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What if learner wellbeing became the primary metric of school success?

Beyond the Bell Curve: Reclaiming the Heart of Education

Author: Vernon Dickason

Opening Reflection

Success has long been measured in numbers, test scores, pass rates, university placements. But what if we turned the lens? What if, by 2030, the primary measure of a school's success was not academic achievement, but learner wellbeing? Not just how well learners perform, but how well they feel, relate, and grow. In a country marked by trauma, inequality and resilience, this shift would be more than symbolic, it would be transformative.

The Scenario

By 2030, South Africa's Department of Basic Education adopts a Wellbeing Index as the central metric for evaluating school performance. This includes:

- Emotional health indicators: anxiety, belonging, self-esteem
- Social connectedness: peer relationships, bullying reports, inclusion
- Physical wellbeing: nutrition, sleep, safety, access to healthcare
- Agency and voice: learner participation in decision-making and feedback loops

Schools are required to conduct biannual wellbeing audits, supported by trained counsellors and community partners. The National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) shifts its focus from compliance to care. Academic results remain important, but are interpreted through the lens of wellbeing. Schools with high wellbeing scores receive additional support to share best practices.

What It Reveals

This scenario reveals a rehumanisation of education. It challenges the assumption that achievement precedes wellbeing, and instead proposes that wellbeing enables achievement.

It also exposes the limitations of current metrics, where trauma, hunger and exclusion are invisible to the spreadsheet.

From a systems-thinking lens, wellbeing is not a soft add-on, it is a structural necessity. It must be embedded in policy, pedagogy and practice.

Why It Matters

South African learners face immense pressures: poverty, violence, displacement, and systemic inequity. If schools are to be sanctuaries, not stressors, wellbeing must be central. Measuring it affirms its value, and invites accountability.

Philosophically, this scenario touches on Ubuntu, trauma-informed pedagogy, and holistic education theory. It asks us to see the learner not as a performer, but as a person.

Reflective Responses

What does a wellbeing-centred school look like?

It looks like learners who feel safe, seen and supported. It means teachers who notice, listen and respond. It means leadership that prioritises care over compliance.

How do we measure wellbeing without reducing it to data?

By combining surveys with storytelling, observation with dialogue. By treating metrics as mirrors, not verdicts.

What risks emerge if wellbeing is sidelined or tokenised?

Burnout, disengagement and silent suffering. Without wellbeing, education becomes a performance, detached from purpose.

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Insights from South African Wellbeing Initiatives (2023–2025):

- The Empowering Minds, Building Futures report highlights the growing role of social-emotional development in South African schools
- CAPS currently includes limited wellbeing content, mostly in Life Orientation
- The DBE's Schooling 2030 vision calls for schools where learners "want to come to school" and "feel safe, respected and supported"

"Healing is not a curriculum strand, it is a way of being. Education must become a space where dignity is restored." - <i>Prof. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela</i>
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