


ASPIRE TO WELLBEING & LEARNING FOR ALL  
MEDGLOBAL 25 MAY 2026  
DR SUE ROFFEY

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### WHY ARE WE HERE?

- We all want our kids to be healthy, happy and become the best of themselves
- What do we want, what is our vision for the future, what is possible, hopeful and what can we build on?
- Exploring what works, not dissecting problems.
- Some serious mental health concerns are genetic, others are the outcome of children’s experiences, including in school.
- This keynote summarises what is needed in education – as well as other contexts - for every child to thrive.

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### THE MYTH OF HAPPINESS

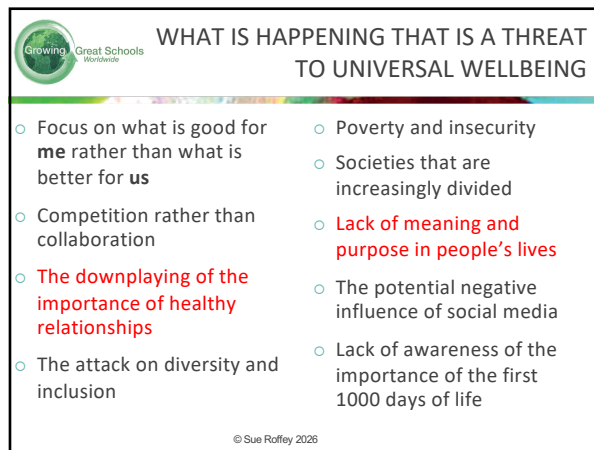




- Long-lasting happiness does not lie in high grades, status, having the latest and best of anything, good looks or fame. Perhaps nice to have but none give sustainable wellbeing

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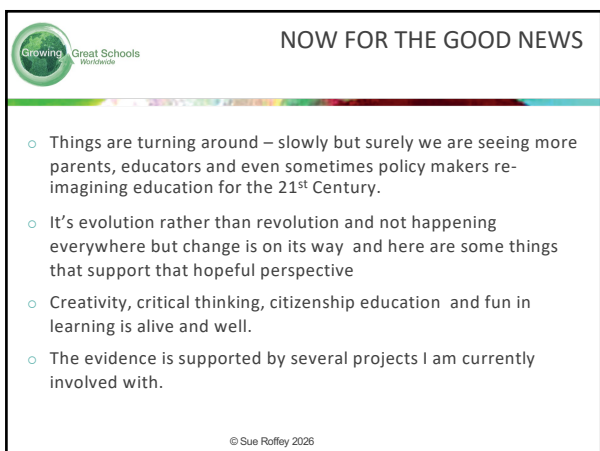


### WHAT IS HAPPENING THAT IS A THREAT TO UNIVERSAL WELLBEING

- Focus on what is good for **me** rather than what is better for **us**
- Competition rather than collaboration
- **The downplaying of the importance of healthy relationships**
- The attack on diversity and inclusion
- Poverty and insecurity
- Societies that are increasingly divided
- **Lack of meaning and purpose in people’s lives**
- The potential negative influence of social media
- Lack of awareness of the importance of the first 1000 days of life

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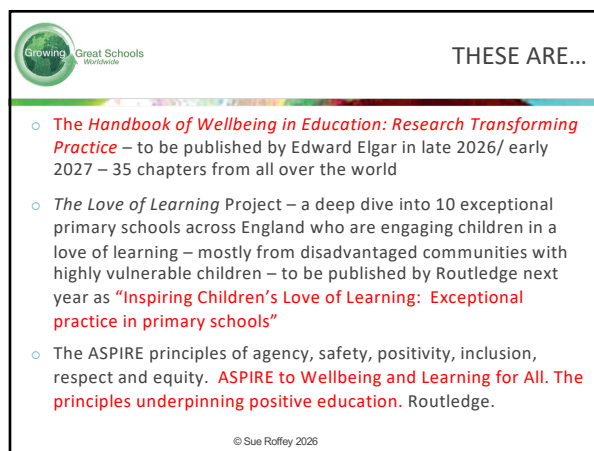


### NOW FOR THE GOOD NEWS

- Things are turning around – slowly but surely we are seeing more parents, educators and even sometimes policy makers re-imagining education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
- It’s evolution rather than revolution and not happening everywhere but change is on its way and here are some things that support that hopeful perspective
- Creativity, critical thinking, citizenship education and fun in learning is alive and well.
- The evidence is supported by several projects I am currently involved with.

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### THESE ARE...

- **The Handbook of Wellbeing in Education: Research Transforming Practice** – to be published by Edward Elgar in late 2026/ early 2027 – 35 chapters from all over the world
- **The Love of Learning Project** – a deep dive into 10 exceptional primary schools across England who are engaging children in a love of learning – mostly from disadvantaged communities with highly vulnerable children – to be published by Routledge next year as **“Inspiring Children’s Love of Learning: Exceptional practice in primary schools”**
- The ASPIRE principles of agency, safety, positivity, inclusion, respect and equity. **ASPIRE to Wellbeing and Learning for All. The principles underpinning positive education.** Routledge.

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THE PRINCIPLES THAT UNDERPIN POSITIVE EDUCATION AND WELLBEING

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WHERE DOES ASPIRE COME FROM?

- Experience across time, place, professions and institutions
- International evidence in positive psychology
- International evidence in wellbeing research
- Aligns with what we know about healthy child development and what children and adolescents need to thrive
- Aligns with what we know supports adults to flourish
- Aligns with what we know about healthy relationships
- Without these principles bad things happen.
- **MOST OF THE TIME IT IS THE LITTLE THINGS THAT MAKE THE DIFFERENCE – from little things big things grow.**

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AGENCY VOICE AND CHOICE

- Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2018) has challenged the view that people only do things for external reward. Having opportunities to make choices and decisions, and being able to impact on the world around you, is now aligned with wellbeing.
- **The opposite of agency is control.** This is toxic to a healthy relationship in any context.

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OUTCOMES OF AGENCY

- If we do not give people agency, they risk feeling others always make the decisions, they blame others and do not learn to take responsibility
- We need to combine agency with high expectations, especially about social behaviour.
- When students have agency they are encouraged to become independent and responsible.
- This is compatible with facilitative parenting – the style that has the best outcomes - high warmth and clear boundaries

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AGENCY ARTICLE 12 IN UNCROC

- Children are not just empty vessels to be filled
- They bring experiences, ideas and personalities to every learning situation.
- **They want to make a difference.**
- When children and young people are given opportunities to exercise agency we realise how much we under-estimate them.
- Kids are amazing.
- In the words of the OECD Learning Compass 2030
- *It is about acting rather than being acted upon; shaping rather than being shaped; and making responsible decisions and choices rather than accepting those determined by others (OECD)*

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MAKING A DIFFERENCE TO THE ENVIRONMENT

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**QUOTES FROM THE LOVE OF LEARNING PROJECT**

- TEACHERS
  - feel very trusted to just do my job... we're allowed to relax into that, and given that leeway, it enables us to really tailor our support for each individual child.
  - We share ideas that we think work well across the school that we could actually develop...as a team we work together really well...
- PUPILS
  - We are learning to become 'architects of a better world'
  - I'm leader of the guinea pigs ... our job is to really care for them and make sure they're okay and if they're having enough food

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**CHAPTERS FOCUSING ON AGENCY IN THE HANDBOOK OF WELLBEING**

- When children have a say: Participation as a route to wellbeing
- Darragh McKee Mathews – the OECD
- Enhancing student's engagement and intrinsic motivation
- Mette Marie Ledertoug – Denmark
- LGBTIQ+ educators voices of resilience and inclusion
- Lynn Damons and Antony Brown – South Africa

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**PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, DIGITAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

- Psychological safety means being accepted for who you are and where you come from
- It is not being judged, blamed, bullied or belittled
- It is mistakes being positioned as part of learning
- Schools might be the safest place in a child's life.
- Schools might also be the scariest place when students are faced with constant failure, rejection or humiliation.

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**SAFETY**



- Although some schools are still going down the route of behaviourist policies of reward and punishment more are recognising the power of Adverse Childhood Experiences and have chosen more relational and trauma-informed approaches to challenging behaviour

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**QUOTES FROM THE LOVE OF LEARNING PROJECT**

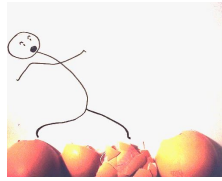
- We try and make school somewhere pupils feel happy and safe...with learning at the right level. If all of that is in place, children will mostly comply with the norms of a classroom that allows everybody to be able to get on with their work.
- We have had children join us from other settings where things have not worked. We meet with them and see what they need. We get to know them
- I'm always shocked by head teachers saying how no one will work with this poor little boy with this horrendous background - and we never get that here. Ever.

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**WHEN EVERYONE IS SAFE NO-ONE IS A LOSER**

- Becoming the best of yourself – not aiming at perfection – the internet has much to answer for.
- Being able to trust others
- Reducing individual competition and promoting collaboration – working things out together
- Not being singled out
- Knowing someone has your back and that others will be there for you. .



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**WITHOUT SAFETY**

- Students may be hypervigilant, anxious and on the alert for threat
- They may lack confidence to try things, ask questions or take risks
- Students who have experienced trauma or otherwise powerfully challenging emotional situations may have a finely tuned amygdala (the seat of emotional memory) that reacts rapidly to perceived threat
- They may go into fight, flight or freeze mode.
- All teachers need to know how to respond effectively – not just trauma aware but trauma responsive

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**CHAPTERS FOCUSING ON SAFETY IN THE HANDBOOK OF WELLBEING**

- **Creating spaces of Imperfection within education**
- Lucy Kelly – UK
- **Developing student agency and safety in a Chinese context**
- Kate Beith and colleagues – China
- **Addressing bullying and mental health in sub-Saharan African schools**
- Marifa Muchemwa and colleagues – South Africa

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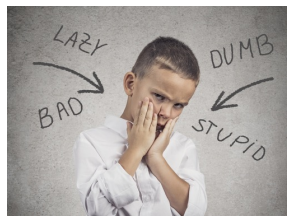
**POSITIVITY**

- Negative feelings (anxiety, depression, insecurity) shut down cognitive pathways –no-one thinks straight when such emotions take over. Promoting positive feelings, values, words and actions can make all the difference
  - Positive feelings enhance learning
  - Positive words build resilience and a positive sense of self
  - Positive actions build community
  - Positive values in action include kindness, gratitude, acknowledgement, forgiveness, support, compassion – this models and teaches how to be and live together

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**WORDS MATTER**



- Words are not neutral
- What children hear about themselves creates their self-concept
- What adults hear about children changes how they perceive them and how they interact with them
- Conversations create culture. The words we use determine beliefs and beliefs underpin actions
- We need to change direction, look for the positive and focus on solutions

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**POSITIVE EMOTIONS BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL AND RESILIENCE**

- A feeling of being valued enhances cooperation
- A feeling of being cared for enhances understanding and compassion
- A feeling of being respected promotes respect for others and willingness to listen to them
- A feeling of being included enhances commitment and motivation
- A feeling of fun relieves stress and fosters belonging
- A feeling of belonging enhances resilience
- Feeling good improves creative problem-solving abilities

All of this promotes well being and caring communities

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**PLAYFULNESS IN THE LOVE OF LEARNING**

- St Ebbe's school begins the day with dance music and every child is greeted as they come in.
- Sinclair school has weekly themes for playtime
- Pupils of all ages value teachers who make learning fun. This was said over and over in our interviews with students in all the schools – and their parents
- *It's a really busy place, but in a good way...there's lots of fun activities (pupil)*
- *My favourite part of Friday is Eco because we plant flowers and have fun*
- *Seeing the impact on my children has reinforced for me how powerful education can be when well-being, play and relationships are at its heart. (Parent)*

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**THIS IS TOO HARD: MISTAKES HELP ME IMPROVE**

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**CHAPTERS FOCUSING ON POSITIVITY IN THE HANDBOOK OF WELLBEING**

- A culture of compassion – schools that foster kinder brains and global citizens
- Aaryan Salman – Global Citizenship Network
- Promoting social-emotional wellbeing in students and teachers
- Niva Dolev – Israel
- Playfulness in teaching to boost wellbeing, learning & motivation
- Louise Tidmand – Denmark
- Pedagogies of wellbeing in India
- Sreehari Ravindranath and colleagues – India

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**INCLUSIVE BELONGING**

- Feeling you belong, you are accepted and you matter is one of the strongest factors for wellbeing
- Bridging social capital (WD40)
- Open to all
- Accepting of difference
- Promotes equity
- An 'I-you' orientation – shared humanity

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**EXCLUSIVE BELONGING**

- Bonding social capital (Superglue)
- Only those like me
- May be intolerant of difference
- Excluding those who 'don't fit'
- Can promote racism, homophobia etc
- An 'I-it' orientation – the potential to de-humanise others

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**SCHOOL BELONGING**

- Means being valued and accepted for who you are
- Making progress in learning so school has meaning
- Mattering includes not just being valued but adding value – being able to participate and have your role appreciated (Prilleltensky)
- Belonging for stakeholders – staff, students, families, community
- But in order to maintain high test scores schools are excluding children who will bring down their average – this has potentially devastating outcomes for their futures:
- Shaw, M., & Audley, J. (2024). *The prevalence of school exclusions in the UK, their root causes, and the importance of preventative offerings over reactive interventions.* Catch22. <https://www.catch22.org.uk/resources/the-prevalence-of-school-exclusions-in-the-uk/>

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**QUOTES FROM THE LOVE OF LEARNING PROJECT**

- *Everyone is welcome here no matter what country they are from, like Poland, Russia, India. That gives us different minds and thoughts and gives us a more multi-cultural school. (Pupil)*
- *They've gone above and beyond ... they've always had (my daughter's) best interest at heart ... they made sure that (she) is happy and thriving the best that she can, and when she hasn't been thriving, there's been discussions about how we can make it better for her (Parent of child with special educational needs)*

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**CHAPTERS FOCUSING ON INCLUSION IN THE HANDBOOK OF WELLBEING**


- **Mattering in education – from early years to middle school**
- Isaac Prilleltensky and colleagues – USA
- **Supporting learners with special needs**
- Berenice Daniels – South Africa
- **Parent-teacher collaboration in social emotional learning**
- Hwei-Tsyr Chan and Li-Jung Yang – Taiwan

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**RESPECT**

- Respect for individuals
- Respect for ideas
- Respect for communities
- Respect for women
- Respect for culture
- Respect for science
- Respect for the environment



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**RESPECT**

- Defining respect is not straightforward – can mean different things to different people.
- The Golden Rule: Treating each other as we would want to be treated
- For individuals – not prejudging on the basis of external factors. Not making assumptions or jumping to conclusions about motivation, intention or purpose. Valuing experiences, validating feelings, accepting diversity in all its forms
- For groups – not stereotyping and checking prejudice
- For culture – not assuming everyone has the same way of being and that ours is superior (See Dobia & Roffey, 2017)

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**WITHOUT RESPECT**

- People do not feel heard
- They often feel disempowered
- At one end of the spectrum is disengagement, through discourtesy to rudeness and aggression
- Can lead to violence
- Disrespect is often subtle and context specific - it can be someone wielding power over another in ways that are difficult to address – verbal and non-verbal ‘put-downs’.
- This inhibits authentic collaboration
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**QUOTES FROM CHILDREN, MANY OF WHOM ARE FROM REFUGEE AND ASYLUM SEEKER FAMILIES**

- *Everyone respects us*
- *No one is left out*
- *Everyone shows affection*
- *There’s no violence, people talk and listen to one another*
- *Everyone treats others like they want to be treated*
- *I feel safe*

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**CHAPTERS FOCUSING ON RESPECT IN THE HANDBOOK OF WELLBEING**

- **Respect for children’s voice and agency**
- Gerison Lansdown UNCROC
- **Respectful relationships education**
- Brenda Dobia – Australia
- **Values and ethical intelligence**
- Neil Hawkes and Andrei Stupu UK and US

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**EQUALITY**  
ILLUSTRATION ©ELIZABETH STANLEY




- The literature indicates that equality is a factor underpinning societal wellbeing (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010).
- However, treating everyone the same does not respect diversity nor lead to what is essentially fair. This requires flexibility and adaptation. The construct of equity reflects this.

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**EQUITY**  
(ILLUSTRATION ©ELIZABETH STANLEY)



- **One size does not fit all**
- Equity means being adaptable so everyone has what they need to thrive
- Being flexible with curriculum expectations, physical access, support and provision.
- Students can often say what they need.

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**EQUITY**



- Not everyone can be a doctor, financier or a lawyer
- We need diversity in society with citizens valued for a wide range of skills, creative, technological, practical, and caring
- Keyworkers in covid 19
- Access to learning for everyone including those with special needs or disability
- We need to value differences

"I am dressed for success! Of course, my idea of success may not be exactly the same as yours."

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**WITHOUT EQUITY**

- People are judged on position, income, race and class rather than qualities and abilities
- We potentially lose the value of merit – people may be successful because of who they know rather than what they know
- Those born with a disability are perceived in terms of their disability rather than how they are disabled by lack of access
- We lose the possibility of innovation and development when the disadvantaged remain so
- The smaller the gap between those who are enabled to thrive and those who are not - the more social justice and more wellbeing there is for everyone

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**QUOTES FROM THE LOVE OF LEARNING PROJECT**

- *Staff do genuinely love the kids, and if there's a child making it difficult to love, we work harder at that (Headteacher)*
- *If we want children to be making progress, and we want them in school and doing well, we need to make sure that they've had their breakfast in the morning and have access to uniform and that their parents are supported with housing. (Safeguarding Lead)*
- *We are starting with some of our pre-nursery parents...to work around speech and language with very small children. So when they're coming to nursery, they've got those foundations - also talking about how children learn to play and interact (teacher)*

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**CHAPTERS FOCUSING ON EQUITY IN THE HANDBOOK OF WELLBEING**

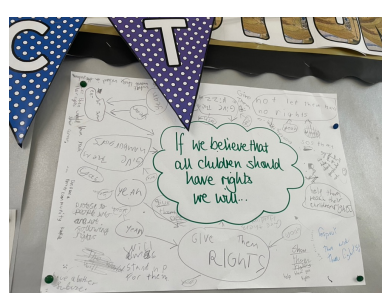
- **Social and emotional education for equity and social justice**
- Chantal Avelino and Carmel Sefai – Malta
- **Positive education and peace education: a synergistic relationship**
- Helena Marujo – Portugal
- **Building equitable school communities with contextual wellbeing**
- Helen Street – Australia
- **Schools and kindergartens as anchor institutions for community wellbeing**
- Dina Von Heimberg and colleagues - Norway

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REFLECTION ON EQUITY

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WHAT ENABLES YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE  
MENTALLY WELL AND THRIVE?  
A SUMMARY OF ASPIRE

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- A: Giving them opportunities to be active, develop their own ideas, independence, creativity and citizenship
- S: Ensuring that school is a safe place for everyone
- P: Giving opportunities for play, creativity and critical thinking Using positive words to enhance a positive sense of self.
- I: Developing practices that enable everyone to feel they belong
- R. Asking good questions and listening to what students say
- E. Being flexible to meet individual needs so everyone has access to learning and development opportunities.

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YOU MAY NEVER KNOW THE  
DIFFERENCE YOU MAKE

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MORE INFORMATION

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- [growinggreatschoolsworldwide.com](http://growinggreatschoolsworldwide.com) - information, research, good practice and links with others who seek an education to meet the needs of the whole child and every child.

- PLEASE JOIN US
- Contact [sue@sueroffey.com](mailto:sue@sueroffey.com)



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