

Effort and Belief Pedagogies in a Post-Primary DEIS context

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Jeffrey Egan is a Newly Qualified Teacher, who recently graduated from UCD in 2022. His recent experiences in the post primary classroom motivated him to research wellbeing as an enabler of student learning and the holistic challenges this poses in education. He is passionate about catering for the wellbeing of students and understanding the pedagogical tools that can empower them to take control of their wellbeing despite adverse circumstances. The research was thought provoking and provided him with the experience to explore aspects of wellbeing that play a vital role in the education of young people.

KEYWORDS: Growth Mindset, Self Efficacy, Meaning in Life, PISA

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to highlight teacher awareness about wellbeing pedagogies that consider the PISA 2018 wellbeing metrics, related to a DEIS setting. PISA 2018 investigated growth mindset, self-efficacy and meaning in life when considering student wellbeing. The motivation for choosing this topic to research was my own lack of awareness about student wellbeing and its impact on learning.

Drawing on a combination of pedagogical theories and my own lived experience in the DEIS classroom, I developed a wellbeing pedagogical framework to help anchor my reflections. This article will provide teachers and educators with information to consider how growth mindset theory, students self-efficacy and sense of purpose, embedded with an attitude of grit can contribute to positive wellbeing. Two attitudes which are linked across all these concepts are 'belief' and 'effort'. Frequently, in discussion about wellbeing, as educators, we can overcompensate our awareness levels of student's anxieties and difficulties, and sometimes can be slower to take corrective action to build up character traits in students which can help them cope with difficulties.

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CONTEXT

In recent years, the education system has focused on the implementation of wellbeing across the curriculum, taking a more holistic approach to supporting students which refers to their social, emotional, and cognitive development. At the same time, there has been advances in educational policy acknowledging student wellbeing as both an outcome and an enabler of learning (DES, 2016). As part of the school self-evaluation (SSE) tool, an internal school review underpinned by the Department of Education's quality framework for post-primary schools, all are required by 2023 to review and implement a wellbeing promotion programme. These policy initiatives are to be welcomed in times where we are encountering students who experience depression, anxiety and anger both in and outside the classroom with the longer-term effects of the Covid pandemic also raising questions about student wellbeing.

Within the post primary education system, clear differences emerge in the DEIS and non-DEIS school settings. The delivering equality of opportunity in schools (DEIS) programme launched in 2005 to help tackle educational disadvantage. It aims to improve the path of educational opportunity for disadvantage students and give additional support to schools who have a high concentration of disadvantage (DES, 2017). Schools with a higher concentration of socially disadvantaged students have lower achievement levels of academic success compared to more socially advantaged schools (Nelis et al., 2021). Likewise, DEIS students experience lower levels of overall wellbeing compared to non-DEIS students (Smyth, 2020) whereby education researchers are exploring the degree to which academic success is connected to wellbeing rather than social status and how this will impact wellbeing policy in the future.

Considering the Irish data in PISA 2018, Nelis et al. (2021) show that three-fifths of students in DEIS schools came from socio-economically disadvantaged homes whereas in non-DEIS school it was one-fifth. DEIS schools had higher levels of unauthorised student absences, classrooms experienced more behavioural disruption, there were higher percentiles of students presenting with special learning needs and DEIS principals reported higher levels of concern about students not being attentive in class (Nelis et al. 2021). This research explored, the degree to which lower levels of wellbeing are connected to these common difficulties encountered in DEIS school environments?

Additionally, the national longitudinal study of children (GUI) shows that students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have lower life satisfaction scores at seventeen and eighteen and were more likely to have a higher number of emotional and behavioural difficulties than students from more advantaged backgrounds (Growing Up in Ireland Study Team, 2016). The same study also suggested that socially disadvantaged students have lower life satisfaction scores than students from more advantaged backgrounds.

Figure 1 provides an overview of how the PISA 2018 study measured wellbeing. PISA recognised that wellbeing is a multi-dimensional construct, not simply evaluating students' feelings about themselves. The psychological functioning concerning meaning in life is the more debated aspect of the wellbeing measurement scale given that the subjective measurement of it can be hard to capture in data. It has been an important study as the only large-scale assessment of students' well-being currently available to researchers.

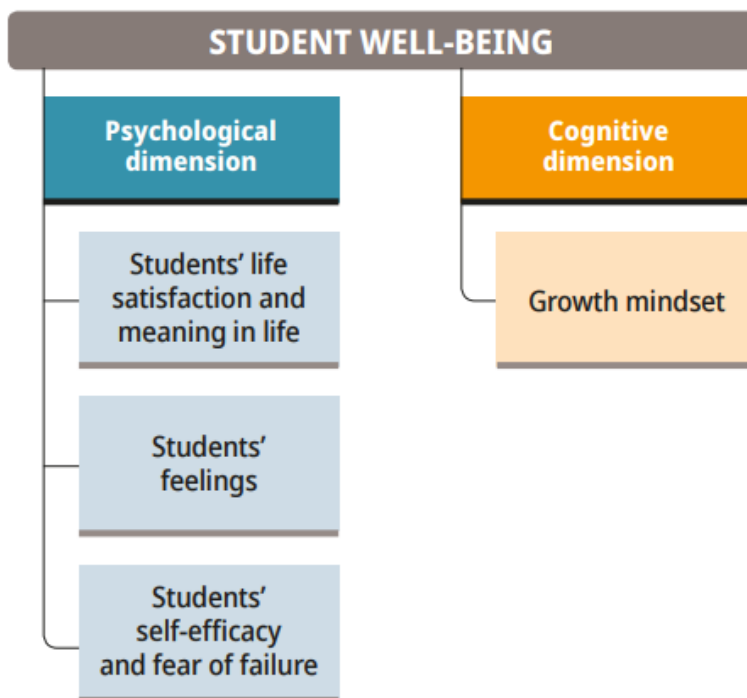


Figure 1. Wellbeing as measured in PISA (OECD, 2020, p.41)

Overall, from a national and international policy level, there has been strong encouragement for educators to develop students' cognitive abilities, social skills, and healthy attitudes in enhancing wellbeing. These policy documents are creating an awareness that students can learn more effectively if they are happy, have meaning in their life and feel supported in their learning environment in promoting positive wellbeing steps.

METHODOLOGY

Recognising that education is an applied discipline, the methodology employed in this project is of a qualitative nature. Within the Croí framework, the Teaching Council in Ireland recommends the practice of practitioner research, that is, research carried out by practitioners, in this case teachers, to advance their own pedagogical practices (McLeod, 1999). A small-scale qualitative study involved collecting data using my own reflections to create systematic and meaningful observations (McKechnie, 2008). Although limitations emerge in generalising theories in a small-scale study (Maxwell, 2005), within these generalisations, Bassy (2001) argues there is scope to apply them in contexts beyond the study itself. The practitioner research approach allows teachers to reflect on their teaching experiences and apply the lessons learned in their practice. In this way, the study's findings from one teacher's experiences and reflections may act as a trigger for a broader understanding of the application of wellbeing pedagogy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This article focuses on the findings of how effort and belief pedagogies can enhance student wellbeing. The framework below is beneficial in recognising how the PISA wellbeing measurements can be viewed from an effort and belief pedagogical setting. An awareness of these findings for teachers and educators can contribute to enhancing overall student wellbeing.



Figure 2. Towards a Wellbeing Pedagogical Framework (Author)

Effort Pedagogies

According to Dweck (2006), underlying beliefs about intelligence may affect students' motivation to learn and have a direct impact on their performance. A fixed mindset is the belief that your intelligence and talents are fixed, whereas a growth mindset, is the belief that intelligence and aptitudes can be developed. To frame it another way, a student's qualities can be enhanced through effort. Students with a fixed mindset, tend to avoid challenges and those displaying a growth mindset will explore challenging circumstances to develop and achieve their learning goals. Gouëdard & Rodrigo (2021), in analysing PISA 2018 data suggest that mindsets have an influence on overall wellbeing, and an attitude towards a growth mindset acts as a bulwark against the adverse impacts of negative experiences. They concluded that growth mindset had a positive impact on a student's sense of belonging in school, satisfaction with their life and experiencing positive feelings.

Growth mindset literature has considered if mindset has an impact on the causes or prevention of aggression, stress, and anxiety among students. Schleider, Abel & Weisz (2015), revealed that youths holding fixed mindset traits showed more anxiety, depression, aggression, and conduct disorder. One implication of this finding is when students are engaged with a task and challenging themselves, they give less attention to their difficulties.

Engagement can happen at many different levels. When students find tasks difficult and want to give up, the responsibility of the teacher is to reframe their inhibition to pursue effort. For example, attempting to connect learning experiences with students' interests where they display effort. Interest and knowledge in sport, music, art, their life experiences, and specific skills showed in other subjects encourage the pursuit of effort. Similarly, when assigning homework or giving exams, constructive feedback, and giving priority to attempt marks is important. In this way, students begin to realise that rewards are associated with industriousness and effort rather than talent and ability.

Attempts to connect the pedagogy of effort with student disadvantage is a current theme in the research community. While growth mindset is not the panacea for student wellbeing issues, research suggests that mindset changes have been a stronger predictor of academic success rather than the availability of economic resources for low-income students (Claro, Paunesku & Dweck, 2016). Students from disadvantage backgrounds can sometimes articulate a victimhood complex based on language and concepts provided by societal culture and media. Rather than raising awareness of the plight of unequal social capital this language can encourage a powerlessness among students to effect change in their lives. It can tempt students to see effort in education as a worthless exercise. Encouraging students to display attitudes of grit, that is, seeking effort in the long term by overcoming obstacles is a necessary trait which help students overcome challenges, enhance wellbeing and consequently foster learning.

Belief Pedagogies

Following the Guidelines for Wellbeing for Junior Cycle (NCCA, 2017), teachers are encouraged to allow space for students to ask important questions about their existence in the world can contribute to positive wellbeing. Frankl (1959) in his seminal work, *'Mans search for Meaning'*, explained that having a sense of purpose in life is necessary for living a fulfilling life and achieving goals. Even in extreme circumstances in concentration camps, he recounts anecdotes of survival and happiness against all the odds when people discover purpose in their lives. Religion and philosophy are two subjects in the Junior Cycle curriculum that seek out answers to the big questions and can encourage students to think about meaning in their lives and their purpose. Gearon (2013), taking the subject of religion, explains how it has moved from a more dogmatic, single-faith background to an academic discipline that provides a framework to reflect on deep questions from a broad range of religious and philosophical ideas. Stegar and Kashdan (2007), argue that meaning in life is an important element of wellbeing, concluding that there are positive psychological benefits for individuals when they have a sense of purpose and meaning in their life. In recent years, we have been battling with increasing levels of self-harm and suicide among young people, and although complex issues, international research has been looking at how young people with meaning in their lives can act as a protective measure against suicidal tendencies (Lew et al, 2020). PISA 2018 concluded that students across the OECD from disadvantaged backgrounds had a lower sense of meaning in their life than students from more prosperous socio-economic backgrounds. Considering these findings, it could be argued that from the perspective of encouraging wellbeing, subjects such as religion and philosophy are probably undervalued in schools and could be given more prominence in promoting a positive wellbeing culture.

As Bandura (1977) notes, self-efficacy is the extent to which individuals believe in their own ability to engage in certain activities and tasks, especially when confronted with difficult circumstances. An inability to deal with challenges can manifest itself in many ways in the classroom. In this regard, lack of engagement, misbehaviour and not experiencing feelings of wellbeing could be a contributory factor in low self-efficacy among students. The PISA 2018 statistics suggest that students displaying a growth mindset have a lower fear of failure and conversely a higher level of self-efficacy compared to those displaying a fixed mindset. Students with a sense of belief in themselves can experience a richer sense of wellbeing since their positive approach to failure and challenges can potentially decrease their anxiety and stress levels (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Similarly, attitudes of grit in persevering to reach goals attainable after years of work allows for students to work toward challenges while maintaining the same effort and interest over a long period of time despite setbacks encountered on the way (Duckworth et al., 2007). According to Roberts (2009), when individuals are gritty, their motivation increases, and this helps them to reduce obstacles or even overcome them. Furthermore, grit has been linked with low levels of depression signs and adverse effects, as well as high levels of wellbeing and good feelings (Datu, King, Valdez & Eala, 2019).

CONCLUSION

While exploring various wellbeing pedagogical tools in my own practice, the development of students' skills in effort and belief emerged. Indeed, my wellbeing pedagogical framework attempted to show the interactions between belief and effort elicited in the growth mindset attitude, seeking meaning in life, and developing self-efficacy traits in the face of challenges. Practicing these pedagogies, allows for grittier students who can pursue long term goals despite the setbacks and experience an enhanced level of wellbeing. The school acts as a nourishing environment for students to develop these cognitive and social traits and contribute positively to student wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

Educational policy can promote more extensively positive wellbeing pedagogies that encourage student effort. Risking a narrow understanding of wellbeing by schools could lead to accommodating anxieties and traumas without building attitudes of grit that can help students overcome their difficulties. Encouraging students to be determined and purposeful in their learning despite challenges can enhance wellbeing.

There is considerable debate in the public square about the teaching of religion in schools. Overtime, religious instruction in schools has moved from a more dogmatic, single faith background to an academic discipline that allows for reflection on deep questions from a broad range of religious and philosophical ideas. In line with the PISA measurement of wellbeing, connected to finding meaning in life, a wide-ranging debate considering the positive values that philosophical and religious ideas bring to the enhancement of student wellbeing is necessary. Subjects that ask the big questions in life can help students ponder and seek out a purpose for long-term goals which can create stability in their lives.

In a DEIS context, where more students are from lower socio-economic backgrounds, developing a growth mindset could be a stronger predictor of academic success rather than the availability of economic resources for low-income students. At a national level, it would be a worthwhile endeavour to compare income and wellbeing levels among students and draw conclusion about their related impact on academic success.

In conclusion, this article explored the impact of wellbeing pedagogies in a post-primary DEIS context underpinned by effort and belief, encouraging students to develop a growth mindset, build self-efficacy and find purpose in their life to enhance their wellbeing and enable learning. The results, limited to the authors observations and the difficulties in measuring student wellbeing, nonetheless have led me to acknowledge that a student holistic approach to building qualities of grit through the wellbeing pedagogies employed is a positive approach to learning.

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