

Teacher perspectives on enhancing wellbeing education through integrating arts-based practices

Sigrid Moar  | Katie Burke  | Marthy Watson 

School of Education, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia

Correspondence

Sigrid Moar, School of Education, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, QLD, Australia.
Email: sigrid.fischer@usq.edu.au

Abstract

Wellbeing education (WE) is increasingly offered among secondary schools internationally to promote the physical, social, emotional and mental health of young people. Current and emerging evidence proposes that scope exists for the enhancement of universal WE, and that arts-based approaches have significant potential for school programmes in enhancing the effectiveness of WE. This sits alongside a growing body of international literature that connects arts engagement with positive mental wellbeing across age groups. Existing research also shows that the evaluation of the goals, pedagogy and student engagement within WE from the perspectives of teachers is uncommon. To this end, this qualitative research investigated teacher perspectives on the potential for arts-based WE. Through an asynchronous group interview, 10 Australian secondary school arts teachers with expertise in a variety of visual and performing arts education reflected on current WE in light of their arts teaching practice, exploring possibilities for enhancement through art-based practices. Thematic analysis using a socio-ecological framework reveals strong support for arts-based WE, noting positive potential for arts engagement to facilitate increased teacher and student autonomy, relationship building, safe and inclusive environments, and enjoyable, embodied learning within WE.

KEYWORDS

adolescent wellbeing, arts-based practices, school mental health promotion, wellbeing education

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper responds to the need to improve universal wellbeing education by investigating the underexplored intersection of arts-based practices and wellbeing education in secondary schools. Drawing on the perspectives of experienced arts educators tasked with delivering existing wellbeing programmes, it investigates possibilities for enhancing universal wellbeing education through combining mental health promotion with arts engagement.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper highlights clear support for arts-based wellbeing education from participants. Insights include the potential for increased teacher and student autonomy, enhanced relationship building, the creation of safe and inclusive environments, and enjoyable embodied learning experiences, contributing to the overall effectiveness of wellbeing education programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Wellbeing education (WE) is an umbrella term for various applications of universal mental health or wellbeing promotion and social and emotional learning in schools. Universal mental health promotion and interventions in schools are programmes and/or strategies designed for whole populations (for example, year levels) aimed at promoting students' social and emotional learning and mental health literacy, with the goal of enhancing children's success in school and life (Durlak et al., 2011). Wellbeing education works towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 4: Good health and wellbeing, and Quality education (United Nations, 2023). It is increasingly becoming a part of school timetables and is considered a worthwhile endeavour that promotes help-seeking behaviours, coping skills, social and emotional learning, and mental health literacy (O'Connor et al., 2017). Despite a range of influencing factors on student mental health being addressed by current educational policies and wellbeing frameworks, there is a noted variability in the design and impact of wellbeing programmes delivered in schools internationally (Durlak & Dupre, 2008; O'Connor et al., 2017; Street, 2017; Weare & Nind, 2011).

This study proposes that there remains scope for more effective ways to concurrently teach mental health literacy and improve student wellbeing; in particular, to utilise the positive potential of arts-based practices. In the context of this study, arts-based practices are understood as an approach where the creative arts, which can include drama, dance, music and visual arts, are utilised as teaching tools to enhance the learning experience for students. Therefore, the focus is not solely on arts education within the curriculum but rather on fostering arts practices and engagement to enhance mental health literacy, facilitated by experienced arts educators. This may include, for example, viewing and making visual arts or watching, devising and performing music, dance or drama in the course of wellbeing lessons, ensuring a more engaging and holistic approach to WE in schools.

Links between arts learning and wellbeing are well documented, with arts experiences providing opportunities for embodied learning and the practical development of social and emotional skills (Edgar & Elias, 2021). Further, engagement in the Arts has been shown

to improve mental health, both for adolescents and for the general population (Bungay & Vella-Burrows, 2013; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). The purpose of this research was therefore to explore current practices within WE and seek insight into arts teacher perspectives on the potential for arts-based practices to enhance its effectiveness.

Teachers have been found to significantly contribute to the quality and sustainability of mental health programmes depending on their attitude to, and confidence in, teaching WE (Weare & Nind, 2011). It was therefore an important dimension of this project to gain the perspectives of teachers regarding current approaches to WE, and beyond this, their views on the capacity of creative arts-based practices to enhance the WE learning environment. This study engaged with secondary arts teachers who are currently teaching WE, with additional first-hand experience of the wellbeing impacts of arts participation via their teaching of arts subjects. Through an asynchronous group interview, they were asked to share their views on current WE, and thoughts on possibilities and potentialities regarding arts-based practices—for WE. The research thus sought to answer: *To what extent do secondary arts teachers view arts-based practices as having the potential to enhance current approaches to secondary school wellbeing education?*

The research design, exploration of literature and data analysis approached this question using a socio-ecological perspective, which recognises a complex interplay between an individual's characteristics and their relationship with their family, community and wider societal factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This framework permitted a more nuanced understanding of the issues underpinning WE, as well as participant teachers' views of factors influencing student wellbeing and their own capacity to create an effective and engaging approach to WE within their school system. The paper will therefore explore key literature related to WE and the potential for enhancement through a socio-ecological perspective, which allows a broad view of factors that influence student wellbeing and the effectiveness of certain wellbeing programmes, policies and/or frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Current WE practices through the lens of the socio-ecological model

Australian schools are advised to consider wellbeing from a socio-ecological perspective (AITSL, 2022), taking into consideration a holistic view of development that recognises a complex interplay between characteristics of individuals, impacts at the family and community level, and wider societal elements such as government policy and cultural factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). [Figure 1](#), developed by the authors, highlights an integrated overview of the interplay of factors within WE across school environments through the lens of a socio-ecological model.

Wellbeing lessons are an opportunity for teachers to influence student wellbeing by cultivating a safe, engaging and enjoyable learning environment alongside equipping students with crucial mental health literacy and social-emotional skills. However, various levels of influence impact the ability of teachers to provide an optimal WE learning environment, and include external factors such as education policy and school wellbeing frameworks, as well as individual desire and capacity to undertake effective WE.

Wider influences on WE: Current we policy and practice

Currently, specific indicators for student wellbeing and strategies for achieving particular outcomes are not stipulated by education policy, which can result in fragmented approaches

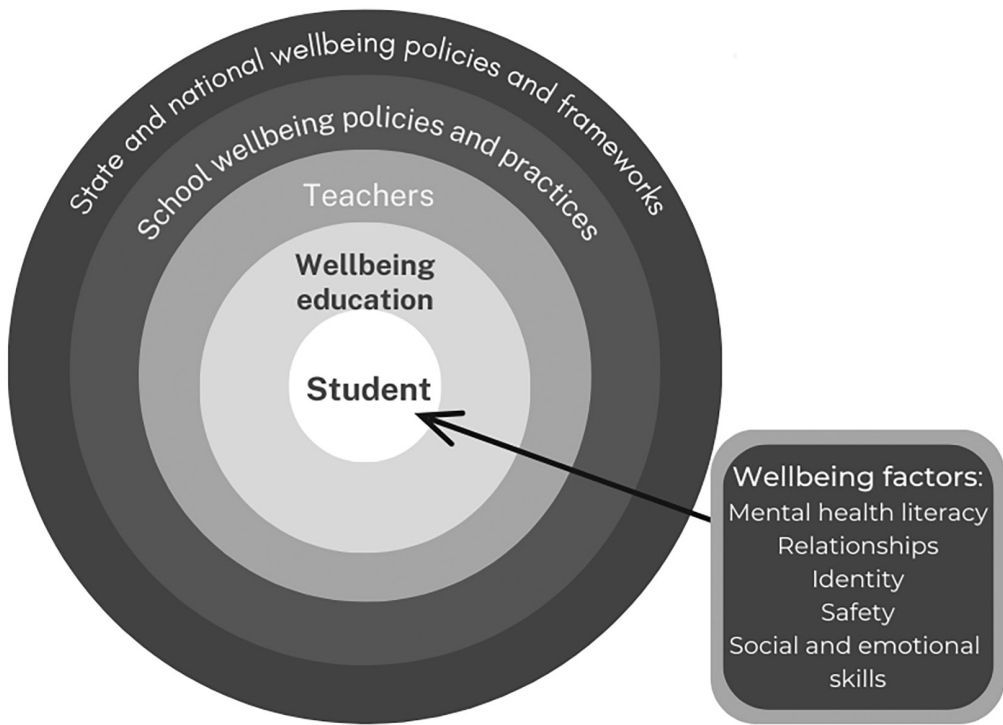


FIGURE 1 Social-ecological model of student wellbeing. The authors' interpretation of the recommendations of the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) for enacting Bronfenbrenner's *Ecological Systems Theory* (1979) in wellbeing education.

to embedding WE within the school environment (McLellan & Steward, 2015; Powell & Graham, 2017). Additionally, this means that school-designed WE programmes are not commonly evaluated. Despite these concerns, common features across international WE policy include emphases on student social skills and safe, inclusive and interactive learning environments; and collectively, research affirms that WE in schools is worthwhile. A systematic review of 29 programmes (O'Connor et al., 2017) found that WE benefited students' help-seeking and coping, social and emotional learning, and mental health literacy. Finding fewer positive results and on a smaller scale, O'Reilley et al. (2018) reviewed 10 universal mental health programmes, concluding that, while some interventions experienced success, issues with sustainability, delivery mode, and the nature of the interventions as engaging for young people remained. Skill practice programmes with interactive discussions have been shown to be more effective than didactic health promotion programmes (Tobler et al., 2000), and prioritising the process of honing skills such as resilience through engagement in physical activities has been found to be beneficial for adolescents within the school context (Rickard et al., 2023).

Most studies investigating successful programmes found adopting the SAFE (sequenced, active, focused and explicit) criteria to be a driving factor for success (Durlak et al., 2011; Sancassiani et al., 2015; Weare & Nind, 2011). SAFE lessons include effective lesson sequencing, coordinated activities fostering skill development, active learning and explicit activities that emphasise developing personal and social skills (Durlak et al., 2010). It was also found that effective interventions focus on positive mental health and are implemented over the long term with clarity, intensity and fidelity (Weare & Nind, 2011). Griebler et al. (2017), Bond et al. (2001) and Greenberg et al. (2017) found that increased genuine participation and student-led health problem solving resulted in students showing enhanced satisfaction,

motivation, ownership, personal development, health skills and knowledge. Importantly, however, some of the above authors noted a lack of teacher perspectives within the evaluation of the programmes they reviewed, recommending that future research incorporate additional measures from teachers' perspectives—a recommendation this research sought to address.

Teacher-level considerations: the role and perspectives of teachers

Teachers sit between the broader structural and cultural influences on WE and the core endeavour of increasing student wellbeing (see again [Figure 1](#)). When examining WE programme sustainability, Han and Weiss (2005) found that teachers' views of programme fit and participation in the pre-implementation phase increased their intrinsic motivation, skills and ability to sustain the fidelity of the programme over the long term. It has also been found when surveying teachers on WE that although teachers believe schools are appropriate for mental health promotion, many feel ill-prepared to teach it, scoring low on knowledge, resources and self-efficacy (Askell-Williams & Cefai, 2014; Reinke et al., 2011). Leadbeater et al. (2015) and Powell and Graham (2017) addressed teacher views regarding WE practice, with both studies finding that there remained a need for multifaceted, holistic approaches to student wellbeing. A critical component found in Powell and Graham's work was an emphasis on the central role of relationships in all aspects of school life, finding that teachers place significant importance on the wellbeing impacts of student relationships with peers and teachers.

A consideration of the key features of high-quality programmes from a socio-ecological perspective is valuable when aiming to design and implement effective WE. A synthesis of the above literature highlights that for schools to genuinely impact student wellbeing, school leaders and teachers can attempt to employ strategies at various socio-ecological levels:

- At the student level—active forms of learning, including shared problem solving, genuine participation and focused opportunities for self-management and the development of social–emotional competence and relationships.
- At the teacher level—interactive and inclusive teaching methods, a focus on positive mental health and the facilitation of learning environments conducive to the development of resilience, student self-identity and connectedness.
- At the administrative level—teacher, staff and student collaboration on programme design, and approaches that are sustainable over the long term.

A case for arts-based practices in WE

When reflecting on the goals and features of effective WE, a range of literature further highlights the value of considering arts-based practices to address what the literature highlights as beneficial. The value of artistic encounters, both in the creation and appreciation of various art forms, is repeatedly and extensively demonstrated to have positive impacts on mental and emotional wellbeing (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Dewey, in his explorations of the significance and function of art, proposed that a key contribution of the arts was its capacity for stimulating aesthetic experience: moments beyond everyday experience through which awe or beauty arises when something beautiful is perceived, appreciated or produced (cited in Barton & Burke, 2024). Greene similarly notes the capacity of the arts to stimulate imagination, making possible a transformation by defamiliarising 'the familiar taken-for-granted and allow[ing] us to see it in a different light' (2007, p. 5). Through such

elevation of human experience, the arts engage the affective domain: emotions, values, attitudes and motivations. They further offer somatic ways of knowing whereby knowledge is gained through experience and embodiment (Eisner, 2008). Further, arts practices are also often collaborative in nature, requiring and cultivating important skills including openness and flexibility (Dinham, 2023) which—according to Robinson (as cited in Burnaford et al., 2001)—also encourages students to think and feel *together*, instead of alone. Other benefits are believed to arise through the arts' capacity to wholly absorb attention and captivate, which Csikszentmihalyi refers to a state of 'flow' (cited in Dinham, 2023) and which is again believed contribute to improvements in wellbeing and general happiness (Barton & Burke, 2024). McDonald et al. (2017) similarly propose that, by inherently valuing pleasure, enjoyment and beauty, arts encounters can significantly promote wellbeing.

As such, the arts provide a creative outlet to express and come to a deeper understanding of emotions through their ability to express the ineffable; to go 'beyond words' (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2018); that 'the limits of language are not the limits of cognition. We know more than we can tell' (Eisner, 2009, p. 3). This emerges largely from the natural interconnectedness of metaphor and symbolism with artistic expression which provides an indirect or less confrontational way for children and adolescents 'to explore personally relevant or challenging ideas that contribute to their identity formation' (Dinham, 2023, p. 104). This establishes artistic encounters as a powerful learning approach that provides for transformative learning in a range of content areas.

By incorporating arts experiences into learning in other domains, including WE, teachers 'explicitly teach students how to understand and express their thoughts and feelings using the Arts key communication tools' (Cornett, 2011, p. 4). Such an approach can be viewed as a fundamental shift in the way education is viewed, from instructive and assessment driven, to valuing students and their development over academic outcomes (Lee & Cawthon, 2015). Research indicates that arts-based practices positively influences learning and the learning environment (Catterall & Pepler, 2007). Reasons noted for this include increased concentration, greater cooperation and communication with peers, catering for a diverse learner capacity and the facilitation of experimentation and creativity, allowing for risk-taking and mistake-making (Burnard & Dragovic, 2015; Countryman & Rose, 2017; McKay & McKenzie, 2017). Fancourt and Finn's (2019) scoping review of evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing for all ages found strong evidence for arts integration in health promotion, with music, dance, singing and craft activities found to be highly effective. Focusing on adolescents, two international reviews assessed the impacts of arts participation in non-school settings, finding that creative activities are empowering, contain the potential to re-engage excluded young people and help build self-esteem, resilience and confidence (Bungay & Vella-Burrows, 2013; Zarobe & Bungay, 2017).

Based upon a synthesis of this literature that demonstrates how the use of arts-based practices enhances student learning and engagement across a range of domains, it is proposed that the benefits and effective strategies found in arts-based practices can both justify and inform WE. Looking across the lifespan, Fancourt and Finn (2019) conducted a scoping review of evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing for all ages, finding strong evidence for arts integration in health promotion, with music, dance, singing and craft activities found to be highly effective. Focusing on adolescents, two international reviews assessed the impacts of arts participation in non-school settings, finding creative activities are empowering, contain the potential to re-engage excluded young people, and help build self-esteem, resilience and confidence (Bungay & Vella-Burrows, 2013; Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). The wealth of literature drawing connections between arts and wellbeing endeavours, considered alongside research establishing the role of teacher mindset and capacity in effective wellbeing programmes, validates the exploration of arts teacher perspectives on WE in secondary schools. When seeking to maximise the potential for wellbeing

lessons to positively impact students, teacher perspectives on pedagogy, the goals of WE and possibilities for increasing student engagement are vital components that require further exploration—something that this study seeks to address.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative research design was chosen to understand the perspectives of arts teachers when aiming to enhance secondary school WE. Perspectives gathered were considered through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological framework, with the goal of understanding how arts teachers view the interacting factors at different levels of the framework that currently, and have the potential to, contribute to student wellbeing through WE.

Participants

Fifteen secondary school arts teachers (dance, drama, music and visual art), working in Queensland schools were invited to participate. All participants had experience in teaching universal weekly wellbeing lessons to year-level class groups (with structured lesson plans provided to them by a year-level or wellbeing co-ordinator). Lesson content generally includes social emotional learning and mental health awareness worksheets, alongside prompts for teacher-led discussions. Participants were recruited via the professional networks of the lead researcher, with contact made by the associate researchers to minimise a sense of coercion to participate. Of the 15 invitations, 10 teachers agreed to participate in the asynchronous group interview. They ranged from early career teachers to those with 20+ years of experience working in three types of schools: inner-city private schools ($n=1$), regional Catholic schools ($n=3$) and regional state schools ($n=6$). Ethical approval was granted from the University of Southern Queensland ethics body (H22REA154). Approval from the various educational bodies was not required as the participants were not approached via, nor asked to represent, their respective schools.

Methods and data collection

A structured asynchronous group interview was chosen as the means of data collection. While a relatively new approach to qualitative data analysis, asynchronous interviews are gaining popularity, particularly given the familiarity most people now have with asynchronous forms of communication (Atkinson et al., 2019). This online method of data collection was deemed salient for gaining perspectives from a geographically dispersed cohort of busy professionals with limited availability. Beyond pragmatics, the asynchronous interview format was appropriate for the nature of the interview questions, which sought reflective responses. Providing participants with a longer time frame for written responses allowed time to deeply consider responses, which, according to Stacey and Vincent (2011) can provide for a 'richer interview than would have been possible with a face-to-face interview in the more limited timeframe that would have been imposed' (p. 605). Participants had the opportunity to see and reflect on the responses of others, helping them to expand on previous points raised, share similar experiences or provide points of contrast that helped to build a richer overall picture in response to the research questions. The researchers chose not to engage in the discussion, so as not to lead the participants in any particular direction.

The asynchronous group interview was conducted on Padlet, an online forum-style sharing platform, in response to four focus questions over 10 days. The Padlet was password

protected and enabled participants to contribute anonymously with pseudonyms. Participants were made aware that they could interact with each other's comments, although participant interaction did not occur. These focus questions served as the beginning of each thread:

- Describe a typical wellbeing lesson at your school.
- What are your thoughts on the potential for arts-based practices to enhance WE?
- In what ways do you currently see your arts specialty contributing to positive student wellbeing in your arts lessons?
- In what ways could your arts specialty be incorporated into WE to enhance the learning environment?

The focus questions addressed various socio-ecological levels of influence on student wellbeing and WE practice in schools, and each featured a set of three sub-questions derived from current literature pertaining to key features of effective WE programmes, and/or the wellbeing benefits of arts participation ([Appendix](#)).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was chosen owing to its capacity to make sense of shared meanings and experiences when working with data gathered from a group (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A phased analytical process was followed and is described in [Table 1](#) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were approached abductively, whereby researchers aimed to find a middle ground between inductive and deductive methods (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Owing to the specificity of the focus questions and points for consideration, there were certain elements on which perspectives were sought; however, an open mind was kept to new and emerging themes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

An important consideration for the research was the credibility of the findings. Consequently, data coding and TA were carried out separately and then discussed and evaluated to achieve researcher agreement. Given the researchers' own backgrounds as arts educators, and the lead researcher's additional role in the wellbeing sector, researcher reflexivity was an additional consideration, and involved the reviewing of perceptions and assumptions through the analysis process to ensure that analysis was reflective of the participants' voices rather than researcher expectations (Greene, 2014). Most significantly, peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was employed, whereby critical feedback from two

TABLE 1 Six-phase data analysis process.

Step 1: Data familiarisation	Highlighting significant words and phrases within in each response
Step 2: Generating initial codes	Noting key words or phrases in a 'Codes' category next to each response, with a word or phrase encapsulating the topic mentioned (based on the content or meaning of the words)
Step 3: Searching for themes	Identifying similarities, patterns and relationships within the codes, arriving at a set of recurring themes across the data
Step 4: Reviewing themes	Checking that the themes captured the essence of the data in relation to the research question. Checking that the themes worked within the whole dataset
Step 5: Refining and naming themes	Reflecting on the themes and their relationship to the research question
Step 6: Producing the final report	Delineating themes into subthemes. Separating participant thoughts within the themes, with the goal of forming a coherent analytical story

Note: Adapted from 'Six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis' (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

outside researchers with no involvement in the project was sought first on the methodology, and later the findings, to ensure these were supportable.

FINDINGS

Through the process of TA, four resulting themes emerged:

- autonomy for empowerment of students and teachers;
- relationships—the arts as a safe space for students;
- engagement through embodied learning experiences; and
- arts and wellbeing connections.

Autonomy emerged as an unexpected theme, as it was not specifically targeted in the participant questions, however it visibly arose in participant responses. This was also the case for the theme of relationships within arts learning environments. Findings analysis explored both the initial concepts raised when designing the research and participant questions and the resulting themes that emerged unexpectedly.

Autonomy for empowerment of students and teachers

Autonomy emerged as an important component in the design and implementation of WE from the perspective of arts teachers. Unanimously, participants esteemed teacher and student autonomy in WE, both for teachers to design lessons that utilise their strengths, and for student input and ownership of learning tasks, which participants associated with contributing to positive wellbeing.

Teacher autonomy

Experiences regarding autonomy afforded to teachers in current WE were typically low, with the exception of Meg, a drama teacher, who was afforded autonomy in her planning of wellbeing lessons by the Head of Wellbeing at her school. She expressed positivity for the impact that drama activities were having in her wellbeing classroom which she could implement owing to her autonomy.

[I'm] encouraged ... to integrate Drama practices into my Wellbeing classes and I find they benefit the students' learning ... I believe the students are genuinely engaged in the content and do also believe (and hope) they are walking away feeling good about the lessons.

The majority however, expressed experiencing low autonomy in the design of wellbeing lessons, and their attitude to this revealed a potential area for improvement within the design and implementation of WE in secondary schools. Gus described the lessons, planned by a year-level coordinator, as 'mass produced', with teachers having 'little to no input in regard to the lesson and how it is to be taught'. The lack of autonomy proved to be a significant issue for participants, as many described feeling disempowered within the design of WE, which from their perspective, negatively impacts student engagement.

Arts teachers were much more hopeful when discussing the potential for arts-based practices to increase teacher autonomy. Although autonomy and empowerment are two distinct

concepts, teachers expressed a view of empowerment as a flow-on effect for themselves and students when personal control over learning processes is present. Kate, a visual arts teacher, thought that 'it would be great to be empowered to use my specialty area of visual art to develop some hands-on tasks that involve play and freedom to express [concepts] visually and in a group situation'.

Student autonomy

Teachers associated the lack of student autonomy in current WE with high levels of student disengagement. Dan identified an absence of student autonomy in the topics covered in WE, which he saw as contributing to disinterest.

The programme as a whole is teacher-centred in that it is them who delivers information and then drives discussion. Topics are not always relevant as they are not student-driven in relation to their welfare needs.

The potential benefits of specific arts activities facilitating student autonomy within learning processes were also discussed. Participants described the wellbeing impacts of undertaking activities in which students have input. Sarah, a dance teacher, recalled her students asking if they could dance during their wellbeing lesson, so she implemented dance breaks. She found that by putting music on and allowing students to move around, 'their faces [went] from sullen, sad and downright bored, to happy, laughing and joyful'. Additionally, forum theatre was suggested as 'a fantastic way to explore various situations where students feel disempowered' (Meg), and self-choreographed dance pieces could help achieve a 'sense of ownership' over the work (Sarah).

Considered through a socio-ecological framework, these insights suggest that the teachers viewed increased teacher autonomy (which can be facilitated and encouraged by school administration and leaders) as holding the potential for positive impacts on both teacher capacity and student empowerment within WE. The dichotomy of responses, as delineated by discussions of current vs. potential practice, demonstrates that a dominant proportion of participants felt a sense of frustration from being *stuck in the middle*, between a desire to enhance the WE learning environment and a need to conform to school WE implementation processes.

Relationships—the arts as a safe space for students

Participants referred to the relationships formed within arts lessons, particularly over the long term, as cultivating a *safe space* for students. It is clear from the use of this terminology repeatedly throughout the data that teachers appreciate the role that relationships play in providing a safe space for students to discuss personal events or concepts, seek help or use a coping strategy. Additionally, arts teachers expressed a view of arts learning spaces as perfectly positioned for those relationships to be fostered, owing to the nature of the arts as endeavours that can examine and reflect the human condition.

Teacher–student relationships

Many arts teachers described a hostile environment inhibiting relationships from forming in current WE. Participants perceived this as resulting from a lack of time spent with the

wellbeing class, a lack of organic activities conducive to the building of relationships, and a sense of distance between the teacher and students inherent in generic lesson designs. Wes described the lesson occurring 'once a week with a teacher that does not have a lot to do with the students in that class ... teacher and students don't genuinely engage in the lessons due to a lack of connection'. Trent affirmed that 'students are reluctant to participate as they are at arm's length'.

On the contrary, participants were optimistic about relationships formed in current arts lessons, and the potential for teacher–student relationships to be cultivated through arts-based practices. Flo, a music teacher, gave a rich description of strong bonds formed with students over time.

Music is often their safe space, having known me for many years ... Students will come to the music classroom at lunch times and play music to calm down, to feel better from being sad/anxious about school and home life. The power of making connections and trusting the people they make music with is incredibly powerful and supportive of their health and wellbeing.

Teachers noted that by undertaking arts activities, relational and emotional barriers can be broken down, allowing time for casual conversations and discussions in which students do not feel interrogated. Sandy thought 'the best way to encourage discussion with adolescents about mental health and wellbeing is through conversation and exploring through the safe space of an art', and Trent described arts spaces as those with 'time for the casual conversations as well as information giving on strategies as well as the art. Trust needs to be fostered'.

Student–peer relationships

Meg, who was afforded teacher autonomy, used check-ins, circle time and roleplay in well-being lessons, and found that student relationships were flourishing. However, the remainder of responses demonstrated that current WE pedagogy lacks facilitation of environments where students can connect and form social bonds. Beau shared that 'due to the limited time and teenage anxiety, trust is not established, and students don't make meaningful connection'. Sandy stated, 'students do not feel comfortable in a class setting answering such personal questions where others can see', with Trent bluntly asserting that 'no adolescent will expose their anxiety in this environment'.

In contrast, positivity resonated throughout responses on the social connections that students make with each other in their current arts lessons, as teachers drew associations between the development of positive social relationships at school and overall student well-being and connectedness. Dan described engaging students in his visual art lessons in a game 'which helps with creative expression and understanding of social connections'. Flo's music classes 'are very interactive and conducted to include all students', and Sarah explained that 'students develop social connections by working in ... groups to create and perform dance pieces. [They] overcome challenges by problem solving and talking things through or physically moving to find solutions'. Teachers highlighted that arts learning environments are safe and inclusive spaces where trust can grow, students can 'socially connect with others and critically examine topics without fear of being exposed to their peers' (Gus), with the 'most beneficial outcome [being] increased participation of students in activities and a newfound ability to speak/participate without judgement' (Kate).

Data thus revealed that school relationships are seen by teachers as a key influence on school connectedness and overall wellbeing for students, and the role of the arts is seen as fostering a space where trusting relationships can develop. This 'safe space' was generated

through arts experiences that engaged students affectively, afforded opportunities for meaningful interactions and social connection. They highlighted how valuable relationships are in connecting a number of levels of the socio-ecological framework that can contribute to positive student wellbeing. Many arts teachers also expressed satisfaction in their capacity to create a safe space for their students—cultivating environments through which trusting relationships and meaningful sharing could flourish via arts-based experiences that invite students to think, feel, express themselves and engage with greater enjoyment.

Engagement through embodied learning experiences

Engagement was a recurring theme, with most participants in agreement that students were not currently engaged in their wellbeing lessons. With the exception of Meg, who was already utilising drama activities, the majority of participants shared the view that there was a lack of student engagement in wellbeing lessons, with a particular association drawn between the lack of engagement and the design of the lessons. Gus ‘found wellbeing lessons to be very generic—students do not see the benefit of engaging’, with Sandy referring to ‘the lessons on the whole [as] of little relevance to the students. [Which] then leads to a disinterested student body who do not participate’.

In contrast, participatory activities were viewed as having compelling potential to increase engagement and make the lessons more student-driven and student-centred. Specific characteristics of arts activities that teachers highlighted as key reasons for a possible increase in engagement included increased active participation, valuing what matters to young people and the nature of the arts as inherently engaging.

When considered ecologically, the extent of student engagement in WE impacts the likelihood that they will be retain valuable information and skills to maintain positive wellbeing and manage their mental health. Arts teachers acknowledged that the current lack of engagement in WE decreases the chances of students developing their mental health literacy, and furthermore, teachers demonstrated conviction that through utilising their strengths in designing WE lessons within their arts specialty, engagement could be increased.

Arts and wellbeing connections

Descriptions of conceptual connections between arts activities and mental health highlighted that participating arts teachers perceived significant potential for arts-based practices to enhance WE. They provided numerous examples of ways in which arts activities can contribute to student wellbeing, most often as a positive side-effect of arts endeavours. Wes, a visual art teacher, described facilitation of ‘time for doodling; self-expression with no explanation or for any assessment. [This] allows time to let go of negative feelings and emotions’. Also in the visual art classroom, Kate found that ‘when creating a painting students can explore personal issues through using colour and symbols to communicate an idea or an emotive response’, viewing this as a cathartic experience. Kate saw the opportunities within visual art to ‘explore deep, symbolic and often abstract ideas and feelings’, adding that she ‘can’t see any other opportunities within a student’s studies for them to reflect so honestly and explore so deeply’.

Dan admitted that ‘lessons ... are not directly linked to wellbeing but indirectly student wellbeing is boosted through the physical movement ... It is also a chance for creative desires to be released’. Gus promoted the social and emotional benefits of both devised and scripted work in drama.

The process of making dramatic action allows for decision making, consultation, building resilience [and] fun ... scripted drama can explore any number of social and emotional contexts. [Students can] empathise with the outcomes, positive or negative.

Beau epitomised the sentiment of participating arts teachers, reflecting that 'it is difficult to authentically teach any of the arts without addressing themes aligned with wellbeing, or social and emotional learning'. It was resoundingly evident that all participants in the research wholeheartedly believed in the capacity of the arts to contribute to student wellbeing, mental health literacy, resilience, connectedness and social-emotional development. The language used by the teachers regarding the potential for arts-based WE was emphatically positive, with participants describing the arts as 'definitely a great fit for WE' (Wes) and containing the 'potential [for making] connections to emotional literacy and creative expression' (Sarah).

DISCUSSION

It is unsurprising that the study participants as current arts educators collectively affirmed the positive potential for use of the arts in WE, which is wholly supportive of a vast body of literature attesting to the power of artistic encounters to positively impact mental and emotional wellbeing (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). More importantly, what this study offers is an insight into constraining features that limit the effectiveness of WE in the participants' contexts, alongside suggestions for how arts-based WE might vastly improve wellbeing outcomes for students, based on their experience as arts educators.

Permitting arts teachers to design wellbeing lessons was uniformly promoted as a positive potential future strategy to enhance WE. As creatives who have lived experience regarding the transformative potential of the arts for students and their wellbeing (McDonald et al., 2017), these educators saw significant scope for creative, arts-based approaches to WE that would answer many of the limitations they currently experienced in their WE classes. However, the current landscape of overly prescriptive and 'dry' wellbeing curricula, and the wider school frameworks and implementation practices which negatively impacted the empowerment of arts teachers to create engaging wellbeing lessons were negative constraints. Only one participant reported positive student engagement: the drama teacher who was permitted by her school leadership to integrate drama approaches in her WE class. As such, the study reveals that teacher autonomy has the significant potential to empower teachers to leverage their pedagogical expertise for more effective learning which has the further demonstrated benefits of increasing work satisfaction, positivity, an empowering climate and student outcomes (Parker, 2015; Sahlberg, 2011). Teacher autonomy in WE can be addressed through staff consultation, wherein teachers can have input on design and implementation, which has been found to improve the sustainability and impact of programmes (AITSL, 2022). Moreover, given the vast body of literature affirming the power of artistic encounters to positively impact mental health (Fancourt & Finn, 2019) and arts teacher expertise in leading student learning through arts encounters, the findings of this study suggest that the development of wellbeing programmes should be created in collaboration with arts educators. Further, teacher autonomy—as compared with prescriptive lessons—permits a more responsive learning environment through which teachers make space for creative student contributions, eliciting aesthetic and affective responses and allowing time for engrossment, or 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, cited in Dinham, 2023).

Participants further viewed student autonomy as a critical element to empowering students within WE. They saw scope for enjoyable arts-based experiences that permit active, creative and collaborative problem solving through which student voice and choice were naturally encouraged as core components of artistic explorations (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2018)—a far cry from the current ‘boring’ approach prescribed in their programmes. Their views align with Galton and Page's (2015) investigation on the impact of student autonomy on wellbeing, finding that affording choice within a creative programme provides opportunities for self-direction, increasing intrinsic motivation and feelings of autonomy and self-efficacy, all of which contribute to positive wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Galton & Page, 2015), and which are often cited as positive features of arts encounters (Dinham, 2023).

Participants further considered relationships as crucial to student wellbeing and saw arts learning environments as cultivating a ‘safe space’, which was prime for the building of relationships through shared creativity, wherein students could open up about their lives and their mental health. They recognised that artistic ways of working could create meaningful sites for student collaboration and problem solving in shared endeavours (Burnaford et al., 2001), which are made all the more ‘safe’ by arts languages that permit an ‘oblique’ or indirect means of exploring personal or challenging ideas (Dinham, 2023). Given the recognition of the central role of student relationships with peers and teachers (Powell & Graham, 2017) and that these are reliably predictive of a wide range of health and wellbeing outcomes (Moore et al., 2017; Suldo et al., 2009), this evidence supports perspectives of participants on two points: that relationships are a significant factor in wellbeing; and that the development of relationships is a key reason for the potential of arts-based WE to positively impact student wellbeing. This rests on the well-established understanding that arts encounters, particularly collaborative encounters, have the capacity to engage learners in shared creative and affective endeavours that engender a sense of personal connection and empathy for others (Dinham, 2023) and build confidence, tolerance and self-regulation which improve emotional and psychological equilibrium (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Learning activities that allow students to explore their own voice, use autonomy and gain proficiency can give students ownership over the educational process, leading to positive relationships and encouraging engagement in learning (Greenberg et al., 2017).

A significant challenge in current WE recognised by participants was the lack of student engagement. They affirmed, however, that arts educators are well placed with the expertise to engage learners in transformative arts experiences through which students might experience the aesthetic, and engage the affective domain (Greene, 2014) through embodied and active experiences. Large-scale reviews of WE commonly assess whether the programmes adhere to the SAFE principles, owing to these programmes proving more engaging through the active, focused and explicit teaching of social–emotional skills (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017; Sancassiani et al., 2015; Weare & Nind, 2011). Participants in this study repeatedly raised the significant value of the embodied and active learning through arts encounters, which not only aligns with the SAFE principles identified by current literature, but arguably offers something even richer: embodied knowing and meaningful engagement. As Eisner contends, the embodied action of the arts offers somatic experience: ‘coming to know the world through the entailments of our body in the world itself ... [knowing] a process or an event through one's skin’ (Eisner, 2008, p. 4). Arts experiences were thus seen to both offer a more engaging environment and further, a more meaningful and personalised learning opportunity. Given that levels of engagement in WE have been found to predict positive social outcomes for students (Mahoney et al., 2007; Shernoff, 2010), the participants’ views regarding arts in WE again affirms the positive potential for arts-based WE.

CONCLUSION

This research has delved into perspectives on the potential for improving the scope and impact of WE in secondary schools, proposing that arts teachers have experienced and can attest to the positive wellbeing impacts of arts engagement for adolescents. Arts endeavours have extensively been recognised as contributing to positive mental health, particularly through their capacity to value and elevate human experience via a non-confrontational means to know and express understanding (McDonald et al., 2017). Further, given the nature of arts encounters to elicit surprise, exercise imagination and connect students to moments of joy (Eisner, 2012), the first key recommendation arising from this study is that arts-based universal WE in schools is considered as a potential solution to current deficits in WE effectiveness. The participating arts teachers demonstrated emphatic optimism regarding the potential for arts-based WE to improve learning environments and have a positive impact on student wellbeing, which sits alongside a significant body of evidence to support such a sentiment (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). However, study participants highlighted that many currently work within school systems that lack staff consultation or autonomy in WE design. This limits teachers' capacity to integrate the strengths of their arts specialties into current wellbeing programmes. As experts in their artforms who have the nuanced understanding to draw students into meaningful arts encounters to express themselves using specific arts communication tools (Cornett, 2011), it is thus recommended that teachers are supported by their schools to collaborate with mental health and arts education professionals in designing programmes, in order to ensure that the goals of programmes align with those of sector-designed universal mental health promotion. It is further recommended that the evaluation of arts-based WE programmes be conducted over the long term, as the true impact of meaningful educational experiences, particularly those connected to a sense of identity, empowerment and resilience, may not be immediately perceptible. The perspectives of arts teachers gathered in this study validate the pursuit of further research within the field of arts-based WE for secondary schools.

It should be noted that this study represents findings from a small sample size of 10 arts teachers in South-East Queensland, limiting the adaptability of the findings to other settings. Additionally, while steps were taken to minimise bias, inherent positive bias must be acknowledged both within the participants and researchers, who innately value the arts and are therefore more likely to see the potential for the arts to enhance WE. Furthermore, this research relies solely on perspectives, not empirical evidence of WE learning environments. Further research that builds upon these study findings through applied settings is thus highly recommended.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data for this project are not made available to ensure the anonymity of participants.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was granted from the University ethics body before undertaking this research.

ORCID

Sigrid Moar  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5256-7442>

Katie Burke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1086-8981>

Marthy Watson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8461-0708>

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APPENDIX

Focus questions and point for consideration/subquestions

FQ1: Describe a typical wellbeing lesson at your school	FQ2: What are your thoughts on the potential for arts practices to enhance wellbeing education?	FQ3: In what ways do you currently see your arts specialty contributing to positive student wellbeing in your arts lessons?	FQ4: In what ways could your arts specialty be integrated into wellbeing education to enhance learning environments?
<i>For consideration</i> (a) Are students genuinely engaged and actively participating?	(a) Why (or not) may the arts be a good fit?	(a) Do students utilise mental health coping strategies in lessons?	(a) Group activities can foster social connections and shared problem solving
(b) Are there opportunities for social connections?	(b) Do arts activities hold the potential for active engagement and embodied learning?	(b) Can students develop social connections and practise shared problem solving?	(b) Creative expression can help students develop their own voice and feel valued
(c) Are students learning and practising strategies to manage their mental health?	(c) Can participatory learning environments enhance WE?	(c) Are there opportunities for students to feel empowered through creative expression?	(c) Creative endeavours can develop students' sense of identity and culture.

Abbreviation: WE, wellbeing education.