Promoting Happiness in Schools: Exploring Supplemental Curriculum Implementation

Abstract

In the midst of a dire mental health crisis among American youth, in which escalating numbers of children are being diagnosed with behavioral and mood disorders and suicide rates are on the rise, schools serve at a critical juncture. This paper analyzes the effectivity of schools' efforts to improve student happiness and well-being, focusing on supplemental "happiness" curriculums. These curriculums generally focus on mental health care, stress coping strategies, social and emotional learning, and other related topics. They have been implemented in schools around the world. A review of limited quantitative data on these pilot programs suggests implementation of such curriculum improves students' attitudes about themselves, their relationships, and their school environment. While more research is required to assess their long-term success, American schools can learn from these strategies to begin fighting back against the declining mental health of American youth and return to their purpose of inspiring children to create, grow, and learn.

Research and media attention have congregated in the past few years around a "mental health crisis" affecting young people in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 5 American children between the ages of 3 and 17, around 15 million people, suffer from a diagnosable mental, emotional or behavioral disorder in a given year. However, only 20% of these children are diagnosed and receive treatment. There are a variety of reasons why a child might not seek diagnosis or treatment. The most powerful of these reasons are persistent stigmas around mental illness, lack of affordable resources, and insufficient access to mental health information. This results in an environment where 80% of children with mental health challenges, around 12 million people, do not receive treatment. Recent research warns that serious depression is worsening among teenagers, especially teenage girls (Snow, 2017). Suicide is the second leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 10 and 34. An August 2017 CDC report indicates that the suicide rate among girls reached a 40-year high in 2015. In the past decade, high-profile instances of multiple suicides at one school, referred to as "suicide clusters" (Rosin, 2015), have occurred. Many suicide clusters happen at high schools with high academic achievement, where students struggle with self-esteem issues under competitive, high-pressure environments. Such tragedies have shocked seemingly safe, happy upper-middle class neighborhoods and sparked a national debate on the alarming state of teenagers' mental and emotional health. One of these sad incidents took place at Palo Alto High School, located just a few miles away from Stanford University in California. The school's suicide rate has been between four and five times the national average over the last ten years, and 12% of Palo Alto high-school students surveyed in the 2013–14 school year reported having seriously contemplated suicide in the past twelve months (Rosin, 2015). Palo Alto's situation is nowhere near unique. Declining mental health among adolescents has affected a wide range of communities and students across geographical regions and socioeconomic stratas. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds usually face additional challenges related to poverty, racism, and other systemic disadvantages that contribute negatively to their mental well-being.

Young people spend the majority of their time in school. Through their everyday interactions at school, they form their social and personal identities. Pressures experienced in school, both academic and social, have been frequently cited as the source of struggling students' stress, anxiety, and depression. However, with potential mentors in the form of teachers, administrators, counselors, and peers and a stated purpose of preparing students to become successful, well-adjusted adults, schools also have the potential to be sources of support, guidance, and recovery for students. As students seem to be increasingly distressed and miserable under today's school environments, how are schools responding to this trend? What solutions have been designed and implemented around the world to improve student well-being? By exploring these ideas and their effectivity, educators, policymakers, psychologists, and more can brainstorm how to make the American school system more conducive to bolstering students' happiness and well-being. Doing so could improve students' long-term success across a variety of indicators, both personal and academic, and even potentially save their lives.

Literature Review

The Role of Happiness In Education

A famous Harvard began study tracking the health of 268 Harvard sophomores in 1938 during the Great Depression, hoping to reveal the secrets to a healthy and happy life. After following the surviving men for nearly 80 years as part of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, one of the world's longest studies of adult life, researchers reported that happiness and close relationships were two of the most essential factors to a long, healthy life (Mineo 2018). If education is meant to prepare children for healthy and productive adult lives, it seems crucial to prioritize students' happiness within education systems.

However, when contemplating the role of happiness in education, some find it difficult to disaggregate the influence of environmental factors, ones that can be created and altered by a school environment, on a child's happiness compared to personal, family-related, and societal factors. While some educational thinkers warn of the limits of education to improve student happiness when so many other factors influence a student's well-being, others, including Nel Noddings of the Stanford Graduate School of Education, contend that "happiness and education are, properly, intimately related: Happiness should be an aim of education and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness" (Noddings, 2003, p.1).

Defining and Measuring Student Happiness

Researchers, psychologists, and educators alike continually debate the ambiguous and oft-changing definitions of "happiness" and "well-being." Happiness, shaped by a complex amalgamation of emotions, beliefs, physical states, and more, is inherently unique to each individual. This makes it very difficult to quantitatively measure. Many researchers opt to create their own operational definitions of happiness for the purposes of their individual research. There are a variety of established ways to measure happiness in social science fields. The most widely-used method for adults is the satisfaction with life scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). This is not often used with children, except for when it was included on The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Program for International

Student Assessment (PISA) tests in 2015. A 2011 study exploring conceptual models to improve student happiness in Iranian schools defines happiness as “characterized by positive affective states such as optimism, positive thinking, and the perception of personal well-being” (Talebzadeh and Samkan, 2011). PERMA, a framework developed by American psychologist Martin Seligman (2011) stands for Positive emotion, Engagement, Good relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment.

Some theories propose that happiness, in the sense of a deep, lasting well-being, is a skill that can be learned with committed effort (Ricard, 2003). This means cultivating classroom practices and lessons designed to promote happiness and well-being, in addition to, and not instead of, traditional educational subjects, may lead to benefits promoted by subjective well-being. Ryff & Keyes (1995) delineate six aspects of wellbeing: self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. A method some thinkers use to parse between conflicting concepts of happiness is distinguishing edonic (felt pleasure) from eudaemonic (purpose-oriented) well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001), advocating for the promotion of more eudaemonic well-being through education. Huppert & So (2009) focus on a state of “flourishing” to define when an individual has reached the highest state of their personal well-being. To flourish, an individual must have all the “core features” below and three of the five “additional features”.

Table 1

Hedonic and Eudaemonic Flourishing[image:] Source: (Huppert & So, 2009, p.2)

In studying students’ happiness, researchers must also consider how to define unUnhappiness is typically measured by depression inventories: the Children’s Depression Inventory in children (Kovacs, 2004) and the Beck Depression Inventory or Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale in adults and analogous anxiety inventories for children and adults (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). While lowering depression and anxiety is a goal of happiness curriculum, unhappiness in the sense of depression and anxiety does not exclude all happiness, but rather hinders happiness (Rezaee, Hedayati, Naghizadeh, Farjam, Sabet, & Paknahad, 2016).

Another concept consistently cited as a source of student stress and unhappiness is burnout. Burnout can be defined as exhaustion due to school demands, a cynical, detached attitude toward one's school, and feelings of inadequacy as a student (Kiuru, Aunola, Nurmi, Leskinen, & Salmela-Aro, 2008). A 2008 study by Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Pietika?inen, & Jokela, characterized burnout as a widespread phenomenon when their results “ revealed only small differences between schools in school burnout.” Their study included 58,657 students from 431 comprehensive schools and 29,515 students from 228 upper secondary schools who completed a questionnaire measuring their school burnout. The survey also measured school-related variables (i.e. negative school climate, positive motivation received from teachers, and support from the school) and background variables (i.e. gender, grade-point average, socio-economic status, and family structure) (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Pietika?inen, & Jokela, 2008). While differences between schools were not observed, at the individual level, negative school climate was positively related with feelings of burnout, and support from school and positive motivation received from teachers were negatively related to burnout. Interestingly, female students and those with lower GPAs experienced higher levels of school burnout compared to male students and those with higher GPAs, perhaps indicating the effects of stereotype threat on burnout. A

longitudinal study on the influence of peer group and selection on students' burnout also concluded that high academic achievement protected group members against an increase in school burnout (Kiuru, Aunola, Nurmi, Leskinen, & Salmela-Aro, 2008). Due to these findings, it is essential that efforts to address student happiness address the populations most likely to experience burnout, a phenomenon characterized by feelings of unhappiness and inadequacy.

Recent Trends

Between 1930 and 2008, a review of research literature on student happiness indicates a gradual shift in both research and school practices away from the concept of general student well-being, with an emphasis on individual assistance and support, and towards the concept of student psychological wellbeing, with an "emphasis on universal, rather than targeted interventions and the development of positive behaviours" (Noble, McGrath, Roffey, & Rowling, 2008). This shift is likely backed by increasing conversations about how emotions are intimately related to cognition and learning, along with concern at growing rates of mental illness, especially depression, among adolescents (Craig, 2007). The increase in the amount of students requiring mental health support indicates a need for more more resources directed towards individual mental health treatment. However, the growing number of students needing this treatment has overburdened already under-prioritized mental health resources in schools and caused more schools to focus more on generalized solutions. It would be ideal for schools provide clinical mental health support for each of their students who may struggle. However, schools are exploring other options to improve student mental health under budget constraints, especially as the number of students who require mental health resources is continually rising. While more generalized solutions are not a substitution for treatment for seriously mentally ill students, they can begin to tackle some of root causes of mental health challenges among children. They can provide strategies to help students develop healthier coping habits as well as accurate information about mental health to help foster a more inclusive and understanding school and peer environment. If designed and implemented effectively, they can help school leadership be better in-tune to which students may be at risk of feeling burnt-out, anxious, or depressed and intervene with more individualized treatment before these feelings escalate.

Supplemental Curriculum Implementation

Multiple quantitative studies have explored the effectiveness of implementing a "positive education" curriculum in schools. Some studies focus on the effect of happiness education on traditional measures of academic achievement such as test scores. In a 2016 study, 18 secondary schools (n=8,385 students) in Bhutan were randomly assigned to a treatment group or a control group. The treatment schools received an intervention targeting ten non-academic well-being skills. A second study replicated this process on a larger scale in 70 secondary schools (m = 68,762 students) in Mexico, where the schools were also randomly assigned to a treatment group or a control group. A third replication study at an even larger scale was completed in 694 secondary schools (q = 694,153 students) in Peru. In all three studies, students in the intervention schools reported significantly higher well-being and performed significantly better on standardized national exams at the end of a 15-month intervention. In the first study, the results for both well-being and academic performance remained significant 12 months after the intervention ended. In all three studies, perseverance, engagement, and quality of relationships emerged as the strongest factors underlying increases in well-being and academic performance. The results suggest that, "independent of social, economic, or cultural

contexts, teaching well-being in schools on a large scale is both feasible and desirable” (Adler, 2016).

Strategies to improve happiness and psychological well-being in students, in addition to relieving individual stress, often include building a stronger sense of community and social engagement between peers and the school community at large. A study investigating the relationship between sense of community, civic engagement and social well-being in Italian adolescents showed that involvement in formal groups is associated with increased civic involvement and increased sense of community. In the study, 566 high school students from two demographically distinct cities completed a questionnaire assessing sense of community, social well?being, involvement in structured group activities, and civic engagement. Its findings suggest that, to increase social well?being, it is important to provide adolescents with more opportunities to experience a sense of belonging to the peers' group and promote prosocial behaviours in a community context (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007).

In China, the Bureau of Education of Beijing funded the 19th Middle School of Beijing to build a model of “happy education” in 2012. The model combined positive psychology with traditional Chinese philosophy to design courses, train teachers, and remodel school culture. Over the course of three years, from 2012 to 2015, the rate of first-class college entrances rose from 69.6% to 75%. In 2015, Ms. Dou Guimei, the principal of Tsinghua University Primary School (TUPS) decided to roll out a Positive Education program designed by the Positive Psychology Research Center (PPRC) of Tsinghua University. TUPS is now one widely-known across China as one of the country’s most popular elementary schools and has inspired other communities and schools to consider implementation of supplemental “happiness” curriculum.

One example in the United States of an effort to promote curriculum aimed at improving student well-being is the work of The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which focuses on studying, defining, and promoting social and emotional learning. CASEL defines social and emotional learning through five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills: Self-awareness (The ability to accurately recognize one’s emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior,) self-management (the ability to regulate one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively, social awareness (the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others,) relationship skills (the ability to establish and

maintain rewarding relationships with others,) and responsible decision making (the ability to make constructive and respectful choices) (Adler & Seligman, 2016). In a review of 213 experimental-control group studies of K-12 students who participated in CASEL programs, students showed improvement in “social and emotional skills, self-concept, and bonding to school, less disruptive classroom behavior, aggression, bullying, and delinquent acts; and reduced stress and social withdrawal” (Adler & Seligman, 2016).

Case Study: Quantitative Results of the Personal Well-Being Lesson Curriculum

The Personal Well-Being Lesson curriculum includes eighteen scripted lessons targeted towards secondary schools, supported by a collection of instructor and student materials and teacher training guidelines. The lessons cover subjects such as the scientific bases of

happiness, focusing specifically on two core aspects – positive emotions/experiences and positive relationships. Each lesson draws from psychological findings on happiness and introduces the concepts and skills through role-plays and other hands-on activities. There are usually three to five of these activities per lesson and students are encouraged to practice them throughout the lesson. Curriculum notes inform teachers of psychological theory and empirical findings behind suggested activities and interventions. References and further readings are also provided at the end of each lesson. Each lesson includes resources, such as PowerPoint presentations and students handouts, bound together in student “well-being diaries” (Boniwell, I., Osin, E. N., & Martinez, C., 2015). The curriculum was developed iteratively over two years with teacher input from participating schools. It was designed with principles in mind which have been identified as important for successful implementation of social and emotional learning and well-being-related programs, including whole-school approach; teaching by class teachers; acceptance by teachers. It incorporates several skills derived from cognitive behaviour teaching approaches such as cooperative learning, educational games, and circle time-type approaches (Noble, McGrath, Roffey, & Rowling, 2008). The eighteen lessons are titled: 1. Building the Basics, 2. Just for Fun, 3. Understanding Emotions, 4. Positive Emotions, 5. Reducing Negative Feelings, 6. Hope, 7. Building on the Positives Pt. 1, 8. Building on the Positives Pt. 2, 9. The Flow Zone, 10. Happiness Across Cultures, 11. The Happiness Equation, 12. Positive Relationships, 13. Everyone is Different, 14. Strengths Stories, 15. Listening to Others, 16. Forgiveness, 17. Kindness and Gratitude, and 18. Putting it Together (Boniwell, I., Osin, E. N., & Martinez, C., 2015).

To test the impact of these lessons, a pre-test was administered in the beginning of September 2013 and post-test was administered at the end of June 2014. A control group and a significant time interval between the two measurement sessions helped minimize the potential bias associated with repeated testing. The same set of measures was utilised for the pre-test and post-test. These were the Students’ Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS) (Huebner, 1991) which is intended for children aged 8–14. It includes seven items rated on a 6-point Likert scale measuring general life satisfaction. Sample items include: ‘My life is going well’, ‘I wish I had a different kind of life’ (reverse-scored). The reliability of this scale was 0.84 (Cronbach’s ? reliability values for the pre-test are given, N = 164). The tests also measured The Multidimensional Students’ Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) (Huebner, 1994; Huebner & Gilman, 2002), a self-report instrument designed for use with students in grades 3–12. It includes 40 items rated on a 4-point scale measuring satisfaction with different aspects of life: self (0.80), school (0.80), living environment (0.78), friends (0.90) and family (0.83). The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule for Children (Laurent et al., 1999) includes a list of 27 adjectives that reflect positive affect (PA: 12 items) and negative affect (NA: 15 items). The students rated the extent to which they experienced each emotion during the past few weeks on a 5-point Likert scale. No significant main or interaction effects were found for the general Students’ LSS, as well as for the total score. However, a number of effects related to domains of life satisfaction measured by the MSLSS were statistically significant.

Data

Figure 1. Estimated Marginal Means with 95% Confidence Intervals for MSLSS Scores (Boniwell, I., Osin, E. N., & Martinez, C., 2015, p.7)

Figure 2. Estimated Marginal Means with 95% Confidence Intervals for PANAS-C Scores (Boniwell, I., Osin, E. N., & Martinez, C., 2015, p.7)

Conclusion

The current mental health crisis among American youth has developed within a world that is rapidly changing and increasingly in crisis itself. Students' happiness is affected by a multitude of factors. Some of the rise in feelings of unhappiness across Generation Z can be attributed to the dynamic pressures of the society we live in. New technology continually alters the way humans interact with information, the world, and each other, escalating threats related to economic instability, climate destruction, and political turmoil place current students' future in danger. Amongst these larger societal forces, there are limits to schools' abilities to completely improve students' happiness and mental health. However, this does not mean schools should not try. As multiple studies have proven, emphasis on strategies to take care of personal well-being through additional curriculum that promotes students creative, interpersonal abilities do improve students' overall attitudes towards school and their own self-confidence. There are certainly limits to this type of research. Happiness is inherently difficult to measure quantitatively and many studies rely on self-reporting by students, which can be unreliable to different degrees. More research on the reliability the various happiness scales discussed in this paper would contribute to more robust and valuable studies about the effectivity of happiness education in the future. Additionally, further research should be conducted on whether such curriculums provide improvement in students' well-being in the long-term. While short-term solutions are easier to implement and study, determining which strategies work in the long-term is the only sustainable way to truly work to change declining rates of mental health among American students and students around the world.

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