

The well-being agenda in education: A philosophical exploration

RUTH CIGMAN
R.CIGMAN@IOE.AC.UK

1. David Cameron's happiness agenda

UK happiness index to gauge national mood

Despite cuts gloom, Cameron wants wellbeing measure to steer policy

Guardian newspaper, November 2010

Expected public consultation

What is happiness?

- Pleasure?
- Wealth?
- Health?
- Social status?
- Family life?

(But is this a checklist question?)

Assumptions implicit in the happiness agenda

- 1 In a democracy, questions of meaning can be resolved by conducting a poll.
- 1 Happiness can be
 - a) measured
 - b) enhanced on a national level.

Some interesting questions about happiness

- What is it to pursue, and help others to pursue, happiness?
- How do we find out how happy a person is?
- What are the relations between happiness, well-being, pleasure, contentment, a good life?

2. Background to the UK happiness debate

1995: headmaster Philip Lawrence stabbed by a pupil at school gate



1997: Tony Blair "Education, education, education"

The standards agenda

Raise standards, produce a better educated population, and people will work harder, keep off the dole, avoid crime...

But was this idea right?

A problem

- To raise standards is to discriminate between those who succeed and those who fail.
- The consequences of educational failure include disaffection, delinquency, violence and so on: the very problems that the standards agenda set out to address.
- Such an agenda may help some children, but for others, arguably, it makes matters worse by drawing attention to their failures and making them feel unworthy and excluded.

2000: Death of 8 year-old Victoria Climbié

"The worst case of child abuse I've ever encountered"

Pathologist

Every child matters: change for children (2004)

Every Child Matters is a new approach to the well being of children and young people from birth to age 19. The Government's aim is for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to:

- be healthy
- stay safe
- enjoy and achieve
- make a positive contribution
- achieve economic well-being.

Primary Behaviour and Attendance Pilot

Included the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme:

- self-awareness
- managing feelings
- motivation
- empathy
- social skills

Evaluation, Hallam (2009)

"The SEAL programme has been successful in promoting the emotional well-being of children"

	Strongly agree	Agree
Head-teachers	38%	62%
Teachers	21%	65%
Non-teaching staff	11%	85%

3. SEAL: an Aristotelian education?

SEAL: as emotional education, it aims to inculcate certain values.

It is a form of moral education. Is it therefore anti-liberal, as some argue?

Schools and parents have always tried to influence children's values.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b19

... fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue.

Upheavals of Thought: the intelligence of the emotions (2001), Martha Nussbaum

Emotions are:

suffused with intelligence and discernment...[involving] judgements about the salience for our well-being of uncontrolled external objects.

Cf. Daniel Goleman (1991), *Emotional Intelligence*

Disaffection in schools is partly a matter of unruly emotions...

Some SEAL outcomes

- I can identify, recognise and express a range of feelings.
- I know that feelings, thoughts and behaviour are linked.
- I can recognise when I am becoming overwhelmed by my feelings.
- I know that it is OK to have any feeling, but not OK to behave in any way I feel like.
- I feel that I belong to and am valued in my class, school and community.
- I can be assertive when appropriate.

Problems with SEAL

- 1 It is based on self-report (epistemology)
- 2 It is a universal (rather than personal, intimate) intervention (ethics)
- 3 It sets children up for personal failure?

4. Problems of self-reportage

Two behaviourists meet on the street.

'You're fine,' says one to the other. 'How am I?'

This is crazy, but Wittgenstein was right (contra Descartes) when he denied that we have infallible knowledge of our own mental states.

Kristjansson (2007)

[the problem] endemic to all self-report instruments, is that people may misjudge their personal characteristics, whether deliberately or self-deceptively. (I have received a high score... [on an emotional intelligence questionnaire] myself; yet realized in hindsight that many of my self-ascriptions were less than realistic!)

Cigman (2004)

Self-esteem questionnaires provide a golden opportunity for emotional fakers. Asked whether one strongly agrees, agrees, disagrees or strongly disagrees with the statement 'I feel that I have a number of good qualities', an individual who doubts himself may think as follows: 'I'm not very nice . . . but I'm not as bad as all that! I gave my brother some of my chocolate—so what if he had the smaller bit? I phoned my Gran last month, or was it the month before . . . In fact, the more I think about it, I'm a pretty good guy. Of course I have a number of good qualities!'

Do well-being questionnaires measure anything?

Imagine someone saying: "But I know how tall I am!" and laying his hand on top of his head to prove it.

Wittgenstein (1953)

The well-being agenda in education

- 1 We measure the well-being of a certain population of children.
- 2 We want to enhance this so we offer a general intervention—a set of curriculum materials to be delivered by teachers—to that population.
- 1 We then measure well-being again, and find out whether the intervention was successful.

SEAL curriculum material (KS2)

HOLLY: With the help of my assistants here, I'll be helping more of you understand and work with some of those tricky feeling situations that we all find ourselves in.

ZAC: When I look at a page, it's as if there are just numbers everywhere, swimming up and down.

NAT: Just try taking some deep breaths.

JOE: Clear your head and forget about everything else.

HOLLY: You know, Zac, you're not stupid and you *can* do numeracy.

Emotions in motion (film), Teacher's TV

"You can..." A particular intervention

"You *can* do numeracy."

"You *can* jump into the swimming pool."

"You *can* give up smoking."

"You *can* say no to the bullies."

Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1937)

SEAL outcomes

- I can take responsibility for my actions and learning.
- I can identify, recognize and express a range of feelings.
- I can stop and think before acting.
- I can calm myself down when I choose to.

A recipe for failure?

The misdirection of third person perspectives to the second person

- Receptionists in your GP surgery wear frozen smiles with patients, betraying the training courses they have taken (how to treat *them*, the patients...)
- Teachers talk stiffly and correctly to parents at parents' evenings... (how to talk to *them*, parents)
- Teachers talk stiffly and correctly to children... (how to talk to *them*, the children...).

(Does SEAL de-personalise education?)

5. What, finally, is happiness?

I rose with the sun and I was happy; I went walking and I was happy; I saw Maman and I was happy; I left her and I was happy: I went through the woods and over the hillsides, I wandered in the valleys, I read and loafed; I worked in the garden, I picked fruit, I helped with the housework, and happiness followed me everywhere.

Rousseau, Confessions

(Is this what we want for children?)

?

I rose with the sun and I was happy; I went walking and I was happy; I saw Maman and I was happy; I left her and I was happy: I went through the woods and over the hillsides, I wandered in the valleys, I read and loafed; I worked in the garden, I tortured a few squirrels, I killed a man who tried to stop me, and happiness followed me everywhere.

Some suggestions

- What we should seek for children is not happiness, contentment or pleasure, but well-being or eudaimonia (a good life). This an inescapably ethical concept, grounded in our humanity.
- The distinctively human capacity that needs to be developed is the capacity to respond wisely to good and ill fortune.
- We need to learn
 - neither to over-react nor under-react to situations in which things are going badly for us
 - to defer pleasure for the sake of important long-term goals
 - to enjoy good fortune without provoking envy in others
 - to deal with conflicts between values
 - to distinguish between cases in which these can and cannot be resolved.

Well-being: some tentative conclusions

- At the heart of well-being is the capacity to think and feel well ethically.
- 'A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about."' Wittgenstein ('voice of disorientation')
- Teachers can help children to acknowledge their disorientation, and find their way in life.
- Towards this end, a good education in the humanities, particularly literature, is of paramount importance.
- If personalised adequately, SEAL (and similar) may play a significant role in schools.