**How to be happy and flourish**

**International Day of Happiness**

**Announcer:** This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast. Proudly sponsored by Teachers’ Mutual Bank, founded by teachers for teachers.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Happiness is something we all strive for but sometimes it’s not easy to obtain.

Hi, I’m Virginia Bowdidge from the Queensland Department of Education.

Last year to mark the 10th anniversary of the United Nation’s International Day of Happiness, I spoke to Leigh Tankey of the Agnes Water’s State School about the Wellbeing programs at her school. This year to recognize the day, guidance officer, Louise Blanch from Mountain Creek State School joins me.

Thanks for joining me Louise.

**Louise Blanch:** Thanks so much for having me Virginia.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Now, happiness is a difficult term to define. Everyone has their own notion of happiness. Can you tell us a little bit about what happiness means to you?

**Louise Blanch:** Happiness like any emotion, it is pretty hard to define and I guess on my reflection, everyone perceives happiness a little bit differently. From my work in the area of Positive Psychology and Wellbeing, I know that I tend to look at happiness differently than I used to. Lots of people might think of happiness in terms of the “when” rather than the “now”. That classic example that we all strive for, “when I win the Lotto”. But research tells us that, that type of happiness is short lived. Lotto winners are no happier further on down the track than they were before the big Lotto win. So, for me I guess, happiness is about generally feeling positive or content about my life overall. So, happiness is being content in my everyday life, experiencing joy and laughter with my loved ones. Having a sense of purpose in my work. How I make a contribution to the lives of young people but also about me as a person, particularly, I guess, finding and expressing gratitude for moments and experiences in the everyday. Positive emotions are kind of like teflon. They tend to slide out of the happiness frypan pretty quickly. Whereas those negative emotions ae like velcro and tend to stick around for quite a while. I think for me, I strive to work harder to focus on the positives and to find happiness in my everyday life and I hope that’s something that I share with the students that I support here at the school.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** That’s a great way of defining and looking at happiness. Last year I spoke to Lea Tankey about happiness and the Wheel of Wellbeing training implemented at her school. I understand your school also follows this program?

**Louise Blanch:** Our school, Mountain Creek Primary, has been involved with the Wheel of Wellbeing for about eight years now. So over that time there’s been a really significant shift in our school to focus on the importance of wellbeing and its strong links to academic achievements for our students. I believe our staff are a lot more recognisant for their own wellbeing, ensuring they take the time to practice self-care.

We’ve been really fortunate to a number of trained Wheel of Wellbeing facilitators on staff here at school and we’ve run training sessions, not only for our own school but a number of schools across the North Coast region. So I guess, that’s kind of like the little ripple effect but it’s resulted in significant uptake in the Wheel of Wellbeing across the region. I’ve been lucky to continue my work in this space and have become an advanced practitioner in the Wheel of Wellbeing and that’s allowed me to work with Lydia Najlepszy the principal advisor for mental health the north coast region and we’ve gone on since 2021, I believe. We were chatting the other day and we’ve trained thirty-four practitioners across, almost 20 schools and regional staff members and also supported teachers and team leaders in early childhood centres, in Metro and Sunshine Coast regions.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And can you jog our memory a little bit as to what the Wheel of Wellbeing actually is?

**Louise Blanch:** So, the Wheel of Wellbeing I guess is a tool or a framework that was originally developed in the UK and as I mentioned it came with that partnership program, to Queensland and the Department of Education but it really has some key elements or principles that we look for that promote wellbeing in individuals. Those things like body; keeping your body active and exercising. Keeping your mind active by learning, be it, spirit, give, sharing kindness towards other people. Place; take notice, being aware of your surroundings, and caring for our planet as well. Caring for the environment and by focusing on some of these things, these various elements we can promote not only our own wellbeing but the wellbeing of others around us.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And is the program just for school staff or has the impact of the program been felt by the whole school community?

**Louise Blanch:** Oh look, I would have to say originally it probably started with a staff focus but over time as the projects rolled out there’s certainly been an increased awareness of the importance of wellbeing for not only students and staff but our families with our broader school communities. We’ve certainly seen an increase in the understanding of concepts like gratitude and mindfulness in our students and certainly the benefits of practicing both and I’ve got a couple of lovely examples I’d love to share.

One is, we opened a space at lunchtime, called the Zen Den, where children could come and engage in wellbeing activities at lunchtimes.

So, one of the activities in place was a gratitude wall and the kids could write gratitude messages and place them on the wall. And to begin with, it was an interesting activity to do because lots of children wrote things like, I want Lego for my birthday, or I like ice-cream. There was lots of “I want”, or all about me messages but as we continued to talk about gratitude in the classrooms and the activities we were doing, we saw over the course of one term, those messages changed to things like, “I love the beautiful trees at our school because they’re homes for the birds, you know. I care about my friends because they’re kind to me. And one that I was particularly proud of, was, the Zen End makes me feel calm and ready for learning. So that was just one example there of some of the changes we saw in our kids.

Anothergreat example was when I was teaching some Year 6 students recently about gratitude through our partnership with the Resilience project. And this student came up to me after the lesson and said, “that was so good for me, I really needed to hear that message”. I obviously asked her why and she said, “she had a great bike which she rode in competitions but was still constantly searching for a newer or better bike online. And her mother had said to her, “You know, you really need to be more grateful for what you have”. And I said to the student, “Well this would be a good opportunity to go home and have a further conversation with mum”. And when I checked in with this student the next day she shared that her mother was really pleased with the discussion they had, because the student had said, that she was very grateful that she had a working bike that enabled her to participate in her activities, and it really wasn’t about wanting more after all.

So there are those small moments, teachable moments that occur and we’re really seeing those changes in the thinking of our students which is really exciting. I guess the beauty of the Wheel of Wellbeing is that it’s a really simple tool or framework that can support individuals or organisations to make small changes but those small changes we know can significantly impact wellbeing over time which is what we are starting to see here.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Now that’s interesting. They’re wonderful examples, aren’t they?

**Louise Blanch:** Absolutely. And you know there are more and more of those happening across the school.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What are some of the other examples of how the Wheel of Wellbeing is used at your school?

**Louise Blanch:** Oh look, we have so many ways where the Wheel is utilised, no only for our staff and students but our community but I get for us, our school motto is, caring, sharing and learning together and I think we truly live and breath that motto at our school.

We do know that learning and wellbeing is extricably linked and having that focus on wellbeing activities is just as important as those academic outcomes for our students. I’ve seen a real shift. Our teachers are very invested in the areas of both staff and student wellbeing and they are placing an emphasis on both of those in their daily classroom practices. Some very simple activities that started in terms of staff wellbeing were having a shared book and puzzle library which staff borrow from and contribute to. We have a staff member who also manages the Share the Dignity campaign where we donate toiletry products and bags which are then passed onto people in need. That’s an annual project which has grown throughout its time here at school.

The staff also try and have a bit of fun in their school day. We do tend to have a bit of a dress up day from time to time with staff. The work we have done in staff wellbeing, staff have realised the importance of wellbeing for themselves and therefore are doing more of those types of activities in their classrooms with our students as well. So, brain and movement breaks we are seeing those happening lots in the classroom because we know movement breaks can have some such a positive ability on kid’s ability to refocus and engage in learning tasks.

We have a really strong interest in the environment in our younger students caring for the safety of our Blue Tongued lizards. And we’re also developing a native fishpond to breed and grow native Australian fish here. So, all of those little pockets around our school, those little projects certainly add up to different spaces where the children can go to access and have those positive emotions and feelings and have those breaks when they need to as well.

So, it’s a really exciting part of our school and it’s exciting to be a part of.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What benefits have you felt personally from the program?

**Louise Blanch:** One of the major benefits for me personally, has been to truly understand what wellbeing is, and I think I was like a lot of people and linked happiness to life satisfaction and I was on what I would call, “the happiness hamster wheel”. Constantly chasing. You know, it might have been a new job or some new things, a new house. Consumerism, I guess, at its finest! Whereas now, I see the importance of experiencing positive emotions, such as, joy, gratitude and love. Those positive relationships I have in my personal and professional life. Finding meaning in my work is really important to me and finding meaning in the personal experiences right now that I have, as they are. Not what they could be in the future. So, happiness is not something I have to chase it’s not when this happens I will be happy. It’s what’s happening in my life right now and happiness is not something we should chase. It’s something we should embrace.

We actually need to be finding those moments of joy, those moments that make us feel happy in our lives right now. By doing that, we can flourish in our lives it doesn’t have to be this unobtainable goal. We can be happy.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What are the biggest changes you’ve seen at the school, as whole, since the program was introduced?

**Louise Blanch:** Look, I would have to say Virginia, the biggest change that I seen is a cultural shift towards the importance of wellbeing practices being incorporated into classroom programs on a daily basis. Teaching, I’ve been in this game for a very long time and it can be a really rewarding profession, as we all know, but it’s not without its challenges. And one of those challenges is enacting a very full curriculum in very busy classrooms. I know for me when I was presenting information on wellbeing and its importance to staff at various schools there may have been some pushback about the time is very busy classrooms. You know we don’t have for this, we don’t have time to prioritise that. But I’ve seen not only here but in other schools, the communities are not just making time for Wellbeing but they are actively incorporating Wellbeing principles and practices, you know things such as gratefulness, empathy and mindfulness into their everyday routines. Its not just an add-on, its actually being embedded within our school culture.

An example from our school – we’re in our second year partnership with the Resilience project which builds upon our work in the Wheel of Wellbeing with our students. We’re continuing to focus on that Wheel of Wellbeing initiative but we found that the Resilience project gave us three key areas of gratitude, empathy, mindfulness plus a really strong emphasis on emotional literacy and we found by enacting those lessons we’re ensuring our staff and students not only participate in a range of activities but we are actually embedding a common language throughout our school which helps our young people develop that self-awareness of their emotions and feelings and it also arranges strategies to support their mental health and wellbeing that is so very important for our young people.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Well thank you Louise and happy International Day of Happiness or should I say, happy International Day of Wellbeing?

**Louise Blanch:** Thank you so much Virginia for having me, I really appreciate it.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Great, thank you.

**Announcer** You have been listening to a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

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