

GUEST COLUMN – April 2025

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The 'Jenga' tower goes through three physical states during the course of a game: stability, instability and collapse. Once the tower is toppled, the game can only begin again by rebuilding the tower, brick by brick, layer by layer.

It would be impossible to play the game with – let's say – just three layers of the wooden bricks. The tower would be too simple and too solid to be toppled. The foundations would be so secure with just the three levels on their own, it would take all the fun out of the game.

When we consider why wellbeing programmes can fail in schools, we might consider this analogy of the game Jenga. Upon initial construction, the tower of blocks is completely stable. Gradually, as blocks are taken away from their stable foundations, layered on top of pre-existing blocks, often added on with little care or at an awkward angle, the once-stable tower starts to lose its integrity. It becomes lopsided, cannot handle any more layers and, ultimately, topples over completely, resulting in the tower needing to be rebuilt from scratch.

This analogy proposes that the leadership of student wellbeing has followed a very similar model of growth and instability in the last few years. Whereas we once relied on the most fundamental concepts – such as relationships, school culture and teacher wellbeing – as the basis for positive student wellbeing, in the post-Covid haste to become better informed and more sophisticated in our approach to wellbeing, we have layered on more and more expectations of teachers in terms of their knowledge and practices, resulting in instability and overload.

If the Jenga tower was a physical manifestation of student wellbeing, we would be blessed with the simplicity offered by three levels of 'bricks'. The foundations of student wellbeing, starting from these simple, stable levels would consist of:

1. strong and positive relationships in school between staff and students
2. a school culture that can support a meaningful wellbeing programme
3. a genuine focus on teacher wellbeing.

These three levels offer a stable base that can support the tower as it continues to build. Without these in place, or if they have been poorly established, anything added to this base is in danger of causing instability. Yet this is exactly what many schools did in the post-Covid rush to 'do wellbeing well'.

We added in complex science, changed our language, sought accreditation, increased our expectations on class teachers, spent money on 'off the shelf' wellbeing programmes/applications and all of these extra 'bricks' or layers toppled the tower for many schools.

Some schools have fallen victim to the simple mistake of trying to do 'too much, too quick'. Which is not to criticise or discourage those schools.

After all, Covid shook us all to the core, especially as our approaches to wellbeing and mental health were thrust under the spotlight, unfairly in most cases, as no one could have predicted the speed at which the profession was forced to respond to a global lockdown and the impact this would have on our students, families and communities.

This is an extract from the forthcoming [*The A – Z of Wellbeing*](#) by Jamie O'Dowd.