan, Vella-Brodrick, Gray, & Swain, 2018). When we adopt a strengths focus, we notice what a student does well and where they can contribute to the community. Many vulnerable children have been told their entire life everything that is wrong with them, undermining a sense of self. The strengths-based shift is foundational, altering the way that educators, students, and their families interact. Adopting a strengths focus leads naturally to adopting a solution-focus as the standard approach to resolving challenges. Adopting a strengths focus allows schools to explore the positive and build on this, whether it is for the individual, the school, or the city (Gardner & Toope, 2011; Lopez & Louis, 2009).

While a strengths focus can occur through specific interventions and activities, much is communicated by the language used within the school. It is not only how you speak to students, but how you speak about them (and their family) that matters. Words influence beliefs about the role of the teacher, perceptions of pupils and their families, and what is and is not possible (citation?). For instance, one secondary school teacher noted: "*It is not considered cool in this school to speak negatively about a student*". In another primary school there is a notice plastered in every room and corridor announcing, "*This is a no put down zone*". The language of strengths-based approaches means not telling children they are naughty, lazy, or worthless, nor labelling students with 'disorders', which puts the problem directly 'within the child'. Using strengths-based language can help a young person begin to think differently about themselves and who they are becoming. This can build confidence and a more positive self-concept. It also changes perceptions of others.

Caring, Compassion, and Empathy

It is easy, in a crowded school day with a curriculum to deliver, to lose empathy for students who are not knuckling down to work. But without both a cognitive and empathic understanding of what disadvantage means for young people and the ways this might impact on their education, then

conflict is more likely to ensue, or children will vote with their feet—or at least with their minds and hearts. Empathy is the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes, compassion is showing that you care. Positive education has much to say about developing empathy in young people themselves, but there has been less focus on the importance of showing compassion to them. For schools to be caring, compassionate places for everyone, all stakeholders need to acknowledge that everyone has their own story, that we all see the world through our own constructs. We will sometimes need to challenge these constructs, and understand that making assumptions about motivation and intent can be unhelpful. Believing in the best of someone and letting them know they matter may be a more helpful way of showing you care. At the same time, it does not mean that students are not held accountable for their actions. At times, this means tough love—having high but appropriate expectations perhaps encapsulated in the phrase, "*I know you can do this, and I'll help you get there*".

Relationships

Overwhelmingly, it is our relationships that matter most to the quality of our lives. In schools, teacher–student relationships make a difference to learning (Hattie, 2009; Murray-Harvey, 2010), promote wellbeing and resilience (Roffey, 2017b), and improve behaviour (Scottish Advisory Group on Behaviour, 2013). A positive teacher–student relationship in a school is one where adults show that they care—not just about students' academic results but about the whole person. For instance, several studies (New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, 2009; Robertson, 2006) found that young people report feeling like their teacher cares about them when:

- They know my name
- They show interest in me—and not just how I am doing at school
- They smile at me
- They listen to me—they don't jump to conclusions
- They encourage me
- They help me
- They make learning fun
- They don't have favourites.
- They know things but don't put themselves above you.

Some students have said that teachers tend to favour the 'good kids', those who are clever and compliant. But young people themselves know that some individuals struggle and need more support. Adults who have been through school in challenging times often acknowledge the difference a teacher's belief in them made to their sense of self and ability to overcome, or at least come to terms with, negative life experiences. It is not unreasonable to say that the warmth and acceptance of teachers sometimes save lives.

Peer relationships are also critical. Unfortunately, young people who most need to have supportive friends are often those who struggle with establishing and maintaining positive relationships. The social dynamics of a school should not be left to chance, where the default mode can be rejection, isolation, and bullying. Social skills training for targeted young people is not enough (Frederickson, 1991). Students need universal input with opportunities to get to know each other and discover what they have in common. The ASPIRE principles used in the AGC described above can be applied across different contexts and have proved to be a valuable pedagogy in promoting class cohesion and a kinder school climate (Dobia, Parada, Roffey, & Smith, 2019; Roffey, 2020).

From Behaviour Policies to Relationship Management

Finally, many behaviour policies in schools are based on a behaviourist model, where children are expected to be compliant with the rules and punished if they are not. Behaviourism is primarily concerned with observable behaviours rather than motivations, perceptions, emotions, or relationships, let alone prior experiences. As we can see from both the research and case studies, vulnerable students may be anxious, hyper-vigilant, and unable to focus. Their behaviour will be driven by a wide range of emotions and include the need to feel they have some control over what happens to them. The fear of sanctions is unlikely to be at the forefront of their minds when they are responding to a perceived threat—whether that is of failure or social rejection. Positive behaviour policies must therefore provide:

- A high focus across the school on the value of relationships and time to develop these.
- Professional development for teachers on the neurological impacts of trauma and other adverse childhood experiences and the development of emotionally literate responses to challenges, including time to calm down from a crisis.

- Clear expectations, which are best developed with students so they can see the rationale and have an investment in them, and support to meet those expectations, including reminders before reprimands.
- Restorative approaches underpinning all relationships and being used to manage both small and large incidents.
- Support for teachers that does not place their needs in competition with those of the student.

Conclusion

An unacceptably high number of students from affluent countries live with disadvantage, which has multiple negative consequences for both the students and their societies. If positive education is to deliver on its promise of well-being, it must focus on addressing the needs of disadvantaged students. This means providing and promoting effective strategies to support resilience and wellbeing in the face of chronic disadvantage, as well as advocating for a more equitable system. We need to apply the tools and strategies of our field to reach the schools and students who need it most.

A significant body of research is clear on strategies that can make a difference, including working with the 'whole child', creating nurturing social climates, adopting restorative approaches, teaching SEL, demonstrating respect for cultural identity, giving students a sense of agency, and listening to their voice. We have both research and informative practice from case studies across the globe. The strategies that support children living with disadvantage will also support the wellbeing of all young people and create more inclusive environments that can benefit all students and educators.

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