

In Pursuit of Happiness at School

Jwairia Saleem

The pursuit of happiness has been an age-old quest and an elusive one at that. Everyone desires it, though it means different things to different people. Because of its subjective nature, the agency for being happy often remains with the individual. So why and when did such a subjective concept become the object of global and national concern to be fostered in schools?

Evolution of school-based wellbeing programmes

In 1986, in response to rising socio-emotional problems among young people, the Ottawa Charterⁱ extended the concept of 'health' to include physical, social and mental wellbeing, and urged other sectors to share the responsibility of promoting it. The 'Global Mental Health Initiative' (WHO, 1995) recommended schools take charge of fostering socio-emotional wellbeing. Since then, several policy documents were released, directing schools to develop life skills, psycho-social competencies and provide better identification and early intervention to students with mental health issues. Thus began the global movement for implementing a host of school-based mental health programmes ranging from mental health and wellbeing to child safety and safeguarding.

Status of wellbeing programmes in schools

The Indian education ecosystem has also been abuzz with discourses around mental health, wellness, and wellbeing. Various programmes for life skills, socio-emotional learning, adolescent development, value education, yoga, mindfulness, meditation and happiness have been introduced to promote wellbeing in school. Post-COVID-19, programmes like *Manodarpan* and *SAHYOG* were launched to support children and youth in dealing with emotional crises.

While these efforts are commendable, they have been sporadic and piecemeal – usually adopting a top-up approach by devoting some time to conducting activities during or after school. A vast majority of the teaching fraternity perceives these as 'additional' to their primary responsibility of

teaching the core curriculum. The general lack of an understanding of what wellbeing is and why it is important obfuscates the intent and impact that these programmes could have.

Understanding wellbeing

'Wellbeing' is often interchanged with many other terms like wellness, happiness, welfare, or quality of life. There has been no universally-accepted definition, thus far. A synthesis of commonly-used definitionsⁱⁱ implies that wellbeing includes:

- Physical health and fitness
- Mental, social and emotional health that comes with trusting relationships and belief in a just world
- General contentment with life that comes from self-belief and achievement of goals
- A sense of purpose in life that makes living worthwhile

Wellbeing, therefore, is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing the physical, mental, socio-emotional, intellectual, as well as the societal aspect of an individual's being, often seen as being part of good health. It has both a subjective and an objective dimension as well – while individuals may differ in their life's purpose or what makes them happy (the subjective element), a good life and life experiences as per social norms and values are much the same for everyone (the objective element).

Importance of wellbeing at school

The growing years spent at school are most critical for developing a worldview and a belief system that determines the attitudes and behaviour that children will eventually bring to adult life. With the universalisation of education, schools are uniquely positioned to 'catch them young' and meet children's physical and socio-emotional needs, predisposing them to experiencing positive emotions. In a stratified and diverse society like ours, this means that all children irrespective of their circumstances, can experience wellbeing and have a fair chance at life.



Figure 1. Multi-dimensional constructs of wellbeing

Feeling respected and cared for and being heard and responded to makes children feel worthy. Their self-worth leads them to believe in themselves, gives them the courage to articulate their thoughts, share their emotions and explore the environment without fear or inhibition. It also builds children's faith in the goodness of people and the world, helping them form healthy relationships with others. A belief in self and the world allows them to rationalise a mishap as a probable event in life rather than blame oneself or others for the 'unjust and unfair' treatment meted out to them. They do not question 'why me?', when a tragedy befalls them, but show resilience and fortitude in the face of misfortune.

Research by Kamble and Dalbert on wellbeing in Indian schools has shown how teachers' good treatment of children leads to a strong belief in a just world (BJW) and greatly contributes to their wellbeing at school.ⁱⁱⁱ

Understanding the impact of a safe school environment has far-reaching implications for educators. Since wellbeing can be neither 'taught' nor 'caught' through specific activities, but only developed through enriching learning experiences in a safe community, the role of educators is to

create such an environment, build relationships, and provide ample opportunities for the development of intellectual opportunities so children can experience their *aha* moments to do what they can do best, and be who they can become.

Approaches to wellbeing at school

It is worthwhile to remind ourselves that the purpose of school has always been to develop the child holistically - mind, body, and soul. Furthermore, the readiness to learn is built only when children feel physically safe, emotionally secure, and socially comfortable (Maslow). So, the integration of wellbeing is subsumed in both, the aims of education and the purpose of school.

That said, the whole-school approach to wellbeing focuses on creating a safe environment, nurturing relationships, and stimulating learning experiences that predispose all children to experience wellbeing. It also prevents, to a great extent, at-risk children from developing illnesses or maladjustive behaviour.

However, a child-centred approach is needed to identify and provide early intervention to children who may show signs of mental or psychosocial behavioural problems. Teachers must therefore be equipped with skills to identify issues, provide necessary interventions within the school, and collaborate with other professionals to make

MASLOW'S Hierarchy of Needs

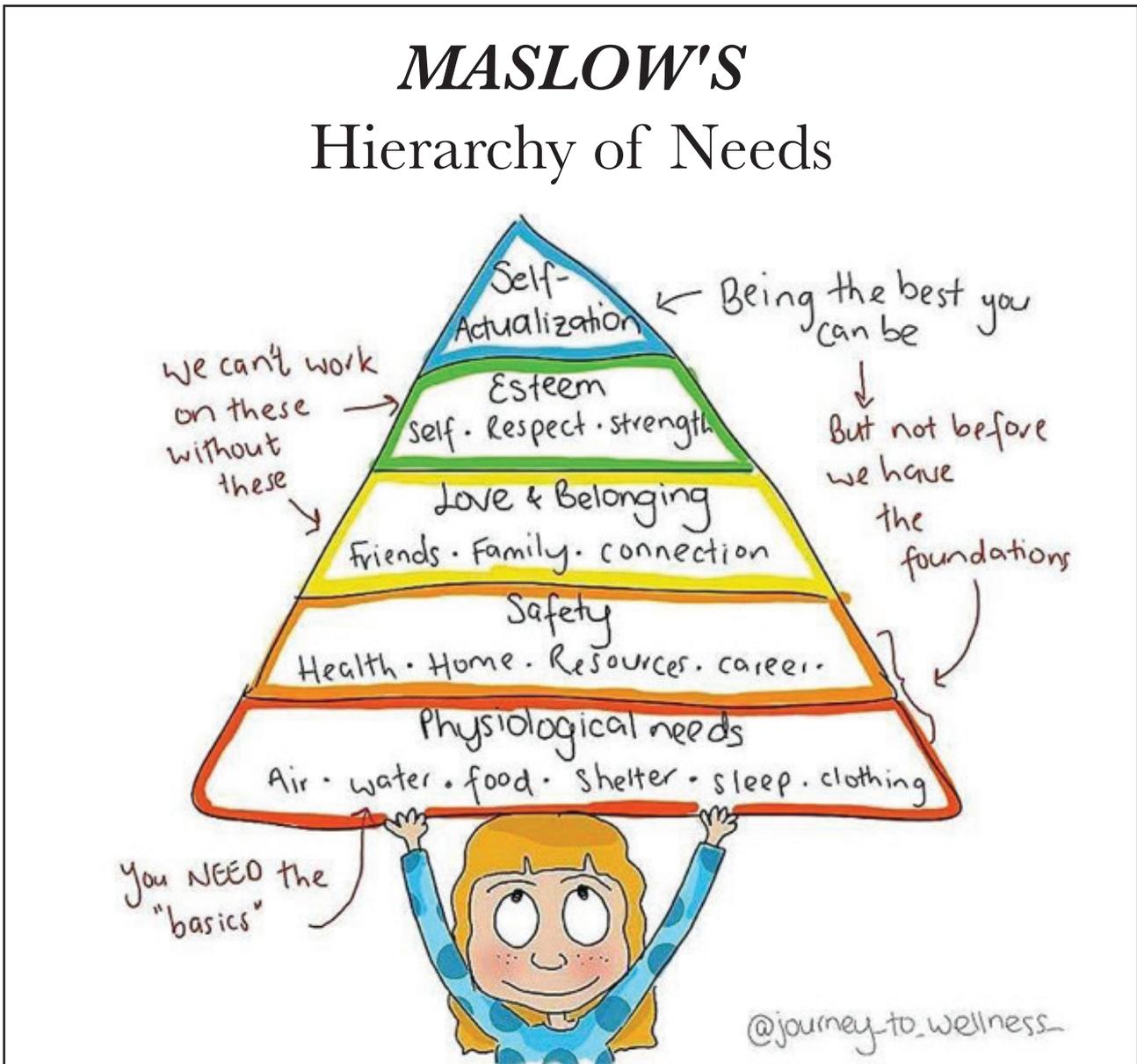


Figure 2. Maslow's Theory of Self-actualisation and Hierarchy of Needs

informed decisions about the best possible support to help develop a child's full potential. Continuous professional development for teachers on differentiation strategies as well as designing and implementing individualised plans with accommodations and modifications as per a child's need becomes critically important.

Schools must, therefore, use both the whole-school and the child-centred approach, so that *all* children benefit from the interventions provided at different levels.^{iv}

Challenges in implementation

One of the biggest challenges school leaders and teachers face in creating a safe and inclusive culture is resistance from stakeholders - sometimes

even students refuse to treat others in their class as equals. Socio-economic, cultural, and religious differences find their way into classrooms, threatening the school environment. A genuine belief in justice and equity can inspire teachers to make conscious and collective efforts to weed out discriminatory practices and ensure fairness.

The second challenge comes from our ideas about *discipline* that can make or mar our relationships with students. Teachers assume that being approachable and friendly diminishes their authority. Nothing could be farther from the truth! Teachers who are humble, compassionate and make efforts to connect with their students are seen as trustworthy

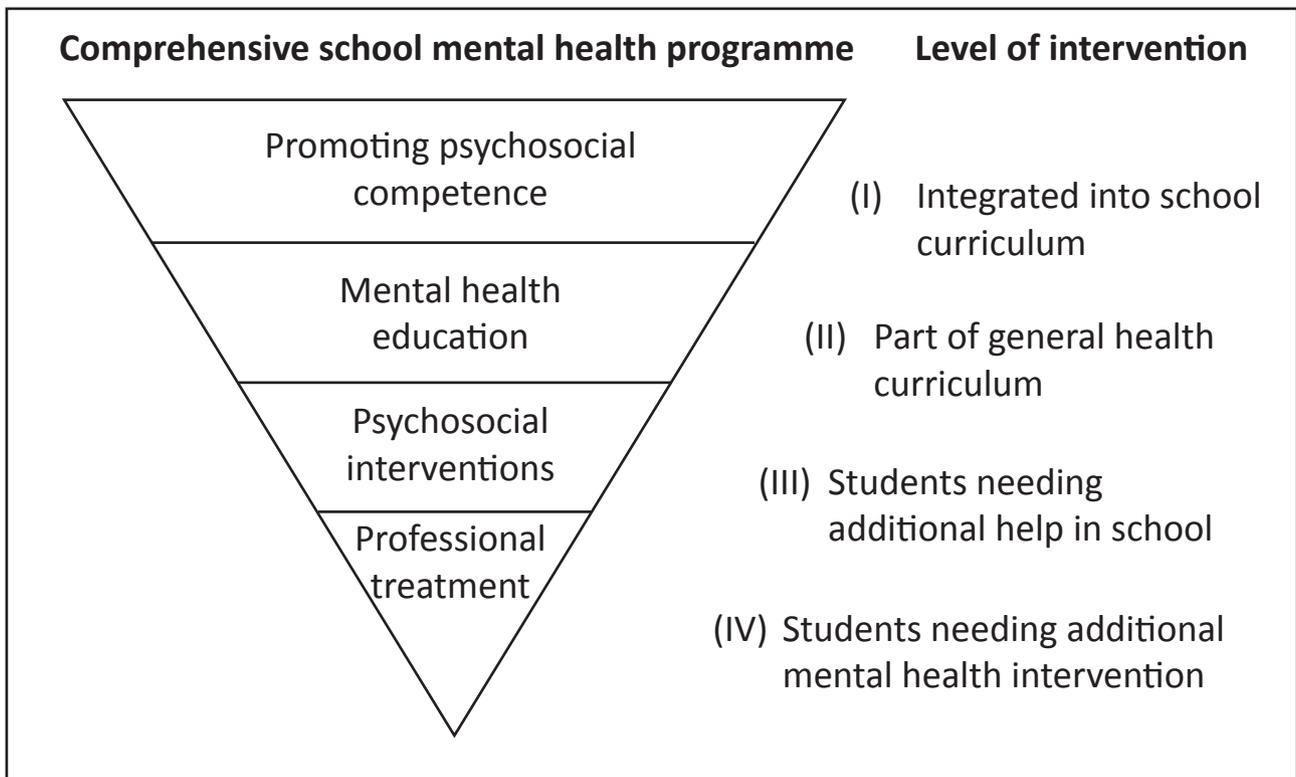


Figure 3. The four levels of intervention at school (WHO)

and held in high esteem. Similarly, the system of rewarding or punishing students' work or behaviour is undesirable. While punishments are obviously harmful to children's self-esteem, rewards can make children focus on success rather than on learning. Teachers must work on creating a love for learning, encourage children to engage in challenging tasks and learn from their mistakes by appreciating efforts rather than results.

The road to wellbeing

The first step on the road to wellbeing is to transform the school ecosystem; this requires principles of change management to be applied. It takes a great deal of patience, time, and sincere devotion to engage with students continuously, and consistently to get their buy-in to the idea of change. But once they are on board, the school-transformation process gains momentum and is collaboratively led to fruition.

Recommendations

For head teachers

1. Discuss with teachers, students, and parents the changes you wish to bring and why; create a shared vision for the school.

2. Share responsibilities with teachers (parents and students too) based on their interests and ability.
3. Appreciate efforts in public and advise in private.
4. Be visible to students: talk to them before assembly, after school and during midday meals.
5. Share, borrow or use community resources.

For teachers

1. Connect and make children feel valued (during rollcall/ break/before or after class) by:
 - Addressing them by name
 - Making eye contact
 - Smiling often
 - Showing a genuine interest in their lives
 - Treating everyone in the same way
2. Help children make and sustain friendships by:
 - Co-developing and setting behaviour expectations
 - Creating a time and a place for discussing feelings
 - Guiding them to resolve conflicts amicably
3. Provide opportunities for deep thinking and metacognition by:
 - Asking probing questions and giving wait time
 - Asking for their views and opinions
 - Offering choices in everyday class/homework

4. Develop health consciousness
 - Encourage healthy eating and physical activity
 - Integrate health topics in class projects
5. Develop compassion and empathy
 - Design lessons around community issues
 - Plan events around community and social service

In pursuit of happiness: a success story

Studies in wellbeing make a distinction between happiness and pleasure. What we construe as happiness is often momentary and does not last long. True long-lasting happiness, studies posit, comes from a deep joy that one gets from being inspired by a purpose that makes a difference to others.

*When you do things from your soul
You feel a river of joy within you
- Rumi*

My fascination with the idea of teaching ‘purpose’ to achieve wellbeing led to the development of the ‘Framework for Teaching Purpose’ which I put to the test at The Indian Academy, Dubai during my tenure there as Principal. Underpinning the framework is the premise that every individual has a natural affinity to do good and find deep and long-lasting joy in accomplishing a task that is of some

benefit to others. We initiated a ‘Buy a Blessing’ programme in which the teachers’ tasks were to facilitate brainstorming to generate inspirational ideas, guide children in checking for feasibility, support them in planning the project and finally coordinate its execution. The children surpassed our expectations by creating projects, such as an organic garden, a zero-budget studio, a lemonade stall, and a piezoelectric jogging mat, each of which had a business plan and a brochure that advertised their products. All the products were then put on sale at a ‘Buy a Blessing’ stall, as the proceeds were to go to various charities. In the first year, the students chose to fund a school for the blind, an old-age home, the Blue Cross, and a centre for autism. ‘Buy a Blessing’ featured as a successful innovation and entrepreneurship project in the news and was later adopted in a few other schools. Around the same time, a Happiness Meter (Fig.4 B) was placed in all classrooms, with a range of emotions displayed on a vertical board. Children were given pegs with their names on them. Every morning, during circle time, children would reflect on how they were feeling and place the peg on the emotion they identified with. Children could, by choice, talk about why they felt the way they did, and others could provide them with suggestions or comments. The teacher took this opportunity

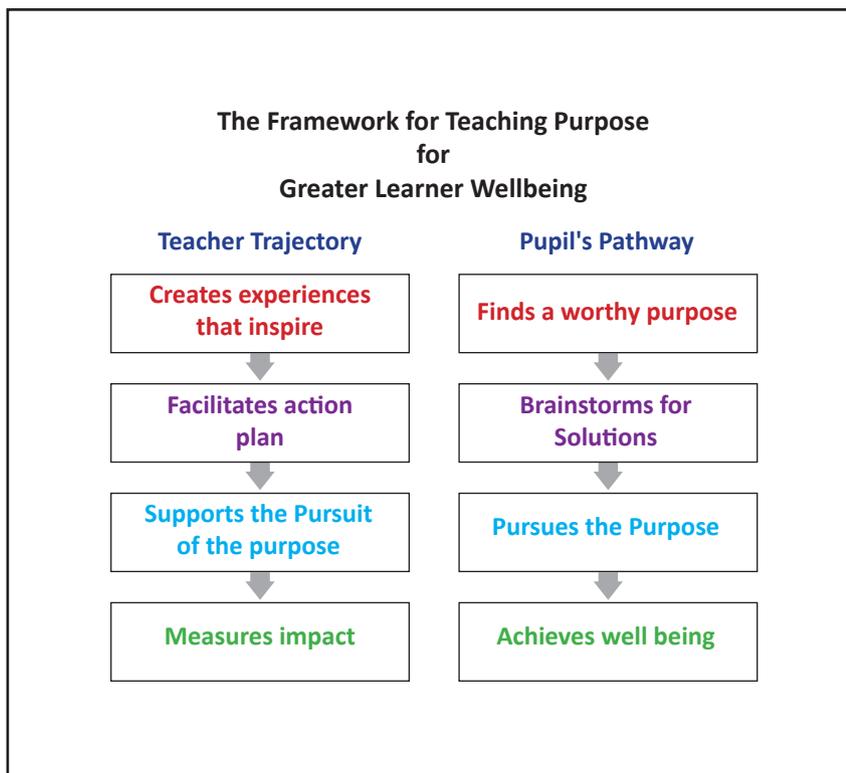


Figure 4A. The Purpose Framework



Figure 4B. Happiness Meter

to probe if anyone had a negative emotion and suggest ways of coping with it. In higher classes, suggestive coping mechanisms were included in the Happiness Meter and circle time was in smaller groups giving students an option to create their own 'safety nets'.

The Happiness Meter served more than the purpose for which it was designed – to create self-awareness and emotional regulation among students. Besides creating a safe environment for student-teacher conversations, it deepened the teachers' understanding of their students, thereby enabling them to support student learning to a greater degree. Over a period of six months,

disciplinary issues and the number of cases referred to the school counsellor were greatly reduced as more and more teachers began to resolve these issues in class themselves. Another heart-warming development was the improved management of learners with disabilities; teachers showed a better understanding of group dynamics and were more positive and supportive in making the 'buddy system' work well.

The data from the wellbeing survey conducted before and after the purpose framework showed a significant increase in levels of wellbeing, with the highest increase seen in primary school.

Endnotes

- i The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion is the name of an international agreement signed at the First International Conference on Health Promotion, organised by the World Health Organization (WHO) and held in Ottawa, Canada, in November 1986.
- ii Definitions by: Oxford and Cambridge dictionary, The Berkley Institute of wellbeing, Allardt's well-being model (1989) The PERMA model (Seligman 2000) Laura King (Health and Wellness Coach), Gemma Simons (2021)
- iii *ibid*
- iv Hendren, Weisen and Orley, Mental Health Programmes in Schools, WHO, 1994



Jwairia Saleem is an Assistant Professor at the School of Continuing Education, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. She has been a School Quality Assessor since 2009 and is a certified ISO 21001-2018 auditor for schools. She has worked extensively on improving school cultures for better learning and happier learners in schools both in India and the Middle East. She is passionate about and committed to systemic reform in education through intensive mentoring and coaching of teachers and other functionaries in the education sector. She received the Advait Leadership Award in 2017 for her work in transforming school ecosystems. She may be contacted at jwairia.saleem@apu.edu.in