I Fail Therefor I Am: Co-Designing Wellbeing Interventions to Challenge Achievement-focused Education

In modern day society, there is a general perception that success equals happiness, and that it is achieved through accomplishing goals, in school, at work and in social settings. In our education system, grading is based on guidelines that allows for no failing. Because of this, children learn from a very early age that through failing they are by definition not good enough. A consequence of that might be that children are likely to grow up with a pressure of having to perform and by perfect in life, through school, sports, at work and constantly look to others for validation. There seems to be a lack of focus on the wellbeing of students globally. Psychologists and sociologists alike have noted that pressure to perform causes stress on a mental and emotional level, which leads to an unhealthy lifestyle.

The PERMA model uses positive psychology to measure wellbeing[1]. Studies have shown improvement in children's performance by using this theory, and countries such as India are changing the educational system to include a happiness curriculum[2]. Here we present a design-led research study that draws upon the PERMA model with an emphasis on accomplishments through success and failures. The goal is to co-create an ideal future for and with students through interventions taking place in high school and at universities. Data is collected through semi-structured interviews, co-creation workshops and design experiments using probes.

Our first intervention was using posters and probes in the bathrooms of Designschool Kolding (DSKD) and Southern Danish University (SDU). The goal was to get insights on whether the students feel pressured, how much and if so, where it is coming from. Both schools showed high levels of emotional pressure, and most people said it is self-induced. Furthermore, we put a box with notes and a pen, where people could leave their thoughts. We did not receive many from SDU, but DSKD had a surprisingly high number of notes from the bathroom in the Bachelor level. Some of the thoughts were very shocking and in general confirming that there are many struggles within the students that are being kept to themselves. While these posters were up, we created another intervention which took place in both universities and also Middelfart Gymnasium. We wanted to collect insights on what "Wellbeing" means to the students. We called it "Let's cook up some wellbeing", where we had a bowl on a table along with material and words inspired from the PERMA model. The students would come up to us and pick their three main ingredients to put in for the version of a wellbeing cake. Based on the data collected, we hosted a workshop where we used co-creation, semi-structured interviews and probes to get more detailed insights on what wellbeing means to the students, why they feel pressured, how they deal with it and how the schools could improve.

I plan to further develop a workshop that can be used in educational settings to teach students the valuable lessons of failing. This will happen during my master thesis from January to June 2020. I am currently contacting collaboration partners for the project, and have already a few schools interested, the municipality of Kolding and a coach who is specialized in mindfulness. We plan to use a participatory action research approach to engage the students and encourage them to act and speak up about the struggles they are facing as a result of never feeling good enough. Overall, our goal with this contribution is to challenge the current system to focus on the wellbeing of students and putting more emphasis on tacit knowledge obtained through the momentum of learning and reaching a goal, rather than solely measuring the outcome. This conference would be a great opportunity for me to test out the workshop with stakeholders and also share my ideas and findings.

1. https://positivepsychology.com/perma-model/
2. https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/here-s-how-happiness-curriculum-in-delhi-govt-schools-can-build-a-healthy-mind-1311804-2018-08-11
   https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327234921_A_Positive_Education_Program_to_Promote_Wellbeing_in_Schools_A_Case_Study_from_a_Hong_Kong_School