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Happy Teachers in Happy Schools: a Practical Unit

The most effective teachers are the ones who allow themselves to be the happiest.

A. Bethune, E. Kell

If you compare all the strategies you can learn from the new psychological trends such as Positive Education in order to cope with stress, such as meditation, mindfulness, digital detox, exercises for mental-physical-emotional well-being, with Stoic philosophy you will find it surprisingly modern. Nothing new under the sun when it comes to human beings' issues, one could argue. Nevertheless, this is a comforting thought for two different reasons. First of all, it underpins the importance of classics and their role outside the academic institutions; secondly, it is solid proof of how our fundamental needs have never changed over the centuries.

From Epictetus to the digital age we always look for joy and relief in life, very often we run into difficulties, sometimes we have to cope with stressful situations and definitely we need more resilience every day. As teachers we experience all the gamut of these feelings and as teachers we know how well-being can improve teaching as well as learning in our classes.

Here below is an overview of Positive Psychology and its holistic approach to Education, with some tips can be useful to manage stress and make our job easier.

Happy Teachers in Happy Schools: if not sheer joy, a shared path towards flourishing.

About Mindfulness and Meditation

Mindfulness= to be in the moment. It's the practice of being aware of your body-mind-feelings in the present moment in order to create a sensation of calm without suffering from FOMO = Fear of Missing Out (by Jon Kabat Zinn); doing one thing at a time and paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment without being judgmental but being instead openhearted (by Daniel J. Siegel). It can be a Formal or an Informal Practice in every moment of your day. There are different genres of Mindfulness: food mindfulness, creative mindfulness... Its benefits are: more concentration, a better control of your thoughts-emotions-behaviours, healthy physical effects. In order to cope with stressors, before practice Mindfulness, we can apply the PBS technique: Pause-Breathe-Smile.

Resilience=how you react against all odds, it's your ability to cope with life adversities, a set of strengths to achieve an inner balance between the highs and the lows in life as well as at work.

Growth Mindset=how to improve yourself by learning from failures, relishing challenges you come across and embracing all the difficulties with an open mind: when I fail, I learn and if you succeed, I am inspired.

YOLO=You Only Live Once, Seize the day

The Circle of Influence: control the controllable: there are things you cannot control and you shouldn't focus your energy and time on; most effective people focus their energy on areas they can make a difference and in doing so their circle of influence grows (by Stephen Covey)

$E + R = O$

Event + Response or Reaction = Outcome

You can keep under control the outcomes by changing your response to the events of your life.

OPPORTUNITYISNOWHERE: it has two different meanings and two different perspectives; it's the so called "reframing": when we change consciously how we view a situation, often we turn a negative one into a more optimistic viewpoint.

STOP philosophy: yes/no (when, why, how)

How to say "no" with grace: setting boundaries, buying time, offering an alternative or saying "not now", finding a compromise, telling a white lie, using the word "reasonable".

W.I.N. = What's Important Now (what I really want): applying the "stop" philosophy in order to deliver your message

Digital detox: it takes us 68 seconds to recover from each email that lands in our boxes (by Dmitri Leonov, SaneBox), your mental wellbeing needs PTO = Predictable Time Off = no technology, no screen time.

Breathing Tecniques: it works for mindfulness as well as for meditation. In a quiet place breathe in and out for three minutes in different moments of the day, becoming aware of what is going on in your mind and trying to notice the sensations in your body: Belly Breathing: take some conscious, deep breaths slowly, using your diaphragm fully.

About Well-being and Positive Psychology/Positive Education

Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

WHO, 1946

Wellbeing=it is a dynamic state in which the individual realises his or her own potential, cultivates innate capacities, nourishes own abilities and copes with the normal stress factors of life. It can be mental, physical and emotional and it takes into consideration your relation to the self, to others, to the environment; Mental Health is a term often used interchangeably.

1. Mental health is a presence and not absence of disease: traditional psychotherapy is designed to curtail misery while Positive Psychology builds strength
2. Happiness and well-being are not the same thing: the first one is a single element, the second one is a construct, like the weather
3. Happiness is a chaotic term, it's overused, it's always linked to a cheerful mood, it's subjective, it's too volatile
4. We have to rethink happiness: Positive Psychology analyzes it into five positive elements which are measurable and not merely subjective
5. PERMA: positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, accomplishment
6. The topic of Positive Psychology is not happiness, but well-being and its goal is to increase flourishing in people: happiness is only subjective whereas well-being is not and flourishing doesn't mean minimizing suffering. It has a different approach from the traditional one because it is not goal oriented; its aim is not to treat your weaknesses but to strengthen your virtue. It can be also applied to Education (Positive Education), whose motto is: if you feel good, you do good. It can help to prevent anxiety at failure at school.
7. Well-being should be taught in school because it could be a way to curb the current flood of depression and to develop better learning as well as creative thinking
8. Exercises to raise your well-being: celebrating gratitude, being focussed on what goes right, using your signature strength more frequently, being optimistic, practicing active and constructive responding, dealing with negative emotions
9. Positive Psychology movement, founded in 1990s by Dr. Martin Seligman, is rooted in scientific evidence and its approach is based on two key points: being focussed on positive evidence and making you more optimistic and stronger so as to prevent misery in life
10. To flourish=prosperare; it is an umbrella term, but all the meanings are linked to a state of well-being: to be healthy, to grow well, to thrive, to be successful, to bloom, to be vigorous
11. The five pillars:
 - positive emotions=what we feel, the pleasant life
 - engagement=being in flow, focussed on your "object"
 - positive relationships=the master strength is the capacity of being loved

meaning=serving something that you believe is bigger than yourself, having your **ikigai** (something worth living for)
achievement=skills x effort: self-discipline (grit), practice, time

Ikigai=it is a Japanese concept that can be translated as your “reason for being”, something worth living for: it is a mix of vocation-profession-passion-mission and it’s a process of discovery (vd. Materials).

Emotionally Positive Classrooms (by M. Smith): since positive relationships and a sense of belonging play an important role in learning, there are three interrelated properties that make a classroom an emotionally positive one: Caring (when students feel trusted and teachers are supportive), Pro-social (when students and teachers are kind to one another), Learning-focused (when students and teachers have clear the goals they are working towards).

Learned Hopefulness=thinking positive because you know that there’s always something you can do.

Appreciative Inquiry=whilst Problem Solving attitude is outdated, you should focus on what is already working, on the positive aspects to improve your performances, because, as science has already demonstrated, we can work better when we have positive feelings.

Quiet Education=building quiet time consciously into your day, having a moment of stillness with the students before starting lessons or taking time for meditation; slow down the pace of your life and pause for a while in order to find your clarity of vision.

The Have-tos vs. the Want-tos (by Tal Ben Shahar): our life is filled with things we feel we “have to” do, on the other hand, there are things we “want to” do. Reducing the have-tos whilst increasing the want-tos is key to enhancing wellbeing.

The 80:20 rule (or Pareto Principle): 20% of what we do is likely to be worth the rest of the 80% put together, so we need to be doing less: just a lot better by prioritising your tasks, being concentrated, keep the main thing the main thing and “eating the frog” (by Tony Crabbe).

Teacher Agency: it’s teachers’ active contribution to shape their work and its condition and it’s considered a specific form of professional agency. In order to being able to take action and promote his/her wellbeing, a teacher needs to find the right school for him/her, being assertive, saying “no” from time to time, taking control of his/her professional development (CPD), being optimistic.

SWB (Subjective Well Being)=it relies on three pillars: frequent positive feelings, infrequent negative feelings, life satisfaction.

Worry Coping Cards: a practical activity to help you and your students deal with negative feelings (vd. Materials).

Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions=there are six basic emotions which are in the inner circle plus other several emotions with a different level of intensity (vd. Materials).

Gratitude=it is an emotion with social/environmental connotation, a cognitive-affective state. Practising it improves the sense of well-being and makes you more optimistic.

SMART Goals=Specific-Achievable-Realistic/Relevant-Time frame: teachers have always to set SMART goals, because only these can lead to success avoiding anxiety.

WHO's Life Skills: Effective Communication, Interpersonal Relationships, Coping with Stress, Coping with Emotions, Critical Thinking, Empathy, Decision Making, Problem Solving, Self-Awareness (vd. Materials).

SODAS Method=it is a problem solving attitude:
Situations/Options/Disadvantages/Advantages/Solutions. It helps you to deal with critical situations.

The PERMA Model of Wellbeing in details

1.

Positive Emotions="a multicomponent response tendency", a mental experience which is intense and pleasurable.

What is an emotion? It has three components: cognitive-behavioural-physiological and the gamut is wide, but being aware and being able to give them a proper name can be helpful to manage the negative ones.

Negative Emotions: we should learn how to manage them by STOPP Method: Pause for 6 seconds, Take a breath, Observe your feelings/reactions, Put them in perspective, Proceed.

2.

Engagement=to be in the flow state. It is a holistic experience that people feel when they act with total involvement: your mind is totally focussed on the task and you do not care about the results, you do not pay attention to time because you enjoy the process in and of itself. The key is this: the challenge has to match your skills, otherwise you can experience anxiety or boredom.

How to reach this state in a classroom, with the students? You have to find the SMART task, be crystal clear about goals and time frame, encourage everyone, avoid distractions, choose a pleasant environment, be the role model, rely on and enhance their strenghts.

3.

Positive Relationships=the indicators of a positive relationship can be to feel free to be yourself, a sense of trust and safety, empathy and compassion, no judgment, mutual support...but the key is how to communicate in a constructive way.

Active Constructive Responding (ACR)=how to communicate successfully with everyone in order to build positive relationships and to develop your assertiveness (vd. Materials).

Practising ACR, Gratitude, Mindfulness at school leads to stronger self-control, reduces level of stress, improves well-being, makes relationships more meaningful. How can we practice Gratitude and Mindfulness at school? For example, we could start our lessons by stating one thing we are grateful for and encouraging the students to do the same; we also could say "thank you" more often or introduce a few minutes of meditation as good practice. Or, again, we could develop a mindful way of living in our students by applying some strategies of Positive Psychology.

4.

Meaning=to have a sense of purpose in life. It is always connected to your values and beliefs. Finding your ikigai is the key factor.

How to find your ikigai? By answering the following four questions.

What do you love doing?

What are you good at?

What can you be paid for?

What does the world need?

You have found your ikigay when these four elements overlap, as it is shown in the picture (vd. Materials)

5.

Accomplishment=the development of an individual potential through striving for and achieving meaningful outcomes. It needs a Growth Mindset and it is connected to your strengths.

Strengths=positive qualities that can promote well-being in themselves and in the others. They have an impact on how you think/feel/behave (vd. Materials).

The project I suggest we should implement in our school:

1. Spending a few moments at the beginning of the lessons to tune with the students and to support who is in need
2. Encouraging the students to work on their emotions by naming them (Self-awareness), spreading the positive ones (Gratitude practice), managing the negatives (STOPP, PBS, Mindfulness practices)
3. Helping the students to find their ikigai as a way to choose their path to a meaningful and flourishing life

