Strategies to Enhance Student Well-Being in a School Environment

Abstract

Children are the future of any country. For any country to succeed, it is pertinent that its children and young people acquire the skills and understanding to become happy, functioning adults. Here education plays a vital role in furnishing students with the knowledge, and skills which they would require in order to live fulfilling lives. The key aspect of effective education involves helping students experience well being which inadvertently affects their performance not only in the academic arena but also in other domains of life including social, emotional and so on. The aim of this paper is to lay out some strategies which can be utilised by schools in order to enhance student well being. Relevant researches have also been cited.

Keywords: Student Well-Being, Effective Education.

Introduction

In the last decade schools have been recognised as strategic settings for the promotion of mental health and well-being (WHO 2013a, b).The delegates at the 2012 United Nations Meeting recommended that with respect to education "values of altruism, compassion, respect, responsibility, Indigenous values and becoming a complete human being need to be integrated in education systems" (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2012, p. 72). Prominent scholars like Martin Seligman, John Helliwell and Jeffrey Sachs, informed the delegates that the psychological elements of well-being can be taught. The report maintained that "happiness is an art of living and can be taught, learned andtransmitted" (p. 38). Hence, a lot can be done in schools to improve the well-being of children and adolescents. Student well-being is crucial since it ignites students' ability to flourish and reach academic triumphs and personal goals. Further research has revealed that academic achievement and social outcomes are enhanced and maintained well into adulthood when the social and emotional development of students is well supported (Durlak et al. 2011). Student well being is therefore key to learning and its importance cannot be undermined.

Aim of the Study

To explore the various ways in which student's well being can be enhanced in a school environment.

Positive Psychology and Positive Education

The young field of positive psychology, which has received a rising interest from scholars all over the world, emphasises on happiness, wellbeing, flourishing and optimal functioning. It focuses on individual and collective strengths rather than weaknesses, on positive experiences rather than problems, on competency building rather than pathology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). It centres on programs and interventions that contribute to wellbeing and happiness. Positive education is the integration of the key principles of Positive Psychology in the academic framework in order to enhance not only accademic achievement but also well being, happiness and optimal functioning. Its goal is to enable and empower all members of a school community to succeed and prosper.

Definition of Student Well- Being

Although earlier research in well-being had predominantly focused on the adult population, yet recent decades have seen a rising interest on the well-being of children. In this arena, terms like social and emotional well being and student well-being are more commonly used. Yet the difficulty of defining well being with respect to children is no less as that for adults. Though a large number of studies have been done on student well being, the review of literature reveals very few definitions of this construct. Moreover, there seems to be not much consensus in what truly is meant by student well being.

Reflecting on this difficulty, Fraillon [2004], whose focus was on

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school aged children i.e. students, remarks "the education sector has been presented with an ironic paradox there is unequivocal consent that it is essential to consider, monitor and respond to student well-being and yet there is little sector-wide consensus on what student well-being actually is" (p. 16). According to Fraillon, six characteristics of well-being were most frequent in the academic literature. They were the active pursuit of well-being; a balance of attributes; positive affect or life satisfaction; prosocial behaviour; personal optimisation; and multiple dimensions. Out of all these constructs, he regarded only the last one (multiple dimensions) as important for a comprehensive definition of well-being. He defined student well-being as the "the degree to which a student is functioning effectively in the school community" (p. 18). Through this overarching definition, Fraillon suggested a multi-dimensional model of student well-being incorporating within his measurement model, the intrapersonal and interpersonal facets. In his view, interpersonal well-being relates to students' "appraisal of their social circumstances and consequent capacity to function in their school community" (p. 37). The other dimension, intrapersonal well-being, is more concerned with students' "internalised sense of self and consequent capacity to function in their school community" (p. 37). Further, each of these dimensions consists of a number of aspects. The nine aspects of the intrapersonal dimensions are namely autonomy, emotional regulation, resilience, self-efficacy, self-esteem, spirituality, curiosity and mastery orientation. The four aspects of the interpersonal dimension encompass communicative efficacy, empathy, acceptance (of others) and connectedness (to others)[Fraillon, 2004].

Another definition, though not as broad as that given by Fraillon (2004], was provided by Engels et al.[2004]. It highlights the interaction of external (specific environmental factors) and internal (personal needs and expectations) in defining student well-being. In their view student well-being (of pupils in secondary education):"… expresses a positive emotional life which is the result of harmony between the sum of specific environmental factors on the one hand and the personal needs and expectations of pupils vis-à-vis the school on the other". (Engels et al. 2004, p. 128)

Stanwick and Liu (2012] advocate that student well being consists of two dimensions namely "social" and "psychological dimensions" Which they regard as corresponding to intra- and inter-personal constructs distinguished by Fraillon (2004].

A more detailed definition was proposed by Noble et al. (2008] who used a Delphi methodological approach. In their extensive study, they asked well-being experts from all parts of the world to point their level of agreement with a preliminary definition of student well-being and with various components of the definition . On the basis of the responses obtained by them as well as through extensive consultations with educators and other education stakeholders, Noble and her colleagues obtained the following definition of student well-being:"Optimal student well-being is a sustainable state characterised by predominantly positive feelings and attitude, positive relationships at school, resilience, self-optimisation and a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences." (Noble et al. 2008,p. 30)

The United Nations objectives for education which are to make people wiser, more knowledgeable, better informed, ethical, responsible citizens who are critical thinkers, and capable of and motivated to become life-long learners, has an integral focus on student well being . At the onset of the 21st century the United Nations adopted four pillars for student wellbeing which are learning to live together, learning to know, learning to do and learning to be (Delors 1996).

Strategies to Enhance Student's Well- Being-

The following discussions elucidates some of the way in which student wellbeing can be fostered in a school environment.

Positive Affect/ Positive Emotions

Numerous researches within the positive psychology umbrella signify the importance of positive emotions in enhancing wellbeing, be it physical, mental, social or spiritual well being. The 'broaden and build' model [Fredrickson's 2013] elaborates the key role of positive emotions for optimal functioning. The model adheres that even brief experiences of positive emotions such as joy, happiness, interest, security, gratitude, anticipation, hopefulness and amusement can both broaden an individual's awareness and encourage novel and varied thoughts and actions. They accumulate over time in a manner which can incrementally contribute to an individual's well of personal resources which are used to enhance their resilience, confidence and relationships. Positive emotions counteract negative feelings of anxiety, depression, stress and so on. They make students' thrive by increasing their resilience, optimism and zeal. The role of some of these positive emotions such as feeling of belonging, feeling safe, feeling satisfied in learning and feeling amused, in increasing student well being is hereafter being discussed.

1. With regards to *feelings of belonging* and connectedness, Goodenow (1993) defined a student's sense of belonging at school as not only being liked and treated with warmth but also a:"… sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. …..it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual. (p. 25)". This need to belong and feel connected (defined as 'relatedness' by Ryan and Deci 2000) Is considered one of the basic human needs in Social deterministic theory, other two being autonomy and competence. Researches indicate that the students' sense of belonging to their school emerged as the central and significant variable in explaining student psychological wellbeing. (Bizumic et al. 2009). A review of literature suggest that students who have a sense of belonging and connectedness at school

are more likely to be more engaged in classroom and school activities,, have a positive outlook towards school and engage in pro social behaviour. They are more academically motivated and less depressed and anxious, indulging less in aggressive behaviour. It would be hence desirable to nurture and enhance the feeling of belonging and connectedness among students. School can plan activities in such a waythat students can work together in small groups so that they can share ideas and get to know each other (Jones and Gerig 1994). Co-operative learning approaches for instructions can be utilised in schools as they essentially increase the count of positive student interaction on a regular basis. [Osterman, 2000]. Further, students sense of belonging can be increased by letting the students know that they are cared for and valued. This can be done by celebrating birth days in class, sending a get well soon note when the student is sick etc.

2. With regards to the positive emotion of *safety and security*, it is vital that the student feel such emotions in his/ her school environment. One common practice, which lowers this feeling is bullying. Although very common in middle school classes, bullying has an adverse affect on students mental health as well as their academic performance. Schools should thus take active measures to prevent its occurrence. Teachers should be trained on effective behaviour management strategies and there should be clear classroom and school rules against bullying which are consistently enforced and re-stated. Further, the playground/yard supervision must be proper and class room management effective. Feeling of being free from the threat of bullying allows students' to focus on cultivating their strengths, doing well in academics and making good social relationships/ friendships.

3. With regards to *contentment and pride* in accomplishing , celebrating success of students in class/ school, not only in the academic front but also at other domains like sports, music competitions, craft work, volunteering and peer support, make the students feel proud and happy. Acknowledging the success of students in a positive way even acts as a positive reinforcer, encouraging them to excel. .

4. With regards to having *fun* in school, arranging activities where students can enjoy are beneficial as they foster students well being as well as class room well being. Laughter enhances positive affect, reduces stress and relaxes the mind. Finding the humorous side can sometimes be an effective strategy for coping resiliently with difficult times

Meaning and Purpose

Having a sense of meaning and purpose is essential for promoting wellbeing. Purpose has been defined in literature as 'a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self' (Damon et al. 2003, p. 121). It

has three key components namely a long-term intention or goal, an action plan and commitment, and a beyond-the-self motivation (Damon 2008). Erikson [1968] highlights the importance of purpose in adolescence, regarding it as a primary developmental task. It has been found to be a good indicator of flourishing (Seligman 2011) and psychological wellbeing (Keyes et al. 2002),It is also a reliable marker of resilience [Masten and Reed 2002] and life satisfaction (Mauss et al. 2011). Purposelessness, on the other hand is related to greater stress and poor mental health. Encouraging students to find a sense of purpose and meaning is therefore desirable as it contributes to their increased feeling of well being.

In a school setting, a sense of purpose among students can be fostered through "Student Action Teams" (Holdsworth et al. 2003). In this, a group of students identify an issue which is important to school or community, research about it, make plans to tackle it and then take required actions. Doing this gives them a sense of purpose since they invest their efforts, energy and time towards a goal which benefits others. A feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction follows. Motivating students to actively participate in peer support programmes like buddy systems, cross-age or same age peer tutoring, mentoring systems also foster a sense of purpose, a feeling of responsibility, worth, efficacy and other positive affects. . For example, when a elder student tutors a younger student, he/ she gains a sense of purpose, a way by which they can make a difference in someone's life by their own skills and knowledge. It fosters a sense of commitment as the elder student feels responsible for the younger students' performance on the subject under consideration. Skills of good communication, patience develop. The successful attainment of goal leads to a feeling of accomplishment, pride and well being.

Positive Attitude

A positive attitude is necessary for well being. It involves being hopeful, having an optimistic explanatory style to negative situations, acknowledging and appreciating the good things or experiences that occur, finding positive aspects in seemingly negative situations, being mindful and forgiving. Positive mindset and attitude can be encouraged in school through a wide range of activities. Students can be encouraged to maintain gratitude journals or write "thank you" letters. Mindfulness practice can be inculcated in classroom activities by setting aside five to ten minutes every day for being silent and focusing on breathing. Students can be inclined to savour positive moments by designing class activities where they can tell/ write about the best moment of their day, where they felt really happy, interested and positive.

Strength Based Approach

Every student has some strengths and some weaknesses. Positive education emphasises the identification and development of these strengths at the same time managing weaknesses. Wood et al. (2011) describes 'personal strengths' as the characteristics of a person that allows them to perform well or at their personal best. These strengths can

vary, incorporating not only cognitive strengths like good memory, intelligence but also strengths in other areas like music, art, sports etc. It also includes strengths in personality like empathy, determination, honesty and so on. Recent years has seen a rising interest and work on building character strengths. Psychological or character strengths can be defined as morally valued traits whose use contributes to, In the fulfilment and happiness (Peterson and Seligman 2004). In a school environment, researches reveal that utilising ones strengths on school work has been found to be more enjoyable as compared to working on one's limitations, particularly for those students whose strengths are not in the conventional scholastic sphere. Efforts should be made by school to help students identify their strengths, be it skills or character strengths. The Values In Action (VIA) model of character strengths developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004] is a popular tool amongst positive psychologists/ educators to identify students' character strengths. Findings confirm that working on ones strengths, developing them, fosters students well being and increases productivity and success

Being in the "Flow"

When students are fully engaged in their work or "in the flow", they feel contentment and experience well being. 'Flow' is a term coined by Csikszentmihalyi (2002] which defines a high level of engagement with an activity. Engagement can be defined as an observable manifestation of student motivation to learn (e.g. Fredericks et al. 2004; Meyer and Turner 2002). It is reflected through the expression of interest, participation, effort, contribution, enthusiasm and enjoyment. Findings by Csikszentmihalyi et al. [1993] Demonstrate that people are more likely to be fully engaged and experience 'flow' from activity which has a degree of challenge that requires a reasonably high level of skill and utilises their strength (s). Being in a state of 'flow' increases students' satisfaction with the completion of a task and even fosters a sense of purpose and meaning. In the short term engagement of student in their learning is a reliable predictor of academic outcomes. In the longer term it is related to student attendance, academic resilience and school completion (e.g. Jimerson et al. 2003;Klem and Connell 2004).

Effective Teaching

Effective teaching is at the heart of the creation of an optimal learning environment as revealed in the meta-analyses on factors influencing student learning (Hattie 2009).Research indicates that the three key elements of exceptional teaching that actively engage students in learning fall into three broad categories: challenge, scaffolding and belonging (Dweck et al. 2015). Building on this, teachers should intellectually challenge their students in activities which enhance critical and creative thinking, problem solving, ethical decision making and other competencies.They should provide instructional, cognitive or motivational scaffolding so that students can reach their high standard set. Using cooperative group structure, which promote fellowship with peers

and teachers, teachers can create in students' a sense of belonging.

Good Teacher- Student Relation

Students' perception that their teachers care about them is among the strongest predictors of student performance (Dweck et al. 2015). The quality of students' relationships with their teachers strongly affects how they feel about to school and their schoolwork. Majority of students want their teachers to like and care about them, looking for signs to validate or form their conclusions. A positive relationship between student and teachers is marked by mutual respect, low conflict, high level of teacher support and acceptance. When students perceive that they have this kind of relationship with their teacher(s) they are more likely to have high rates of school attendance, (Klem and Connell 2004), have greater achievement motivation, more willingness to engage in school work and experience greater sense of security and well being. Hence, it is the professional responsibility of teachers to nurture a positive relationship with students. This can be done in a number of ways. Teachers can foster positive open communication with students, assisting them when they need support. They can be fair and respectful when talking to students, motivating them and being less critical. Accepting students with their weaknesses and strengths, acknowledging them with a smile, encouraging them to make decisions, valuing their view points and helping them achieve their goals, goes a long way in forming a positive relationship with students.

Growth Mindset and Cooperative Goals

Most of the times, schools focus on academic achievement as outcome. To enhance this, they work on curriculum or pedagogy. However, reforming the curriculum and pedagogy alone does not complete the picture. Other factors also come into play. Research indicates that students who have a fixed mind set [believing that intelligence is a fixed entity] as compared to those students who have a growth mind set, perform better academically and feel better. Studies reveal that admiring students for their ability taught them a fixed mindset while praising them for their effort/ strategy, taught them a growth mindset and cultivated resilience [Blackwell et al. 2007].Further, it has also been found that classroom activities which engage cooperative rather than competitive or individualistic goals, motivate the students more and have better academic outcomes.

Positive School Climate and School Culture

Schools are complex social environments. The culture of a school affects everyone in the school community. A positive school culture is characterised by positive student peer relationships, positive student–teacher relationships, positive staff relationships and positive family-school relationships. The intentional development of these relationships helps in creating not only a positive school culture but also increased student engagement and success in learning [Cohen et al. 2010]. Thus, it is necessary that a school maintain a safe and supportive school culture, keeping levels of bullying low. By endorsing and promoting positive values like honesty, respect,

kindness, etc, the school environment instils in students from a very young age, to be good human beings. Students should be motivated to use respectful language while conversing, respect their environment [by keeping it clean, not wasting water, using the bins], following rules[both in class and in play ground] and to respect diversity [based on class/culture/ creed].

Friendships

Friendships are a significant source of emotional and psychological support for students and contribute to their sense of belonging (La Greca and Harrison2005). Quality friendships which are characterised by loyalty, trust and support, enhances a student's feeling of well being. It has also been found that a student's level of social competence and their friendship networks are predictors of their level of academic achievement (Caprara et al. 2000; Wentzel and Caldwell 1997). The implementation of "peer support" programmes is an effective way by which schools develop positive student-peer relationships across year levels. Research by Stanley and Mcgrath [2006] reveals that using a 'buddy system' in which every child in the first two years of school (ages 5–6 years) had an older student (aged 11–12 years) as a 'special friend', had many positive outcomes including building positive relationships. The younger students felt supported and safe and the older students got an opportunity where they could develop confidence, social skills and a sense of responsibility. Explicitly teaching social emotional skills which facilitate positive peer relationship is also helpful. These skills include sharing, caring, negotiating, cooperating, listening, empathy, respectfully disagreeing, having an interesting conversation, playing fairly, managing ones strong negative emotions, recognizing emotions of others and so on. Cooperative learning styles of teaching in class as well as cooperative games are essentially advantageous As they provide a platform where the social emotional skills which have been theoretically taught by teachers can be practiced and embedded in students life.

Resilience

Resilience is an important factor associated with student well being. Difficulties are experienced by many students, however its nature and degree varies. Poverty, abuse, disability, prolonged illness, negligence are a few to mention. Resilience has been defined as 'the ability to persist, cope adaptively and bounce back after encountering change, challenges, setback, disappointments, difficult situations or adversity and to return to a reasonable level of wellbeing. It is also the capacity to respond adaptively to difficult circumstances and still thrive' (McGrath and Noble 2011a). Students who demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity perform better at school, experience greater well being as compared to those who simply give up and are not resilient, under similar circumstances. . Many factors like hope, optimism, humour, efficacy, knowledge, support of parents/friends/community etc act as protective factors.

In a school environment, skills can be taught to students to enhance resilience. These skills include teaching optimistic explanatory skills [believing that negative situations are not permanent but temporary, specific and not likely to spread over other domains and that they are not always caused by self. And teaching to be hopeful and expect good. Activities which encourage pro social behaviour and acquisition of positive social skills are useful as well. Encouraging students to find positive aspects in negative situations, find humorous elements in a perceived bad situation, adaptively distancing oneself from anti social and bad influences, building self efficacious beliefs etc are some ways resilience can be enhanced in students.

Other Studies on Well Being

Researches in this sphere support the proposed and above mentioned strategies to increase student well being in a school environment. Some years ago, the Department for Education and Child Development (DECD) in South Australia accepted the importance of the link between well-being and learner success. They thereafter introduced a "Learner Well-being Framework" (DECD 2013) for all government educational institutions This framework was to be employed by educators of all pre-school and school aged children, to improve teaching practices and enhance student well-being. The impetus for this approach was the recognition that well-being is crucial to learning and that learning is central to well-being.Also, Seligman (2011) has developed the PERMA acronym to organise the five elements of wellbeing (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Purpose and Accomplishment).These elements are applicable for individuals across all ages and spheres including students. Further, Noble and Mcgrath [2015] propose the PROSPER framework for enhancing student well being in a school environment. They lay out means by which student wellbeing can be increased, utilising positive emotions, positive relationships, positive outcome, strengths, purpose, engagement and resilience to foster growth.

Conclusion

The above discussion clearly elucidates some of the ways in which student well being can be enhanced in a school environment. Various factors like positive emotions, resilience, meaning, social support, positive interactions with friends/ family / community, working on ones strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses ,positive attitude, optimism, hope, humour and positive engagement individually and collectively influence student well being. Strategies to increase these constructs assists in furthering well being significantly. Student well being is an integral aspect of effective education. It not only fosters academic productivity but also contributes in making young people happy and fully functioning adults. It assists students to feel contentment and enjoy their school years in the present and life in future. All possible steps must be therefore employed by schools all over the world to enhance their students well being.

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