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Exploring well-being and ill-being in education: disciplinary insights and curriculum perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen a significant increase in the explicit naming of well-being in educational policy and practice. However, there is a tendency for such naming to occur in a theoretical vacuum which can lead to an ambiguous and ill-defined application, and runs the risk of the construct being viewed purely as 'happiness' and negates the space for individual vulnerabilities and experiences of ill-being that are part of the human condition. In this paper we consider some of the philosophical and psychological conceptualisations of well-being, with a specific emphasis on the interplay between well-being, happiness, and ill-being. The paper draws on specific curricular areas, physical education and arts education, to consider first how well-being is integrated in the areas, and second the potential of the subjects to address issues of ill-being. We argue for the need for a wider, nuanced application of well-being to education, perhaps drawing from Aristotle's view of flourishing, that allows for a more authentic perspective on human functioning that embraces ill-being and vulnerability rather than the narrow pursuance of individual happiness.

Introduction

Education and well-being have a long history of interconnection. However, the explicit naming of well-being as part of education curricula is relatively new, and the conceptualisations of well-being underlying the recent growth in such references are frequently varied, unclear, and contested (Bourke 2024; Nohilly and Tynan 2022; White and Kern 2018). This paper engages with philosophical and psychological theoretical considerations of well-being with an applied focus on well-being from the curricular areas of Physical Education and Arts Education. Drawing on philosophical and psychological literature, including the differentiation (or lack of) between happiness and well-being, and broader notions of human flourishing, we consider education as a space for the authentic human condition, including experiences of both positive and negative emotions

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and challenge, within a growing counter-narrative concerning well-being and happiness and its supposed universalist application.

Explicit references to well-being, or the largely equivalent and overlapping reference to 'positive education' and 'social and emotional learning' (SEL), have become ubiquitous across educational systems in Ireland and globally. The Irish Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools has named 'being well' as one of seven key competencies that support the curriculum's vision for education, and well-being as one of the six curriculum areas to be covered specifically in schools (NCCA 2023). It has been argued such policy in Ireland is being realised without any clear definition of well-being (Nohilly and Tynan 2022); however, as we argue below, there are many different perspectives and nuances to this broad topic, and giving space to these different perspectives limits the constraining effect that a singular perspective might bring. We focus on some of the approaches and challenges to the notion of well-being from two disciplines of education – philosophy and psychology – and its application to two curricular areas – physical and arts education. We do not claim to provide an interdisciplinary perspective in the absence of sociology, but instead to coherently explore how these disciplinary and curricular areas can inform our approach to well-being in educational policy and practice. Both philosophy and psychology were identified by Noddings (2003) in her position on the integration of happiness into educational practice – although we do acknowledge the nuanced relationship between happiness and well-being. Furthermore, the influence of psychology particularly on global education policy has been criticised for its emphasis on personal agency and individual responsibility (Bryan and Mochizuki 2023). The Primary Curriculum Framework states that 'wellbeing supports children's social, emotional, and physical development now and into the future' (NCCA 2023, 18). It is evident that while the subject area of Wellbeing includes Physical Education, the competency of being well is presented as interconnected with the other competencies outlined in the Primary Curriculum Framework. Competencies, it is stated, 'are embedded across all curricular areas' and 'have relevance across the curriculum and provide continuity and connectivity in children's learning as they move through primary school' (NCCA 2023, 9). Thus, we intentionally chose two curricular areas that address the 'being well' competencies, one which sits within the well-being subject area – physical education – and one which sits outside – arts education.

Philosophical questioning of the normativity of well-Being

The revival of interest in, and respect for, the concept of well-being in philosophy, can be traced from the growing influence of a specific group of neo-Aristotelian philosophers in the latter part of the twentieth century, most especially the works of Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum (Mac Intyre 1981; Nussbaum 1986). Nussbaum's work shows the influence of the more therapeutic dimension of late Hellenistic thinking in the Stoics and Epicureans. In contrast, Mac Intyre's philosophy fuses the earlier thinking with Christian philosophy. In terms of their influential conceptions of well-being or *eudaimonia*, however, both can be seen as heavily infused with Aristotelianism (Aristotle 1976). Each of these thinkers constructed their vision of philosophy and well-being through a critique of what they saw as the deficit of well-being and happiness in the philosophies

stemming from the late nineteenth century thinker Friedrich Nietzsche (Nietzsche 1967), whose descendants became known as the postmodernist school within philosophy (Drolet 2003). Mac Intyre went so far as to see it as an either/or choice, in his famous text *After Virtue*: Aristotle or Nietzsche? (Mac Intyre 1981).

The reasons for the divergence between these two paradigms of philosophy, specifically with regard to the conception of well-being will be considered. In the *Ethics* (Aristotle 1976), Aristotle puts forward a view of human life which sees well-being and virtue as interdependent. Although well-being is defined as the ultimate goal of human life, the supreme end for which all other minor ends are sought, nonetheless, there is an impossibility of imagining some individual being happy without also being virtuous. Aristotle captures this balance in his concept of 'eudaimonia', which may be translated also as 'flourishing', further nuancing our understanding of 'well-being' (Aristotle 1976). This assumption of the connection between virtue and well-being is rooted in the Aristotelian principle that 'all things tend toward the good', elaborated in Book 1 of the *Ethics* (Aristotle 1976). It also demonstrates Aristotle's debt to his mentor Plato, who had argued in the *Republic* (and elsewhere) for the interdependence of social justice, well-being and individual virtue (Plato 1987).

The appeal of such a philosophy is clear in the contemporary context. If 'happiness' or well-being has come to be defined more as an individual psychological state, then Platonism and Aristotelianism sound an important warning. The detachment of well-being as an ideal from its interdependence with virtue runs two significant risks. First, it runs the risk of evolving a society incapable of caring about the justice or well-being of others, in short, it runs the risk of leading to *a society which can no longer care* and the dissolution of the societal as such. The second risk, and perhaps more to the point, is it foregrounds the price to be paid if we follow this route – without virtue, there can be no society, but *there can also be no individual happiness*. That is, the individual also has a lot to lose from the dissolution of society and the unravelling of the umbilical cord which links well-being and virtue. The reinvocation of such an Aristotelian perspective by figures such as Mac Intyre and Nussbaum is directed at what they see as the current deterioration of contemporary society and also at the kind of philosophies which reject such an Aristotelian perspective and which can thus be held (at least theoretically) responsible for the current moral malaise.

Such anti-Aristotelian philosophies are myriad, covering much of so-called postmodern thought or thinking within the 'postmodern' moment of history, broadly construed as from the late 1950s onwards (Drolet 2003). For the purposes of this paper, it seems best to concentrate on a specific strand of this anti-Aristotelianism, what has come to be termed as 'neo-Nietzscheanism', or more broadly, post-modernism (Nietzsche 1967/Derrida 1977). The reasons for concentrating on this specific strand are; first, because of the apparent vehemence of its anti-Aristotelianism (as an extreme contrast may be more revealing), and also because many of the designated problems of culture are often said to have derived from the supposed 'nihilism' of neo-Nietzscheanism, which is said to be a paradigm which rejects the normativity of well-being in favour of 'ill-being' (or what Freire has termed 'necrophily' (Freire 1972)).

A detailed analysis of the philosophy of 'ill-being' is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is instructive to look at one of the main reasons for the divergence between

the neo-Aristotelians and the postmoderns with regard to the issue of well-being. One of the main disagreements lies in the postmodernism critiques of the very idealisation of well-being or happiness *as such*. Why should well-being be the ultimate goal of human life? There is nothing self-evident about this and many postmodern thinkers opt for a different ultimate goal or, more commonly, no ultimate goal at all. Derrida rejects the concept of teleology in his essay 'The End (s) of Man' (Derrida 1977), through pluralising both the idea of 'man' as such, and in turn affirming a plurality of 'ends' rather than one 'end'. Instead of a grand narrative of well-being, we then have a whole series of micro-narratives concerning the goals of human existence. This view also looks back to Nietzsche's advocation of perspectivism (Nietzsche 1967), the idea that there is no ultimate perspective on life's meaning, but only endless perspectives. It also looks across to the disavowal of well-being as an ultimate goal even in psychoanalytic therapy, at least of the Lacanian type: As the significant Slovenian thinker Slavoj Žižek has observed of Lacanian psychoanalysis: '*the goal of psychoanalytic treatment is not the patient's well-being, successful social life or personal fulfilment, but to bring the patient to confront the elementary coordinates and deadlocks of his or her desire*' (Žižek 2006). The example of Lacanianism also shows up differences within postmodern thought. Whereas Derrida is keen to deconstruct any ultimate *telos*, Lacan seems more inclined to replace the Aristotelian *telos* of well-being with the Lacanian *telos* of desire: '*the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire*'. Indeed, it is here that we perhaps get closest to what might be termed *the idealisation of ill-being* contra well-being. Žižek (2006) develops the enigmatic conception of the 'Real', which was originally introduced by Lacan, as a way of foregrounding what amounts to the impossibility in principle of well-being. Other related examples of postmodern 'ill-being' can be found in Virilio's (2000) extreme pessimism and Georges Bataille's notion of a 'useless expenditure' (Bataille 1985). These concepts can also be related to the emphasis on despair, anguish and abandonment in the existentialist philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Sartre (Kierkegaard 1992; Mac Quarrie 1972). Although out of fashion for several decades, the existentialists are currently more relevant than ever, with a recent surge of new publications re-evaluating their importance. This renaissance of concern with 'negativity', or what Hegel termed the 'unhappy consciousness' (Baugh 2024), seems to mark a parallel, but contrary move, to the recent return of interest in well-being (Mac Intyre 1981; Nussbaum 1986).

A further difference between postmodernism and neo-Aristotelianism is that postmodernism attacks the emphasis on virtue, characteristic of the latter. Nietzsche's critique of morality and virtue as a social construction with negative psychological effects for individuals in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche 1967) is set up in opposition to the contrary assumption, in Aristotelianism, that 'being good' actually makes people happy. For Nietzsche, then, there is a need to move 'beyond good and evil'.

This last point pushes us towards a more positive possibility within the postmodernist philosophy. Rather than such a philosophy being a recipe for nihilism, it may also be seen as offering the possibility of a critique of the blind spots within the discourse of neo-Aristotelianism or the more generalised discourse of well-being. To this extent, postmodernism may be arguing less for an end to well-being than for the advent of a more authentic well-being, albeit as couched in terms of an avowal or acceptance of 'ill-being'. This

theoretical reconstruction of the concept of 'well-being' (a kind of both/and rather than either/or) can enable a renewed theory and practice in education, which also avoids overly simplistic binary oppositions, and we will see this argued below in relation to a renewed vision for contemporary curriculum.

Psychological perspectives influences on education

Within psychology, the exploration of authentic well-being is relatively new. The development of positive psychology in recent decades has seen the movement away from the predominant focus on mental illness to the exploration of what helps the individual flourish (Linley and Joseph 2004). Within this discourse, well-being and positive mental health are seen as more than the absence of illness, or being in a neutral state, but rather focuses on human flourishing (Ryff and Singer 1996). In this context, while mental well-being and mental illness are not simply two opposite ends of the same dimension, there is a clear indication from the empirical literature that the two constructs are intricately tied (Bartels et al. 2013; Houben, Van Den Noortgate, and Kuppens 2015). Early psychological theories of well-being tended to differ on the focus on hedonic elements, such as positive affect and pleasure, and/or eudaimonic elements, such as purpose, autonomy, growth, and environmental mastery (Ryff 1989; Ryff and Singer 1998). Ryff (1989) was one of the first theorists, using empirical support, to argue for due weight to the enduring life experiences such as purpose and direction, satisfying relationships, and self-realisation along with short-term affective well-being (i.e. happiness). Modern theories tend to integrate both hedonic and eudaimonic elements as well as relational, contextual, and agentic elements (e.g. Deci and Ryan 2008; Diener, Lucas, and Scollon 2006; Seligman 2018). Such theories argue against the unitary pursuance of positive emotion, as elements such as striving and growth that may bring momentary/state discomfort yet they can serve the overall aim to ultimately be well. Unlike their philosophical counterparts, psychological theories of well-being have given relatively little attention to virtue. While constructs such as altruism and empathy have been widely studied, the scientific study of virtue is still emerging and is typically seen in the context of situation × trait interactions (Fowers et al. 2020) rather than in the context of the individual's pursuance of well-being. There may be more similarity with the pluralising idea of Derrida as the discipline (of psychology rather than the field of positive psychology) explores the many ways of being, as it dedicates itself to the scientific study of the human.

For the most part these psychological perspectives have focused on subjective well-being – how an individual subjectively experiences and evaluates their own lives, including emotional states, satisfaction with their lives, and sense of purpose (National Research Council 2014). This perspective contrasts with objective well-being which considers the objective requirements needed for well-being – and as such the subjective perspective has been heavily criticised for disregarding social, cultural, and temporal contexts in which well-being occurs (Becker and Marecek 2008; Taylor 2011). Indeed, the growth of positive psychology's impact in education has been criticised for its emphasis on individual rather than more collective and socio-political understandings (Bryan and Mochizuki 2023). Some of this relates to the broader philosophical lens of the discipline being on the study of the individual human, as well as the challenges in translating

theoretical and empirical complexities of the discipline to policy and practice. Although the focus of study is on the individual, the individual's growth and human fulfilment are heavily influenced by social contexts, and as such, that the opportunities for self-realisation are not equally distributed (Ryff and Singer 2006). Gross inequalities in material resources within a country generate high levels of ill-being (Gross-Manos 2017; Pickett and Wilkinson 2010). Such critiques illustrate the risks associated with the detachment of well-being from issues of virtue and social justice.

A further critique of these conceptualisations is the focus on positive affect and the concern that the focus on the positive to the exclusion of anything that could be regarded as negative (Lazarus 2003; McNulty and Fincham 2012). While some theories of psychological well-being have attempted, at least in part, to disentangle the notion of well-being from happiness (Ryff 1989; Ryff and Singer 1996), the nuance is frequently lost in the translation to policy, particularly in the educational context. For example, in 2009, Seligman and colleagues defined positive education as 'education for both traditional skills and for happiness' (293). Such perspectives are likely influenced by the more hedonic perspectives of well-being that focus on emotions, rather than the more cognitive constructs such as growth and striving.

Human emotions are extremely complex, and unlikely to follow the simple dichotomy of positive and negative affect that some hedonic theories of well-being espouse (Diener et al. 2006; Seligman 2018; Silton et al. 2020). Definitions of emotions are numerous. Cabanac (2002) proposes that *emotion is any mental experience with high intensity and high hedonic content* (pleasure/displeasure) – the experience of which includes four dimensions – the hedonic experience, along with quality, intensity, and duration of the experience. While research does indicate that experiencing relatively high levels of positive and relatively low levels of negative emotions predicts well-being (Fredrickson and Joiner 2002; Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener 2005), more recent empirical evidence suggests we should also consider fluctuations and dynamics of emotions across time rather than just strength and valence (Houben, Van Den Noortgate, and Kuppens 2015). Houben, Van Den Noortgate, and Kuppens (2015), in their meta-analysis on the relationships between patterns of short-term emotion dynamics and psychological well-being, found that lower levels of psychological well-being was associated with more variable, more unstable, but also more inert emotions (how well the intensity of an emotional state can be predicted from the emotional state at a previous moment) and these associations were stronger for negative compared with positive emotions (i.e. the dynamic patterns of negative emotions were more predictive of psychological well-being). The authors suggest that despite the importance of the message of positive psychology, a large part of the emotional flourishing encountered in different forms of high psychological well-being is reflected in the dynamics of negative emotions, rather than positive emotions. Such nuanced empirical findings support the argument for giving space to Hegel's 'unhappy consciousness' noted above (Baugh 2024). Such empirical findings support this renaissance of concern with negativity and suggests that the authentic emotions that contribute to well-being are both positive and negative, and the focus of attention solely on valance is flawed – the stability and variability of emotions must also be considered (Houben, Van Den Noortgate, and Kuppens 2015).

The motivational value of emotions is particularly relevant to the education context where emotions impact on teaching, motivation, and self-regulated learning (Schutz

and DeCuir 2002). Learners experience both positive and negative emotions, at varying levels of intensity, at school and curricular areas will approach these experiences differently. Noddings (2003) suggests that the happy classroom is one in which there is a continually negotiated balance between expressed and inferred needs and the meeting of these needs occurs through the care displayed by the teachers. She argues that one expressed need is that of pleasure. By providing opportunities to enjoy what they do in the classroom provides learners opportunities for such pleasure. According to the Broaden-and-Build theory (Fredrickson 2004), experiences of positive emotions broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires, which, in turn, serve to build their enduring psychological, social, and intellectual resources. These resources function as reserves that can be drawn on later to improve the odds of successful coping and survival. At the same time, there are also many places in education where difficult knowledge challenges the ultimate focus on happiness; knowledge which is affectively rather than cognitively challenging. Britzman (1998) defines difficult knowledge as a concept meant to signify both representations of social traumas in curriculum and the individual's encounters with them in pedagogy. Pitt and Britzman (2015) integrate psychodynamic constructs in their exploration of difficult knowledge. The teaching of social justice issues and difficult knowledge highlights the challenge of the disentanglement of the plight and well-being of others from our subjective own well-being and also points again to the necessity of educational policy to allow space for negative experiences and emotions.

Thus, philosophical and psychological perspectives provide for possibilities for education to pursue more nuanced, expansive, and fluid ideas of well-being, perhaps more in line with Aristotle's eudaimonia, or human flourishing while also connecting to more affirmative possibilities in the postmodern critique of well-being. Such ideas provide the opportunity for educational policy and practice to focus on the authentic human experience that includes both positive and negative emotions and experiences. Below, we explore the opportunities for Physical Education and Arts Education to support this more broad expansive perspective on well-being that reflects in the dynamics of negative emotions as well as positive emotions. They explore the routes to learning for human flourishing through movement, aesthetic and imaginative learning experiences. We also explore how these areas provide opportunities to engage with issues of social justice and the accompanying difficult knowledge and difficult emotions that reflects the Aristotelian perspective on the interdependence of virtue and well-being.

Physical education and well-being

Well-being is increasingly gaining traction as a construct related to physical education. The concept of well-being related to physical education has been explicitly connected with curriculum aims worldwide and exemplified in the Physical Education Curriculum at primary level in Ireland where the importance of health and well-being was identified. Gray et al. (2022), in a review of UK physical education, argued that discourses related to risk and prevention of ill health tend to dominate enactment of physical education contrasting with health and physical education in Australia where the focus has been on leading a healthy life informed by strength discourses. Many references to development of a child's psychological well-being through development of positive personal qualities,

experiencing enjoyment and the joy of movement while developing positive attitudes towards physical activity and physical education are threaded through curricula worldwide. The explicit naming of physical education in the well-being area in the recent *Irish Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA 2023) references the valuable and unique contribution of physical education to a child's well-being in providing explicit opportunities to learn about and through movement while the *Draft Wellbeing Specification* (NCCA 2024b) describes the learning within the subjects of physical education and social, personal and health education.

Inclusion of individual elements such as gymnastics, games, and outdoor activities present a vision in many primary curricula of a broad and balanced experience for children rather than the more traditional focus on teaching of games that had dominated worldwide. Although perhaps not explicitly named as such, the role of ill-being and Derrida's perspective on the many 'ends' may be considered in the debate over the role of competition and sport within physical education, which tends to focus on the importance of supporting achievement of potential but not at the expense of inclusion of all learners (Derrida 1977).

Debate around a child's psychological and physical well-being has often been linked with the need for physical activity (WHO 2021) and the belief that increased levels of physical activity can improve the overall quality of life, and in particular, the mental health of children and young people. Levels of physical activity of children have been monitored in many countries (Vaquero-Solís et al. 2020; Woods et al. 2022) and some studies have suggested that physical activity can predict quality of life in adolescents providing a rationale for increased emphasis in programmes. Against this backdrop, multiple interventions in school settings have been devised in efforts to promote psychological well-being, varying in terms of duration and focus. Evidence in support of such interventions is inconclusive and hindered by disparities in how the concept is defined and measured, although some relationship between physical activity, well-being and quality of life is considered to exist (Piñeiro-Cossio et al. 2021). The positive impact of outdoor adventure activities within physical education on learners' psychological well-being (Slee and Allan 2019) is frequently cited within the literature also.

It is argued that physical education has evolved under the pressures of societal demands often informed by research evidence highlighting particular 'gaps' in children's development or experiences (Capel and Blair 2020). As well as responding to the societal pressures to enhance both physical activity levels as a key means of tackling childhood obesity and mental health of children, arguably adopting a deficit perspective, the importance of factors such as physical literacy (Whitehead 2010) and the teaching of fundamental movement skills are considered relevant in the context of physical education's role in supporting children's well-being. In turn, transference of such skills to breaktime play provides a growing context for enhancement of well-being.

The promotion of social justice and citizenship with a broad focus on social and emotional learning (SEL) (Wright and Richards 2021) is a key element of the wider debate around well-being and physical education. Such focus on social justice indicates some Aristotelian perspective on the connectivity between virtue and well-being within this space (Aristotle 1976). One such approach is the design of a widely adopted framework for teaching personal and social responsibility (Hellison 1995). It was designed to foreground teaching of values and behaviour that can contribute to the positive

development of students' lives within physical education, sports and physical activity that could be transferable beyond the physical education class. Using this model, Manzano-Sánchez and Valero-Valenzuela (2019) reported improvement related to prosocial behaviours, personal and social responsibility, as well as psychological functioning, self-determination, and motivation.

While well-being is highlighted in many debates about physical education, and the promotion of a child's well-being frequently provides a strong rationale for physical education, consideration of the counter narrative of ill-being has received little attention in the literature to date. It can be argued that there are many opportunities for the child to experience ill-being: discomfort in physical activities, failure to achieve, physical discomfort caused by exertion or the negative feeling of losing in a competitive situation. Yet a child can learn to navigate these situations having experienced some negative emotions and develop characteristics such as resilience, identified as an attribute of being well (NCCA 2023), or coping with winning and losing while developing a sense of fairness. The 'dark side' of competitive sport may be clearly identifiable, even to young children, where they are exposed to sporting contexts that highlight unhealthy levels of focus on body image or competition that languishes at the negative end of the fairness spectrum. Within this societal context, physical education can provide the space to develop self-awareness and opportunities for emotional regulation in age-appropriate situations through engagement in a broad range of experiences such as those within games or gymnastics. Such experiences can support children in coping with the normal stresses of life and the explicit emphasis on enjoyment, joy and fun through movement (Stevens and Culpan 2021) can ensure that any discomfort experienced by children on this journey towards well-being will be balanced with a plethora of positive experiences.

In an Irish context it is critical that the implementation of programmes of physical education underpinned by the Wellbeing subject area (encompassing physical education and social, personal and health education) is driven by careful consideration of authentic human flourishing exposed by the philosophical and psychological perspectives above, including considerations of the connections between well-being and virtue as well as considering the full range of human emotions (not only the strength and valence of emotions but also fluctuations and dynamics of emotions across time (Houben, Van Den Noortgate, and Kuppens 2015)). We recommend addressing the so-called blind spots that occur in more generalised discussions of well-being as programmes of physical education are planned and implemented – to recognise the balance of positive and negative that underscores learners capabilities and limitations (Segal 2017). This could mean that children begin to explore, with a teacher using age-appropriate pedagogies (including play-based pedagogy) concepts such as self-doubt, anxiety, disappointment, fear of failure or injury. It will be important that children are not prevented from experiencing some negative emotions giving space as argued earlier in this paper to the 'unhappy consciousness'. This might simply be nudging children towards an understanding of the varying emotions they may experience within physical education, often evoked simply by the nature of the activity experienced in a particular lesson or series of lessons. Sometimes this means experiencing negative emotions or coping with the negative emotions of others. As such, physical education provides opportunities for engagement with difficult knowledge that is affectively rather than cognitively challenging. In essence, we argue that physical education provides the context for pluralising the ends rather

than adopting a narrow focus where one meta-narrative dominates, resonating with the earlier discussions of Nietzsche's perspectivism (1967) and Derrida's (1977) argument for micro narratives.

This can ensure that children can benefit from the many opportunities they will experience that are joyful while simultaneously engaging in a process that is at times discomforting yet contributing to their longer-term psychological well-being. This understanding will be important for children as they navigate not just physical education but also the related areas within primary schools of breaktime physical activity and sport beyond the school context. Dyson, Howley, and Shen (2021) have argued that using a cooperative learning pedagogy, for example, can promote SEL in physical education with a compulsion to explicitly show ' … how we are doing SEL now' (150) within our programmes of physical education. Indeed, as schools plan programmes of physical education it will be crucial that they examine the complementary role of social, personal and health education in providing alternative spaces where the teacher draws on some different pedagogies, for example using circle time, to build on the learning initiated within physical education. Adopting such an integrated approach can prompt children to view situations from different perspectives and to apply their learning in different contexts, flourishing as they are provided with multiple opportunities to do so within and beyond the physical education lesson.

Arts education and well-being

The conception of arts education in Ireland's curriculum reflects the global trend of prioritising social and emotional learning. The *Draft Primary Arts Education Specification* for Ireland's new primary curriculum makes frequent reference to goals related to self expression and exploration of feelings (NCCA 2024a), and this suggests that there is room for the exploration of a spectrum of feelings. It is the case however that arts education is consistently framed as having a positive effect on the individual. Dewey (1934) argued that art enhances the way people experience life, and The World Health Organisation has stated that engaging with the arts can be beneficial for both mental and physical health (Fancourt and Finn 2019). The well-being impact generally associated with arts education relates to the idea of excitement and personal growth (NCCA 2024a) and connectedness and feeling capable (Clarke and McLellan 2022), indicating that it is the flourishing aspect of the arts which is seen as the benefit, although through positive rather than negative emotions. These positive emotions may arise through the process of engaging with difficult feelings, as aesthetic and imaginative experiences allow a range of emotions to surface in a process of artistic meaning-making.

A consistent theme that emerges in arts education literature is the importance of creating space for arts engagement that is thought provoking, challenging, or even uncomfortable (McCabe and Flannery 2024). In the context of primary curricula, typically the subjects encompassed under the umbrella term of arts education are art, music, and drama. Research particularly highlights the positive effects of group belonging and collective meaning-making in drama education. Neelands (2009, 173) asserts that 'the importance of drama in schools is in the processes of social and artistic engagement and experiencing of drama rather than in its outcomes'. An examination of the purpose and effect of drama also implies the centrality of engagement with ideas that

are uncomfortable, difficult to understand, or even oppressive or upsetting. Drama is used to explore situations related to historical injustices, ethical dilemmas, or social conflicts, encouraging students to grapple with multiple perspectives, and it is a curricular aim of drama to have children explore a dilemma, a conflict or an issue (NCCA 2024a). In drama lessons written for use with primary age children with the theme of child labour (Baldwin 2012), children work in role as factory workers in a Victorian cotton mill. Conditions in this imagined factory which they inhabit are terrible, and an accident occurs, which they also dramatise. They then encounter the teacher in role as a mill owner who is unsympathetic, and later a factory inspector. They must decide both individually and collectively what they can say and do, within the restrictions of their character's plight. Dramatic explorations might also be around stories which reflect personal struggles (such as bullying or exclusion through the lens of a drama based on the story of *The Ugly Duckling*) which allow students to process emotions in a safe yet challenging way. Drama is a site in which, collectively, truth is questioned, and the human condition is explored. Drama educators view their subject as an art form which is related to theatre and shares a similar goal of educating, challenging, and reflecting society and has an explicit intention of effecting change (Prentki and Preston 2013). Heathcote, a pioneer and highly influential theorist and practitioner in the field of drama in education, based her early work on the idea that the dramatic act helps us to explore a challenging experience and in doing so decreases the related anxiety and stress (Wagner 1976, 16).

Music is an art form with a set of associated skills which are clearly distinct from those associated with drama education, yet research indicates a similar set of effects which are associated with wellbeing. Howe finds that 'in adolescence, music contributes to development of an individual's emerging self identity, which can have a profound effect on mental health and happiness' (Howe 2022, 9). Self concept is developed through the uplifting nature of experiencing music, personal connection to music, and of the shared experience of music making and receiving. Students who learn to play or sing often describe a sense of personal achievement and emotional release, whether through classical compositions, improvisation, or songwriting. Musical choirs create a sense of belonging and community, positively impacting social engagement and identity development. A choir for children living in direct provision has enabled them to express and reshape cultural identities (Kenny 2018). Burnard and Dragovic (2014) discuss how groups of children can develop co-creative, trusting, musical communities of practice under the guidance of their teacher, which enables children to choose to engage with 'difficult' feelings or situations such as long hours of rehearsal, difficult tasks and emotional risks such as expressing an unhappy experience through music or playing a complex piece of music in public. Pleasure is achieved through the flourishing of one's own ability, and also of the group and the task. An area within music (and drama) education where spaces for ill-being may not be as present is performance of musical theatre productions. These productions are increasingly popular, both in schools and on mainstream entertainment platforms. They often have slick production values, with largely familiar and comforting themes, and they seem to contribute to a feeling of safety and happiness. *The Lion King* and *Oliver*, for example, are popular in primary schools and have a happy ending, in which good triumphs. Such productions sometimes prioritise spectacle, perfection and escapism over the

exploration of difficult or personal experiences and create the need for auditions for the best performers in a few starring roles. Research indicates that when music education is framed as social praxis (Regelski 2015), there is more potential in this space for an approach in which ideas are expressed authentically and all participants are regarded as capable of expressing an idea musically.

Similarly, visual art participation is frequently described as personally transformational, in how it reaches 'beyond the self, setting aside preconceptions and connecting with external reality, and with other people, from new perspectives' (Harter 2007, 177). While we may be drawn to artwork depicting idyllic scenes; we also celebrate art that depicts scenes of tragedy and horror, or challenges our view of the world. A political and imaginative thought process is needed to create such artwork, underscoring the importance of emotion in calling for change (Duncombe and Harrebye 2022). Visual arts educators state the need to embrace the revelations that may be made through children's art. Ill-being can be seen as an aspect of art when children make images depicting family arguments, war, or other real and imagined fears. It is suggested that disallowing this in the classroom could pathologise children's life experiences, rather than enabling them to express a vision of their life as it is (McClure et al. 2017). Such approaches support Segal's (2017) argument to include the 'dark side' for a more balanced picture of contemporary human experiences. This therapeutic aspect to all arts engagement is important, alongside the impact of the joy of creativity.

Arts education collectively are increasingly viewed as a democratising and empowering agent for social as well as personal change (Mreiwed, Carter, and Mitchell 2021). Just 'doing the arts' may not always be enough; it is how they are done makes a difference to the well-being of the individual. As D'Olimpio (2016) points out, there may be multiple reasons for enjoyment or flourishing within the experience, and it may be to do with empathy, or moral development, or just finding that one has a talent for expressing ideas through the arts. A growing body of literature does dispute the well-being association with the arts, suggesting that curriculum has become too heavily influenced by neoliberal thinking to realise the well-being impact which is claimed (Damerow 2023; Gormley 2024). Nietzsche's advocacy of perspectivism (Nietzsche 1967) is relevant in its reminder that multiple ways of experiencing and interpreting ideas are essential, highlighting the significance of co-creation and shared ownership in artistic processes. The challenge presented lies in providing the kind of education needed for a pedagogy which is truly artistic and socially engaged. An emphasis on social transformation in the arts demands an education which permits visceral, felt engagement with that which is troubling and difficult, in order to experience a catharsis, an aesthetic response, and a change.

Conclusion

There are divergences between philosophy and psychology in their approach to well-being (Fishman and McCarthy 2013) which can pose challenges to an interdisciplinary application of the concept to education. However, there are also convergences, and although challenging, a deeper exploration of both theoretical and empirical perspectives is pivotal to an authentic application to the curriculum. In the context of increased emphasis on wellbeing in policy and curricula, we argue that the incorporation of

well-being should not singularly focus on the pursuance of 'happiness' or solely positive emotions. Instead, the Aristotelian translation of eudaimonia to human flourishing may be more apt in such applications, to allow for a more fulsome ideas of the human experience. Psychological literature supports this caution against the singular focus, and contemporary theories of well-being point to the multidimensional nature of the construct implicating notions of striving, growth, and purpose, as well as varying emotional states. Given that some of the nuances in well-being have been lost in the translation from the academic literature into educational policy and practice, our central argument is to ensure that the application of well-being to policy and practice ensures that learners' vulnerabilities and idiosyncrasies in well-being (or the many 'ends' suggested by Derrida) along with fluctuations between well-being and ill-being, happiness and discomfort, are considered in such applications. The teaching of and for well-being needs to consider the complexity of human emotions, including the stability and intensity of emotions as well as the valance of the emotions – both positive and negative. The examples of arts and physical education provided here exemplify how education encounters well-being and ill-being, including the negative emotions associated with discomfort, failure to achieve, disappointment, challenge, and so on. It is important that, in the implementation or well-being, educators continue to provide space for such authentic and complex emotional experiences rather than sole pursual of learner 'happiness'. Both physical and arts education also provide opportunities for the interrelations between well-being and virtue through their teaching of social justice issues. This wider narrative on well-being is needed in the educational context, and arts education and physical education have the potential to embrace in this more ambiguous, authentic space.

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