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The Redesigning Pedagogy International Conference—National Institute of Education's flagship conference—will be taking place on 30 May to 1 June 2022. The theme of the upcoming conference will be on "Transforming Education and Strengthening Society", focusing on how education can be even more transformative in line with the new and rapid local and global developments. Find out more about the conference at <https://rebrand.ly/RPICwebsite>.

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Associate Professor Gregory Arief D. Liem

*Psychology and Child & Human Development Academic Group
National Institute of Education*



Dear Teachers and Researchers,

Success feels good. While many would agree, the relation between socially endorsed performance and positive emotion may not be as straightforward as it sounds. To what extent do success and happiness contribute to each other? Does happiness follow or precede success? Is it possible to be happy before success happens?

Doing well academically, getting admission to a certain school and securing a particular job are often considered as social measures of success. With one or more of these conditions fulfilled, one will become happy. Success precedes happiness. That said, the hedonic treadmill hypothesis (Brickman & Campbell, 1971) posits that success will make us happy only until we ask ourselves, “What’s next?” Happiness—based on the aforementioned markers—is thus a fleeting state of positive affect, because an expectation for achieving greater heights that follows a successful endeavour brings us back to our “baseline” emotion.

In contrast, Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005) found ample evidence—based on their reviews of cross-sectional, longitudinal and experimental studies—that happiness also breeds success. They found that happy people tend to be successful in various life domains (e.g., marriage, friendship, health, work performance, income). Their findings are in line with Barbara Fredrickson’s (2013) broaden-and-build theory which suggests that positive emotions broaden our perspectives on the self, others, and environment, as well as build our cognitive and behavioural resources to deal with a task at hand effectively. Together, it is sensible to assume that happy students and happy teachers are likely to be those who will perform well in school too. Insofar as this may be the case, there is reason to promote happiness in our students and teachers.

Beyond their causal relationships, success and happiness are sociocultural constructs (Gill, Trask-Kerr, & Vella-Brodrick, 2021; Joshanloo, 2019). The benchmark of success and happiness, and ways of their pursuit are largely dependent on the values prevailing in the society that the individuals reside in. What is considered as a key marker of success and happiness in one culture may receive less emphasis in others. Further, scholars have now agreed that experiencing positive emotions (a.k.a. “happiness”) is only one of the pillars of well-being. Psychological well-being is multidimensional and can also be derived from such experiences as enjoying warm and genuine social connections, and pursuing a “personal project” that allows us to use our strength and express our interest. Each of these “day-to-day” experiences appears to be practically attainable—more so than the markers of success—and is likely to give rise to a more long-lasting state of satisfaction that make us feel that life is worth living.

The current *SingTeach* issue, “Fostering Student and Teacher Well-Being”, features voices of teachers and researchers who agree that mental well-being and academic success are equally important and must not be “either/or”. Editing this issue has given me an insightful and pleasurable experience, especially through learning from the teachers who share how they promote the mental health of their students (and their “personal secrets” to work-life harmony), as well as from the NIE colleagues on their research efforts to foster students’ psychological well-being and academic motivation.

As much as success and happiness are sociocultural in nature, they are inherently personal and subjective too. So, it is possible for us to form our own meanings of success and happiness (or well-being at large). Signing off as Guest Editor, I will leave you with what Albert Einstein noted down a century ago, and invite you to consider revisiting (and perhaps redefining) your own conceptions of success, happiness, and their relationship. I wish you all well. ■

“A calm and modest life brings more happiness than the pursuit of success combined with constant restlessness.”

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Understanding Well-Being to

Uplift

Low-Progress Learners



Research on positive psychology has shown that well-being breeds success. Students who are happy and psychologically well are more likely to develop a broader sense of awareness (self and social) and perspectives of the tasks at hand. As a result, they are more well equipped to build a necessary repertoire of resources and skills to do well in school. How can we apply this understanding of well-being to low-progress learners and motivate them to reach their full potential? Associate Professor Arief Liem, guest editor of this issue, is currently leading the Programmatic Research that seeks to answer these questions. The Programmatic Research, which consists of five Sub-Projects, is conducted mainly on students from the Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) streams. In this article, Arief invites principal investigators of the Sub-Projects, who are also from NIE, to share with us more about his and their studies.

Many people assume that academic excellence will bring about positive well-being in a learner when in actual fact, student well-being is the “pre-condition” for effective, engaged, and enthusiastic learning (and, in turn, desirable performance). This misconception is not surprising, says Associate Professor Arief Liem, who is from the Psychology and Child & Human Development (PCHD) Group at NIE, since our society places a high value on academic performance.

“Many of our youths or, for that matter, adults mistakenly see their academic achievements and qualifications as the main source of their self-esteem

and happiness,” he says. “However, basing one’s self-esteem on academic performance alone can have a detrimental effect on one’s psychological well-being, especially when academic performance may depend on various factors, both controllable and less controllable”.

For low-progress learners, learning in a pressure-cooker environment such as Singapore’s may induce more stress and anxiety as compared to other learners. Although some have been identified as being “resilient”, many tend to be less academically motivated and engaged.

The PERMA Theory of Well-Being

The theoretical framework underpinning Arief's Programmatic Research is the PERMA model of flourishing by Professor Martin Seligman.

According to the PERMA model, as the acronym of the model suggests, positive emotion (P) forms only one part of an individual's well-being. Having a sense of engagement (E), good social relationships (R), a meaning and purpose in what we do in life (M), and a sense of accomplishment (A) are equally essential as well.

"As you can see from these individual pillars of well-being, flourishing is therefore both *feeling good* and *doing well* rather than one or the other," Arief explains. "Based on this model, it is clear that we need to prioritize both academic and well-being skills."

The first of the five sub-projects, led by Dr Chue Kah Loong, studies the relationship between well-being and relevant educational outcomes as well as longitudinally tracking the well-being profile of students in the various academic streams. In addition, this Sub-Project aims to validate a multidimensional measure of well-being for adolescent-aged students in Singapore.

Learning from "Positive Deviants"

Although low-progress learners often face multiple challenges during their schooling and growing up years, there are some who make good academic progress. Termed "positive deviants", these students are able to thrive despite facing similar risks and sharing the same level of low resources as their counterparts.

"These 'positive deviants' have developed 'uncommon' but beneficial practices that enable them to thrive in a challenging environment. By capitalizing on the successful solutions that already exist in the students and their sociocultural contexts, we learn how the positive deviant characteristics relate to their psychological well-being," Associate Professor Chong Wan Har, the principal investigator of Sub-Project 2, shares.

Arief is optimistic that the findings from Sub-Project 2, conducted on Normal (Academic) students, can inform schools on the appropriate strategies or interventions in promoting motivation and engagement among low-performing students.

Strategies for Effective Intervention

Sub-Project 3, led by Arief himself and conducted on students from the N(A) and Normal (Technical) streams, explores the efficacy of identity-based motivation (IBM) intervention, also called the "School-to-Job" intervention.

The IBM intervention, Arief says, is based on the "possible selves" theory which suggests that our identities—how we see ourselves in the near and far future—are motivational when they are clear and salient in our mind. It also posits that we tend to act in ways consistent with what our accessible identities suggest. Seeing the relevance of what we do to a goal that we set, or a person who we aspire to become, make the effort that we put in—including the struggle in overcoming challenges—"personally meaningful".

"In the intervention, we try to help students clarify what their future selves are as an individual with a variety of social roles (e.g., as a student, a child, a contributing citizen) and how these future social roles are related to what they do in school now," he states.

"Through this IBM intervention, we hope that students realize the importance of schooling for their future and become more motivated and engaged. We want them to understand that the preparation for their future begins in the present moment and in what they do in school. Further, equipping students with strategies to overcome challenges that they may face in the journey of attaining their future selves would make them more optimistic and improve their well-being too," Arief adds.

Sub-Project 4, led by Assistant Professor Anuradha Dutt, proposes a psychoeducational intervention with the aim to reduce test anxiety and boost well-being of N(A) students.

The intervention used in the study is based on a combination of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) components, positive psychology and study smart skills. Some of those components include psychoeducation, in which students learn the important connection between their anxious thoughts, feelings and behaviours and their interactional effects on individuals, as well as relaxation training, in which students learn relaxation techniques of "deep breathing" and "progressive muscle relaxation".

Anu states that students in the experimental group have reported a decrease in test anxiety after

participation in the programme as compared to the students in the control group. The experimental group has also reported a greater increase in test coping skills and psychological well-being.

“Preliminary results from our pilot phase of the study are promising and support that our psychoeducational programme is beneficial in helping students cope with test anxiety using healthy strategies that promote well-being,” Anu comments.

An App to Track Well-Being

Sub-Project 5, currently in its initial stages, utilizes technology to enhance the psychological well-being of low-progress learners.

“The project is looking to support the positive education intervention with a mobile app that will be able to personalize and customize content to the students even after the initial interventions have ended,” Assistant Professor Stefanie Chye, the principal investigator of Sub-Project 5, shares.

The mobile app is modeled after health-tracking apps and is able to monitor student well-being and help raise awareness of their own sense of wellness. The app is also designed to deliver “vaccines” or “treatments” in the form of positive psychological content as well as provide “boosters”, as and when necessary.

“This would make the effects more sustainable as well as build students’ ability to self-regulate their well-being,” Stefanie remarks.

Supporting Schools in Improving Student Well-Being

Arief foresees that the findings of the programmatic research will provide schools with a readily useable tool to measure the key dimensions of well-being of secondary school students in Singapore. The three validated intervention packages will also cater to low-progress students of varying educational and psychological needs.

The latter, he says, is especially important as low-progress students do not represent a homogenous population.

“So, for example, when a school leader knows that some of the students in his or her school suffer from heightened test anxiety, the school could conduct the test anxiety reduction intervention tested in Sub-Project 4. When students are lacking in school motivation and engagement, the school may consider conducting the motivation intervention tested in Sub-Project 3,” he explains.

Arief also sees the potential in adapting the motivation and test anxiety reduction interventions, designed for N(A) and N(T) students, for students in other academic tracks.

“It would also be important and interesting to see how the psychological profiles and learning-related attributes of N(A) students, as explored in Sub-Project 2, differ from students in the Express or N(T) academic stream,” he adds. ■

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEES



Gregory Arief D. Liem is Associate Professor with the Psychology and Child & Human Development Academic Group at NIE. He teaches courses in the area of educational psychology at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. His research interest mainly centers on understanding student motivation, engagement and well-being through a sociocultural lens.


Stefanie Chye is Assistant Professor with the Office of Teacher Education, and Psychology and Child & Human Development Academic Group at NIE.

Chue Kah Loong, Chong Wan Har and Anuradha Dutt are Lecturer, Associate Professor and Assistant Professor, respectively, with the Psychology and Child & Human Development Academic Group at NIE.



A SCHOOL-WIDE APPROACH TO Well-Being

Pandemic stress has affected students and teachers in more ways than one—more students have reported experiencing anxiety and isolation amid an uncertain COVID-19 landscape while teachers' mental health has suffered too. How can schools better support student and teacher well-being? Mdm Koh Seok Hwee, Lead Teacher (Learning Needs) from St. Anthony's Canossian Secondary School, shares what her school's approach is to well-being.



Cultivating a Feedback-Rich Culture

"At SACSS, we strive to be a 'happy' school where staff and students look forward to coming every day," Mdm Koh Seok Hwee from St. Anthony's Canossian Secondary School (SACSS) shares. "We do so by empowering teachers and students to make the school a better place for working and learning."

The school, however, acknowledges that the evolving COVID-19 situation in Singapore has seen more students with increased signs of mental stress and fatigue. The demands brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have also increased the workload and stress of teachers.

To tackle these challenges, SACSS sees value in regularly seeking feedback from staff and students. The school's Year Head team conducts regular wellness surveys with the students. From there, SACSS form teachers, who have undergone training on positive education, can identify students who show symptoms of poor mental health and provide early intervention.

"Additionally, as a Catholic school, we are privileged to have nuns who offer emotional support to both

students and staff," she remarks. "The nuns speak to students during their recess time and keep a lookout for students who are alone or seem unhappy. Staff may also turn to the nuns for support and advice when needed."

A Safe Space to Share

Raising awareness of mental health issues and equipping students with the necessary skills to manage themselves are crucial in bolstering the psychological resilience of students. When students know more about the various mental health conditions, they are able to seek help early if they are experiencing mental health struggles themselves or observe it in their peers.

"The conversation on mental health need not be heavy and awkward," Seok Hwee states. "An interesting way we found to encourage our students to talk openly about this topic was by screening an online musical 'The Monster in the Mirror'. It deals with mental health issues among teenagers, and allows us to open up a safe space where our students can discuss what it means to have 'monsters' in their head."



“One thing to note,” she continues, “is that we often assume that students will naturally acquire the right skills and knowledge to navigate through life as they grow older. This is unfortunately not always the case. Those with poor executive function skills, such as organizational, planning or time management skills, for example, may often face anxiety and stress when dealing with task completion.”

To help students improve their overall well-being, SACSS makes it a point to share with the students important self-management and self-care skills such as improving executive function skills, knowing when and how to seek help, the responsible use of electronic gadgets and stress management.

Peer Support is Important

While support from the school and teachers is important, peer support is equally vital. Thus, Seok Hwee shares, SACSS provides student leaders with the essential skills to help identify and support classmates who may be facing challenges. As part of their leadership training programme, all student leaders are also trained in active listening and peer support.

“Our Student Council has been instrumental in helping to support their fellow students,” she notes. “This also extends to digital well-being. For instance, some students may start comparing themselves to their peers based on what they see on social media, and

this may lower their self-esteem. We hope to equip students with the necessary skills to navigate the cyberspace landscape safely.”

As part of a school-wide cyber wellness initiative, the Student Council has conceptualized the “SAC Cares” programme. Some of their activities include encouraging their schoolmates to share uplifting notes on social media as well as organizing a school-wide bingo game, played over the PA system. The latter, Seok Hwee remarks, certainly helped lightened the mood in the school and put a smile on everyone’s faces.

Safeguarding the Well-Being of All

To ensure well-being for both students and teachers, Seok Hwee suggests that as a start, schools should find out what their staff’s needs are and try to meet them—highlighting the need to exercise flexibility when offering support to different personnel. She also encourages teachers to celebrate successes—even those that may seem small, like a note of appreciation from a parent.

“We should recognize that we must first help ourselves before we can help others,” she advises. “Teachers need to prioritize self-care no matter how busy they are. Like the saying goes, you can’t pour from an empty cup. No well-being programme for students will be successful if it is run by stressed-out teachers.” ■



A STRONG SUPPORT NETWORK FOR TEACHERS



To help teachers with their workload, St. Anthony's Canossian Secondary School (SACSS) school leaders provide teachers flexibility in terms of time spent in the office and the option to work from home whenever possible after school officially ended on 29 Oct 2021. They also ensure that staff meetings are kept to one hour per week during term time.

Apart from trying to balance teachers' workload, SACSS has a Staff Well-Being Committee (SWC) to look after overall staff well-being. The SWC takes staff feedback into account and plans activities according to the teachers' needs.

"For example, recognizing that our teachers are tired, the SWC planned a simple, scaled down Teachers' Day celebration that allows us more time to rest," Mdm Koh Seok Hwee says. "With restrictions in staff interaction due to safety management measures, they also started a blog and hosted online games so that we can keep up-to-date and bond with one another online."

Aside from implementing programmes that promote physical well-being (e.g. providing health check-ups) and social well-being (e.g. bonding activities), SACSS prioritizes emotional well-being as well.

"In stressful situations, it is easy to lose sight of our purpose and go about our job in a mechanical manner, experiencing no joy in the process," she points out. "Our school leaders encourage us to always be intentional and mindful, especially when taking on new work. The purposes of various programmes and school-wide committees are explained clearly before implementation, and staff are given time to reflect and choose roles based on our interests."

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE



Mdm Koh Seok Hwee is Lead Teacher (Learning Needs) at St. Anthony's Canossian Secondary School. She teaches Science at the school.





Harnessing **Peer Power** *for Positive Student Outcomes*

Research literature has shown that having a supportive social network positively affects students' academic, motivational and well-being outcomes. To better inform policy that can positively impact students' social and academic experiences, Dr Imelda Caleon and her team from the Office of Education Research at NIE delve deeper into how students' peer power—peer relationships and peer network attributes—influence these outcomes.

Studies have shown that students are more likely to be motivated to engage in school tasks when they feel a sense of belonging and perceive that their peers support them.

"Peer relationships can allow students to access emotional, instrumental and informational support that can improve their well-being, motivation to learn and academic performance," Senior Research Scientist Dr Imelda Caleon explains.

The students' peer networks, especially those formed with their close friends, can play an important role in their growth and the realization of their potential. How then can we harness students' peer networks so that they can produce positive outcomes?

To answer this question, Imelda and her research team have embarked on a project that explores the nature of students' peer networks, how these

networks change over time and the factors that contribute to the formation of these networks.

Studying Peer Power to Inform Policy Implementation

In 2020, the Ministry of Education (MOE) started to pilot the Full Subject-Based Banding (FSBB) scheme, which entails the placement of secondary school students in mixed form classes where they can interact with peers of different strengths and interests.

One of the foci of Imelda's study is to ascertain how policy initiatives, particularly FSBB, influence students' social relationships and how such relationships influence the students' academic and non-academic outcomes.

The study follows students from Secondary One to Secondary Two. These students are from 10 schools, five of which are piloting the FSBB scheme.

Although the research project is still ongoing, Imelda shares several insights that can help us better understand the influence of peer power in both traditional and mixed form classrooms.

The preliminary results of social network analysis that was conducted by the research team show that students in FSBB schools have more cross-stream friendships compared to students in non-FSBB schools. These findings suggest relatively greater social mixing among students across different streams in FSBB schools.

In both FSBB and non-FSBB schools, meanwhile, Imelda observes that, “compared to students attending the Normal (Academic) or Express courses, students from the Normal (Technical) course tend to be the most open to friendship but their efforts to make friends tend to be the least reciprocated.”

Understanding Friendship Networks in Schools

According to Imelda, “relationships with peers are crucial in the development of behaviors, attitudes, and well-being of students, particularly adolescents who experience a barrage of changes—socially, emotionally and psychologically.”

The preliminary results of the study indicate that students who have a higher number of perceived friends (i.e., more nominated friends), are more popular (i.e., received more friend nominations), or have more mutual friendships (i.e., with more nominated friends reciprocating the nomination) tend to be more motivated to study, more engaged in doing learning tasks, experience lower level of depressive symptoms and have higher level of life satisfaction.

Imelda shares another interesting insight. “Compared to the students’ popularity and reciprocated friendship, their perceived friendship

has the strongest relationship with their well-being and motivational outcomes.”

Future Direction of the Peer Power Study

Imelda hopes to see the implementation of more programmes to better support students who are isolated in the students’ social networks.

She shares, “After conducting interviews with students, I saw how important empathy, common interests, active listening, and trustworthiness were in forming and maintaining friendships.”

“I also learnt more about the different ways by which students interact and nurture their friendships; just like in their learning, they use varied approaches.”

She believes the results of this study can support and guide MOE’s efforts to take advantage of and help shape existing peer network structures to promote better academic and socio-emotional outcomes of students.

Imelda also hopes that as schools transition from academic tracking to subject-based banding schemes, insights gleaned from this study can guide the decision-making of schools in relation to group and class composition, as well as school activities that can promote inclusivity and optimal experiences for students.

“There are several lingering questions that I hope future studies may answer—one of which is the long-term effects of the nature of students’ peer relationships during their initial secondary school years. We are currently conceptualizing a new project to address these questions.”

“For now, however, we definitely need to do more to help improve students’ capacity to form supportive and reciprocal relationships for their overall well-being and school functioning,” she concludes. ■

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE



Imelda Caleon is the Assistant Dean for Partnerships and a Senior Research Scientist with the Office of Education Research at NIE. She is also the Programme Director of the Lifelong Learning, Cognition and Well-being Research Programme at the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice. Her research interests are in the areas of positive education and science education, with a particular focus on resilience, mindsets, and metacognition. Her foremost intent was to utilize and develop approaches rooted in positive psychology to facilitate learners’ conceptual and mindset change, and build resources (emotional, psychological, social and cognitive) that can help learners, especially students placed at risk, to thrive in school and beyond.

Student Well-Being Matters

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition that schooling is much more than just about academic outcomes. Equally crucial in contributing to a child's positive schooling experience is his or her well-being. Overall well-being can help to enhance intrinsic motivation and improve school satisfaction, amongst many other benefits. In this article, NIE Research Scientist Dr Munirah Shaik Kadir, who is currently leading a research study that focuses on the well-being of at-risk students in Singapore, sheds some light on the definition of student well-being and how it can impact their learning.

How would you define student well-being and why is it important for teachers?

There are various well-being frameworks in literature with some that says there are four types of well-being: physical, emotional, mental or intellectual, and spiritual. There is hedonic well-being, which focuses on happiness, positive emotions, attaining pleasure and avoiding pain. Then there is eudaimonic well-being which focuses on one's sense of meaning and purpose, self-realization, the degree of full functioning or fulfillment of one's potential, and connection in the real world.

So when we talk about student well-being, it generally encompasses student's health, sense of purpose in life, sense of belonging, personal and social fulfilment, happiness, satisfaction, and purposefulness. Rooted in positive psychology, the importance of student well-being has, in recent years, gained enormous attention from policymakers and practitioners.

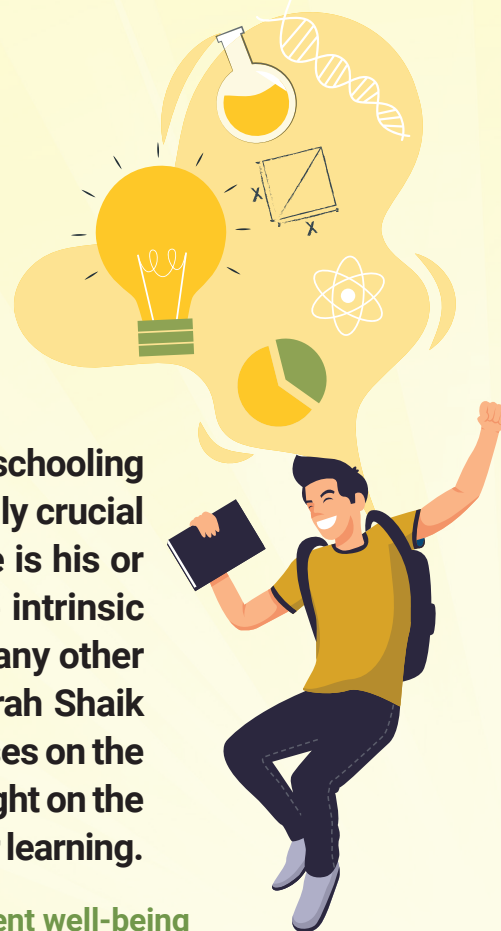
Student well-being is important as it is known to impact student mental health. Studies have shown that those with high well-being and positive mental health tend to enjoy good quality of life, have high energy levels, build and maintain better relationships, develop coping skills for life, and have the resilience to soldier on in times of difficulties. On the contrary, low levels of well-being and associated mental health problems can have adverse consequences for the health and development of students, and are usually the precursor to difficulties in adulthood.

How does student well-being impact learning?

There has been convincing evidence for links between well-being and academic achievement drawn from research carried out internationally, including from China, Germany, Chile, the UK, Australia and Mexico. Students with higher well-being are healthier and happier, and tend to be more engaged in learning activities, have better concentration, and a higher motivation to learn. These students also tend to overcome difficulties successfully, possess academic resilience, and engage in lifelong learning.

As well-being impacts all learning, initiatives related to it should be integrated across curriculum domains and a whole-school approach should be adopted to include all staff and students. Studies have indicated that interventions yield the most successful outcomes when they are integrated into daily practice and school culture. Schools should ensure that there is an acceptance of emotion and vulnerability along with celebrating and embracing student differences.

One example of a well-being initiative is to develop a supportive school and classroom ethos that builds warm relationships and a sense of connectedness with focus and purpose. Creating a school ethos that promotes well-being, resilience and positive skills has been shown to improve individual and school performance.



Could you briefly describe what your research project (Examining Well-Being, Interest, School Engagement, and Life Stressors of At-Risk Children: A Profile Analysis) is about?

The prevalence of low academic achievement, high absenteeism, misbehaviour, low motivation, and low well-being is high among at-risk students (i.e., students who are at risk of academic failure and dropping out of school), resulting in poor school engagement.

However, few studies have focused on the stressors, well-being, interests and school engagement of primary school students identified as “at-risk” or “high-needs”. Early intervention and support are crucial for these students to halt the escalation of existing problems. Some schools have organized after-school programmes for at-risk primary school students. These programmes include sports activities to engage these students after school but sustaining the students’ interests in the activities and having them attend the after-school programmes regularly are some of the challenges faced by the schools.

A possible reason could be because the programme is not a good fit for the students. “One-size-fits-all” types of programmes are ineffective, so it is desirable that programmes are tailor-made to cater to the different needs of the students.

How do you think teachers and students may benefit from the finding(s) of your project?

The aim of the proposed study is to develop a profile of at-risk primary school students in terms of their well-being, interests, school engagement, and key stressors. Having such a profile will be useful in guiding the design and development of programmes for these students. The methodology could be replicated in the years to follow to find out students’ profiles before designing programmes for them. The project is being carried out in a primary school in Singapore and my team and I are in the process of analysing the data.

The findings from this study could shed light on the key stressors of at-risk primary school students, their well-being, interests, and school engagement, so that programmes can be designed to provide them with the support that they need. It would also help educators explore ways of providing these students

with the opportunities to engage in their domains of interest which could help them flourish in life.

What drew you into this area of research in education?

I choose to venture into this field of research because it is close to my heart. I was a teacher, so I understand what the job entails and am familiar with students’ school experiences and challenges. I venture into this field of research because I want to find out the psychosocial factors that can help make teachers’ and students’ lives better. I want to make a difference in their lives.

Research has substantiated that if well-being is ignored, it could lead to burnout and other negative outcomes over time. So, I venture into this field with the desire to raise awareness of the importance of well-being and show how we can nurture teacher and student well-being in schools.

When I was in Australia for research work, I had the privilege to work on Well-Being and Positive Education projects and see the positive impact it has on students, teachers, and principals in Australia. Now that I have returned to Singapore, I would like to implement those strategies in our local schools to help teachers and students here in my hometown enhance their well-being for positive outcomes. ■



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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE



Munirah Shaik Kadir is a Research Scientist with the Office of Education Research at NIE. Her research interests include educational psychology, lifelong learning, positive education, student motivation and teacher well-being. She has over 20 years of educational research experience in Australia and Singapore. She works closely with several schools to provide input on their school programmes, ranging from after-school activities for at-risk students to the implementation of positive education intervention within the school.





TEACHERS' VOICES ON *Mental Health*

Since the pandemic hit, many teachers have reported experiencing burnout and an increased level of work stress. This is not surprising as the COVID-19 situation and current endemic phase has created additional responsibilities for teachers. These include dealing with safe management measures and planning for online lessons during home-based learning days. Three teachers share how they maintain their well-being during these challenging times.



Dr Elaine Cai

Senior Teacher (Maths)
St Gabriel's Primary School

As a teacher, how do you try to maintain a work-life balance?

Eat a live frog first thing in the morning and nothing worse will happen to you for the rest of the day.
– Mark Twain

I eat the frog. I make a list of things to do for the day and prioritize the ones which are hardest to accomplish. As I tick off the list of things I have completed, it gets easier to get through the day. I go to quiet corners of my school where I can engage in deep work without distractions and interruptions.

I also go on long walks by the beach near my home to maintain a healthy mind and body, to be in touch with how I am feeling and why I am feeling in a certain way. A Stanford University study has also found that walking awakens creative ability by 60%! Taking breaks enable me to be more productive and efficient, and I can get more done with less.

Despite the challenges faced, what is the most satisfying aspect of your job that keeps you motivated?

I am motivated when my students liken Math to Pepsi and "Ask for More" (a tagline used for one of Pepsi's advertising campaigns). They adopt a craftsman approach to master their work through deliberate practice by asking for more exercises and sessions beyond curriculum time which I would

be only too willing to oblige. They take ownership to deepen their learning by asking questions and are enthusiastic about sharing with their peers the methods they had adopted in solving Math questions. My students also show that they are cognitively engaged when they debate about the next appropriate step to take to solve Math problems. Their drive to do well drives me to do well too.



Darren Nonis

Lead Teacher (English)
Greendale Primary School

As a teacher, how do you try to maintain a work-life balance?

As the saying goes, "The hardest thing about being a teacher is that it matters every day". I truly believe that teaching responsibly is about nurturing the child academically, as well as making sure the child is morally upright. This belief strongly influences the way I go about my work.

Maintaining a work-life balance is often a challenge for teachers. Teachers understand when we talk about the myriad of tasks we are engaged in daily. Marking and other administrative tasks are often "packed" for home. The COVID-19 situation has only made it more challenging. Regardless, many teachers go on because they believe in what they do.

To maintain physical and mental well-being, I do a few things. On a daily basis, just before the rush of the day, I would spend 5 minutes reflecting

on things I am grateful for. I developed this habit after reading Shawn Achor's book "The Happiness Advantage" (a recommended read). This is an important exercise for me as it keeps me positive and reminds me that I am blessed.

When at home, I make sure to apportion time (usually between 6.00 pm – 8.30 pm) for myself and my family. This time is sacred to me. Any work that needs to be done, will be done after 8.30 pm. It is a blessing that my wife is a teacher as well, hence, we are able to better understand each other.

During the weekends, I attempt to leave work aside. I spend the weekends cycling (my hobby), eating at interesting new places and having quality time with the family. I feel that the concept of work-life balance is a personal mental construct. Every individual will need to find his or her balance. What works for one, may not work for another.

In summary, I maintain a work-life balance by

- remaining positive and constantly reminding myself of the blessings,
- being assertive with my personal time,
- engaging in hobbies, and
- keeping family time sacred.

Despite the challenges faced, what is the most satisfying aspect of your job that keeps you motivated?

There are many aspects of teaching profession that have enabled me to remain in it for so long. However, the one that provides me with the greatest fulfillment would be viewing my role as a developer and influencer of young people, enabling them to become thinking and morally upright adults.

To be ready to face the challenges ahead, our students must not only be equipped with the subject-content knowledge, but they also need to be taught to discern between good and bad.

As a teacher, I feel that I have a direct impact on the development of my students in these areas. Knowing this reminds me daily that my job matters. It not only matters to my students but it matters to Singapore as a whole since my students will be the future of Singapore. I get a good night's rest knowing that I have invested and contributed to the future of my students and Singapore.



Alice Yeo

HOD Educational Support (SEN)
Serangoon Garden Secondary School

How has the pandemic affected your mental health?

In the busyness of the school term, there was a tendency for the stresses of the pandemic to insidiously creep in. These include the uncertainty of catching COVID-19, supporting students who were affected emotionally from the stresses they experienced at home, and familiarizing with the changes in home-based learning and safe management measures.

In school, one impact was the strain of engaging the students in big classes whose energy was not expanded by the variety of activities which pre-pandemic afforded—including group work, learning journeys and activity-based CCA. The constant need to think and plan for classroom activities ended with my mind not being able to switch off from work even after school hours.

It was not uncommon for colleagues to ask one another how we seemed more busy and tired in spite of not having to plan for learning journeys and level programmes.

What are some of the coping strategies you find useful?

I look for both internal and external sources of support to cope. Having supportive family members and colleagues has been a blessing. School leaders who understood the stresses have also been encouraging and they organize workshops on mental health every term to remind us about self-care.

Being able to support students from vulnerable families through the school's HOPE@SGS Programme (I was part of the team that secured sponsors to provide necessities and meals for students from vulnerable families and planned programmes for them), has also given me purpose during the pandemic period.

Finally, during the weekends, I create space for self-reflection and allow myself to acknowledge my emotions through drawing and journaling. This helps me to recharge and start each week feeling refreshed. ■

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