

# A Participatory Exploration of the Relationship between the Focus on Academic Achievement in UK Education Policy and Adolescents' Wellbeing and Mental Health

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## Introduction

*«Something has emerged from you which surprises, which astonishes and which denies everything which has made our society what it is today. That is what I would call the extension of the field of possibilities. Do not give up!»*  
J.P. Sartre (1968, my emphasis)

In 2018, inspired by two broad questions «But what kind of education? For what kind of world?» (Abbott, 2010), I carried out a pilot study as part of my Master in Social Research, investigating how 11 year-olds' (Y6) experience of teaching and learning in London influenced their well-being and subjectivity.

The investigation unearthed the incongruencies of the UK's educational system generated by ongoing examinations and a pedagogy to-the-test; it explored the past, present and future 'possibilities' generated by students to influence their wellbeing, both as coping mechanism and expressions of resilience. Garista (2018) defines Resilience through its ability to recover from a trauma, and perhaps even get stronger because of it, like 'bamboo sticks'; adolescents' narratives and the people supporting such narratives, what Garista (2018) refers to as the mentoring factor in a holistic education for resilience, become central to the acquisition of resilient skills.

While I considered the school-environment as «an assemblage of behaviour policies, physical spaces, curricula, school ethos, teaching and learning practices» (Bonnell, 2013a). I analysed it with the actors involved in the day-to-day of schooling: students, parents, teachers and school leaders. As a result, I identified divergent pulling factors concerning all the actors and which generated ambiguous expectations and relationships; I also noticed how the importance students placed on being resilient and agentic-selves countered the impact of undesirable structural forces.

The following summary of my pilot will be carried forward to support a similar research with y12-13 cohorts (16-18 y/o); more emphasis will be placed on mental health (MH) and a reflexive analysis on Resilience processes, which incorporate students' accounts and life-histories' narratives, as Garista (2018) suggests.

## 1. Methodology and epistemology

### 1.1. Participatory Action Research (PAR) and ethnography

Much as the distinction between participatory and action research was an important area to delve into, for this research a combination of the two was the ideal methodological reference reflecting my research intentions and feasibility of outcomes. For example, PAR's bottom-up and reflexive approach could be

less alienating for participants as it re-presented the school's democratic potential, where democratic opportunities were available. However, drawing on several PAR projects I carried out as the student-council coordinator in my old school, several PAR issues needed extra attention:

1. Did participants offer reliable perspectives on teaching and learning that expose the school-environment's influence on students' MH?
2. To what extent were their perspectives 'qualified'?
3. What constituted qualified participants' voice and leadership?
4. What if participants' knowledge was used by school leaders to control them further?

Considering these pressing questions, I argued that PAR provided a platform for social actors to be put at the heart of the debate of adolescents' MH and teaching and learning's influences. Finally, ethnographic methods such as participant and non-participant observation supported my participatory epistemology, namely, a double-take on knowledge constitution. I argued that knowledge was equally produced and emerging within the research field, imbued with participants' 'meaning-making', and my interpretations - a convergence of multiple hermeneutics. Here student-participants extended the 'field of possibilities' to be agents of change in their lives; firstly, by reflecting on their acquired Resilience skills and stories, secondly, by articulating and conceiving the school-environment not only as part of 'governance', but as a seasonal process in their lives, albeit a central one.

## **2. Findings and discussion**

This section presents three overarching findings. I first employed Foucauldian lenses for theory-verification (Wolcott, 1992 in Bell, 2014), to unpack historical and political roles of education, then, to frame the findings within a socio-political, pedagogical and psychosocial framework, some ethnographic examples were employed to support theory-generation (ibid.).

### **2.1. Overarching findings/themes**

a) Teachers, students, parents, and Headteacher often found themselves pulling in disparate directions, with detrimental impacts on relationships and WB.

On one hand, teachers and students struggled to balance their relationships with professional and personal drives under the strain of schools' measurements; on the other, parents and the headteacher stressed the importance of exam results to sustain wider structural pressures. For example, teachers had to balance their anxieties about professional values, such as offering a holistic, creative and broad education as emphasised by teacher training, with the strains of regular testing, examination and their preparation. Similarly, students had to balance their anxieties stemming from parental expectations and societal demands with more basic needs related to their growth and their expectations as learners, often overlapping with identity-making, self-discovery, and puberty. We discovered that teacher-student relationships were pivotal to overcome school and exam-pressures, which also included subject content, competence, and interests, as generated through teacher-student relationships: such relationships were deeply complex.

b) Autonomy and independence (Agency), as well as a focus on what constituted 'Resilience', could calibrate students' WB and schooling's negative structural influences.

It was evident that students' perception of their independent learning diminished with rote exam preparation (e.g. all students found it demanding to start

head-on in September with mock exams), while they asserted that taking risks and playful exploration were the glue that engaged, motivated and occupied them constructively.

Overall, this was a complex finding, perhaps because it was counter-balancing the structural focus pervading my initial approach: how could a query on the impact of exam-focused schools concerning WB lead to theorizing Agency and Resilience as beneficial to WB? Dean's and Deci and Ryan's arguments, that WB is inherent to competence, autonomy, and relatedness, helped me unpack the conundrum.

While Dean (2010) argued that measuring levels of WB involved asking how societies can ensure their members' enjoyment of good health, free participation in society and the ability to think for themselves, Deci and Ryan's Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction/Frustration criteria (2000 - BPNS/F), reinforced the point about having optimal agentic factors to enhance WB, leading to healthy psychological functioning, in relation to:

- Autonomy: The feeling that one can act with a sense of volition, endorsement, willingness, and choice
- Relatedness: Feeling related to other people, having intimate and legitimate relationships
- Competence: The ability to masters one's environment

During the pilot, examples of Agency and Resilience were expressed by students' coping and resilient mechanisms as elaborated in the problem-solving-tree task<sup>3</sup>, to cope with exam pressure, but were also reminisced and elaborated as part of their participation in this research. For example, when they recollected expressing themselves within the school-environment for a convenient outcome, independent actions, as well as interdependence, negotiation and collaboration, subversion and more. However, the limited opportunities to be agentic-selves in Y6 were bemoaned by most students, who resorted to more Resilience stories and attitudes.

So, while Agency could be theorized as a means most likely leading to happiness, a consequence of knowing to have made choices and produced 'results', Resilience could be theorized dynamically, through an education of Resilience (*a la* Garista), through resilient experiences, attitudes, narratives and stories that initiate new pedagogical discourses (next finding).

c) Schooling and the resilient narratives students built within it offer nourishing experiences and students benefit from remembering and reflecting on them.

All the happy memories the photovoice method brought to the fore are part of what Cieslik (2019) called the 'ebbs/flows' of life, taking place in the school's microcosm. Drawing from Cieslik's longitudinal study on happiness (which captures the everyday experience of the struggle and joys of people over a 7 years period), I agreed that happiness/WB was something people 'have and do'; as Cieslik argues «happiness is both an abstract ontological concept but also about the things that people do to make themselves happy, happiness as a creative response to structural pressures» (Cieslik, 2019). In other words, one way to 'do' Agency and bring to the fore Resilience, as a choice or a coping mechanism.

Structural limitations are inevitable as are students' creative responses to it, adaptations, and negotiations. This means that people's responses to structural pressures are complex, varying and their impact cannot be tested in a brief period. But, by identifying and understanding such responses and adaptations we can further support children's development without necessarily manipulating it. but facilitating it.

<sup>3</sup> Using the tree metaphor: trunk=problem/s, roots= cause/s, branches= consequence/s, fruits= solution/s

### 3. Recommendations

By triangulating broad educational aims, psychosocial problematics of compulsory education and overarching findings in the field, I aimed to produce a persuasive argument that identified the significance of education in the students' WB debate to which it controversially relates to, and suggested a way-out:

1. By investigating the processes undertaken in school that would impact students' WB, I discovered that teachers struggle to balance a more holistic and broad education, characterizing teacher training, with the strains of accountability-measures. Therefore, teacher-student (pedagogical) relationships are pivotal to overcome school and exam-presures, incorporating subject-content, competence and interest as generated by the teacher-student relationship and the learning intrinsic to their 'exchanges'.
2. By exploring the meaning schooling has come to hold for all participants and how this may inform improved understanding of students' WB, I discovered that parents and headteacher's stress on the importance of exam results - to sustain wider social/structural and existential pressures - result in added stress affecting students' WB. However, as a whole, the school-environment offers students nourishing experiences and they benefit from (remembering and reflecting on) them.
3. By identifying pros-and-cons of the current schooling system I discovered students' perception of their independent learning, and curiosity for learning, diminished with rote exam preparation. More ad-hoc notions of Agency and Resilience with/in the school-environment, but also researched, agreed and implemented as part of school cultures, could reconcile the subjective-hopes intrinsic to WB with structural objective-influences. Agency and Resilience constituted students' survival mechanisms, to generate 'meaning' within the structural constraints of schooling.

### 4. From wellbeing to mental Health

My ensuing doctorate in a Sixth Form College (London) stems from current data suggesting that WB and MH are at their lowest amongst 16-19 y/o in the developed world (WHO, 2014). By adopting a similar methodology and stance over 10 months, I will strictly distinguish between WB and MH. This is due to the recent ambiguous 'yoking' (Gillies, 2018) of the two concepts through governmental policies, instrumentalized for economic efficiency and ideological ends (Exley, Ball, 2014), part of a global discourse on 'education governance' (Wilkins, 2016); I will emphasize not only how WB's rhetoric in schools got entangled with the clinical aspect of MH but also with 'character building' and 'behavior for learning', clearly supporting neoliberal 'educational governance' agenda.

Such 'yoking' raises questions for teaching and learning practices, teachers' roles, students' subjectivities, parents' expectations and education of and for Resilience, while school leaders seek, varyingly, to balance an exam driven culture with accountability measures.

The research question will shift the focus from 11 y/o's WB to 16-18 y/o's MH: To what extent does a policy focus on achievement/attainment, in a 6th Form College in London (UK), influence adolescents' MH?

I firstly intend to frame adolescents' MH in terms of its impact on adolescents' subjectivity as produced in the school-environment and the policies upholding it; secondly, there is a potential for mental ill-health (as generated in school/colleges) to be embodied by students as an agentic response to constraints (this partly emerged from the pilot data), representing embodied knowledge of the world. For example, during the pilot, it was quite telling how, despite substituting my long-term interest in MH with WB, it was students themselves who drew in mental ill-health and added physical ill-health as a result of it – from my field-notes: «Sir I could not sleep/eat/function during my SATs or in preparation for it, or... My body resented the school pressures during SATs, or...I was restless for weeks before and during SATs..., or...I had eating issues the week before SATs...».

The body seemed to be claiming its fair share of attention!

## Conclusion

Through Participative Action Research (PAR) and Ethnographic approaches, I discovered that the headteacher's and parents' emphasis on the importance of exam-results was juxtaposed with the ambivalent experiences of students and teachers. We saw that students, despite uneasiness generated by the exam-focused school for so many different stakeholders, had had nourishing experiences within the school-environment processes and showed possibilities for development. However, such nourishing experiences did not detract from the formal education's shortcomings concerning students' WB. The importance students placed on being resilient and agentic-selves countered the impact of undesirable structural forces on their subjectivities. Re-thinking students' Resilience and Agency within the school-environment constituted the final recommendation for students, parents, leaders, and policy-makers to facilitate a healthier school experience.

On one hand, the notion of Agency and Resilience came to constitute key 'analytic interests' (Braun, Clarke, 2006) to build bridges between schooling and WB; this is because both countered top-down, ideological forces with students' conscious and unconscious attempts to be resilient and agentic-selves. On the other, the complexity of teacher-students' relationship, performed while preparing and undergoing SATs exam, brought out additional contradictions from within the classroom. Understanding the contradictions better is timely.

In conclusion, inspired by Walkerdine's (1998), education can sustain adolescents' MH and WB by producing the child in its terms, without losing sight of its needs, wants and rights to emancipate itself. To paraphrase Sartre's starting quote:

«Something emerged through our participatory-research, which questioned some of the processes which have made our school-environment what it is today. That is what I would call the extension of the field of possibilities. Do not give up!».

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