

Positive and Negative Emotions in Post-Secondary Students

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Abstract

This case study, conducted at a Maltese post-secondary school, was guided by Bradburn's Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) theory, which suggests that individuals define wellbeing based on personal experiences. According to SWB theory, wellbeing is influenced by positive factors that evoke positive emotions and negative factors that lead to negative emotions. The study aimed to understand students' perceptions of wellbeing, identify positive and negative factors influencing it, and propose recommendations for improvement within the school. Using a qualitative interpretative approach, the researcher conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of students, analysing data with the Braun-Clark method. Findings were categorised into three themes: personal factors, social factors, and cognitive factors. The most frequently cited negative factors were workloads, deadlines and examination failure, while the most frequently cited positive factor was teacher support. Students recommended reducing workloads and deadlines, organising sports and extracurricular activities, upgrading gym equipment, and promoting counselling services. In a final reflection, the researcher discusses how teachers, as the highest-rated positive factor at school, could help address the most significant negative factors that are workloads and deadlines, by fostering a growth mindset, promoting resilience through positive psychology, and equipping students with effective coping skills.

Keywords

Coping, Cognitive, Resilience, Positive Psychology, Growth Mindset

1. Introduction

This case study was conducted in a local post-secondary school that highly prioritises the wellbeing of its members. Recognising that students deserve the best

educational services possible, the school consistently strives to foster greater well-being. This study utilises a student-centred approach to explore how the school can develop initiatives once it understands students' perceptions in this regard.

1.1. Post-Secondary Education in Malta

A post-secondary school in Malta can be considered as the stepping-stone between compulsory education and tertiary education (Eurydice, 2023a). Like all education levels, this stage aims to enable students to acquire academic knowledge and prepare them to become active citizens who can effectively navigate socio-economic realities while avoiding inequity, poverty, discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion (European Union, 2021). However, achieving this goal requires that the education system prioritises the health of students and their wellbeing, recognising that these have become even more pronounced and demanding (European Union, 2021).

1.2. The Need to Foster Wellbeing

The need to foster wellbeing among student populations in schools has always been paramount. Evidence of this is found even in national important documents like the Education Act (Legislation Malta, 2022). The *Maltese Mental Health Strategy* 2020-2030 reveals that one in four Maltese adolescents aged 15 and above experience wellbeing-related issues (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2019). It should be noted that students who attend post-secondary schools fall within this category, as most of them are between 16 and 18 years old. Hence, schools must be mindful of this statistic and prioritise fostering wellbeing among their student populations.

Furthermore, a local study carried out in 2022 by the National Statistics Office (NSO) reported that only 25.5% of adolescents aged between 16 and 17 years feel that their overall life satisfaction is high (NSO, 2024). A recent local study carried out among medicine and pharmacy students at the University of Malta revealed that eight percent of them thought of suicide due to academic stressors (Blundell & Degiovanni, 2024). These statistics underscore the ongoing commitment to prioritising wellbeing. Therefore, this study is dedicated to exploring the perceptions of students in a particular post-secondary school to set the foundations for strategically implementing more measures to foster higher wellbeing. The study values the voices of the students and aims to proceed following the guidelines of the Directorates for Education, which recommend the adoption of effective pedagogical approaches within the curriculum that both reflect and accommodate diversity (Directorates of Education, 2021). This approach ensures effectiveness with all students who require different kinds of attention and support.

Initiatives aimed at fostering greater wellbeing must be customised to suit the individuals availing of the services (Gatt, 2022). Thus, emphasising the significance of initially examining the perceptions and requirements of these students in their scholastic setting (Bettencourt et al., 2021) is of utmost importance.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

Recognising and appreciating each student as a distinct human being with unique strengths and needs, this study is guided by Bradburn's theory on Subjective Well-being (SWB) (Bradburn, 1969). SWB theory was chosen over alternative wellbeing frameworks because it emphasises the individual's personal perception of their own wellbeing, capturing the nuanced interplay between positive and negative affect. This is particularly relevant to the study as it aligns with the diverse and individualised nature of students' experiences, which are shaped by various personal, social, and educational contexts (Ahanonu & Jooste, 2016; Cefai & Cooper, 2011; Sfeatcu et al., 2014). By focusing on how individuals perceive and evaluate their own lives, the SWB framework provides a more tailored and student-centred approach to understanding wellbeing, making it an ideal lens for exploring the unique and subjective nature of wellbeing among post-secondary students.

Students in a post-secondary school, particularly those studying academic subjects rather than vocational ones, may have varying perceptions of wellbeing compared to individuals of their same age who lead different lifestyles. Bradburn (1969) proposed this theory as a means of understanding wellbeing by considering the balance between positive and negative factors that influence it. According to Bradburn, wellbeing is determined by the presence of positive emotions and the absence of negative ones. To explore the subjective wellbeing of students, this study adopts this framework to investigate the factors contributing to positive and negative emotions. Additionally, Bradburn's theory has been widely used in previous research studies and has proven useful in educational settings (Adler & Seligman, 2016).

1.4. The Research Gap

Numerous local studies have investigated the subjective wellbeing of students during compulsory education (Askell Williams et al., 2013; Cefai & Camilleri, 2011; Cefai et al., 2014; Cefai & Cooper, 2017; Debono, 2018; Haber, 2020; Sammut, 2007) and tertiary education (Borg & Cefai, 2014; Camilleri & Galea, 2017; Cauchi & Degiovanni, 2015; Mamo et al., 2012). However, there has been limited research on the post-secondary years, particularly among students in academic programmes rather than vocational ones. This gap in research motivated this study, which was conducted in one of Malta's largest post-secondary schools, where no prior studies in this domain have been undertaken. By listening to students' voices, the educators of this school, who consistently strive to promote wellbeing, can enhance their knowledge and implement effective strategies to foster higher levels of wellbeing (Cefai & Cooper, 2011).

2. Objectives

The main aim of this case study was to understand what post-secondary school students who attend this school, understand by the term "wellbeing". Guided by Bradburn's (1969) SWB theory, the objective was to identify their perceived

positive factors that elicit positive emotions, contributing to their higher wellbeing, and to detect their perceived negative factors that elicit negative emotions, resulting in lowering their wellbeing. Ultimately, the study sought to gather suggestions and recommendations from students on how the school can enhance greater wellbeing. To explore these objectives, the main research question was: What do post-secondary school students understand by the term “wellbeing”?

The three subsidiary questions were:

- 1) What positive factors do students believe contribute to positive emotions that promote wellbeing?
- 2) What negative factors do students think generate negative emotions that consequently decrease wellbeing?
- 3) What initiatives or processes do students suggest or recommend to the school to enhance the overall wellbeing of the students?

3. Methodology

The case study employed an interpretivist philosophical stance. Interpretivism, as an epistemology, necessitates studying humans as social actors (Saunders et al., 2007). In this context, the interpretivist approach allowed the exploration of students’ lived experiences, identities, and relational dynamics, shedding light on the subjective realities underlying their perceptions of wellbeing. Recognising the value of multiple perspectives, this approach facilitated a holistic understanding. The investigation adopted an inductive approach to gain deeper insights into the research context. Qualitative research aligns with the interpretivist stance, recognising that knowledge is socially constructed and subjective, influenced by students’ interpretations and experiences (Saunders et al., 2007). Thus, the study followed an interpretivist inductive research approach.

3.1. The Research Process

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who were selected using the convenience sampling method after consulting and deliberating with the Head of School. To ensure honest and candid responses, several measures were implemented. Participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process, emphasising that their identities would not be disclosed in any reports or publications. They were also informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any repercussions. To further enhance honesty, the interviewer deliberately selected students whom she does not teach and whom she encountered casually near the school’s canteen. Before the interviews, the interviewer explicitly requested that the participants provide the most honest responses possible, emphasising the importance of their truthful insights for the research. Additionally, a form was provided containing comprehensive details about the aim of the study, the identity of the researcher, the research process, and their rights, including the assurance of non-judgmental and unbiased analysis. The interviews were audio-

recorded and transcribed verbatim, and a copy was provided to the participants to verify the accuracy of the information and further build trust in the research process.

3.2. The Analysis Stage

The Braun-Clarke (Braun & Clark, 2006) thematic analysis method was employed to analyse the interview data. The transcripts were read multiple times, significant data units were coded, themes were generated, out of which the most significant ones were selected, and finally, the account was written, presenting the findings.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Theme 1: Personal Factors

The findings reveal that students place a significant emphasis on personal factors when defining and evaluating their wellbeing. Students mentioned mental health, physical health, proper nutrition, balanced lifestyle, time availability, emotions, and quality of life as essential elements. These factors resonate with the concept of hedonic wellbeing, which focuses on personal happiness and life satisfaction, an idea traced back to ancient philosophy. Cho and Yu (2020) elaborate on hedonic wellbeing as an individual's perception of themselves and their surroundings, linking it to positive emotions and satisfaction. Similarly, Orth et al. (2022) discuss hedonic wellbeing's relationship with mental wellness, highlighting its role in enabling individuals to feel good about their lives. This is contrasted with eudaimonic wellbeing, which is oriented towards achieving purpose and optimal functioning, further underscoring that wellbeing involves more than merely feeling good; it includes living well.

Historically, the term *wellness* emerged in the 17th century as a state opposite to illness, signifying an absence of disease (Scaria et al., 2020). This term fell out of frequent use until the mid-20th century, when it was revitalised through the World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition, which expanded the understanding of wellbeing to include physical, mental, and social dimensions. The WHO's (1947) definition underscores that wellbeing is not merely the absence of illness but a holistic state of health and fulfilment. This broad view aligns closely with the students' responses in this study, as they frequently highlighted the importance of mental and physical health alongside a balanced diet and lifestyle.

The students' emphasis on a balanced diet as part of their wellbeing reflects public health priorities within the Maltese context. The policy document, *A Whole School Approach to A Healthy Lifestyle: Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Policy* (MEDE, 2015), advocates for the integration of healthy eating and physical activity within schools. This document aligns with findings in the current study, where students identify a balanced diet as a contributor to positive emotions and enhanced wellbeing. The policy's focus on nutrition is crucial, given the high rates of overweight and obesity among Maltese youth, as highlighted by the Health Ministry (MEDE, 2015). The emphasis on diet reflects students' awareness

of how physical health and lifestyle choices impact mental and emotional wellbeing, resonating with the WHO's holistic view of health.

Furthermore, this study's findings support the link between nutrition and academic performance, as outlined by MEDE (2015), which suggests that improved nutrition is associated with better learning abilities and, subsequently, academic success. Interestingly, students in this study also highlighted poor academic performance as a negative factor, which is consistent with research indicating that academic setbacks can lead to stress, anxiety, and a diminished sense of wellbeing. Thus, students' responses reflect an understanding of the interconnectedness of personal factors such as diet, physical health, and mental wellbeing.

Educators and policymakers should prioritise initiatives that address specific negative factors identified by students, such as poor mental and physical health, unbalanced lifestyles, and inadequate nutrition. Integrating holistic health education into school curriculums and supporting policies like the Maltese Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Policy can help combat issues like unhealthy diets and sedentary habits. Additionally, raising awareness about the connection between nutrition, mental wellbeing, and academic performance can mitigate the detrimental impact of poor lifestyle choices, which students linked to stress, reduced energy, and negative emotions.

4.2. Theme 2: Social Factors

The findings reveal that students place high importance on relationships with teachers, family, friends, and the support offered by school structures like guidance services and extracurricular activities. These social connections play a critical role in shaping students' wellbeing and providing a supportive foundation during challenging times. Student 8 explained: "The first positive factor is other people who are ready to hear you, especially when you have problems, like your girlfriend, mother and father support me. Support helps a lot and I am sorry for those who don't have it as honestly, I don't know how I would cope if I was by myself."

Most students highlighted the positive impact of teachers on their wellbeing. A student described: "I think that a big factor in school that raise the level of wellbeing are teachers. There are certain teachers that you can tell that they really try their best to raise our morale and motivate us in school and help us never to give up in studies although they acknowledge that it's hard" – Student 10. This aligns with OECD (2015) findings, which indicate that 71% of students with good teacher relationships enjoy school more. Teachers' support, empathy, and motivation foster a positive school environment, underscoring Oppen's (2014) claim that "teachers matter more to student achievement than any other aspect of schooling" (p.1). Teachers who listen, understand, and show empathy contribute not only to academic success but also to the emotional resilience of students, enhancing their overall wellbeing at school.

Family and friends were frequently cited by students as pillars of their wellbeing. At this age, peer relationships are particularly significant, with students

identifying friends as central to their sense of wellbeing. Research by [Abela et al. \(2024\)](#), [Ahanonu & Jooste \(2016\)](#), and [Chattu et al. \(2020\)](#) supports this, noting that meaningful connections with family, peers, and educators are crucial for positive emotional health. Participants highlighted that supportive social interactions provide them with a sense of belonging and security, which are essential for their wellbeing.

This study also indicates that guidance and counselling services contribute positively to students' wellbeing. Participants described how these services provide a safe space for students to explore their feelings and gain support, which aligns with [Eurydice's \(2023b\)](#) description of counselling as offering time and space for reflection. The availability of such resources underscores the school's commitment to supporting students emotionally, beyond academics.

The school's commitment to fostering wellbeing through extracurricular activities further supports social connections. Students reported that school clubs, such as photography, drama, and sports, uplift their wellbeing by creating a positive atmosphere at school. As Student 5 observed, "The activities continue increasing the wellbeing because there is excitement in the school and there is positivity." Participants described how these activities allow them to form bonds with peers, explore interests, and engage in non-academic pursuits that contribute to emotional wellbeing.

On the negative side, hostile family dynamics such as parental conflict and chaotic home environments were identified as suppressing wellbeing. Despite being older, students are still affected by family conflicts, as noted by [Abela and Walker \(2014\)](#), who state that parental fighting undermines a sense of security. Student 12's comment, "The biggest thing that upsets our wellbeing are parents fighting or substance abuse at home," highlights how these environments disrupt their emotional balance, causing stress and distress.

Peer conflicts and bullying also emerged as social factors negatively impacting wellbeing. This aligns with research by [Cefai et al. \(2024\)](#), which indicates that bullying can lead to physical, social, and emotional difficulties, with long-term effects on mental health, self-esteem, and school engagement. This study's findings reflect that bullying can lead to anxiety, school avoidance, and lower academic performance, reinforcing the need for anti-bullying measures to ensure a safe learning environment.

Finally, this study reveals how social comparison, when a student is being compared to siblings or peers, affects students' self-esteem and emotional wellbeing. According to the Social Comparison Theory ([Gibbons & Buunk, 1999](#)) and Expectancy Value Theory ([Wigfield & Eccles, 2000](#)), such comparisons can lead to feelings of inadequacy, disappointment, and reduced self-worth. These findings suggest that social comparison, whether intentional or unintentional, can be detrimental to students' confidence and overall wellbeing.

Strengthening relationships between students and their teachers, families, and

peers can directly address negative factors such as lack of support, parental conflict, bullying, and social comparison. Schools should invest in teacher training to enhance empathy and support for students, while family engagement programmes can help alleviate the impact of hostile home environments. Anti-bullying campaigns are essential to counteract the physical and emotional difficulties caused by peer conflicts. Expanding access to guidance services and extracurricular activities can mitigate feelings of isolation and foster a sense of belonging, addressing students' concerns about limited emotional support.

4.3. Theme 3: Cognitive Factors

The findings indicate that cognitive stressors such as workloads, deadlines, and stress are significant factors that negatively impact students' wellbeing. Nine out of the twelve students interviewed mentioned these elements as sources of negative emotions, creating mental strain that hinders their overall wellbeing. These insights align with existing literature, which consistently identifies cognitive stressors, especially academic workload and deadlines, as detrimental to student wellbeing (Abela et al., 2024; Cefai & Cooper, 2017; Cefai et al., 2024; MEDE, 2017; Ogrodniczuk et al., 2021; Pascoe et al., 2019).

Workload emerged as a predominant stressor in this study. Students noted that heavy academic demands limit their time for relaxation and personal interests, leading to stress and frustration. Student 11's reflection, "When I have too much work and I can't have time for myself... I feel stressed," highlights the conflict between academic responsibilities and the need for personal time. This sentiment is echoed in the work of Cefai & Cooper (2017), who emphasise that excessive academic workload can cause a build-up of stress, leading to emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Abela et al. (2024) argue that high workloads disrupt students' mental wellbeing, reducing their ability to focus, engage, and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Participants also described how deadlines contribute to student stress by creating a sense of urgency and pressure to perform within limited time frames. They explained how meeting multiple deadlines often forces them to prioritise academic tasks over other aspects of their lives, leading to a reduction in time for social interactions, rest, and leisure activities. This pattern of time constraint is explored by Pascoe et al. (2019), who found that time pressure associated with strict academic deadlines can lead to heightened stress levels, decreased life satisfaction, and poorer mental health outcomes. In addition, Ogrodniczuk et al. (2021) report that constant deadline pressure can generate a cycle of stress, as students often feel that they must sacrifice personal wellbeing to meet academic expectations. Students explain that this feeling of "time scarcity" exacerbates mental strain, making it difficult for them to balance school with other pursuits that could potentially enhance their wellbeing.

Stress itself is both a consequence and a catalyst in this equation. The pressures

of academic workload and deadlines contribute to a continuous cycle of stress, negatively affecting students' emotional and cognitive functioning. MEDE (2017) underscores that prolonged exposure to stress due to academic demands can disrupt cognitive processes, leading to difficulties in concentration, problem-solving, and decision-making. Additionally, Cefai et al. (2024) report that academic stress often correlates with symptoms of anxiety and depression, especially when students perceive that their workload is overwhelming. This aligns with the notion that cognitive stressors not only generate immediate negative emotions but also create lasting effects that impair both mental health and academic performance. Ogrodniczuk et al. (2021) further argue that sustained academic stress can lead to burnout, a state characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment.

Addressing academic workload, strict deadlines, and stressors is crucial to reduce negative emotions and mental strain reported by students. Policies that promote balanced workload distribution, more flexible deadlines, and stress management initiatives can directly counteract the time pressure and feelings of overwhelm identified in the findings. Incorporating relaxation and mindfulness programmes into school schedules can help students better manage stress and reduce its long-term impacts, such as burnout. Ensuring students have time for personal and leisure activities can alleviate the strain of excessive academic demands and improve their overall wellbeing.

5. Conclusion

The first research question sought to explore post-secondary school students' understanding of the term *wellbeing*. Students consistently highlighted mental and physical health, proper nutrition, balanced lifestyle, time availability, emotions and quality of life as essential components of their overall wellbeing. A subsidiary question aimed to uncover the positive factors that generate positive emotions which enhance students' sense of wellbeing. Students identified teacher support as the most significant positive factor within the school environment, followed by family, environment, friendships, personal time, mental and physical health, diet, lifestyle, and overall quality of life. The next subsidiary question explored the negative factors that generate negative emotions which diminish their wellbeing. Students most frequently cited workloads and deadlines, followed by academic challenges, stress, anxiety, negative influences, and health issues. Beyond school-related pressures, students also recognised that strained family relationships and chaotic home environments impacted their academic and personal lives. The final research question sought to explore students' suggestions for initiatives that the school could implement to enhance their wellbeing. Students recommended that educators minimise workloads and deadlines, improve gym facilities, organise more sports tournaments, and offer a wider range of engaging extracurricular activities.

While certain factors, such as workloads and deadlines, were perceived negatively, it is important to note that these elements are not inherently detrimental. Since teachers were cited as the highest positive factor at school, the school might consider implementing strategies through educators to help students better manage and reframe academic challenges such as workloads and deadlines. Based on the study's findings, the school could organise training sessions on time management, organisational skills, resilience, and positive psychology. Educators could also receive training to guide students in adopting a growth mindset, helping them reframe stressors and view challenges as opportunities for personal growth, thereby extending their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

As students progress through their studies and future careers, workloads and deadlines will naturally increase. Therefore, by equipping students with essential coping skills and fostering open communication about academic expectations, educators can create a supportive environment that reduces stress. MEDE (2017) similarly recommends establishing clear communication to manage workload expectations, which can help alleviate pressures and promote a balanced learning environment conducive to wellbeing. Cultivating a culture rooted in positive psychology and a growth mindset encourages students to approach challenges with optimism and resilience (Dweck et al., 2014). Lastly, implementing recommendations such as enhancing gym facilities, organising more sports tournaments, and offering engaging extracurricular activities could further uplift students' wellbeing.

The study's limitations include a tight timeframe of only four months, which restricted the depth of exploration. Another limitation regards the inability of ensuring complete honesty in responses during the semi-structured interviews. Additionally, potential biases may have arisen from students being interviewed by a teacher within the school setting, which might have influenced their responses. Recommendations for future research include conducting a quantitative study using a standardised subjective wellbeing test to provide a broader measure of students' overall wellbeing. Moreover, a follow-up study could be conducted to explore the outcomes of these initiatives, potentially contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of strategies that effectively support student wellbeing.

About the Author

Josephine Ebejer Grech graduated with a B.Ed. (Hons) in Biology Education from the University of Malta. She later pursued a Postgraduate Diploma in Applied Educational Leadership at the Institute for Education, Malta, and a Master of Business Administration (MBA) at the Central Mediterranean Business School (CMBS), Malta, in collaboration with Coventry University London. Currently, she is a doctoral candidate at IDEA College, Malta. Her areas of interest include quality assurance in education and developing strategies to enhance the resilience and overall well-being of post-secondary students.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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