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at the Interface of Disciplines:
Research and Practice**

International Conference at the
Department of English Language
and Literature

Blaže Koneski Faculty of Philology
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University
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8th - 9th April 2022

**Студии по англистика -
Интердисциплинарност во
истражувањата и практиката**

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**THE CASE FOR OFFERING PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT
TO STAFF AND STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Abstract: This paper looks at aspects of professional wellbeing addressed by a project we designed and ran in our roles as members of the Committee for Enhancing the Quality of Teaching at Blaže Koneski Faculty of Philology (Saints Cyril and Methodius University, North Macedonia). First, we present findings on the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on the students' and teachers' psychological wellbeing to stress the necessity of providing psychosocial support to both groups. Then, we forge links between professional wellbeing on the one hand, and educational psychology and educational philosophy on the other hand, in order to highlight the centrality of wellbeing to performing well in any job, including in academia. We go on to discuss the project design and the feedback we received from some of the project participants. We discuss the findings and make recommendations for the future.

Keywords: psychosocial support, teacher wellbeing, student wellbeing, tertiary education

1. Introduction

In this paper, we look at aspects of professional wellbeing by presenting a project we designed and have been running since 2020 in our roles as members of the Committee for Enhancing the Quality of Teaching at “Blaže Koneski” Faculty of Philology. The project was entitled “Psychosocial Support¹ for Teachers and Students at the Faculty of Philology during a Pandemic”.

A study carried out at “Blaže Koneski” Faculty of Philology in the aftermath of the first academic semester impacted by COVID-19 (March-May 2020) highlighted the need among both teachers and students for a structured psychological support offered by the institution (Ončevska and Ivanovska-Naskova 2020). In response to this expressed need, we ran a series of nine online workshops for 15 teachers, all led by a clinical psychologist. The teachers worked on developing strategies for self-care and, by extension, care for their students in the context of a pandemic, which arguably made them vulnerable to new and existing demands within higher education. In addition to this, the teachers experimented with new teaching approaches, most notably such that drew on learner autonomy. Namely, the teachers encouraged some of their students to hold classes on their own, i.e., without the teacher present in the (virtual) room, as a way of empowering their learners, who later wrote about their experiences and shared their insights. The initial feedback from all project participants (15 teachers and, by proxy, 121 students) suggests that projects like this one are indeed necessary and beneficial to all involved.

To put our project in context, we first review the literature for the extent of the global educational disruption caused by COVID-19. Then, we present a case for the importance of maintaining positive levels of wellbeing in academia. It is against this backdrop that we outline the project and discuss some of the key findings it has yielded so far.

2. The effects of COVID-19 on teachers’ and students’ psychological wellbeing

The abrupt changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic have had an enormous cognitive, emotional, physical and social impact on everyone, including students and teachers. Numerous studies since the onset of the pandemic have shown a range

¹ The term “psychosocial” refers to the “dynamic relationship between the psychological and social dimension of a person, where the one influences the other. The psychological dimension includes the internal, emotional and thought processes of a person – his or her feelings and reactions. The social dimension includes relationships, family and community networks, social values and cultural practices.” The term “psychosocial support” refers to the “actions that address the psychosocial needs of individuals and of communities, taking into consideration psychological, social and cultural aspects of well-being” (IFRC 2009).

of detrimental effects. Cognition has been affected resulting in rigid thinking, lower memory, poorer concentration, and reduced motivation (El-Monshed et al. 2021: 2), while class engagement and performance is also reported to be diminished (ILO 2020: 7). Students have also reported changes in their eating and sleeping patterns (Chaturvedi et al. 2021: 1), experiences of social withdrawal, cyberbullying, alcohol misuse and addiction (Sundarassen et al. 2020: 3), and absenteeism (ILO 2020: 7). The effects on mental health have been widespread too, with increased prevalence of stress, anxiety, depression and even suicidal ideation or attempt reported (El-Monshed et al. 2021: 2). Previous studies on students' mental health have shown that they are a demographic group which experiences more mental health problems than the rest of the population (Lei et al. 2016: 2), increasing their susceptibility to the effects of COVID-19. Table 1 illustrates data from various studies on students' mental health before the pandemic as well as studies conducted in China, Egypt, Malaysia, Spain and North Macedonia during the pandemic. The high prevalence rates of mental health indicators among students during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate how much these have worsened as a result of the changes brought by the pandemic.

Table 1. Prevalence rates of mental health issues among students before and during COVID-19

Country	Anxiety	Depression	Stress	PTSD	Suicidal thoughts
Before COVID-19					
China (Lei et al. 2016: 2) > 30.000 students	/	23.8%	/	/	/
China (Yang et al. 2017 in Chi et al. 2020)	21.4%	/	/	16.6%	/
During COVID-19					
China (Chi et al. 2020) > 2000 students	15.5%	23.3%	/	30.8%	/
China (Cao et al. 2020) > 7000 students	24.9%	/	/	/	/
Malaysia (Sundarassen et al. 2020) - 1000 students	29.8%	/	/	/	/
Egypt (El-Monshed et al. 2021) > 600 students	47.1%	74.5%	40.5%	/	/

Spain (Odriozola-Gonzalez et al. 2020) > 2500 students	21.34%	34.19%	28.14%	/	/
North Macedonia (Ristevska-Dimitrovska 2020) > 250 students	28.2%	42.5%	/	49.4%	19.6%

These effects result from two sets of causes: those related to the pandemic itself and those related to the nature of online teaching and learning. Both these sets of causes affect both students and teachers. The preventive measures introduced to stop the spread of the virus meant that people had to reduce or even eliminate their in-person interactions and endured a monotonous lifestyle confined to the same space for a prolonged period. Consequences such as less physical activity and more screen time resulted in irregular sleep and diet and weight gain (Wang et al. 2020: 946). Exposure to excessive or incorrect information or lack of information about the pandemic and how to protect oneself and the close ones created additional stress for teachers and students. This was coupled with their personal fear of infection as well as frequent witnessing of suffering and death in the media or in their environment. Such changes, combined with the serious economic and financial consequences of the lockdowns, created a feeling of uncertainty about the future, especially among final year students (UNESCO 2021). Students and teachers who have experienced difficulties and inequalities before, such as domestic violence or lack of IT resources, have been affected the most (Mbunge et al. 2020).

Lockdown measures also meant that in-person classes had to be replaced with online classes, which has brought challenges in its own right. The new virtual environment has reduced class interaction and social interaction with peers (Cardenas et al. 2020: 2187). It has created stress due to the lack of digital skills (Naidoo & Cartwright 2020: 4) and resources as well as work overload (Olawale et al. 2021:185). There was a lot of uncertainty about how to introduce the current curriculum in the online classroom and how to conduct evaluation and assessment (Olawale et al. 2021: 180). Studying and working online has also shifted work-life balance by blurring the boundaries between work/study and family, which for some meant juggling household duties with online work/study (ILO 2020: 18). University life was affected by limited international mobility (UNESCO 2021) and uncertainty about the future of teaching and learning (Sundarasan et al. 2020: 8).

The literature review on the effects of COVID-19 on mental health highlights the importance of tapping into wellbeing as a crisis response strategy and, we would argue, also as prevention from future crises. Next, we review the literature on

wellbeing and establish its centrality to motivated learning and its potential to inform critical pedagogy.

3. Supporting professional wellbeing to develop self-determination in a higher education setting

We define professional wellbeing as comprising of four primary dimensions (Warr 1994):

- affective content, i.e. the emotional states one experiences in the context of work, on continua such as, e.g. anxiety-comfort, boredom-enthusiasm, anger-calmness;
- aspiration, i.e. the extent to which one engages in meaningful, development-conducive professional activity;
- autonomy, i.e. the degree to which one is granted freedom to operate in their professional environment;
- competence, i.e. the psychological ability to experience success in one's dealings in/with the environment.

To Warr's (1994) criteria for professional wellbeing, van Horn et al. (2004) add the following:

- social factors, i.e. the levels of positivity with which one regards one's collaborators;
- cognitive factors, e.g. concentration;
- psychosomatic wellbeing, i.e. factors involving one's physical health.

Definitions of professional wellbeing to a large extent overlap with those of general wellbeing. One of the most influential conceptions of wellbeing is presented by Seligman (2011), according to whose PERMA-V model wellbeing consists of the following components:

- positive emotions, i.e. one's ability to experience sufficient positive emotions;
- engagement, i.e. one's ability to immerse oneself in an activity to the extent that one loses sense of time or surroundings;
- relationships, i.e. the network of available positive relationships;
- meaning, i.e. the sense that what one is doing is meaningful and worthwhile;
- accomplishment, i.e. the ability to experience success in one's tasks;
- vitality, i.e. experiencing a good balance of sleep, nutrition and exercise.

If we juxtapose the two views of professional and general wellbeing, we can see that there's a good degree of overlap. The only dimension from the professional wellbeing framework (Warr 1994 and van Horn 2004) that does not have a clear counterpart in the general wellbeing framework (Seligman 2011) is Autonomy.

However, it can be said that Engagement relies on a certain amount of freedom to operate in a given context.

3.1 How is wellbeing central to motivated behaviour?

One of the most influential motivation theories is Ryan and Deci's theory of self-determination (2000), which stipulates that motivated behaviour relies on meeting three basic needs:

- competence, i.e. being able to experience success in one's engagement with the environment;
- autonomy, i.e. having relative freedom in operating within a framework set by the environment;
- relatedness, i.e. enjoying nurturing relationships in the environment.

These conditions for motivated behaviour are featured in the wellbeing frameworks we reviewed above (Warr 1994; van Horn 2004; Seligman, 2011), which suggests that the benefits of focusing on wellbeing in education may not only be psychological but also academic. This warrants a discussion of some practical ways in which wellbeing work can be incorporated in pedagogical tasks.

3.2 How can wellbeing inform critical pedagogy?

Freire's (1970) work on critical pedagogy supplies the philosophical rationale for incorporating wellbeing work in academia. He sees students as "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (ibid, 62), i.e. collaborators in a meaningful teaching/learning process, not merely an audience to a lecture. Freire's understanding of the role of the teacher is similarly powerful, "The teacher is no longer the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (ibid, 61).

One way in which students can be actively engaged to the point of becoming teachers' collaborators in the teaching/learning process is by experiencing learner autonomy, as enacted by our project. Holec (1981) defines learner autonomy as the willingness and ability to take charge of one's own learning, e.g. by having a say in how a course is run. More specifically, teachers can tap into learner autonomy by inviting students to exercise choice about the course aims, content, methodologies, and/or assessment. By encouraging learner autonomy, to use Seligman's (2011) PERMA-V framework, teachers would be tapping into their students' sense of meaningfulness, as an entry point to their wellbeing work. Such meaningfulness, in turn, is likely to result in more positive emotions, deeper engagement in their day-

to-day tasks, more meaningful connections, experiences of success and improved health more generally (ibid.). By designing regular ‘exercises in wellbeing’ in academia, teachers would be supporting important wellbeing habit formation in their students, an important skill for students to take forward in their adult lives as part of a self-care toolkit. With this knowledge in mind, we embarked on a project to incorporate wellbeing topics in academia. A review of the project and our findings follow.

4. Project overview

Responding to the immediate needs of the staff and students at our institution, the purpose of our project was to build new (healthy and safe) spaces with the support of a psychologist. The main goal was to locate critical points for action in order to enhance the educational and personal working conditions. A key aspect of the project was involving all stakeholders into the relevant processes, maintaining communication among them and facilitating the development of teams and networks to strengthen cooperation and support.

The project was based on the biopsychosocial model of mental health (Engel and Romano 1977 in URM), which sees health not as a mere lack of illness, but a much more intricate combination of factors which need careful management both at a personal and at a social level. Therefore, it can be said that every crisis can be defined as an imbalance of the needs of a system (a person, a family, a group, the society). On this basis, the pandemic was a crisis which needed managing on both social and personal levels. With the psychologist’s help, we reflected on attachment and authenticity as the two crucial psychological drivers of human development, central to crisis management. The key learning point was that during times when attachment is hindered, like during the current pandemic, authenticity is to be pursued to ensure one’s psychological health and to enable one to find creative ways out of the crisis. Hence, the main goal of the project was:

- to raise teachers’ awareness that they can help themselves and their students to manage the crisis caused by the pandemic without needing to be wellbeing experts themselves;

- to increase students’ active involvement in class discussions, in choosing discussion topics, and even in holding whole classes on their own, without the teacher being present in the classroom, as a way of strengthening their authenticity and agency, and in turn, their wellbeing.

Nine online workshops (approximately two hours each) were held with 15 teachers in the first phase of the project. The workshops focused on how teachers can enhance their communication with the students and how they can manage their personal lives vis-à-vis their work environment. To improve teacher-student

communication, the following was discussed: active listening, empathy, sharing, kindness, and tolerance; the teachers then designed tasks to operationalise those principles in their classes. To improve teachers' wellbeing, each workshop included a practical self-care component, which focused on e.g. deep breathing, visualisation, creating a safe place, and daily rituals. Teachers practised these techniques in the workshops and beyond them to tap into their own wellbeing. The workshops also served as a supportive environment where teachers could share their views (personal and professional), experiences, dilemmas and concerns, and learn from each other. The discussions on each workshop were carefully noted in so called "minutes" to serve as a reminder for participants' future reference.

In addition, teachers compiled an online publication² to summarise their experiences and allow for other, non-participant teachers and students to benefit from them too (Project Experiences 2022). The publication contains a brief presentation of the project, followed by specific wellbeing techniques and their benefits. Teachers also described in writing some of the engagement activities implemented with their students to allow for even better and more widespread collaborative learning. Finally, the publication contains a section where the students' feedback on the project is presented, based on a survey conducted among them. The data discussed in this paper are derived from teachers' writings and students' answers to the survey.

In the sections that follow, we present the teachers' and the students' experiences of the process.

5. From dialogue to affective sharing and empathy in the classroom – the teachers' perspective

This section is an attempt to present and evaluate some of the findings³ included in the part of the publication referenced above (Project Experiences 2022), where teachers shared some of their classroom experiences. We discuss how teachers talked about their changed/enhanced teaching methods and perspectives.

As a practitioner, the teacher is faced with the necessity to transform the classroom into a space where students feel safe, and also into a microuniverse where their viewpoints and considerations are validated in an unbiased manner. By experiencing dialogue in practice, i.e. the way it happens (or unfolds) in a certain moment, the student is aware of his/her role in the process of shaping dialogue and learning as well. In the publication, personal experiences from the educational

² Available in Macedonian at: https://coda.io/d/_d-BpfE3Oinz/_supjT#_luWLR Machine translation into English gives a fair idea of topics and sources.

³ This paper, therefore, reviews only some aspects of the project; it by no means refers to the totality of the project.

process are revealed in the part presented under the subtitle “Classroom stories/narratives”, written after year and a half of online teaching practice. These stories are structured by following one formal principle of classification – their connection to the specific field of philology from which they originate (linguistics, methodology, literature and translation studies) and their main component (informal and formal). The informal practices are defined as an attempt to engage students in informal, free discussion at the beginning, end, or during each class, in order to provide a more active reception of the content or the formal component of lectures and classes. Here, we read about engaging the students into shifting their awareness, discussing the way they (students and teachers) spend their free time, presenting educational videos about enhancing professional well-being, experiencing the present moment (here and now), evaluating the current situation etc.

The application of formal practices demonstrates the manner by which students become an essential factor in the process of knowledge construction. In that sense, the dynamic collaboration between each of the sides engaged in the learning process and their respective aspects is of utmost importance. Students can be involved in the activities regarding the shaping of courses’ content or the syllabus by actively molding the presupposed methodologies. This concerns the evaluation of the educational/studying process as well. The results of this changed the perspective regarding the role of the students, who are understood in terms of their more effective involvement, especially when their future professional engagement is at stake. This also means that a student's position/classroom identity is more than an object shaped by the strategies of knowledge transfer. This process renders the student an active subject, capable of gaining and transferring a more profound perspective of what is learned in a unique way. One of the teachers, for instance, shared the following account of using an informal task in class: “Since the lecture was dedicated to the artistic technique of defamiliarization, and the automatism connected to it, I started the class in a strange way, because the essence of this technique contains seeing the ordinary things in an unusual manner. I was asking every student that joined the online class to say what time it is and how he/she can determine it (i.e. what does he/she use as a tool). Some were ‘defamiliarized’ by thinking that this was a punishment for them being late, and some were wondering about the question ‘where do they see what time it is’, because it is common knowledge to see it in the right top/bottom angle of the computer. There was a discussion about how automatic the action is – to see what time it is (in any form), and that sometimes we need to do something differently in order to ensure a more intense brain activity.”

The formal practices which are described also raise the question of empathy and its distinctive elements regarding classroom narratives and the experiences which resulted from this enhanced practice. They serve as a stepping stone to a more

advanced teacher-student interaction, especially when it comes to understanding what students' expectations, needs, emotional/cognitive state of being etc. are in a certain moment. One of the teachers volunteered the following summary of a formal task used in class: "I gave the students a task to prepare a short simulation of a speech act in different contexts (police station, hospital, school etc.), and a short list of terms. Afterwards, in the online class, they simulated these situations, and an *ad hoc* interpreter was appointed. The other students were supposed to follow his work and grade it according to the professional and ethical standards that we accepted prior to this class. As a teacher, I monitored the process and commented on it when necessary. The point of this exercise was to boost their self-confidence and to point to their errors in terms of educational purposes."

The publication sums up teachers' perspectives regarding the process of engaging students into an active dialogue and represents a valuable text phenomenon. It reframes the traditional roles in the educational process, thus assuming the possibility of a more thorough and interdisciplinary approach to the questions related to learning activities. Even though students' viewpoints are expressed by a mediator (i.e. teacher's perspective and his enunciations), their essential role as a factor in the changed interplay of teacher-student duality is expressed in a direct and distinctive manner.

6. Analysis of the feedback from enhancing students' participation in classes – the students' perspective

This section focuses on the 121 students' responses to a survey that was carried out as a part of the project in order to receive feedback about the undertaken activities, both the informal and the formal ones. Responding to several questions in the survey, students' responses generally indicate that they prefer interactive classes, in which their participation is an important segment. This shows the connection between the research carried out so far in the area of widening the active participation of students in classes, and the activities undertaken in this same direction within the scope of our workshops for psychosocial support.

Asked to compare and assess frontal instruction and interactive classes, they consider that interactive classes are a better option (52.3%), or that both types are equally efficient (41.46%). Some of the arguments they offer are that interactive classes contribute to avoiding monotony, help them to get to know each other better, offer them the opportunity to learn from each other's experiences and to exchange opinions. They emphasise that the nature of the course is also important regarding whether the teaching should be frontal or interactive. This supports the view that both approaches can be combined to lead to the most beneficial results for students.

Most of the students (93%) liked the attempts that instructors made to include them more actively in the classes. Concerning the reasons or arguments offered to support this view, students underlined that interactive classes expose them to a variety of opinions, thus encouraging critical thinking. Other benefits that were pointed out were that active involvement improves their focus, concentration, motivation, creates a good atmosphere, improves self-confidence, and creates the impression that the teacher is creative and dedicated to getting the students to learn more. To give an example of a student's answer: "The attention and motivation are easily lost online. If I am not encouraged to actively participate, (sometimes) it happens that I do not pay attention to the lecture."

On the other hand, the students who do not prefer to actively participate consider that this creates stress, pressure and discomfort, because the attention of the group is directed towards one student at a given moment.

The majority of students (83.6%) consider that short activities for reducing stress and improving the wellbeing of students should be integrated into the classes. They propose some activities along these lines:

- have 10-15 minutes in the beginning of the class for free discussion on topics that are outside of the scope of the material;
- teachers to refrain from expressing negative emotions, and instead to show empathy and understanding for the problems of the students;
- work in groups as a possibility for more introverted students to relax and actively participate.

The answers from the survey showed that the results and the arguments offered by the students at the Faculty of Philology are in line with the findings of contemporary research in education psychology, as well as that the activities undertaken as a part of the project for psychosocial support have been beneficial to them.

7. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to present the findings of a project on psychosocial support provided to the teachers and indirectly their students at our faculty. The project was developed to meet the challenges faced by teachers and students after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the changes it brought to education and life in general. The project was designed to respond to teachers' and students' psychological distress due to COVID-19 and to provide them with opportunities for mental stability and personal growth by increased self-care, authenticity and autonomy. The project aims seemed to be in line not only with modern theories of personal and professional wellbeing (Seligman, 2011; Warr, 1994; van Horn, 2004), but also with theories of motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000) and critical pedagogy

(Freire, 1970). The feedback provided by both teachers and students shows that they value the freedom to operate in a safe environment and explore their own potentials both personally and professionally. The results of the project demonstrate that increased autonomy and self-directed learning where both teachers and students, through dialogue and empathy, feel competent and connected contributes to increased levels of engagement, improved relationships, a sense of accomplishment, and a better overall wellbeing.

The literature review and our project experiences show that possible solutions and proactive approaches that can be taken to address mental health and help build resilience among teachers and students in higher education include high-quality, timely crisis-oriented psychological services (Cao et al. 2020: 4) based on holistic policies (Sundarasan et al. 2020: 9). These may include: screening and offering management strategies that address mental health including stress management (meditation and continuing to be socially active by video chats), building resilience and emotional intelligence (Cardenas et al. 2020: 2188) through online interventions by providing a supportive social network (e.g. online support groups (El-Monshed et al. 2021: 10)), enhancing self-efficacy strategies, learning mindfulness skills and nurturing a sense of purpose of life and the ability to find meaning in the face of COVID-19 (Chi et al. 2020: 7). In our project, we have done this by providing teachers with a support group to build their self-care awareness and abilities, and students with a safe environment in which to explore and develop their resilience, autonomy and competence.

Following Shea and Armitage (2000a in Barr 2014), higher education institutions providing online education should provide: mental health education (by providing links to articles on issues common to college students such as stress, fatigue, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse), crisis services (prominently displaying phone numbers for crisis and/or suicide hotlines), self-help services (providing access to tools for self-evaluation, with accompanying articles on strategies for coping with common mental health issues), referral to disability services and counseling services. Authorities may also create a platform for gathering the best online education courses or self-help materials about healthy lifestyle to motivate children to have a healthy lifestyle at home by increasing physical activities, having a balanced diet, a regular sleep pattern, and good personal hygiene (Wang 2021: 946), as well as stress reduction and self-calming techniques (e.g. online relaxation classes, tutorials and apps) (ILO 2020: 29). Our online publication serves exactly this purpose by providing teachers and students at our institution a one-stop-shop for the most essential well-being ‘ingredients’.

Creating positive events in daily life as a momentary respite from chronic stress is another immediate strategy that can be used to protect students’ mental health (Shimazu et al. 2020 in Olawale et al. 2021: 182). This was done in our project by

the teachers' giving students opportunities to freely share their joys and concerns and empowering them to take an active part in their own learning. The teachers experienced similar cathartic effects by being part of the project group, which increasingly operated as a safe and inclusive community of practice.

Finally, our project seems to be innovative in a sense that it does not conceptualise wellbeing as separate from learning; to us, wellbeing is a necessary prerequisite for motivated learning, to be tapped into directly (e.g. by self-care activities for teachers and informal activities for students) but also indirectly, i.e. via engaging academic tasks co-authored, at least partly, with the students; such tasks are more likely to help meet students' needs for success, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000) and result in improved wellbeing.

8. Concluding thoughts

Our project has demonstrated that it is indeed possible and desirable to set up psychosocial support in higher education. While it is true that the pandemic made the need for psychosocial support in our institution more visible, it can be argued that having a custom 'wellbeing toolkit' is a necessary requirement for every individual, not only to be able to navigate major social crises but also to be able to manage one's own personal crises, which nonetheless operate on similar principles. We encourage colleagues to consider putting in place similar psychosocial provisions in their respective contexts; we feel that such initiatives can have a far-reaching positive impact on both individual and social level, not only during the current pandemic but also beyond it.

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