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HOW WELL ARE YOU?

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one
wild and precious life?*

– MARY OLIVER

Go into a primary school and talk to teachers. Listen to students read. You will probably notice an unsettling trend among readers and the teachers who love and work with them. Too many students have trouble answering questions such as “What do you love about reading?” “Who are your favourite authors?” “What are your favourite genres? Why?” “How is what you are reading changing the way you think?” “What books bring you such enjoyment that you forget you are reading?” And these days, too many teachers struggle to answer questions such as “What do you love about teaching?” “What daily teaching practices bring you such joy that you get lost in them?” and “How does your work with students help you discover your best self?”

So much of what trends in education focuses on fixing something in readers. Students not comprehending? Teach them these strategies. Students having difficulty figuring out words? Administer DIBELS and teach them phonics. Fluency issues? Timed readings are in order.

In his TEDx talk “The Happy Secret to Better Work”, psychologist Shawn Achor (2011) says that “the absence of disease is not health,” which makes us question our current models for reading instruction. Does the absence of traditionally defined reading difficulties equal “reading wellness”?

We can't help but wonder if vaccinating against "comprehenza", treating "decoderitis" or intervening to remedy a case of "robotitis" has led to inaccurate assumptions that all is well with our readers. Perhaps it is time to stop and ask students (and ourselves), "How are you?" Many people are likely to respond to this question with a cursory "I am well." Perhaps the better question, however, is "How well are you?" with the parallel question related to reading – "How well are the readers with whom you work?"

In routine exchanges, people often indicate "wellness" without really thinking about what it means; it means a lot, however. Coined in the 1950s the term *wellness* was described as "maximising the potential of which the individual is capable" and maintaining "balance and purposeful direction" (Dunn 1961, 4). In *The 22 Non-Negotiable Laws of Wellness*, Greg Anderson adds that "Wellness is the complete integration of body, mind, and spirit – and the realisation that everything we do, think, believe, and feel has an effect on our state of well-being" (1995, 3). Ultimately, wellness is about the ways in which we weave together all the facets of our lives to be our best selves.

So, what about those readers in your life? How will you intentionally help them find balance and purposeful direction in their reading lives? Are they maximising their potential? Are they weaving together all the facets of their reading lives – reading for relaxation, reading for information, reading for meaning, reading fluently, selecting texts, and on and on – to become their best reading selves?

When we set the aforementioned definitions of wellness alongside our reading instruction, we realise that reading wellness extends beyond skills and strategies. Although we endorse teaching comprehension strategies, explicitly showing students how the written code works, and practising fluency intentionally, the ultimate purpose of fluency work is not improved fluency; it is becoming a lifelong reader. Reading wellness includes all aspects of readership, from discovering favourite books and authors to working on fluency, from reading magazines to reading directions for assembling something, from knowing when comprehension is breaking down to having strategies for figuring out unknown words. We are interested in students becoming more completely well as readers, which means not only having the skills and strategies to read the text, but also enjoying the text, having ideas, and developing identity and agency (Johnston 2004, 2012). When considering our students' growth and progress as readers and the joyful instruction that can support these things, we think about

how our students are weaving together all the facets of their reading lives and pause to ask the bigger question, “How well are my students as readers?”

● ● ● Why We Wrote This Book

In this anxiety-riddled period in educational history, there is extreme pressure to teach the relevant standards and meet demands of accountability. Even as we were working on this book, Kim dealt with the repercussions of her area implementing new units of study, which translated into her ten-year-old son (who loves to read) spending his first ten days of school reading nothing but the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 1948) and coming home from school each day talking about how much he hated reading!

As illustrated in the story above about Nathan, accountability pressures can not only lead us to move away from, or in some cases abandon, our highest purposes, but also influence us to teach in ways that actually interfere with the realisations of our highest visions for students. Instead, we would rather teach “in ways that strengthen student-centred, deeply interactive approaches to literacy, approaches that invite students to live richly literate lives, using reading and writing to pursue goals of personal and social significance” (Calkins, Ehrenworth and Lehman 2012, 2), despite accountability demands. Simply put, we want to show you new ways to address relevant external standards while remaining true to your inner teacher – that is, to *your* standards.

To begin our collaboration with you, we ask you to stop for a moment and consider why you became a teacher in the first place. What is your vision for students as lifelong learners?

When we work with groups of teachers to help them reconnect with their visions for students as lifelong learners, the following ideas repeatedly emerge:

Lifelong learners are curious.

Lifelong learners are willing to take risks.

Lifelong learners need answers to the questions that nag them.

Lifelong learners don't give up when they are trying to figure something out.

Lifelong learners learn for fun and/or relaxation.

Lifelong learners are excited about what they are learning.

Lifelong learners connect ideas.

Lifelong learners think across disciplines.

Lifelong learners aren't afraid to mess up.

Lifelong learners seek differing perspectives.

Lifelong learners see potential for learning in all life's experiences.

This ideal of lifelong “learnership” is much bigger than a school mural or a printed mission statement that administrators require teachers to hang inside their classroom doors. Furthermore, although lifelong learnership includes most of the ideals of tertiary and career readiness asserted by the authors of most current curricula, lifelong learning is bigger than preparing students for what happens in university and the workplace; it's about hope and recognising the classroom as “a location of possibility” (Hooks 1994, 107). These possibilities are what drove many of us to the field of education in the first place; few teachers (if any) would say that they entered the field to raise test scores!

In her book *What Keeps Teachers Going?* in which she explores teacher identities and autobiographies and how these relate to students, Sonia Nieto writes, “Hope is at the very essence of teaching. In all my years of working with teachers, I have found that hope is perhaps the one quality that all good teachers share. Whether they teach in preschool or [university], whether they teach maths or art, good teachers have an abiding faith” (2003, 53).

Lifelong learning is about tapping into this faith, hope and possibility, and showing students the potential of their minds, and it can change the way we teach.

We wrote *Reading Wellness* because we want to help you find new ways of meeting the demands and pressures of the relevant standards and other accountability measures while staying connected to your broader visions of students as readers, helping them establish habits that will support a lifetime of reading wellness. Our intent is to offer you practical, self-extending lessons

that invite you to think about *your* intent as you teach toward instructional standards, ever mindful of your larger goals for students as readers and people. We want to offer you actions to try in your classroom, actions that simultaneously stir your thoughts about your ideals, reaching far beyond standards-based instruction.

● ● ● Teaching and Learning Intentionally

As a foundation for our collaboration with you, we offer four equally important “intentions” that run throughout this text as supporting ideas. These intentions inform our work in schools with teachers and students; they shape the thoughts we translate to paper, and they form an evaluative tool against which we can consider our movement toward the best selves *we* want to grow into. Even more, they hold up for us as tenets that students can eventually grow to own. You may use different words or articulate these ideals differently, but in all likelihood, if you are reading this book, these principles already shape your vision for yourself and your students. These intentions hold an element of universality that pre-dated the current curricular standards and will certainly live beyond them.

Intention 1: We intend toward alignment with our inner teacher.

In these days of aligning curricula, instruction and language with performance standards, we offer as our primary teaching intention alignment with our highest purpose for teaching – that is, a focus on lifelong learning. This includes a reconnection with our original visions for our teaching selves and a reawakening of our loftiest visions for students as learners. Staying true to the alignment intention means keeping our sights set on our long-term outcomes and the ways in which our instructional decisions can affect who children will grow up to become. The alignment intention is all about recognising and acting on our agency as teachers, and using this agency to empower students.

Although alignment of this sort involves recognising when our instruction has wandered across our internal boundaries to meet standards objectives, it doesn't mean that we are narrow-minded. Rather, alignment to our true teaching selves also involves persistently exploring the counterpoints to what we believe about teaching children. So, we step into our most closely held tenets and assume that we are vulnerable to bias, that we inadvertently tend toward habits that can limit our students, and that we must bravely explore the value of those things that make us bristle.

The reclamation of the term *alignment* as staying true to our inner teacher (versus alignment to standards) lets us claim bodies of research that hold tremendous promise for helping students become lifelong learners, such as Carol Dweck's research on mindset (2006) or the research on the gradual release of responsibility (Burkins and Croft 2010; Pearson and Gallagher 1983), both of which reinforce problem solving rather than dependence and can translate into a lifetime of powerful learning for students while also making our inner teacher happy.

Your work within Intention 1 may involve aligning to deeply felt beliefs that are different from ours. Whether you align yourself to developing classroom community, teaching with authentic literature, integrating cultural relevance, pushing for rigour, teaching children flexible habits of mind, or all of the above, the work begins with identifying the ways of working that are most important for *you*.

To evaluate lessons against the alignment intention, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does my inner teacher, my highest teaching self, feel safe (even happy) in teaching this lesson? How do I know?
- How does this lesson show students their power as learners?
- Am I excited about teaching this lesson? Why?

Intention 2: We intend toward balance.

We intend to balance the aforementioned alignment with expectations set forth by the instructional standards we are required to teach, whether specific standards in the curriculum or simply expectations that we use certain curricula. We must

attend to accountability demands intentionally, but we want to do so without losing sight of our best selves as educators and who we want students to grow to become. Balancing the expectations of others and our expectations of ourselves is possible, and critical, requiring us to weave moments of alignment between our intentions toward lifelong learnership (which includes learner attributes such as mindset, agency, purpose and vision) and movements toward some degree of standardisation. The balance intention recognises the role of standards-based/standardised instruction in today's classroom, but always checks standards-based actions against our alignment with ourselves (Intention 1).

Intention 2 not only attends to standards, however, but also deals with the ways we fight our own biases. Whatever we believe about teaching, we must recognise that believing something doesn't necessarily make it best for us or for students. In fact, even though we must take care of our inner teacher (Intention 1), we must also challenge him or her, lest we fall into routines and practices simply because they are comfortable, because they are habituated, or because *not* doing them would suddenly throw all our previous teaching into question.

To evaluate lessons against the balance intention, consider the following questions:

- How well does this lesson help students meet the expectations others place on my students and classroom? How do I know?
- How does this lesson accentuate the aspects of accountability and standardisation that are most closely connected to what my inner teacher holds most important?
- How does this lesson marry the goals of my inner teacher, the immediate considerations of accountability and checks against my own biases?

Intention 3: We intend toward sustainability.

Classroom time restraints demand that we teach lessons that serve purposes beyond the immediate work. Sustainable lessons are those that teach processes, strategies or routines that will support learning in other contexts. We acknowledge that, ultimately, practices that support reading wellness must be self-sustaining, even habituated. So, we begin not only with the end in mind

(Covey 1989), but with the *end in place* as much as is possible. This means that we help students practise their approximations of the targeted, integrated tasks as early in the gradual release as possible (Pearson and Gallagher 1983). Because “the key to remembering is repetition and use” (Fisher and Frey 2009, 19), we must prioritise lessons that teach ways of learning that can grow into other lessons. Thus, the lessons in this book are not an end in themselves, but rather pathways for establishing new ways of being, knowing and doing that can serve students within our classroom communities, and even for a lifetime. To evaluate lessons against the sustainability intention, consider the following questions:

- How does the core of this lesson make future work easier, better and deeper?
- How does this lesson make it easier for us, as a classroom community, to talk about our work? For example, does this lesson introduce a classroom vocabulary that will continue to support students?
- How will habituating what they are practising in this lesson make students more “well” as readers?

Intention 4: We intend toward joy.

We intend toward joyful instruction and joyful learning in classrooms all the time! We actively search for sources of joy, and work to extend and perpetuate them. We are not referring to “fun” lessons or “cute” activities, although joyful learning *is* usually fun and may well lead to inspired (and even inspiring) and innovative student work. *Joy* in this context refers to the moments you and your students are engaged in work that matters to you, that holds the potential for propelling lifelong learning habits, and that results in growth both toward accountability standards and toward an agentive life of learning. To evaluate lessons against the joy intention, consider the following questions:

- What makes this lesson memorable?
- How does this lesson fill my students and me with energy, awe and/or inspiration?
- How well does this lesson engage students in ways that make them forget they are working?
- How does this lesson teach students to love learning?

It is important to note that there is overlap among the four intentions; they are not categorical, but connected. Consequently, the important work around the intentions is *not* in categorising lessons into the “correct” intention, but in exploring the ways in which these ideals can weave through our lessons. In sum, our vision for teachers and students is founded on integrating (versus sorting) skills, strategies and dispositions focused on growth and engagement. We do not claim mastery of these intentions, but commit constant effort to nurturing them, aiming for balance and momentum toward increased wellness.

● ● ● The Shape of This Book

This book charts a path for helping students develop reading wellness – with an incidental, parallel pathway for extending teacher wellness – that runs through six chapters. *Reading Wellness* integrates a wellness metaphor across all the chapters, with vignettes, discussions, book lists and lessons designed to help you meet the demands of the external standards while staying in touch with your vision for students as lifelong learners. All the lessons in this book have been field-tested by both of us, in real classrooms with real teachers and students.

Chapter 1, “Love,” presents the *Heart, Head, Hands and Feet* graphic organiser, which we use for interacting with biographies of people who pursued their passions throughout their lifetimes, such as Jane Goodall and Henry Ford. This lesson serves as a springboard for student-directed explorations of informational text, while also introducing much energy and joy to classroom communities.