

Preparing Teachers to Nurture Wellbeing of Children

Rajashree Srinivasan

Educational practice in a society is an endeavour directed at the wellbeing of young children. John White (2011) in his book *Exploring Wellbeing in Schools*, observes that as an educational aim, school education should equip every child to lead a life that is personally flourishing and help others to do so, too. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 states, ‘...seeking guidance from the constitutional vision of India... certain broad aims of education have been identified in this document. These include the independence of thought and action, sensitivity to others’ wellbeing and feelings, learning to respond to new situations in a flexible and creative manner, predisposition towards participation in democratic processes, and the ability to work towards and contribute to economic processes and social change’ (NCF Document, p.vii).

In these articulations, wellbeing moves beyond the description of its construct as an individual accomplishment or experience. It becomes an amorphous amalgamation of good health, psychosocial competencies and ethical sensibilities that acquires its specific meaning in the contexts of the society in which the educational practice is carried out. Children’s wellbeing, both as a process and an experience, is influenced by, and in turn, influences the ecologies of development such as the family, peers, schools, and the socio-political, economic, historical, cultural and policy contexts. Wellbeing in educational settings rests on the quality of relationships and responses to interpersonal needs, interests, capabilities and challenges. It is not an inherent capacity or a personal characteristic of the child. It emerges in the process of development across childhood and adolescence, influencing their futures as well. That is, children’s perceptions about their wellbeing emerge from a negotiation with the environment over time and place. Therefore, the supportive relationships they experience in their social settings during childhood matter to their wellbeing.

Schooling, teaching and wellbeing

Schooling provides an environment for expanding a child’s capacities in multiple areas essential for their

wellbeing – the capacity to engage in understanding and reasoning, academic knowledge, socio-emotional and moral development (including forming engaging and worthwhile relationships and activities with others) and participation in the processes of democratic citizenship. Schools, therefore, have the task of ensuring a learning environment imbued with empathy, dignity, respect, autonomy, and plentiful opportunities for self-expression, among others. An education aimed towards such a contextualised understanding of wellbeing encompasses notions of justice and care as its building blocks. Justice and care are essential ingredients of inclusive schooling, and foundational to the notion of teaching as a ‘relational practice’.

Critical classroom practices of social justice are premised on the notion that all children in the classroom deserve fair and equitable rights, opportunities and access to resources. Social justice practices aimed at humanising the classrooms help students embrace their own identities, avoid bias and respect people from different backgrounds. Social justice-based approaches include a focus on differences rather than on deficits among children; build on culturally relevant previous knowledge; create a classroom culture of relational trust and empathy; help students question injustice where prevalent; nurture children’s commitment to their communities and towards civic engagement.

Central to good teaching is caring. Care is not a woolly or a feel-good construct. It refers to a relational quality that shows an active concern for the wellbeing of others. It is more than the formation of interpersonal relationships between the child and the teacher. It includes the ability to sustain connections, and the commitment to respond to children with sensitivity and flexibility. Caring practices are visible in a variety of interactions that teachers and children engage in: planning age-appropriate lessons, engaging

students in classroom processes, providing safe spaces for expression, praising students, including children's perspectives in decision-making, setting boundaries both inside and outside classroom interactions, building classroom norms and rules together, listening to children's mental health needs, being there for them through their difficult times, challenging them with concepts and ideas, declining their requests, providing constructive feedback and so on.

However, such an articulation of a teacher's role in the wellbeing of children does not mean that ensuring the wellbeing of children is the sole responsibility of the teacher. School is a web of relationships, and wellbeing manifests at multiple levels in a school: intra-personal, interpersonal and institutional. Therefore, wellbeing is a key educational concern that all actors of the school have to pay attention to – head teachers, teachers, non-teaching staff and parents, as well. Given the central significance of wellbeing in the lives of children, it becomes important to pay attention to these aspects in teacher-preparation programmes too.

Pedagogy of teacher education and children's wellbeing

Pre-service teacher education programmes are the first point of contact for prospective teachers to develop capabilities in terms of their knowledge, skills and values. The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009) highlighting the vision of teacher preparation observes, 'Teachers need to be prepared to care for children, enjoy to be with them, seek knowledge, own responsibility towards society and work to build a better world, develop sensitivity to the problems of the learners, commitment to justice and zeal for social reconstruction' (NCFTE, p 20).

Role of student-teachers

Student-teachers need to be prepared to respond to the developmental needs and diversity in their classrooms. Challenges to the wellbeing of children can come from factors inside or outside the classroom. Children, especially those coming from difficult social and economic backgrounds, may experience conflicts, corporal punishment, violence, stigma and discrimination extensively. These events impact their educational outcomes in the classroom and thwart their emotional wellbeing. Student-teachers need to respond to these situations with sensitivity and flexibility.

Teacher education programmes can prepare

student-teachers to nurture enabling environments in their classrooms by: a) providing knowledge, skills and values to enact caring practices in their classrooms; b) preparing them with a range of specific pedagogical approaches so that they may create caring communities within the classroom and school spaces; c) fostering sensitivity to the socio-emotional needs of children. Outlined below are a few pedagogical approaches to achieving these goals. These approaches do not require separate time or space in the curriculum of teacher education. Teacher educators could integrate them into their teaching of theory- or practice-related courses.

Aspects of promoting wellbeing

The approaches outlined below include three components – first, the domain in which teachers need to be prepared; second, a rationale for including this domain and third, the possible curricular and pedagogic approach.

Tackling discrimination and prejudice

Children in government schools may experience discrimination emerging from differences in social class, gender, religion, caste, language, disability and sexual orientation. Discrimination is a human violation and undermines the social cohesion, educational success and wellbeing of children. Teachers need to be aware of the possible forms of direct and indirect discrimination in a classroom and the different sources of discrimination, such as their own attitudes, school rules, curriculum, pedagogic practices, teaching-learning materials and access to food and other infrastructure at school.

Teacher education (TE) programmes need to help student-teachers examine their assumptions, beliefs and stereotypes about a host of issues concerning childhood, socio-cultural backgrounds, learning, teaching and diversity. An inquiry into 'self, contexts and relationships' through an examination of their own identity markers of caste, class, religion, gender and abilities may develop their sensitivities and sensibilities about diversity and wellbeing. Discussions in pre-service teachers' classrooms can be about understanding who might be at risk for discrimination, the approaches to minimise discrimination, ways to support children at risk of discrimination, promoting inclusion and an appreciation of the benefits of diversity in schools and classrooms.

Preventing violence

Schools need to be sanctuaries of wellbeing, peace and inclusion. They have an obligation to protect children from violence. However, various forms of direct violence are inflicted on children by teachers and by other children in the form of hitting and bullying (including cyberbullying). Fear, corporal punishment and competition in the classrooms cause anxiety in children. Prospective teachers need to be educated to develop democratic and constructive approaches to creating safe and brave spaces for dialogue with children. They need to be taught various non-violent approaches to classroom discipline and communication. Student-teachers need to be prepared to listen to children with empathy.

Dealing with fake news and misinformation

Propaganda, misinformation and fake news can cause harm, intentional or unintentional. Within school spaces, it can polarise student opinion and undermine democratic ways of functioning. Sharing links, texts, videos, or images through a variety of digital medium allow information to go viral. Young children can be extremely vulnerable to misinformation and fake news. Sometimes, students also resort to social media to convey negative images about teachers, principals and their peers. This can cause a great strain on their physical and mental wellbeing. Prospective teachers need to be trained in media and digital literacy. This can include developing strategies to understand and assess information from different sources of media, critically evaluate information, make arguments, use evidence and learn to make interpretations within contexts. Pre-service teachers need to gather skills to also integrate this learning into the curriculum of various subjects.

Managing conflict

Since the caring work of teachers implies reciprocity in the relationship and a commitment to social and emotional connections, it brings with it relational tensions. Prospective teachers need to address sensitive and complex moral dilemmas and conflicts in the classroom or outside. Brushing them aside is harmful to the wellbeing of children and to themselves as well. Approaches such as peer mediation, restorative justice and conflict management can be taught to student-teachers during their programme. Such training in conflict

management helps them uncover their own biases and prejudices and offers them the courage to handle conflicts confidently in their classrooms. Participation in such methods of handling conflicts allows them to understand the work of teaching and their roles as teachers in ensuring the wellbeing of children. It helps them understand that conflicts are inherent to their everyday personal lives and to their professional work as teachers.

Addressing controversial issues

Schools are miniature societies and the challenges that afflict society are often reflected in the workings of the school. Children may feel troubled by the injustice and negative events that happen around them. Controversial issues may relate to experiences of poverty, terrorism, gender, caste or any other life events where questions of inequality and justice may be seen to have been challenged. These are usually highly emotive in nature and most children (and adults too) have challenges in discussing these rationally. These may emerge in the classrooms or sometimes teachers may have to raise them among children respectfully. Therefore, pre-service teachers need to have an understanding of handling controversial issues. Collaborative, reflective inquiry, and dialogue on these issues may help in developing multiple perspectives about these issues and nurture democratic capabilities, such as openness to others' beliefs and views, critical thinking, speaking respectfully, and adaptability to ambiguities and uncertainties. These encourage pre-service teachers to listen to each other and work out possibilities sensitively.

Examining their educational practice through the lens of social justice and care perspectives helps student-teachers understand that social realities are dynamic and fluid and that they need to be critically reflective about these on an everyday basis. Besides the approaches to conflict management mentioned above, cooperative learning approaches such as 'academic controversy' can also be introduced to prospective students to teach controversial issues. Such training also prepares them to protect students from vulnerable backgrounds to handle unexpected remarks and questions in constructive ways.

Listening to children

How children view themselves in relation to their life in school and its elements - the curriculum, child-teacher relationship, pedagogy practices, curricular and sports activities, playground, infrastructure, peer relationships – provides insights into how children perceive their wellbeing in school. Listening to children’s perspectives must be the central, caring agenda for schools that seek to be inclusive. Therefore, it is imperative for pre-service teacher programmes to help student-teachers understand ways and methods of facilitating children’s participation in discourses that concern their lives – on how to consult and involve children in the learning processes, on decision-making about school and classroom activities, and in encouraging them to express their views.

Developing an understanding of our Constitution and other legal rights of children

The Constitution of India represents a broad framework to protect citizens’ rights and serves as a frame for the overall social, economic and political development of India. School practices ought to reflect the basic values of equality, equity, secularism, justice, liberty and fraternity enshrined in the Constitution and must encourage children and teachers to practice these values in their individual and social life. Knowledge and critical understanding of Constitutional values, fundamental duties and rights of children need to inform curricular and pedagogical action.

Pre-service teachers need to be educated about the Constitution, its values and approaches to connect them to their classroom practices. Having a knowledge of the Constitution and other legal rights of children also helps teachers deal with conflicts and controversial issues in the light of the Constitution. Constitution education will help pre-service teachers understand that the protection of children’s dignity and respect is non-negotiable in assuring the wellbeing of children.

Opportunities for self-development

Teachers’ own wellbeing is critical to children’s wellbeing and to the formation of schools as caring communities. Caregiving professions, such as teaching, can be emotionally exhausting. Sustaining teaching needs high motivation, commitment

and autonomy. Teacher education programmes will need to equip student-teachers with not only knowledge about children’s socio-emotional needs but also strategies for developing one’s own social and emotional competencies. Experiencing art, music, dance and theatre promotes opportunities to understand self, strengthen relational capacities among adult students and enhances their physical and psychological wellbeing. For example, in the online classes during the pandemic, students (MA Education) who took my course, ‘Teachers and Teaching’ at the University, shared their art or sang a music piece, played an instrument or taught knitting, sketching, mandala art or yoga in the first fifteen minutes of a ninety-minute class. Most students turned their videos on during this brief session. In the feedback, the majority of the class shared that these aesthetic experiences provided great joy, strengthened emotional connectedness amongst their peers and offered opportunities to connect with their friends beyond academic learning spaces. Emerging from this experience, I continued this effort while teaching in the face-to-face mode and students expressed similar thoughts and feelings. While far deeper scrutiny of the process and outcomes are required to make any concrete formulations, adult students’ views seem to indicate a positive proclivity towards these pathways of self-development and awareness.

Final observations

Teaching occurs at the interface of the socio-emotional and cultural worlds of children and the wider socio-political, historical and economic contexts. Gaining an understanding of both these worlds is essential to carry out the work of teaching. Learning to teach is a complex phenomenon. Becoming a teacher involves attuning oneself to children’s ways of learning and knowing, and having a capacity for empathy for the socio-emotional lives of children. Student-teachers need to develop qualities of care, respect, empathy, warmth and sensitivity towards the social backgrounds of children as a professional requirement. A wide spectrum of experiences that includes reading and writing, questioning, teaching, dialogue, collaborative inquiry, self-development, reflection, introspection and creative expressions are imperative for developing socio-emotional

orientation and ethical sensibilities of the student-teachers towards children and schools. If these experiences can 'initiate' teachers into appreciating the educational aims of flourishing or wellbeing

and help them become critical actors in the school communities they join, it is a well-begun journey of possibilities towards self-renewal, life-long inquiry and learning.



Rajashree Srinivasan is Professor, School of Education, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. Her interests are in child development and pedagogic practices in teacher education. She may be contacted at rajashree@apu.edu.in

It is important to talk about emotions in the classroom and provide a space for expression. When children experience a new emotion, they want to share it but are generally not encouraged to do so. Such emotions, if left unexpressed, lead to negative social behaviours, like bullying. Creative art forms are fun to engage in and also create space for building trust.

Mahima Rastogi, Expressive Art Forms | Tools for Teachers, p 27