Enhancing Learning Through Facilitating Techniques and Environments: An Investigative Analysis

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Introduction

In consolidating on the key recommendations for research in the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's publication : "Social, Emotional and Mental Well-Being in Primary and Secondary Education", the survey aligned with this paper aims, amongst its other objectives, to identify early signs of social, emotional, mental well-being issues – and particularly in young adults.

According to the National Foundation for Educational Research (2021:9) publication, "What does PISA tell us about the wellbeing of 15-year-olds?",

- *Wellbeing' comes in many forms. Within the research community, it has previously been defined in many different ways, but it is generally agreed upon that wellbeing typically contains both objective and subjective components, including those that affect a person's life such as self-reported information about physical, mental or psychological health.*
  According to the Office for National Statistics (2020), self-reported aspects of subjective wellbeing include affective wellbeing (positive and negative emotions), cognitive wellbeing (quality of life/life-satisfaction) and eudemonia (psychological wellbeing).

> *In PISA 2015, the OECD monitored psychological, physical, social as well as material dimensions of wellbeing. Whilst the physical dimension of wellbeing is beyond the scope of the present report, the PISA 2015 framework described the psychological dimension as "students' self-reported psychological functioning, [covering] life-satisfaction and three aspects of education related to psychological functioning: students' career and educational expectations, achievement motivation, and test and learning anxiety"*

(Borgonovi & Pál, 2016, p 18). The social dimension "captures both the quantity and the quality of students' social networks" (Borgonovi & Pál, 2016, p 29) covering aspects such as pupils' sense of belonging in school or relationships with others. The material dimension of wellbeing was comprised of four wellbeing factors measuring aspects such as material resources at school or extracurricular activities."

Wellbeing policy context across the UK, is further highlighted:

- Across the UK, the wellbeing of pupils in our schools is high on the political agenda. In England, the Government is taking forward proposals for all schools to identify and train a Designated Senior Lead for Mental Health (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2020) and it is also introducing compulsory health education focussed on the link between mental and physical wellbeing (DfE, 2020a). At the same time, there is renewed focus on how schools can support pupils to develop character via the Character Education Framework which forms non-statutory guidance to schools on how to develop pupils'

mental wellbeing appropriately (DfE, 2019b). In Wales, the National Mission places wellbeing at the core of the new curriculum and a whole-school approach to support children and young people to become healthy and confident individuals (Williams & Gething, 2020) whilst in Northern Ireland, the iMatter programme recently launched a self-assessment tool for schools (DE, 2020a). DE has also launched the Education Restart Programme Wellbeing Initiatives in Schools to help educational settings support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (DE, 2020b).

In light of recent national and international study findings, the UK parliament are currently debating the case for the government to use wellbeing as a key indicator of national performance."

Recommendations from the Report are as follows (see page 5):
To:

- Develop inclusive whole-school approaches, where the wider school community is fully committed to improving pupils' wellbeing;

- Explore what schools and others can do to support positive relationships with friends and family;

  Increase pupils' perceived sense of belonging by ensuring their voices are being heard;

  Continue to reinforce positive relationships between pupils and staff by encouraging positive teacher

feedback, as well as positive relationships between pupils. And finally, that:

Programmes such as peer-support / mentoring can help to create a positive school climate and therefore support pupils' wellbeing, as long as they are implemented carefully and monitored well.

According to the Conseil de l'Europe, well-being is regarded as " the experience of health and happiness, which includes mental and physical health, physical and emotional safety, and a feeling of belonging, sense of purpose, achievement and success." In their opinion, it is a concept which is not only wide, but covers a range of psychological and physical abilities.

Five major types of well-being are also identified as follows:

- Emotional well-being – the ability to be resilient, manage one's emotions and generate emotions that lead to good feelings;
- Physical well-being – the ability to improve the functioning of one's body through healthy eating and good exercise habits;
- Social well-being – the ability to communicate, develop meaningful relationships with others and

create one's own emotional support network;

- Workplace well-being – the ability to pursue one's own interests, beliefs and values in order to gain meaning and happiness in life and professional enrichment;
- Societal well-being – the ability to participate in an active community or culture." It is also highlighted that "students' well-being and their success in and outside school depend on their ability to use their competences for democratic culture."

Hence, it is vital that the above classifications of what is regarded as well-being, be incorporated into the pedagogical curriculum – as well as into the teacher's planning and design of classroom activities. It is also important to reiterate that a school environment that promotes not just the students' well being, also directly and indirectly facilitates the staff's well- being. As important as discipline and management of classroom behaviour are, teachers and students may be going through personal pressures at the same time and the classroom environment and climate should serve as conducive and facilitating not only for learning, but also as a place for coping with and addressing pressures that particularly arise from increased demands of the educational environment.

In her paper, “Building Positive Emotions and Playfulness “ (2021), Tidmand adds that “play can facilitate positive emotions and thus broaden the mindset (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) encouraging novel, varied, and exploratory thoughts and actions, creating the urge to be creative when creativity is needed.

Further , she argues that, “play can consciously be used to broaden habitual modes of thinking and acting (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). Playful people tend to perceive a lower level of stress (Magnuson & Barnett, 2013) and use adaptive coping strategies (Leung Chun Lok, 2014).”

The concept of positive psychology is also introduced (see page 424) to incorporate the term playfulness as “an important part of the Values in Action (VIA) strength of humour (Peterson & Seligman, 2004): the VIA Institute on Character’s definition of playfulness as “the core of humour and playfulness as a generator for reinvigorating the strength humour.”

Five ways of expressing playfulness are also highlighted, namely: spontaneity, expressiveness, creativity, being funny and silly.

As well as evaluating and assessing students, teachers perceptions of humour and playfulness, and the roles of these concepts within the classroom environment: particularly as facilitating tools for easing stress, improving relationships within the school environment: as opposed to obstructing and hindering tools to learning,
This survey will aim to identify challenges to the facilitation of effective teaching techniques and practices within the school environment.

As highlighted through the literature relating to the topic on adaptive coping strategies, and positive psychology the concepts of humour and play can apply, as well as be interpreted broadly. Hence the differences in interpretation, the boundaries within which they can and should be used, should also be defined. However, given specific and differing relationships – as well as the need to consider individual backgrounds and social, cultural contexts, a general interpretation cannot be applied across all levels.

The need for equity in applying rules generally to students will require a degree of flexibility depending on the stress levels applicable to individual students: based on the family backgrounds, pressures faced at school – as well as at home. Whilst some students face little or no pressures from home: inclusive of pressures to perform well in their exams, some may face additional financial, social – as well as pressures of adapting to the school environment: for various reasons and based on personal and family backgrounds. It's important for teachers to be aware of pressures that individual students may

be facing and incorporate such vital knowledge in helping and explaining why humour and stress coping strategies need to be embraced: particularly where the student approaches the teacher directly or indirectly for “help”. In other situations, the teacher should be able to discern within the reasonable boundaries to accommodate humor and play and what balance is to be struck in incorporating humor into the classroom environment: as opposed to activities and tasks that place students under undue and excessive pressures.

“The wellbeing of young people in the UK has been deteriorating. The most recent Good Childhood Report stated that happiness continues to decrease in 10 to 15-year-olds in the UK. The aspects that decreased significantly over a 10-year period were happiness with life as a whole, happiness with friends and happiness with school (The Children’s Society, 2020a). Ottová-Jordan et al. (2015) have also confirmed that there is a recent downward trend in overall mental health in England compared to other European

countries.
Research from the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC, 2014) suggests that wellbeing across adolescence presents as a ‘u-shaped’ curve, with 14 to 15-year-olds experiencing the lowest wellbeing. This is an important finding, as 15-year-olds are in a crucial period of transition from childhood to adulthood. A growing bank of evidence suggests that adolescence is a particularly vulnerable period in young people’s lives as, during adolescence, major cognitive, emotional, behavioural and neurochemical changes take place which may be the reason why the first signs of mental disorders often emerge before the age of 14 (Kessler et al., 2005). In line with this, the State of the Nation Report (DfE, 2019a) confirmed that younger children (aged 10 to 12) had higher life-satisfaction than 13 to 15-year-olds – shaping a strong rationale for the need to provide early support for children and young people’s wellbeing.”

And as rightly added in the COE’s publication (2018), “developing a sense of well-being in students is made all the more difficult when school staff themselves do not have a positive sense of well-being. Well-being at work is strongly related to stress. Stress at work is related to workload, quality of professional relationships, level of autonomy, clarity about one’s role, availability of support and the opportunity to be involved in changes which affect one’s professional life. High levels of stress can lead to demotivation, lack of job satisfaction and poor physical and mental health, which has a knock-on effect on students’ own well-being.”

These are actual facts: not myths. It is surprising that following recovery from a global social pandemic – which has

not only affected habits and social interactions, it appears that societies are embracing passive behaviours, lack of empathy and compassion for others. Support for staff is indeed crucial and vital to students' well being: particularly where such support exists and has been anticipated as a crisis management mechanism. Where there is breakdown in communication between staff and school management, effective and prompt resolution mechanisms should provide alternative measures of resort at such critical moments.
In situations whereby a recurring pattern of failures and breakdown in communication between staff and management, appears to be the norm, independent investigative procedures should also be instigated.

We live in an increasingly stressful environment which necessitates the encouragement of stress relief mechanisms, humour and understanding in our relationships with others. The boundaries, context within which humour, jokes, should be used vary, and as such, should be defined – as well as specific to individual cases. So far, it has been highlighted that a certain age-group has tendencies to experience greater stress levels, as revealed in the Department of Health and Social Care's report in which 14 to 15-year-olds were considered to have the lowest wellbeing. This being, in their opinion, a crucial finding, "as 15-year-olds are in a critical period of transition from childhood to adulthood. A growing bank of evidence suggests that adolescence is a particularly vulnerable period in young people's lives as, during adolescence, major cognitive, emotional, behavioural and neurochemical changes take place….." Such considerations are rarely taken into account by many schools and pupils aged 15-18, particularly in the United Kingdom: where adolescence is acknowledged in many cases only when the age of 18 has been attained. This

is however generally not the case. In terms of cognitive, emotional, behavioural and physiological changes and responses, these vary considerably between individuals. What is generally considered the average height for a fifteen or sixteen year old, may not apply to all 15-16 year olds: as is their response to other factors triggered by changes attributed to puberty. Educational programs have been introduced in the form of the SMSC (Spiritual, Moral, Social, Cultural) Education: however, there's growing recognition of the need for greater emphasis on incorporating Sex and Health Education – particularly in strict religious based schools.
As rightly added, "Educating the mind without educating the heart, is no education at all." Genuine empathy should lie at the heart of every teacher's relationship with their students. Where a teacher senses the need for acceptance or belonging, from a student, particularly attributed to a combination of many factors: social, physiological or cultural factors – balanced by the type of environment and the personality of the student, they should help their students to be/become the best version of themselves. Schools should not serve to undermine a student's genuine need to feel a sense of belonging or acceptance, should not serve to suppress their true personality – but rather, enhance their strengths. Whereas some students are naturally full of humour, they should be encouraged in demonstrating such strengths under the right conditions – as and when needed. Humor demonstrated in reasonable measure: that is, balanced and proportionate, should not be subject to punitive measures. The entirety and context within which it is used, should also be taken into consideration.

Students may be natural born "helpers" and facilitators: always there to help and add humor to the classroom climate. A teacher should be able to distinguish such a student from

one who frequently and constantly disrupts the class for no reason. Other contributing factors may stem from the lesson/topic being taught: how challenging or motivating the teacher is, or probably a need for “attention “: in which case, prior knowledge of student’s upbringing and the accommodation of school programs which are aimed at engaging parents in the school curriculum (Parents, Teachers Associations/Meetings), constitute a healthy way to understand students’ needs. A teacher who genuinely cares for the well-being of their students will be impacted where there is a lack of knowledge about the progress of their students: particularly where a bond and understanding has developed between the teacher-student relationship. Some teachers get to teach the same students for up to six years or more. Such continuity is vital to students’ progress and development: particularly if from an early age (the educative formation years).

The Recommendation that “pupils’ perceived sense of belonging should be increased by ensuring their voices are being heard”, is without doubt the most important of the recommendations. Further, in implementing the whole school approaches, as highlighted by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2022:5), “core values that the school culture and practice are built on, and the psychological safety of pupils, staff members and leadership, should be taken into consideration.” This is corroborated through “developing a school culture and ethos in which children, young people and staff feel safe to make and learn from mistakes.”

What is considered a reasonable mistake should also be distinguished from a deliberate and consistent one: based on past history and experiences of individuals involved. Punitive

measures imposed should not be disproportionate to acts committed. In safeguarding the psychological safety of pupils, staff members and leadership, monitoring procedures – as well as punitive measures should not be excessive in such a way that impacts psychologically and mentally on those involved. Children and younger individuals particularly are impacted more, psychologically, by constant reminders of their mistakes and errors. How often should an individual be reminded of the same mistake or punished for the same mistake?

Effective communication, privacy and understanding is vital to assessing a young person's needs, wishes, feelings and assessing the best outcomes. Further, as highlighted in the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2022:8), local support services, should "proactively gather and be responsive to the views and concerns of schools and colleges in their area about children". More importantly, they should have representatives in the form of support staff in various schools where there are higher identified risks amongst students.
Such support staff should be independently paid and assigned by local support services – as well as managed in such a way that conflicts of interests do not arise in respect of those they are intended to protect.

In providing targeted support, the involvement of parents and carers, whilst highlighted, is also cautioned. The range of individual needs and risks, developmental age and cultural backgrounds of the children/students it is being offered to, also merit consideration.

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