**Students well-being**

BY N E D A M U L J l 2022-09-20

POST-PANDEMIC times have seen a rise in the need to focus on student well-being if we are to close learning gaps resulting from the long period of school closures. Many children have suf fered loss and grief within their families and communities. Teaching emotional self-regulation and well-being as part of the curriculum helps students focus on self-management, no matter which pathway or subject specialisation they choose.

Some schools have taken steps in this direction, as part of their global skills agenda. From regular exercise in the morning to mindfulness and meditation, many programmes have been initiated. Yet, none of these can be described as a system established to work towards emotional well-being on a sustainable basis. Well-being initiatives will have to be intertwined with the subject content, if they are to be useful and inculcated as lifelong skills in students.

From self-regulation of emotions to managing stress and loneliness, resolving conflict and standing up to bullying, a wellcrafted curriculum and thoughtful classroom approaches can bring about positive and sustainable change. In classrooms that support emotional well-being, students are given opportunities to talk about themselves. They learn that their experiences are valued, and that they are seen and heard in their learning environment.

Much of this has to do with linking learning to daily life experiences, where texts taught are used as springboards to engage students in thinking about their own lives, and to support them in finding a voice. This can also be done through presenting hypothetical situations that motivate them to think critically and use a problem-solving approach to brainstorm in groups. The idea is to provide opportunities for collaboration and self-expression consistently and in a structured way. Such strategies help draw out students who appear shy and withdrawn, and are essentially hesitant to share their views, of ten glaring at others and masquerading as difficult learners. Many of them may be using shyness as a coping mechanism to mask fear, anger or grief.

Aggressive behaviour in class is often the flip side of the same coin a coping device for lack of better tools to manage heavy emotions. Students are unable to reach out for help of ten the necessary channels such as school counsellors are not available, neither are digital tools which can enable them to read up on their own and find ways to help themselves. Not every student is lucky enough to get help from parents. Schools can provide a nurturing and empowering environment to those who do not have access to it within the f amily set-up.

Many seemingly disciplined students arerunning on a band-aid that protects them f rom revealing their dif ficulties to the world around them. Traditionally, as a culture, we have valued discipline over self-expression and, unfortunately, our curriculum has prioritised learning over self-care. Luckily, the pandemic has opened up digital lines of communication between the teachers and learners; we now have more schools willing to showcase their work on social media, and allow access to teachers and staff through WhatsApp, resulting in a collapse of traditional barriers so that the child is better supported through teamwork between the school management, teachers and parents.

The pandemic has also opened up a window of awareness for previously shelved necessities such as a research-backed curriculum that teaches social and emotional skills as part of the subject content. A few minutes of `looking out for each other` words of kindness, checking in with a positive greeting, team games in class and teaching a vocabulary for emotional expression can fos-ter a culture of calmness and positivity.

Social and emotional learning is directly correlated to the improvement of relation-ships across the school community, resulting in increased motivation and better academic performance. Conversely, students whose emotional and social well-being is at stake, may slide into disengagement, demotivation and low grades. The spiral is hard to beat. One student described himself as a `hamster on a wheel`. Most students in that kind of trap will need a bailout and usually it comes in the form of tutors who can help them get their grades up, but not necessarily develop the emotional skills required for self-discipline.

Schools that can bridge the gap between learning and emotional self-regulation and social skills can boast a school community with a progressive ethos, a spirit of growth, accomplishment and community. Emotional and social well-being can bring about positive connections between students, help them make responsible decisions and set realistic goals for themselves and contribute constructively to the learning of others. The writer is senior manager, professional development, at Oxford University Press Pakistan and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy UK.

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