

Current discourses on teacher wellbeing often revolve around causes of stress and burnout among teachers and recommendations on how these can be remedied. This article delves deeper into what teacher wellbeing entails, why it is important and how institutions can foster and sustain a happy school culture that nurtures emotional intelligence and allows for the actualisation of the potential of every individual. It then explores some of the ideas on how teachers and leaders can further their own as well as their learners' wellbeing.

Importance of teacher wellbeing

Teacher wellbeing has become increasingly important in the wake of elevated levels of stress of modern life, smaller family structures that lack support from extended family and neighbours, and declining emotional resilience, particularly in post-COVID-19 times. These factors affect not only the teachers' own wellbeing, but also thrust on them the additional responsibility of dealing with learners who are going through these challenges. Only when a teacher experiences wellbeing will she be able to empathise and deal with the challenges of meeting the diverse socio-emotional and academic needs of the learners. The need for ensuring teacher wellbeing is most aptly articulated by Thich Nhat Hanh as quoted in *Teaching to Transgress* (Bell Hooks, 1994): 'The practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people.'

Teachers play the most crucial role in building a safe and nurturing environment needed for learner wellbeing. There is adequate evidence from research about the positive impact of teacher wellbeing, directly and indirectly, on student learning as well as on a positive and flourishing school culture. Teachers who experience wellbeing are able to bond well with their students, have better skills at managing class interactions, create a safe and positive classroom climate and are

sensitive to the needs of diverse students, often providing them with the support they need to make progress. They are also able to cash in on the social capital that schools provide them with, in forming networks of the professional community, upon which they draw support for meeting personal and professional goals.

Ensuring teacher wellbeing is also important from the administrative and financial perspective as it leads to better productivity, greater job satisfaction and reduces attrition. Caring for teacher wellbeing also leads to an understanding of issues that are a threat to wellbeing and enables the creation of work conditions for teachers to engage positively with their learners and colleagues, attain success in what they do and experience job satisfaction.

Dimensions of teacher wellbeing

Wellbeing is the state of experiencing satisfaction with life, marked by feelings of happiness, contentment, and purpose. It is often associated with the individual's ability to cope with life's stresses, build and sustain relationships, be healthy and fit, and be purposefully productive in achieving their goals.

However, wellbeing at the workplace has a socio-ecological dimension as well. While teachers' wellbeing is to a great extent dependent upon their own competence in dealing with emotions, managing relationships, and achieving personal and professional goals, it is significantly influenced by factors related to all aspects of their working life – from safety and security of the physical environment to emotional safety that comes from being valued, appreciated and heard; and having genial and trusting relationships with colleagues, learners and the larger school community. Teachers' perceptions about the quality of their work, the effectiveness of their instruction and the 'value addition' they bring to the learning environment and learners' achievements, also contribute conspicuously to their job satisfaction and feeling of wellness.



Figure 1. The personal, social and ecological dimensions of teacher wellbeing

Socio-emotional competencies as enablers for wellbeing

The Consortium for Socio-Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2013) suggests five socio-emotional competencies that are instrumental in the attainment of teacher wellbeing and also impact student learning outcomes.

- Self-awareness: Being self-aware is to understand one’s emotions, goals, values, strengths, and limitations; it helps develop a positive state of mind.
- Self-management: The ability to regulate one’s thoughts, emotions, and behaviour; it allows one to manage stress, set realistic goals and adapt to these, if and when needed.
- Social awareness: Being socially aware involves understanding social norms, and expectations. This understanding enables one to be perceptive to others’ socio-emotional needs and be empathetic and compassionate. Teachers are in a better position than anyone else to understand the diverse needs of their students, identify resources and garner support from the wider school community.
- Relationship building: Being able to build strong and trusting relationships with learners and colleagues is key to creating a warm and supportive work culture. The ability to listen actively, communicate clearly and feel connected enables one to experience belongingness to the community. It allows for mutual cooperation and amicable resolution of differences, so everyone feels safe and cared for.
- Responsible decision-making: Knowing oneself gives one the confidence to make decisions when needed. Teachers, in particular, need to make well-informed decisions throughout

their workday across all domains of their work, from student seating and grouping, selecting appropriate teaching-learning and assessment strategies to providing very specific feedback and support to help learners improve. Some of these decisions require careful consideration on moral and ethical grounds to make sound choices so as to be just, fair, and mindful of the wellbeing of those in their care.



Figure 2. Socio-emotional competencies (CASEL, 2013) as enablers of wellbeing

However, teachers possessing adequate socio-emotional competencies may also be at risk of stress and burnout for reasons beyond their control and which emanate from the external environment. Highly charged and self-driven teachers are at a greater risk of experiencing frustration and stress when, because of extraneous reasons, they are unable to meet their goals. For instance, resolving behavioural issues requires an ecosystem of

collaboration with colleagues and leaders as well as a shared understanding of positive disciplinary measures and processes of amicable conflict resolution. In the absence of these, teachers are likely to feel emotional exhaustion and frustration. Yet another threat to their wellbeing comes from top-down instructions on syllabus completions and other administrative work that eat into their time, impeding the fulfilment of their professional goals. The issue is compounded if the work culture of their school does not encourage the creation of learning communities, within or outside the school, which could offer them support.

Nurturing teacher wellbeing

Nurturing wellbeing is the collective responsibility of both teachers and school leaders. While teachers themselves need to work toward developing their own competencies that lead to wellbeing, leaders at the workplace must be committed to creating a positive school climate that affords teachers autonomy, professional development opportunities, and possibilities of developing trusting relationships with learners and colleagues. Such a culture is reflected in distributed leadership, transparent and clear two-way communication, and collective decision-making.

What teachers can do for themselves:

- Schedule a 'me-time' and space for self-care: Teachers need to do this consistently every day. Some routines that add a 'feel-good' factor for teachers are: spending time on fitness, pursuing a hobby, meditation, or something as simple as talking to someone they value.

- Slot some time for professional development: Teachers who read up or discuss with colleagues the latest development in education, reflect on their practice and incorporate new ideas into their teaching, report gains in confidence and self-esteem. They perceive their professional practice as effective and successful and enjoy a greater sense of accomplishment and job satisfaction.
- Network and build relationships with students, colleagues, other staff and professionals outside school: Teachers consistently report that having healthy relationships with students takes away the stress of managing classroom behaviour and instruction. Similarly, genial relationships with colleagues not only ease their work through collaboration but also makes it richer and more joyful.

What school leaders can do:

- Treat everyone with respect
- Give each teacher a voice and involve them in decision making
- Provide autonomy
- Create a safe space for discussing teachers' problems and finding solutions so that they may share, learn and grow together
- Organise opportunities for unwinding or showcasing non-teaching talents. These events create umpteen opportunities for teachers to feel valued and appreciated and bond with each other, creating a sense of belonging to the community



Figure 3. Nurturing teacher wellbeing

Three practices from a 'happy school'

Iqbalia International School (IIS), Hyderabad, was recognised for its transformative practices by the Adhvaith Foundation in 2017. The following practices were instrumental in creating an ecosystem that nurtured the wellbeing of teachers and learners and created a happy school culture.

1. Teachers' circle time

Every Saturday, while the students lead the morning hour, teachers gather in the hall for circle time and each one shares an experience that affected them positively. Initially, when this practice was started, teachers struggled with this – clearly, our minds dwell more on unpleasant experiences. Over time, conversations flowed spontaneously, and teachers commented on how they gradually learnt to take notice of positive experiences around them, think about and savour these more often, and how this left them feeling 'good' about themselves as well as those around them. This practice helped teachers know each other better, created opportunities for building relationships and fostered a feeling of belongingness and camaraderie.

2. The 3-5 meeting'

Once a week, all subject teachers met for 90 minutes (two periods) which was planned in their calendar. The agenda was to discuss any classroom strategy that worked well for them or any struggle they faced, with the entire team pitching in with possible solutions for the latter. This provided teachers with a safe space where they could discuss their struggles, seek help, and find solutions to their everyday problems. It provided many teachers with the platform they needed for professional development and brought out the best in each. Not only did this help in increasing teaching effectiveness across the school, but it was also instrumental in establishing a collaborative practice as a norm in the school, with teachers using this space for working together to plan lessons and sharing resources, inviting each other to observe classroom practice and learning to give meaningful feedback. This system served as a powerful tool for ongoing professional development at school and created a learning culture that benefitted students as much as it did the teachers.

3. Teacher-Leader

The teaching community is diverse with each teacher having a different set of skills- some of which might not be fully optimised for lack of opportunities. The 'Teacher-Leader' approach opened up the doors for each one to bring forth their best, and with a

culture of support, the less confident ones also eventually took up responsibilities of their choice and did well. While preparing the events calendar for the year, teachers were free to choose events they could lead and pick their support teams as well. They had all the autonomy they needed to plan and conduct the event as they deemed fit, within the resources available and ensuring the outcomes were achieved. At the end of the first year, teachers had this to say: 'I didn't know I had this in me'; 'It gave me so much time to plan and execute an event of my choice. I had always wanted to do it this way, but with so many events to manage, never had the time'; 'I had never compered before; felt good when my students and parents complimented me on my pronunciation. I think we limit ourselves too much and are hesitant to take on new things. I wouldn't have done it if I had to do it alone. Having a supportive team really helped.'

Central to all these practices that were pivotal to transforming the school culture and ensuring the wellbeing of teachers and learners, is an empathetic and compassionate leader, who willingly shared both her expertise and her authority to bring out the best in her team.

Sustaining the 'happy culture'

Wellbeing is not a 'stage' that once achieved will remain for good; it can be disrupted by trauma to socio-emotional self by events in personal or professional life. To ensure that teachers continue to be happy and content with personal and professional performance, it is essential that their wellbeing be measured periodically, and adjustments made to the system as a whole.

There are a number of tools and methods that offer valid and reliable measures of teacher wellbeing at school; from questionnaires, surveys, and group discussions to personalised one-on-one interviews as and when the need arises. Whatever the mode of data collection, the focus must be on the information that is truly representative of the observable constructs of wellbeing. Three important and interconnected aspects are usually considered as valid measures of work-related wellbeing:

- Professional effectiveness: Success at quality teaching, meeting professional obligations, professional growth
- Work-related stress: Teaching loads, administrative and additional duties, commuting issues, strained relationships with learners or colleagues

- Sense of belonging and connectedness emanating from strong relationships with learners and colleagues

Taking teachers’ opinions and perceptions around these three parameters allows leaders to build a fairly reliable measure of the status of their wellbeing. However, creating a safe climate as well as clear communication for the purpose of data collection is a prerequisite to ensuring responses are no-holds-barred and candid. The data then can be safely used to draw meaningful inferences and serve as a basis for decision-making. A particularly

useful tool borrowed from management science is the iterative PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle which helps institutions embrace quality through continuous improvement.

School leaders are able to gather reliable data for evidence-based action planning, continuously check for the impact of their actions, and adjust plans when intended outcomes do not happen. It also helps them identify factors that might endanger wellbeing and take appropriate preventive measures to strengthen a happy work culture that promotes wellbeing for all.

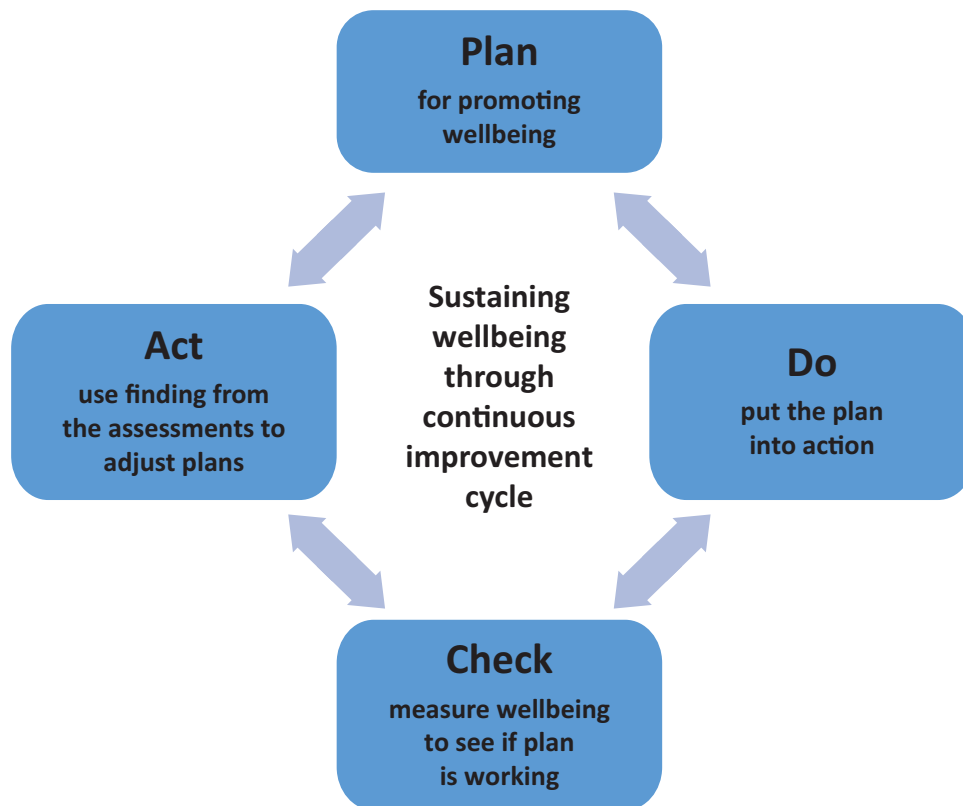


Figure 4. Sustaining a happy work culture

Endnotes

- i A triangular curriculum structure consisting of Subject Matter, Self-learning and Social Learning.

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The most critical part of the care of a child with a disability is early intervention. Parents and teachers need to look out for developmental delays in the early years. If any development milestone is missed or delayed, first a paediatrician should be consulted and, on their advice, the child may be referred to an organisation and school which cater to their needs. At such a place, counsellors and psychologists employ methods such as diagnostic tests to understand the difficulty the child may be facing and create a plan for the interventions required.

Pallavee Datta, Children with Disabilities in Regular Schools, p 64