

FRESHMAN SEMINAR 24K: *The Science of Happiness*

Creating a happiness curriculum: teaching children how to achieve positive well-being

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 11% of today's youth experience a depressive disorder even before they reach the age of 18. More and more adolescents are reporting feelings of loneliness and social isolation, both at school and in the home. Even in this digital age of technology and online communication, studies have found that depression continues to be the leading cause of disability spanning from early teenage years to later adult years. To make matters worse, because research previously did not focus on the unique onset of emotional disorders in younger patients, less information is available for proper prevention and treatment in children. It is clear, however, that this rise in negativity amongst the youth necessitates the establishment of several preventative measures. Of those that have already been discussed by experts across the globe, a prime focus on spreading "happiness" seems most unconventional, yet also the most promising. Researchers agree that early methods are key, but rarely is a full-fledged intervention ever necessary. Though existing methods have previously focused on fixing a supposed problem, my personal proposal involves promoting innate mechanisms that all humans are born with. Of these, the most important seems to be the concept of happiness. After reading extensively on the topic, I will propose through this essay that happiness must be cultivated in children early on, most specifically in the academic setting. A public policy goal for state governments should be to implement a "happiness curriculum" in public schools across the country. Through this, emotional disorders such as depression can be avoided, and children can become equipped with long-term skills to achieve the highest quality of life possible.

Before I delve into the precise measures I believe are necessary to see this happiness curriculum to fruition, I find that it is customary to set the boundaries for what I speak of when I mention the term “happiness”. This paper works on the assumption that happiness is a subjective concept that differs from one individual to the next. In essence, it is a holistic view on a person’s well-being, and one that is largely determined by the individual in question himself. Through a series of self-reports and surveys, researchers are able to assign a numerical value to one’s tendency to be happy relative to the state of well-being that he or she is currently experiencing. Though we continue to be hard-pressed for means by which to measure this abstract notion of happiness--and even those in existence exhibit major defects--we nevertheless communally accept the basic indicators from which happiness is derived. In his book, “Happiness in Children”, Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia Mark D. Holder lists three key aspects in determining an individual’s subjective well-being, namely the cognitive appraisal of one’s life, low but appropriate levels of negative affect, and an affective appraisal of one’s positive emotions.

The limitations of these standards of measurements for children, however, are obvious. A child, especially one of very young age, cannot be expected to have fully mastered the skill of self-realization or introspection. A child’s assessment of his or her own emotional well-being is difficult to consider a valid measurement for happiness. Furthermore, variables that are currently associated with well-being, including job satisfaction, marriage, and spousal contentment, are very adult-oriented. No child-specific variables have so far been defined in existing literature. Even worse, researchers have attempted to apply these rigidly adult-designed models to children on the assumption that any differences in happiness-related factors between these two population sets are negligible. In defense of these existing methods, happiness has always been too complex

to relegate to a numbers game anyway. In other words, happiness has always relied heavily on self-reported data, a method that lends itself to an erroneous collection process anyway. So whether or not children have the capacity to fully assess their personal well-being is a moot point. In addition, variables that comprise our definition of happiness are easy enough to create. Whereas marriage contentment or job satisfaction are perhaps not relevant to the youth, these are easily supplanted by depth of friendships or academic success respectively. One thing that remains uncontested, however, is the fact that most findings surrounding happiness are admittedly centered on adults. Research must be conducted independently for children to more strongly validate the claims in this paper. Nevertheless, it is important to note this early on that there are major limitations in the research that I will be continuously citing, as well as inescapable flaws in the measures I will propose.

I will begin first by illustrating that the benefits of cultivating happiness in children are plentiful, both in its immediate and its long-term effects. While most often see the importance in promoting happiness as a lifelong pursuit, people are less inclined to believe that it is necessary to start early in childhood. It is no question that, in general, higher rates of happiness lead to several desirable outcomes in adults. Holder, who terms happiness as “positive subjective well-being”, names these outcomes: “health, greater creativity, increased facial recognition and attention, more productivity and success in one’s career, better social relationships, higher levels of hope, and more resilience and post-traumatic growth”. It is also commonly undisputed that individuals of varying ages see happiness as a value and even as a goal to be desired, constantly trumping with love and health. In fact, out of 9,000 college students surveyed from 47 nations, only 3% reported that they did not value happiness at all (Kim-Prieto et al. 2005). But why

specifically is happiness beneficial for younger children, most of whom are already cared for and reared by their parents?

One of the primary benefits of cultivating happiness in children is its correlation with health. A study conducted in 2002 by Mary A.M. Rogers, member of the Joint Research Program for Pediatrics and Family Medicine at the Medical College of Ohio, aimed to determine whether factors contributing to happiness--such as art, entertainment, and recreational activities--could lead to healthier children. Rogers juxtaposed the frequency of public performances or exhibits, the preservation of historical sites, and the maintenance of recreational facilities among other factors against child health indicators in communities all over Northwestern Ohio. Rogers discovered that the county with the highest dollar entertainment value per resident also had the greatest percentage of children with exceptional health. The correlation illustrated here by Rogers' study shows specific advantages to a happier, and therefore healthier, child population.

Another benefit of high happiness levels in children is its supposed connection to longer lifespans, the effect of which is more pronounced the longer the child has been happy. Diener and Chan (2004) actually concluded, upon performing a meta-analysis on several longitudinal studies, that positive subjective well-being could contribute as much as 4 to 10 years unto a person's life. A study conducted by Danner, Snowden and Frisen in 2001 affirmed these conclusions. In this research, a sample population of 180 Catholic nuns were assessed on the basis of perceived levels of happiness, which were determined on the basis of the emotions they expressed in their personal journals. Researchers discovered that nuns who displayed more positive rather than negative or neutral emotions in their journals were more likely to experience longevity. Logically, these findings lend themselves nicely to the idea that a generally positive disposition induces a more holistic approach to assessing one's surroundings. In fact, it is also

believed that the happier children are, the more likely they are to display greater cognitive abilities, such as heightened attention and a better formed perspective in complex situations.

Thus, upon establishing the multiple benefits to raising happiness levels in today's youth, I wish to move onto the ways in which this happiness can actually be achieved in a school setting. First, following the aforementioned results published by Rogers (2002) from her research in Ohio, we can logically assume that heightened levels art, entertainment, and recreation contribute to children's happiness. Simple activities, for instance, such as visiting the zoo, playing at a public park, or going on amusement park rides have arguably minimal yet nonetheless notable impact on a child's overall happiness. We can thus take this general observation and apply it to a child's academic experience. For instance, frequent field trips to art or science museums or the building of a school-wide playground would inevitably provide an outlet for the child to experience this heightened sense of art and recreation. More importantly, it gives children the opportunity to explore both as part of a larger group and on their own. Time I have spent personally at the Andrew Peabody K-8 School in Northern Cambridge has showed me the value of "Choice Time", where a young student can independently select what activity to dedicate half an hour to. For younger grade levels, other schools also encourage students to speak out through "Share Time" or "Show and Tell", which encourages personal development while highlighting the child's individual contribution and value to the class. These are practices that are, in fact, already practiced in most elementary schools. What must be improved, however, seems to be continued encouragement from teachers and parents for kids to make use of these opportunities.

Because so much of our current definition of happiness centers on the idea of self-realization and self-appraisal, any attempt to raise happiness levels must inevitably include the improvement

or, at the very least, practice of these processes. In a paper published by Mark Holder, Ben Coleman and Judi Wallace in 2008, a link between spirituality and happiness was drawn. Spirituality, with its relation to religiousness, is arguably the closest concrete measurement to self-realization and self-appraisal, which majority of religions move its followers to practice regularly. With a participant set of 320 children from public and private faith-based schools, researchers measured spirituality through the Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire and happiness through the Oxford Happiness Scale. They discovered that spirituality, on both the intrapersonal and interpersonal level, were associated with enhanced positive well-being. While religion itself was only weakly associated to happiness, acts which were altruistic in nature such as community volunteering contributed to a greater sense of well-being. Thus, in following this trend, we find that besides increasing recreational and exploratory opportunities, schools must also give children the chance to increase meaning in their own lives through volunteer work. Becoming more aware of their contributions to the community may also help with children's well-being, which is why schools must encourage the documentation of these altruistic deeds in some sort of journal or reflection session.

With these goals in mind, we can now assess practices and programs that are currently in place, most of which adhere to the methods I have suggested. Beginning on the smaller scale, the organization Project Happiness has released a handbook and a film that aim to guide teachers through the process of implementing a "happiness curriculum" in their classrooms. Victoria Obenchain, Middle School Science Specialist at the Saklan School writes that her eighth graders use the Project Happiness Handbook "as a workbook and as a resource" and can thus learn which aspects of their lives contribute most to their positive well-being. "In the end, they suggested that having family and friends who love and support you is the best plan for achieving lifelong

happiness,” Obenchain writes on the Project Happiness blog. The organization’s film, which was released in 2008, also outlines the journey of High School students from three countries as they meet with cultural icons--including the Dalai Lama--to truly determine what comprises happiness.

On a larger scale, the United Kingdom introduced lessons in happiness for 11-year-olds in 2006 in response to the rising rates of depression among the youth. The move was initiated by the government with the prompting of former senior inspector of the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED) Jim Rose, who reported that schools should “focus a bit more on how the children will be equipped to handle the world outside after they finish their studies” (Softpedia). Other big names in happiness-related research spoke out on the issue, including Lord Richard Layard, professor at the London School of Economics, who said that schools should focus more on “emotional intelligence” (BBC). Spearheaded by Professor Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania, the pilot program of the initiative reached out to 1,500 secondary school pupils in 22 schools around Britain with cognitive behavioral techniques designed to boost self-esteem and the expression of emotions (Goodchild, BBC). Government officials hoped that this move would not only promote greater well-being among pupils, but also raise test scores and academic performance, which researchers said are directly linked to an individual’s happiness. Researchers also believe that this public policy will lessen bullying and aggressive behavior in young children if carried forward. Though reports on the initiative’s success at achieving its aims have so far remained unpublished, there is reason to believe that these happiness lessons benefited the children who partook in them.

In addition to the U.K.’s implementation of happiness lessons in secondary schools, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced in 2007 that schools could choose to give students credit

for engaging in public service (BBC). In conjunction with the findings of Holder, Coleman and Wallace in 2008, this policy could potentially motivate students to pursue volunteer opportunities, which would tap the altruism that research claimed induces happiness. Even the Russell Group of prestigious universities welcomed Blair's announcement gladly, encouraging their students and staff to volunteer.

Here in the U.S., the Hawn Foundation has been dedicated to improving children's lives academically, socially and emotionally by providing them with the means by which to attain the necessary skills. As stated in their mission statement, "[the Hawn Foundation] also assist[s] educators to create supportive learning and social environments that effectively address children's mental and physical well-being while nurturing the growth of creative, reflective habits of mind". The foundation's forefront initiative is called MindUP, which employs the basic tenets of positive psychology and the latest cutting-edge research in cognitive neuroscience. Again, much of the skills taught through MindUP are directly associated with the self-appraisal necessary for happiness to truly improve. Its four-part curriculum directly includes a unit on how to "quiet" the mind and then another unit on how to be completely "mindful" of one's senses. Employing even the aforementioned need for recreation and exploration, the curriculum also includes a unit where students are encouraged to find their place in the world, giving themselves and others around them value and meaning. The use of gratitude journals also employs the idea of deriving happiness from volunteer work or activities that promote self-growth and development. Thus, so far, it seems that the Hawn Foundation's curriculum is the most comprehensive one in existence that applies all the aforementioned techniques to raise happiness in schools. In addition, it even teaches children how to breathe and meditate. This practice is predicated on the believe that the ability to control one's physiology and calm down the the

body's processes is extremely helpful when children need to control their anger or give in to relaxation. The foundation's MindUP program does all of this in conjunction with increasing positive social exchanges in the classroom and partnering with parents and families to form the incredibly stable social support network that happy children often have.

Happiness in children is an underdeveloped field of cognitive psychology that should really garner much more attention than it currently is. More effort into research of this kind would provide us with more concrete ways to measure child-specific variables of happiness and hence use these scales to more effectively identify factors that enhance positive well-being. Through this paper, I have showed that the benefits of raising happiness levels in children are plentiful--ranging from health to academic success. I have discussed key aspects of a possible happiness curriculum in schools across the nation, including access to recreational activities, motivation to volunteer for public service, and self-appraisal to enhance value to oneself and others as well. Lastly, I have listed current programs applied on the local, national, and international levels that have implemented many of these happiness-enhancing techniques. Of these, the Hawn Foundation's MindUP curriculum is the most comprehensive model currently in existence that promotes well-being on the basis of scientific evidence for very realistic, concrete goals. It is my hope that, in the future, schools worldwide will choose to implement a curriculum such as this to ensure that our youth receive the happiness they deserve.

RESOURCES

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