FURTHER EDUCATION
TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

LEADING BY LISTENING:
REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Paper 7: Wellbeing

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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LEADING BY LISTENING

This project was commissioned to assess the mood and wellbeing of the FE sector in England in 2019, using the 'Listening Post' methodology developed by the educational charity OPUS*.

Listening Post is a form of social enquiry, not unlike a focus group, that is used to take a 'snapshot' of society, or a section of society, at a particular time. It proceeds on the basis that the themes and patterns emerging from discussions by a small group will unconsciously express some of the characteristics of the wider system to which that group belongs.

Between June and November 2019, 33 Listening Posts were conducted in the FE sector:

10

+

The view above

7 groups of college leadership teams
3 AoC Regional groups of CEOs, Principals, Deputy Principals
and Assistant Principals

12

+

The view in-between

6 groups of support staff
6 groups of teaching staff

11

The view below

11 groups of students

33

*OPUS – An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society Regd. Charity No. 282415 (see p.26)

HOW IT WORKS

- A Listening Post is a 60-minute group discussion, with minimal facilitation[*].

- Participants contribute anonymously as representatives of the FE sector, sharing experiences of their current roles within FE (what it feels like to be me, here, now).

- An anonymised transcript of the discussion is sent to participants to check for accuracy and anonymity[†].

- All transcripts are analysed for connecting themes and patterns that speak for the whole sector.

[*]In cases where a group fell silent for an extended period, participants were asked a question, usually about the measures they took to look after their own or others' wellbeing. Some student groups required more concerted facilitation, involving questions about how college differed from school and what they had learnt about their own ways of learning or coping with pressure. Three discussions were reduced to 45 minutes due to time constraints affecting participants. In larger groups, except those involving students, participants were divided into two groups who took turns to discuss their preoccupations for 30 minutes each while the other group sat behind them and listened. Those in a listening role were invited to write down any personal associations they had to the issues being discussed. The associative data was also retained and used.

[†]Transcripts were not circulated to student groups owing to concerns about the propriety, from a data protection and safeguarding standpoint, of requesting their contact details.

SEVEN THEMES

Engagement with purpose

> **1. Priorities** – the primary ends set for or by the sector and people within it, as reflected in the choices made by or for them.

> **2. Compliance** – the means by which the sector and people within it seek to achieve the goals set by or for them.

Engagement with practicality

> **3. Capacity** – the extent to which the sector and people within it have a realistic grasp of what they and each other can and can't do.

> **4. Effectiveness** – the extent to which the sector and people within it manage to accomplish those things of which they are capable.

Engagement with people

> **5. Presentation** – the ostensible characteristics of an individual or group (the inside seen from the outside: how the group regards the individual).

> **6. Community** – the extent to which people take responsibility for each other (the outside world seen from the inside: how the individual regards the group).

Each of these themes contributes (positively or negatively) to:

> **7. Wellbeing** – both of the sector and people within it.

Each theme is explored in a separate paper. This paper explores **theme seven**: **Wellbeing**. Excerpts from the transcripts are reproduced to show how the views expressed about wellbeing in the 33 Listening Posts reflect aspects of the first six themes.. Full transcripts are available at **www.fetl.org.uk.**

THEME SEVEN

Wellbeing

"We are just like the students really – we are just not switching off anymore."

The wellbeing of a sector or organisation requires some alignment between individual and collective approaches to priorities, compliance, capacity, effectiveness, presentation and community. Any volatility in external conditions can cause individuals and groups to take actions which are damaging to each other's wellbeing even if protective of their own, and vice versa.

- Wellbeing requires there to be alignment between individual and organisational purpose, usually involving adherence to a common set of values. The stalemate or discord produced by an incompatibility can be a cause of significant anxiety, bringing individuals into conflict with the organisational authority or their own sense of self. This can only be resolved by confronting and in some way resolving what is felt to be irreconcilable between the two.

- Organisations and individuals show their values in the priorities they accord to different interests. Wellbeing also requires effective management of competing priorities, including the maintenance of an effective work-life balance. This means putting 'firebreaks' in place to provide a means of escape from the demands of work and from potentially damaging temptations and requests.

- Wellbeing involves finding a way to derive reward from working, perhaps from the satisfaction of completing a task, mastering a skill or helping another. Without this, work can become drudgery. Wellbeing can be impaired by having to wear a mask of compliance which involves behaving in ways which are inauthentic or contrary to personal values.

- Wellbeing is individual, so it is counter-productive to prescribe 'solutions' or expect everyone to cope in the same way. Initiatives that focus on the milder end of the wellbeing spectrum risk trivialising those with more serious problems.

They also do little to address their underlying causes such as lack of autonomy, excessive workload, dysfunctional working relationships, conflicting values and unclear purposes.

- A good measure of personal wellbeing is having the capacity to attend to the wellbeing of others as well as one's own. Where it is one's job to attend to the wellbeing of others, the risk of failing to attend to one's own needs is more acute.

- Wellbeing also involves recognising (and not exceeding) one's own limits. This also means deciding what is a 'good enough' level of effort or achievement, rather than leaving judgements about the value of one's work entirely in the hands of others.

- Wellbeing involves getting to know oneself in order to play to one's own strengths rather than weaknesses. This does not mean avoiding mistakes but trying to learn from them: finding a reliable method of working may come naturally to some but involve much trial and error for others.

- It is ultimately down to individuals to find their own method of coping. Adopting a positive outlook may be popular and effective for some, while others need to confront the worst that could happen. Care must be taken with each choice to ensure it doesn't impinge upon the coping strategies of others.

- As well as allowing other people space to cope in their own way, wellbeing comes from learning to contain and manage personal anxiety and stress rather than looking to others for support, and from checking that one's own anxiety about others doesn't inadvertently increase the burden on them.

- Wellbeing is easier to maintain if there is mutuality in working relationships: this means not only giving and receiving due recognition and reward for each other's efforts but also showing understanding of the wider context in which those efforts need to be understood. Sometimes all we need is to know that someone else understands what we are going through.

- There is a cultural aspect of wellbeing that requires people to know that their emotional and mental health will be put ahead of intangible interests such as reputation, budgets, timetables and plans. The idea of community involves reciprocal provision of support and understanding for everyone by everyone, with no one left thinking that they have to cope alone.

WELLBEING PRIORITIES #1

Wellbeing requires there to be alignment between individual and organisational purpose, usually involving adherence to a common set of values. The stalemate or discord produced by an incompatibility can be a cause of significant anxiety, bringing individuals into conflict with the organisational authority or their own sense of self. This can only be resolved by confronting and in some way resolving what is felt to be irreconcilable between the two.

Key words: switching off

"Even if you don't physically take it home, then you do mentally."

"My pay doesn't reflect the emotional ties that I have to take home sometimes."

"I take work home emotionally. I might not take a piece of work home to mark but I know, last year, definitely I took 4 or 5 children home with me."

"Not lying awake at night worrying about what you have to do next day. That would be good."

"They are good at catering for the people who are having the time off but not those who are covering."

"At the gates, I can switch off. I have a good healthy social life and home life and I don't allow it to creep in."

WELLBEING PRIORITIES #2

Organisations and individuals show their values in the priorities they accord to different interests. Wellbeing also requires effective management of competing priorities, including the maintenance of an effective work-life balance. This means putting 'firebreaks' in place to provide a means of escape from the demands of work and from potentially damaging temptations and requests.

Key word: compartmentalising

"Take five minutes and sit in silence."

"If you are having a bad time and you've got somewhere to go like that where you can just get away and have some silence and zone out, then, maybe, 15 minutes later, you can get up and go back to class."

"Sometimes you need your personal space, to be on your own."

"Retreat into a safe place."

"You just compartmentalise."

"I meditate and it's gone. Or I put it in a box and think 'I will deal with that tomorrow'."

"Just knowing you have the chance to take the space reduces your stress."

WELLBEING COMPLIANCE #1

Wellbeing involves finding a way to derive reward from working, perhaps from the satisfaction of completing a task, mastering a skill or helping another. Without this, work can become drudgery. Wellbeing can be impaired by having to wear a mask of compliance which involves behaving in ways which are inauthentic or contrary to personal values.

Key word: pretence

"There are posters up round the college saying they look after you but I don't think they do, really."

"Stress can help us perform to our best so I don't think we should think of that as necessarily a negative."

"Did anyone go to the wellbeing workshop? I didn't have time."

"They were told they can't go to these welfare groups and say they haven't got enough admin time, or they can't do this; we have to go to it and be positive. So, we don't go any more."

WELLBEING COMPLIANCE #2

Wellbeing is individual, so it is counter-productive to prescribe 'solutions' or expect everyone to cope in the same way. Initiatives that focus on the milder end of the wellbeing spectrum risk trivialising those with more serious problems. They also do little to address their underlying causes such as lack of autonomy, excessive workload, dysfunctional working relationships, conflicting values and unclear purposes.

Key word: personalised

"Everyone's idea of wellbeing sits in a different place. A plant doesn't do it for me."

"[Wellbeing]'s not something the college can just decide. Someone may say they do like to get a fruit tea from the wellbeing box, whereas other people think 'no thank you'. There is no one-for-all fix."

"There was an email come around that was telling us to go and talk to a tree or stroke a plant. Is it really viable?"

"It is obviously well meaning to set up these happiness stations. People do look at the books and I think it's great if it helps those who are receptive to that. But I derive my happiness differently."

"This is getting ridiculous. We are running out of resources and you're buying plants and salt lamps."

WELLBEING CAPACITY #1

A good measure of personal wellbeing is having the capacity to attend to the wellbeing of others as well as one's own. Where it is one's job to attend to the wellbeing of others, the risk of failing to attend to one's own needs is more acute.

Key word: headspace

"We haven't got time to do the wellbeing because we haven't got time to do anything else."

"I think we are helping students but only by putting in extra hours, being flexible, overcoming problems but these problems are not stressing them, they are stressing us."

"The bottom line is I am expected to do more for less and that threatens their wellbeing."

"Every day we're making decisions that potentially threaten wellbeing as a result of the capacity, the stretch that we've got."

WELLBEING CAPACITY #2

Wellbeing also involves recognising (and not exceeding) one's own limits. This also means deciding what is a 'good enough' level of effort or achievement, rather than leaving judgements about the value of one's work entirely in the hands of others.

Key word: limits

"We can't keep going at that speed. You're right. We now spend more time reflecting, talking, exploring, which is really important."

"I think I know my limits. If I find I'm getting too stressed, I'll just go to my line manager about things. And not just bottle it up."

"I come out of here sometimes and I've cried my eyes out here before I've even got home because I need to get it out."

"I do other things that take my focus completely away but I do, at the end of the day, have to write a list of what I need to do tomorrow, lock it off and then carry on."

"You can't manage those things if you are tired; everything gets worse."

WELLBEING EFFECTIVENESS #1

Wellbeing involves getting to know oneself in order to play to one's own strengths rather than weaknesses. This does not mean avoiding mistakes but trying to learn from them: finding a reliable method of working may come naturally to some but involve much trial and error for others.

Key word: self-knowledge

"You get better at picking up the warning signs and what works for you."

"You get more resilient the more you do it."

"Some will feel better for getting that piece of work out the way; others need a break."

"It's really important that, when you do go home, you do do something for yourself. If you don't look after yourself, you can't help others."

"I know the resources I need to help me. They may not help anybody else."

"Unknowingly, I am better at managing stress because I've learnt how to time manage and become more independent and, in doing so, learnt how to control stress."

WELLBEING EFFECTIVENESS #2

It is ultimately down to individuals to find their own method of coping. Adopting a positive outlook may be popular and effective for some, while others need to confront the worst that could happen. Care must be taken with each choice to ensure it doesn't impinge upon the coping strategies of others.

Key words: coping strategies

"Some people do yoga; others go for a run. I can't think of anything worse, personally. I would rather sit and watch a bit of TV."

"I love my plants; I love my garden."

"I run. The drive home helps."

"Dog walks, family time, fresh air."

"I go to the gym."

"Get yourself a puppy."

"Go for a long walk."

"I watch children's programmes with my kids."

"You develop a really dark sense of humour."

"Alcohol."

"Chocolate."

WELLBEING PRESENTATION #1

As well as allowing other people space to cope in their own way, wellbeing comes from learning to contain and manage personal anxiety and stress rather than looking to others for support, and from checking that one's own anxiety about others doesn't inadvertently increase the burden on them.

Key word: self-soothing

"I may seem like a confident person but the things I have been through, it wasn't helpful that I had to bottle it up and deal with it by myself."

"I chat to my parents but I don't tell them anything."

"I think it's more about expectations than pressure. If you've got parents with high expectations who want you to get really good grades, that can be bad."

"You are just scared. That is it. You haven't got anxiety. That is a different feeling. We all have that."

"We all have anxiety, it's a modern-day thing – but is it really anxiety? You're not allowed to say that but they're using that card."

"The advice I would give to myself is to smile, keep smiling because it doesn't hurt to smile."

WELLBEING COMMUNITY #1

Wellbeing is easier to maintain if there is mutuality in working relationships: this means not only giving and receiving due recognition and reward for each other's efforts but also showing understanding of the wider context in which those efforts need to be understood. Sometimes all we need is to know that someone else understands what we are going through.

Key word: load-sharing

"On the way home, we used to ramble about work and get it out of our system."

"We joke – I think that's what gets us through the day."

"I work closely with someone; we are good pals, and we make sure we have a coffee together every day or a bit of fresh air or something together."

"Everybody needs that time to be able to just say 'How has your day been? What are you going to be doing this weekend?'"

"When our senior team gets really down, I say 'come on, let's go for a walk around'."

"I talk when I need to. And I still have hissy fits. I say it how it is. But if I couldn't do that, I don't know."

WELLBEING COMMUNITY #2

There is a cultural aspect of wellbeing that requires people to know that their emotional and mental health will be put ahead of intangible interests such as reputation, budgets, timetables and plans. The idea of community involves reciprocal provision of support and understanding for everyone by everyone, with no one left thinking that they have to cope alone.

Key word: acknowledgement

"We feel the burden as much as the people we look after; and being able to talk about it, I think, is vital."

"If you know about other people's issues, they will be more approachable. You can live what they've been through."

"My mantra to the staff is 'just talk to me' because, if I don't know about it, I can't help you."

"We will go out for a fag or take time out – take a walk for a couple of minutes. If your head is a bit fuzzy today, they will understand that."

"It's good to talk in the classroom about our personal issues and what we've been through. BBC Bitesize: I don't care!"

WELLBEING:
RELIABILITY OVER EXCELLENCE

Priorities

Leaders' pursuit of their colleges' purpose is compromised by both funding constraints and by the performance measures imposed by Whitehall. Teaching and support staff find themselves similarly hampered by resource constraints and performance measures imposed on them, creating a constant conflict of priorities between what is required from above and from below. Finally, students face a parallel conflict between their own short-term impulses and longer-term interests. There is a common struggle to shield home and work lives from impacting on each other as individuals become overwhelmed by the demands from above and below, causing them stress, anxiety and unhappiness.

Compliance

For many college staff, there is a stark contrast between the wellbeing measures they deploy to meet the needs of students and those offered by colleges to attend to their own wellbeing, which fail to acknowledge not just the workload but the psychological burden of their roles. In turn, they display little concern for the wellbeing of college leaders, whose role carries a similar burden.

Capacity

It is clear that the sector is stretched to capacity and that this is affecting the wellbeing of many people: leaders and teachers routinely working at weekends and evenings, and facing constant pressure to prioritise emergent issues over longer term planning and sequencing. Meanwhile support staff face an explosion of need among young people and the loss of support from external support services. Finally, students are more easily overwhelmed not just by the pressure of exam situations but also by the challenges of taking up their place in the world as self-reliant, socialised adults.

Effectiveness

Accompanying the variety of methods chosen to mitigate the pressures of work is an implicit (but unacknowledged) recognition within the sector that workload is a constant threat to their personal wellbeing – something that needs to be escaped from rather than enjoyed as a source of fulfilment and reward. Some means of escape, such as alcohol and chocolate, risk exchanging one problem for another. Alongside those who have put in effective firebreaks between their work pressures and home lives, there are many others who have not and who are suffering as a consequence.

Presentation

The sector is a 'squeezed middle' when it comes to wellbeing: part of its role is to carry the emotional burden for those in their charge whose wellbeing is at risk but this is achieved at some cost to their own wellbeing. The personal cost to leaders and staff is treated as if trivial or non-existent by those in authority over them; and this is mirrored in the way they then present themselves in role in order to maintain the confidence of those who depend on them.

Community

Wellbeing is best approached as a communal endeavour even though there is a current trend towards individualising responsibility. Colleges are experiencing increased volatility – from above, below and in-between – which has led to some understating and others overstating their own wellbeing (among leaders, support staff, teachers and students). This has made it much harder for leaders and staff to direct resources appropriately so that the turbulence can be stabilised.

Turbulence in the sector

The degree of volatility in the FE system makes any snapshot measurement of performance within it unreliable. This volatility arrives from many quarters, most notably in the emotional turbulence of adolescent students: the dysfunction and instability of their home lives and their disaffection with learning carried over from school.

Meanwhile, teaching and support staff are pared to the bone in numerical terms, leaving those who remain with less time to ensure reliability in their teaching, marking or (physical or mental) availability to students. There is also constant flux in the nature and numbers of courses offered, the course content and the choice of Awarding bodies. For leadership teams, the demographics of student numbers rise and fall alongside funding levels. Even the Ofsted inspection framework itself is changing. These are not stable conditions for measurement.

There is evidence of volatility in the struggle faced by college leaders to 'keep finance at the bottom' as a priority; the need to minimise costs forces colleges to cut essential teaching resources and make other choices which are detrimental to their overall purpose of getting school leavers ready for work.

Further volatility is introduced into the student population by colleges seeking to increase funding by maximising the numbers of students enrolled onto courses, even where they do not have room for them or the course is unsuitable.

Similarly, the Maths and English condition of funding radically alters students' reasons for enrolling at college, and also frustrates their progress in becoming equipped and qualified for employment. This results in an increasing number of students being taught on level 1 and 2 courses, requiring SEND or EHC support and in a greater incidence of problems with retention, attendance, behaviour and achievement.

Finally, volatility is introduced into the sector by the performance culture being pursued. The scenes greeting an Ofsted inspector may not represent college life the day before or after her visit. The efficacy of teaching by one teacher in one lesson on one course will be no indicator of the standard of teaching at a college overall, or even of that teacher on that course. The colleges themselves are not directly comparable, either with each other or with universities or sixth forms, because of disparities in levels of funding, in levels of local community deprivation and in the quality of student intakes.

Turbulence distorting assessment

On a league table or a spreadsheet, the comparison of one number or percentage with another may often seem reasonable at first glance but will be less so on closer inspection. Students who are present may be recorded as absent on the register; those who are present may have disrupted the learning for others; and others present may have had lessons disrupted by staff sickness absences or classroom unavailability.

Fundamentally, the efficacy of teaching itself is impossible to measure by observable criteria. A student's epiphany may not occur until after a lesson is over, or it may occur despite the fact that a teacher omits to follow steps an Ofsted inspector is told to look for. Nor do exams permit a reliable comparison to be made between students who do not cope well with pressure. It may also be that their performance is affected by the pressure their teacher is under or the funding pressure their college is under. There is no way of recognising these pressures as contributory factors.

Students making great strides in Maths or English may nonetheless still fail to reach Grade 4 GCSE; they may be taught in a class-size of 38 or a class of 7; they may be learning what they need to get a job or find that they have acquired a redundant skill; they may get a distinction in their coursework but not have written it themselves; or they may not show up at all, either because they enrolled to preserve their mum's tax credits or because they are in the toilets cutting themselves. What is the assessment model that can aspire to measure all this?

The pursuit of reliability

If measurement is a prerequisite for the sector, it might be more meaningful for colleges, leaders, support staff, teachers and students to be assessed for their reliability in delivering good enough outcomes instead of measuring individual performances or the methods used to achieve them. Reliability is arguably what employers need more than excellence. Moving to this approach would allow the FE sector to escape from the shadow of unfair comparison, both internally and externally, that currently inhibits it.

Sandy Henderson, OPUS

OPUS - An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society is an educational charity (no. 282415) founded in 1975 to promote understanding of society. It encourages reflective citizenship as a way for people to take more personal and collective responsibility for the common good – through active involvement in society and its institutions, rather than self-interested behaviour.

OPUS provides a combination of education, training, academic research, publication, public events and organisational consultancy. Its Listening Post methodology is now in regular use in over 30 countries around the world.

www.opus.org.uk

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