

**Cherkowski, S., & Walker, K. (eds). (2018). *Perspectives on flourishing in schools*. Lanham: Lexington Books. Pages: 436. ISBN: 9781498579421**

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*Perspectives on Flourishing in Schools* is a collection of chapters/essays comprised almost entirely of authors from various corners of Canada (about 95% of authors are Canadian or closely connected to Canada). This collection offers a unique opportunity to consider Canada in many educational contexts: what we value as a country, as individual provinces, in small and rural school districts, and in individual schools. Central to the concept of *flourishing* are the ideas of well-being and care. The book is a reminder that education is about more than surviving: it is about thriving and flourishing as learners, teachers, and leaders.

Chapters, as identified by the editors, are about flourishing schools where human beings are both the organizational priority and the center of these communities (p. xi). Chapter authors have paid “particular attention to human capacities such as happiness, resilience, optimism, and compassion” (p. xi) in their research into “the shift in perspective towards appreciative mind-sets and the trends toward using insight from emerging positive research in psychology and organizational studies” (p. xi). The overriding assumption is that readers will find more benefits in hearing about “growing strength” than the implied assumption that other theories are deficit-oriented—discussing what is wrong. This collection reaches for a net gain in effectiveness, particularly in considering life-long health, and in placing care and well-being at the heart of organization in school communities.

Definitions were hard to come by as *flourishing* is a complex and multifaceted concept, and each essay defines it in its own way. We did put together some pieces for this review, using components from several contributed chapters. The concept, identified as first belonging to Aristotle and being comprised of living meaningfully in the physical, emotional, social, and rational aspects of human nature (p. 39), is later identified as comprised of part of present-day positive organizational scholarship. Stasel provides a definition of what the title of the collection refers to, citing Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Peterson as significant researchers in the establishment of the field of positive psychology (pg. 185). Each researcher contributed as follows:

- Seligman (2002, 2006, 2011): optimism, authentic happiness, flourishing as central tenets;
- Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997): flow, positive states one enjoys when hyper-focused on something one is passionate about as critical; and
- Peterson (2000, 2013): optimism, character, and well-being in relation to characteristics of “flourishing” (ibid, p. 185).

We know what this collection on flourishing is about, but zeroing in on how this is different from other research about well-being, learning, and working in schools is, perhaps, a bit difficult to discern. Flourishing is certainly something we all value. So, let us move on.

The book is comprised of 26 chapters, divided into four sections. This organization is helpful as it establishes the reader’s expectations about what topics each section covers, and many readers will look across sections for common themes. “Section I: Perspectives on Flourishing Schools,” contains six chapters, almost all involving Canadian authors/researchers, and focuses on the perspective of schools and school systems. The first chapter, however, written by an Australian, focuses on the epistemology of care, and encourages school leaders with a Noddings quote: “Educators holding leadership positions should

care for themselves and others; there is ‘no single greater or higher duty’” (2003, p. 103). The quote establishes the importance of care as well as identifying the risks of failing to care for ourselves, as well as others. Other chapters in Section I include a lovely, and very Canadian, chapter written by Jennifer Watt on the seasons of flourishing. She encourages leaders to use “winterlike” experiences as birthplaces for flourishing. Other subject themes in this section include: how to bring joy back into the lives of teachers and students, school health and flourishing, the impact of school climate on student well-being and achievement, and the moral imperative of *My Prairie Spirit Classroom*. The broad overview of the perspective of schools and school systems provides some orientation before focusing more specifically on students, teachers, and administrators.

Section II is titled “Students Flourishing in Schools.” This section also has six chapters, covering a wide array of areas of importance in schools. In keeping with the overarching theme of care, the third chapter in this section explores the role of *Community Service Learning* and its impact on students and their character development. The author speaks about the benefits to student achievement, and how this type of learning can help students understand why they should care about problems within their communities; they come to see the perspective of the humanity on the other side of the issues (p.153). Other topics include student voice(s) and assessment of their well-being, a description of the ARC model (autonomy, relatedness, and competence), comparisons to self-determination theory and *Developmental Assets* (trademark), and a chapter supporting inquiry and co-curricular learning. The last two chapters address (1) an interesting project on a high school experimental theatre effort, and (2) a chapter on physical literacy and its components. The chapters in this section address various aspects of involvement in schools with students, and highlights learning as the focus for inspiring this flourishing.

Section III is the shortest section in the collection with four chapters. It is titled “Teachers’ Flourishing in Schools”. The shortness of this section inspired some reflection by the reviewers, particularly when considering the eight chapters in Section IV (“School Administrators and Flourishing”). It is therefore interesting that a book on educational flourishing would address teachers so briefly. It was, however, worth reading. Jim Parsons wrote about four learnings that he believes made a difference in his 50 year career in Education. He believes that teaching flourishes when (1) focus is on engagement, (2) where formative assessment and trusted student learning occurs, (3) when communities of practice focus on professional learning and collaborative work, and (4) where collaboration is used to respond to students’ and teachers’ needs (p.222). The personal and collective efficacy that builds through these strategies creates an environment where teachers thrive. Parsons believes that where teachers thrive, students also thrive. Also included in this section is an interesting chapter on *SpiritEd*, a well-being in education project, which provides recommendations for staff, as well as a plan for sequencing of activities. Chapter 16, “Building a Well-being Plan for Teachers,” describes a project done with the *British Columbia Teachers’ Federation*. This project began in 2009 and continues to flourish, and to encourage flourishing. One of the helpful items in this chapter is the reminder to keep breathing; that in order to exhale—to put out into the world—we have to inhale—to take in for ourselves. We need to take time for the inhale (p. 263). This section ends with a description of a mentorship approach for rural teachers. The mentorship recommendations could be valuable for those in the unique context of teaching and leading rural schools, particularly when considering the broader space of the rural school districts, as well as the lower numbers present within their system(s).

Section IV, as stated earlier, is the most extensive section in the book with eight chapters. It is titled “School Administrators and Flourishing.” The first chapter in this section is a well-constructed review of a large research project in Ontario on principal and vice-principal well-being and the related issue of work intensification. The eternal bind of school leadership is identified well, as the authors (Wang, Pollock, and Hauseman) note that “a higher percentage of principals and VPs indicated their work often and always puts them in emotionally draining situations and that they rarely have an appropriate work-life balance; surprisingly, however, a majority of them also reported having a high level of job satisfaction . . . this sense of purpose and significance can help sustain their will and passion for the job” (p. 300). The reviewers, one a former school principal, one a practicing school principal, recognize the truth in this conclusion, and it reminded us of the “wintering” chapter about using seasons to build resilience. Other chapters in this section included one on learning forward, which identified “salvation” in Parker Palmer, something many of us, faced with the need for courage, have experienced. The next chapter identified the need for decolonizing leadership, developed from one author’s doctoral dissertation plus their lived experiences. In this chapter on schools lead by Mi’kmaq women, principals provide first-hand accounts of the importance

of building community support within schools in order to establish relevant cultural knowledge and role models.

As the section continues, the discussion turns to graduate programs for future school leaders who need to focus on well-being, as opposed to focusing only on producing employable graduates. There is a chapter outlining a graduate program that is currently running at the Werklund School of Education called “Leading with Heart” which first focuses on theoretical foundations and understanding personal visions before moving into broader concepts of leading in education with heart and enacting leadership with heart (p.366). The program provides ample opportunities to foster well-being in future leaders in the hopes that they will take that knowledge back into their schools. The Prairie Spirit School Division in Saskatchewan outlined in the first section how they have renewed their vision, beliefs, and institutional goals away from a “business and managerial-focused model, to an intentional focus on learning in all interactions” (p.91). In this administration section, they report on how they have refocused their hiring practices, for both teachers and school leaders, to be more sustainable and better aligned with their renewed vision. The final two chapters of the book step outside of a Canadian context in (1) telling the story of three primary schools in Jamaica, and how the principals are overcoming unique challenges to create conditions where students flourish and (2) focusing on what the authors (USA and Turkey) call “Vibrant School”. Their purpose is to help schools respond to the “Four Cs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning—collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity” (p.383). They define *school vibrancy* as an affirmation of student-centered practice and a starting point for school transformation (p.392). These authors have developed an instrument called the *Vibrant School Scale* which measures a school’s climate in the areas of enlivened minds, emboldened voice, and playful learning.

The epilogue sums up the optimistic message of the collection using the metaphor of “keeping your eye on the ball.” Rather than reminding us, as our bat approaches the ball, not to miss the mark, the collection provides us with a picture of what flourishing looks like and where it exists once the ball has been hit (p.398). The idea of flourishing schools is one of well-being and where the focus is on creating compassionate school systems. With these variables considered, students, teachers, and administrators not only survive in their schools, but they, and their interrelated communities, thrive. Readers will find encouragement in reading about successes and probably adopt some of these ideas to help their own schools flourish.

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