A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Relationships between learning and health and wellbeing in Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence (CFE)

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Background to this study

This work was stimulated by the introduction of the CFE’s ‘health and wellbeing across learning’ policy, in which a close link is made between education and children’s wellbeing. The policy frames health and wellbeing as the responsibility of all, demanding that teachers consider health and wellbeing as an intrinsic aspect teaching and learning. This is something of a policy novelty, following on from a time when responsibilities for health and education of children lay with different professional groups, albeit with responsibilities towards interagency working. This study examined how health and wellbeing was conceptualised in Scottish policy, and how it was linked to learning. Following Bernstein’s (2000) observation that written policy is ‘recontextualised’ i.e. reshaped and reinterpreted by those who implement it, this study also involved interviews with policy actors and teachers.

Multiple discourses of wellbeing

Over the past decade the term ‘wellbeing’ has become ubiquitous in children’s policy, yet according to Watson et al (2012) it remains an ill-defined concept. Ereaut and Whiting (2008) identify how our understandings of wellbeing emerge from a range of different academic and professional traditions which can bring multiple perspectives to our understanding of a ‘good’ childhood. In this Scottish study the following were identified as the dominant discourses and formed a framework for analysis:

- Discourse of physical health promotion. This draws from a medicalised understanding of wellbeing and focuses on health related behaviours, often framed in terms of choice.
- Discourse of social and emotional literacy. This emerges from psychology and involves understanding and managing emotions and social behaviours.
- Discourse of care. This links to the field of social care, and focuses on the way in which
professionals look after children. School-based concerns include ethos, relationships and rights, based on the concept of development of the whole child.

- Philosophical discourse. Drawing from the work of Aristotle, the contemporary philosopher, Sen (2009), characterises wellbeing as leading a life one has reason to value. Individual agency and opportunity, in the context of democratic citizenship are key features.

This research study aimed to identify how these discourses were invoked, how they related to each other and how these discourses were linked to learning.

**Data sources**

Policy texts included in the study were: CFE Health and wellbeing policies, Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), CFE Building the Curriculum series, CFE ‘Approaches to learning’ web pages and the Scottish Government Economic Strategy.

Nine interviews were conducted with policy actors in education, health and the voluntary sector. Sixteen primary and secondary teachers with an interest in health and wellbeing were interviewed; four in each of four schools.

**Key Findings – policy texts**

- The discourses of wellbeing

The focus on health and wellbeing as an inter-agency concern has necessarily given rise to a migration of discourses from other professional and academic traditions into educational policy. In particular the CFE understanding of health and wellbeing adopts discourses of care, health promotion and social and emotional literacy.

Drawing heavily from Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) a discourse of care is articulated in CFE health and wellbeing policy through notions of ethos, relationships, children’s voice, anti-bullying and through recognition and applauding of achievements. Such caring activities are repeatedly depicted as an important way in which the school can support the physical, social and emotional wellbeing of children.

The Experiences and Outcomes convey health and wellbeing as individualised skills of self-understanding and self-management relating to physical health, emotions and social skills. In this context wellbeing is portrayed as a set of desirable attributes which are framed as personal responsibility.

The philosophical understanding of wellbeing as a life well lived was less evident in CFE health and wellbeing policy.

- Links between learning and wellbeing

Health and wellbeing (physical, social and emotional), fostered through a caring environment is repeatedly portrayed as a prerequisite of learning. In tandem with this, health and wellbeing is seen as key to motivation,
positive attitudes and dispositions, and to employability.

The converse relationship of learning supporting wellbeing was evident in the context of learning about wellbeing (health education). However, there was scant attention paid to the role of learning per se in widening opportunities to lead a life of value. Arguably, the unique contribution that education could bring to childhood wellbeing has been overshadowed in policy by the discourses of other professional groups.

**Key findings – interviews with policy actors and teachers**

Much of the interview data echoed the policy message that health and wellbeing supports learning and other objectives of the school, and, conversely, that poor health and wellbeing places obstacles in the way of learning. In some cases this was further reinforced, so that the definition of wellbeing was conflated with the capacity to learn. Offering supports to wellbeing was often construed as a solution to a problem (in behaviour or learning). Sometimes it was evident that working with the child to improve his / her wellbeing was proposed as a solution to a problem that originated elsewhere.

However, this ran alongside and was interwoven with accounts of teaching and learning supporting wellbeing. With reference to pedagogical choices, subject content, and extracurricular experiences teachers described how the process and outcomes of high quality teaching and learning enriched the lives of children and expanded their opportunities to choose and live a life which they valued. Moreover, they identified how relationships were strengthened through learning together, suggesting that not only does a caring environment support learning, but classroom communities were strengthened through learning together.

This resonates with the way that philosophers view wellbeing, as a life well lived, with others (rather than an assessment of an individual’s emotional state). Moreover, it identifies the role of education in supporting wellbeing.

**Conclusions**

Biesta (2009) distinguishes between two purposes of education: socialisation whereby children are taught to fit into the status quo, and ‘subjectification’ whereby each child’s individuality is invited to ‘come into presence’. Both of these are important functions of schooling, although Biesta cautions that socialisation without subjectification is anti-educational.

In Curriculum for Excellence an emphasis on wellbeing as a state of personal self-management, which underpins successful learning has, arguably, focussed the health and wellbeing curriculum on the socialisation of children into a particular type of self motivated, resilient, high performing and employable citizen. This invites the interpretation that the discourse of childhood health and wellbeing is, possibly inadvertently, used in the pursuit of other purposes.
However, the interviews demonstrated how some teachers and policy actors conceptualised health and wellbeing in a more nuanced way. Discourses of physical and emotional wellbeing were interwoven with an understanding of the role of a high quality educational experience in helping children to understand themselves and their place in the world, and to pursue those things which they consider to be of value (subjectification).

This study therefore proposes that freedoms provided by linking learning with health and wellbeing should be considered at two levels. At a basic level good physical health and social and emotional literacy enhance the freedom of children to access and engage successfully with schooling. At a more complex level high quality and meaningful learning extends the freedom that young people have to identify and lead valuable lives in the present and the future.

**Messages for policy makers and teachers**

In the contemporary interagency landscape the role of education in fostering wellbeing has been overshadowed by discourses of other professions and academic traditions. This study suggests that there should be some re-balancing of the debates and policies around health and wellbeing, to highlight the intrinsic value of learning in enhancing the opportunities to lead a life of value.

Whilst the call for all teachers to be mindful of physical and emotional wellbeing of children is to be welcomed, there should be an acknowledgement that the pedagogical and curricular choices that teachers make are equally important. By extending our understanding of wellbeing to include a life well lived, then we can see the unique contribution that teaching and learning can make to the wellbeing of children, young people and future adults.

**References**


