

Well-being of Children:

Creating Positive Ecosystem In Schools

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Well-being of individuals, families, communities and societies has emerged as prime developmental concern of the positive psychology. Positive psychology strives to achieve “a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving individuals, families and communities” and to “build those factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish (Seligman & Csikzentmihalyi, 2000). A few decades ago, when the western world was witnessing fast economic growth and bringing fortunes to individuals, families and communities, it was being assumed that wealth will automatically enhance elements of good life, bring life satisfaction and happiness. But, later decades proved the widely prevailing assumption as not so true. Money could not buy happiness. Depression among the well-earning individual and families became the unsurprising norm. People could understand that lack of money can be source of miseries and sorrows but affluence can't ensure well-being. Psychology provided remedial services but such services could at best lead a person from languishing state to a neutral point. Seligman and other leaders in this field have emphasized that basic research

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and application are not meant to supplant the more traditional emphasis on problems, their prevention and repair. But rather to complement such work through recognition and promotion of positive aspects of individuals, groups and their environment (Huebner et. al. 2009). Such efforts have brought attention to the ecosystem within which individuals learn, behave and grow.

Varied indicators are applied to define health, good life and well-being; and, many approaches and perspectives bring with them a new understanding for promotion of well-being. “An individual’s quality of life can be conceptualized within an ecological perspective, which reflects the notion that individuals live in a number of interlocking systems that influence the development of their physical, socio-emotional and cognitive competencies” (Huebner et. al. 2009). Bronfenbrenner (1979) has described about four such systems:

1) Microsystem- The institutions and groups that most directly influence the child’s development and include family, school, peer group.

2) Mesosystem- Mesosystem consists of interconnections between microsystems. For example interaction between parents and teachers at the school.

3) Exosystem- Included in this category are distal contextual factors like neighbours, mass-media, social services which exist in interaction with the microsystem and mesosystem on one side, and, the macro-system on other side.

4) Macrosystem- The macrosystem comprises the “Overarching institutional patterns of the culture or the subculture, such as the economic social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem are concrete manifestations”

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Macrosystem indirectly influences the state of life through its manifestations.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model illustrates a broad range of systemic factors which positive psychologists should pay attention to for promotion of well-being.

Importance of Context For Well-being: “What ever the evolutionary origins, genetic basis, or physiological substrate of personality, both its level and channels of expression will be strongly affected, in complex ways, by the multiple dimensions of social context: not only by the immediate situational context, but also the larger contexts of age cohort, family, institution , social class, nation/culture, history and (perhaps supremely gender)” (Winter & Barenbaum, 1999). Importance of life context/space in determining our personality and behavior was, very early, recognized by Lewin (1935). Contextual variables and social factors such as health, social relations, marriage, work, and income impact our happiness and well-being (Diener et. al. 1999 Helliwell & Putnam, 2004) across the macrolevel of society, the mesolevel of organisations, and the micro-level of individuals (Veenhoven, 2015).

For people to live a good life efforts have to be made at the levels of individuals and their context of life across their life span. Contextual features influence human endeavours by fostering – or, conversely, hindering personal competences. Under certain circumstances, the only way to enable people thrive is to change their surrounding context (Martino et. al. 2018). Howeveras kloos et. al. (2012) noted “We tend to minimize contextual factors and overlook ecological level of analysis” (p. 140). People can have many types of interaction/relationship with their situation or context: (i) they can choose some aspects of the environment or ignore them; or (ii) they can “seek out, modify or even create environments that are consistent with

their individual characteristics” (Atherton et. al. 2020). Two way transaction with the environmental forces is observable but arrangement created by the agencies functioning outside the inner/organismic life space of individuals can facilitate the process of flourishing. Ecological perspective of well-being enhancement during childhood becomes even more important because (i) the school as an organisation influences the children during formative years of personality, and, (ii) the ecosystem at the school includes many layers of influences : the peer relationships, the teacher, parents-teachers interactions, the content of education and the learning teaching approaches, the values represented and emphasized. By creating an ecosystem which makes it easier for children to flourish, schools can be enabled to deliver well-being education. Penn Resilience Program (PRP), implemented by the Pennsylvania University. Geelong Grammar School (GGS) in Australia, Gross National Happiness (GNH) program in Bhutan, Tecmilenio University in Mexico and New Horizon Academy (NEHA), India (Rai, A.N. 2023) have strived to build an ecosystem suitable for enhancement of positivity and well-being. Experiences from the above organisations provide evidences (quantitative and qualitative both) of well-being and flourishing life. Such an ecosystem involves working with all the stakeholders- students, teachers, parents, principal and supporting staff, beside creating a safe and secure environment.

An Ecosystem for Positive Schooling:Stakeholders in the Schools:- Schools (refer to all the organisation providing education upto the university level) as an organisation have many stakeholders. While students are at the centre of all the objectives of education, the teachers, parents, principal and the supporting staff and agencies assisting the schools in various ways, the education policy, and providers and facilitators of education, are present physically or

psychologically Stakeholders are involved in policy framing, envisioning the strategies, decision making, supporting and facilitating best outcome for the students, Parents' and teachers' interaction is an example of moving in tandem for the overall well-being of the students. To be able to enhance the quality of life of the children- in the present as well as for their future- stakeholders need to modify and transform what traditionally exists. Teachers have to be enabled to become enablers for the children. Parents and teachers, and all others there, need reeducation in the psychology of well-being. This kind of transformation is always an ongoing process reflecting the growth in the area of knowledge about what makes the life of children good, and what helps them flourish. Parenting practices (teachers and other caregivers are also alloparents) have to be modified. Parents, caregivers and teachers will require understanding how authoritarian, liberal or neglectful parenting harms the well-being of children and what is good about authoritative parenting. Experiences from GGS and elsewhere tell us that only sustained training of teachers along the spectrum of positive education content can bring the desired result. Parents and teachers are more than likely to carry forward their personal experience received in interaction with their parents and teachers and hold high regard for them.

Enabling the Stakeholders:- Stakeholder in the schools are resources present in the community there who are to function as enablers for flourishing in the life of children. To be good enablers they have to be enabled at first. Well-being education, positive education are newly found concepts of positive psychology. "Interventions based on an understanding of what makes life worth living, what makes individuals grow to the state of well-being and flourish, may adopt two complimentary directions. One helping individuals build on their positive traits

and experiences, helping them learn and acquire optimism, become resilient and flourish in their personal lives, Two, an ecosystem of enabling factors may be built which may provide suitable and sustainable context for individuals, families, communities and societies to grow towards collective well-being” (Rai, 2023). The second option prompts positivity psychologists to enable the enablers. Advocacy for transformation and training/education of parents, teachers and other stakeholders, in principles of positive psychology; components of positive education; psychology of behavioural and emotional problems of children, for a period stretching over a week or two, enables them to practice positive education and thus they become enablers. This is what has been the strategy at GGS and GNH intervention programme. GGS and GNH programs involved a thorough training of teachers from all subjects for about 10 days. Seligman (2011, pp. 88-92) describes GGS approach by dividing the whole positive education activity into: ‘Teaching Positive Education’, ‘Embedding Positive Education’ and ‘Living Positive Education’ and that can be possible when the school/teachers focus on the strength of stakeholders, identifying the strengths present in the ecosystem and finding the ways to further build on them.

Education Policy: Transforming the objectives and practices of learning & teaching:- Education policies are at the heart of learning and teaching, policies define and guide the objectives, aims and practices. Traditionally policies implemented at schools are more concerned with acquisition of knowledge. UNESCO report ‘Learning: The Treasure within’ prepared by Delors et. al. (1996) describes learning as an ongoing process with 4 pillars. One more such pillar has been added to this list by the ‘Unesco report on Education for Sustainable Development’ (2005-2014). These pillars are (i) Learning to know; (ii) Learning to do; (iii)

Learning to live together; (iv) Learning to be; and (v) Learning to transform oneself and society. Traditionally schools focus on the first objective and to some extent good professional education programs aim to achieve the second objective, “Positive education is not just about some additional content of education, it is about the whole environment that is functional in the campus. For the well-being education approach, to flourish life of the individuals, families, communities, organisations and societies, to succeed we need to create/build positive ecosystem with an education policy which emphasizes on all the five pillars of learning by transforming the content of education, and, suitable teaching and learning practices. Thinking critically, analytically and creatively is important for good life.

Cultivating positivity broadens mind and builds resources of the individual (Fredrickson, 1998, 2009) and thus helps students perform better academically besides functioning as an antidote to depression and vehicle for increased life satisfaction (Seligman, 2009). The content of well-being education includes: Positive emotion and cognitions, positive engagement, positive relationships, meaningfulness in life, and accomplishment (PERMA); and resilience training, development of physical health, virtues and character strengths, cultural values GNH curriculum emphasizes on 10 non-academic life skills for students of classes 7-12.

Transforming the content of education to include well-being education is one part of creating a positive ecosystem. The other part is transforming the learning/teaching practices, the physical and the social environment of the schools. The whole environment in the schools should provide sense of belongingness, safety, self-assurance, enthusiasm and will-power (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005). For this to happen school campus should build a positive community of parents, teachers, principal, supporting staff, students, the government agencies.

Learning method must not be limited to acquiring knowledge through books – supported by rote memory – as disseminated by the teachers. But teaching/learning processes must also include opportunities for exploration, discovery, experimentation, creative thinking, cooperative undertakings (e.g. in sports and cultural programs). Students/children should be enabled to explore how the knowledge obtained through the class room teaching relates to their real life context.

Building the positive ecosystem in schools: What stakeholders can do?- The description enclosed above emphasizes the importance of and pathways to building positive school environment through transformation of the content of education – to include well-being education – and through transformation of learning/teaching practices. For smooth progress in the direction of well-being education, importance of positive context in the life of children, as it may unfold in the school environment, becomes naturally salient. Some resources, strengths are always available in any community which can be further built upon. The preceding section of this chapter: enabling the stakeholders/the enablers, is just one part of the whole story. The other part of the story is that all the stakeholders can contribute to enrich the school environment positively while executing their roles, and, their contribution to the ecosystem of the schools would facilitate the growth of well-being and good life among children. Efforts to develop a positive ecosystem involves: (i) Creating those conditions which are missing, and (ii) building those which are available but have weak strength. Roffey (2021) has presented some ideas about the actions to be taken by the parents, the families, the teachers, the school and the governments to develop a healthy environment for well-being education. Fortunately, the authors have their own experiences related to issues, challenges and implications gained from

their close association in implementation of such program at the New Horizon Academy, Ghazipur (India). We can build the ideas presented by Ruffy by suitably adding insights emerging from our qualitative experiences (a broad outline of our experiences may be found in Rai, 2023). Parents, families, teachers, schools and governments can all contribute staying within their defined roles. Environmental perspective of the development of personality and behavior “posits that stability and change are a result of contextual factors including social interactions, life experiences, social roles and major life events” (Atherton et. al., 2000) and it is possible for the stakeholders in the school to facilitate positive development of children there. All the organs/stakeholders must act in unison.

What to Do? Propositions For:

(A) The Parents:- It must be borne that parents are first teachers/educators of children besides being caregivers and guardian. Hence, role of parents’ is very wide. They need to practice methods of positive parenting but here propositions are presented in the context of their role in strengthening the positive ecosystem for the schools. Parents’ activities at home are extensions to some extent, of the school activities or facilitators of the learning/education processes to be executed at the school. Some of the roles proposed from this perspective are:

- Parents may/should take time off the internet and engage with children to explore, discover the surrounding; help children innovate ideas for activities at home (for all the family members)

- Challenge the wrongly held views/ ideas/beliefs of the child; ask them to validate/verify their false views/beliefs and help them think like a scientist questioning their cognitive structures before holding on them .
- Be listeners and not teachers/preachers; give them questions to find answers; pretend as though you don't know the answer; let the children play the role of a teacher and thus help them become curious to learn in the class room.
- Talk positively about the school, the teachers and the supporting staff there.
- Leave behind power and ego-system when attending the parents-teachers meeting; engage positively with all the organs of the school.
- Give choices to the children to choose from alternatives, followed by task of rethinking about the wisdom of their choices. If required ask the child to rethink about and see if there could be better choice.

[For parents becoming able to play the above rules training workshops for parents may be required so as to enable them to successfully play their wide roles.]

(B) For Families:

- All the members of the family may do the best by imbibing values of life and allowing values colour the collective ambition and aspiration of the life in their families.
- Help children understand the importance of learning to do, learning to be, learning to connect with others, learning to transform oneself and contribute for others – whether children are at home or in the school. “Emphasis on learning to know” might be helpful in staying ahead in the academic race but not for meeting out the challenges of the life as it unfolds through the life span.

- Celebrate the achievement of the child across various activities at the school. Don't limit celebration just to academic achievement.

- Encourage the schools to bring out the best potential of children; alongwith teachers be the gardeners of your child to allow them flourish and not becoming carpenters by felling down the natural branching out the children's natural growth. Such attempts may only dwarf down the flourishing.

(C) The Teachers: It must be remembered that many of the propositions presented for parents stand equally good to teachers. Teachers are not merely agents for transfer of knowledge contained in the books. They are alloparents and share the parenting roles with their biological parents as students spend a large part of their developmental years in schools and colleges.

- Active listening with positive attitude (ALPA) approach is good for parents and teachers both. Listening the mind and heart of children/students opens their minds and hearts to flourish. Active listening (involving challenging the wrong ideas, beliefs etc. of children) creates a healthy connect with the child/students and thus opens the doors to hope, trust, belongingness.

- Find something to like about every student and let them know (Sue Roffey, 2021).

- Deal with children's learning, behavioural and emotional issues in manners supported and validated by psychology as a science.

(D) The Schools: Organisation can be better equipped to outperform individuals' contribution. School must not remain confined to conducting class for 'learning to know or do'. As an organismic body involving so many stakeholders schools can become

instrumental to flourishing the life of students, teacher and parents by what Seligman (2011) called embedding positivity in the culture of the school. Presented here are so many ideas put forward by Roffey (2021).

- Ensure that wellbeing is at the heart of all policies and practices.
- Have strengths and solution focused approaches.
- Safety and security needs of the child must be met.
- Develop behavior policies that promote positive relationships, and a sense of belonging.
- Develop a school culture that is inclusive, safe and respectful, and, no to discrimination of any kind.
- Acknowledge the importance of play for resilience and wellbeing.
- Focus of identifying ‘personal bests’ rather than a competitive culture.
- Have protected time for social and emotional learning, and embed this learning throughout the school day.
- School should arrange for well-being/positivity education for all; the parents, teachers and students and other allied organs.
- Adverse conditions and events taking place at home, or in the school is natural part of life course. Teaching ‘how to bounce back’ and ‘how to be resilient’ must be part of well-being education.

(E) The Government: The government policies determines the approach to schooling, priorities of the nation and the allocation of resources. The gross national happiness (GNH) curriculum and the priority allocated to GNH by the government of Sikkim

shows how the state of the nation, well-being of its people can be assured. Hence, the

government and education policy should focus to:

- Invest resources for well-being education for all its citizen.
- Education policy should reflect the importance of all the five pillars of education as described in the UNESCO report by Delors et. al. (1996).
- All the stakeholder be provided training in the lessons from the psychology of positive parenting, positive schooling; and the psychology of dealing with the learning deficiencies, and, the behavioural and emotional problems.

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