

Introduction

In the past few months, when I have told people that I'm writing a book on happiness and education, more than one has responded with some puzzlement, "But they don't go together!" Indeed, the fact that the two seem increasingly opposed these days is one motive for tackling the topic. 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.

An interest in biography has increased my concern about the connections among happiness, misery, boredom, and schooling. Why is it that so many bright, creative people have hated school? Observing this well-documented misery, why do we continue to justify it with the old excuse, "Some day you'll thank me for this"? Parents and educators are sustained in this attitude, in part, because so many adult children *do* thank us for their perceived success – a success, sometimes questionable, that they credit to their earlier misery. And so, they are ready, even eager, to inflict a new round of misery on others. Indeed, many parents and teachers are afraid *not* to do this, fearing that children will be spoiled, unprepared, undisciplined, unsuccessful, and ultimately unhappy.

Another motivating factor has been disappointment with my Christian upbringing. I have developed an aversion to the glorification of suffering that pervades Christian doctrine, to the fear-based admonitions to be good, and to the habit of deferring happiness to some later date. Some readers will be quick to point out that formal religions – even Christianity – also bring happiness to many lives and that the concept of joy is central to religious life. In the

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discussion of religion, I have tried to balance these very different tendencies.

Through more than five decades of teaching and mothering, I have noticed also that children (and adults, too) learn best when they are happy. This is not to say that harsh methods are never effective in producing rote learning, nor does it mean that intermittent vexation and occasional failure are absent from a happy student life. On the contrary, challenge and struggle are part of the quest for knowledge and competence. However, struggle is an inevitable aspect of learning; we educators do not have to invent struggles for our students, and students who are generally happy with their studies are better able to bring meaning to difficult periods and get through them with some satisfaction.

Closely related to the observation that happy students learn better than unhappy ones is something I judge to be even more important. Happy people are rarely mean, violent, or cruel. Having said that, and I believe it is largely true of individuals, I will immediately modify it by noting that groups and even whole societies can be happy, while others suffer under their exploitation and neglect. We shall have to ask in what sense such people are happy. I will, however, affirm the initial claim: Happy individuals are rarely violent or intentionally cruel, either to other human beings or to nonhuman animals. Our basic orientation to moral education, then, should be a commitment to building a world in which it is both possible and desirable for children to be good – a world in which children are happy.¹

These are the major observations that have led me to a study of happiness and education. But there have been smaller things, too. Why do we so often defeat our own purposes by choosing means that are in clear contradiction to our aims? If, for example, we teach poetry in the hope that it will be a lifelong source of wisdom and delight, why do we bore students with endless analysis and an emphasis on technical vocabulary? Why do we tell children to do their best and then give them low grades when their best is not as good as that of others? Why, for that matter, do we give grades at all?

I have also wondered why so few educational theorists have written about happiness. A. S. Neill has spoken out boldly on the topic, but most school people find Neill too permissive, and even I prefer more direction than Neill recommends.² The Japanese educator

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Tsunesaburo Makiguchi also makes happiness a primary aim of education, and his identification of happiness with the creation of value is interesting, but its focus may seem a bit odd to Western readers.³ Another approach is that taken by Robin Barrow, who presents an analysis of happiness and some implications of that analysis for schooling.⁴ His book, like those of Neill and Makiguchi, is well worth reading, but some readers may find it too abstract. As my own investigation proceeds, we will see that a few others have also discussed happiness in connection with education, but we are unlikely to find any mention of happiness in current writing devoted to school reform and standards. (I hasten to add that we find some such mention in writing that opposes the present movement.)⁵

In the chapters that follow, I first discuss some important definitions and descriptions of happiness. Is happiness episodic or can a whole life be described as happy? Is pleasure the main feature of happiness? Can only good people be really happy, and what does it mean to be good? Is there such a thing as a happy personality? Educators need not agree on exactly what constitutes happiness in order to agree that students should be given an opportunity to learn about the variety of views. What could be more important than sorting through these views to find or modify one's own?

Teachers should not define happiness for their students and, although I clearly prefer a complex description of happiness, I have tried to leave the concept open to continued exploration. Similarly, I have not tried to separate questions about the description of happiness from questions about how to achieve it. Understanding the possibilities and reflecting on them should in itself make a major contribution to finding happiness.

As the discussion proceeds, we encounter closely related topics that require further analysis. For example, one feature of happiness seems to be the absence of pain or suffering. I will reject the glorification of suffering so often found in religious traditions, but I will contend that true happiness requires a capacity to share unhappiness; that is, to be truly happy, we must be moved to alleviate the misery around us. We must ask whether there are times when an otherwise happy person *should* be unhappy. The analysis offered will not, however, be a "hair shirt" perspective. With the philosopher David Hume, I have little admiration for the ascetic virtues unless they are necessary for the happiness of others, and they rarely are.

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To be happy, human beings must have important needs satisfied and, in considering needs, several fascinating questions arise: How far should parents and teachers go in satisfying expressed needs (those that arise in the one who has them)? How far should we press in establishing and meeting inferred needs (those that arise externally and are imposed on the one said to have them)? How do we distinguish wants from needs? Do we know what makes us happy? Are there things that *should* make us happy?

Throughout these chapters, I will refer to two great domains in which we seek happiness – the private (or personal) and the public (primarily occupational) – as well as a number of sources of happiness. For example, positive relations with other people are certainly a source of happiness in both private and public life. Similarly, a good character seems to contribute substantially to both personal and occupational happiness. However, despite such overlaps, I have separated the two large domains to facilitate the analysis. Part 2 looks primarily at personal life, and Part 3 considers public life.

Before discussing the sources of happiness in personal life, I consider a fundamental question of education – that of aims. Not only do I suggest that happiness should be an aim of education but also I encourage the restoration of aims-talk. In the past, great educators have devoted much thought to the issue of aims, but today we hear little such debate. It is as though our society has simply decided that the purpose of schooling is economic – to improve the financial condition of individuals and to advance the prosperity of the nation. Hence students should do well on standardized tests, get into good colleges, obtain well-paying jobs, and buy lots of things. Surely there is more to education than this. But what? This question is at the heart of aims-talk. What are we trying to accomplish? For whom? Why? Closely related to basic aims-talk is discussion of the function of aims in evaluating all we do. Are our aims consistent with one another? Are the means we have chosen compatible with our aims? *Aims-talk* – the continual dialogue and reflection on aims – is essential to the thoughtful practice of education.

Armed with some sense of what happiness is, its relation to suffering and the satisfaction of needs, and the centrality of aims-talk in education, we are prepared to explore several important sources of happiness in personal life: making a home, love of place and nature, parenting, and the development of personal and interpersonal

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capacities. In this last category, we will consider the development of character, spirit, intellect, and personality. Throughout all of this discussion, I ask readers to imagine how rich and satisfying studies of these topics might be and to wonder with me why we give them so little attention in our schools. Why do we insist on teaching all children algebra and teach them almost nothing about what it means to make a home? If one's answer to this is that making a home is properly learned at home, how do we provide for those children who do not learn this at home? Moreover, all of us still have much to learn about this task that is so central to our lives and happiness.

In Part 3, I consider the sources of happiness in the public domain. It is wonderful to find happiness in one's work. How can schools help in this quest? The role of community in supporting happiness is also considered and, finally, I ask whether happiness is likely to be enhanced by life in a democratic society. If democratic life influences our happiness at all, the effects are probably indirect, but the possibility is worth exploring. Perhaps even more important is a question of the special requirements exerted on citizens by life in a liberal democracy. What does it take to be happy in such a society?

In the last chapter of the book, I ask about happiness *in* education. Education aimed at happiness cannot be satisfied by simply teaching students about happiness. Here, again, aims-talk is crucial. If our means are to be compatible with our ends, then the quality of life in schools must yield some happiness, and students must be encouraged to put what they have learned into practice. Moreover, the evaluative function of aims-talk becomes important. Happiness is not the only aim of either education or life, but it is a central aim, and it can be used as an evaluative screen through which to judge everything we do. That sort of evaluation can change the lives of teachers and students.

PART 1

Happiness as an Aim of Life and Education

In these opening chapters, I explore various views on happiness, on the relation between suffering and happiness, and on the satisfaction of needs as a major aspect of happiness. I then call for a revival of the discussion on aims (aims-talk) in education and attempt to justify the establishment of happiness as an aim of education. These chapters provide a foundation for the discussion of educating for happiness in personal life (Part 2) and in public life (Part 3).

1

Happiness

Most human beings want happiness for themselves and their loved ones. It is reported that the Dalai Lama once said, “Whether one believes in religion or not, we are all seeking something better in life – the very motion of our life is toward happiness.” And William James started one of the chapters in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* this way:

If we were to ask the question: “What is human life’s chief concern?” one of the answers we should receive would be: “It is happiness.”¹

As we will see, there are some gloomy souls who deny that happiness is our chief concern and claim something else as a greater good but, even among the vast majority who agree with the Dalai Lama and James, questions arise about what happiness is and where we might find it. These two questions supply the subject matter of this chapter. Our ultimate question: How might schooling contribute to the attainment of happiness? will only be hinted at in this chapter, but keeping it in mind will help us to evaluate the views under consideration. I do not attempt a chronological account of happiness here, but I will start with classical views because they have been and continue to be so powerful in educational thinking.

Classical Views

The Greeks in the age of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle wanted to make happiness safe from contingency;² that is, they wanted to define happiness in a way that makes it independent of health, wealth, and the ups and downs of everyday life. Happiness, from this perspective, is

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not episodic; rather, it should apply to a whole life or to the tendency of that life. In this, many religious traditions have agreed. They have said that human beings cannot count on happiness in their mortal lives and cannot achieve it by pursuing it directly. But, whereas the Christian and Moslem traditions posit an afterlife in which some will attain an absolutely dependable happiness, the Greeks located happiness in the full exercise of rationality. Reason, they argued, is the essential characteristic of man, and the development and use of reason constitute his genuine happiness.³ In insisting on the primacy of reason, Greek thinkers believed that the exercise of reason makes it possible for man to live his life in harmony with the universe, which itself is characterized by order.

Aristotle gave us two views of happiness, both of which affect our thinking today. Actually, Aristotle wrote of *eudaimonia*, which is perhaps better translated as “human flourishing,” but I will follow the common practice of calling it “happiness.” In the view that has been most widely adopted, Aristotle analyzed happiness to find its components. This “comprehensive” view allows contingencies such as health, wealth, reputation, and friendship to enter the picture, but the exercise of reason is the major component of happiness. In his attempt to order the components of happiness, Aristotle pointed out that when we are ill, health seems most important; when we are broke, wealth seems most important; and so on. But, obviously, healthy and wealthy people can be unhappy. Thus, none of these components (or others like them) can be the most important factor in happiness. Is there anything that is both necessary and sufficient for happiness? As we proceed, we will see that philosophers, social scientists, and ordinary people are still engaged with this question. We still ask: What exactly are the components of happiness?

In his second view, often labeled the *intellectualist* view, Aristotle held that theoretical or contemplative thought *is* happiness, and such thought is superior to practical wisdom and activity in the world. Both views claim that the fullest exercise of rationality marks the divine aspect of human life. We are closest to the divine image when we are engaged in contemplative thought. In this mental activity, we are satisfying our god-given function – to think.⁴

Few of us today accept the intellectualist position. At least, few of us admit to it or state it publicly, but our school curriculum continues to be heavily influenced by it. The heavily abstract and theoretical

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subjects are more highly respected than practical, less theoretical ones. Aristotle created a hierarchy of human activity that devalues the practical and those who do the world's practical work. Indeed, he claimed that it was the function of some to do this sort of work so that those with greater intellectual capacity could fulfill *their* function – to think. John Dewey pointed out again and again the pernicious effects that this Aristotelian doctrine has had on education.⁵ It created a sharp separation of theory and practice, and it artificially branded some subject matters as superior to others. Dewey liked to point out that mathematics – thought by Aristotle to be more perfect (next to theology) than other subjects – can be engaged either intelligently or stupidly. The same can be said for more practical activities such as cooking. Therefore, it is not the label or ostensible content of a subject that matters but how it is engaged or conducted. We should note, too, that Dewey warned us against making an error opposite to the intellectualist one. Emphasizing the practical to the exclusion of the theoretical is just as bad. “We lose rather than gain in change from serfdom to free citizenship if the most prized result of the change is simply an increase in the mechanical efficiency of the human tools of production.”⁶

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the view placing intellectual activity over all other forms of activity is still alive today. We see it active in the elevation of mathematics and physics over politics and natural history. We see it in the insistence that all students study algebra and geometry but not parenting, even though most of us become parents and relatively few use algebra. Oddly, we also see its influence in the sort of opposite reaction that worried Dewey – in the worship of purely physical activity such as professional sports. And, of course, it has been active in recent intellectual life. The great mathematician G. H. Hardy claimed with pride, “I have never done anything ‘useful,’”⁷ and the claim (although demonstrably false) was made in deference to what he regarded as better – mathematics that is pure and beautiful. It would not be hard to find other such cases. Again, the mistake is not in loving the abstract and beautiful but in devaluing the concrete and supposing it “ugly,” as Hardy claimed.

Equating happiness with the life of pure thought strikes most of us today as the height of intellectual snobbery, and yet there is something in it that is not easily brushed aside. Surely the development

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of our human capacities has something to do with happiness, and rationality is one of our most treasured attributes. When I discuss happiness as pleasure, I will take seriously pleasures of the mind,⁸ but I will not evaluate these pleasures as necessarily superior to all others. Rather, I will note that creating a hierarchy of human attributes puts tremendous pressure on people to “measure up” and may, thus, create unhappiness in some who would not otherwise be greatly troubled by their deficiency in a given attribute. There are also ethical problems in elevating rationality/reasoning over all other human characteristics. If it is a special form of rationality that gives a being moral worth, questions immediately arise about the status of beings, human and nonhuman, who lack this quality. We need not denigrate the gift of mind, but we must be careful not to make it the single mark of moral worth.

From this very brief discussion of classical views on happiness, we extract several things that must be explored further: If happiness is construed as a comprehensive state, what are its components? In particular, what are pleasures of the mind, and how are they developed? What have been the effects on the school curriculum of favoring the abstract and theoretical over the concrete and practical? Is it desirable to espouse a view of happiness free of contingencies? Let’s consider this last question next.

Religious Views

Another way of escaping the contingencies associated with happiness in everyday life is to accept misery as our mortal lot and put our hope for happiness into an afterlife. If we believe in an afterlife and live so as to merit it, we are assured of happiness; it is a certainty. For many people, however, religious faith has also had the salutary effect of relieving earthly misery, indeed transforming it into contentment, which (they suppose) is the nearest thing to happiness that people should expect in earthly life.

We enter here an enormously complex area of human life. Belief in an afterlife of eternal happiness has helped countless individuals to find purpose in life and to maintain courage and moral goodness in the face of hardship and disaster. An austere adherence to strict moral rules and religious rituals does not deny that humans seek happiness above all else; indeed, such obedience confirms the desire for