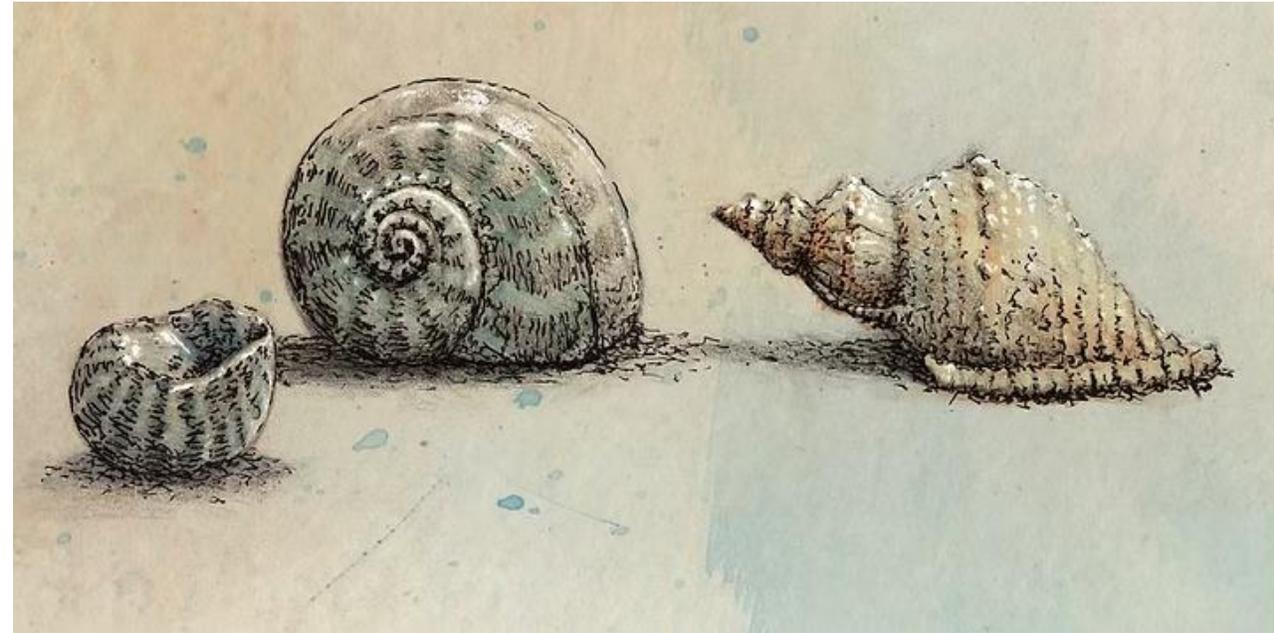


School Career Practitioners' Forum

March 2026

Educator wellbeing

The importance of meaning in work

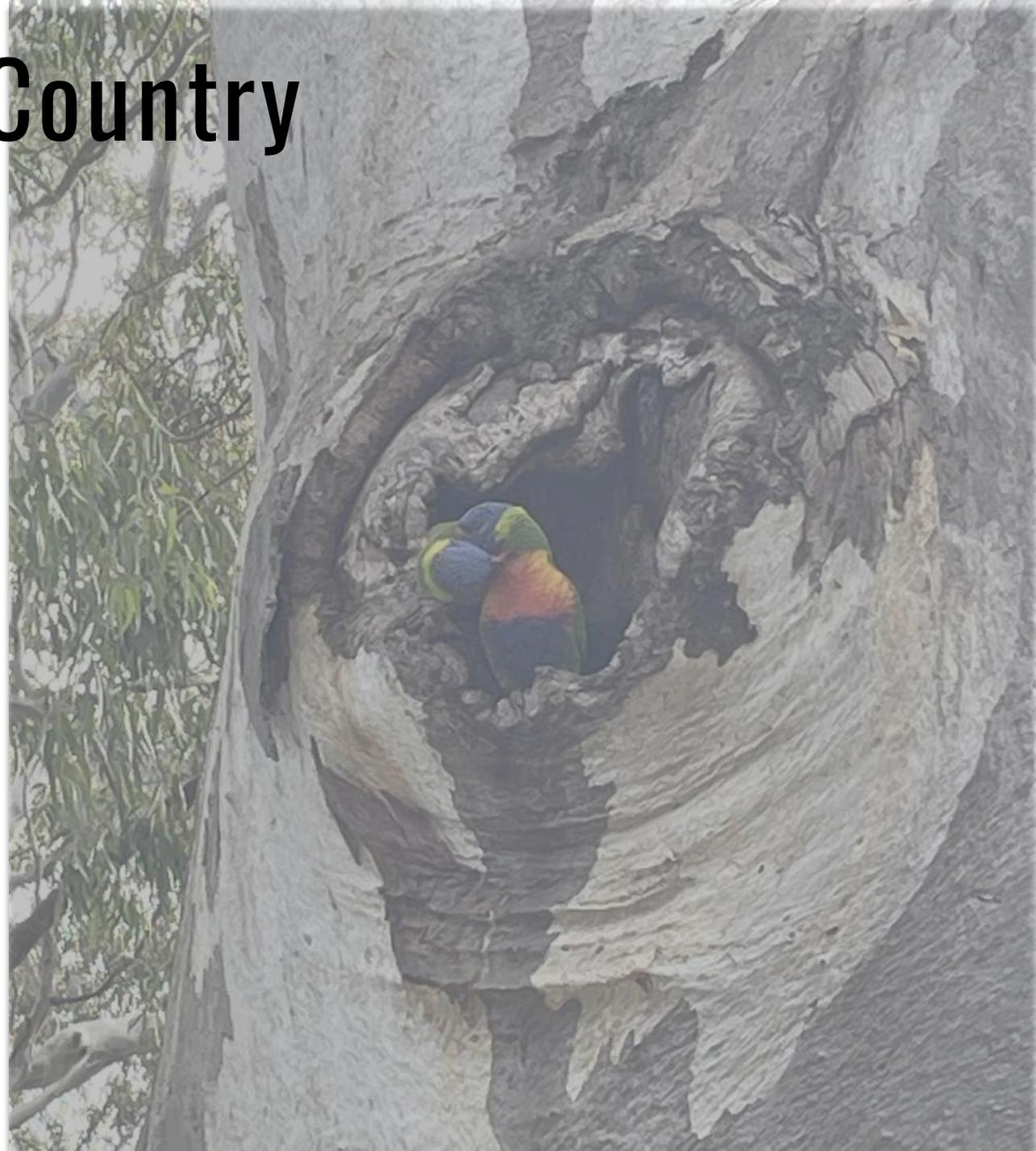


Prof Monica Thielking

Dean, School of Psychology and Public Health

Acknowledgement of Country

We proudly acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands where our we live, work and play. We recognise that Indigenous Australians have an ongoing connection to the land, and we value their unique contribution to our work as educators and leaders and to our students, families and communities. We especially acknowledge, in the context of our work, the knowledges that Indigenous Australians have shared in relation to supporting and growing well people, communities and Country.



About the School of Psychology and Public Health

5,000 students

400 staff

In 2025: \$16.5 million in research income

Core undergraduate degrees

- Bachelor of Psychological Science
- Bachelor of Health Sciences
- Bachelor of Health Information Management

Core Public Health and Health Systems

- Master of Public Health
- Master of Health Administration
- Master of Digital Health
- Master of Health Information Management

Core Psychology and Mental Health

- Master of Clinical Psychology
- Master of Clinical Neuropsychology
- Master of Professional Psychology

Department of
Psychology, Counselling
and Therapy: Top 175-
200 globally

Department of Public
Health: Top 75 globally

Centre for Alcohol
Policy Research

Australian Research
Centre In
Sex, Health and
Society

Olga Tennison Autism
Research Centre

The Bouverie Centre

Summer Foundation
Disability Research
Centre

Teacher wellbeing research team

Chief Investigators

Professor Monica Thielking

Dean, School of Psychology and Public Health

Former school psychologist, career counsellor and youth worker

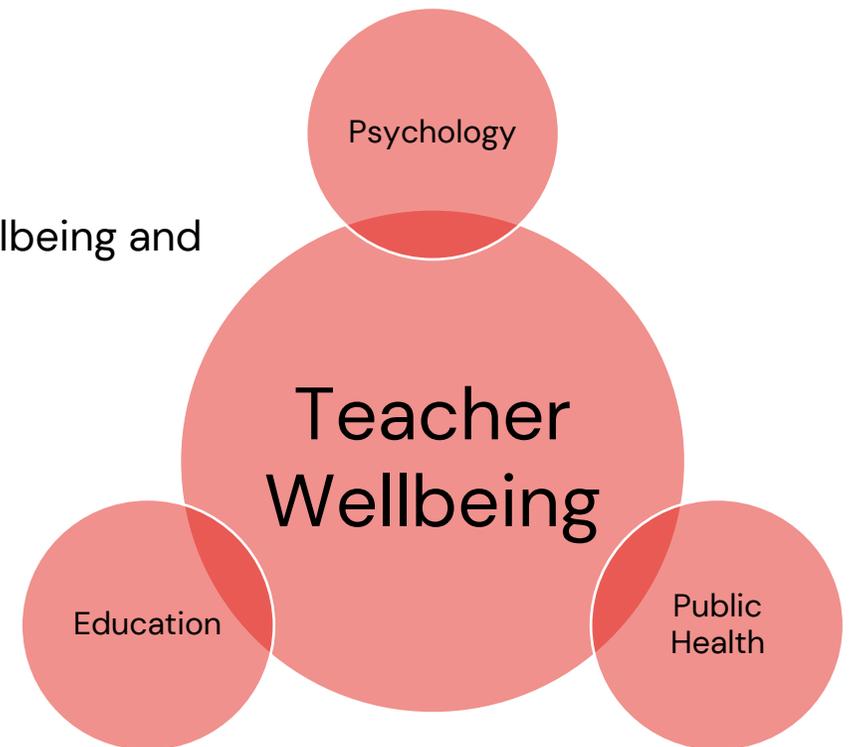
Dr Kristina Turner

Senior Lecturer Evidence-Based Pedagogy, Discipline Lead Teacher Wellbeing and Resilience, School of Education

Former teacher

with

Dr Clare Kermond and Dr Mehak Batra



School Career Practitioners

Against poor policy and implementation nationally, the school career practitioner continues to provide an enormous range of services while typically being under-resourced for the needs of students and working within a limited time allocation. For most students, they are they are the point of contact for formal career engagement in Australia. For most students, this engagement occurs long into their school journey and years after most young people have developed gendered role stereotypes. In an increasingly fragmented and uncertain time, building a sense of purpose and helping young people to understand their strengths and interests is a gift that career practitioners can deliver.

Australian Centre for Career Education – 2025

<https://acce.org.au/media/iinlugtx/conditions-for-career-practitioners-in-schools-2025-final.pdf>

Being present



School Career Practitioners

The most common title amongst respondents was Career Practitioner at 36%. 11% noted their title was Head of Careers, 5% Leader of Careers, 8% Coordinator of Careers and 2% Careers Teacher. The diversity of titles is highlighted by 37% of respondents who reported a different job title to the list provided and these included:

12 x Careers Counsellor/ Career Guidance Counsellor

11 x Pathways Counsellor
9 x Career Advisor

7 x Careers and Pathways Leader
4 x Pathways Leader

Conditions for Career Practitioners in Schools, 2025 ACCE Research©

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3 x Careers Support
3 x Career and Pathways Coordinator
2 x AST Pathways and Partnerships
2 x Career and Pathways Advisor
2 x Careers and Pathways Coordinator
2 x Careers and Pathways Manager
2 x Careers counsellor and teacher
2 x Careers Development

Practitioner & Pathways Manager
2 x Careers Education Leader
2 x Careers Specialist
2 x Student Futures Specialist
Among the 'other' titles were:
Assistant Principal
Careers Development Practitioner and Pathways Leader
Director of Operations Risk and Compliance
Employment Consultant
Director of Student Pathways -
Leading Teacher

Vocational Experience Coordinator
Student Services Leader (Wellbeing and Pathways)
Leading Teacher of Pathways and Careers
Student Futures and Pathways Coordinator
HeadStart coordinator
VET and SBAT Coordinator
Head of Career Development

Barriers to Effective Career Education

Career education remains critical to student pathways, workforce readiness, and equity of opportunity. However, current delivery across schools is constrained by structural, capability and access-related barriers.

Resourcing & Structural Constraints

Non-compulsory status → limited timetabled priority; Under-resourced career staff and programs; Strong curriculum pressures → careers seen as secondary; Chronic underfunding

Capability & Workforce Challenges

Variable staff capability, including use of unqualified personnel; Limited whole-school understanding of career education value; Inconsistent leadership support and buy-in

Operational Delivery Barriers

High administrative burden reducing program delivery time; Insufficient time for meaningful, structured career education

Equity & Access Gaps

Uneven provision across schools; Reduced access for rural, remote and alternative education students
Cost barriers (e.g. transport/excursions) limiting participation

Calling orientation

Job orientation: for a paycheck, the work is not an end in itself but instead is a means for acquiring the resources needed to enjoy time away from the job

Career orientation: the overarching goal is to maximize income, social status, power, and prestige in their occupation.

Calling orientation: a commitment to the work because it contributes to the greater good and makes the world a better place, the work is fulfilling in its own right

(Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997).

Research has confirmed that finding meaning in life is a well-established route to psychological wellbeing (Cohen-Meitar, Carmeli, & Waldman, 2009; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008).

Individuals who find meaning in their work report:

- Increased workplace motivation and wellbeing (Damásio, de Melo, & da Silva, 2013; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012)
- Greater engagement in work (Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann, 2000; Fourie & Deacon, 2015).
- Greater professional commitment (De Klerk, 2005),
- Improved work performance and enhanced job satisfaction (Bonebright et al., 2000).

WE CARE ABOUT TEACHER WELLBEING

In Australia:

- Teaching has been categorised as a high-risk occupation for work-related mental health claims
- Teachers frequently cite burnout, stress and a reduction in wellbeing as the reasons they leave the profession
- Between 35 – 50% of teachers intend to leave the profession within the next ten years

TEACHERS MATTER

Teachers hold a critical role in shaping our society by educating, inspiring, and nurturing the growth of children and young people.

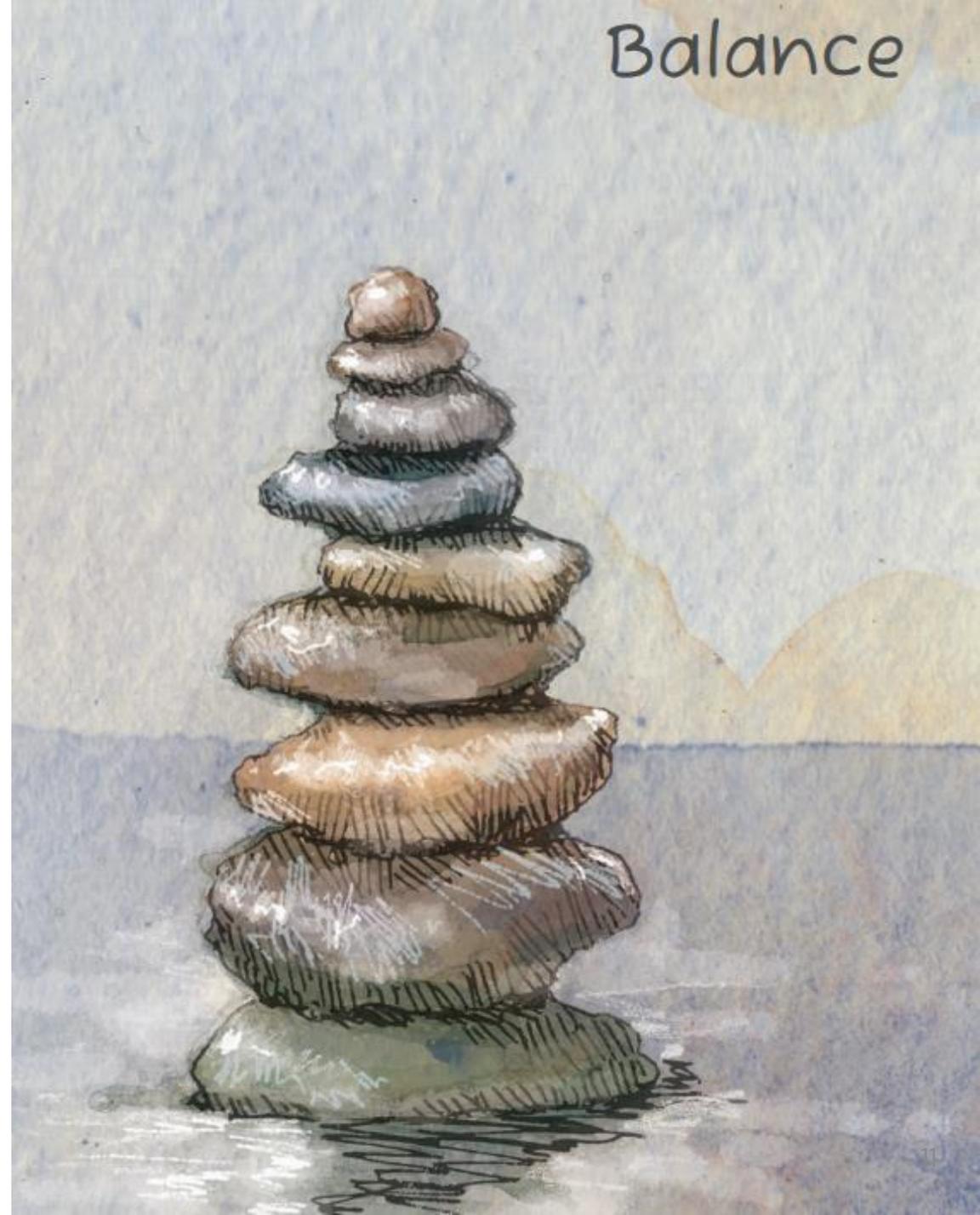
Supporting teacher wellbeing is essential for preventing attrition and enabling teachers to thrive and deliver high-quality educational outcomes.

When teachers experience positive wellbeing at work, they are able to manage the emotional demands of teaching, maintain a sense of purpose, experience positive relationships, and feel supported within their school and community (Turner & Thielking, 2019).

Culture



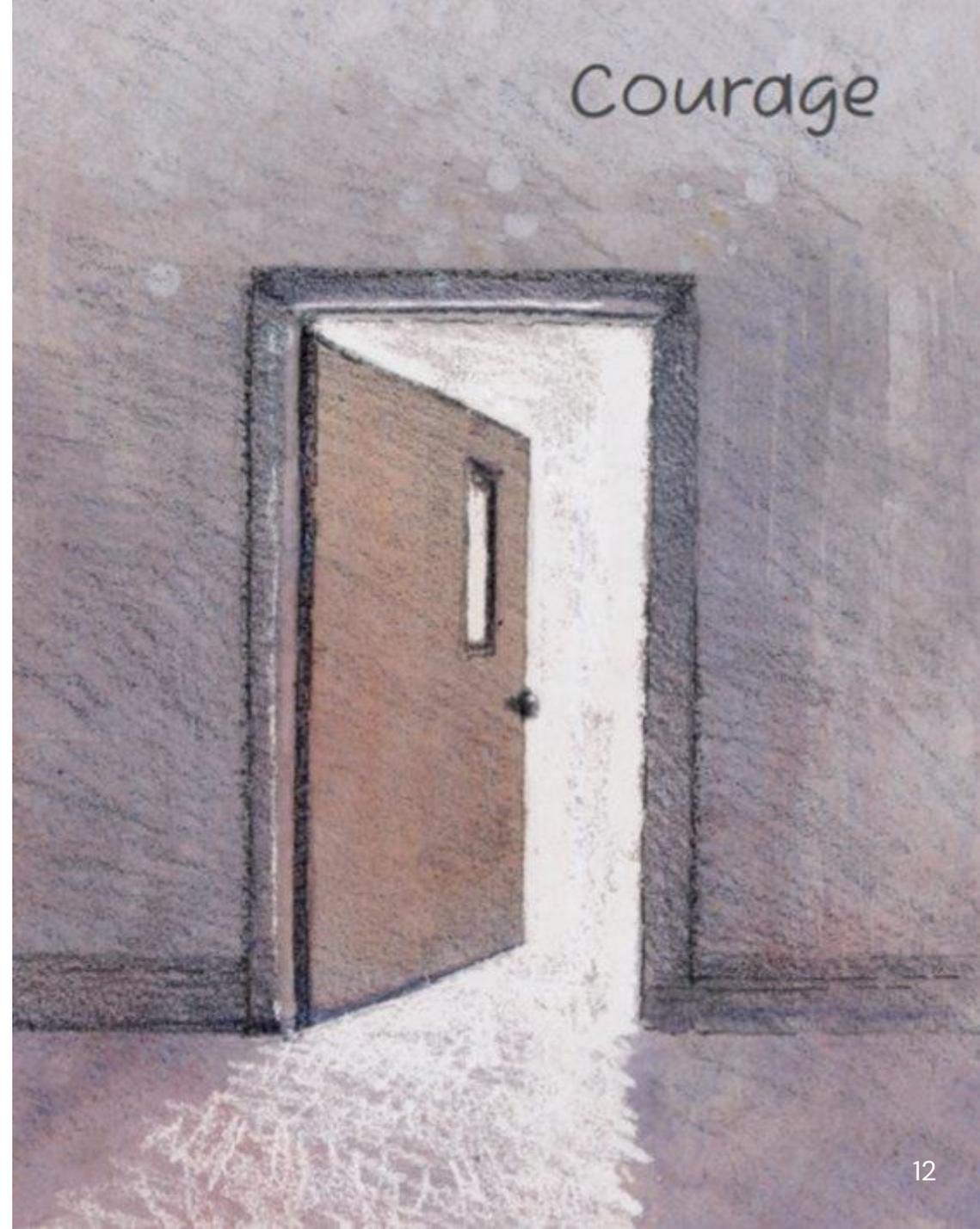
TEACHER WELLBEING INTERVENTION



Teachers receive our professional development (intervention) to consciously and purposefully (implementation):

- Find meaning in work
- Provide social support
- Create micro connections
- Use their strengths and values at work
- Look for what went well

We then evaluate the effect of their application of positive psychology strategies on their wellbeing at work (and any other knock-on effects) over the following 6 months.



Our most recent study

A total of 593 educators from 20 regional Victorian schools participated in the research.

Most teachers (89%) had implemented the positive psychology strategies

Most teachers reported:

- Improved wellbeing
- Feeling more positive at work
- Being calmer in the classroom
- Experiencing less stress at work
- Positive effects on their work with students with students who display challenging behaviours

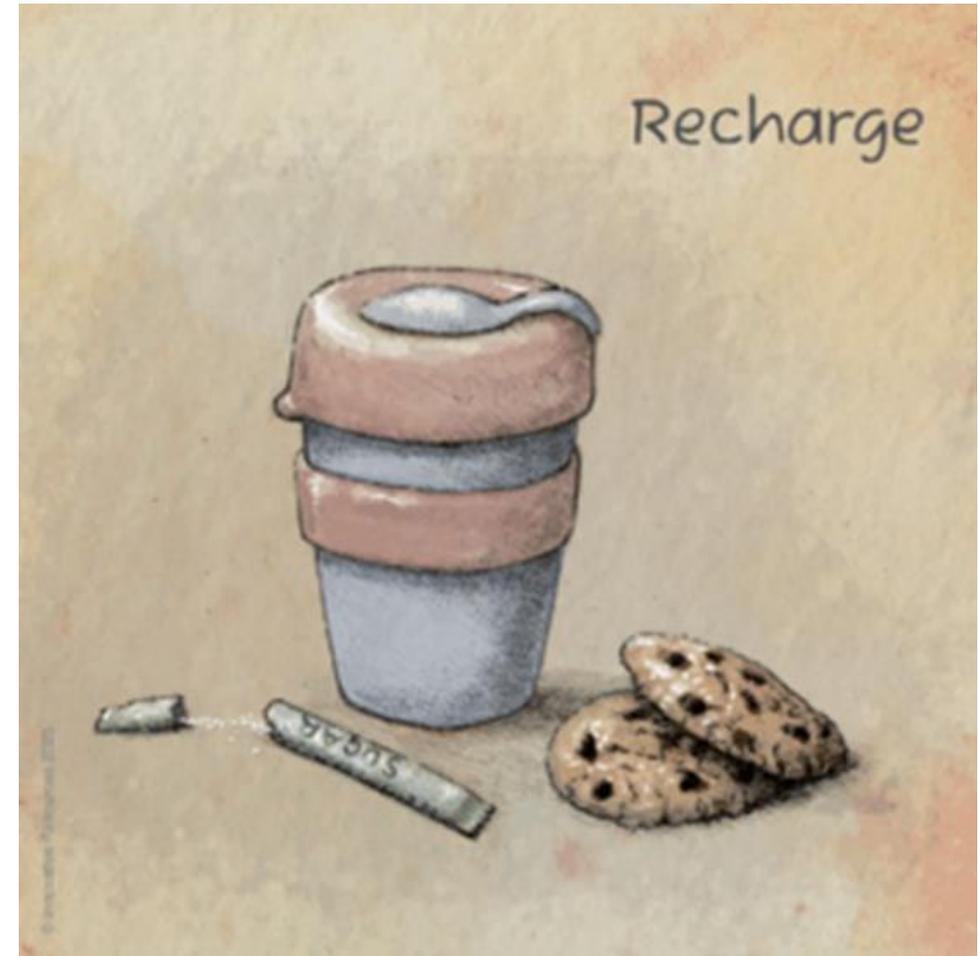
Meaning in work

Looking for meaning at work made me pay more attention to how I was feeling and how this could impact my teaching and my interaction with those around me.

With students who display challenging behaviours:

Since I have been looking for meaning at work, I have been able to keep my composure and patience better.

Looking for meaning at work has allowed me to really think about each student as an individual, reflect on how they are travelling and what supports are in place to ensure that are having a positive experience every day.



How Teachers Find Meaning in their Work and the Effects on their Pedagogical Practice

Kristina Turner
Monica Thielking
Swinburne University of Technology

Abstract: This study addresses a gap in current literature by applying a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand how teachers with a calling orientation perceive meaning in their work. A calling orientation has been defined by Wrzesniewski, et al. (1997) as a commitment to one's work as it contributes to the greater good and makes the world a better place. Individuals' perception of participation in meaningful work has been closely linked to subjective wellbeing. The current study revealed that teachers' reported that they found meaning in their work through having an impact on their students' lives and through positive relationships with students and colleagues. However, there was an incongruence between activities that teachers find meaningful and the actual activities that they perform daily in their roles. Supporting teachers to find meaning in their work and to engage in meaningful work activities may serve to improve teacher wellbeing.



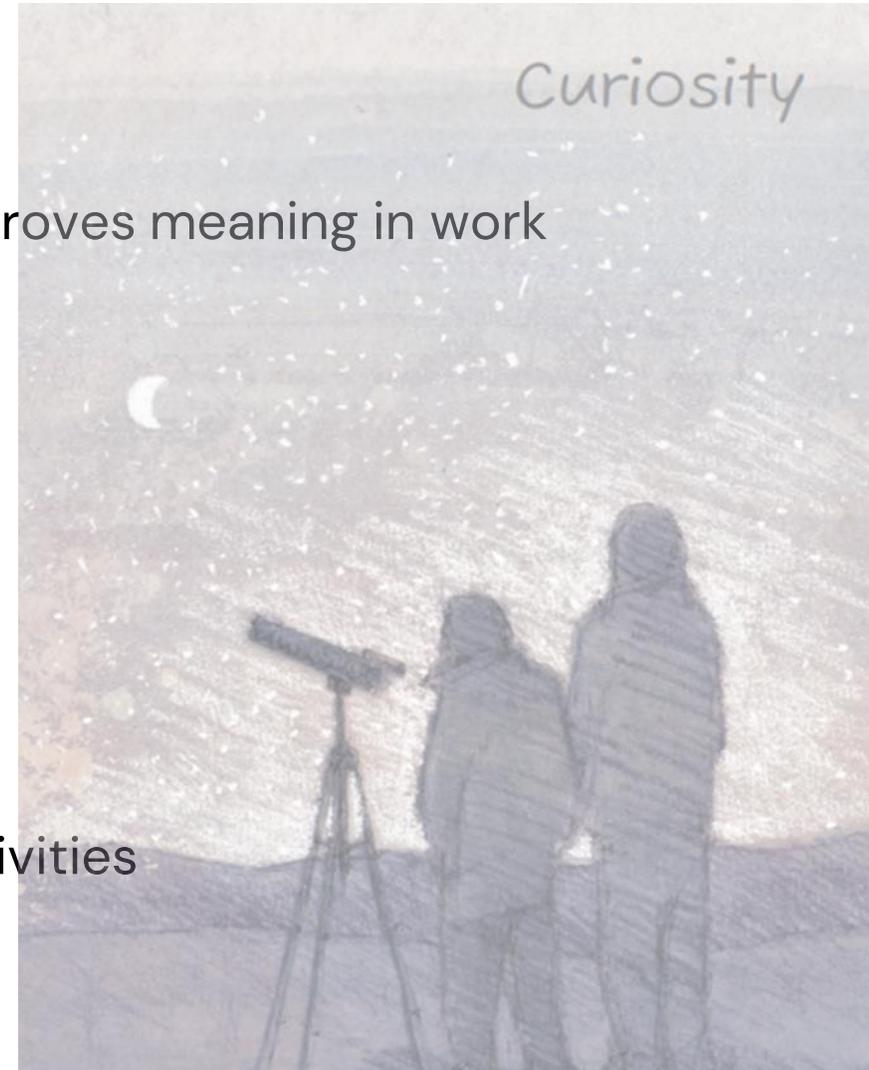
Participants

5 teachers, all who self-identified as having a calling orientation to their work, were asked to consciously look for meaning in their work each day for fifteen days.

- **Kate** has been teaching for seven years, works in a government primary school, which has 520 students. She currently teaches a Year One class.
 - **Ava** has been teaching for two years. Ava works in a government Preparatory to Year Twelve school, which has 950 students. She currently teaches a Year Five and Year Six combined class.
 - **Steph** has been teaching for four years. Steph works in a government primary school, which has 240 students. She currently teaches a Year Four class.
 - **Naomi** has been teaching for fifteen years. Naomi works in a government primary school which has 300 students enrolled. She currently teaches a Year Five class.
 - **Jayde** has been teaching for four years. Jayde works in a government primary school, which has 180 students. She currently teaches a combined Years Preparatory and Year One class.
-
- How did you find meaning in your work?
 - In what ways does your work make the world a better place?
 - Did consciously looking for meaning in your work change your teaching practice?

Summary of findings

- Consciously noticing the positive aspects of their work improves meaning in work
- Multiple sources of meaning in work
- Positive impact on students' lives
- Meaning comes from improving pedagogical knowledge
- Meaning arising from positive relationships with students
- Providing social support to colleagues creates meaning
- Incongruence between meaningful activities and actual activities



Summary of findings

- **Consciously noticing the positive aspects of their work improves meaning in work**
- Multiple sources of meaning in work
- **Positive impact on students' lives**
- Meaning comes from improving pedagogical knowledge
- **Meaning arising from positive relationships with students**
- Providing social support to colleagues creates meaning
- **Incongruence between meaningful activities and actual activities**



Consciously noticing positive aspects of their work improves meaning

All teachers in this study found meaning in consciously noticing what was going well.

I am starting to see this process of reflection as beneficial because it provides me with some acknowledgment of how much I do every day. It gives me a moment to celebrate my successes. I am acknowledging my abilities in myself and not looking for as much external validation. This is important. – Naomi

The days are hard here, they are very challenging and it can be overwhelming. Focusing on the tiny things that went well each day helped me to get through, because the tiny things built up and then overtook all the negative that might have been happening. – Ava

Positive impact on students' lives

All teachers found meaning through having a positive impact on students' lives in ways which extend beyond the classroom.

Helping kids have success, not just academically, but also personal, emotional and social success is meaningful. These students really need positive influences from school in order to develop positive values in their life. Some of these students do not have this at home and this really adds a lot more meaning to the term 'teacher'. We are more than that and often are their only support system. I am trying to embed a sense of confidence and ability in my students. Education acts as their portal to great things and it is our job as teachers to guide them through this portal. – Ava



Meaning arising from positive relationships with students

All teachers in this study found meaning in their relationships with students.

Each day on the way to school I thought about, 'how do I find meaning from work' and I realised that I find meaning through building relationships with my students and making them feel valued and trusted. Building relationships with students is my strength as a teacher, it is something I have always done well, I am very close with my students. It makes me feel good to know that every single student in this class has a joke with me on a weekly basis and comes and tells me things. It's a really special bond and a partnership. That's what's most important to me and because I really reflected on it made me feel good. – Steph



Incongruence between meaningful activities and actual activities

Findings from this study highlight the contrast between the demands of teachers' workloads and the ways in which teachers find meaning in their work.

I guess because I am looking for positives in myself, I am looking for positives in the students too. So, I have stepped back little and I am more positive, I am not getting so caught up in what they need to do. Sometimes you get really dug down in data and caught up in this expectation where everything has to be done and ticked off and you forget the real authentic parts of learning. Instead, I have been thinking about how to help my students to actually shine or grow in some way. – Kate

This confirmed previous studies:

Whilst not directly related to the context of teaching, Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) also found that when participants looked for meaning in their work they began to notice discrepancies and mismatches between their ideal reality and the current reality. They suggest that organisational practices should be developed to assist individuals to engage with such tensions in meaningful ways. Rather than pretending that everything is okay (inauthenticity), meaningful work is often based on an authentic engagement with the often less than perfect reality. – Page 83

Wellbeing reflection for school career practitioners

- What was your motivation for becoming a school career practitioner?
- Do any of the findings resonate with you?
- How do you think 'looking for meaning in work for 15 days' would impact your work as a career practitioner and your wellbeing at work?

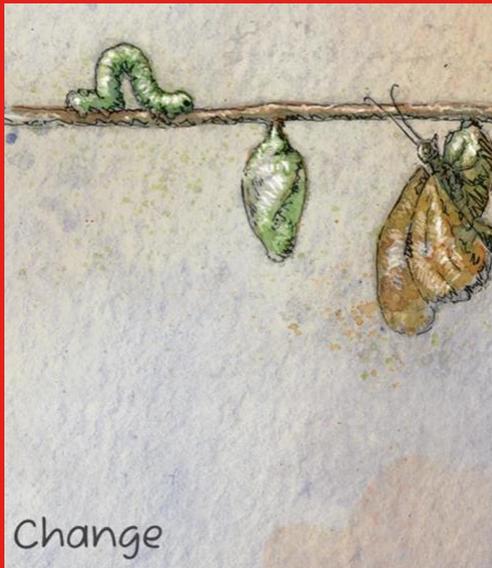


Thank you

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and the teacher wellbeing team

Images from the teacher wellbeing cards, artist: Kain White



<https://www.kainwhite.com.au/>