

The Paradoxes of Student Well-being in Singapore

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Abstract

Purpose: Singapore's education system is known for its robust curriculum and excellent results. It is also a system of keen competitiveness and high pressure. This article addresses how such an education system responds to the issue of student well-being.

Design/Approach/Methods: This article analyses the recent initiatives and shift in education philosophy in Singapore's education system, which have a bearing on the issue of student well-being.

Findings: This article argues that while there are direct efforts to address student well-being, the direction Singapore is taking is to pursue a holistic education paradigm, in which education is engaging, joyful, meaningful, and values-based. This article also argues that such a paradigm goes beyond the current well-being agenda and is aligned with a view that education should be about wholeness and purpose. While there are challenges associated with these changes, the Singapore experience suggests that the more we focus on holistic education, rather than interpret student well-being narrowly, the more wellness the students may actually and eventually experience.

Originality/Value: This article brings to readers learning points from Singapore regarding student well-being, as the country grapples with change to develop a generation of young people, whose *beings* are and will continue to be *well*.

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Keywords

Competition, examination, social emotional learning, stress, student well-being

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Introduction

In the introductory article of this special issue, the editors have argued that after decades of focusing narrowly on academic achievements, many education systems have shifted their attention to the issue of student well-being, a rather belated move to address increasing student stress and anxiety. There are different ways of understanding the concept of student well-being. For example, according to Bornstein (2003), well-being is the state of successful performance of physical, cognitive, and social-emotional functions, which results in productive activities, fulfilling social relationships, transcendence of problems, and a sense of satisfaction associated with fulfilling one's potential. According to Seligman (2012), well-being is about feeling good by experiencing the five elements of positive emotion, engagement, meaning, good relationships, and accomplishment. Generally, the idea behind student well-being is that students should experience a holistic form of wellness. This appears to be quite sensible, but although there has been significant attention paid to conceptualizing and evaluating student well-being, this remains a narrowly defined, if not ill-defined, area of practice (read, e.g., Ereaut & Whiting, 2008; Soutter et al., 2014).

Many international organizations report on Singapore's stellar performance in international comparative test results. The Singapore education system is globally renowned for its high academic standards (Ng, 2017). However, some raised the concern that students in Singapore were feeling the stress of examinations. Various news outlets carried reports of an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) comparative study that showed that 86% of Singapore's students were worried about poor grades at school, compared with the OECD average of 66%; 76% of Singapore's students were anxious about a test even if they were well prepared, compared with the OECD average of 55% (read, e.g., Davie, 2017). This might be the unintended cost of high performance (Zhao, 2017). But it might also be the consequence of the competitive culture in the country, resulting in people being driven hard by a *kiasu* (local slang that means fear of losing out) mentality (read, e.g., Ng, 2017). The issues associated with student well-being are of course multifold, and stress is merely one of them. But this gives one an indication of the gist of the issues involved.

However, Singapore is rather paradoxical (Ng, 2017). Although Singapore appears to be an academic pressure cooker, it has also been recognized as a very good place for raising children. For 2018 and 2019, Singapore has been ranked the top country in the world for children to live in, according to the annual Global Childhood Report by nongovernmental organization "Save the

Children” (Liu, 2019). According to this report, Singapore has the lowest rate in the world, at 0.1%, of children at primary and secondary school age who are not attending school. It invests heavily in high-quality education and health care, creating a nurturing environment for children. In financial year 2019, education and health were the second and third largest fiscal items on the budget, after defense spending (Chang, 2019). So, one picture portrays Singapore as a pressure cooker. Another portrays Singapore as an oasis for childhood. Which is the real picture? According to Ng (2017), both are real. Singapore’s education system is always in a state of change, during which an old paradigm coexists with an espoused new one, each manifesting contrasting phenomena. Therefore, one has to embrace seemingly contradictory pictures, each of which is a valid facet of reality, to appreciate the situation in Singapore.

The issue of student well-being is currently a hot topic in Singapore. But, until recent years, the phrase “student well-being” was not prominently featured in policy discourses. That does not mean that schools did not care about the well-being of students. Pastoral care and physical education for students have always been a part of the “staple diet” in Singapore schools. However, initiatives directly addressing the well-being of students appeared only recently, thereby giving impetus to this issue, triggered by an increasing concern with the stress faced by students. One of the clearest move in this area was the introduction of the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework in 2005, an initiative that this article will revisit in the next section.

Actually, more importantly, even before the implementation of the SEL framework, the Singapore education system was already trying to move away from an examination-orientated system to focus on holistic education. The editors of this special issue have argued in the introductory article that while the current well-being agenda are steps in the right direction, they are inadequate. Education systems have to go beyond them to include the concepts of wholeness and purpose for children to grow and develop healthily. This article argues that holistic education in Singapore is precisely such a movement. Some programs to equip students with individual psychological solutions (e.g., teaching students mindfulness strategies) could be good, but “it’s heroic to keep pulling drowning people from a river. But it’s also important to go upstream to stop those who are pushing them in” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2018, p. 62). Therefore, while there are direct student well-being initiatives in Singapore, holistic education is an effort to “go upstream” in student well-being, and it embraces the notions of wholeness and purpose for children’s development.

A clear milestone for the pursuit of holistic education was the launch of the “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” (TSLN) vision for the education system in 1997. TSLN envisaged a school system that could develop young people holistically so that they were creative and willing to serve their community. TSLN also envisaged a national culture where lifelong learning and innovation flourished at every level of the society. TSLN is still the umbrella vision for the education system

today. Various initiatives, such as the more recent “Joy of Learning” and “Learn for Life,” were implemented as part of the TSLN vision (read, e.g., Ng, 2017).

Of course, such a change is a very long and contested journey because it is a change in culture. The dominant examination-oriented culture and the initiatives of holistic education coexist in tension along the way. Therefore, as the rhetoric of holistic education takes root in the policy discourse, the issue of student well-being in an examination-oriented past era gained prominence.

To explain the current state of student well-being in Singapore, this article first describes the recent student well-being initiatives in the education system. It then examines the shift in Singapore’s education philosophy, how that has a bearing on student well-being, and the issues and challenges associated with this change in the years ahead. This article is not a report of empirical research. It argues the author’s analysis and point of view regarding the issue of student well-being. In describing the case of Singapore, the article draws information mainly from key speeches of political leaders, parliamentary replies, official press releases, ministry websites, and news reports. Having set the context, the article then presents the author’s perspective about student well-being in Singapore. This article brings to readers what the author believes are key learning points from Singapore in the area of student well-being, as the country grapples with change to develop a generation of young people, whose *beings* are and will continue to be *well*.

Direct student well-being initiatives

There are initiatives that address student well-being quite directly. A few examples serve to illustrate these. Firstly, schools are encouraged to purposefully integrate programs and processes to support students’ physical, mental, and social health through the Holistic Health Framework (HHF) introduced by the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE). With total well-being, inclusion, and quality delivery as its three guiding principles, schools can employ para-educators to provide support to teachers to implement HHF effectively (MOE, 2017b). Other than developing programs for students, HHF emphasizes supportive school culture, relevant curricula, and close partnerships with stakeholders to support student well-being.

Secondly, socioemotional learning is a compulsory part of the national school curriculum. As part of Character and Citizenship Education, the SEL framework guides school programs in this important aspect of student development. The SEL, which was first implemented in 2005, now also forms an integral part of MOE’s 21st Century Competencies and Student Outcomes that schools aim to achieve (MOE, 2016a). The key domains of SEL are self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management, and responsible decision-making. The SEL framework also stresses the importance of developing whole school environments that support students and nurture positive teacher–student relationships.

Singapore is a city and most kids grow up in urban settings. Therefore, as part of holistic well-being, the MOE launched the outdoor education initiative in 2016, which makes it compulsory for all secondary three students to experience a 5-day expedition-based camp on an off-shore island. Through this initiative, the MOE aims to provide students with opportunities for experiential learning in nature that imbues resilience, tenacity, and teamwork, something that cannot be replicated within the four walls of a classroom (MOE, 2016b).

Children nowadays grow up in an environment where “social interactions” are increasingly linked with digital interfaces. As such, it is critically important for them to learn how they can successfully navigate the complexities of interaction on social media. Cyber wellness (CW) in schools addresses these complexities. Within the SEL framework, the CW framework is designed to equip children and youths with a set of principles and tools to help them become responsible and mature digital learners (MOE, 2016c), so that they may benefit from the interactive opportunities in cyberspace and avoid potential harm.

In many Singapore families, both parents are working full time. Therefore, the MOE tries to provide after-school environments where children are safe and engaged in productive activities that support their holistic development. Student Care Centres (SCC) are in-house centers that provide meals, homework supervision, and after-school recreational activities for children ages 7–14 years who may need after-school care (MOE, 2017a). Seventy percent of local schools house an SSC in 2016 and all schools should have one by 2020 (Yang, 2016).

Beyond well-being: Holistic education for wholeness and purpose

This article now argues that notwithstanding the more “direct” student well-being efforts, the current direction that the Singapore education system is taking, which is about holistic education, is indeed aligned with the ideas of wholeness and purpose, albeit with areas to be improved. The MOE has been putting in major efforts in shifting its educational paradigm to one that is holistic, engaging, joyful, meaningful, and values-based. Seen in this light, student well-being is not the result of a direct “wellness” policy in education. It is an emerging result of wider systemic changes in education that support meaningful learning and wholesome childhood or adolescence. Such a direction aligns well with the ideas of wholeness and purpose. Indeed, given that children spend so much time in school, one area of student well-being to work on is precisely to ensure that students truly benefit from and enjoy their time in school! A few key initiatives will illustrate this direction.

While Singapore may be more well known for its academic rigor, the education paradigm has been shifting from a narrow focus on examination results to a broader one on quality education (Ng, 2008, 2017). Examination grades and paper qualifications are not sufficient for life. Education has to be much more holistic, so that children grow up to become wholesome young people with a broad range of thinking and life skills.

As part of the effort to focus on holistic education, the 21st Century Competencies framework was launched in 2014 to guide the development of students holistically for their future lives. This framework has a central set of core values—respect, responsibility, integrity, care, resilience, and harmony. The framework emphasizes Social and Emotional Competencies as a foundation for students to manage themselves and relate with others. It also emphasizes the acquisition of the following skills—civic literacy, global awareness, and cross-cultural skills; critical and inventive thinking; and communication, collaboration, and information skills (MOE, 2014).

Even if the curriculum is holistic, the learning process ought to be joyful. When we go to a restaurant for a meal with family or friends, it is not for just the food but for the company. We would like to enjoy the time, not just to address our hunger. In the same way, while learning is a process that is necessary for its utility value, it should be enjoyable as well. If schooling is a “torture,” the well-being of the student is compromised. Engaged learning is, in this sense, one of most important aspects of student well-being, since a child has to spend many hours at school. Yet, internationally, the current student well-being discourse seldom emphasizes this. If there is joy in learning, the being of the student is well and achievement is likely to be enhanced. If there is no joy in learning, schooling becomes dreary and students spend much of their time thinking of how they could get out of the classroom, usually without much success. Experiencing joy in the learning process is a critical part of student well-being.

“Joy of Learning” is therefore an imperative in the Singapore education system in recent years (MOE, 2018a). Many members of parliament have raised concerns about the culture of overdrilling, overtesting, and stress, to which the ministry has acknowledged and intervened. For example, in the preschool sector, the Early Childhood Development Agency has recently placed more emphasis on outdoor play and children’s physical development. In the primary sector, schools implemented an MOE initiative called “Programmes for Active Learning” and encouraged student learning through “unstructured” open-ended play (Rajah, 2018).

The MOE is also making the effort to emphasize that learning is for life rather than for tests. As part of this effort, the MOE is determined to turn an examination-focused system on its head. Current Minister for Education, Ong Ye Kung (2018), said:

‘Learn for Life’ is a value, an attitude and a skill that our students need to possess, and it is fundamental in ensuring that education remains an uplifting force in society. . . . Once we recognise this broader objective of education, examination and grades are comparatively small milestones in the life journey of a child. The ability to score in an examination frankly may not matter very much later on in the life of a child. . . . We know that students derive more joy in learning, when they move away from memorisation, rote learning, drilling and taking high stakes exams. Very few students enjoy that.

In recent years, the MOE has taken steps to reduce the emphasis on grades as a measure of student success. For example, MOE has ceased the practice of publicizing school rankings and names of the top scorers for national-level examinations (MOE, 2013). In particular, for the high-stakes Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) for students at the age of 12, what was originally a precise statistical measurement for ranking student scores clinically, called the PSLE T-score, was replaced with wider achievement bands. Ng Chee Meng, who was Minister for Education when the change was implemented, elucidated (Ng, 2016a):

The way that the T-score is calculated may also have created unhealthy competition among our young children. Because it is calculated based on how students do relative to one another, students may feel the pressure to do better than their peers rather than help each other out to learn. This runs counter to the values we want to inculcate in our children. We can find a better balance between encouraging our students to study hard and get good results, and making them overly-competitive and anxious about outdoing one another.

Other than national examinations, the MOE is reducing school-based assessments as well. For example, in 2019, all weighted assessments and examinations for Primary One and Primary Two students were removed, and there would not be any overall grade. The ministry also plans over 2019 to 2021 to remove midyear examinations of Primary Three, Primary Five, Secondary One, and Secondary Three. The freed-up time is to allow students to adjust more comfortably to increasing academic demands as they progress to high levels of learning (MOE, 2018b). However, Minister Ong (2018) cautioned:

... whatever time we may free up for the students, we must avoid the tendency to fill it up with extra practice and drill. Instead, treat this as curriculum time that we return to the school for better teaching and learning ...

Students have to feel and discern that what they learn is useful and meaningful in their lives. Learning comes alive when students are given opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world situations. Such experiential learning is a motivator for more learning and makes students' overall learning so much more meaningful and purposeful. So, every school (both primary and secondary) is encouraged and supported to develop an Applied Learning Programme (ALP) for their students (MOE, 2018a). For example, in one school, all students go through enrichment programs regarding media, picking up skills such as journalism, photography, and programming. In another school, students used 3D-printing to create a pair of chopsticks with an attached spring, as a solution for older people with weaker hands to use chopsticks to eat (Chua, 2018). Schools can design learning spaces that are not graded to encourage students to tinker with new ideas. Alongside such applied learning experiences, Education and Career Guidance programs

are designed to help students to discover what they are really interested in and to make informed choices for their future education or work (MOE, 2018b).

The introductory article of this issue argues that young people should have opportunities to consider the role they could play in a larger social and moral order and how they could find fulfillment by contributing to a cause larger than status, money, or themselves. Values and character education plays a critical role in the holistic development of students in guiding them to navigate an increasingly complex and uncertain future. This has always been important and the MOE has, over the years, developed various platforms for it (Ng, 2017). The Values in Action (VIA) Programme, which is the current program, aims to develop students who are socially responsible and contributing members of the society. Through constant practice and reflection, they become more mindful about community needs and what they could do to contribute to something bigger than themselves (MOE, n.d.). Through the VIA platform, students from different schools involve themselves in projects and activities that benefit others in their community. These activities include caring for students with special needs, tutoring students who are their juniors, volunteering in social service welfare groups, or promoting the awareness of biodiversity in Singapore (Tang & Lim, 2017).

All these initiatives are national policies. Their impact is system-wide because they are implemented nationwide, affecting all schools and students. For example, all students are involved in VIA activities mentioned in the previous paragraph. Even so, as readers will see from the next section, there are always issues and challenges associated with policy implementation. Across the society, there is a wide range of responses to the initiatives, including hearty buy-in, moderate acceptance, skepticism, and even indifference.

Issues and challenges

Even with a great policy rationale, implementation is never easy or clinical. In fact, it is often filled with paradoxes (Ng, 2017). Even the official rhetoric contains an element of tension. On the one hand, the MOE has been very clear about focusing less on academic results and focusing more on holistic education. On the other hand, it is also maintaining that academic quality should not be sacrificed just because less time is spent studying for tests and doing homework. The key is to finding the right balance, as Heng Swee Keat, former Education Minister (2012), said:

Our education system must have sufficient rigour and strength—it must not become soft. The key for us is not to reduce stress to zero, but to strike the right balance. There are no easy solutions, but we in MOE must reflect on what we can do, and do our best.

So what about drills and exams, for which Singapore appears to be well known for? Ong Ye Kung (2018) explained:

It is not to say that these are undesirable in learning; quite the contrary, they help form the building blocks for more advanced concepts and learning, and can inculcate discipline and resilience, and get students used to tackling difficult problems and overcoming those difficulties. But there needs to be a balance between rigour and joy, and there is a fairly strong consensus that we have tilted too much to the former.

This is a balanced and nuanced understanding of the matter. Qualities such as discipline and resilience are still valued and to be inculcated. Students should learn to overcome difficulties. However, for the interventions regarding holistic education to continue to bear fruit, the MOE may need to clarify its stance at some point in time where this balance point is. Of course, this point is a dynamic one and there will always be some tensions. However, citizens will demand for clarity, especially when issues of fairness and priority of school choices or career pathways require resolution, and good governance requires regular communications to clear the air and send the right signals.

Secondly, the move toward holistic education is also not totally within the control of the ministry. Different ministers acknowledged that this was no easy task. Despite many initiatives aligned with holistic education, the society is still quite fixated with grades and paper qualifications—something deeply ingrained in students, parents, teachers, and employers. Over the years, various ministers make similar remarks to that effect. For example, in 2016, Ng Chee Meng (2016b) said:

But policy changes can only go so far. This is not something MOE can do unilaterally and in a top-down manner. We need a partnership with parents and the community to make this shift, and this will take time. Students, parents, educators and employers must come on-board, and adjust mind-sets and behaviours as well, together with MOE.

About 2 years later, current Minister Ong Ye Kung (2018) said:

We must expect that some things are beyond MOE's or the schools' control—such as parents comparing notes in their WhatsApp groups that often raise anxieties, and sending their children for tuition and enrichment.

Singapore parents are very competitive in their children's education. Many are afraid that their children will lose out to others and they have to try many ways to get their children to stay ahead. This is the phenomenon of the *kiasu* parents (Ng, 2017). One news outlet reported that with the reduction in the number of exams, some anxious parents had inadvertently looked to private tuition agencies to fill the void so that they might have a better gauge of how their kids were doing at school (Mokhtar, 2019). So, the idea of holistic education and learning for life is sound when one considers the issue from the national perspective. But it is not necessarily so from the perspective

of an individual parent. The average parent asks: If I do not get my children into top schools, would I not lose out to those who do? So, the stress on students is not something that schools can address unilaterally. A senior clinical psychologist at Singapore's Institute of Mental Health commented (Poh, 2018):

The idea that academic achievement is a necessary ingredient to obtain lifelong success has become a long-held but unhealthy belief ingrained into our culture. It is a momentous task to shift this national mindset to one that is more encompassing, more accepting and less competitive. Yet, as Albert Einstein once wrote: If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid. There are many students who excel in other varied areas, such as arts, sports or music, and deserve to be recognised for these non-academic abilities. At the same time, expectations should be set according to individual abilities, with appropriate cajolements to push our children to reach their maximum potential, but not to the point where it becomes corrosive to their mental well-being.

Therefore, one observes that addressing student well-being is not just a schooling matter. There are deep-seated cultural issues to be addressed, including the measure of success, the route to a better life, and how expectations can be met or managed. Individual circumstances and aspirations also differ. For parents who are anxious to get their children ahead of others, it is debatable whether they are more concerned with their children having a healthy childhood or getting into top schools. They probably would like to have both, but not exactly sure how that could be achieved or balanced. So, they compete on results and complain about a lack of student well-being. Students do the same. Schools and teachers are caught in between. Professionally, educators ought to believe in holistic education. However, there are heavy expectations from parents about their children's results. Holistic education and good results are not mutually exclusive (Ng, 2017), but it takes time to improve the capacity to do both.

Of course, anxious or competitive parents are found all over the world, and they are not unique to Singapore. However, being a small country, this phenomenon is manifested at a national scale in Singapore and, unlike many other jurisdictions, is not merely an issue of a few. What that means for Singapore is that there is an increasing need to upgrade the professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) within the entire fraternity of educators as they grapple with the tensions between what will give children a healthy childhood and what will prepare them for a rigorous curriculum and assessment.

The paradox of student well-being

While the practices and outcomes in Singapore are still far from ideal or perfect, this article argues that instead of a narrow interpretation of student well-being, the efforts reflect a much broader agenda aligned with the ideas of wholeness and purpose. The Singapore experience suggests a paradox of student well-being that other jurisdictions may consider in their journey. The more we

focus on holistic education, rather than student well-being narrowly, the more wellness the students may actually and eventually experience. This article posits that this is the direction that the Singapore education system is taking. Conversely, the more we focus on student well-being narrowly, the more well-being may become “well-be” or “well-been.” Here, “well-be” refers to a current state of wellness. However, if efforts focus primarily on students feeling well at that point in time, they may not develop resilience for future challenges. “Well-been” refers to that future state in which adults are not resilient enough to cope with life’s challenges because they have not really develop resilience during their younger days. Let us consider this paradox further.

When Confucius was asked about learning, his response was, “Is learning not a joy?” If learning is supposed to be a joy, then why is there a need to focus so much on student well-being? A narrow focus on student well-being may actually mean that there is a need to examine the wellness of the schooling system! If the system is well and students are learning meaningfully and joyfully, as they should, why is there a compelling need to promote student well-being? So, while we should look into various aspects of social justice and needs of impoverished students, one critical area of student well-being is to examine whether there is real joy and meaning in learning. Are student well-being strategies merely interventions at the periphery when the central activity of learning is dreary? Moreover, if education remains a very competitive affair and maintains a very narrow academic focus, all this talk of student well-being may paradoxically accentuate the competition! All sorts of extra mindfulness programs can spring up, so that students can learn to concentrate better to cram an extra bit of information into their brains! The practices in the name of improving student well-being can end up leading to the opposite outcome. So, the more we focus on student well-being narrowly, the more unwell the students may become! That is one reason why the Singapore Education Ministry has focused its attention on improving the “well-being” of the schooling system, so that students can learn meaningfully and joyfully.

Student well-being is not superficially taking away challenges to reduce student stress. Do not take away the joy of hard work! Consider those who enjoy cooking. The hours of preparation and cooking are hours of enjoyment despite the hard work. If others say to them that cooking is too much hard work and therefore suggest a meal at a restaurant, these “kind” people have just robbed the people who love cooking of the very joy of cooking, even if the food in the restaurant actually tastes better! Students are well when they are able to set healthy goals, equipped to manage stress and overcome adversities in achieving these goals, and feel actualized in the process. If students like or appreciate what they are doing, there is joy in putting in hard work to learn and achieve something. Therefore, it is imperative that we do not simply assume that cutting back on learning is equal to increasing joy! The point is to make learning come alive so that students become interested in and appreciate what they are learning in school. To do so requires a combination of meaningful curriculum, engaging pedagogies, competent teachers,

opportunities to apply knowledge and skills in real life, and educational pathways that suit the aptitude of the students.

Instead of bubble-wrapping students, student well-being may be better addressed by creating appropriate learning challenges and providing the necessary support for them to overcome difficulties. Young people have to grow into a work environment with stiff competition and high demands. Stress and indeed burnout are common problems in many East Asian competitive economies (Chan & Fan, 2019). Millennials are a burnout generation and simple coping techniques, while helpful to an extent, are not solutions (Samra, 2019). Young people therefore need to develop resilience—a capacity to manage and bounce back from critical challenging life events (Cunningham et al., 1999; Tugade & Frederickson, 2004). There is a positive correlation between resilience and well-being (see, e.g., Mak et al., 2011). Many successful people with outstanding achievement have grit, which is a special blend of passion and persistence (Duckworth, 2016). Well-being is a continuous process. It is not a short-sighted “well-be” (student is well only at this point in time) or a future “well-been” (student has been well as a child but is no longer so as an adult). So, the more important question to maintain a continuous sense of well-being from childhood to adulthood is how one could deal with adversities and emerge victorious and stronger. The more students are shielded from challenges, the more vulnerable they are in the future! Therefore, the more we focus on student well-being narrowly, the more well-being may become “well-be” or “well-been.”

Instead of interpreting student well-being narrowly, for example, by bubble-wrapping children and young people, the delicate balance that Singapore education system is trying to achieve is to move toward holistic education and emphasize engaged learning so that students find school life meaningful and enjoyable. It aims to nurture students with the values and skills to overcome challenges, not to be discouraged by setbacks, and always emotionally anchored in difficult times. It maintains standards and encourages hard work and discipline. In this way, students are much more likely to enjoy well-being at a higher level and in the longer term.

Conclusion

Paradoxically, by moving toward holistic education, the Singapore education system appears to be both addressing student well-being problems while raising even more subtle ones at the same time. But these do bring the importance of student well-being into sharper focus and reduce the momentum of an exam-meritocratic arms race. Student well-being is no longer an afterthought, but a high priority item in the national strategy and discourse. The only subtlety is that it is not addressed through a direct intervening policy of student well-being, but an ongoing reform to provide meaningful and engaging education. Superficial approaches to student well-being do little in addressing

the real issues that compromise student well-being at scale. Well-being is not a “soft” concept, but a “good” concept. Well-being is not a one-point-in-time concept but a continuous lifelong concept.

Even so, there are still philosophical questions that Singapore has to grapple with. Does individual or community well-being come first? Where and how big is the space for students to learn from setbacks? It is always a fine line between being protective and being overprotective. These questions are nontrivial because they affect many subtle interpretations of policies and practices for future change. Notwithstanding these subtle challenges, both the ideas and gaps in Singapore’s developments can be instructive to many jurisdictions that are grappling with implementing initiatives for student well-being.

In summary, reflecting upon Singapore’s experience, this article argues that initiatives about student well-being can be good in themselves, but if education itself embraces wholeness and purpose, student well-being follows as a natural result in a much more sustainable manner.

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