Should Happiness Be Taught in School?

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Abstract

Within positive psychology, the concept of well-being (happiness) represents the main criteria for positive functioning and is generally considered the goal in life to be promoted. Research in this field is providing very strong evidence that happiness brings highly desirable life benefits, such as better health and longer life, successful relationships and better work performance. The most important reasons for teaching happiness in school are high prevalence of depression among young people worldwide, the small rise in life satisfaction in the last half a century, low students' satisfaction with school in many countries, and the synergy between learning and positive emotion. A number of studies suggest that school-based positive psychology programmes are effective in improving positive traits and well-being, even though reliability of these findings is still questioned. The Model for Positive Education is presented in this paper as a possible area of future research. This is applied framework of implementing positive psychology as a whole-school approach targeting six well-being domains, including positive emotions, positive engagement, positive accomplishment, positive purpose, positive relationships, and positive health, with a focus on character strengths.

Key words: *happiness; positive education; positive psychology; school; well-being.*

What is Happiness?

The emergence of positive psychology represents one of the most important developments in the field of psychology at the start of the 21st century (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The central premise in positive psychology is that psychological health does not equate with the absence of psychological problems (mental illness) but rather with the ability to lead a fulfilling and meaningful life (Keyes, 2006; Rusk & Waters, 2013). Within positive psychology, the concept of well-being (more formal label for the colloquial term "happiness") constitutes the primary criteria for positive functioning and is generally considered to be a worthwhile life goal.

The concept of well-being refers to optimal psychological functioning and experience. Current research on well-being has been derived from two general approaches. First is the hedonic approach, which focuses on high degree of satisfaction with one's life, experiencing a high level of positive emotions, and low level of negative emotions (Kahneman et al., 1999). The second is the eudaimonic approach (Waterman, 1993), which is focused on meaning and self-realization. Within this approach well-being is defined in terms of the degree to which a person is fully functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Evidence from a number of studies has indicated that well-being is probably best defined as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes aspects of both the hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives of well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Recently there has been increased recognition that both feeling good and functioning well are important elements of psychological health (Keyes & Annas, 2009), and the term flourishing has been used to comprise these two aspects of well-being. Diener and his co-workers (Diener et al., 2010) define flourishing as a psychosocial construct that includes having rewarding and positive relationships, feeling competent and confident, and believing that life is meaningful and purposeful. Seligman (2011) conceptualizes optimal well-being as consisting of five elements: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement.

Benefits of Happiness for the Individual and the Society

Research in the field of positive psychology provides strong evidence that happiness results in highly desirable life benefits, such as better health and longer life, successful relationships, and more. Although in some studies the causal relationship between happiness and these outcomes cannot be clearly established, strong correlation between happiness and life benefits is undeniable.

In a number of studies, high levels of well-being have been shown to be related to various positive outcomes, such as effective learning, productivity and creativity, good relationships, pro-social behaviour, and good health and longer life (for reviews see Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Diener et al., 2010; Huppert, 2009; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Happy people are kinder to others, less materialistic, as well as more likely to demonstrate self control (Fishbach & Labroo, 2007; Otake et al., 2006; Polak & McCullough, 2006). According to Lyubomirsky and colleagues (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), positive affect and life satisfaction predict work performance across a range of professions.

These studies, along with others, suggest that happy people contribute to better society in many ways. In addition to that, they also suggest that increasing happiness is a worthwhile goal – not only because being happy feels good, but because it is associated with successful outcomes in life.

Can Happiness Be Learned and Taught?

Even though external forces are constantly changing our lives and our life goals, hedonic treadmill theory of human happiness suggests that it is a relatively constant

state (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). According to this theory, every individual has a set point of happiness, which is close to neutrality. Different life circumstances can change this set point for short periods of time, but eventually it returns to neutrality.

Contrasting this view, research in positive psychology provides evidence that certain life events and circumstances can lastingly improve or decrease an individual's happiness set point (Diener et al., 2006). Martin Seligman (2002) was first to claim that individual happiness is a reflection of each individual's set happiness points, life circumstances, and factors under his or her voluntary control. Summarizing previous studies Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) integrated research on well-being into a single conceptual model. Specifically, they propose that a person's chronic happiness level is determined by three factors: a genetically based happiness set point (accounting for approximately 50% of the individual differences in chronic happiness), life circumstances that affect happiness (10%), and intentional activities and practices (the remaining 40%). Although we are not able to influence neither the set point of happiness nor our life circumstances, factors under voluntary control can be improved upon. Intentional activities appear to offer the best potential for permanent increase in well-being. The scope of these activities and practices is very broad. They can be cognitive, for example having an optimistic attitude (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006) or believing in benefits of forgiveness (Rijavec et al., 2013); behavioural, for example counting blessings, writing or sharing a letter of gratitude once a week (Froh et al., 2008; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005); or motivational, for example developing and pursuing life goals (Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). These intentional activities help people to act on what is happening in their lives rather than simply reacting to circumstances that are often uncontrollable and difficult to change. They can be taught to individuals, including students in the classroom. For example, some previous studies have demonstrated that an optimistic outlook can be taught to schoolchildren (Seligman et al., 1995).

Should Happiness Be Taught in School and Why?

There are several reasons why happiness should be taught in school. According to Seligman (Seligman et al., 2009), the most important are high prevalence of depression among young people all over the world, the small rise in life satisfaction in the last half a century, and the synergy between learning and positive emotion. Low satisfaction with school in many countries can be added to that list as well.

Preventing Depression

The rates of depression among young people are extremely high all over the world (Rao 2006; Rudolph et al., 2006). Nearly 20% of youth experience an episode of clinical depression by the end of high school (Lewinsohn et al., 1993). In Croatia, symptoms of existential crisis related to depression have been found in 5.7% of girls and 2.3% boys in high school (Bezinović, 2000). By some estimates, at the end of 20th century

depression was about ten times more common than it had been 50 years before (Wickramaratne et al., 1989). Estimates of depression among general population vary between 20-25% and 10-15% among children and youth (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1991; Seligman, 2011; Vulić-Prtorić, 2004). Although these findings can reflect not only increases in rates of depression but also increased awareness of depression, almost all investigators agree that the level of depression is high and that it mostly goes untreated (Costello et al., 2006; Twenge & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002).

Increasing Life Satisfaction

Although increases in income have been very high in advanced countries over the last 50 years, happiness level has stayed more or less the same (Frey & Stutzer, 2002). In most government programmes it is implicitly assumed that more wealth leads to more well-being. The general assumption is that if people have more money, they can buy more products and services, which will improve their standard of living, and consequently also their well-being. The evidence from a number of studies throws doubt upon this line of thought. For example, it has been shown that extrinsic life aspiration (including financial success) does not enhance but often detracts from well-being while investment in, or success at, intrinsic goals (emotional intimacy, community service, and personal growth) is associated with higher levels of well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 2001; Rijavec et al., 2006, 2011). In transitional countries (such as Croatia, Hungary or Russia), as opposed to wealthy western countries, extrinsic goals were not found to be so detrimental to well-being, but even in these countries intrinsic aspirations were more important for happiness than extrinsic ones (Brdar et al., 2009). These studies suggest that greater weight needs to be given to other factors that shape happiness and satisfaction.

Increasing Satisfaction with School

School satisfaction is probably a major aspect of children's quality of life. It is important because children have a right to feel good in the institution which is so important in their life. In addition to that, school satisfaction is important because it affects psychological well-being, as well as school engagement, absentee rate, drop-out and behavioural problems (e.g. Ainley et al., 1991; Reyes & Jason, 1993).

According to one study (WHO, 2008) conducted on 68,000 15-year-old students in more than 40 countries, on average 20% of all students (22% girls and 18% boys) "like school very much". In Croatia this percentage was 7% for girls and 8% for boys. Two years later the percentage was even lower (6%) placing Croatia at the bottom of the list (Kuzman et al., 2012).

Better Learning and Creative Thinking

Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory states that positive emotions broaden the scopes of attention, cognition, and action, widening the array of percepts, thoughts,

and actions presently in mind. Contrary to that, negative emotions shrink these arrays (for review see Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Bearing that in mind, it is not surprising that happiness is related to better academic achievement. There is evidence that well-being is associated with higher grades and lower rates of school absences (Suldo et al., 2011), and higher self-control and lower procrastination as well (Howell, 2009). Studies of children and adolescents have also shown that higher levels of life satisfaction are strongly correlated with increases in school grades and feelings of hope for future success (Ciarrochi et al., 2007; Valle et al., 2006).

Most young people attend school, so schools provide the best opportunity to enhance their well-being on a wider scale. According to Hamilton and Hamilton (2009), schools can be a key source of the skills and competencies for successful adaptation of the students. Furthermore, schools provide accessible sites within which programmes for promoting well-being can be located (Bond et al., 2007). Children and adolescents see school as "their own" setting, which can further facilitate these promotion-based interventions (Short & Talley, 1997).

How Effective Are School-Based Positive Psychology Programmes?

Several major projects have so far been developed in order to answer the question whether well-being can be taught to school children and how it can be done. Penn Resiliency Program (PRP, Seligman et al., 1995) aimed to increase students' ability to handle day-to-day problems more realistically and flexibly. It also teaches assertiveness, brainstorming, decision making, relaxation, optimism and coping skills. PRP is the most widely researched depression-prevention programme in the world. During the past two decades, over twenty studies, including more than three thousand children and adolescents between the ages of eight and twenty-two have evaluated PRP in comparison to control groups. These studies gave evidence that PRP reduces and prevents depression, hopelessness, anxiety and behavioural problems, and works equally well for children of different racial/ethnic backgrounds (for review see Brunwasser & Gillham, 2008). Some positive effects were found for The Strath Haven Positive Psychology Curriculum. This curriculum was designed with the goal to build character strengths, relationships, meaning, raise positive emotions and reduce negative ones as well. The evaluation of the programme revealed that it increased students' reports of enjoyment and engagement in school and improved social skills. However, the programme did not improve depression or anxiety symptoms, character strengths, or participation in extracurricular activities (Seligman et al., 2009). In one Israeli school a positive psychology school-based intervention resulted in significant decreases in general distress, anxiety and depression symptoms among the students (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2013).

There have been some attempts to implement positive psychology programmes in Croatia as well. In a one year programme (15-25 sessions during the school year) 115 secondary school students from 5 schools were included (Rijavec et al., 2007). Topics, such as awareness of positive experiences, gratitude, forgiveness, creativity and optimism were taught. After one year students included in the programme showed higher levels of life satisfaction and positive emotions than students in the control groups. Similar programme increased the level of optimism (Šverko et al., 2009) in second year secondary school students and third and fourth graders in primary school (Ivanković & Rijavec, 2012).

A study by Dawood (2013) attempted to assess efficacy of positive psychology interventions in schools by evaluating 28 studies from a number of databases. The results revealed positive psychology programmes to be effective in improving positive traits and well-being, but a scarcity of data does not support the reliability of these findings for the purpose of introducing these programmes on a large-scale. The results also reveal that programmes may not be equally effective for boys and girls.

Most studies to date have focused on the effects of positive psychology programmes at the level of individual students. Schools implementing these programmes as a whole-school approach are very rare.

The Model of Positive Education – an Example of Positive Psychology Programme as a Whole-School Approach

Positive Education is a recently developed paradigm that, broadly speaking, refers to the application of positive psychology in educational contexts (Green et al., 2011). Seligman (2011) defines Positive Education as traditional education focused on academic skill development, complemented by approaches that promote well-being and good mental health.

Jacolyn M. Norrish and her co-workers (Norrish et al., 2013) suggest Model for Positive Education, an applied framework developed over five years of implementing Positive Education as a whole-school approach. This framework was developed following the Geelong Grammar School project in one Australian school. Since 2005 they collaborated with Martin Seligman in working on well-being for students, as well as teaching and non-teaching staff. This project has been recognised as one of the pioneering pillars of what has come to be defined as Positive Education – a theoretical framework that unifies the core principles from the science of positive psychology with the practices of education in its broadest sense. The project aims to increase the experience of positive emotions in students and encourage them to engage their strengths for personal and community goals.

Implementation within this model focuses on six domains central to well-being - positive emotions, positive engagement, positive accomplishment, positive purpose, positive relationships, and positive health - supported by a focus on character strengths. These domains are described in Table 1.

Table 1

Six domains of well-being within the Model of Positive Education (adapted from Norrish et al., 2013)

Domains of well-being	Description
Positive emotions	Encourages students to anticipate, initiate, prolong and build positive emotional experiences. In addition to that, they are also encouraged to accept and develop constructive responses to negative emotions.
Positive engagement	Focuses on interest and curiosity. Encourages students to purse worthwhile goals with vitality and passion, using their signature strengths.
Positive accomplishment	Focuses on developing confidence and competence through striving for and achieving meaningful outcomes.
Positive purpose	Develops an understanding of the benefits of serving a greater cause and engaging in activities to support that.
Positive relationships	Develops social and emotional skills to enable the development of nourishing relationships with self and others.
Positive health	Helps students develop a sound knowledge base from which to establish habits that support positive physical and psychological health across the lifespan.

The well-being domains are integrated into the school curriculum on three levels, referred to as: teaching, embedding and living positive education.

Teaching Positive Education refers to teaching students elements of positive psychology, such as resilience, gratitude, strengths, meaning, flow, positive relationships and positive emotion. This helps students understand key ideas and concepts, engage meaningfully in exploration and reflection, and apply the skills and ideas in their everyday lives.

Positive Education is also implicitly embedded into the academic curriculum in most academic courses, on the sports field, in music or in pastoral counselling. For example: music teachers use resilience skills to build optimism from performances that did not go well; athletic coaches teach the skill of "letting go of grudges" against teammates who perform poorly or in history, students explore the topic of genealogy through the lens of character strengths by interviewing family members about their own and relatives' strengths.

Living Positive Education refers to programmes that support staff well-being and help staff to 'live' the skills they acquired within Positive Education and to act as authentic role models for students.

Conclusions

Although number of studies suggest that positive psychology programmes are effective in improving positive traits and well-being, further studies are needed to address reliability of these effects, as well as some inconsistencies in the results. One possible area of future research are positive psychology programmes as a whole-school approach within the model of Positive Education.

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Treba li sreću poučavati u školi?

Sažetak

U okviru pozitivne psihologije pojam dobrobit predstavlja glavni kriterij pozitivnog funkcioniranja i općenito se smatra važnim životnim ciljem. Istraživanja u tom području daju vrlo jake dokaze da sreća dovodi do različitih životnih prednosti, kao što su bolje zdravlje i duži život, uspješni odnosi i bolji uspjeh na poslu. Najvažniji razlozi za poučavanje sreće u školi jesu raširenost depresije kod mladih ljudi diljem svijeta, mali porast životnog zadovoljstva u posljednjih pola stoljeća, učeničko nezadovoljstvo školom u mnogim zemljama i sinergija između učenja i pozitivnih emocija. Veći broj istraživanja ukazuje na to da su programi pozitivne psihologije u školi djelotvorni u razvijanju pozitivnih osobina i povećanju dobrobiti, ali pouzdanost je tih rezultata još uvijek upitna. U ovom radu prikazuje se model pozitivnog obrazovanja kao jedno od mogućih područja budućih istraživanja. To je okvir za primjenu pozitivnog obrazovanja na razini škole usmjeren na šest područja dobrobiti uključujući pozitivne emocije, pozitivnu uključenost, pozitivna postignuća, pozitivnu svrhu, pozitivne odnose i pozitivno zdravlje, s naglaskom na osobne snage.

Ključne riječi: *dobrobit; pozitivna psihologija; pozitivno obrazovanje; sreća; škola.*