Chapter 1

Education and Health

One principal I met at Starbucks complained to me that he did not know how to cope with the dwindling numbers of student admissions to his school in recent years. If the situation remained unchanged, he would be facing a reduction in the classes his school could run and subsequent cuts in financial resources from the government. He had spent all his energy and that of his staff looking for potential recruits to ensure the school's survival and therefore had nothing left for curriculum planning or providing sound pastoral care for his students. He raised a question: what is the point of staying in education if survival is all I am concerned with every day?

Another principal is troubled to see the endless work stemming from education reform landing on his shoulders and those of his staff. It pains him a lot to see them sacrifice so much of their family time working late into the evening in the school, or taking students on tours or excursions during holidays, with some even suffering poor health as a result. He sometimes blames himself for having to push the staff to implement the new policy measures imposed from above. He wonders how long it can continue and also how teachers as tired as he is can ever help students seek a healthy lifestyle and an enjoyable work life. It is quite ironic to ask teachers to help students plan a work-life balance when their own lives seem to be spinning out of control.

Still another hates to see her students making long faces when coming to school because of the piles of homework and the ceaseless tests and quizzes they are subjected

to. They have lost their childlike curiosity and joy of play, which she wanted very much to see in her school when she made the decision to become a school head. What saddens her even more are the frequent reports of students who have committed suicide because of excessive exam stress they claimed to have experienced at school.

From time to time friends would ask me why many youths nowadays are so listless and physically weak, and seem so pessimistic about their future. The younger generations are enjoying so much more materially and have so much more opportunity at school than we did in our younger days. They should be more grateful and should therefore achieve more in life. Why are they still dissatisfied with school life and life in general?

The stories above reveal much about what challenges school leaders are confronted with nowadays. In recent years, they have indeed been buffeted by numerous reform initiatives, which may be well meant, but have come too quickly and too close to one another. As a result of these incessant challenges, school leaders might lose their original zeal for education as well as their sense of direction over time; they are not sure what education is all about anymore or their role in it. To counteract such purposelessness, it is desirable for school leaders to pause and return to the existential question: what is school leadership for? There may be a battery of answers to the question, but ultimately, they boil down to two: first, school leadership is for ensuring the total well-being of our students — that is, the healthy and holistic development of them all — and second, it is for building, with all the resources at one's disposal, a positive school environment that is conducive to and favourable for learning as well as teaching.

Purpose of Schooling

Learning, according to Dimmock, is "the central purpose of schools" (2000, p. 109). While no one would dispute this, it is still essential to sort out what students are to learn, why they have to learn it, how it can best be learnt, and where to do so. Discernment in this can facilitate students' growth and development in school. Regarding what to learn, no one can argue that nowadays it should embrace not only the major domains of hard knowledge like literacy, numeracy, science and technology, and the humanities, but also the oft-mentioned soft skills like critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving skills, emotional skills, and team skills, which

are becoming more and more important over time. The reasons for learning all these are plain: to equip the young for future life and work.

Seen in this light, it is a school leader's moral duty to seek real learning outcomes for their students. Even when it comes to learning outcomes, the non-academic kind are just as important as the academic ones. Walker says it well,

> Helping all students to "score well" is the educative or academic purpose of leaders' work — as such it is a key connective activity. But if purpose connects to academic achievement only; are school leaders addressing the whole? Have they fulfilled their broader purpose and responsibility? Have they connected in ways which improve the learning, the lives and the virtues of students? (2012, p. 14)

Barnett also argues:

> School systems and their leaders have the moral and ethical responsibility to ensure the academic, social, and emotional development of students in their care. If educational institutions are serious about developing successful citizens, consumers, and contributors, then school leaders must create the conditions for students not only to achieve and overcome obstacles in their current situations, but also to thrive in the future. Therefore, this moral obligation to affect the hopes and dreams of children and adolescents rests on school leaders' core values and ethics (2015, p. 13).

In the same vein, Professor Edward Chen (2018) asserts that the purpose of education is to make a living and enjoy a significant life. To him, making a living means having a success career, and in today's and tomorrow's contexts, this requires our students to be multi-skilled, trans-disciplinary, and insightful rather than just well informed or knowledgeable. Moreover, being able to cope with change and to create comparative advantages, they need to understand the lifelong need for learning. A significant life should be a happy, meaningful, and worthwhile one. To achieve such purpose, he advocates nurturing students into whole persons who possess adaptability, brainpower, and creativity, and who are equipped with cognitive, communication, and community skills. Focusing on the all-important relationship between life and learning, Marshall is even more forthright and philosophical by stating:

> Conceived and framed within a context of scarcity, deficiency, and fragmentation, our current patterns, processes, and structures of schooling are

> not designed to ignite our children's joy, intellectual energy, and imagination. They are not dynamic or integrative enough to enable our children to analyse and solve complex, messy problems and to engage with passion in exploring their real questions about life. And they are not experiential enough to encourage our children to access and experience the mystery and enchantment of their rich interior lives, understand how they belong to the world and one another, and embrace and celebrate their remarkable capacity to sense an emergent future and evoke its creation. They are quite simply irreconcilable with the principles of life and learning. As a result, many of our children have become schooling disabled in a learning-abundant universe. Our schools must be transformed (2006, p. 9).

Robinson thinks school leadership should be measured by its impact on students' learning outcomes, although "there is a very long causal chain between how a principal thinks and acts and student outcomes" (2012, p. 10) and it is hard to pin down this link. However, she is right to contend that educational leadership is about teaching and learning, involving curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Moreover, school leaders should work to provide the right kind of conditions for teachers to teach effectively. Naturally, the school environment, where much of the effective learning should take place, becomes a focus of concern. The existing or traditional mode of schooling needs to be seriously reviewed for relevance and effectiveness.

While lamenting our students' lack "of meaning, wholeness, connectedness, and belonging" (p. 6) and emphasising that "life is a dynamic, perpetually creative learning process" (p. 68), Marshall imbues the word "school" with new meaning and new images, and also sees it as "part of a living and connected whole" (2006, p. 69). She continues to portray the new school she has in mind for learning in this new age, saying:

> It is but one many small multiage and often multigenerational learning centres embedded in a dynamic learning network — a living system — that connects the communities' "curriculum" with its intellectual and creative resources (personal and institutional) with the learning needs of its children. Such new schools move beyond the rigid boundaries of established places and times and situate learning in diverse locations, institutions, and facilities. They also recast the concept of public education and accountability. Not only does public accountability mean reporting information about student learning to the public, it also means engagement in children's learning by the public. Intergenerational learning can revitalise and restore a community (p. 69).

Moreover, she thinks it is a school leader's duty to create a "generative and life-affirming learning environment" (p. 192) for the students, in which they can engage themselves and reach their full potential as humans, engage with adults and the community in the process of deep learning, and engage actively, creatively and wisely in the living world so that they can help build a better future for it. To her, "exploration, creativity, imagination, passion, wonder, and awe lie at the heart of life and learning. They must also be at the heart of schooling" (p. 195). In simpler terms, the report on the 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Results by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018) also states that "schools are not only places where students acquire academic skills, they are also social environments where children can develop the social and emotional competencies that they need to thrive" (p. 17).

If a school leader is fully convinced that their school has to help students achieve desirable outcomes in both academic and non-academic learning to equip them for life, and that education should be a common concern and joint venture of the school and its community, they should ask pragmatic questions about how to achieve such worthy and lofty goals: what sort of school model should be used to develop such a wholesome, generative learning environment, and is there any existing all-embracing framework that could help guide their thinking and actions?

The Case for Developing Healthy Schools

If learning is so pivotal, where and how it is done deserves due attention. Understandably, it can best take place in a social environment in which human relationships and interactions are positive and learning-centred, and also in a physical environment which is well equipped for learning. It should also be experienced as inviting, clean and hygienic, comfortable, and relatively safe from physical threats or social abuses, such as bullying and gangs, or from drugs and addictive substances. This is where the healthy school setting, which is advocated by the World Health Organization (WHO), comes in as a viable option. The WHO states on its website (2020) that a health-promoting school is defined as one that "fosters health and learning with all the measures at its disposal" among other functions (please see Appendix A for a detailed definition). For schools wishing to become healthy, it also provides a framework for action, which points to six areas

of development: healthy school policies; the school's physical environment; the school's social environment; community links; action competencies for healthy living; and school healthcare and promotion services. According to the WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific, this framework

> offers schools, parents, teachers, communities and other stakeholders the key principles and simple tools to help them create healthier learning environments. Ultimately, the Framework is envisioned to enhance the ongoing work in the health and education sectors and to contribute to the achievement of other global commitments for child health. The aim is to build global standards for health promoting schools. (WHO, 2014)

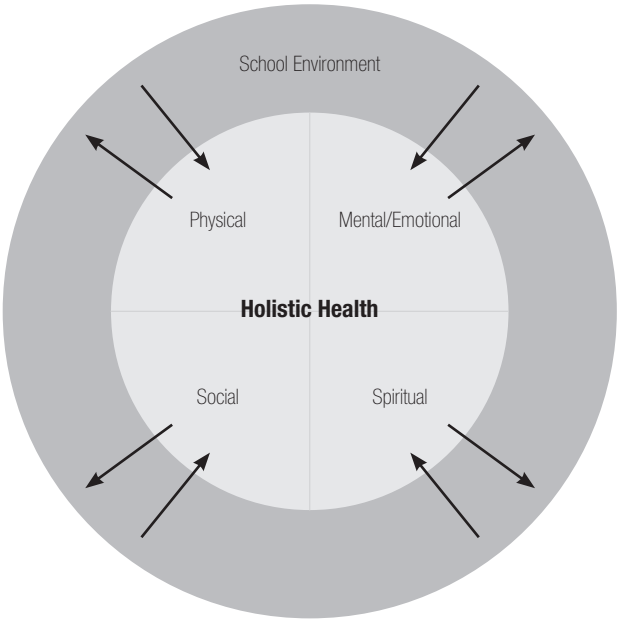
Seen in this light, healthy schools, which are built on such foundations, are not for promoting health alone, but also function to support learning and education.

Health and Education

If one understands the present-day definition of health, one would also know that in its holistic sense, it embraces not only physical health, but also mental and emotional, social and interpersonal, and even the spiritual health of a person. Of course, these four aspects of health interact with one another and lead to different states of overall health for a person. Different people may put different emphasis on each separate aspect, resulting in different kinds of integration. However, for schools, it is both reasonable and educational to seek the balanced and integrated development of all four aspects in students and for these to concepts to become a major focus of their school life and learning.

Moreover, health is related to the environment as well as the social systems in which one lives. When the definition of total health is applied to the school setting, it can be easily discerned that healthy living overlaps with a wholesome education. Both are concerned with the holistic development of a person to bring forth the best of their potential in the service of humanity. In other words, it is the total wellness or well-being of our students (and teachers as well) that we seek. A healthy school does more to achieve wellness for its students and teachers, while healthier stakeholders further enhance the school as a healthy environment for learning, as illustrated in Diagram 1.

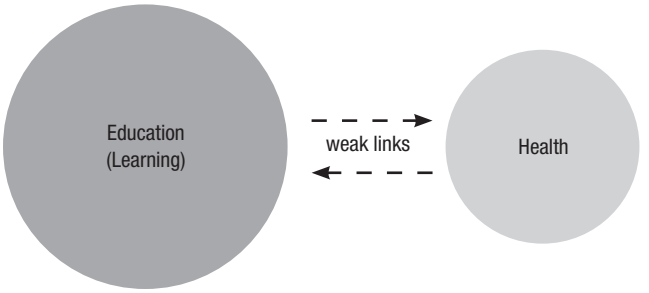
Diagram 1: The Concept of Holistic Health Embedded in the School Environment



In addition, what school health promotion does also fit into the four pillars of knowledge as advocated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Commission (Delors et al., 1996). Accordingly, students should be helped to learn four main things: to know (grasping the different disciplines, including learning how to learn), to do (applying their knowledge and skills in problem-solving), to be (understanding, accepting, valuing, and being themselves), and to live together (accepting differences and living in harmony with different people). Learning the four kinds of knowledge should form the basis of school education to equip students for their futures (seen in this light, the word "learning" is hereafter used interchangeably with the word "education"). It would also be fair to claim that all four of these pillars of learning readily embrace health in its entirety.

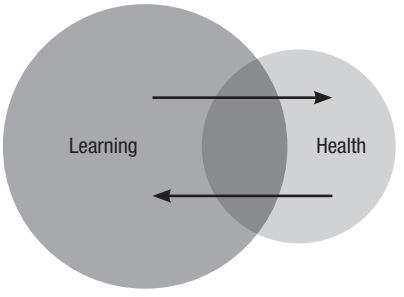
On the other hand, one may argue that health and education are still two separate entities, which traditionally speaking, share little common ground, have weak links between them, and their operations involved different kinds of expertise,

Diagram 2: The Traditional Weak Links Between Education and Health



as highlighted in Diagram 2. However, more recently, the two, driven by changing needs and demands, seem to be moving closer towards each other, while still carrying their own characteristics. Both education and health contribute to students' well-being. Through the lenses of educators and health promoters, the differences between them may lie more in the types and depths of knowledge and skills they require students to learn than in the pedagogical approach to such acquisition. For example, both require students to learn about the human body; while health may focus more on its anatomy with special relation to aspects of protection and disease prevention, education may require the knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the body as well as values concerning it. Both health and education share concerns for students' wellness. They are now considered to overlap in many more areas than ever before, as reflected in Diagram 3.

Diagram 3: The Migration of Education and Health Towards One Another to Create More Overlap



For example, students' emotional skills, which are now a major concern in schools, are among the action competencies the healthy school framework earnestly advocates for in healthy living. Regarding the learning approaches or processes, both health and education benefit from the more active and interactive types of learning, like experiential learning, contextual learning, group or peer learning, in addition to direct instruction or classroom exposition, especially when it comes to developing students' action competencies. However, the school still remains the main institution in society to date for imparting and nurturing wholesome learning — although schools too need changing and renewing.

Health and education are much intertwined and in fact one impacts the other much more in today's context. McCall (2010) has listed many research studies, reports, and resources from different places in the world which show a strong positive connection between the two, providing schools with a much needed evidentiary base for adopting a combination of health and learning interventions to help students improve their learning outcomes and educational achievement, especially those who are at-risk or from disadvantaged communities. The International School Health Network (ISHN) (2017) mentions, for example, a webinar on a recent report on the New Zealand health-promoting schools programme. The report shows the school health programme, used by 1,566 schools in New Zealand, is effective in significantly improving students' attendance, reducing their disciplinary problems and suspensions, and lifting their reading performance. Good health contributes to well-being, and well-being in turn contributes to achievement.

In a four-year study conducted in Ontario, Canada, Hargreaves and Shirley (2018) argue that "get the well-being agenda right, and it will support and be supported by effective learning, so that all our students can be successful and well". In their interviews with educators, they found that well-being and achievement are closely linked in three ways: "Well-being is a crucial prerequisite for achievement; achievement is essential for well-being, failure leads to ill-being; and well-being has its own value: it complements academic achievement". They also make some important remarks in their article:

> Having a sense of achievement isn't or shouldn't be all about getting good test scores, though. Having meaning and purpose is integral to people's sense of

> well-being. Well-being involves far more than happiness, and accomplishments go far beyond test success.

Furthermore, the literature review by Kutsyuruba and colleagues (2015) teases out the relationship among school climate, school safety, student academic achievement, and student well-being. They conclude that "undoubtedly, school climate affects the behavioural and academic outcomes of students, and developing ways to improve the various dimensions of school climate is vital" (p. 122). They also hold that strong school leadership, through the leader's authenticity and supportive and collaborative leadership practices, especially when working with teachers, is instrumental in building a positive school climate, a safe and peaceful school environment, trusting relationships among stakeholders, good classroom teaching, and closer school-community ties, which are all conducive to learning and teaching and can bring forth desirable academic achievement and non-academic learning outcomes. What these researchers point to is what the healthy school aims to bring.

Practitioners in Hong Kong hold similar views. Principal Mak, one of the principals in the success stories in Appendix C, for example, remarked that he believes all educators "seek good academic results and positive attitudes and behaviour for their students, but if there was anything that could cover everything in a student's life, including life planning, career planning, family, education, and personal growth, then health was it". He went on to say that "if students could be helped to study healthily and acquire positive and healthy personal values, then they could work more healthily with a work-life balance one day. With this 'health' concept instilled in them, the direction for living a healthy life would be clearer".

Health Promotion and School Improvement

For learning to be effective, the school needs to be developed into a healthy setting where policies, services, curricula, ethos, intra-school relationships, and community ties are supportive, integrated, and geared towards making relevant and powerful learning happen for the students and, ideally, for other school stakeholders as well. In short, through the proven means and framework, healthy schools should make learning central and effective for all students and to seek their total wellness. These relationships are highlighted in Diagram 4.