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Research Paper

Fostering Student Happiness in Learning During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Phenomenological Study in Elementary School

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Abstract

Students` comfort while at school plays a vital role in learning. Teachers` representation is required to foster students` well-being. This mini research explores the perspective of the 1st-grade elementary school teachers on student well-being and their experience in promoting it. The data was obtained through an interview with one teacher and analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. The analysis results showed four themes: the principles of student well-being, the ways the teacher encourages students` well-being, and support and challenges for the teacher. This study concludes that the role of teachers is very important in providing a pleasant learning atmosphere for students. There are many ways that teachers can be creative with support from schools and the community

Keywords *student well-being, teachers' role, phenomenology, schools, distance learning*

INTRODUCTION

Research on student well-being in schools is substantial because student well-being at schools provides support for the optimal learning and growth process. Student well-being is associated with higher academic achievement (Kaya & Erdem, 2021), greater self-esteem (Alwi et al., 2020; Palwade, 2022), and more positive relations at school (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012). Well-being also relates to student problem-solving skills and resilience in adversity (Morales-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Orkibi et al., 2014).

In the context of learning at the elementary school age, the school's efforts to meet the student well-being are highly relied on the practices carried out by classroom teachers. In the context of well-being for first-year students, classroom teachers play a vital role in delivering learning and supporting children's social-emotional development (Egan et al., 2021). This developmental stage typically relies on daily, close interactions between teachers and students. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has limited in-person gatherings, reducing students` learning volume and making it challenging for teachers to build relationships, provide necessary support, and offer mentoring.

By understanding the interconnectedness of students` well-being and learning outcomes, we argue that well-being can contribute to learning success when children experience it from an early age, such as at the elementary school level. Therefore, documenting the experiences of elementary classroom teachers in promoting student well-being can provide valuable insights. Among numerous studies on how the pandemic impacted education, only a small number are focusing on primary school. Based on these considerations, this study aims to explore and describe the

perspectives, experiences, and thoughts of an elementary school teacher regarding student well-being during learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Well-Being

For decades, empirical research on well-being has been guided by a range of theoretical perspectives and is known by various terminologies. Initially, Diener (1984) found that well-being was experienced by individuals based on subjective assessments of satisfaction in various aspects of their lives. This opinion is known as subjective well-being. From another perspective, Ryff and Singer (1996) argue that well-being can actually be judged by other people because it is built from the internal psychological factors of the individuals who are connected to their environment and society. This idea was developed by Ryan and Deci (2000) as the Self-Determination Theory. Following, well-being is also popular as authentic happiness (Seligman et al., 2004).

The following theories describe the domains of well-being. Diener (1994) stated that well-being represents a mental condition assessed subjectively, comprising life satisfaction, the predominance of positive emotions, and low levels of negative emotions. In contrast, Ryff and Singer (1996) believe that well-being consists of six psychological aspects: self-acceptance, positive relations, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Similarly, well-being is described as happiness and joy, which require three components in life: autonomy, competencies, and relation (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Furthermore, Seligman (2004) figured out happiness comes from signature strengths, virtues inside the self, meaning, and purpose in life.

Well-Being In School Age Student

Over time, in the context of education, theories about student well-being that relate to positive school attributes have emerged. Student well-being should be recognized as it includes their emotional, physical, and mental needs, which can change every day depending on whether these needs are being met in their learning environment (Zheng, 2022). In addition, studies found that well-being at school is related to positive emotion, (lack of) negative emotion, relationships, engagement, accomplishment, purpose at school, intrapersonal factors, and contextual factors (Hossain et al., 2022), and higher academic achievement (Datu, 2018; Kaya & Erdem, 2021), prosocial behaviors (Hui et al., 2020), higher resilience and lower stress (Li & Hasson, 2020).

To identify student well-being in the school context in Indonesia, the research by Kurniastuti and Azwar (2014) has developed a measurement tool based on the findings of 4 dimensions that make up student well-being, namely self-esteem, self-development, normative behavior, and emotional control. However, there are still a small number of studies on elementary school children in Indonesia. This was also expressed by Aulia et al. (2020), who then researched and developed a well-being model for elementary school students. In the Indonesian elementary school context, student well-being includes five themes: school attachment, achievement, relationships, positive emotions, and negative emotions.

Teacher role in student well-being

Studies on teacher-student relationships show their impact on student well-being (Chamizo-Nieto et al., 2021; Holfve-Sabel, 2014; Hossain et al., 2023; Sethi & Scales, 2020). It encourages positive connections with peers and is linked to improved academic performance (Olivier & Archambault, 2017), especially in students who require additional support. Moreover, studies pinpoint how a positive teacher-student bond presented in good communication, support, and interpersonal relations reduces students` stress and signs of intrinsic and extrinsic behaviors (Longobardi et al., 2016). Schonert-Reichl (2017) stated that a teacher`s abilities shape the

relationship quality with students, which further strongly influences student well-being. The daily closeness between a teacher and students affects how well a teacher understands and meets students` needs.

RESEARCH METHOD
Participant

This study is qualitative research with a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological studies describe the general meaning that individuals are assigned to various life experiences related to a particular concept or phenomenon. A teacher from a public elementary school (SD) was purposely selected as the participant for the outstanding performance reputation, over 15 years of experience, and insightful teaching. She participated voluntarily through the consent form (*informed consent*) and met the following criteria: (1) was a permanent teacher at an elementary school for at least 2 years, (2) was a graduate of the elementary teacher education study program, (3) was a full-time teacher, was not studying or working part-time, (4) was not a school principal.

Data Collection

Face-to-face, semi-structured interview were recorded to collect data. The typical IPA method was used to collect plentiful, worthwhile data about the phenomena being investigated (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The interview process was conducted in the classroom of the participating teachers, to allow the researcher to obtain additional perspectives from observations, both in the classroom atmosphere and the school environment. The observation data was captured though photos as permitted by the school. Before the interview, the researcher visited the school and communicated with the principal for permission and approval. The interview was 50 minutes long and was later transcribed verbatim manually. Field note was taken to capture the intimacy and relationship between teachers and staffs, the participant and the school principal.

Analysis Method

The presentation of the research results was carried out through the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). In qualitative research, IPA is an approach to understand the participants' experiences from personal perspective and social interaction. The analysis process is carried out with abstraction process in stages starting with reading the entire interview transcript repeatedly. In the next stage, extraction is carried out by writing exploratory comments that focus on the content of the participant's speech, the use of language, the context and the researcher's interpretive comments. The collected and extracted comments are then categorized into themes and sub-themes. The themes abstracted in this manuscript are those that are relevant to the research questions. Observation data is used as a support that convinces the validity of the participants' testimonies. From the interview transcript, the participant conducted member checking on the interview transcript to confirm that all recorded information accurately reflected her experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Findings

The analysis of research data reflected by the participants resulted in themes and sub-themes that answered the research questions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Theme and Sub-Theme of Research Results

Theme	Sub-themes
Student well-being principles	• Student comfort priority • Conducive atmosphere • Lesson mastery support • Peer interaction • Various ways need to be done
Efforts to create student well-being	• Prioritizing needs, conditions, and physical, social-emotional development and positive behaviors • Designing a fun yet effective learning atmosphere and way • Facilitating individualized assistance • Establishing cooperation • Using language that is easy for children to understand
Support	• School policies • Community around the school
Challenge	• Making all children able to learn

Student well-being principles and teachers' efforts

Teacher`s concerns and principles regarding student well-being are reflected in five sub-themes. Interestingly, the teacher noted the emotional excitement of children and parents to the opportunity to return to school after being at home since the pandemic began in 2020. The boredom experienced by both children and parents during home learning rooted from the challenges the children faced due to the lack of teacher guidance and the difficulties the parents encountered in supervising them at home.

The participant expressed her priorities and concerns for students` emotional well-being. Participant was aware of students' emotional dynamics, including positive emotions such as happiness, excitement, and comfort, and negative emotions such as fear, boredom, and confusion. At the same time, participants felt a connection with the students' emotions. When students were learning comfortably, the teacher also felt comfortable teaching. On the other hand, students' anxiety expressed in words or distinct facial expressions and behaviors also triggered certain emotions in teachers. She recounted an impressive moment:

"There was once a kid who were naturally difficult to manage. Very hard to be advised. Wouldn`t use nice worlds, always rude. I was so irritated. I slammed the door. I was rude. I even cried, "if

you can't manage yourself, you can leave this room. I won`t even bother to find you.". To my
surprise, the child realized it. He understood that I was angry, but then he regretted. "I won't
leave, ma'am. If I leave the class, I won`t become a clever child".

The participant paid attention to reducing the negative emotions of students so that students could learn. For example, on children who were afraid, always cry or avoid going to school, the teacher approached by inviting them to talk, providing opportunities to switch classes, or providing learning alternative like peer-tutor method. She helped students to overcome their negative emotions first. It enabled her to provide space for developing students' emotional abilities.

The principle of prioritizing comfort and pleasure of students was also carried out in the academic context. She realized students would understand the lesson more easily if they were happy with the condition. She creatively prepared fun opening activities in her study plan that relieved tension and built excitement. Various learning methods that stimulated students' active participation were carried out, such as singing, games, hands-on practice, observation and activities outside the classroom.

Efforts to help students understand the lessons included individual guidance for those struggling. She provided repetition, used simpler language, and facilitated them to learn in a separate room with a support teacher. Peer tutors were also used as a strategy. She observed that students could help each other, become more enthusiastic, and were happier learning together with their friends. Students' interactions with their friends do not only academically beneficial but are also believed to increase students' enjoyment at school and entertain each other from boredom by sharing stories and jokes with each other.

"Yes, there are students who are afraid of me, but they are more enthusiastic accompanied by
their friends. The student who assisted their peers were also happy and felt more enthusiastic
because they felt more capable than the friends they were helping. So, they all enjoyed the
process".

The participant stated that active learning methods were not always mentioned in the Lesson Plan (RPP) document. There are times when it is carried out instinctively as a response to the students' needs and the conditions in the classroom. For example, when she noticed that some students showed signs of boredom, or even she herself felt bored:

"Yes, sometimes I spontaneously change it. Sometimes it's as simple as, "Let's go for a walk".
Sometimes I am also bored. So sometimes I skip over materials. I sometimes say, "Let's do my
things" when I noticed the class seemed bored."

Even though paying a great attention to affective domain, the participant still prioritized mastery of the learning. The priority she identified at the beginning of school year with students when they started coming back to school was the students' reading ability. In Grade 1 of elementary school, she prioritized the reading ability because it was considered as the foundation for the fulfilling competencies and completing subsequent tasks in all subjects. With reading skills and mastery of lessons, students feel more enthusiastic towards learning, which translated to have better well-being at school. She compared it with students who still had reading difficulties. She found them feeling afraid, crying, avoiding, or not excited.

"In the beginning, children might show anxiety. Sometimes they cried. If I tell them to read, they
will cry at school, and even some of them would not go to school. I usually visit students who are

anxious for school."

Participants reflected on the results of their efforts; student well-being increased as students' learning abilities developed.

"*Students now dare to speak in front of the class. Nobody would do it; they were too afraid. Now, when I ask them to come forward, everyone wants to do it. They will happily do it."*

Strategies to support student comfort were also formulated. Since learning conditions during the pandemic required safe distance between students in the classroom, the participant tried to arrange the student seating area to be accessible to facilitate the necessary mobility, interaction between teachers-students and among students, and individual guidance. She sought appropriate boundaries between school provisions and children's needs. She also considered the safety of students when studying outside of classroom to avoid certain behavioral risks.

Support

The participants' commitment to create a comfortable, well-being-focused environment for students was supported by school policies enabled by the principal. She mentioned the flexibility and trust given by the principal, allowing teachers is to select learning methods that suited to the children.

"*The principal is happier when the students learn outside the classroom. She said that learning did not have to be in the classroom. It could be anywhere. There are 3 principles that must be met. First, you don't have to spend money; the second important thing is that the children are comfortable; The third is the subject matter is fulfilled."*

Information from parents about the students' personalities was also valuable to the participant. She employed a unique strategy to understand her students more deeply by taking them for walks around the village where the school is located. Many students live around the school. She said:

"*When I went out with the students, they showed me their houses or their friends' houses, so that I could indirectly see the condition of the child's neighborhood and also the child's family. Sometimes I talk with the family and ask how their child behave or what habits they do at home. Without having to do a home visit, I can get a lot of information. This method is even less noticeable and does not cause concern among parents, unlike formal home visit which sometimes can make parents worry that there are issues with their child at school. "*

She said that the principal supports the activity with students safety being highlighted. In addition, participants also utilized the support of the community around the school to interact with students during out-of-school learning. The communities around the school could become a contextual learning resource that gave a positive impression on students as well.

Challenge

The participant has more than 15 years of teaching experience in elementary schools. She is serving in a public school that welcomes students from various social, economic, and special learning needs backgrounds. At this point, she reflected that the challenge in providing student well-being is to make all students able to learn optimally, regardless of their physical condition and

potential. In particular, she felt unsatisfied with the teaching strategies she had applied if students` problems and needs had not been fully acknowledged and fulfilled.

"The biggest challenge is to guide students with special learning needs to be able to read. Although sometimes I am assisted by a special tutor, I still have not figure out how to teach some students more effectively. Sometimes if I push them too hard to study, it makes them cry in class."

She added more data about challenges from the parents in this matter.

"In my effort to make students read, I also face challenges from the parents. There are parents who cannot make their children keep studying when their kids start to face difficulties. The parents give up. So sometimes I need to urge them to be willing to accompany and encourage their children to practice reading at home.

In other words, further assessment of certain students and understanding the effective teaching strategy for them remain a challenge.

CONCLUSIONS

Balancing students` academic achievement with their well-being is crucial. This requires teachers' attention to students` to physical, social-emotional, behavioral and learning challenges, as well as their understanding and mastery of lessons, meaningful interaction with peers, and conducive learning environment. Teachers can perform various strategies to implement effective fun learning methods and provide individual assistance. Support and challenges for teachers in creating student well-being can be various depending on the environment and teachers' personal factors.

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

The results of this study can be used as a reference to design interventions that strengthen the role of teachers in supporting student well-being in schools adapted to the student needs and the school environment. This research required direct data collection at school, but the number of participants was limited due to the restriction to face-to-face interaction at school during the Covid-19 pandemic. Future research could include additional informants to further explore this phenomenon.

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