

**Lighting “dark rooms” for Early Childhood Development student teachers health system:
A case of one Teachers’ College in Zimbabwe**

By

Sam Mutandwa

Marymount Teachers College

P. O. Box 20, Mutare

mutandwas@gmail.com

Nomatter Manzunzu

Midlands State University, Faculty of Education

Department of Educational Foundations, Primary Education and Pedagogy

P. Bag 9055, Gweru

Corresponding author: manzunzunomatter1977@gmail.com

&

Loveness Bema

Midlands State University, Faculty of Education

Department of Educational Foundations, Primary Education and Pedagogy

P, Bag 9055, Gweru

Abstract

This article seeks to light “dark rooms” for Early Childhood Development student teachers with respect to health facilities and their general well- being. A multiple thronged approach to enhance physical and mental health was explored using the case of one Teachers’ College in Zimbabwe. Phenomenological approaches ensured lived experiences exposed “dark rooms” in need of intervention. Key phenomenological instruments used were interview guides and questionnaires which complimented observed phenomenon. Interpretation of lived experiences revealed critical need for intervention at institutional and individual level. Major findings were that chiefly low self- efficacy is causal to decreasing motivation in mental health dimension deficiency and public health facilities and information access need improvement. It was noted that convergence and integration of physical and mental health dimensions in Teachers’ Colleges should be key consideration pillars for youth friendly health services. The article recommends a system thinking in planning students’ wellness where all facets of wellness are projected equally and addressed in a social context. Constant monitoring and regulation should be visible in the curriculum and wellness facilities and activities. Robust advocacy through workshops, drama, debate, various sporting activities among other activities should be harnessed for students’ health and well- being to increase.

Key words: Zimbabwe, College, Early Childhood Development, health, teacher, wellbeing

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Introduction

Early Childhood Development student teachers’ well-being is nuanced and multi-dimensional. Over-projection of academic success by institutional authorities has foreshadowed critical domains of wellness much to the detriment of students’ health and well-being. This article illuminates these overlooked regions, herein called “dark rooms”, and attempts to explore wellness using a contextualised approach that integrates all critical dimensions of wellness in Teachers’ Colleges. The researchers were keen to seek a self-regulating holistic approach which is grounded and contextualised to ascertain robust students’ well-being and health system. This brings the systems thinking in students’ health, that is, assemblage of interrelated domains working together by way of some driving forces. The focus is to draw a discernible relationship of all well-being domains to some observed patterns whose transactions are regularly monitored.

Early Childhood Development student teachers’ well-being issues are often multi-faceted World Economic Forum (2022), OECD (2017), Villarino (2021). Wellness is full integration of states of physical, mental and spiritual well-being Uchicago (2022), Villarino (2021). Literature thus avers that Early Childhood Development student teachers’ well-being goes beyond absence of diseases or infirmity but envisages cognitive, emotional, social and physical dimensions of the construct. Approaches in institutions are more inclined to academic success ignoring the key role of educational institutions to superintend over all facets of the wellness system subject in this article. What happens in school life is key to wellness as averred by Adamson 2013; Bradshaw et al 2007; Currie at al 2012, Huebner et al 2004; Rees and Main 2015; OECD 2017. Interventions observed by the researchers looked rudimentary and lacking sustainable monitoring and evaluation and systems thinking subsets hence, the research.

Exploring the systems thinking in order to illuminate all dimensions of students’ well-being to promote a culture of wellness spurred this research. No dark rooms, overlooked and foreshadowed elements of the system, should remain unlit on account of pursuing only academic success either at individual level or institutional.

Statement of the Problem

Dimensions of Early Childhood Development student teachers’ health and well-being are not being projected equally in Teachers’ Colleges thus, a cause for concern. Illumination to date seems inclined towards academic and future work skills development at the expense of critical elements of wellness system like environment, physical, social, emotional and spiritual dimensions of well-being. These dimensions are placed at the periphery as after thoughts in Educational institutions. The quest for a framework that envisages systems thinking in students’ health and well-being for balanced lives is the gist of this research paper.

Research Aim

The research aimed to achieve a systematic, contextualised and holistic approach towards Early Childhood Development student teachers’ health and well-being in Zimbabwe.

Research objectives

1. To establish the extent to which the students’ well- being culture has been embraced in Teachers’ Colleges.
2. To explore the implementation level of students’ well- being elements in teachers’ colleges.
3. To develop a contextualised and integrated system framework of students’ wellness in Teachers’ Colleges.

Research questions

1. What are the dimensions of Early Childhood Development student teachers’ wellness in existence?
2. What efforts are in place and being implemented for students’ well- being?
3. How successful is the integration of all dimensions of well- being in the college?
4. What model can be used to ensure integration of all wellness facets equally?

Literature Review

Henrico (2022) noted that popular discourse identifies education as a cure for many society’s ills. This projects academic success and foreshadows its health pre-requisites. However, students are faced with a unique array of challenges causing incremental signs of psychological, physical and emotional distress. Illuminating on all dimensions of wellness holistically and in contextualised approach can provide a panacea to this threat.

Salutogenesis theory posits that life experiences help shape one’s sense of coherence- and orientation towards life as more or less comprehensible, manageable and meaningful Mittelmark et al (2022). It is the building of a pervasive enduring but dynamic feeling of confidence which is subject to this article. This self-efficacy is a product of dimensions of well-being, inter-alia; physical, emotional, environmental, intellectual, social and spiritual. These precipitate into one conglomerate herein called wellness, each equally important and worth the focus as given by this research work.

Wellness is a way of life that always involves exploring, searching, asking new questions and discovering new answers all the while living in the physical, mental and social dimensions Fig 1.1 (Biju, 2019; Ramarathne et al., 2021). The dynamism implied spurs the need for continuous research in different temporal-spatial settings such as is subject of this study. Wellness in this study is the deliberate recognition of all its facets in context of institutional information and culture. It strives to illuminate facets that are otherwise taken for granted with respect to total wellness. The article projects Morris-Paxton et al (2017) conclusion that a holistic, salogenic, wellness education programme increases students value for information with

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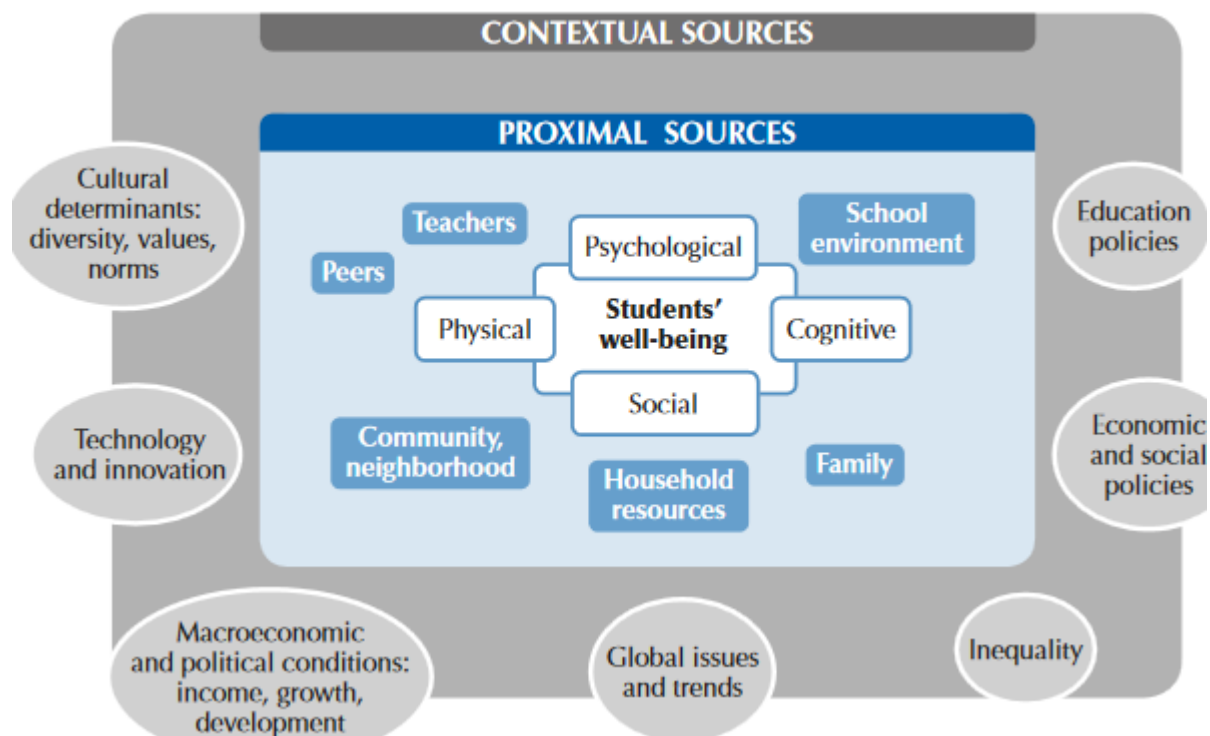
regard to a number of health variables. It attempts an exploration of all dimensions of wellness equally in contemporary context using the case study selected.

Health literacy in the adult education system is becoming of equal concern to general literacy Schechter and Lynch (2011). Baker et al (2011) avers noting that wellness appear to have impact on academic success and higher socio-economic status later in life. Henrico (2022) concurs noting that stressors often lead to a decrease in academic competence and severe professional ramifications. The study is spurred by the need to impart health education information at individual level and at management level to realise student friendly Teachers’ Colleges with a culture of wellness across its spectrum.

Key health dimensions for students’ wellness illustrated

Students’ wellness is an aggregate of many equally important dimensions worth monitoring and evaluating continuously given its dynamic nature. OECD 2017 framework of students’ well-being is summed in fig 1.1 ensuing.

Fig 1.1 Framework of Students’ well-being; Source: OECD (2017)



Institutions seem to have gravitated towards a skewed health system which is selective on critical wellness constructs. Akbar et al (2020) gives an example of how for instance traditional physical games have numerous physiological and psychological benefits for indigenous youth around the world. In Zimbabwe, such games include among others; *nhodo*, *pada* and *zvira*hwe. These were

not done for competition but reducing stress and relaxing even as critical thinking is entrenched. Colonial praxis seems to have decimated such contextualised games laden with a culture of wellness in pursuit of academic success per-se. Youth development through physical activity equally needs projection for a holistic health system in Teachers’ Colleges. This does not make peripheral issues of diet, clinic health services, infrastructure and affection from staff members as is part the holistic approach envisaged in the study to increase motivation. Eloff et al (2021) also highlight the almost virtually unrecognised role of lecturers which equally needs exploration with respect to wellness. These unrecognised areas of wellness are subject to exploration in order to realise a systematic approach to this subject.

This study attempts conjectures on a contextualised model that envisages continuous monitoring and evaluation of all facets of wellness to guarantee sustainable students’ well-being. Systematic integration of the dimensions of wellness and self-regulation of the system compels this study.

Research Methods

The study adopted a constructivist paradigm which sought to explore the phenomenon under study. A mixed methods approach was used. QUALI- Quanti is an approach where data was collected and analysed using more of qualitative methods than quantitative (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, Creswell & Creswell, 2019). The data obtained was mostly qualitative and a few inferential statistics were used. A case study design was adopted because it allowed the researchers to have an in depth understanding of students’ wellness at a particular college. It enabled the researchers to have more time to do the study.

This study comprised of twenty students and five administrators in a college of study on student wellness. The administrators were purposively sampled by virtue of their offices while stratified sampling was used to select student teachers using their gender and intake strata. Data which was collected was presented into themes. The themes were drawn picking the similarities on data collected. Thus, thematic content analysis was adopted.

Data was collected using semi- structured interviews, observation and questionnaires. Content themes were drawn and used for discussion and analysis along the themes crafted. A form of consent was attached to the questionnaire explaining to the participants the study thrust. Ethical consideration was ensued in the emphasis for confidentiality to participants. Respondents were assured of confidentiality so that questions were answered freely without fear of victimisation (Brundent & Rhodes, 2013). The researchers had no interests or inadvertent influence on results given. Approval to carry the study was sought from the College authorities.

Research Findings and discussion

State of students` wellness dimensions

There is evident existence of hugely dormant wellness structures in the case. This evidence is observed in wellness infrastructure, sporting facilities, health facilities and students diet at the college, emotional and mental wellness state as well as social and spiritual wellness.

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Wellness infrastructure

Existence of physical infrastructure for physical wellness was observed in different spheres in various levels of use and dereliction respectively as ensuing;

Sporting facilities and physical wellness

Different physical facilities were observed to be satisfactorily kept. These are soccer pitches, basketball courts, netball and volleyball pitches and gymnastics room

Triangulation of responses from students, staff and observation showed that these facilities are hardly used. 83% of administrators said sporting activities were only for designated times under supervision. These were done at least twice per week. Students observed that such students are only either those who would have excelled in different sporting activities or those specialising in sport. All of the students interviewed said the swimming pool does not have a current history of use.

Health facilities and physical wellness

There is a functional college clinic and qualified nurse. Services are offered per designated time to students save for emergence cases. Students bemoaned lack of medications to which administrators attributed to economic hardships.

It was observed that ablution blocks were being well maintained although incinerators are work in progress. On sexual health, the refrain response was the need to make protection materials more accessible in private settings.

Food, diet and physical wellness

There is a functional standard dining hall with skilled and semi-skilled workers. Resident students have three meals a day. Non- resident students are not fed at the school and there are no functional attempts to check this physiological need on this group of students. 84% of Administrators rated the diet to be satisfactory. 16% rated it poor. 0% rated it to be good. Students averred the diet is poor. It was a refrained response that students with special diets are not considered even and would have to individually find alternatives. The tuck-shop is rarely stocked to satisfaction.

Emotional and mental wellness state

The student affairs department oversees all guidance and counselling services. It falls in the Dean of students` office. 20% of the students interviewed were ignorant of the counselling structure and conscious only to the Students Representative Council (SRC). Health and life skills lessons were visible and taken in conventional classes formally. Students also noted that lecturing staff vested much of their efforts on their subject domains content without deliberate efforts to build social rapport with students. Interviewees were satisfied about counselling sessions but also concerned about confidentiality should one confides with counselling staff. It was observed that some matters getting to the Dean`s office would have gotten past threshold and thus firefighting effects.

Social and spiritual wellness

These are shown by response indicators in the case study like “Edutainment” mantra recognising the importance of Education and entertainment for a balanced student. Various clubs respond to varied interests in students. Christian faith issues are addressed by inter-denominational group called “FOCUS”. Nonetheless, it was observed that this assumes the students are all of Christian religion which is hubris at organisational planning level.

Discussion of findings

Student health and well-being is wrought with challenges in the case requiring systematic attention for holistic addressing. The discussion is conveniently put in two major themes; a) over-projection of academic success and Illumination of dark rooms and b) Systematic Approach to student wellness: Towards sustainable students` wellness framework`.

The foregoing findings indicate over-projection of academic success foreshadowing critical wellness domains. Illumination and addressing of these dark rooms should automatically result in academic support. This triangulates well with literature as noted earlier; health literacy in the adult education system is becoming of equal concern to general literacy Schechter and Lynch (2011). Baker et al (2011) avers noting that wellness appear to have impact on academic success and higher socio-economic status later in life. Henrico (2022) concurs noting that stressors often lead to a decrease in academic competence and severe professional ramifications. Quoted verbatim, one student felt hard done and said that as a non-resident student, she felt college favours resident students reducing morale of non-resident students. Such feelings need regular address and monitoring mechanisms using salutogenesis thinking, that is, one`s sense of coherence and self-efficacy depend on a conglomeration of all life experiences in a setting.

The observed sporting facilities were largely idle and time may lead to dereliction as is the case with the swimming pool. Students specialising in Physical Education and a handful who would have excelled for competitions occasionally use the facilities. The absence of a driving force, let alone monitoring, to encourage physical exercises in the majority of the students was glaring. It was evidently observed that no budgetary allocation ensured resourcing this critical area for holistic students` well-being.

Sporting for leisure in African contexts may include traditional games like *nhodo*, *pada*, *tsoro*, or *tsvare* which besides physical engagements also challenges the mind and done for leisure. Akbar et al (2020) gives an example of how for instance these traditional physical games have numerous physiological and psychological benefits for indigenous youth around the world and comes naturally in context of their cultures. Such are areas in need of illumination for holistic and inclusive culture of wellness in the curriculum.

Strong advocacy on wellness must also target students through different platforms that instil health literacy. Among such being workshops, peer education, quizzes, drama and a host of other platforms.

The presence of a clinic shows acknowledgement of the physical health need with regards disease and illness. Wellness however should be a full integration of states of physical, mental and spiritual well-being Uchicago (2022), Villarino (2021). Early Childhood Development student teachers` well-being goes beyond absence of diseases or infirmity but

envisages cognitive, emotional, social and physical dimensions of the construct. These overshadowed areas need equal projection as academic performance.

The services on the other hand were wrought with challenges chiefly under stocking of medications. This was alluded to budgetary constraints in a harsh macro-economic environment. Respondents averred the need to involve health stakeholders in the provision of medication and services.

Food is a physiological need with a direct link to motivation and self-efficacy. The disgruntlement over lack of balance diet was over-arching and has the ripple effect of decreasing morale and motivation. Innovative ideas of supplementing income to alleviate budgetary stress are critical for redress. Students in need of special diet are critically demotivated as they have to fend for their special diet. The planning phase does not cater for this group. Most non-resident students bemoaned hunger throughout the day hence destroying motivation and morale.

Emotional domain is directly proportional to physical domains in the preceding discussion. Addressing the physical domains as sporting, food, diet and clinic services would go a long way in alleviating stressors. This gives value to the observation that wellness should be addressed as a system with various interlinked facets.

Counselling services in existence need to solve issues from the source not addressing them when they would have passed threshold. The sources entail all facets of students’ wellness. Even in the academic facet, students need affection from lecturing staff for motivation. This rapport is often ignored as Eloff (2021) noted the almost virtually unrecognised role of lecturers which equally need exploration with respect to wellness.

There was a presumption that spiritual facet of wellness is addressed by practising Christian ethos in the institution. This was observed in the emphasis of the Christian inter-denomination group, Focus, in coordinating activities even at main assemblies. The extent to which other religions are made peripheral is profound and impact to individuals.

Self-efficacy is a product of dimensions of well-being, inter-alia; physical, emotional, environmental, intellectual, social and spiritual. These precipitate into one conglomerate herein called wellness, each equally important and worth the focus. A rudimentary approach projecting one facet over a host of others is causal to unbalanced student with regards wellness. Elements of wellness are practically indispensable and impact on each other hence the systems thinking to wellness in Early Childhood Development student teachers.

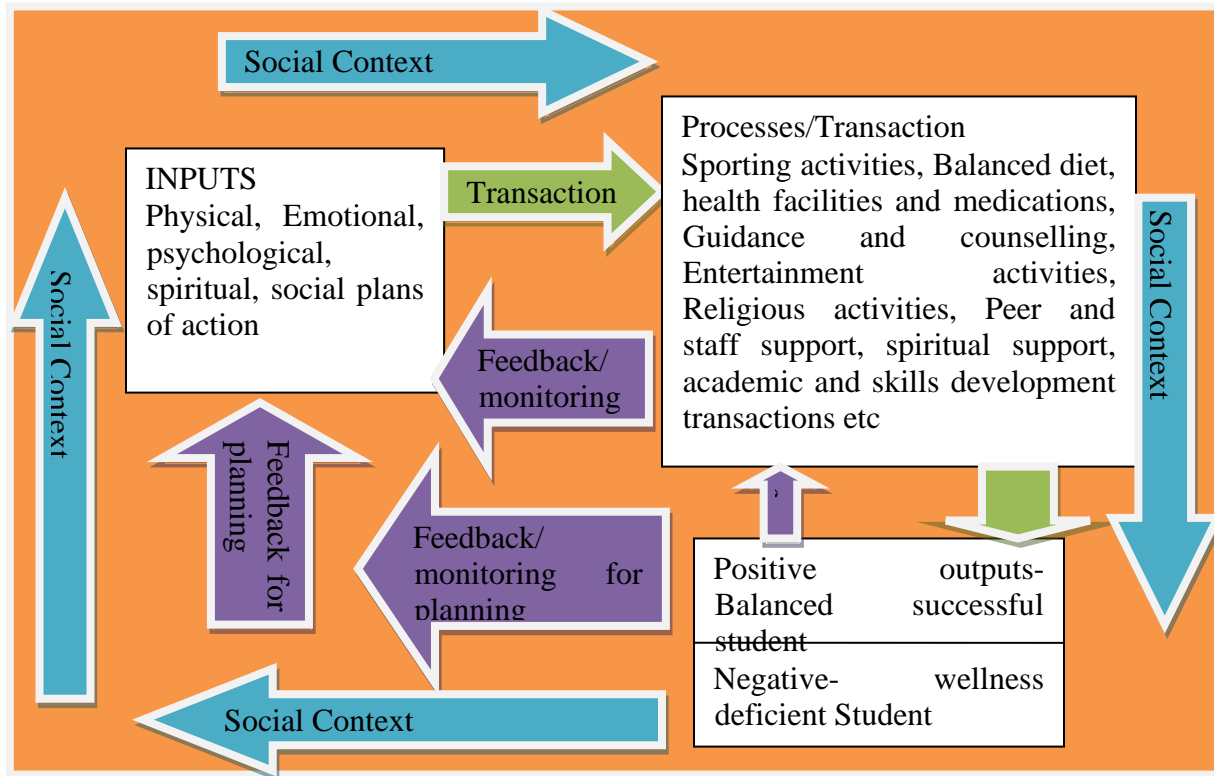
Subsequently, sustainable students’ wellness model must subsume all facets addressing physical, social, spiritual, emotional and psychological domains. The setting must consider the context of the institution holistically. This deliberately adopts salutogenesis thinking, that is, all life experiences at Campus considered. Such experiences must propagate health literacy on various platforms like debate, clubs, and workshops among others.

A sustainable system should have a discernible pattern regularly monitored. Absence of such is a disservice to the well-being of students. The current praxis that highlights academic success without feeding the facets of wellness is doomed and unsustainable. Such pretence fails students to reach their potential and self-efficacy. The illumination of hidden stressors, herein called dark rooms, is critical for sustainable well-being in Teachers’ Colleges. The dynamism in wellness system entails the need for frequent monitoring of the transactions of the system. A

rudimentary approach gives fragile peace which crumble upon a tipping point or beyond a certain threshold.

The systems diagram ensuing in Fig 1.2 is a proposition envisaging systems thinking in wellness construct for Early Childhood Development student teachers

Fig 1.2 Early Childhood Development student teachers’ wellness: A Systems Approach



Conclusion

Wellness has a direct correlation with success and should be central at institutional planning stage. It is a system requiring a holistic approach integrating all facets with equal illumination and projection lest some seemingly minor elements of the system remain overshadowed. The current overarching projection of academic success is not sustainable and needs redress. Student wellness must have a discernible pattern of constituent parts which are constantly regulated and monitored in various dynamic contexts. This is thought to produce a sustainable framework of wellness system.

Recommendations

A system thinking in institutional student wellness plan. This entails strategic planning that mandates specific members to regulate and monitor all dimensions of students’ wellness in Teachers’ Colleges. This should integrate mental and physical wellness.

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A budgetary allocation that illuminates all dimensions of students’ wellness with equal projection

Engaging students at all levels as in the “Nothing for them without them mantra”. This should target high health literacy through strong advocacy and monitoring of health system facets.

Capacity building of all stakeholders in students’ well-being in institutions

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