

The Concept of Well Being in the Context of School Education.

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"I am always ready to learn but I do not always like being taught"

Winston Churchill

INTRODUCTION

Some interactions with the school students make the mind ponder whether our schools lay more emphasis on the test scores and rankings at the expense of joy, wellness and learning? Do our schools focus only on top academic performers or pay attention to the top learners too? Does school education aims at only academic success or it even promotes curiosity and personal development? Many such questions lead to a view that lately academic excellence has emerged to be the *summum bonum* of school education. Somehow in education we seem to value what we measure more than measuring what we value. Such a scenario compels one to raise further questions—do our schools promote well being of the children? Shouldn't our schools aim at becoming well being habitats for the children of the country?

THE CONCEPT OF WELL BEING

Well being as a word has many definitions and due to this reason it sometimes appears as an indeterminate and abstruse concept. This is as a result of multitude of perceptions that people from varied backgrounds have regarding this concept. Broadly well being can have five dimensions-which actually capture the variance in well being in the present times. They are:

- 1) Career or occupational well being: How people occupy their time during the day and whether it is fulfilling.
- 2) Social well being: The quality of relationships in people's lives.
- 3) Financial Well being: The degrees of financial security people have.

- 4) Physical well being: the extent to which people can do what they want to do free of pain.
- 5) Community Well being: the extent to which people feel safe and are involved in giving to their community.¹

Thus 'Well being can be defined in terms of an individual's physical, mental, social, and environmental status with each aspect interacting with the other and each having differing levels of importance and impact according to each individual'²

These days in its popular use, well being is related to health. In this sense health becomes one of the constituents of person's well being but it cannot mean to stand for the over all meaning of well being. In order to understand its more profound meaning, one may turn towards its philosophical use—which though being the oldest interpretation of well being, yet can be of great relevance in the 21st century.

ARISTOTLE ON WELL BEING AND EDUCATION

Well being is generally used in Philosophy to describe the ultimate good of a person. This term is of immense interest in the realm of moral Philosophy. It was Aristotle³ who gave much thought to well being in his *Nichomachean Ethics*. Ethics, according to Aristotle, is an attempt to explore the highest good of human life. There are umpteenth ends that a person seeks in life but there is one end which is not the means to anything but is an end in itself—*Eudaimonia*, the closest English translation of which is well being. Aristotle clarified that

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well being could not be equated with pleasure but with happiness (former being temporal in nature and shared with animals while the latter being a state of permanent nature and being a distinct feature of human beings only). For him, the true happiness lay in active life of a rational being. Prior to Aristotle, Stoics had given their interpretation of *Eudaimonia*. They believed that leading a virtuous life was the only possible means to *Eudaimonia*. Aristotle agreed to this viewpoint but even acknowledged the significance of external goods as health, wealth and beauty as the requirements for *Eudaimonia*. According to him, *Eudaimonia* consisted in living well and doing well by enjoying the goods of the mind (wisdom, moral virtues and happiness), goods of the body (physical beauty, health and pleasure) and external goods (wealth and adequate material resources, good parents and families, peace and security within and between communities and well governed communities).⁵

Elaborating on the concept of well being, Aristotle divides the human soul into-rational and irrational. The rational element is further divided into the calculative faculty and appetitive faculty and the irrational element into appetitive and vegetative. The irrational element is shared with animals and the rational element is distinctly human. The primary irrational element is vegetative

	Calculative-----Intellectual Virtue
	Rational
Soul	Appetitive (desires)--Moral Virtue
	Irrational
	Vegetative-----Nutritional Virtue

faculty which controls growth and nutrition. Mastery of this falls within the category of nutritional virtues. The second level of the soul is the appetitive faculty which takes care of our emotions and desires. The appetitive faculty is both rational and irrational. It is irrational because animals also experience desires. Yet it is also rational in nature because human beings possess a unique ability to control these desires with the help of reason. The human capacity to control these desires is called moral virtue. Aristotle states that there is a pure rational part of the soul-the calculative, which is responsible for the human ability to contemplate, reason logically and formulate scientific principles. The mastery of these abilities is called intellectual virtue.⁶

Intellectual virtues owe both its birth and growth to teaching and moral virtues come as result of habit i.e.

Vice of Deficiency	Virtuous Mean	Vice of Excess
Cowardice	Courage	Rashness
Insensibility	Temperance	Self-indulgence
Illiberality	Liberality	Prodigality
Petiness	Magnificence	Vulgarity
Undue Humility	Pride	Empty Vanity
Unambitiousness	Proper Ambition	Over-ambition
Spiritlessness	Good Temper	Irascibility
Cantankerousness	Friendliness	Obsequiousness
Ironical Depreciation	Sincerity	Boastfulness
Boorishness	Wittiness	Buffoonery
Shamelessness	Modesty	Bashfulness
Spritefulness	Righteous Indignation	Envy



intellectual virtues grow with instruction and moral virtues grow with habituation. Intellectual and moral virtues with special emphasis on the moral virtues lead to the well being of an individual. Virtue for Aristotle is a state of character concerned with choice and he elucidates that a human being has two vices-the deficient and the excess and the virtue lies in between the two. It is only by fluctuating between the two vices and ultimately settling in the mean position through reasoning and habitual practice that a person becomes virtuous and ultimately treads on the path of well being-*Eudaimonia*. Some moral virtues that lie between the two vices are as follows:

For Aristotle *Eudaimonia*-well being/happiness is the supreme good to which all aspire but a happy person is neither a noble savage nor a person in her/his natural state. A happy and a good person is a virtuous person and virtue is acquired precisely through education. A good person is thus a well trained and habituated person. According to Aristotle ethics and education merge at a point with *Eudaimonia* as a common goal of both. Some things are learnt through instructions, while others by habit and reason. It is through education that one acquires virtue, wisdom and happiness. Education functions to 'produce sociable and happy citizens' and the process of education culminates in the development of reason.

Education begins with physical training which is not a mere training of the body but it has a larger role of character building and instilling the spirit of courage and sense of honor amongst the young minds. He further elaborates on the importance of musical education because for him music is a means of influencing the moral character and develops a capacity to listen amongst the youth. Education with its emphasis on physical training, understanding of music, focusing on growth of both intellectual and moral virtues, finally culminates in the study of Philosophy. This type of education is education through reason, experience and habitual practice.

In view of Aristotle, education has a tripartite goal consisting of training of body, mind and soul-it is only through such a system of education that the potential happiness can become truly accessible. Human beings possess many natural aptitudes but it is through education that they learn their role and responsibility of being human. Education does not simply mean instruction and transmission of information but it is an integral process of social, moral, political and intellectual advancement of the citizens. It can be aptly said that Aristotle's ethics is a teaching manual on art of living and education is the

touchstone of Aristotelian ethics. In this way Aristotelian philosophy of education focuses on the well being of students, making each one learn the art of living well(both physically and mentally). Thus the study of Aristotle's thoughts on well being as the goal of education and ultimately life proves to be deeply rewarding for educators.

ANCIENT INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM AND WELLBEING

If on one side Aristotle called our attention to an all encompassing system of education, concentrating on the well being of the pupils then on the other hand in the ancient Indian *Gurukulā* system, the education was always taken as an intimate relationship between the teachers and the taught. The objective of education was to develop the personality, the innate and latent talents of the students. The guiding principles of education were *satchit*(true knowledge), *ānanda*(bliss), *satyam*(truth), *āivam*(beauty) and *sundaram*(goodness). These were the supreme values of the ancient indigenous culture. The early Indian educational system also aimed at the development of personality by eulogizing the feeling of self-respect, by encouraging the sense of self confidence, by inculcating the virtues of self restraint and fostering the powers of discrimination and judgment. An all encompassing –holistic education emphasizing both on physical and mental growth, thus aimed at making students understand the meaning of life and living. For an ordered development of human personality, the ancient educational thinkers developed a unique concept, the *purūârtha*-the meaning of which was explained and elaborated to youth from the early days of their education. The four *purūârtha* are *kāma*(physical pleasure-bodily needs-physical well being), *artha* (economic resources-financial needs-material well being), *dharmā*(righteousness-moral needs-ethical well being) and *mokāa*(emancipation-mental needs-spiritual well being). The comprehensive understanding of all the four human goals made the students understand the importance of education for well being. The purpose of education was not to produce *sukha* (pleasure) but to realize *ānanda* which can be accurately understood as *Eudaimonia*-well being. A brief exposition of ancient Indian educational pattern spells out that well being remained to be the aim of the education with its focus on the complete development of a student.

This early system of education in India calls for our reflection on the contemporary school education and



poses an important question—are we doing justice to the minds of the future of this nation by overburdening them with the knowledge of facts and figures and by completely ignoring the real life education to them? An observation makes one understand that the present requirement of the school education is to integrate the education for life and the education of livelihood, focusing on the well being as the goal of the education.

WELL BEING AS THE GOAL OF CONTEMPORARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

The contemporary school education in India is strictly structured around the traditional academic subjects, didactic teaching modes, unquestioned submission to authority with a complete focus on excelling in the exams. This system of school education teaches children many things which one wonders when they are used by them in day to day life. Children are taught to write checks and balance budgets when they hardly have bank accounts and no income; they are strained to learn the structure of legislature when they have no say in what is legislated. This sounds very strange but it stands as a tall fact that the very many habits that the school tries hard to inculcate amongst the students are rarely useful for life but are only required for the artificial functioning of the school curriculum and successful conducting of examination procedure. How justified it is to adopt the dictatorial means to teach the democratic citizens? It is most unreasonable (almost ridiculous!) to expect students to learn skills if the skills are outside the domain of application. There is abundant research and material on how a student can fare well in exams and in the class but there is scarcity in the talk on how well being can become the focus of school education system. Some points that can be stressed upon along with academic knowledge (within the domain of school teaching) which helps in augmenting the well being of students are:

a) *Social Development and Good Citizenship*

A child stands as an individual as well as a member of a society. A school, according to John Dewey⁷ has a great moral responsibility towards the society. A school has an important function in maintaining the life and advancing the welfare of society. Dewey categorically asserted, “...the educational system which does not recognize this fact as entailing upon it an ethical responsibility is derelict and a defaulter”⁸ One way the

school can achieve the well being of the child in school is by focusing on the social development of a child because a child is “...a member of a family, himself responsible...in turn, for rearing and training of future children, and thus maintaining a continuity of society.”⁹ Social development is possible only when a child is made to learn the spirit of cooperation rather than fierce competition.

The family is the first stage where a child encounters learning for the first time and school is the second stage of learning for the child wherein s/he spends thirteen to fourteen initial years of life. Since the children spend the significant time of their shaping years in the school so it becomes an important habitat of a child. It is like a “miniature community and an embryonic society”¹⁰. The schools have a major role to play in the development of the good persons and thus contributing in the well being of a child. It is at this level that children must encounter a comprehensive moral system where they must learn and understand that their “...enjoyment of freedom for ourselves involves the recognition that it is exercised with others and not in isolation.”¹¹ It is only when the education will equip the young minds to make choices in life, then they will become active participants in their families, communities, societies, in their democracy ultimately making them global citizens. A country can have good citizens if there are many good persons and these good persons can be produced only through a comprehensive educational pattern at a school level, focusing not just on academic grades but on the over all development leading to the well being of a child.

b) *Moral virtues*

If the present day school education has to have any meaning for life and contribute towards the well being of the students then it must certainly undergo a complete transformation. The school’s education pattern plays a momentous role in instilling of moral habits and in this way they can be aptly called as ‘moral habitats’ wherein the values and the beliefs of the community and further the society and nation are formed and nurtured. When the school will pay attention to the inculcation of moral virtues (as stated by Aristotle) amongst the adolescents then the path for caring relations will be built and the students will become sensitive to the existence and pain of others. The focus of school education must not be just on mastering language and memorizing of facts but to make the students learn life skills, acquire knowledge,



cultivate values, build appropriate attitudes, beliefs and behaviors which in fact would prepare the ground for their sustained personal, social and moral well being. It is only when such an approach is adopted by schools then we can be rest assured to have in future, a society that will be amicable, ethical and admirable, wherein tolerance and mutual coexistence would exist and human life will acquire a more meaningful, healthy and happy existence. Whatever happens in a school, the content, pedagogical methods and the ethos and organization of school –all together play a major role in achieving the well being of all students.

c) Confidence and Character Building

The goal of school education has to be positive youth development with its focus on producing healthy and happy adolescents treading on the path of adorable adulthood. Another way in which well being of the students can be achieved is when confidence building becomes a part of teaching module. It is a very important component in the development of a personality and plays a significant role in the promotion of the mental health of all school goers. Confidence and character are almost the two sides of the same coin. That is why character education somehow helps in confidence building also. Education for the development of the character of a student is possible if the focus is laid on inculcating vitality (good health which ultimately promotes the power of hard work and rational thinking), courage (overcoming fear not only in action but in feeling), sensitiveness (empathy- emotional, cognitive and aesthetic sensitivity) and intelligence (an aptitude for acquiring knowledge and not just storing of knowledge) amongst the young minds. These can be promoted amongst the students through films, dialogues, organizing of excursion visits to social institutions and by making them participate in community service. These sorts of activities encourage the fresh minds to think and reflect which in turn creates sensitivity and understanding of their own selves and the others in a more comprehensive manner resulting in building of both confidence and character. Such qualities, if made to learn during the early years of education paves way for the happy life of an individual.

d) Health literacy

In last few years there has been considerable amount of attention that has been laid on the global health challenges. The health care professionals have started considering some link between education and health (though this existed both during Aristotle and the ancient Indian system of thought). It is felt that the literacy

debate cannot just be confined to a simplistic understanding of literacy as the capacity to read, write and have bare numeric skills (the three Rs') but need to account for complexity, culture, individual empowerment and community development. It is high time that literacy must be viewed as including a variety of skills required by an adult to function in a society. Health being associated with well being is the new emerging trend which cannot be overlooked in the present context. Well being in the sphere of education has to focus on the creating favorable and friendly environment for health literacy. The point to be emphasized is that the health education must be realistic and relevant to various groups of children and to ever changing experiences of the adolescents, and thus be dynamic in nature.

Health education must be taken as a source of self empowerment wherein 'every subject is open to rational debate and to a consideration in a scientific manner'. It can become successful if the students are given patient listening and their doubts and queries are respected and valued. It is only in a comfortable environment and with some support from the teachers that the adolescents will be able to share the anxiety related to their mind and body functions. If the health experiences of children have to be understood, all concerned with teaching need to be sensitive and imaginative about the lives of students which are very often different from their own lives. They need to cultivate the spirit of calm hearing and dialogue with students. Within the framework of health education for the well being of the children, it is significant that there is a complete involvement of children and they be allowed to define their own health agenda. It is only when this much freedom is given to the students then we can expect the success of health literacy for their well being.

e) Role of a teacher

A teacher has a significant role to play if education has to focus on the well being of the students. Most often a teacher is taken as an instructor, someone who transmits knowledge from the book to the minds of the children but in the context of new focus, the teacher's responsibility lies in 'facilitating the learning processes' according to the need of the time, place and environment of the students. A teacher cannot continuously be thundering instructions into the ears of the students as if pouring it through the tunnel. Her/his task lies in inducing the child to think, to observe, to imagine and to distinguish-sometimes clearing the way and at other times leaving it for the students to clear up based upon their reasoning,



reflection and judgment. "Teachers offer an excellent opportunity to children to develop their abilities to think, reason and to argue." It is a pressing need to introduce those activities in the schools that can enhance the children's abilities to critically analyze situations, take independent decisions, empathize with people and work cooperatively towards the well being of all.

A teacher's responsibility lies in teaching students to see the vitality and beauty in themselves and in assisting them in learning rather than just merely teaching. The teachers need to descend from the throne where they are treated as the objects of reverence and be available to offer guidance to those who are in the process of ascending the throne of learning. Mindless injection of knowledge will not open the gateway of well being of students. Instead the school education will have to make efforts towards the development of the humanistic processes that can help in nurturing wisdom and enabling every student's potential to bloom to the fullest.

Aristotle who gave utmost importance to the role of teacher in the well being education of a student said that those who educate children well are more to be honored than even their parents because parents only give the children life but it is the teacher who teaches them the art of living well-the art of well being.¹² In the new role of a facilitator, the teacher becomes 'the guide on the side' rather than 'the sage on the stage.'¹³

Thus the purpose of school education is securing the well being of each and every student. The system of education needs to make it crystal clear that no one's well being can be achieved in utter isolation but in working for the well being of others i.e. in complete harmony with others. Education is always an unending search for the best that is yet to be known. It is an adventure within that is endless, ceaseless and exhilarating. It is only when there is complete harmony amongst all the components of well being for the students that the true worth of school education will come forth. Time for all of us to ponder!

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