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Holistic Me: A Pilot Study of Integrated Approach for Students' Wellbeing

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Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic research on teaching and learning shows that there is a significant increase in students' stress and anxiety levels. Similar studies also document that student participation levels have significantly dropped, as a result of which their commitment to learning has decreased. Students struggled with mental health problems such as stress, anxiety and depression. Because of lack of peer support during online education, students also have been experiencing de-motivation. In this pilot study, we designed an 8-week long workshop for undergraduate students to see if methods that are commonly used with teachers to enhance their wellbeing will be applicable for students. Our aim was to understand how students would be engaged with designed activities and how this workshop would increase students' awareness about wellbeing. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect and analyze data, and results showed that the stress level of students decreased, and their awareness about wellbeing increased at the end of the workshop.

Keywords: Higher Education, Wellbeing, Alternative Education, Pandemic, Stress, Motivation

Introduction

Wellbeing is a wide concept that can be defined as the combination of feeling good and functioning well. Functioning well is the experience of positive emotions such as happiness and contentment, development of one's potential, having some control over one's life, having a sense of purpose, and experiencing positive relationships (Ruggeri et al., 2020).

The World Health Organization (WHO) (WHO, 2004) defines mental health as: a state of wellbeing in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (p.2) and the organization relates the wellbeing to positive mental health.

However, scholars such as Brugha (2015) and Gaderisi et al. (2015) find this definition too narrow because positive feelings and positive functioning are not the only key factors for mental health. From a broader perspective, a new definition needs to include more social and cultural elements. Therefore, this study uses the definition by Gaderisi et al. (2015):

Mental health is a dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society. Basic cognitive and social skills; ability to recognize, express and modulate one's own emotions, as well as empathize with others; flexibility and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles; and harmonious

relationship between body and mind represent important components of mental health which contribute, to varying degrees, to the state of internal equilibrium (pp. 231-232).

As illustrated by the 3rd Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)'s Good Health and Wellbeing, mental health also plays an important role in achieving healthy communities. Depression is one of the leading causes of disability and suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds (SDG Report, 2021). Despite progress in some countries, people with mental health conditions often experience severe human rights violations, discrimination, and stigma. The United Nations' 3rd SDG, Good Health and Wellbeing, as well as the OECDs' Report on Future of Education and Skills (2020) emphasized that for a sustainable world, communities should acquire awareness of wellbeing for themselves, for others and for the planet. Furthermore, if we want to meet the challenges of the 21st century, contribute to and thrive in our world, we should start to acquire these skills at an early age.

Research on teaching and learning in the time of Covid-19 pandemic shows that there is a significant increase in students' stress and anxiety levels (Bekaroğlu & Yılmaz, 2020). The same study documents that student participation levels have significantly dropped, and as a result, their commitment to learning has decreased. It was also observed at one public university in Turkey that student motivation levels drastically decreased and that these students were dealing with mental health related problems more than ever (Cihan-Aydoğdu & Tok, 2021). Kim et al. (2020) emphasized that active participation in the classroom plays a crucial role in students' learning. However, with the pandemic, students are limited in their ability to participate due to problems such as unstable Internet connection or the lack of support from classmates and teachers (Human Rights Watch Report, 2021). From the UNESCO report (2020), it can be said that most students lost commitment and focus; as a result, their learning motivation levels decrease during the pandemic. Therefore, mental health of students and their personal and professional wellbeing have become more crucial in the pandemic era. Accordingly, higher education institutions and instructors have been applying new options and solutions to resolve pandemic related problems and increase the wellbeing of students. It is observed that positive education and contemplative pedagogical methods have been embedded in education systems of other countries (Seligman et al., 2009).

Positive education is used to describe empirically validated interventions and programs from positive psychology that have an impact on student wellbeing (White & Murray, 2015). Although positive education can positively impact students, teachers, and educational community members, seeing the effect immediately is not possible. Positive education programs do have a positive impact on the way that many students know and understand themselves, their peers, and their families (White & Kern, 2018). It also can be helpful to be able to cope with de-motivation and attendance problems (Lopez & Louis, 2009). Another method that was used for the study is contemplative pedagogy. Bush (2010) stated that contemplative pedagogy supports mindfulness in the classroom and benefits from positive psychology interventions. According to Selligman and Adler (2018), it also includes identifying and developing strengths, cultivating gratitude, and visualizing students' best possible selves. Hart (2004) argued that the ability to concentrate, conceptual flexibility, and greater capacity for synthetic thinking can be developed by contemplative pedagogy.

Both the literature and SDG, OECD and UNESCO reports emphasize the need for the awareness of wellbeing, especially for young people. This need has become urgent in the pandemic era. Recent global and university-wide student evaluation reports made this designed workshop and pilot study essential. The research questions guiding the workshops are:

- How would students be engaged with designed activities?
- How would this workshop increase students' awareness of wellbeing?

Method

Course Design

The workshop was designed for eight weeks. Because of the pandemic, weekly sessions were held online. During two months, students and researchers met every Monday for three hours. It was important to create a classroom environment where students would feel safe. For that purpose, in the first week, sessions started with icebreaking games for students to get to know each other and get familiar themselves with the environment. Almost all sessions began or ended with breathing exercise and qigong practices. To illustrate the importance of holistic approach on wellbeing, experts from different but related fields, as an example a dietitian, a yoga instructor, and an aromatherapist, were also invited to the sessions.

Table 1

Holistic Me Workshop Weekly Schedule

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week8
Intro	Breathing 101	Energizer	Qigong	Nutritionist	Aromatherapy	Dixit Cards	Wrap up
Definition of Wellbeing	Breathing Exercise	Neuroscience	Meditation 101			Qigong	Q&A
Intro of Activities	Qigong	Breathing Exercise	Breathing Exercise			Breathing Exercise	Qigong
Nadi Shodana	Meditation Practice	Qigong	Meditation Practice	Qigong	Breathing Exercise	Meditation Practice	Evaluation

Research questions that shaped the study were: (1) will this workshop increase students' awareness of wellbeing? and (2) will students be able to engage with designed activities?

Simultaneous mixed method was used to collect data from students' experiences to be able to see the big picture and increase the reliability of the pilot study. For qualitative data, students' critical reflections were collected at the end of weekly sessions by using digital tools such as Jamboard, Sli.do and letters. The short version of Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) that was developed by Cohen et al. (1983) and Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) that was developed by Baer et al. (2006) were used to collect quantitative data, and these surveys were given to the students as a pre-test and post-test. The quantitative data were analyzed using frequency counts because of the small number of participants. Since our aim was to understand how students engaged with designed activities, we categorize qualitative data according to the activities that we have used.

Our participants were students of a mid-size public university. We used purposive sampling since our aim was to understand the target audience interest in wellbeing interventions. To reach out participants, we sent out emails to the student club email lists, since students attending the workshop can add this experience to their Non-Academic Transcript (NAT). Nat, is an unofficial transcript that is given with student's official academic transcript that documents various competencies of students such as communication, commitment, motivation, social skills, and teamwork. The aim of this transcript is to assist students to be aware of the competences that they gained during the workshop, event, activity or project. NAT is a tool for learners to reflect on their learning journey under the supervision of advisors. We tie this workshop to NAT to increase students' interest in the workshop, however students' interests were higher than we had expected. For a homogenized distribution of the attendees, students were selected from different departments (e.g., Electric Electronics Engineering, Molecular Biology and Genetics, Industry Engineering, and Computer Engineering) and clubs (e.g., IEEE, Women in Business, young TEMA, Idea Camp). We also kept the gender distribution the same and kept the number small to be able to manage the workshop. In total, 20 students joined the workshop. As part of the ethics approval, all of the participants gave their consent to be part of this study. Since this paper is written in English, the qualitative data were translated from Turkish to English by the authors.

Data Collection Tools

Quantitative Data

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)- short version (Cohen et al., 1983) and Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) (Baer et al., 2006) were used to collect data for the research. According to the study that was conducted by Gue et al. (2016) PSS scale has been found suitable for measuring university students' perception of stress. FFMQ is a self-help and self-scorable measurement with 39 items on the five aspects (or facets) of mindfulness which are observation, description, aware actions, non-judgmental inner experience, and non-reactivity (Gu et al., 2016).

Qualitative Data

Critical reflection is a method that can be used to collect qualitative data and can be seen as a transformative tool for learning as early as the 1990s' (Mezirow, 1990). Related research showed that critical reflection can be used as a tool to develop students' meta-cognitive skills (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Eames & Coll, 2010) and to improve their "learning, thinking and assessment of self and social systems" (Smith, 2011, p.211). Various online tools were used to collect critical reflection of students, such as Jamboard, a digital interactive whiteboard developed by Google; Slido, an interactive Q&A and polling platform for live and virtual events; and letter writing. Channa (2017) identifies letter writing as a tool that can "facilitate the self-evolution, self-introspection, self-awareness, and identity change that emerges with, and through, reflection" (p.358). We asked students to write a letter at the end of the workshop to be able to understand their experience with the workshop. In addition to these tools, in one week, we used game-liked cards (e.g. Dixit) to inspire students to talk and discuss about the topic of that specific week by means of a given card in an unstructured way (Kwiatkowska et al., 2014) and encourage students "divergent thinking" (Hornecker, 2010:107).

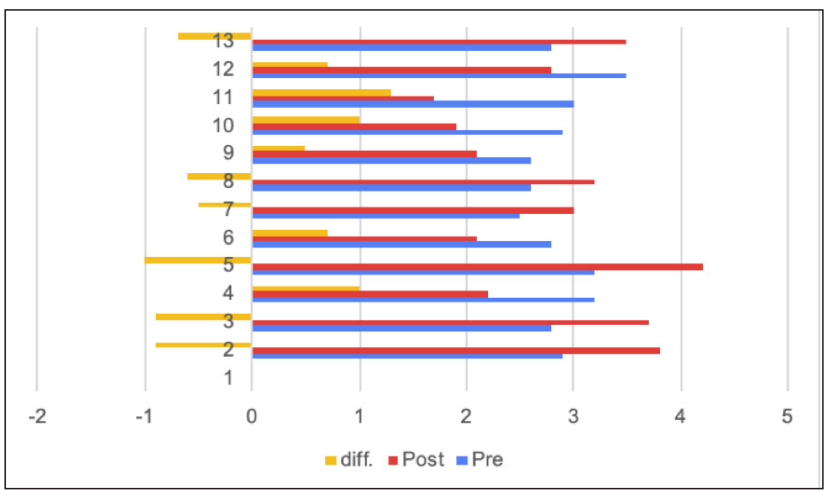
Findings

PMS and FFMQ

In the first meeting session, we asked students to fill out the PMS and FFMQ to evaluate their stress level and awareness of mindfulness. At the end of 8 weeks, students were asked to fill out these questionnaires again to be able to observe the differences in their stress level and awareness of wellbeing practices. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the frequency differences of the scales.

Figure 1

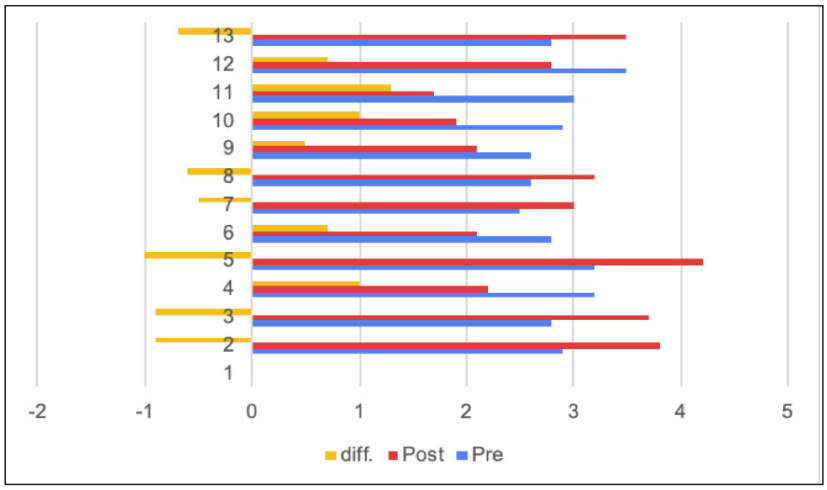
Results of Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)- Short Version



Although the number of participants and variables in the research may not be enough to generalize the results, findings help infer whether the workshop supports the aim of study. Overall results are sufficient to discuss that this workshop had a positive effect on students' perceived stress level. The biggest change between the pre-test and pos-test can be seen on the item 3, In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"? compared to the beginning of the workshop, with means drop from 4.1 to 3.0, respectively. Moreover, before the workshop, the item 5, in the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way? had the mean of 2.7, but after the workshop the mean for this item increased to 3.5. This change shows that students began to perceive the things and events more positively after attending the workshop.

Figure 2

Results of Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire



The overall results showed that students mindfully be aware of themselves and their surroundings increased with the workshop. Compared to the pre-test results, students' ability to recognize their feelings, emotions and thoughts were increased and they start to build a positive perspective. The results also supported those students start to see the relationship between eating habits and wellbeing (item 11, I notice how foods and drinks affect my thoughts, bodily sensations, and emotions). The mean of the item 11 increased from 3.2 to 4.2. Another important change was observed in the item 25, when I have distressing thoughts or images, I feel calm soon after. The mean increased from 2.6 to 3.2. This shows that students start to be more aware of their stress and stress management.

Students' Reflections

To be able to observe students' engagement with the activities that we embedded in the workshops, we asked students to write about their reflections. They did it by using digital tools such as Slido, Jamboard and letter writing. In this section you will read students reflections about the workshop and also about the qigong and dixit cards.

Qigong

Qigong (also written as Chi Kung) is a life energy exercise that strengthens internal organs, breath, cardiovascular system, immunity, bones and joints. Mindful movements and postures of Qigong reduces insomnia, tiredness and pains and improves peace of mind, strength, energy and endurance(Tsang and Fung, 2008). "Qi" means air, breath, energy and "Gong" means skill, result, service, work. Qigong is one of the four practices of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Tekman, n.d.)

After the Qigong exercise students were asked about their experience. In their reflection, students emphasized how these movements made their body relaxed and peaceful. A student indicates the changes in his sleeping cycle and he started to have

"more restful sleep because of the exercise and meditation" (M.6.3).

A student said:

> I was full of negative energy until I came to the session, but after the [Qigong] and meditation, when I closed my eyes, my surroundings became white and I felt my heart relaxing with the [each] breath I took. I feel that all the negative energy is gone and replaced by positive energy (C.3.3.)

Another student mentioned how her awareness changed as a result of qigong:

> In today's event, I discovered different areas where I can [...] [relax] [find]motivation and myself. [With pandemic] when I have to spend [my] time in a room, these activities make [me] relaxed. I realized that everything we do [to be active] actually helps me feel more peaceful and happier (B.7.3)

Students' reflections indicated that this kind of life energy exercises improve their mood and personal wellbeing.

Dixit Cards

We used the Dixit cards to inspire students to talk. When students asked about their experience with the activity, they all emphasized the inspiration that these cards provided for them. A student shared his thoughts "these [cards] helped me to focus on my own thoughts" (M.5.3.).

Another student emphasized how these cards assisted her to collect his thoughts:

the issues that I couldn't find time to think about due to the intensity of the week and that I have been avoiding to think about came to light. (S.10.3).

Students' reflections pointed out that metaphorical representation of Dixit cards helped students to express their feelings in a different way.

Students Reflection about the Workshop

At the end of 8 weeks, students were asked to write a critical reflection letter, and were also asked to participate in a poll that was created with Slido. Students mentioned that they found the workshop productive, and as one of the students said:

everyone here actually knows the topics discussed here more or less, but we have never applied it or we did not know where to start [from]. By participating in this workshop, we reinforced what we [have] learned and [had a chance] to practice. (E.1.3).

Three students of the students wrote about how they were discouraged to attend the workshops every week because of their busy schedules; however, they also emphasized the difference they had observed on themselves as a result of the sessions which motivated them to participate every week, as a student wrote: the classes were so busy that I thought I couldn't spare time, but after [each session that I attend], I felt a change in myself, and this motivated me to participate in the [coming] week. (M.6.3) and a student wrote "every week, I said I wouldn't attend because of the intensity of the classes, but after each [session] I said I'm glad I did." (S.8.3.). Some other students also indicated that how they shared what they learned in the sessions with their room-mates or classmates "I pass on what I [have] learned here to my friends and we [practice] breathing techniques and meditation together." (S.2.3.). Students' reflection on their experience indicated that experts from the field increased the efficiency of the workshop and they found the process inspiring.

Discussion and Conclusion

Both contemplative pedagogy and positive education approaches agree on the necessity of mindfulness practices in higher education (Waters et al., 2015; White, 2015). The global initiatives are not only aware of the importance of wellbeing for young people, but they also know the need for more research on wellbeing in higher education. This pilot study was designed in the light of the discussed methods, global initiative reports and recent literature. The research findings supported that positive education and contemplative pedagogy has a potential to increase students' motivation and decrease their stress levels within the framework of the relevant literature (Lopez and Luis, 2009; Waters et al., 2015; White, 2015).

This pilot study results highlight that this kind of workshops and wellbeing exercises need to find places in the higher ed-

ucation curriculums. New methods of data collection and analysis that can support integrated wellbeing and pedagogical approaches need to be incorporated (Costanza, et al., 2016). However, there is also a need for qualified counsellors, instructors, and wellbeing professionals at universities. For future studies, larger groups and different scales can be used to generalize the results and to improve validity and reliability of the research. In addition, as there are lots of different techniques in wellbeing practices, using different tools can be helpful to evaluate the effectiveness of exercises.

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