

Teaching happiness – A brave new world?

Maggi Evans on well-being initiatives and whose vision is being pushed

Well-being is firmly on the government agenda and from April 2011 there are plans that national well-being will be measured alongside GDP. This will bring numerous challenges around definition, measurement and interventions. Some of these issues have already been encountered within the field of education, which under the previous government had a clear responsibility to increase the well-being of pupils. This article explores some of the research and issues encountered by this agenda. Whilst the aim of increasing well-being is admirable, there are many concerns and potential difficulties that merit full debate. An understanding of the approach in education may help to inform the government course as they embark on increasing our national well-being.

'And that,' put in the Director sententiously, 'that is the secret of happiness and virtue – liking what you've got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny.'
– Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

Many of you will have read Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*... a frightening tale of extreme social conditioning and genetic engineering: the portrayal of a world where people's satisfaction with life is high, but their quality of life is low; where their desires are met, but these are conditioned by the World Controllers; where people feel happy, but they have no genuine choice or freedom. *Brave New World* provides an interesting and challenging backdrop for considering some of the current initiatives to increase happiness and well-being in schools.

Within society, a number of

commentators have observed a growing interest in happiness and well-being, in part fuelled by the advent of the positive psychology movement, (e.g. Layard, 2005; Noddings, 2003; Seligman, 2003). The field of happiness and well-being is recognised as complex and cross-disciplinary (e.g. Huppert et al., 2005), with psychologists, sociologists, neuroscientists, philosophers and economists tending to have different perspectives and approaches to answering the questions 'What are happiness and well-being?', 'What makes us happy?' and 'How can more people be happy?'. This concern with increasing happiness and well-being is set against some interesting statistics. It is claimed that despite our increased material wealth, we are no happier (e.g. Layard, 2005) (although according to the Office for National Statistics suicide and depression rates in England are relatively stable) and in 2007, UNICEF put the UK at the bottom of a list of 21 industrialised countries for childhood well-being.

Within England the government has tasked those involved in education to take an increasingly proactive role in developing the happiness and well-being of children. Over recent years a number of policy initiatives have emphasised the school's role in increasing pupil well-being. For example, Personal, Social and Health Education (2000); Every Child Matters (2003); National Healthy Schools Status (2005), and in 2009 well-being was included in the Ofsted Inspection Framework. However, despite these policy initiatives, there is a limited amount of quality research to underpin

interventions to increase happiness and well-being within schools (Stallard, 2010;



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questions

What can we learn about well-being measurement, interventions and challenges from the field of education?
How can we apply this learning to support a national increase in well-being?

resources

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www.cambridgewellbeing.org

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Weare & Gray, 2003). So what is being done in schools? Is it possible to teach happiness and well-being? What challenges does it raise?

The research on happiness and well-being in schools can be summarised in a number of ways. For this article, I shall firstly give an overview of research that helps us to understand more fully what happiness and well-being mean to pupils. I shall then describe some of the research that is taking place on interventions to increase happiness and well-being, focused either on strengthening individual pupils, or strengthening the whole school. This research raises some important challenges regarding the teaching of happiness and well-being.

Pupil voice

The largest 'pupil voice' research study has been conducted by the Children's Society (2006) (in collaboration with York University), and is an ongoing programme to develop a better understanding of well-being from a young person's perspective and to establish measures that can be used to monitor well-being over time. Initial research conducted in 2005 involved 11,000 young people aged 14–16. From this sample over 8000 responded to questions about the things that make a good life for young people and the things that can prevent a good life. Ten themes emerged, with the four most frequently mentioned as family, friends, leisure and school. There were also some overriding themes: relationships (love/care, support, fair treatment and respect) and safety/stability and a sense of freedom. From this research a preliminary framework has been developed with three elements of well-being: self; relationships; and environment (including school). This framework is now being applied to current well-being, and a future focus of 'well-becoming'.

These findings are consistent with other research, with children generally (for example, Counterpoint, 2008), and with

research that is school-specific, such as Duckett et al. (2008). This study also identified factors felt to have a negative effect on well-being, including negative experiences from boredom and frustration through to fear and terror; pressure and expectations to achieve academic success; rules seen as arbitrary or unjust.

There are many challenges raised by the research on happiness and well-being from a pupil-voice perspective. One of the most fundamental of these is the lack of a clear definition of happiness and well-being that incorporates the pupil's perspective and is consistently applied. For example, within policy documents, Ereaut (2008) identified that the term was applied in two fundamentally different ways: as an ambition/holistic goal that could improve life, or as an outcome that could be defined and measured. This creates difficulties in designing appropriate measures, synthesising research, communicating the concept and understanding how happiness and well-being link with other aspects of a school's remit.

Strengthening individuals' social and emotional skills

A number of programmes in England focus on strengthening individuals through developing their social and emotional skills. Some of these interventions, such as level 1 SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) are generic, aimed at the whole school community, others provide specialist support for those experiencing difficulty or seen as vulnerable, such as level 2 and 3 SEAL and the Targeted Mental Health in Schools initiative TaMHS (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Stallard, 2010).

A generic programme currently being piloted is the 'UK Resilience Programme' (UKRP). The purpose of the programme is to increase positive behaviour and well-being in schools through skills training, with approximately 18 hours material (largely using cognitive behavioural

therapy techniques), trying to reduce depression, helplessness and anxiety and increase optimism (Challen et al., 2009). The programme is being evaluated through a longitudinal study, involving nearly 2000 pupils and utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods. The purpose of the review is to assess the scalability of the programme and the impact on well-being, behaviour, attendance and attainment. The interim evaluation suggests that the programme has a positive impact on depression/anxiety scores, is perceived as positive by pupils and facilitators (for example, 58 per cent of pupils felt their problems were a bit better or much better since participating). The report highlights that they are still at an early stage of analysis and that so far they have concentrated on depression and anxiety scores 'which are the most important outcomes in the existing literature' (Challen et al., 2009, p.51). This highlights a risk that the approach talks about positive psychology and well-being, but focuses primarily on reducing rates of depression, and increasing positive thinking, with the potentially circular reasoning and dubious causality (Miller, 2008). It is anticipated that this apparent contradiction will be addressed in future analysis, and that the data on life satisfaction will be reported. In addition to the above, the report makes some recommendations for improvement, particularly a desire to adapt the materials for the UK, as some of the pupils were conducting the role plays in American accents.

Further studies have evaluated a range of approaches (e.g. Carnwell & Baker, 2007; Parton & Manby, 2009; Stallard, 2010) and have also reported benefits, seeming to convey a consistent message – the interventions had a positive impact on feelings of confidence. Some changes in behaviour and social skills were also found and many participants felt better able to deal with their problems. Both pupils and facilitators generally reported the experience as positive and for some it was extremely positive.

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However, these findings do not provide a foundation for claiming that these interventions increase well-being in pupils. From a methodological perspective, such an assertion is fraught with difficulty. Within the UKRP evaluation for example, the researchers recognise many of the problems with the UKRP study: self-selection and time investment by the facilitators make it likely that they will be positive; the possibility of spillover effects to the control group; the lack of consistency in how the programme was rolled out, whether or not the whole programme was covered; difficulties in getting data from questionnaires. Establishing causality is a further challenge for these studies, and the designs do not preclude other effects. Further concerns with individually focused programmes are highlighted by McLaughlin (2008), who calls for a wider emphasis, incorporating relationships, pedagogy and community building.

Whole school

Whole-school approaches take a wider view of happiness and well-being, focusing on 'strengthening the community' and 'reducing structural barriers' (Mental Health Foundation, 1999). The whole-school approach fits within the context of SEAL and the feedback from pupils (Duckett et al., 2008) and teachers (Cowie et al., 2004; Kidger et al., 2009), who have stressed the need for well-being interventions to be fully integrated as part of school life, not a 'bolt on' to be thought about for an hour a week. It should however be recognised that in common with the terms 'happiness and well-being', 'whole school' does not have an agreed definition.

Smith et al. (2007) report on a pilot of an approach to encourage secondary schools to take a whole-school approach to implementing Social and Emotional and Behavioural Skills (SEBS), commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Over 50 schools took part in

the pilot, supported by local authority (LA) consultants to develop a SEBS programme that was appropriate for their school and applied to both children and staff. Schools tended to implement a number of targeted initiatives (such as specific lessons), and take a whole-school approach in integrating SEBS into pastoral and behaviour policies, in some cases encouraging SEBS learning objectives across all lessons. In the evaluation, involving pupils and staff, most reported that SEBS was having either 'considerable' or 'some' effect. Key factors contributing to the perceived success of the programme were: tailoring to each school; LA leadership and support, including network meetings; and positive pupil response, particularly for anger management and developing understanding of how they learn productively. Links with other activities such as peer mentoring and bullying were also seen as beneficial.

A number of issues were also identified: some teachers wanted to focus on academic issues instead; pupils didn't like the inconsistency of teacher behaviour between these lessons and other lessons, and teachers felt there should be a clearer focus on teachers' SEBS to provide an appropriate foundation for the programme. Although there were frustrations for the researchers in terms of collecting follow-up data, they conclude that the programme was seen as worthwhile, with a potentially positive impact on achievement, school environment, pupil behaviour, pupil/staff relationships and attendance. They summarise that moving forward, interventions should take a whole-school approach, challenging attitudes and cultures, and clearly link with the wider community.

This whole-school approach



Some teachers have reported confusion regarding their role

emphasises the importance working with pupils and staff to create a positive culture, environment, skills and processes that support well-being. However, there is more to be done in terms of international studies and reviews, and Coleman succinctly summarises the current research on interventions: 'It will come as no surprise to find that research provides no clear answer to the question as to whether programmes in schools are able to enhance the well-being of pupils' (Coleman, 2009, p.286).

Some challenges

This area is not without its challenges. Those around definition and measurement are widely debated (e.g. Coleman, 2009; Ecclestone & Hayes,

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 Parton, C. & Manby, M. (2009). The contribution of group work programmes to early intervention and improving children's emotional well-being. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 27(1), 15.
 Seligman, M. (2003). *Authentic happiness*. London: Nicholas Brealey.
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Rudd, P. (2007). *Secondary social, emotional and behavioural skills (SEBS) pilot evaluation*. DCFS Research Report 003. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.
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2009; Griffin, 1986; Michalos, 2008; Noddings, 2003), but here I want to expand on the political and ethical concerns, such as the issues of power and control encountered by Duckett et al. (2008).

Working with pupils to identify factors within school that contributed and detracted from well-being, Duckett and colleagues encountered a number of issues of power and control. For example, the commissioning local education authority (LEA) vetoed some innovative data collection methods suggested by the pupils, such as text, video and drama, despite being keen to conduct participatory research. Further, attempts were made by both the school and the LEA to discount or censor findings on the factors that were seen as detracting from well-being (such as bullying and humiliation by teachers), and communication about the results within the school sanitised the issues.

Power and control are key considerations within wider education research, with concerns of manipulation and control, and recognition of the political nature of education (e.g. Apple, 2003, 2006). Within much of the work on happiness and well-being, certain values, feelings and behaviours are promoted, without necessarily having a full contextual understanding of specific

individual circumstances. This raises a key ethical and political challenge: Should the state dictate such values and feelings? Who is deciding on the 'legitimate' knowledge or 'truth' of what is happening and what the solutions should be (Apple, 2006)?

Within happiness and well-being there are many 'truths' that could be challenged. For example, Cigman (2008) asks how we know what feelings are unconditionally good, pointing out that it can be appropriate to feel fear and shame. Norem (2002) identifies research showing the positive benefits of pessimism to some individuals – yet optimism training seems to be widely promoted. The importance of worker well-being is widely recognised as an important contributor to performance (Black, 2008), however, within schools the focus is largely on pupil well-being rather than teacher well-being. These issues raise the question 'Whose brave new world is this?'

A further major 'truth' that merits further exploration is the belief that it is appropriate to attempt to increase happiness and well-being. Smith (2008, p.560) states, 'The focus on happiness is kindly, and unquestionably well intentioned, but also potentially cataclysmic in two of its tendencies'. He goes on to list his two major concerns: a focus on self rather than the wider world, and treating happiness as an individual achievement. The focus on self is raised as a concern by others highlighting a risk that it further fuels the individualistic society (e.g. Michalos, 2008), and fails to recognise that we value things that don't make us especially happy (e.g. Layard & Dunn, 2009). A further critique emerges from focusing on happiness and well-being as a primary measure of success (e.g. Elliot, 2007), raising a concern that this may pathologise emotional states other than happiness, and present a diminished view whereby the individual pupil is perceived to need to develop further skills, awareness, knowledge or abilities (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008, 2009). The implications of such an emphasis should also be considered in terms of the risk of further marginalising groups with mental health difficulties.

A further aspect of the political debate is to clarify the appropriate aims of schools regarding happiness and well-being so that interventions can be evaluated against these aims. Government policy has clearly given schools in England a remit to develop pupils' well-being, (whatever they may mean by that), apparently based on

the rationale that low well-being is causing a diverse range of issues such as poor educational achievement and antisocial behaviour (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). However, the current situation is unclear and some teachers have reported confusion regarding their role and a reluctance to be involved in supporting emotional well-being without a clear remit, training and support for their own well-being (Kidger et al., 2009).

Many welcome a broader approach, for example, both Noddings (2003) and Layard (2005) believe that schools should play a key role in supporting the happiness and well-being of children, both while at school and laying the foundations for a happy life, in both public and personal arenas. Noddings claims, 'Happiness should be an aim of education and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness' (2003, p.1). Others reach a similar conclusion about the role of education, linking it to the importance of flourishing and meaningful life – young people seeing their lives as meaningful and also preparing to lead meaningful lives (White, 2009).

However, the enlarged remit is challenged by some as there has not been a full and critical debate regarding the growing focus for schools on helping pupils to develop their well-being, (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). Further, Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) challenge the prioritisation of emotional needs over intellectual, which may result in students failing to achieve their potential and therefore not be in the student's best interests. This debate can be seen as fundamental to education and concerns the broad question 'What are the aims of education and how does this relate to happiness and well-being?'. Such a debate is essential to clarify which areas of well-being education is trying to influence and how. It is only within this context that interventions to increase well-being can be appropriately designed and assessed, ensuring that the significant investment in well-being brings appropriate benefits to individuals and society.

Is this a brave new world? Do we want to move towards it?



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