

SOCIAL WELLBEING – A KEY FACTOR IN THE MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENT

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Abstract

This contribution represents a long-term project to support the social well-being of pupils for use in the educational environment of schools. The presented project was created as part of the GAČR grant task No. 23-07934S. Social well-being emphasizes well-being in social relationships, specifically in the classroom environment and in the overall climate of the school. It focuses on improving the atmosphere, following the rules, mutual respect, tolerance for diversity, as a basic source of social and individual well-being. The paper responds to the steady rise in mental health problems of children and adolescents (data from the National Institute of Health, CSU), the increase in self-harm and suicide in this age group, based on a long-term analysis of the school environment in which the author is involved, the results of research at home and abroad.

Guiding pupils to achieve life's optimum through the promotion of a healthy social environment has a positive impact on school performance, according to current domestic research. A healthy social environment increases tolerance for differences, reduces anxiety in children and adolescents, and enables them to maximise their own potential.

Thus, caring for the social wellbeing of pupils in schools must be one of the key areas in the comprehensive promotion of mental health, especially in the long term.

The theoretical starting points of the paper are different conceptions of "wellbeing", in which a different quality of this state is highlighted (cf. Jandová, 2021), the starting points are also the thought concepts of Z. Matějček, a leading child psychologist focusing on the needs of children (positive social bonds in the family and school environment, engagement in a variety of activities supporting physical, intellectual and emotional development, a sense of safety and security, a healthy sense of self, social fulfilment and a sense of an open future).

This background was used to design a project to promote the social wellbeing of pupils, the project was prepared in collaboration with Czech Television (CT Edu). Taking into account the possibilities of the school environment, it is ready for implementation in the classroom. All the aspects mentioned above are addressed in the different parts of the presented project, as well as the possibilities of the classroom teachers and their sense of security in working with personal development techniques.

Keywords

Social wellbeing, project, healthy environment, prevention, anxiety, classroom lessons

1 INTRODUCTION

"Wellbeing" can be understood as a synonym for well-being, life happiness, personal satisfaction. It is a complex and very broad concept – it touches on the understanding of human existence, the meaning of life and existence itself. It

explores the material, psychological, social, spiritual and other conditions for a healthy and happy life. A comprehensive view of wellbeing affects both the external conditions and the internal dimensions of the person. Interestingly, in each country, a different quality of wellbeing is highlighted, taking into account the cultural, sociological and

anthropological contexts and traditions of a particular nation, which is also associated with different names for this state of 'wellbeing'. We encounter the terms "Ikigai" (Japan), "Feng shui" (China), "Gemütlichkeit" (Germany), "Gezelligheid" (Holland), "Hygge" (Denmark), "Koselig" (Norway), "Sisu" (Finland), etc. (cf. Jandová, 2021).

Despite the fact that the concept of wellbeing is "new" in our culture (in fact, with a tendency to adopt foreign expressions into Czech) and it is necessary to consider its specificity due to its scope, one cannot ignore the ideas of a number of leading Czech experts who have pointed out the importance of mental well-being - an important part of wellbeing - before.

Let us recall the wise words of Prof. Zdeněk Matějček and summarize what children need to support their mental well-being. These include positive social connections both in the family and in the school environment, engagement in a variety of activities that support physical, intellectual and emotional development, a sense of security and safety, a healthy sense of self and social fulfilment, and a sense of an open future. All of these aspects are the focus of the different parts of the new educational plan.

An important component of pupils' mental well-being at school is social well-being... Social well-being therefore primarily emphasises the well-being of social relationships within a particular classroom, and refers to the quality of the social climate of a particular classroom and the overall atmosphere of a particular school. It focuses on improving the atmosphere, respect for rules, mutual respect, tolerance.

The ideal means of building social well-being can be regularly implemented classroom lessons. These lessons can be set up as a full part of the pupils' regular timetable, and by preparing appropriate activities, teachers can be helped to increase their confidence in implementing classroom lessons (for more details see

e.g. Švamberk Šauerová, 2023), while encouraging pupils to actively contribute to building a healthy social environment and promoting their own wellbeing.

The increase in mental health problems among primary and secondary school students is on the rise. The increase in the incidence of these problems is markedly related to the Covid-19 pandemic and other emerging risk phenomena that we have recently encountered (war conflict, extreme difficulties in transitioning to secondary school in some regions, economic contexts – a sense of subjective deprivation in many families, an increase in psychological difficulties among adults).

Emphasis on mental and physical health care (at different levels, including social health) can be found in almost all experts who deal with the topic of health education or wellness in general (Smetáčková, & Štech et al, 2020; Krejčí, Kornatovská, & Kokeš, 2014; Krejčí, 2011; Švamberk Šauerová, 2018; Maroon, 2012; Kallwass, 2007; Ptáček, Raboch & Kebza, 2013, Hošek, 1999, Jandová, 2021).

In this context, we also note a significant lack of psychological and paedopsychiatric care.

2 OBJECTIVE

The aim of this paper is to propose a program for long-term support of social well-being of secondary school students, which would be easily accessible to all schools and could be used by teachers without the help of specialists (psychologists, psychiatrists).

3 METHODOLOGY

The theoretical starting points are the analysis of the issue of the increase in stress among primary and secondary school students, the increase in anxiety and mental health problems in the general

population and the deterioration of the climate in student groups after the quarantine of the Covid-19 pandemic.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Design of a long-term project to promote pupils social wellbeing for use in the classroom management lessons

The content of "wellbeing" is very closely related to a number of subjects, such as Health Education, Physical Education or Civics. Unfortunately, in practice it is difficult to imagine incorporating new educational themes into already full educational units. Linking topics to the content of classroom lessons therefore seems to be one of the ideal ways to develop pupils' wellbeing and to act on their health in a preventive way, in a safe environment with the class teacher.

When designing projects for use in the classroom management lessons, it is necessary to consider the professional competences of teachers to implement individual activities aimed at promoting social well-being - here it is necessary to respect their teaching position.

It is necessary to consider the multi-layered role of the teaching profession as presented by a number of specialists – e.g. Teacher – Preventionist (Emmerová, 2020), Teacher – Leader (Pašková, 2020), Teacher – Experience Designer (Božík, 2020), etc.

Within the framework of such broadly considered teacher competences, the project can use didactic methods they normally work with, personal development techniques (without deeper psychological topics) and an emphasis on encouraging reflection and self-reflection of the students. It is also necessary to consider the possibility of teachers conducting simple sociometric investigations, emphasizing that teachers should monitor the classroom climate on a regular basis, as part of routine pedagogical diagnostics (for more details, see e.g. Čapek, 2010; Jedlička, Kot'a & Slavík, 2018; Braun, 2003, 2013; Mareš & Ježek,

2012) and use this information for comprehensive work with the class. At the same time, it should be emphasized that standardized psychological tools of sociometric investigations belong only to psychologists, and I consider it unfortunate if standardized sociometric tests fall into the hands of teachers, as they are not sufficiently familiar with their use and unnecessarily neglect techniques that are much more appropriate from the perspective of their competences (but this topic can be the subject of another professional paper).

The described project is the author's work and was created over several months in cooperation with Czech Television - CT Edu division, the primary focus is to support the mental health of pupils and promote wellbeing. Within this cooperation, 10 basic topics with methodologies and worksheets were created for each month, with emphasis on use in classroom lessons. The entire project "School Wellbeing in the Classroom" is available on the CT Edu website (Švamberk Šauerová, 2023).

For each month, one area of wellbeing has been selected, for which a method sheet has been developed, using video demonstrations, a worksheet and recommended techniques/games to achieve the intended competences. Teachers do not have to follow the elaborated scheme, but the selected areas of wellbeing are logically ordered with regard to the pupils' school life and the typical circumstances arising from the age period and themes that are typical for adolescents (e.g. academic failure/school workload, procrastination, time-management, working with goals and personal development, stress, social relationships, identity).

The activities primarily address the personal and emotional development of students, introducing them to practical ways of using positive emotions to support their own mental well-being and ways of processing negative emotions when dealing with common and challenging life situations. They focus on the above themes and support adolescents in taking care of their

own mental health, increasing resilience, developing well-being, and in the school environment.

The activities offer space for preventive preparation of pupils for similar situations (promoting desirable personal competences, competences for further studies in secondary/college or professional life).

In the whole concept of the project, the activities place average demands on the teacher, his empathy, and his ability to work with personal topics. The topic focusing on the processing of emotions may be more challenging than other topics, it is advisable to process these topics with the pupils with the support of an educational counsellor or a prevention specialist (if a school psychologist or special educator works at the school, then in their presence).

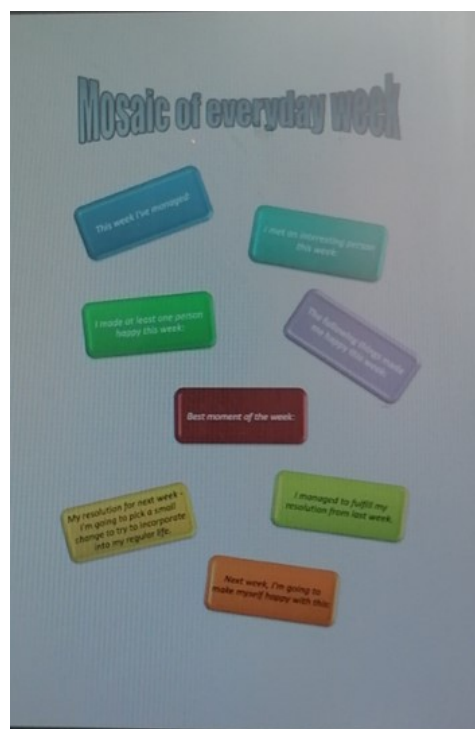
The topics are designed so that they can be implemented in the classroom, and in addition to developing the pupils' personal competences and supporting their own potential in achieving well-being, the project also aims to use the classroom and strengthen the role of the class teacher in preventing pupils' mental health.

Most topics are appropriate to revisit, with a suggested time period to revisit given in brackets for each topic within the Project Scheme (see below) and for each PL usually at the end or at a point that is appropriate. The Project Scheme is based on the regular delivery of the classroom sessions. For selected topics, teachers are also suggested procedures for further elaboration of the topic.

The project also includes the use of a "weekly journal" – similar to a diary. The structure of the weekly diary is simpler, it can better suit those who do not have the need to record every day, at the same time the guidance for self-reflection and planning is a very important part of promoting wellbeing, so it is advisable to motivate pupils to use it. It is designed to be usable in both electronic and printed formats (the variant of use should be

discussed with pupils to meet individual needs). Pupils can create their own version of the weekly diary (mosaic of everyday week).

Fig. 1 Sample of the diary



Source: own

4.2 Project structure

The project is divided into 10 thematic areas:

- 1) Academic stress/prevention of academic failure - analysis of school stress - what stresses pupils – where they experience stress and how it can be addressed.
- 2) Swot analysis – strengths, own resources, reserves, personal development opportunities within the reserve analysis – self-reflection.
- 3) Procrastination – prevention options, 4 steps to change – increasing resilience.
- 4) Time-management – time pie, measurable goals, developing potential.
- 5) Comfort zone, discomfort, situation analysis, ways to use discomfort to increase comfort.

- 6) Emotions, coping with challenging life situations, experiences, returning to inner security, visualizing pleasant stimuli, relaxation.
- 7) Social wellbeing – fostering healthy group relationships, team building and promoting belonging to the group, empathy, tolerance of differences.
- 8) Stress, changing destructive thinking to constructive thinking, promoting positive thinking, visualising pleasant stimuli, mindfulness.
- 9) Using inner potential, dreams and long-term goals (Disney method) as part of developing one's own identity, analysis of inner resources, techniques for increasing self-efficacy.
- 10) Mental health support techniques - inducing calm, healthy communication strategies, sleep hygiene, adequate physical activity and appropriate eating habits as part of long-term wellbeing.

The main themes of the project promoting social wellbeing include:

- Personal development (the foundation of social wellbeing)
- Promoting tolerance of diversity (ethnicity, gender, disability, etc.)
- Adaptation to change
- Understanding emotions
- The Art of Cooperation
- Recognising your strengths

As mentioned above, the primary themes for promoting social wellbeing are promoting teamwork and fostering tolerance for diversity – ideally, techniques to promote teamwork, achieving a common goal, self-commitment to the whole, and developing an interesting joint class project.

Specifically, the following techniques can be used: work with class rules (revise them often, reflect on their meaning, add new ones), "My coat of arms", "Camera" (looking at the world through the eyes of the other), "Climbers", "Mission to the moon", SWOT analysis, games aimed at solving dilemmas, discussion on a set topic with the division of roles of the discussants.

It is also suitable to include relaxation methods or methods aimed at working with stress - e.g.: Ed's Doll, Pot of Wellbeing, breathing exercises (conscious breathing, triangle breathing, box breathing, visualization of a pleasant stimulus).

To increase the variety of activities, it is possible to use the material "Classroom at ease" (Šmejkalová, & Schmidová, 2012) or "Methodology of conducting classroom lessons" (Skácelová, 2012), etc.

4.3 Discussion

In the framework of the project preparation, the pilot testing of the individual topics was carried out simultaneously (the piloting took place in five classes in three different schools). The results of the pilot testing showed that teachers feel considerable uncertainty in conducting regular and intensive classroom lessons, and that administrative classroom lessons are still preferred in practice.

The results of the sociometric survey in the classrooms (test B-III) before and one year after the programme showed an improvement in the overall climate in all the classrooms where the pilot was implemented (more positive evaluation of the classroom climate by pupils, reduction in the number of isolated pupils, more frequent choice of pupils' characteristics in the categories "friend", "cooperation", "safe environment").

Teachers in the survey preferred the presence of a school psychologist for most topics (it places high demands on the school psychologist's time).

Teachers' concerns were identified in providing feedback and encouraging self-reflection, teachers feel insecure, and the preparation of teacher workshops should be considered in this regard.

Teachers' apprehension to actively participate in the activities (to try them out) emerged as a fundamental limiting factor in the implementation of the project, which can be considered as a significantly negative finding and shows the need to prepare teachers more intensively already during their pre-service training for their active role in the teaching process, also criteria for personal selection for the teaching profession can be discussed.

Clearly, there was an increased interest of schools in using the project (the positive side is the ready methodology, ready worksheets, ready videos).

5 CONCLUSIONS

The CT Edu project, in line with the intentions of the Ministry of Education and the Strategic Framework for the Development of Health Care in the Czech Republic until 2030 (especially its support for changes in mental health care), aims to develop pupils' wellbeing in schools where pupils spend most of their time, through a plan for specific content of classroom lessons.

Attention to pupil wellbeing - guiding pupils to achieve this life optimum – can have a significant positive impact on reducing pupils' anxiety and increasing their resilience, making a significant contribution to the prevention of school failure (due to mental ill-health) and drop-out. Caring for pupils' wellbeing in schools needs to be one of the key areas in the comprehensive promotion of mental health in the long term.

Promoting mental wellbeing includes not only focusing on the art of relaxation, but also promoting resilience to challenging life situations, increasing the resilience of today's young generation and contributing

to the overall empowerment of today's fragile children.

The whole project, as it focuses on different aspects of pupil wellbeing, not only contributes to the important prevention of mental health problems in children and adolescents, but also provides classroom teachers with appropriate practices, adequate to their profession, which they can use to promote the wellbeing – and social wellbeing – of their pupils. In spite of some uncertainty that teachers indicated during the pilot testing, they consider the activities to be reasonably safe.

Meaningful content of classroom lessons throughout the school year not only acts as a form of prevention of risk phenomena in children and adolescents, but also as a prevention of burnout syndrome of teachers (increases their confidence in working with the classroom team) and at the same time significantly strengthens the interaction between students and classroom teachers, improving the classroom climate. Its comprehensive concept influences the building of a safe environment for both sides of the educational process.

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