Should schools be teaching happiness?

Abstract: Anthony Seldon and Ian Morris believe that there is no more important task for schools than teaching happiness – or wellbeing as it is more accurately described. Here, they describe how all students at Wellington College experience wellbeing classes. Each lesson starts with two regular features: meditation and ‘blessing counting’ followed by various elements of the skills of wellbeing. These may only become fully meaningful for students later but should equip them with life skills for the rest of their lives.

“Happiness” was the new buzzword of 2006. A host of books was published on the subject, including on the history, philosophy and politics of happiness. Every newspaper carried articles on the subject and even David Cameron, the Conservative Party Leader, started to say that an objective of government policy should be to maximise “general well-being” (GWB) rather than the traditional target of maximising Gross National Product (GNP). The year finished with The Economist magazine (2006a, 2006b) devoting its front cover to happiness, and many of the pages inside; and the New York Times looking at why happiness classes have become so prevalent in American universities. Truly, the idea has come of age.

But can and should we be teaching happiness in our schools? Everyone seems to have a view. When Wellington College, an independent senior school in Berkshire, announced that it was to be teaching happiness (or well-being, as it should be called), there were howls of derision from the right wing press and scorn from the left. The right regarded any attempt to teach children how to be happy and to look after their minds, bodies and emotions, as a dangerous distraction from “real teaching”. The left had traditional contempt for any idea emanating from private schools, coupled...

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with a view that "this kind of thing is all right for posh kids, but not in the real world". I have tried not to caricature either viewpoint (sadly, I have in fact represented both accurately).

This article is in two parts. The first part, written by Anthony Seldon, discusses why all schools in Britain should be teaching well-being, and the second, by Ian Morris, Head of Philosophy and Religion at Wellington, describes the course, as it is taught at the school.

The reasons why

I believe that there is no more important task for any school than to ensure that its children leave at the age of 11, 16 or 18 knowing more about who they are; what they want to do with their lives; how to manage and look after themselves; and how to relate well to others and to their environment around them. All these are the core of well-being lessons. The conventional curriculum in schools today, meanwhile, gives young people, more or less well, the skills and knowledge they need to learn to be able to work and live in modern society.

I believe that the present education system in Britain is badly out of line. What is currently studied in schools is the product of what universities, employers and government have put there. Interestingly, these three bodies are far from happy with school leavers. Universities increasingly find A level to be such a blunt instrument that they are setting their own tests to help sift the intellectually able from the merely well taught. Employer organisations regularly complain about poor levels of literacy, numeracy and social skills, while government bodies, most recently the report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group (2006) have concluded that the current levels of under-achievement in British schools can only be tackled by a greater emphasis on personalised learning, and a whole host of other measures. These three bodies have only themselves to blame. We need to go back to the drawing board, and ask "what is the purpose of school education?" What would we like our young people to be/do, know/understand by the time they leave school at the age of 16 or 18?

Children need to be put at the very heart of education. Schools are for many children an almost brutal and irrelevant experience where they are drilled with facts and they find it hard to understand what this means to them. Well-being classes, and the whole philosophy that goes with them, are designed to put the child at the centre of their own learning discovery. I believe strongly that what is not taught in schools will not be acquired later on in life. We send out our young people directly into jobs or higher education without fundamental knowledge of how their minds work; what the main emotions are that they will encounter and how to deal with them; and how to look after their bodies and to ensure that they operate
well.

Child depression, as well as adult depression and mental illness, is at an all time high. Again, these classes will help young people ward off the risks of developing depression in their lives. Much of the anger and alienation of young people comes because schools have not helped them to discover what it is that they most want to do in their own lives, and these classes help in that direction.

In practice
But what exactly goes on in the classes? The aims of the wellbeing course at Wellington are simple and threefold. To make students aware of who they are, to develop and improve students’ relationship with life; and to help students to develop the skills of wellbeing.

The teaching methodology is pretty straightforward too. We hope to engage students in actively improving their own wellbeing and living what we teach them, which is the great hurdle for PSHE. In other words, we try to get the students to live in ways that are productive for them, rather than lapsing into destructive behaviour. To do this, lessons have to be engaging, active and not didactic in any way: we hope that students will discover most of what we are trying to teach them and feel as if the knowledge or the skill belongs to them. It is also important to be provocative, unusual and challenging: for example we might use clips from ‘The Office’ or ‘Fawlty Towers’ to make a point: any kind of stimulus which helps students to engage with the ideas is encouraged. We play games or use role play or perhaps might use drums in a lesson to illustrate points about cooperation and harmony.

The lessons do not follow a set formula, although there are two ingredients that are present every time. Each lesson begins with five or more minutes of ‘imaginative practice’ which is akin to meditation. Psychologist, Kabat-Zim (1993) carried out research into the positive benefits of meditation where he offered a course in meditation and divided the people who applied into two groups: one group would learn meditation immediately, the others would have to wait. The group that learned immediately was given eight weeks of training and had their ‘happiness’ measured afterwards by questionnaire and tests on brain activity. The group who had mediation scored much more highly that the group who had not. Also, everyone taking part in the study was given a flu jab after the course whether they had meditated or not: those who had meditated developed a much higher immunity to flu as a result of the jab.

Top performers also use ‘imaginative practice’: Sir Steve Redgrave has commented on how much of a difference it has made to his success at rowing and you will often see bobsled drivers using a form of it to rehearse the course before they set off. For students it can be an enormous help in
getting them to sleep effectively, helping them to develop focus and concentration and also to rehearse potentially tricky situations before they occur.

The second core ingredient is ‘blessing counting’. All students, after they have done some ‘imaginative practice’, write down two things that they are grateful for that have happened since the last session. Some promising research carried out by Emmons and McCullough (2004) shows that people who regularly reflect on positive things in their lives have increased levels of wellbeing.

We encourage our students to practice both of these skills as often as possible outside lessons.

The skills of wellbeing
Aside from these two regular features, over the course of two years, our students experience the following ‘skills of wellbeing’:

■ **Who am I?** We start by getting the students to engage with who they are by filling out a ‘who am I?’ sheet containing various questions about them. A colleague had some interesting results with this. One of his students is quite hard work: surly and prone to emotional immaturity in a number of ways. One of the questions in the exercise is, ‘what are your regrets?’ My colleague asked the group if they wanted to contribute any of their answers and this one student, unusually, put his hand up. His regrets were, “I regret not having a better relationship with my dad and I regret that my parents aren’t still together.”

■ **Emotions:** This is all about teaching the students emotional intelligence and how to use emotions to make progress: harnessing the energy inherent in emotion to bring about productive and desirable outcomes. Another facet of this is looking at how our emotions can have physical consequences such as stomach trouble, heart disease, or in the case of Gail Porter, whose story we look at, hair loss.

■ **Past, present, future and fantasy:** We all know people who are stuck in one or more of the following: their past, the present, their future or a fantasy life. The aim of this part of the course is the integration of these four important parts of human life into the self in a balanced way, and to show students the pitfalls of getting trapped in any one area. We teach students about how to avoid this, using ideas such as Csikszentmihalyi’s (1997 and 2002) theory of ‘Flow’ and Baylis’ and Keverne’s (2005) work on the avoidance of living a fantasy life.

■ **Relationships within ourselves:** This module is concerned with getting ourselves set up to achieve wellbeing. We examine how factors such as regular exercise, getting enough sleep, good diet and awareness of our subconscious mind can all contribute to increased wellbeing if harnessed skilfully.
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- **Relationships with others:** We teach students about the value of relationships of all types. People who are the most successful human beings always cite the importance of a partner, family and friends. We teach community living, conflict resolution and collaboration instead of the individualism that governs many peoples’ lives. A great example of how to work with others can be seen in the army bomb disposal unit who undergo rigorous training in teams.

- **The environment:** The environment plays a very important role in our wellbeing. In modern life, which can confine us to a room with a TV or games console, this can be forgotten. We show students that a vital part of being well is to get outside as often as possible. Research has shown that patients recovering from surgery, who have a view of the outside from their hospital window, recover on average a day faster than patients who do not.

- **Technology:** This module examines how factors of modern life such as TV, email, advertising and text messaging can be excessively intrusive and we get students to explore whether or not they are overdosing on technology, or using it to benefit them.

- **Talent:** this module explores the importance of becoming an expert in something. The idea that you have to be born with a talent to become good at something is a myth. The reason Zinedine Zidane is a better footballer than David Beckham is that he didn’t waste practice time by going to school, and consequently has a few more hours under his belt. Anyone can develop a reasonable level of expertise in anything at any point in their life.

- **Stretch and balance:** This last module is directed at showing the value of constantly challenging ourselves to give a constant feeling of achievement. Those who live stagnant lives do not experience the incredible sense of satisfaction at having pushed their own personal boundaries. Of course, it is vital to counterbalance challenge with rest and it is crucial for young people to choose their battles well.

Students keep a diary throughout the course, which they fill with their reflections, the things they are grateful for and resource sheets that we produce for them. Wellbeing is a lifelong skill that takes time to practice. Many of the things we go through with our students may mean nothing to them until they are in their twenties or perhaps older: it is important that they have a record of what they have looked at for reflection at the times they need it.

**Sex and drugs**

You will have noticed that the course does not have dedicated modules on SRE (sex and relationships education) and substance misuse. As a PSHE
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coo-ordinator, I was happy to lose curriculum time on drugs and sex. I think that we sometimes over-egg the pudding with this aspect of PSHE and can end up with a diet of quite negative education, rather than equipping students with skills that avoid this kind of behaviour in the first place.

At Wellington, the key elements of SRE/substance misuse are covered elsewhere in the school through peer education in ‘Hype’ and external providers such as the school nurse, or the police and there is no curriculum time specifically dedicated to SRE/substance misuse. It is our belief that students who are taking care of their wellbeing will naturally avoid things like one-night stands/unprotected sex and experimentation with illegal substances, because if they take their self-esteem and wellbeing seriously they may not have the need to mask emotional problems with risky sex or drugs. Also, for those who decide to experiment anyway, hopefully wellbeing will encourage the kind of mindset that will help them out of these situations.

Wellbeing needs to be a whole school ethos. We are in the early stages at Wellington, but it is my hope that as wellbeing evolves, we will be ‘a wellbeing institution’ where students and staff realise that their primary duty is to guarantee wellbeing for the simple reason that everything flows from it. Without wellbeing, good exam results and positive behaviour are difficult to achieve!

References