

Happiness **and** **Education**

NEL NODDINGS

Stanford University



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2003

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface New Aster 9.5/13 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Noddings, Nel.

Happiness and education / Nel Noddings.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-80763-8

1. Education – Aims and objectives. 2. Happiness. 3. Moral
education. I. Title.

LB41.N55 2003

370'.1 – dc21

2002041547

ISBN 0 521 80763 8 hardback

Contents

Acknowledgments • vii

Introduction • 1

Part 1. Happiness as an Aim of Life and Education • 7

1 Happiness • 9

2 Suffering and Unhappiness • 39

3 Needs and Wants • 57

4 The Aims of Education • 74

Part 2. Educating for Personal Life • 95

5 Making a Home • 97

6 Places and Nature • 119

7 Parenting • 138

8 Character and Spirituality • 157

9 Interpersonal Growth • 179

Part 3. Educating for Public Life • 195

10 Preparing for Work • 197

11 Community, Democracy, and Service • 220

12 Happiness in Schools and Classrooms • 240

Notes • 263

Bibliography • 291

Index • 303

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

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

Introduction

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.

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

Introduction

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.