

Thoughts on the Pandemic and Wellbeing

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Abstract

Education has invariably been a hot topic: Too many seem to be experts in highlighting the flaws and shortcomings of the educational system and fake news keep thriving on social media. In any case, COVID-19 raised more real educational issues than anything else in the last decades. Surprisingly, we had to rethink education as a whole, we were forced to set priorities, and acquire knowledge and skills overnight. Let us be honest, we all, teachers and administration, could have done more and better, but lack of in-depth training, apps and devices, access to the Internet, made us experiment with what we had and what we could do in the given circumstances. Undoubtedly, a compromise always puts us on a slippery slope. And here we are facing mental health issues, severe learning gaps, and higher illiteracy rates. One question, however, persists, whether wellbeing practices can significantly improve behaviour problems and school results or not.

For the last decade, technology and modern lifestyle have turned our whiz kids to tech wizards and then again to gaming zombies. If before the pandemic, we were concerned about how much time and energy youngsters spend online, COVID-19 pushed us all into being permanently connected and reachable. The picture is still incomplete on how helpful or harmful the total immersion into Internet and media during the last two years was.

Prior pandemic studies on children's emotional state, such as Rojas's [1] and Prooday's [2], would point out the impact overstimulation and sedentary lifestyle had on children. Digitally-distracted parents just added to the exposure of their children to risk behaviours and mental health issues. Let us recall just a few of the alarming results: There was a 43%-increase in ADHD, a 37%-growth in depression, a 200%-rise in the suicide rate, 20% suffered from mental health issues, and 4 out of 5 families owned a device to play video games [3]. Meanwhile, teachers all over the world used to preach on the benefits of reducing screen-time

and focusing on things that matter: family, education, health, and environment. Have we influenced our learners' behaviour? Only to a limited extent.

And then, pandemic struck. Now we, teachers, were the first to convince students that they had to stay wired, they had to be online, they had to spend most of the day in front of their screens: attending classes, doing research, posting assignments, learning to use new apps, and taking tests. No wonder, 20% state their mental health has significantly worsened, 85% experience difficulties in focusing, 76% can hardly maintain a routine, 55% do not know whom to address with their mental health problems, 91% have been affected by stress and anxiety [4]. And then again, we, teachers, have had to take action as there is no learning without engagement, motivation, and socio-emotional development [5]. Tech tools and IT gadgets are not attention-getting devices in themselves. Besides teaching content and applying technology, teachers are also expected to foster the general wellbeing of their students. But has providing for the needs of our learners not always been our priority?

Unquestionably, the lockdown crises of 2020 and 2021 severely affected teachers, too. More than 60% are convinced that school practices have changed for good and the old 'normality' will never again move in [6]. Shifting to distance-learning proved to be a huge challenge for the teaching staff and school administration, as over 60% experienced for the first time online teaching [6]. More than 40% of the teachers complained, on the one hand, about increased workload and stress and, on the other hand, about struggling to keep their students motivated and engaged [6]. Has anyone catered for the teachers' needs? Frankly, there were resources provided by the Ministry of Education and some IT firms, but by far insufficient and not customised.

At present, most teaching worldwide is done on-site. And indeed, things have changed and keep changing. Improving wellbeing in schools is a major factor of school performance and mental health. Summerfield argues that stress is the main culprit of dissatisfaction, being most often triggered by heavy workloads, lack of control, class sizes, and poor collegial relationships [7]. A handy solution might be rebuilding the sense of community. As suggested by research, in order to achieve it, we must nurture relationships, encourage new connections, ensure safe learning environments, debate on pandemic issues, raise students' voice and participation, and involve parents [8]. A strong teacher-student bond is key to both wellbeing and quality instruction [7]. But how can we promote, improve or achieve it?

Besides implementing a school-wide policy on mindfulness strategies, SEL (social and emotional learning) and SL (service learning) are of great value. The good news is that what teachers love most about their job is related to them: experiencing how children learn and progress (91%), interacting with learners (90%), and making a positive difference (80%) [9]. But can teachers meet the demand? Nothing is self-evident. Tailored, in-house training remains crucial and, according to experts, at least 1-2% of the overall school budget should be invested into continuing professional development (CPD) [9]. The latter will raise morale, impact the teaching-learning process, and alleviate pressure. In SL projects, learning goals and contents of the curriculum are interwoven with practical skills and the common good [10]. It is not learning for learning's sake, it is community-engaged, meaningful, efficient education. Moreover, it encompasses SEL [11], that is, students put into practice their knowledge, achieve both personal and collective goals, empower each other, and create inclusive and safe learning environments. Are these targets achievable?

If political agendas on instruction were shaped according to the needs of students and teachers, by co-opting them into the creation of curricula, schools could address a wide range of issues our educational systems face. In this case, each school, based on its own reality, would be able to openly and flexibly individualize about 10-20% of its teaching time so as to create real world contexts and opportunities for learning, guarantee greater inter-personal and inter-cultural understanding, promote self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-management, and make wellbeing into school priority. In conclusion, despite the somber facts studies pinpoint, reform in education is sustainable and should be supported by all decision makers. Irrespective of what politicians and educational experts do or should do, we, teachers, can still prove our worth by reaching out to our students and fellow teachers. Remember, teaching is not only a job, it is a vocation.

Webography accessed on the 27th November 2021:

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3. <https://marquemedical.com/constantly-connected-effects-media-children-teens-colleen-kraft-m-d/>

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