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Anthony Seldon

Lessons in life: Why I'm teaching happiness

The school has been developing a pioneering programme with Dr Nick Baylis, of the University of Cambridge, and it will be brought into the curriculum in the 2006 academic year as a new element of PSHE lessons.

Helping to produce happy young adults when they leave the school at 18 is my highest priority as head. I have been saying this for 10 years, but only in the past year have I begun to realise this isn't just an airy-fairy aspiration, but one can in fact learn happiness in classes. Hence my decision, announced recently, (18th April 2006), to teach happiness and positive psychology in timetabled lessons at my new school, Wellington College.

Positive psychology

Last year, I came across Dr Nick Baylis of Cambridge University, who lectures in positive psychology and the science of well-being, and who has just set up the "Well-being Institute" at the university. Then I started hearing about the highly popular and well-publicised courses on happiness at Harvard University, and I realised what might be done. I recognised the duty to do something about it at my school. Hence, the classes that begin later this year, which will be taught by our staff, to be overseen by the team at Cambridge.

Ill-balanced education

I believe that our education in schools is fundamentally ill-balanced. Of course exams matter greatly - they are the passport to an individual's higher education and career. A school which fails to let every child achieve the best grades of which he or her are capable is failing to do its job properly. But education is far more than this, which is why league tables, and the reverence in which they are treated, is so wrong. They say nothing about the quality of the teaching (or the intake), about the wider life of the school, or whether it is turning out resentful and ill-balanced young adults, or whether it is helping to produce young men and women who are happy and who know themselves and what

they want to do in life.

Tortured and unhappy pupils

As a teacher, I have seen far too many tortured and unhappy pupils who have achieved four or five A grades at A-level. If they can achieve these grades while leading balanced lives, taking part in a wide variety of activities which will develop different facets of their character, and if they blossom as human beings, then all is well and good. But as any teacher will know, this isn't always the case with high achievers. Neither is it with high achievers in life. These driven people see their lives flash by in fast living and fast cars, and most fail to realise they are missing the point of life. Is it more important to be highly successful, or to be a respected colleague and a valued friend, and a loving parent whose children grow up in a secure environment in which they know they are valued and treasured? I have had to learn the hard way, the answers are obvious.

Hence the need to teach happiness while at school, while individuals are still having their characters and habits formed. It is much harder to acquire good habits later in life.

Lesson content

So in what will the lessons consist? These will not be lessons like history or physics, where it is primarily the intellect involved, and where the acquisition of knowledge is all important. This is about emotional learning and emotional intelligence, and is a far more reflective activity than traditional classes. Pupils will learn about how to form healthy and sustaining relationships. They will gain understanding about the goals they should want to set in life, which should be realistic and appropriate for their own talents and interests. The negative emotions which are an inevitable part of life will be explored:

pupils will be able to learn more about what it is that causes them pain and unhappiness, how they might be able to avoid or minimise these emotions and how to deal with them when they do occur. So the essence is that pupils learn more about themselves, which will be information which they will be able to use for the rest of their lives.

Some individuals are born with sunnier dispositions than others. These lessons will be able to help children regardless of their genes. The childhood experience of some is very happy and secure while for others it is fraught and unstable. Again, these classes should be able to help children with both kinds of experience, not the least by learning from each other.

Morals

The lessons will, I believe, be highly moral. The pupils will learn how to look after their bodies well and how not to abuse them. A healthy body is far more likely to lead to a happier mind than one which has been abused with bad food, drink, cigarettes and drugs.

Good relationships, which lie at the heart of anyone's happy life, are based on a strong moral code of caring for the other and being loyal. Abusing others, either with words, physically or by inappropriate sexual relations, does not produce happiness but rather the opposite.

True happiness

The pursuit of true happiness is also a deeply spiritual quest: the heart of spirituality is about the transcendence of one's own self and the forming of deeply loving and compassionate relationships with others. Neither do I see these lessons as selfish. Ask any parent. Would they sooner see their children happy and fulfilled, even at the cost of achieving slightly less, or stressed

out and vexed in the pursuit of ever-higher goals which always seem to be beyond their reach? Happiness I believe lies in knowing one's own limitations, accepting oneself for what one is, and being proud of what one achieves, at whatever level that might be.

Happiness lessons

The purpose of these happiness lessons becomes abundantly clear when one considers the lives of students at university. Once there, they will not each day enjoy the presence of loving parents, or caring teachers. They will no doubt have to cope with loneliness, depression and rejection in love. Yet schools send them off ill-prepared to cope with these eventualities, as they also mostly fall short in preparing their leavers to manage money, accommodation and looking after themselves.

Purpose of schooling

What is the purpose of schooling if not to prepare its young for higher education and beyond? It is not only at university that personal difficulties arise. Most of us have had to cope in our lives with professional rejections, breakdowns of relationships, bereavements and periods of depression. These are all part of life. I personally wish that I had received a better grounding at

school, not only in what kind of career I might have followed to make me feel fulfilled, but how also to cope better with the difficulties that life throws at one.

Similar conclusions

Studies as diverse as those from the Cabinet Office, the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research and Harvard University point to similar conclusions, that money, fame and worldly success do not necessarily lead to happy and fulfilled lives.

Despite the large increases in income in Britain over the past 30 years, studies show the levels of satisfaction have not increased commensurately. Research further shows that focusing on materialistic pursuits often diminishes personal well-being. Yet governments, for reasons to do with their own re-election, try to convince us that life is getting better for all because of economic growth, just as they try to convince us that schools are getting better because exam results are improving. If they are re-elected, it makes them happy. But does it make the nation happier?

Greater understanding

Schools cover some of the positive psychology curriculum in existing classes.

But the focus is on the acquisition of knowledge, about the effects of drugs, sexually transmitted diseases and so on, rather than on encouraging the pupils to reflect on their own lives and learn to understand themselves and their relationships better.

I would like to see all schools within five years begin to teach positive psychology and happiness. The Well-being Institute is becoming involved with advising the health service and businesses about the subject. Valuable though this will be, I believe it is almost too late to teach, and it is much better to put the whole subject over to individuals when they are still at school. Governments will not be able to boast of quantifiable improvements, and schools won't be able to show off any tangible benefits for league tables (although I would say that happy children are more likely to do their best in exams).

But I do believe that by taking the subject seriously, schools will not only be doing a much better job morally for their pupils, but they will also help produce young men and women who will help to build a far better society than their parents did. This is a real challenge and it is one to which I believe all schools should rise.