



2020-2021

Valleyview Secondary ***Spiral of Inquiry in Action***

**A Case Study:
Nurturing well-being in our school
community**

Using an inquiry mindset to work through a
complex challenge in our school

Valleyview Secondary School

www.vss.sd73.bc.ca

The Impact of a Pandemic

In March of 2020, the world hit pause as the coronavirus, COVID -19, swept across the planet. For our school this meant a move to online learning for 3 and a half months followed by a full return of students to classrooms the following September. Students came back telling us they felt frightened, stressed and unsure about being back at school. It was clear to all of us that we needed to respond with a plan to look after their well-being. So... we scanned them one week into school to make sure we understood what was going on for our students.

Scanning is an essential part of the Spirals of Inquiry Framework. Understanding what is going on for learners is critical in order for us to discover where to go next. Although this initial scan got us on the path of looking at student well-being, scanning continued throughout our whole inquiry journey!



"I would feel safer at home".

"Because of the whole COVID thing, school is really hard to get used to".

"It's a pandemic and we shouldn't be at school".

"I don't have anyone to hang out with".

"COVID scares me".

I am not happy to be back when I could be learning online.

"I don't like being around people again".

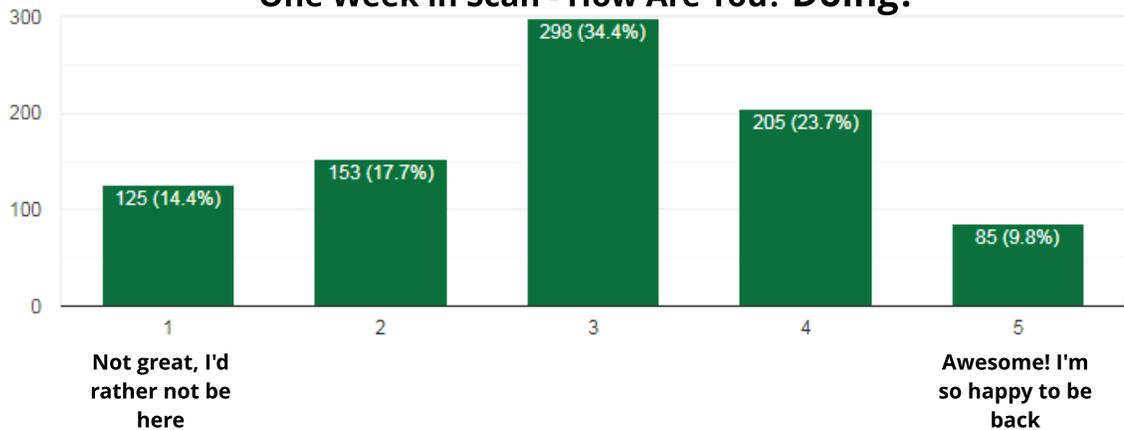


On a scale of 1 to 5, how are you feeling about school right now?



866 responses

One Week in Scan - How Are You? Doing?



"Many students will experience emotional distress from the pandemic, ranging from anxiety to post-traumatic stress symptoms. Some students will have had poor nutrition due to lack of access to school meals. Student mental and physical health will need explicit support in the return to 'normal life'".



What Will Have the Biggest Impact?

There are so many competing priorities in a school and VSS is no different. From the 856 pieces of anecdotal student feedback, two focus areas bubbled to the top. Students told us they were worried about their **well-being** and many others talked about issues relating to **belonging**. We needed to find a way to make sense of this feedback and hone our inquiry.

As a further scan, staff were asked for their thoughts on the feedback we received from students. Their questions and comments were sorted into 4 categories:

Sense of Community

"How can students feel connected when they are on different breaks and lunch hours?"

Rules & Behavioural Expectations

"How do we ensure students are following all of the safety rules?"

School Structures

"Can we use announcements from admin to make sure student expectations are made clear?"

Health & Well-Being

"I am worried about our students' mental health. How can we get back to feeling normal?"

Reviewing rules and expectations in order to ensure students knew how to keep themselves and others safe was something we could routinely incorporate. Changing school structures like putting in announcements was also something that we could introduce. Helping students feel connected and improve their mental health was a more complex problem, and in many ways, much more important.

Based on student and staff feedback, we were now on our way to defining our focus. The next challenge we faced was knowing what direction we needed to take. What did any of us really know about nurturing well-being? We all cared deeply about the students in our classes, but despite that, students were telling us they were anxious.

The one thing we understood from the **OECD 7 Principles of Learning**, however, was that learners' emotions play a key role in their motivation to learn.



Research Supporting the Focus

Learning should not be understood as a purely cognitive activity as students' emotions and motivations are integral to its success... Students learn better when they feel competent and experience positive emotions. Being attuned to one's emotions is an integral part of developing strategies for successful learning.

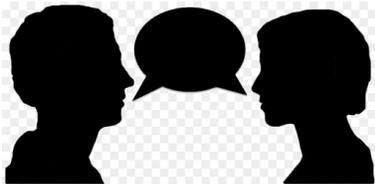
Being highly attuned to motivations and emotions is not an exhortation to be "nice" - misplaced encouragement in any case does more harm than good - but is first and foremost about making learning more effective".

The OECD Hanbook for Innovative Learning Environments, 2017



"In the focusing stage phase teams ask themselves: Where are we going to concentrate our professional energies so that we can change the experiences and results for our learners?" Halbert & Kaser, Spirals Of Inquiry (2015)

Current Strategies Used by Staff to Address Well-Being in their Classrooms



Conversations with students



Circle check-ins



Going for a walk



Mindfulness

Establishing a Baseline and Challenging our Assumptions

With our focus emerging, we scanned again from an appreciative standpoint. We asked staff what strategies they were currently using in their learning environments to nurture well-being and belonging so that we could establish a baseline of our understanding.

We also asked staff if they identified themselves as someone with expertise in this area, and if so, what expertise did they hold. Teaching is a profession steeped in relationships and we wondered whether many of us believed we already knew what to do in order to nurture well-being in our classrooms. We intentionally scanned to check these assumptions.

We discovered not many of us believed we were experts, yet most of us were purposefully using strategies to connect with students and help them self-regulate.

18% of staff indicated they had expertise

How effective were these strategies we using? Were we doing anything to contribute positively or negatively to students' well-being?

- through learning design?
- with attendance management?
- complex behavior management?
- assessment practices?
- workload?

HUNCH



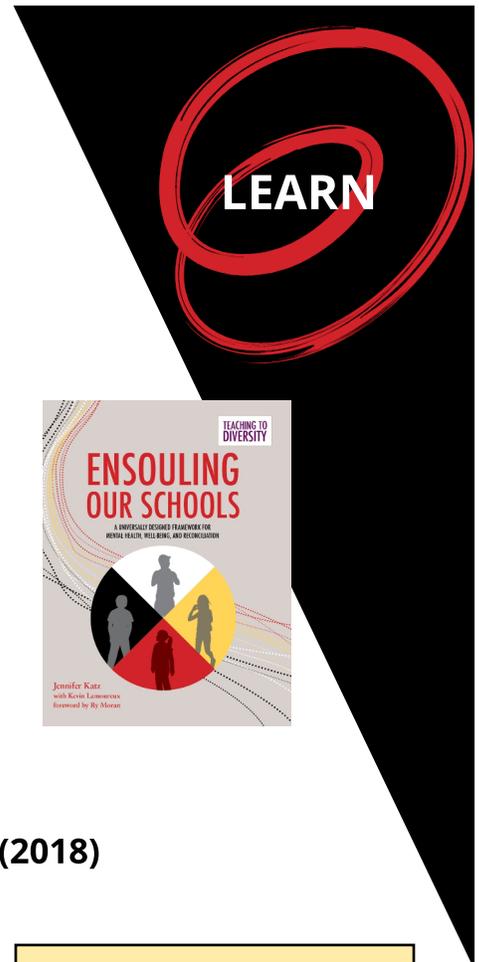
"Mindfulness is similar to meditation; however, rather than trying to remove stressful or negative thoughts, participants work to become more attentive and non-judgemental of their current feelings and thoughts". OECD, Trends Shaping Education Spotlight 14, 2018

What do we need to learn in order to deepen our impact?

The strategies being used in a variety of learning environments was a great start. In order to move forward we used some guiding questions...

- How could we move from add-on strategies to more purposeful and integrated approaches?
- Well-being seems a bit nebulous. How would we know if we were making a difference?

As a staff we had been using Jennifer Katz, *Ensouling our Schools* to guide us on building belonging for staff. This book also included a framework for Well-Being in Chapter 7: "Addressing Mental-Health Needs with All Students". This framework provided us with a better understanding of well-being, where to go next in our action, and criteria to help us check to see if we were making any progress. With descriptors pertaining to intrapersonal, interpersonal and spiritual well-being, we could now ask ourselves whether we were creating the conditions in our environments to nurture one or more of these descriptors! Not only that... we could use these to help us check our progress along the way.



Jennifer Katz: *Ensouling Our Schools* (2018)

A Framework for Well-Being

Intrapersonal

Intellectual:

- Critical thinking/problem-solving
- perseverance
- develop interests
- meta-cognition
- positive self talk
- brain-biochemical awareness

Physical:

- nutrition/exercise
- body image
- mastery/self-regulation
- sensory awareness

Emotional and Psychological:

- Joy, happiness
- self-worth
- personal growth
- environmental master
- autonomy
- sense of purpose
- set and meet goals
- resilience/distress tolerance

Interpersonal

Intellectual:

- engage in social issues
- problem solving

Physical:

- touch
- participation/engagement
- sensual/sexual

Emotional and Psychological:

- belonging
- cultural connection
- positive relationships
- finding your social circle
- service and social contribution

Spiritual / Existential

Finding Meaning and Purpose:

- who am I?
- why am I here?
- what is my gift?
- where does my joy lie?

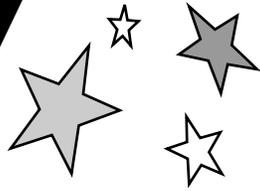
Recognizing Interconnectedness:

- where do I belong?
- how does my existence impact others?
- how does my existence impact history?
- how do I fit in the web of life?



" Educators, views of teaching is shaped by their own experience, so that they return to the places of their past, complete with memories and preconceptions often unaffected by their higher education or training college experience"
Mccbeath, *Leading Learning in a World of Change* (2013)

ACTION



Learning Bursts



Senior English class: Using children's books on diversity to talk and learn about identity.



Senior Textiles class: Making fidget mats for seniors with dementia.

Taking Action and celebrating the micro-moves

Teachers were beginning to think about well-being in a deeper way and some were taking action in ways that moved beyond add-on strategies. We began to ask ourselves some very specific questions which deepened our approach to nurturing well-being:

Am I creating the conditions in my learning environment to grow **sense of purpose** as well as **joy and happiness** for my students?

Do my classroom structures help students **find their social circle**?

Does the design of learning opportunities for my students help them **discover their gifts** or even their **impact on the planet**?

Through classroom visits and discussions with the VSS Instructional Leadership team, some excellent practice began to emerge. Valleyview is a large school with over 50 teaching staff so we needed to be creative with ways to showcase these great examples of purposeful learning design.

Learning Bursts which became known to us through the *Network of Inquiry and Indigenous Education* allowed educators to share their stories in 10 minute sessions. We adopted this structure and Learning Bursts became a part of the learning agenda at staff meetings. We used video and slide presentations made by a few staff to showcase learning design that intentionally touched upon multiple descriptors of the Katz Framework for Well-Being.

One these artifacts was even used in a presentation to the School Board as part of our School Plan:

Connecting To Our Community

Our Theory of Action:

Collectively, if we create environments promoting connections to self, others, and to something greater, we will observe better engagement, improved attendance, increased feelings of self worth, positive interactions with peers, and increase in academic performance.



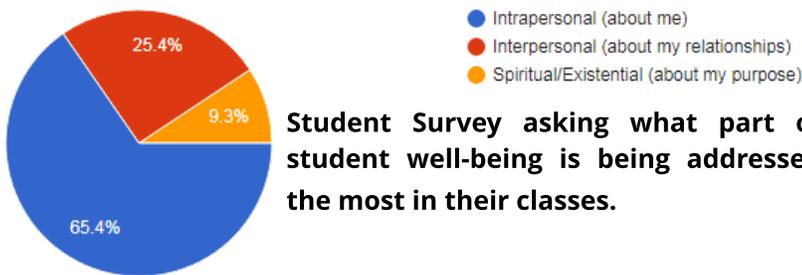
"We know that taking informed action will lead to different and better outcomes for learners. The question for inquiry teams to ask now is how much difference they are making, and is it enough?" Halbert & Kaser, *Spirals Of Inquiry* (2015)

Using Katz' Framework for Well-Being as a *Checking* Tool

The three pillars from the Katz Framework contains succinct descriptors about interpersonal, intrapersonal and spiritual well-being. We began this inquiry with a question about whether we would be able to measure the impact we *were or were not* making in the well-being of students, however, as we continued to return to the Katz Framework it became apparent that we could use the descriptors as criteria for checking.

We used the Framework to assess the effectiveness of the artifacts staff shared. It helped us uncover some promising practice, and provided us with direction on where each of us needed to go next in our work within our own learning environments.

Eventually we gave paper copies of the Katz Framework to students with a highlighter felt pen and asked them to think about the classes they had this year where their well-being was nurtured. They then highlighted specific criteria they noticed being addressed. Finally, we asked them which pillar contained the most highlighted criteria from this class.



Student Survey asking what part of student well-being is being addressed the most in their classes.

Where to next?

We are curious about the impact our efforts would have had in the classroom if we had shared the Katz Framework on well-being with students right from the beginning. We are also curious about practice and learning design that helps students explore their purpose authentically.

Both of these wonders will help guide us in our next steps.



School Wide Check in June

- 1/3 of students in grades 8-12 responded
- 23% knew their teachers were focusing on well-being
- All students identified criteria from one or more of the pillars of Katz's Framework that were being nurtured in multiple classes.
- Most students identified fewer criteria from the "Spiritual/Existential" pillar

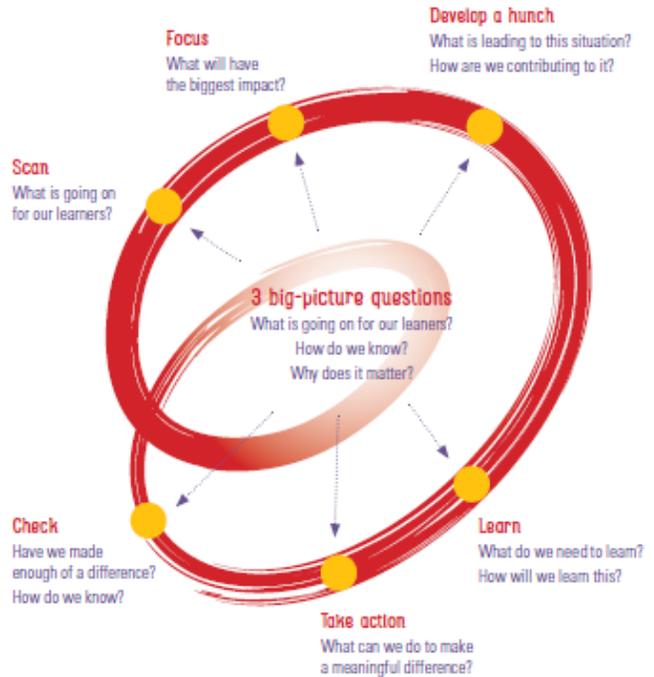


"Celebrate what you have learned. Acknowledge the gains, the losses, and the uncertainties. Stay open to new possibilities!" Halbert & Kaser *Spiral Playbook* (2017)

Using Inquiry to develop adaptive expertise

Using the *Spiral of Inquiry* as a Framework to guide us through complex problem-solving has been helpful. Each phase reminds us of where we need to go next. We also know the phases in the Framework do not necessarily occur in order. That doesn't matter. What matters most is that we truly understand what is going on for our learners. That we use this information to base our decisions on what new learning we will do. That we challenge our own assumptions and constantly check our progress along the way. In essence, that we develop adaptive expertise as a *mindset* making the *Spiral of Inquiry* a way of being for all of us.

Inquiry is not about a packaged solution in search of a problem. The issues we face are complex so they require adaptive approaches. Most of the significant learning challenges at your school will require experimentation, new discoveries and shifts in some established practices. Routines polished over years of use will be challenged and have to change. Halbert & Kaser (2015)



Acknowledgements

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OECD. Coronavirus Special Edition: Back to school *Trends Shaping Education Spotlight 21*

OECD. (2018). Good Vibrations: Students' well-being. *Trends Shaping Education Spotlight 14*.



"Adaptive experts have the capability to work out when known routines do not work for students and sufficient knowledge to work out innovative approaches when needed. Part of being an adaptive expert is to know when and from where to seek help". Timperley, H. from Halbert & Kaser *Spirals of Inquiry* (2015)