Cambridge Assessment International Education

Education brief: Learner wellbeing

Learner wellbeing is a complex psychological state that can broadly be understood as how learners *feel* and *function* in the context of education.

What does learner wellbeing mean?

To define learner wellbeing, it is first important to understand the construct of wellbeing more generally. In Western thought, wellbeing is a multidimensional state of being most commonly attributed to positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihaly, 2000), which gave rise to the positive education movement. Wellbeing research and practice is founded on two historic traditions of wellbeing: hedonia and eudaimonia, both of which originated in Greek philosophy.

- **Hedonic wellbeing** refers to how individuals *feel* about their life. It is conceptualised as a combination of an individual's overall satisfaction with their life, their experience of positive feelings and the absence of negative feelings (Diener & Lucas, 1999).

- **Eudaimonic wellbeing** can be understood as how individuals *function* in their life. It is also described as 'flourishing' and self-actualisation, nurtured through one's commitment to personal development, meaningful activities and interpersonal connectedness with others (Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Together, hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing represent individuals' overall wellbeing (Figure 1). Learner wellbeing in the context of education can therefore be understood as a holistic, multidimensional state of being that is the combined product of all of these different aspects.
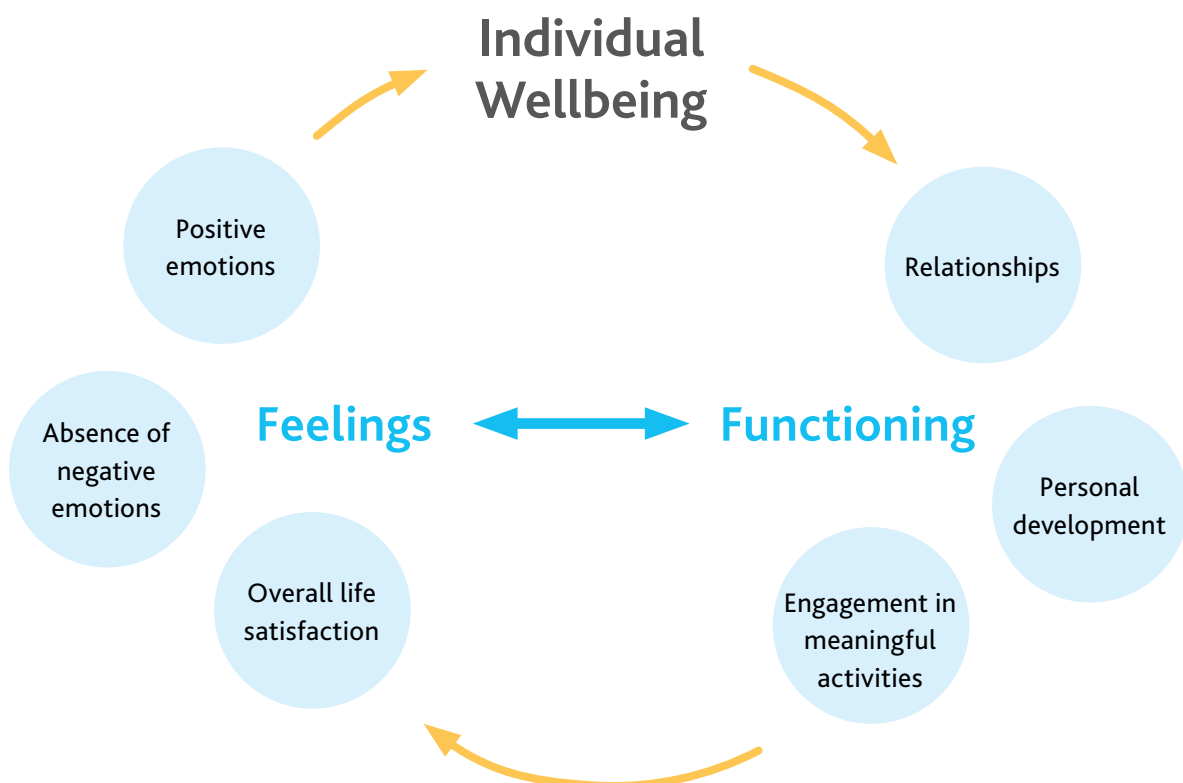

Fig. 1: Multidimensional model of individual wellbeing

How is learner wellbeing understood across the world?

There are universal similarities and distinct differences in how children experience wellbeing across cultures (Rees & Dinisman, 2015). Nonetheless, learner wellbeing has been advocated as a central goal of education by Eastern and Western scholars alike since ancient times. For example, Confucianist philosophy emphasises self-improvement to become an upright moral person *(junzi)*. According to Confucius, self-improvement requires the practice of humanity *(ren)* towards others and yourself, and the virtues of attitude, procedure, knowledge, moral courage and persistence *(li)*. There are therefore clear links between Confucianist thinking and eudaimonic wellbeing (interpersonal connectedness and flourishing). Wellbeing is also a key feature in the 19th century writings of Japanese educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi – founder of Soka (value-creating) education, which is practised today in 190 countries – who posited that happiness cannot exist only at an individual level; it should be an educational goal of the school, home and community.

In the 21st century, increased interest in wellbeing within education can be attributed to the work of economists who introduced measures of adult wellbeing as an alternative measure to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the evaluation of the success of an economy. Following this, international organisations (such as the OECD and United Nations) began measuring children's wellbeing alongside their academic outcomes in transnational research (OECD,

2019; UNICEF, 2007). Most well-known is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which introduced the measurement of children's wellbeing alongside their academic outcomes in 2015. The OECD now uses a multidimensional measure of learner wellbeing consisting of four sub-constructs: cognitive, social, physical and psychological wellbeing.

What is the theory behind learner wellbeing?

A number of theoretical frameworks are used to explore learner wellbeing in education.

- **The Theory of Human Motivation** (Maslow, 1943) suggests that individual growth can be understood as a **hierarchy of different stages**. Each stage describes a unique set of wellbeing 'needs'. Maslow's **Hierarchy of Human Needs** (see Figure 2) theorises that individuals require **'lower-order'** or **'deficiency' needs** (including being physically well, feeling safe and loved) to be met before they are able to strive to fulfil their **'higher-order'** or **'growth' needs** (to achieve and strive towards self-actualisation). Maslow's theory has important implications for education because research suggests a significant association between learners whose lower-order needs are successfully met and their ability to achieve academically (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). Since achievement is a higher-order need, consideration of whether learners' lower-order needs are first being met may be useful for teachers as a means of explaining behaviour and educational outcomes.

Higher-order needs

Lower-order needs

Self-actualisation
Fulfilment of one's potential

Self-esteem
Achievements, status, recognition

Belonging
Love, acceptance, connectedness to others

Safety
Security, health, resources, money
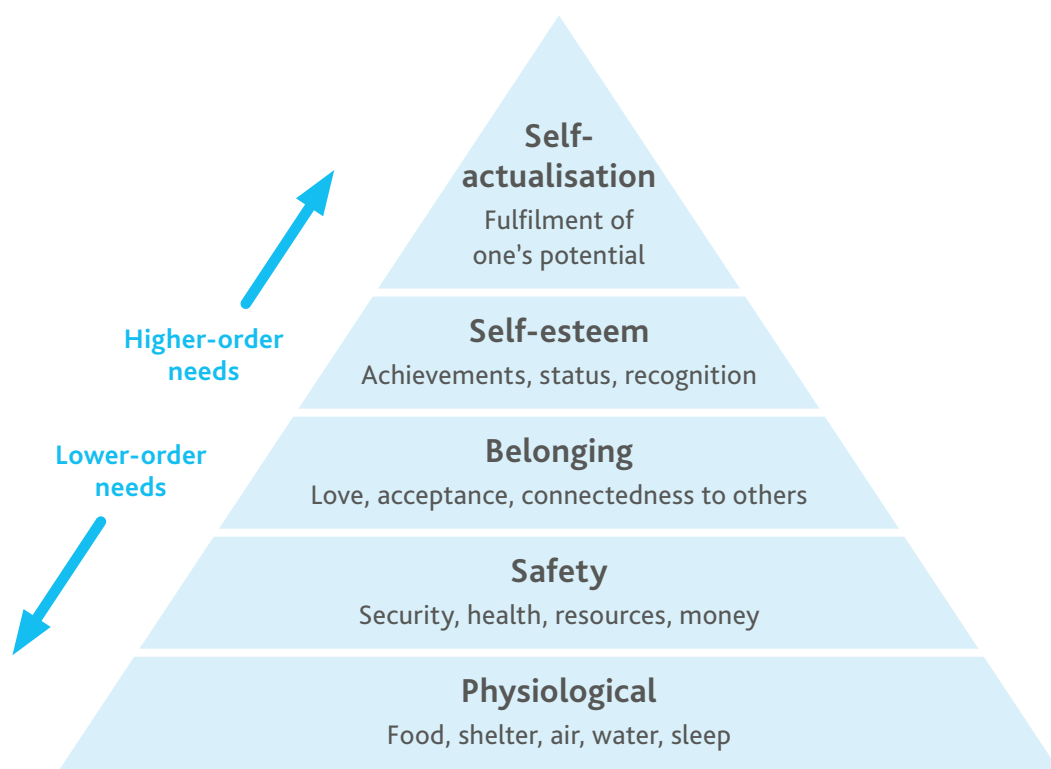
Physiological
Food, shelter, air, water, sleep

Fig. 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs (1970)

- **Self-Determination Theory** (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) is a modern theory of eudaimonic wellbeing with direct educational applicability. SDT suggests that individuals have three core **psychological needs** (**competence**, **autonomy** and **relatedness**) that, when fulfilled, result in high wellbeing:
    - **Competence** refers to succeeding at challenging endeavours and being able to achieve desired outcomes.
    - **Autonomy** involves experiencing freedom of choice and being in control of one's own actions.
    - **Relatedness** is understood as connectedness with others, feeling one can rely on others and mutual respect.

The fulfilment of these needs is important for healthy child development, wellbeing and academic achievement (Boncquet et al., 2020).

- **The PERMA model** (Seligman, 2011) is made up of five pillars of individual wellbeing:
    - **Positive emotions** (the ability to remain optimistic about one's past, present and future).
    - **Engagement** (in activities that keep our mind on the present and, ideally, in a state of 'flow').
    - **Relationships** (strong and loving social connections with others).
    - **Meaning** (a sense of greater purpose, spirituality or religion).
    - **Accomplishment** (having goals and ambitions).

The central idea of the PERMA model is that it is possible for individuals' wellbeing to undergo positive change.

- **Theory of Self** (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) is a **cognition-affect-behaviour model** which suggests individuals' 'implicit theories' (deeply held beliefs) have important implications for their psychological functioning. Individuals' **theory of self** can be expressed in one of two types of mindset: a **fixed mindset** (whereby learners believe they are made up of *fixed* traits), or a **growth mindset** (whereby learners believe they are made up of *changeable* traits that they are capable of improving). The two belief patterns – the **'helpless' fixed mindset** and the **'flexible' growth mindset** – impact learner wellbeing (Schleider et al., 2015). Biopsychosocial research further suggests pupils with fixed mindsets experience more intense stress in response to academic pressures (Lee et al., 2018). In addition, mindsets direct learners to adopt different adaptive and maladaptive learning goals in education. That is, learners' mindsets determine the type of goals pursued, which in turn impact their self-esteem. Individuals' mindsets therefore impact not only how they *think* about their self (e.g. their intelligence), but also how they *feel* about their self and their life (i.e. their wellbeing).

- **The broaden-and-build theory** (Fredrickson, 2004) extends the work of Dweck and colleagues, suggesting that positive emotions expand individuals' positive mindsets and thought-action 'repertoires' which in turn leads to the development of psychological resources they can draw upon when challenged.

What other terms are associated with learner wellbeing?

- **Mental health** is related to but distinct from wellbeing. Mental illness is associated with lower hedonic wellbeing (Keyes, 2002). The extent of an individual's wellbeing can be understood as symptomatic of their mental illness or mental health. However, formal diagnoses and treatment for mental illness are undertaken by qualified clinicians (i.e. psychiatrists, doctors or school counsellors), whereas wellbeing is a wider state of being that can be nurtured in education, home and community settings.

- **Socio-emotional learning** (SEL) refers to active processes learners engage in (such as recognising and regulating their emotions, communicating with others and differentiating between feelings, thoughts and emotions) in order to better understand and manage their emotions, relate to the emotions of others, and create and maintain positive relationships (for more information, see the Education Endowment Foundation website).

- **Grit** refers to an individual's passion and perseverance towards long-term goals, despite setbacks. Grit is positively associated with wellbeing and growth mindset.

- **Resilience** is defined as positive psychological adaption in the face of challenges. Though resilience and wellbeing are positively associated, resilience refers to a specific individual trait and is a focus of many educational skills-training programmes, whereas wellbeing is more all-encompassing.

What are the benefits of nurturing learner wellbeing?

- Not only is wellbeing promoted as an important educational aim in and of itself, research documents positive associations between **learner wellbeing** and **higher academic achievement** (Kirkcaldy et al., 2004; Suldo et al., 2011). Conversely, research suggests lower learner wellbeing is associated with an increased **risk of academic underachievement** (van Batenburg-Eddes & Jolles, 2013).

- **High learner wellbeing** is also positively linked to other important academic characteristics including **self-confidence**, **growth mindset** and holding **mastery-approach goals** (an adaptive form of motivational goals whereby learners strive to improve their understanding and skills, rather than performance- or avoidant-approach goals, which are maladaptive) (King, 2017). These academic characteristics have in turn been linked to higher achievement (Blackwell et al., 2007).

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- **Learners with higher life satisfaction** at school have significantly more positive academic experiences, while **learners with lower wellbeing** are at greater **risk of school drop-out and behavioural difficulties**, according to research (Arslan & Renshaw, 2018).

What are the misconceptions of learner wellbeing?

- **Wellbeing is the same as not having mental illness.** A lack of mental illness does not equate to complete mental health and wellbeing. Mental illness and mental health can be imagined as existing on opposite ends of a continuum, whereas wellbeing represents an individual's overall state of being, taking into account all dimensions of their wellbeing and their mental illness/mental health. Importantly, it is possible for individuals with a diagnosed mental illness to experience high wellbeing, or individuals without mental illness to experience low wellbeing.

- **Wellbeing equates to how happy you feel.** Experiencing positive affect (happiness) is just one component of children's hedonic wellbeing. An individual's wellbeing comprises both their feelings and functioning, and is more complex than simply how happy they feel. The complex nature of learner wellbeing requires educators to adopt a multidimensional approach that considers learners' social connectedness with peers and teachers, sense of belonging at school, motivation, sense of purpose, and experiences of positive and negative emotions.

- **Wellbeing is a static state of being.** Learner wellbeing is cultivated socially and culturally through children's interactions with others, their environment and experiences. Learner wellbeing is malleable to positive change and can be influenced by school climate and practices that prioritise wellbeing (Steinmayr et al., 2018).

- **Young learners and adolescents have the same wellbeing needs.** There are significant developmental differences between how primary- and secondary-aged learners experience wellbeing in education. During the developmental window of late primary to early secondary school (ages 7–12) hedonic wellbeing is particularly important, especially in relation to learners' academic achievement (Gutman & Vorhaus, 2012). However, eudaimonic wellbeing (e.g. motivation to work, academic engagement and friendships) appears more important for adolescents' academic achievement (Tobia et al., 2019).

Practical tips

- **Develop a school wellbeing policy** as a collaborative activity, engaging learners, teachers and parents. Empowering learners to express what kind of school climate best promotes the wellbeing of themselves and others can nurture **school connectedness** through s**hared purpose and ideals**. Other useful activities to workshop with learners include priorities-setting exercises that help both learners and teachers understand aspects of school that are most important to learner wellbeing.

- **Cultivate a caring and connected school community** that fosters **respectful, supportive relationships** among learners and teachers. Ensure **learners feel they have a trusted and supportive adult** to turn to at school. Feeling connected to others is an essential psychological need and contributes to positive learner wellbeing. Providing learners with **opportunities to help others** such as peer-to-peer academic mentoring, a 'buddy' system or regular spaces to work as a team can facilitate a community of care.

- **Adopt a whole-child approach to understanding the academic outcomes of learners** that considers how their psychological lives (both at home and in education) contribute to their ability to engage in their learning. Learner wellbeing cannot be understood in isolation to other areas of children's lives. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) provides a useful model for understanding this, with the 'microsystem' (the home and school) being critical environments for shaping children's development. Working closely with experts and clinicians in the community (such as school counsellors, educational psychologists and psychiatrists) can facilitate a joined-up approach that provides 'wrap-around' support for learners. In particular, mental health experts can support teachers in understanding any family-, social- or child-level **risk factors** experienced by individual learners in order to contextualise and understand their learning and behaviour at school.

- **Facilitate learners' core psychological needs** of competence, autonomy and relatedness in existing classroom practice. Research shows that **need-supportive learning environments** are conducive to learner wellbeing. For example, activities that are learner-initiated or offer a degree of control over how learning takes place can support learner **autonomy**. Ensuring that learning is pitched at an appropriate level for learners to feel effective can promote a sense of **competence**, while pedagogic approaches that facilitate collaborative working with peers provide increased opportunities for learners to feel a sense of **relatedness** to others.

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- **Prioritise teacher wellbeing and provide teachers with both professional and personal support.** Professional support could include recognising teachers' valuable contributions to school life and achievements through celebrations and rewards so that they feel appreciated, or including them in decision-making to provide them with a sense of autonomy. Personal support on the other hand may involve getting to know teachers as individuals and finding time to discuss non-teaching matters that may be affecting them. Providing designated mental health support and resources for teachers is also important. Facilitating opportunities for regular social interaction among teachers inside and outside of school can also foster connectedness with colleagues. Teacher and learner wellbeing are closely linked: teachers who feel supported and mentally well are better able to care for learners and model a healthy lifestyle and mindset.

How is Cambridge International supporting schools with learner wellbeing?

- We understand learners' educational experiences as being holistic; inclusive of their cognitive, social and emotional development. This is reflected in our Cambridge learner attributes, as we aim to support schools to develop learners who are **confident**, **responsible** for themselves and respectful of others, and **engaged** intellectually and socially, ready to make a difference.
- In both our Cambridge Teacher and Cambridge School Leader Standards, we outline the importance of being committed to learners' learning, personal growth and wellbeing (teachers) and investing in the professional development and wellbeing of all staff (school leaders).
- We also regularly partner with experts in learner wellbeing and host events such as **Q&A sessions** with school counsellors and leading academics in the field, to offer our schools targeted support.

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Where can you find more information?

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