

## A Review of Falkenberg, T. (2024). *Well-Being and Well-Becoming in Schools*.

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Falkenberg's (2024) edited collection makes an important contribution to educational research by bringing together diverse voices from the province of Manitoba, each sharing unique perspectives that contribute to a deeper understanding of well-being and well-becoming in education. Inarguably, there is a vital need for increased attention towards the well-being of young people and educators. Thomas Falkenberg notes that research has "rarely been grounded in an explicit understanding of student well-being as a core-purpose of education" (p. 11). He notes the exception of Nel Noddings (2003), who has argued that "happiness should be an aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness" (as cited in Falkenberg, p. 11). At the heart of the text, *Well-Being and Well-Becoming* is a sense of caring for the holistic well-being of all learners and educators.

This compelling book offers refreshing insights and perspectives on well-being and well-becoming that are grounded in Indigenous and global philosophies and interdisciplinary educational research. The edited collection consists of four sections that explore research in the following areas: "philosophical foundations; conceptualizing well-being; the school and the social ecology of and for well-being; and curriculum, teaching, and learning for well-being" (p. 12). Across the four sections, the authors provide inspiring insights, from diverse research frameworks and curricular areas, into how well-being and well-becoming contribute to the flourishing of young people and school-based professionals in educational settings and beyond.

The authors invite readers to consider how we may collectively contribute to healthier schools by focusing on transforming classrooms and schools into healthier, joyful, vibrant and hopefully even "wilder" (Watt, p. 255) spaces where all students and educators will flourish as they make meaning in their lives, and feel free to be their authentic selves. In his introductory remarks, Falkenberg poses the following thought-provoking questions: "What do we wish for our children? What do we wish for our neighbours and our communities? What do wish for ourselves?" (p. 3).

I appreciate the way this text begins by acknowledging Indigenous, Anishinaabe teachings related to "*mino-bimaadiziwin*, meaning 'the good life' or 'living in a good way'" (p. 3, see Bell, 2016), citing Anishinaabe scholars Nicole Bell and Michael Hart. The five foundational concepts of *mino-pimatisiwin*, as identified by Michael Hart (2002), include "wholeness, balance, harmony, growth, and healing" (as cited in Falkenberg, p. 3). These Anishinaabe teachings provide guidance for holistic inquiry as the authors, Indigenous and non-Indigenous from Manitoba:

... inquire into the central importance of a purpose of life and of a purpose for our own lives, of a holistic and relational view of what it means to be human and of life more generally, of core values and principles that guide social and individual living, and of the important role that education plays in all of this. (Falkenberg, p. 4)

The first section of the book features foundational matters, delving into the philosophical frameworks and theories of well-being and how they relate to schools and education. Erik Magnusson and Heather Krepski (Chapter 2) emphasize the "substantive theories of well-being that seek to provide a concrete account of the things that make a person's life go well" (p. 25) while also discussing the challenges of applying these theories in Canadian classrooms and

elsewhere. The authors note that while using an objective list to track well-being is one of the most common approaches in school settings (with the example of the Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) due to their “intuitive appeal and practical advantages”, there are two main challenges with this approach. The first challenge relates to “the arbitrariness: what rationale can be provided for the particular list of objective goods that a school division or educational authority takes to be constitutive of well-being” (p. 37), while the second challenge is that “students may experience alienation if they are told that, according to a particular objective list measure, their lives are going well when in fact they are subjectively dissatisfied with how their school life is going (or vice versa)” (p. 37).

In Chapter Four, Rebeca Heringer and Thomas Falkenberg argue “that the pursuit of a flourishing life requires an ethic of well-being that brings together both individual well-being and the concern for the well-being of others” (p. 71). The authors propose that an “ethic of hospitality can complement and inform individual well-being in a sustainable way—that is through a sensitive and tactful host who welcomes the unknown Other unconditionally while not neglecting their own well-being” (p. 71). This chapter encourages readers to reflect on relationality and ethics in the classroom context and reminds us that our lives are inextricably connected. Thus, educators have a responsibility towards themselves and to their students and must “be attentive to their own needs and feelings...it is also incumbent upon educators to resist any kind of projection of what students’ well-being should look like and to make room for students’ emerging responses” (p. 71). When educators are open to the “unpredictability of the encounter of the self and the Other”, there lies “the promise of a flourishing life” (p. 71). Drawing on philosophical and psychoanalytical theories, the authors describe how an ethic of hospitality is an ethic of well-being.

In the second section of the book, theories of well-being and well-becoming are conceptualized. For instance, Frank Deer and Jessica Trickey (Chapter 5) provide an overview of Indigenous perspectives of well-being from Indigenous communities around the world, discussing how “Indigenous knowledge, heritage, consciousness, and experience may be understood” by employing the five components of Falkenberg’s (2019) WB2 Framework— “agency, opportunities for agency, enjoyment of life, meaningfulness in cultures, and social connections” (pp. 80-81). Importantly, Deer and Trickey note:

Understanding health and well-being among Indigenous communities involves knowing how their social network involves connections with family, community, land and spirits. Understanding the way Indigenous people feel connected and in harmony requires listening and learning from each community’s perceptions of well-being. (p. 93)

These authors highlight the importance of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and how the spirit of reconciliation may “serve as an inspiration for understanding, sharing, and collaborating” (p. 94), especially in relation to well-being. I particularly appreciated reading Deer and Trickey’s explanation of how “well-being involves enjoying one’s cultural traditions and appreciation of one’s cultural community” (p. 82). At a time of reconciliation, this appears to be an important finding to be considered by all involved in education.

Also in this section on conceptualizing well-being, Virginia Tze and Stephanie Brekelmans (Chapter 7) note that while there is an increased focus on well-being of young people in schools, there is also a need to “support the well-being of the school-based professionals who serve these student populations” (p. 120). The authors draw on the definition of well-being from the *American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology* (n.d.) as “a state of happiness and mental

health and outlook, or good quality of life” (as cited in Tze & Brekelmans, p. 120). Building on the work of Ryan and Deci (2011), Tze and Brekelmans’ chapter demonstrates the need for school counsellors and school psychologists to feel valued and motivated, thus having “more energy and positive experiences, leading to a greater feeling of competence” (p. 131). The authors note that “school counsellors play an integral role in fostering the well-being of students, but the stresses of their job can take an emotional toll” (p. 125). Therefore, considering the challenges facing school counsellors, such as “job overload” and “professional burnout” (p. 124), this chapter offers valuable insights that consider school-based professionals’ overall well-being as well as the importance of self-care.

The third section of the book contextualizes the school and the social ecology of and for well-being. Jeannie Kerr’s work (Chapter 9) draws on both Indigenous and Western philosophies and frameworks to discuss social inequities in inner city schools. Kerr’s chapter challenges deficit discourses that persist in educational contexts, arguing that educators must understand systemic issues related to colonialism. Importantly, Kerr mentions that “attention to reclaiming Indigenous languages, as well as enriching multilingual experience, is important in supporting the well-being of children and communities” (p. 172). Furthermore, Kerr reminds readers that “in the Manitoba context, school districts, schools, and teachers have a great deal of latitude in choosing classroom resources and curricular materials” (p. 169). As such, the author encourages educators to connect with parents and community to “support reforms in curriculum and pedagogy” (p. 173) and “the wholistic flourishing of students” (p. 173). Importantly, Kerr’s chapter highlights the potential of multimodal and trans-language curricular and pedagogical approaches and the need for “well-being and well-becoming to be carefully considered in relation to place, community, and located histories” (p. 172).

Finally, the fourth section of the book focuses on curriculum, teaching, and learning for well-being. The reader is invited to consider possibilities that go beyond simply “covering” the curriculum, to truly enable young people to make meaning as they are invited to explore ideas and concepts and make connections to their own lives. I was fascinated by the way the authors made connections to well-being across curricular areas, specifically with chapters on science curriculum through place-based education and ecojustice, mathematics education, and language arts (English). Notably, within each of these chapters, the authors share the significance of meaning-making for promoting well-being in classrooms.

In his chapter on mathematics education, Falkenberg emphasizes that “schools should provide opportunities to children to develop the capabilities linked to being able to live a flourishing life” (p. 220). Furthermore, Falkenberg offers that “meaning in life is not something like a treasure that we unearth but is rather something that we develop as we interact with the world around us, and that there is an aspect of *learning* involved...” (p. 227). I appreciated Falkenberg’s description of how mathematics educators may contribute to students’ meaning-making by “facilitating exposure to and awareness of opportunities for developing purpose, value, efficacy and self-worth” (p. 227). A powerful example is how a student may develop a life-long interest in playing chess simply through a conversation with another student.

Michael Link (Chapter 13) observes that “schools have, to varying degrees, uncritically perpetuated the dominant, hierarchical way of relating to each other and to the natural world” (p. 235). By centring eco-justice and place-based pedagogy in the science curriculum, Link asks: “How might schools play a role to prepare students to both fulfil their fundamental human needs and live according to an ethic of sustainability and social justice?” (p. 240). Drawing on

Falkenberg’s WB2-Framework (2019), the author proposes a nature-based framework in which “students are provided opportunities in nature to develop and enact capabilities that have been identified as necessary to meet fundamental human needs, for example, and to ask and voice questions and ideas about what they encounter” (Link, p. 241). Link’s chapter inspires educators to consider how to foster well-being of students in meaningful ways through the science curriculum by connecting to the local community.

Jennifer Watt (Chapter 14) provides refreshing and thought-provoking ideas for teaching writing as she encourages teachers to focus on the writers “right in front of them, right in the moment – contributing to the enjoyment, exploring possibilities, and making meaning in students’ immediate lives” (p. 258). Watt draws on the work of G. Lynn Nelson (1994), who underscores the intrinsic joy that may be found through writing:

Here is what I hope you get from this... Ten years from now, I hope you will be sitting up some night at midnight under the light at the kitchen table—writing. Not because you have a paper due the next day or because someone has given you an “assignment”—but because you are hurting or grieving or confused, or because you are collecting some of the small joys of your day. (Nelson, 1994, as cited in Watt, p. 254)

Inspired by Nelson, Watt describes her vision for teaching writing in English language arts classrooms in ways that empower students to experience “increased agency and voice, more joy and spark in what they are doing, a deeper sense of meaning-making, and more authentic connections to themselves and others” (p. 259). Finally, Watt suggests that teachers “can also experience more flourishing in their personal and professional lives if they dedicate time to their writing practices, venturing into the greenbelt or sitting under the midnight table themselves” (p. 267). As such, Watt invites teachers to write and to “become part of the interconnected community of writers—not just a guide at the side, but as another writer right in the messy middle of it all” (p. 267).

In Chapter 15, Falkenberg concludes the book with important questions emerging from the authors’ inquiries that may lead to further exploration and research on well-being and schools. Given that the book began with acknowledging Indigenous perspectives on ‘*mino-pimatisiwin*’ (Hart, 2002), I had anticipated that Indigenous philosophies might also be discussed in the conclusion. This is an area that may be further developed for future work on well-being and well-becoming in Canadian and international contexts. Another noted absence is that I would have appreciated the inclusion of author biographies at the end of the book. However, a unique feature of the book, mentioned by the editor, is that the authors agreed to engage in dialogue through a series of podcasts. I was delighted to find the six-episode podcast (Falkenberg, n.d.) and to have the chance to listen to the authors.

In closing, I propose that this book would be of interest to teacher educators, counsellors, curriculum makers, curriculum theorists, and researchers. Additionally, the text will be an appreciated resource for students in undergraduate and graduate education courses. This timely and insightful edited collection offers hope that change within education is both possible and necessary. The authors have provided multiple perspectives for connecting well-being and well-becoming to social and ecological justice by considering broader issues in education and society that must also be examined if we are to collectively move forward towards healthier, and ultimately happier, classrooms and societies.

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