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ARTICLE

A case study of a small-group, teacher-led, timetabled post-Covid-19 wellbeing intervention for six Grade 9 students in a Hong Kong secondary school.

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Abstract

The intervention assessed through this case study looks to address specific social and learning needs of Hong Kong secondary school students, with a focus on reintegrating students into an on-campus setting, and aimed at improving communication and socialisation among peers, providing time away from devices and screens, and improving focus and concentration in lessons. The question that this case study seeks to answer is: can a small-group, teacher-led and timetabled post-Covid-19 wellbeing intervention for six Grade 9 students in a Hong Kong secondary school help to improve the social and academic integration back into normal school routines? The findings of the case study, based upon both quantitative and qualitative data, are that whilst the intervention showed strong efficacy in promoting socialisation and time away from screens, it was less effective in improving focus in lessons. From triangulating the data and discussing it in relation to the literature, it is concluded that the focus of the intervention was perhaps too narrow, and that the programme could be improved through augmenting the timetable with further academic and pastoral support (e.g. counselling, discussion circles, study skills). These augmentations could provide a more holistic approach to reintegration back into school, and might prove especially useful for students with additional learning needs, who are likely to have been more severely affected by Covid-related school closures — as well as changes to learning environments, lack of agency and control, and more limited 1-1 support — than other students in the school.

Introduction

This case study is focussed on a faith-based, comprehensive-intake secondary school in Hong Kong; the school comprises approximately 140 students from Grade 6 to Grade 12, with a further 260 students on the Early Years and Elementary campuses.

Like all Schools in Hong Kong, this institution was heavily impacted by the emergence of Covid-19 in early 2020, with manifold disruptions to and deviations from normal school practices. In particular, the closure of school campuses was a key instrument in the Hong Kong government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Between February 3 2020 and the present date, school closures were mandated for a total of 42 weeks, with a provision of "blended learning" (limiting the number of students on campus) permitted for approximately 10 weeks. Campus-based learning, when permitted, involved a raft of social distancing regulations, limiting student access to co-curricular activities and sports, and severely interrupting communal opportunities, such as dining together.

In order to mitigate the social, psychological and developmental impacts of these closures and disruptions, in April 2022 the school initiated a 6-week intervention with a focus on wellbeing. This followed the implementation of a broader but smaller intervention in the previous academic year. Sessions for the Grade 9 programme detailed here supplemented timetabled classes, and took place each Monday and Wednesday, as well as during recess and lunchtimes from Monday to Thursday. During this period there were whole-school events and activities, aimed at renewing a sense of school spirit through encouraging students to become "active and positive contributors to the School" (School Strategy, 2022, p. 1); and alongside these whole-school activities was a student-specific intervention for Grade 9 students, identified by teachers, who were finding it difficult to reintegrate back into school life; this programme comprised sporting, relaxation, service and creativity activities (see Appendix 1).

The intervention assessed through this case study looked to address specific social and learning needs, with a focus on reintegrating students into an on-campus setting, and aimed at improving communication and socialisation among peers, providing time away from devices and screens, and improving focus and concentration in lessons. The question, then, that this case study seeks to answer is: can a small-group, teacher-led and timetabled post-Covid-19 wellbeing intervention for six Grade 9 students in a Hong Kong secondary school help to improve the social and academic integration back into normal school routines?

In order to help answer this question, this case study will lean on the burgeoning academic studies of the psychological, educational and social impacts that Covid-19 has wrought upon children in recent years, and will look in particular at the specific and unique predicament faced by young people in Hong Kong, a city beset with some of the most stringent anti-Covid measures worldwide. Finally, the literature review will assess recommended interventions in response to the seismic impact of the recent (and continuing) pandemic.

Literature review

Wellbeing and Covid-19

The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that, "Adolescence is a crucial period for developing social and emotional habits important for mental wellbeing" (WHO, 2021, para. 4), and that factors such as "adopting healthy sleep patterns, exercising regularly, developing coping, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills, and learning to manage emotions" (ibid., para. 4) are crucial to the development and maintenance of adolescent wellbeing and health.

This focus on wellbeing as a foundation for a happy life is nothing new. In the 19th century, Jeremy Bentham's (1829) philosophy of utilitarianism argued for the centrality of the term as a philosophical principle (Collard, 2016), and one can even look to Aristotle's conception of *Eudaimonia* (human flourishing, or living well) for a much earlier exploration (Kraut, 2001). Discussion and use of the term burgeoned, though, during the 21st century, giving rise to an entire wellness and wellbeing industry, and, crucially, the establishment of the term as a keystone for effective educational practice and administration.

To this end, Reupert (2020) notes, the "critical role of schools […] in the provision of safe environments for the development of wellbeing and academic learning" (p. xiiv), and in doing so makes clear the connection between a school (as a site of safety) and the emotional flourishing of its student body. Likewise, Gaetz's (2016) essay in Rosalyn Shute's edited collection *Mental Health and Wellbeing Through Schools* (2016) looks to interrogate both the role and function of schools as facilitators of mental health and wellbeing programmes, arguing that schools need to become "more discerning" (p. 7) in the ways through which they approach student mental health. And it is this same impetus which lies behind Claire Erasmus' informative 2019 book *The Mental Health and Wellbeing Handbook for Schools*, which aims to provide practical advice to school leaders and teachers (such as "Listen to and identify the wellbeing barometer of your school" (Erasmus, 2019, p. 21)).

That schools play a vital role in the wellbeing of their students (as well as teaching faculty) has been brought into much sharper relief by the explosion of Covid-19 in early 2020 — because, of course, returning to the prescriptions made by the WHO in the quotation above, every wellbeing factor is disrupted and/or annulled by the impact of lockdowns, isolation and quarantine as a result of governmental restrictions in response to Covid-19.

It is fair to say that the full impact of the pandemic on children has yet to be realised; however, as reported by the UK Government, what is clear is that the disruptions caused by Covid-19 took a toll on "pupils' mental health and emotional well-being", and that many of the these effects were "most noticeable when [students] first went back to school" (Education recovery in schools: Spring 2022, 2022, para. 26). A meta-analysis of 985 articles entitled "Consequences of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children's mental health" notes that Covid-19 has "exacerbated mental health problems" and that "[c]hildren with pre-existing socio-demographic or developmental risk factors may be particularly vulnerable" (Bussieres *et al*, 2021, p. 1), echoing similar

findings by the Education Endowment Fund (EEF, 2022) and the Angus Reid Institute in Canada (Korzinski, 2022).

Hong Kong and Covid-19

As noted by Tso (2020), "Hong Kong was one of the first cities to mandate school closures during the coronavirus outbreak" (p. 162), and thus the psychological, social and physical impacts of Covid-19 on children have been especially keenly felt. The longevity of these Covid-19 restrictions, coupled with Hong Kong's notoriously cramped living conditions (Wang *et al*, 2018), widespread and wage growth deceleration (Census and Statistics Department, 2021), and long-standing social stigma associated with recognising and treating mental health (Mak *et al*, 2015), affords the city an unenviable status with regards to the potential long-term impacts of the pandemic.

Indeed, a recently published "Situational Mapping and Desk Review" report by Viva HK (2022), a leading child protection organisation in Hong Kong, presents with clarity the raft of issues currently facing young people in the city. Such issues are manifold and complex, and include: psychological impacts, with one survey showing that 50% of respondents had increased anxiety (ibid., p. 6); psychosocial impacts, with children reporting feeling "anxious about having contact with another person" (ibid., p. 7); physical impacts, with increases in childhood obesity (ibid., p. 6; Department of Health, 2021) and postural complaints (ibid., p. 19); and habitual impacts, with "77.5% of primary school students and 65.4% of secondary school students [reporting] an increase in school-related usage of electronic screen products" (ibid., p. 29). Citing independent research by both Lingnan University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), the reports authors state bluntly that "children in Hong Kong are generally less satisfied with their lives, and well-being is behind international expectations compared to children of the same age in other countries or regions" (ibid., p. 15).

Additionally, Tso (2020) notes, that the impacts above are exacerbated for vulnerable groups of children, and that the "risk of child psychosocial problems was higher in children with special educational needs, and/or acute or chronic disease, mothers with mental illness, single-parent families, and low-income families" (p. 169). These factors lead to a complicated picture of post-pandemic recovery for children in Hong Kong and around the world (EEF, 2022), and highlight the need for schools and other institutions to take meaningful action in reducing the long-term consequences of extended social isolation and anxiety — particularly for students who are at risk.

Strategies

For Tso, such mitigations might include "strengthening family coherence", promoting "adequate sleep and exercise" and encouraging "responsible use of electronic devices" (Tso *et al*, 2020, p. 161). And these ideas are echoed in explicit recommendations made by Save The Children Hong Kong, which asks educators to:

- "Create an enabling school environment that can prioritize children's happiness and well-being to facilitate students' learning as well as balanced physical and mental health development." (Save The Children Hong Kong, 2020, p. 17)

- "Launch school-based mental health awareness campaigns that engage and are led by children and youth." (ibid., p. 17)

These recommendations speak to the need for schools to reestablish themselves as loci for engagement, interaction and activity, and thus by extension — and, returning once more to the WHO prescriptions regarding adolescent wellbeing — as sites for the promotion of student wellbeing. In a similar vein, Grove (2022), in an article for the Chartered College of Teaching, writes of the need for "educational ecologies" in response to Covid-19, noting that our post-Covid response needs to be "integrated across contexts and situations that constitute a person's life" (para. 2) — or put differently, that the broad base of school life needs to be revivified following the isolation and insulation of the pandemic. Psychologist Kelly-Ann Allen put this especially well, in fact, when arguing that "Rekindling a sense of school belonging" (Allen and Grove, 2020, p. 2) is integral to restoring students' view of school as a place for connection and togetherness.

The following case study will assess one such attempt to "rekindle" a sense of school belonging, togetherness and connection for a small group of Grade 9 students in a secondary school in Hong Kong.

Methodology

Before discussing the methodology for data collection for this case study it is important to note that since this intervention was implemented and completed in April of 2022, student reflections and surveys completed *at the time* of the intervention are included for analysis in this case study report. *The results of these pre-existing reflections and surveys were not collected during the course of the research for this case study.* This important ethical consideration, in addition to my role as an insider-researcher, and moreover a school leader, was taken into account when conducting in-person and email interviews with current and former coordinators and teachers.

The methodology for this project will follow case study research design (Bell, 2010, p. 8; Hamilton, 2012, pp. 3–21), with a focus on producing, through assessing the case, a "step to action" (Cohen *et al*, 2017, p. 379), or a way to put to use the findings from the study. In order to help achieve this, the data for this case study draws on both qualitative and quantitative sources, and comprises student reflections, student survey data and key stakeholder interviews. Since this intervention has already been completed, it is not possible to include direct observations as a data stream; however, to supplement the data listed above, SENCO and Experiential Learning meeting minutes during the special programme have been drawn upon.

Firstly, quantitative student survey data collected in May 2022 (at the close of the intervention) was provided to the researcher by the Director of Experiential Learning. These data were collected through Google Forms, with each participant evaluating the programme in relation to enjoyment, wellbeing and reintegration back into ordinary school routines. These categories were assessed on a scale rating, with the results tabulated in Google Sheets.

Secondly, qualitative student reflections were also collected at the end of the intervention in May 2022; again, these reflections were provided to the researcher by the Director of Experiential Learning for the purposes of this case study. These reflections were written as part of the students' weekly Service as Action MYP session and stored on the school's Learning Management System, with some being selected, after obtaining student consent, to appear in the school's weekly student newsletter.

Thirdly, in-person and email interviews were conducted with current and former teachers and coordinators involved in the intervention. These semi-structured interviews (Bell, 2010) were completed in December 2022, and were organised around a series of developmental questions covering the conception, implementation, impacts and evaluation of the intervention. These interviews were conducted with the Director of Experiential Learning, the Director of Pastoral Care and the Learning Enhancement Coordinator, all of whom were involved in facilitating the programme.

Finally, as mentioned above, it was not possible for the researcher to directly observe the sessions as they took place as the programme was completed in May 2022. In order to mitigate this, meeting minutes conducted between key stakeholders during the intervention have been drawn upon to supplement the data streams above.

These data streams will be triangulated via "methodological triangulation" (Denzin, 1970, p. 301), and will look to find multiple data collection points on the specific learning needs previously identified.

All information collected as part of this case study was kept strictly confidential and was only used, as necessary, in the course of researching, writing and submitting this case study. All school-related information, as well as the names of any staff or students involved in the intervention, has been redacted and anonymised for ethical reasons.

Data collection

Table A: Quantitative student survey data

Question	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	Mode	Mean
AQ1: How effective was the programme in connecting you socially?	4	5	4	4	3	4	4	4.00
AQ2: How effective was the programme in releasing stress and anxiety?	3	3	2	3	4	5	3	3.33
AQ3: How effective was the programme in improving your focus in class?	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	2.83
AQ4: How effective was the programme in giving you a break from devices?	4	4	5	4	5	4	4	4.33
AQ5: How much did you enjoy participating in the programme?	4	4	5	4	4	2	4	3.83

The survey was conducted with six students (S1–6) using Google Forms with answers for Questions 1 to 4 corresponding to a scale rating for effectiveness (1 = not effective at all, 2 = a little effective, 3 = effective, 4 = very effective, 5 = extremely effective) and the answers to Question 5 corresponding to a scale rating for enjoyment (1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = neutral, 4 = moderately, 5 = a lot).

Table B: Qualitative student survey data / reflections

Question	Comments
BQ1: What does wellbeing mean to you?	In sum, students responded holistically to this question, with answers encompassing physical, mental and spiritual health. One student looked at the question from a more reflective angle, stating that it incorporates how you see yourself and your life.
BQ2: Name 3 activities / things you are grateful for now you are in school.	Every respondent highlighted seeing friends and/or teachers; another common response was playing sports and taking part in clubs which were unavailable at home; 3 respondents noted better learning environments were appreciated.
BQ3: Why do you think this programme of events was put into place?	3 students answered this question through the lens of socialisation and interaction; 1 student noted the transition back to school from home learning; 1 student focussed on keeping fit and active; 1 student suggested it was to reduce stress and have fun.
BQ4: Which activity did you enjoy the most during the programme?	Ultimate frisbee (2); eSports (1); table tennis (1); finger painting (1); yoga (1)
BQ5: Why did you enjoy this activity the most?	Ultimate frisbee (2) — active, keeping fit; eSports (1) — got to play together with friends; table tennis (1) — first time playing the sport; finger painting (1) — laid back and relaxing, using hands, no devices; yoga (1) —active, improve focus

The qualitative survey above was conducted using Google Forms with long answer boxes available to students; some students also used these questions to write longer full paragraph reflections to go in the school newsletter.

Table C: Staff interviews

Question	**Key quotes/phrases**
Covid-19 Impacts	
CQ1: What was the overall impact on student wellbeing as a result of Covid-19?	T1*: no social interaction, exercise / build up of stress / academic pressures T2: parental stress impacts / home-schooling / isolation / entrapped T3: isolation / no control over life / lack of motivation / fear
CQ2: How specifically were our students impacted by Covid-19?	T1: some not allowed to leave house / no exercise / three generation households T2: religious and social restrictions impacting community and togetherness T3: uncertainty and lack of control / lack of transparency in HK / social issues
CQ3: Were some students impacted more than others?	T1: all students impacted, but mental health challenges complicated picture T2: those with difficult home life / SEND students / later - school refusers T3: students with SEND and/or anxiety
Intervention	
CQ4: Were there any key skills or ATLs developed during the intervention?	T1: collaboration / resilience / social skills T2: teamwork / collaboration / risk-taking T3: ability to relax and unwind / laugh and enjoy activities
CQ5: Was the intervention based on any research or studies, or conversations with other schools?	T1: no studies, but online meeting with other Directors of Experiential Life in HK T2: not aware of this T3: n/a
CQ6: What kind of impacts were you looking to create through this intervention?	T1: personal, academic and social improvements / connections T2: reintegration / promotion of wellness / development of coping strategies T3: create a sense of enjoyment about being back at school
Evaluation	
CQ7: Do you think the intervention was successful in its stated aims?	T1: broadly, but student buy in could be improved T2: yes, but aims need to be better communicated T3: yes, but need better evaluation and dissemination of information post-hoc
CQ8: Do you believe that the intervention was successful for the students you interact with?	T1: yes - students have adapted back to school life T2: it helped, but many pastoral and academic issues left - was a first step T3: yes, but hard to quantify - SEND students were able to reintegrate with success

Question	Key quotes/phrases
Covid-19 Impacts	
CQ9: Should the intervention be repeated, or form part of an ongoing programme?	T1: now that school is back almost to normal, shouldn't be necessary T2: should be integrated into structure for all students T3: need to continue monitoring students; should form part of normal school life

* T1 = Director of Experiential Learning | T2 = Director of Pastoral Care | T3 = Learning Enhancement Coordinator

The interviews were conducted with three members of faculty (T1–3). Two interviews with current faculty were conducted face-to-face, and one interview with a former member of faculty was conducted via email. The nine questions above were used as general prompts for the face-to-face discussions, rather than as a set script. The researcher made notes during the audio recorded interviews.

Data analysis and discussion

The quantitative and qualitative data collected for this case study indicate that the intervention was broadly successful in reintegrating the identified students back into school following Covid-related closures and interruptions, but that not all of the aims of the intervention were fully met.

It is evident from the data that students and teachers alike agree that the biggest impact of Covid-19 on students was extended isolation and a lack of social interaction, with faculty respondents noting, too, that these factors can be exacerbated by both "parental stress" and, in some cases, the complicated familial dynamics of "three-generation households". As reported by Viva HK, the consequences of such conditions are increased anxiety and frustration, as well as decreased level of physical fitness (Viva 2022), and this is borne out in the students' qualitative responses to BQ2, where they stated that they were grateful for a change in their learning environment, and opportunities to meet friends and engage in clubs and sports. It is also interesting to note that students were able to determine post-hoc the rationale for the programme (see BQ3), in seeing its potential benefits in terms of socialisation, reintegration, physical activity, and reduced stress and anxiety.

The results from the quantitative student data suggest, however, that the intervention was more successful in connecting students socially (4/5) and in giving students a break from their devices (4/5) than it was in alleviating anxiety (3.33/5) or improving focus in class (2.83/5), which suggests, following T3's response to CQ6 in the faculty interviews, that the intervention proved successful in "creat[ing] a sense of enjoyment" about being back at school. This chimes, too, with Save The Children's plea for schools to "prioritize children's happiness and well-being" (Save The Children Hong Kong, 2020, p. 17) in response to the pandemic.

Whilst, however, students evaluated the programme as "very effective" at connecting them socially with one another, they were less enthusiastic about the intervention's academic- or classroom-based efficacy, with students evaluating it between "a little effective" and "effective" at improving focus in class. This result, which admittedly comes from a very small sample size, indicates that students need additional academic support to aid their reintegration into school life, and that the programme's focus on sport, creativity, service and meditative activities did not fully address the needs of all students. This can also be seen in T2's response to CQ8, in which the Director of Pastoral Care highlighted that there were still "many pastoral and academic issues" to resolve, and that the intervention was "a first step" towards post-pandemic reintegration.

Given, though, that the students identified for this supplemental programme were those already struggling with re-adapting to school, or had additional learning needs, it is perhaps unsurprising that the intervention alone did not result in a marked improvement in focus and attention. As Tso (2020) and the EEF (2022) make clear, the impacts of the pandemic were exacerbated and multiplied for vulnerable groups of students, and academic outcomes were affected as a result (DfE, 2021). This is also corroborated by the faculty responses

to CQ3, with each member of faculty highlighting the further complications which arose for students with additional needs.

One key implication of the data collected from both students and faculty, then, is that the intervention — at least in relation to its academic aims — could have been improved through a more explicit focus on academic and pastoral counselling. In returning to Grove's (2022) conception of "educational ecologies" (para. 2), one can argue that whilst the intervention had holistic aims and ambitions, the programme itself was too narrow in focus to achieve them. Or, again borrowing from Grove, that it was not fully "integrated across contexts and situations that constitute a person's life (para. 2), and that as a result its holistic impact on students was somewhat limited. As indicated by T1's response to CQ5, one reason for this could be that the intervention was based not on academic studies but rather on shared communities of practice within Hong Kong.

This is not to seek to diminish the pivotal role that student enjoyment evidently had on wellbeing and reintegration, but rather to highlight that the broad base of school life (as a combination of social, physical, academic and psychological factors) needs to be considered for the purposes of post-Covid reintegration, and that this is perhaps even more pressing when dealing with a population of students who have likely been more severely impacted than others. Grove's (2022) conception of an "ecology" is again instructive here, since an ecology is inherently defined, as a whole, by its relationships *between* the individual organisms which constitute it — which is to say, put differently, that one must take into account the web of social, physical, academic and psychological connections that constitute a school — as well as a student's life within it — when designing reintegrative programmes.

Can, then, a small-group, teacher-led and timetabled post-Covid-19 wellbeing intervention for six Grade 9 students in a Hong Kong secondary school help to improve the social and academic integration back into normal school routines? The answer suggested by the data and research conducted in this case study is that in order for such an intervention to be wholly successful, a diverse range of activities (including academic and pastoral aspects, e.g. counselling, discussion circles, study skills) need to be considered for implementation.

This conclusion must of course be tempered by several limitations in the case study above which hinder the reliability of the data. Firstly, since the intervention was conducted in April 2022, it was not possible to use direct observations of the activities as part of this report, and thus the study instead had to rely upon faculty recollections of the programme, alongside meeting minutes and other documentation, to build a picture of the intervention as a whole. Secondly, the student surveys conducted after the completion of the programme lack some nuance, both in relation to the 5-point scale in the quantitative survey, and in the focus on "effectiveness" in the qualitative survey. Redesigned and pilot-tested surveys would likely produce more graded and rich results for discussion. Thirdly, the sample size of the student data is extremely limited, and therefore any results are susceptible to volatility due to outliers. In order to produce more reliable and meaningful data on such interventions in the future, a larger sample size case study, with live observations and pilot-tested surveys, would be needed.

Conclusion

This case study has studied a small-group teacher-led and timetabled post-Covid-19 wellbeing intervention for six Grade 9 students in a Hong Kong secondary school, and has looked to assess its effectiveness in improving the social and academic integration of its participants. The learning need underpinning this intervention concerned reintegration back in school life, and involved specific focuses on improving communication and socialisation among peers, providing time away from devices and screens, and improving focus and concentration in lessons. The findings of the case study, based upon both quantitative and qualitative data, are that whilst the intervention showed strong efficacy in promoting socialisation and time away from screens, it was less effective in improving focus in lessons. From triangulating the data and discussing it in relation to the literature, it has been concluded that the focus of the intervention was perhaps too narrow, and that the programme could be improved through augmenting the timetable with further academic and pastoral support (e.g. counselling, discussion circles, study skills). These augmentations could provide a more holistic approach to reintegration back into school, and might prove especially useful for students with additional learning needs, who are likely to have been more severely affected by Covid-related

school closures — as well as changes to learning environments, lack of agency and control, and more limited 1-1 support — than other students in the school.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Schedule of Events

Grade 9	**Monday Period 7 (14:30-15:15)**	**Wednesday Period 8 (15:15-16:00)**	**Recess**	**Lunch (13:00-13:30)**
Week 1	Football (whole school)	eSports	Grade 11&12 run club options: philosophy, drama, art, debate, music, fitness	Whole-school options from: ultimate frisbee, finger painting, music, eSports, yoga and meditation
Week 2	Table tennis	Yoga and meditation		
Week 3	Yuki Gassen	Creative writing		
Week 4	Volleyball	Service: Schoolwide recycling		
Week 5	Dodgeball (whole school)	Yoga and meditation		
Week 6	Badminton	Service: Wellness Cards		