

Linda Grīga

University of Latvia, Latvia
veestules.lindai@gmail.com

Promoting children's wellbeing in an educational context

Summary

The topicality and the context of this research are related to the phenomenon of wellbeing and factors influencing it, regarding early childhood and primary school. The aim is to study, analyse, and identify the key factors of promoting the wellbeing and healthy lifestyle of a child. Children's wellbeing, therefore, and health and safety are more than just physical wellbeing; it should be seen holistically, as a whole welfare, and it depends not only on the environment where the child is raised, but also involves emotional support from all the people who are connected with this little human being. Thus, the first years for children at school and also for teachers (especially young teachers who have just begun their career) are a special time in their life because during this period the experience of what the child and the teacher is, and how strong and essential their connection will be, is formed. It is very important already at the early stage to understand that each child is different; they have different physical and emotional development, individual characteristics, as well as a different approach to understanding and learning things. Therefore, in the primary school it is important for the teachers to create a positive, highly social, interactive and creative environment so that the children can develop and learn more successfully. Wellbeing has a great importance in the school environment in order to create teachers' and children's satisfaction with life, positive relationships with others, as well as a positive and successful learning environment. The family, as well as the teachers who are involved in the development of the children's lives, especially in the first grades at school, are one of the most essential factors that define the personal growth of the young children.

Keywords: wellbeing, factors influencing children's wellbeing, education, pre-school, primary school

Introduction

Before considering the issue of promoting children's wellbeing in an educational context, it is important to have a closer look at the Latvian education system. Article 4 of the Education Law of the Republic of Latvia (1998) prescribes compulsory education in Latvia, namely, "The preparation of children from the age of 5 for the acquisition of basic education, or the continuation of the acquisition of basic education until reaching the age of 18, shall be mandatory." One of the main education target groups is recognized as children of pre-school age and children and young people of mandatory education age (Article 7 of the Education Law), without defining who are considered to be children, and who are the young people. Although a person attains his/her full legal capacity at

18 years of age (coming of age), it means, in accordance with common knowledge that it is considered that at this age the person is relatively mature and is able to realise himself/herself without assistance in society, as well as with regard to economic relations. However, within the framework of this article and in accordance with the Youth Law (2008), young people are persons from 13 to 25 years of age, and so persons under the age of 13 years are considered as children who acquire education in pre-school and primary education programmes. Taking this into account, the phenomenon of wellbeing is examined in the age group from 5 to 13 years, paying more attention to primary school children (aged 7 to 13).

Defining wellbeing and the child's wellbeing

Wellbeing is multi-dimensional and is generally understood as one of the major qualities of a person's life. "Wellbeing" is a term which has been created within the framework of positive psychology. It has its roots in the late 20th century when the psychologist Michael Argyle created a concept "psychology of happiness", which can now be considered more as a concept of the hedonic aspects of psychology (Svence 2009: 17). As M. Argyle (1992) states, "if people are asked what they mean by this word [happiness] they give two kinds of answer. Some describe it in terms of positive emotions – joy, fun, euphoria – others in terms of satisfaction and contentment, with life as a whole, job, spouse, home, and so on, a reflective state of mind" (Argyle 1992: 282).

Alongside with M. Argyle another psychologist, Edward Diener (2012), also examines wellbeing as "life satisfaction" and "positive emotions and moods", asserting that wellbeing is based on both physical and mental pleasure, "positive and negative emotions are typically thought of as aspects of hedonic well-being because they are inherently pleasant or unpleasant" (Diener et.al. 2012: 334). Therefore, hedonic aspects of wellbeing are linked with states of pleasure, emotions and moods, and this is a big step forward in psychology, which previously focused more on healing the mental illnesses of people and helping them to understand those illnesses and live with them.

One of the founders of positive psychology, Martin Seligman (2002), describes his idea, why this new branch of psychology was necessary, saying that for the last half century the main focus was on one topic – mental illness – but people want something more than just to correct their weaknesses, so therefore, the time to understand positive emotions, build strength and virtue, and live a good life has come. "Positive psychology has three pillars: The first is the study of positive emotion. The second is the study of the positive traits, foremost among them the strengths and virtues, but also the "abilities" such as intelligence and athleticism. The third is the study of the positive institutions, such as democracy, strong families, and free inquiry, that support the virtues, which support the positive emotions" (Seligman 2002: xiii). M. Seligman affirms with reference to these strengths and virtues, that strong families, as well as institutions and one's closest people are very important for promoting positive emotions and environment. The positive emo-

tions of trust, hope, and confidence are essential, especially at an early age and during school while the personality is developing.

There has been and still is on-going considerable work regarding the definition and measurement of the wellbeing of childhood in the United Kingdom (Statham and Chase 2010). The authors (Statham and Chase 2010) agree that the concepts of “wellbeing”, “quality of life” and “life satisfaction” include both objective and subjective aspects of a person’s life, namely, not only the state of family, income, educational achievements, and health, but also person’s own feelings, emotions, and thoughts about life in general. The research shows that although the objective data collected from different countries demonstrate the level of a child wellbeing, (for example, children in homes with low “material wellbeing” or children with a few education resources are indicators of a low wellbeing) it is still very important to take into account also subjective indicators such as happiness, socialization, and the quality and satisfaction of life etc.

While the objective aspects are more difficult to change, the subjective aspects may be changed more easily by family members and educators in order to promote the wellbeing of children. However, all aspects should be seen holistically. Angela Owens (2012) says that early childhood educators think, not only about the children’s physical wellbeing and practical safety and health, but also about emotional support, therefore, taking into account their differences, their needs, while respecting their individual life context. “A strong sense of wellbeing is fundamentally connected to children’s sense of *belonging, being and becoming*” (Owens 2012: 1). She continues that a key part of learning is when children see a healthy lifestyle modelled positively and enthusiastically by surrounding people who are important to them, such as family, educators, peers, and communities.

Building a positive learning environment and children’s wellbeing

According to the Article 20 of the General Education Law (1999), the pre-school Educational Programme shall ensure the preparation of a student for the acquisition of a basic education, comprising:

- 1) the development of individuality;
- 2) intellectual, physical, and social development;
- 3) the development of initiative, inquisitiveness, independence, and creative activity;
- 4) the strengthening of health;
- 5) psychological preparation for the commencement of the acquisition of a basic education;
- 6) acquisition of the basic skills for using the official language.

Furthermore, the pre-school educational programme shall be acquired by children up to 7 years of age. Acquisition of the pre-school educational programme may be prolonged or reduced by one year depending on the state of health and psychological preparedness of the student in conformity with the wishes of parents and the opinion of the family doctor or psychologist. Therefore, the whole pre-school education process focuses on the

development of personality, and the development of a healthy lifestyle, namely, physical, emotional, social, and mental wellbeing already at the quite early stage of the child's development. According to psychiatrist Erik Erikson (1950), pre-school education is related to children who are in between the third and fourth stage of psychosocial development (the third stage – “play age” from 3 to 5, and the fourth stage – “school age” from 5 to 12). This transition period is particularly important because from the “playing period” the child becomes more mature – the cognitive processes become more active, and more attention is paid to social adaptation, behaviour, emotions, socialization, and learning.

The importance of emotions and the construction of meaning in the learning process is essential. Creating a positive emotional atmosphere where children can feel safe, self-confident, motivated, and free is equally important to the activities that have emotional connections. A positive classroom climate with different classroom customs and traditions, different tasks for children, as well as an inquiring learning environment helps to develop personalities and promote wellbeing.

While, according to the State Education Development Agency (SEDA) of the Republic of Latvia, the objective of the pre-school education curriculum is to ensure the multi-faceted development of a child's personality and to promote health and readiness to enter the primary stage of basic education, the aim of basic education is to provide opportunities for acquiring the basic knowledge and skills required for community and personal life, to lay the foundation for continuing education, to promote the learner's harmonious development, and to foster a responsible attitude toward one's self, family, society, the environment, and the state. The basic school in Latvia is divided into primary school (the first six grades) and lower secondary school (up to ninth grade). Although in the recent past the primary school covered the first four grades, nowadays the General Education Law (1999) provides that the basic educational programmes of the first stage for grades 1 to 6 shall be implemented in primary schools (Article 30, Paragraph 4). Thus, the wellbeing of children in primary school is particularly important because not only do they move from the “play age” to “school age”, but they also ‘touch’ the adolescence stage by crossing the line of youth.

Pursuant to E. Erikson (1950) at the pre-school age children are becoming more creative and imaginative; they cooperate with others, and start to learn independence and its influence with the environment. Afterwards they start to learn step by step how to read, write, and calculate, as well as to do things on their own. In primary school the importance of child's peer group and the need to demonstrate their skills, and receive attention and praise increases.

Riga City Council's Education, Culture, and Sports Department (2008) has developed special support material for the class teachers in order to help them to understand the development of the children's personalities, thus promoting a positive and successful teaching-learning environment and cooperation among teachers, children, and their parents. At the early school age (7 to 11 years) interest in *who am I?* is formed; children are aware of their own abilities and restrictions, they form their behaviour and like to observe the behaviour of other people. At an intellectual level children learn how to do elementary

operations in their minds, how to arrange objects by different features. It is important for the teacher to understand that usually children with a lower self-esteem at this age tend to have lower motivation, they are sensitive to criticism, and often are quiet and insecure, so therefore, the criticism of the teacher should focus on a certain activity or action of a child, not on the child's personality, as it can deeply affect the child's wellbeing. In later years (age 11 to 13 – the youngest teenagers, and aged 13 to 15/16 – the oldest teenagers) teenagers try to explore themselves, their personalities, abilities, and characteristics. They become more independent, and they start to feel a sense of being a part of society and try to fit in. It is very important for the teacher to understand that at this age teenagers are seeking their identities, thus they can often be impulsive, egocentric, unbalanced. Although this age (especially the age of 14 to 16) may be difficult for teachers to deal with, especially inexperienced ones, all is based on understanding, positive relations, awareness of problems, and problem-solving skills, self-acceptance, and other factors.

M. Seligman (2002) explains that wellbeing depends also on the level of satisfaction and happiness in life, and it can be seen already in early childhood when looking after children. He talks about the styles of loving and being loved in childhood and how it affects life later. There are three types of children regarding styles of loving: *secure*, *avoidant*, and *anxious*; his ideas are based on John Bowlby's observations on children. M. Seligman goes further explaining that observation on how the infants play in early childhood can lead to understanding their behaviour, as well as understanding negative and positive experiences later. Therefore, it is often a challenge for first grade teachers to understand and deal with such different children – some of them are very secure, they smile a lot and do not have any difficulties in connecting with the teacher and other children, but some of the children, on the contrary, are anxious, and are more stressed in larger groups, and do not trust anyone. Moreover, according to M. Seligman (2002) it leaves a huge imprint in adult life: "Secure adults have high self-esteem and few self-doubts. Other people like them, and they regard other people as trustworthy, reliable [...] Avoidant adults regard other people with suspicion, as dishonest and untrustworthy. They lack confidence [...] Anxious adults feel they have little control over their lives, find other people hard to understand and predict [...]" (Seligman 2002: 193). Thus, it is very important for both parents and, later, teachers of children already in the stage of early childhood to pay attention to children – how they play, how they interact with each other, how they react in certain situations and so on, because it may help to understand the psychological and subjective wellbeing of the children better, as regards their health and safety, which are important for their cognitive and emotional development, and other factors.

Balancing work and life is the biggest challenge in every profession, but especially in the teaching profession. As Victoria Neumark (2014) points out, teachers need school leaders to help them find the joy of teaching when unrealistic targets influence negatively their space to reflect and develop. It is very important that staff wellbeing is taken into great consideration because it can influence the whole educational environment. Taking into account the aforesaid, it is very important to understand that the link between chil-

dren's wellbeing and teachers' wellbeing exists, and they should be seen holistically, as interrelated elements. The wellbeing of teachers affects also the learning processes of the children, and if the teacher has a high sense of wellbeing it ensures the ability to motivate children, and the teaching-learning process will be effective, too. As C.R. Snyder and Shane Lopez (2007) explain, it is essential that the teacher knows what positive schooling means, and although there are a few bad teachers, they can still do harm even more than anyone can imagine. "Although negative teachers are relatively rare, even one is too many; it would be bad enough if these poor teachers only impaired the learning of their students, but they also may inflict psychological pain and damage" (Snyder and Lopez 2007: 381). Therefore, both the wellbeing of the teachers and children should be considered, as well as interaction and cooperation with children's parents, which are also essential.

Although genetics and personal characteristics and behaviour influence a person's health and wellbeing, cultural, social and economic environment also play a significant role in wellbeing. In order to promote the wellbeing of teachers several factors need to be taken into account – a positive attitude towards yourself, your job, and others, the ability to cooperate, a meaningful sense of life, the awareness of problems and problem-solving skills, self-acceptance, as well as support and understanding from the others and other factors. If the teachers are aware of these factors, there is no obstacle to prevent them from building a positive and successful atmosphere at work and in their lives.

Conclusions

Promoting children's health, safety and wellbeing in an educational context is one of the most important tasks of teachers. Creating a caring, supportive, and safe learning environment in which the children can grow and thrive plays a crucial role in developing children's wellbeing. Another factor that significantly influences the development of pre-school and school-age children's personality and wellbeing is teachers' wellbeing.

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