

**SYMPOSIUM ON “STUDENT MENTAL WELL-BEING AND WELL-BECOMING”**  
**5<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2017**  
**FACULTY OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA**

*Focus 3:*

**How do we assess student mental well-being and well-becoming and for what purpose?**

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I want to make five points in my response to our third focus question, “How do we assess student mental well-being and well-becoming and for what purpose?”

(1) When we ask this focus question, we should keep in mind that we already do assess student mental well-being. All of us; all the time; and we do so for our own mental well-being and that of those we encounter in school, whether we are a student, a teacher, or an administrator. As a student I respond with concern when my friend comes with tears in her eyes to school. As a teacher I give an extension on an assignment to a student who explains to me that her parents just split up and she is having a hard time coping with the situation and could not concentrate on the assignment. As an administrator I ask the student who was just brought into the office because she yelled at a teacher what is going on in her life to understand the context of her present state of mind.

On the other hand, what we do not do is assess student mental well-being in a systematic and systemic way so that we can with deeper understanding care for what Heesoon and Grace in their presentations this morning have referenced as students’ mental development in our schools. What we also do not do well in school education is to consider students’ mental well-being as an educative concern. Rather – like in the teacher and administrator example I just gave – students’ mental well-being becomes a concern to us if it affects students’ readiness to learn curricular outcomes, without considering students’ mental well-being itself as a focus of curricular learning in school. My next four points speak to what we might need to give consideration to if we wanted to assess student mental well-being more systematically and systemically.

(2) Why would we want to give consideration to a more systematic and systemic assessment of student mental well-being in schools? For two reasons. First, because we should assess what matters – and as Heesoon and Grace outlined this morning, mental well-being is central to the quality of our lives: How we enjoy our life; how we make meaning in and for our life; how we relate to other people; and so on. Being mentally well matters to the quality of the lives of students, and so we should assess how well our students are, because what we assess we pay attention to.

The second reason for a more systematic and systemic assessment is that for mental well-being there are knowledge, skills, attitudes, and capabilities that need developing; and if we do not want to let the development of those to chance and luck – or misfortune as it might be – we need to be intentional about teaching for their development. And as all good educators know, assessing what we teach for is crucial for knowing what we are actually doing and how successful we are.

So, we should assess for student mental well-being systematically and systemically. What should we consider when doing so? The next three points will speak to this question.

(3) We need to assess mental well-being *and* well-becoming. The difference between the two is the following. “Mental well-being” refers to a person’s state in the present, while “mental well-becoming” refers to a person’s development toward a state of well-being. While we now talk more

readily about student mental well-being and less so about student mental well-becoming, the latter has traditionally received greater attention. In the quite prominent child and youth social indicators research, the focus had been on child and youth well-becoming, because the researchers were concerned with indicators for a desired development of children and youth toward *future well-being as adults*. Children and youth were seen in this research as developing adults, so the focus was on what was good for them with their future in mind, rather than their situation in the present. (By the way, this is a perspective we are not too unfamiliar with in the education system). This sole focus on well-becoming, however, changed over the last two decades under the influence of the child rights movement and the resulting UN Convention on the Rights of the Child almost 27 years ago. This convention articulates children and youth's rights to be heard and consulted in questions that concern their lives.

For assessing student well-being and their well-becoming, this means two things. First, we need to give students a voice and consult with them in our concern for their mental well-being. Second, we need to also assess what matters for and to students *in the present*, not just what might be good for their future.

(4) What we assess as student mental well-being and well-becoming has to be grounded in a holistic and systemic concept of “mental well-being”. In her presentation, Grace gave us the rationale for it: Mental well-being should be best understood as the processes of interaction between us and our surroundings. One core assessment question then is whether these processes of interaction of a student with her school context is supportive of developing and engaging healthy and resilient mental response patterns. The other core assessment question is whether and in what way students' curricular experiences in school are such that students are helped to develop agency over their own mental well-being.

To assess student mental well-being, we have to consider not just students, but also the school life that surrounds them, *and* the processes of interaction between both. That is a tall order, and clearly goes beyond having students sit down and complete a questionnaire to find out about their mental well-being. We should keep in mind that we should assess what is important, not what is easy to assess. We can start small, starting with assessing certain aspects of student mental well-being – as long as we keep the underlying holistic concept of mental well-being in mind, and as long as we continue expanding upon what we started with.

(5) We need to assess student mental well-being and well-becoming for different purposes and differently for different purposes. I want to distinguish between three purposes of assessing student mental well-being in the context of school education, without claiming these are the only ones.

The first purpose is to support educators in schools as they create the educative experiences for students. Here assessment takes the form of formative or even developmental assessment. The focus is on the mental well-being of each individual student in a teacher's class. Such assessment requires knowledge, skills, attitudes, and capabilities from teachers in the areas of student mental well-being, supported by students' self-assessment competencies.

The second purpose is to support school divisional policy making and the development of focused initiatives in the area of student mental well-being. Here assessment might be formative in order to find out how a school divisional or school-based initiative is progressing, or it might be summative to find out about the mental well-being and well-becoming of the students in the school division. The focus is on students in the division as a whole or in identified areas of the division. Such assessment requires program evaluation expertise at the school divisional level.

The third purpose is to tell the government and the public how the Manitoba school system is doing in regards to student mental well-being. Here assessment is undertaken for summative and/or accountability reasons. The focus is on mental well-being and well-becoming of all students in Manitoba; it is about the big picture; it is about trends; it is about disadvantages for clusters of

students; and it is about setting priorities. Such an assessment requires as well expertise in program evaluation at the ministry and in educational partner associations.

Program evaluation research is clear on the following point, which I apply here to our context: If the assessment of student mental well-being and well-becoming is not guided by those who are the intended users of the findings of the assessment and by the use that those users are to make of the findings, then the assessment findings have only a very slim chance of being actually used as intended.