



Can happiness be taught?

Yes, it can



IT'S TIME WE MOVED TOWARDS A SCHOOL-BASED WELLBEING CURRICULUM, SAYS TREVOR LEE.

As teachers and school leaders we're not often afforded the luxury of time to consider the bigger picture about what we are all trying to achieve – we have classes to teach, budgets to organise, parents, staff and students to meet. In the last five years, however, I've been fortunate enough, through my travels as part of my research, to share rich conversations with other colleagues involved in education, from all over the world.

What amazes me is the way in which beliefs about the central purpose of our work in schools are still heavily contested. Could it be that our fundamental beliefs about the purpose and function of education have been blurred in

the race for league table positions based on exam results? This places school leaders who hold a broader view of the purpose of education in a dilemma: the purpose they give to education is often at variance to the meaning assigned by other members of society. After many years of central government obsession with testing where I work in the United Kingdom, there is a strong desire in many for more freedom.

Sometimes we have to use a telescope to see the bigger picture rather than be always enslaved by the use of the microscope of data analysis in our path to school improvement. In response, this article is a call to action for all of us, teachers and school leaders to find time in our busy

schedules to review our own priorities and to reflect on why we were called to do this work in the first place.

Notwithstanding the hollow rhetoric about the development of all aspects of the educational experience provided for students contained in many school promotional websites, prospectuses and mission statements, it can be argued that it is the statistically measurable content of assessments that is one of the principle drivers of education currently in the UK. As Tom Peters and Robert Waterman remind us, in *In Search of Excellence*, ‘What gets measured, gets done.’

We in the UK have suffered from initiative overload for decades but there is a stirring in government that chimes with the current spirit of the age in a time of economic austerity. The quest for the holy grail of personal happiness and fulfilment is being seriously revisited. Even UK Prime Minister David Cameron is trying to draw attention to this concept – in the midst of public service cuts and soaring living costs. ‘It’s time we admitted that there’s more to life than money and it’s time we focused not just on GDP (gross domestic product) but on GWB – general wellbeing,’ Cameron said at the Google Zeitgeist Europe Conference in December last year. ‘Wellbeing can’t be measured by money or traded in markets,’ he added. ‘It’s about the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our culture and, above all, the strength of our relationships. Improving our society’s sense of wellbeing is, I believe, the central political challenge of our times.’ As a result, the UK Office for National Statistics is leading a debate in the coming year, called the National Wellbeing Project, which will seek to establish the key areas that matter most to people’s wellbeing.

This initiative has a profound impact on teachers and school leaders as we substitute the vague notion of ‘happiness’ with the compound noun ‘wellbeing.’ It’s vital to actively promote student wellbeing for a number of reasons, despite the complexities involved. At the core of this argument is the notion that developing a holistic approach, where due regard is given to student wellbeing, should become a key aim. I see five imperatives that justify the inclusion of student wellbeing in schools. (See Figure 1.)

Firstly, there are ethical imperatives if we are to move against rising trends in stu-

dent anxiety and depression. Surveys suggest that clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties are restricted to a minority of around one in 10 children aged 11 to 15 years, who show one or more of these problems at any given point in time. An important issue, though, is whether these types of difficulties are increasing. What we are seeing with new data is that the trend has continued upwards in the UK. There is a wide range of possible causes for changes to the wellbeing of adolescents, and while few if any have been properly researched, most have been raised somewhere in the research literature, albeit in a rather tentative way. It’s likely that intervening more effectively and imaginatively could significantly reduce adolescent mortality, through reducing suicide rates, and improve life experiences. If we can accurately assess mental health problems, and we know both how to intervene and also that intervention may work, then there’s an ethical imperative to lead improvement initiatives immediately.

Secondly, there is a legislative imperative in the UK: the government’s Every Child Matters reforms supported by the *Children Act 2004* places a duty of wellbeing on schools. Student wellbeing has thus become a national concern, reflected by provision in extended services, and could play a key role in any attempt to introduce a broader social pedagogy.

Thirdly, there is a social imperative: there is a needy minority in each of our schools. The key point is that those who are supported and have more positive experiences can learn better and are more likely to fulfil their social and academic potential. Schools are powerful institutions which influence social development and there is a need to have appropriate

social goals, in contrast to a discourse of managing behaviour and a narrow focus on the ‘academic,’ which this discourse views as separate from the emotional and social.

Fourthly, there is a developing research base that suggests that an effective program for student wellbeing helps improve the academic outcomes of the majority of students who do not suffer depressive illnesses. Education for wellbeing could have important school improvement outcomes



Figure 1: Connected understanding: five justifications for promoting student wellbeing in schools

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in terms of student attainment, behaviour, satisfaction, future life chances, resilience and creativity.

Finally, student wellbeing lessons can help join up the wider system. It's easy for the principle purpose of schools to be centred on knowledge transmission and teaching rather than on the broader needs of the learner. In turn, students are expected to conform to the process of school rather than schools serving the needs of its students.

Can happiness be taught? Probably not, just in the same way as it cannot be bottled or demonstrated on a spreadsheet. It seems to me, however, that it's possible to recognise three scientifically credible constituents of happiness that can be shared in classes. (See Figure 2.)

The first route to greater happiness is hedonic, increasing positive emotion. Within limits, we can increase our positive emotion about the past, for example by cultivating gratitude and forgiveness, our positive emotion about the present, for example by savouring and mindfulness, and our positive emotion about the future, for example by building hope and optimism.

A second route to happiness involves the pursuit of 'gratification.' The key characteristic of a gratification is that it engages us fully. Although there are shortcuts to pleasures, no shortcuts exist to gratification. Martin Seligman, former Chair of the American Psychological Association, argues that the pursuit of gratifications requires us to draw on character strengths such as crea-

tivity, social intelligence, sense of humour, perseverance, and an appreciation of beauty and excellence.

A third route to happiness comes from using individual strengths to belong to and in the service of something larger than ourselves; something such as knowledge, goodness, family, community, politics, justice or a higher spiritual power. The third route gives life meaning. This certainly chimes with our current fascination in the UK with the notion of citizens contributing to a 'big society.'

If happiness cannot be taught I suggest that it might certainly be feasible to provide students with the necessary skills with which to nurture happiness themselves. Simply described, schools have a twofold role in the promotion of happiness.



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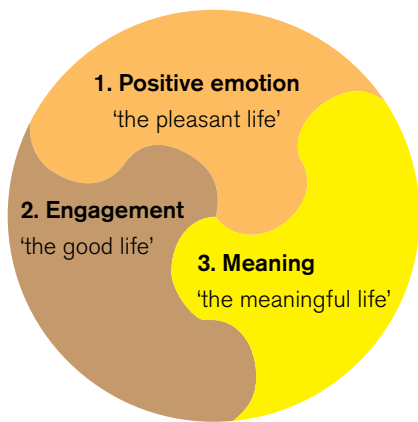


Figure 2: Three constituents of happiness

Firstly, the school itself must be a happy place to be. The basic needs of the students need to be met, the curriculums – formal, informal and hidden – must enable students to discover and develop their physical, intellectual and social strengths and abilities, and above all the school must create the conditions for excellence and allow its students to discover a sense of meaning and purpose that will carry them well beyond the school gates. This might be termed ‘education as happiness.’

Secondly, schools should give explicit guidance to their students on how happiness might be achieved in life and not just assume that happiness will result from the ordinary activities of school life; this might be termed ‘educating for happiness.’ It is this second suggested role that is controversial and that has attracted a great deal of media attention in recent times.

Wellington College in the UK is leading the way in this respect. I researched Wellington’s program thoroughly through a five-year longitudinal study. The school’s work has been informed by a positive psychological approach, espoused by Martin Seligman, Daniel Goleman, Richard Layard and more indirectly Howard Gardner. Wellington’s wellbeing course is divided into six areas. Students learn:

- how to improve the way their mind works through the way they manage their bodies
- how to manage their subconscious mind and be aware of how it can influence the conscious mind

- how simply being out in the natural world can increase their wellbeing
- that it’s not good to immerse themselves in the fantasy world of television and video games

- how to resolve conflict with others, and
- the benefits of stillness and mindfulness meditation.

The lessons take place once a fortnight and last for 40 minutes. Students who took part in a study I conducted in 2010, reported:

‘When the school’s wellbeing campaign launched, we were all a bit sceptical. We thought the new master was just doing it to look good. Happiness lessons seemed an unlikely proposition. How could we be taught to be happy? We had already sat through PSHE (personal social and health education) and citizenship. We had this vision of getting a D mark for being gloomy or the occasional pubescent mood swing.

‘But our happiness lessons are actually wellbeing lessons. That is an important distinction. Because you can’t teach someone to be happy, you can only teach them to pretend to be happy. And if they are only pretending to be happy, that is no use to anyone. What the school is trying to do is give us some sort of basis, so that when we have a time of sadness or grief, we can deal with it constructively rather than turn to false comforts of drugs and alcohol.

‘It is easy to get trapped in unhealthy relationships. What enables you to step out of them is your own self-worth and individuality.

‘There is also a much more practical aspect. I know a lot of people use meditation to help them go to sleep. Small things like that can make a big difference to your day. An extra hour’s sleep can really impact on your learning.’

Students comment on the unique, useful and enjoyable nature of the wellbeing lessons, with 88 per cent indicating that they highly enjoy their wellbeing lessons and look forward to them; 85 per cent strongly agreeing that the lessons have meaningful content and are very worthwhile; 68 per cent

stating that the lessons help them to become resilient and challenge negative thoughts; 72 per cent reporting that the lessons encourage them to become calmer in their thinking and more thoughtful and understanding; and 66 per cent reporting that the lessons help them change their behaviour for the better and to recognise their individual strengths.

A key finding of my study is that relationships matter a great deal. The centrality of teacher-student relationships in the everyday experience of schooling is underdeveloped. While it may seem more powerful to devise a program of activities, it’s the everyday and pervasive power of relationships that affect learning, social development and mental health. Reforming the curriculum is not sufficient: it will need a skilled and empathetic workforce to deliver such a program.

The challenge for teachers and school leaders is to ensure that this vitally important aspect of school life does not become implicit or hidden at a time when the main pressure is on assessment or a school’s position on league tables. This will require a new sense of conviction and a new style of courage on the part of teachers and school leaders, particularly as school leaders decide on priorities and then decide what is really worth fighting for. What’s clear is that the wellbeing of students is a long-term project that is vital to improving attainment. The expectations of students as well as families and employers have to be addressed. This requires a new way of looking at how teachers and school leaders work as they attempt to follow their best instincts. **1**

Dr Trevor Lee is Headmaster at Northwood Prep in north-west London, a school that has been recognised as outstanding in all aspects by the Schools’ Inspectorate in the United Kingdom. He teaches internationally on strategy, leadership and student wellbeing. His latest book is Strategy and Leadership for Turbulent Times.

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