

Chapter 6

I Am Happy, So I Learn It: The Ethical Dilemma of Choosing to Promote Happiness in an Education World of Standards

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of research that indicates that children experiencing happy emotions are advanced problem solvers, stronger collaborators, and perform better on cognitive tests. The science of happiness provides solid quantitative data indicating that happiness is positively correlated with motivation, learning, and academic achievement. However, schools are enmeshed into the culture of high-stakes testing and standards. Teachers are forced into an ethical dilemma as they attempt to follow the professional code of conduct focused on teaching and nurturing the whole child and the promotion of happiness within this culture of high-stakes accountability. This chapter will explore this ethical dilemma for teachers, the demands of standards and high-stakes testing, the intersections of happiness, wellbeing, and positive psychology in learning and the scientific data supporting those claims. Strategies for cultivating happiness, student wellbeing, learning, and academic success will be shared.

INTRODUCTION

The prepping for our standardized testing takes so much time; time away from real teaching and learning. We begin when school starts and continue until the test in April. Instead of doing projects or hands on activities where kids are truly engaged and learning, I have to focus on teaching them the testing format and making them comfortable with taking multiple tests. I want them to enjoy learning and have fun doing it. Instead, I watch some kids stress about the test and other lose all confidence in themselves.

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There must be a better way. Teaching to the test is not why I became a teacher. I struggle with this every year and wonder if I want to continue (Karen, third grade teacher, 2018).

For many teachers, this ethical dilemma is all too common; if learning and happiness are connected, how can happiness be promoted and nurtured in the classroom while meeting the academic demands of the standards-based and standardized testing environment?

Understanding this phenomenon of happiness within the school context requires understanding the standards-based culture, what happiness is and is not, the connection of happiness/well-being and learning, and the intersection of happiness and Positive Psychology within schools. Upon completion of this chapter, the reader will have a greater understanding of how to navigate this ethical dilemma along with a toolkit of ideas to build a culture of happiness /well-being and academic accountability.

UNDERSTANDING HIGH STAKES SCHOOL CULTURE

The purpose of this section is to focus on the effects of high stakes standardized tests and accountability measures on the fundamental aspects of teaching and on the professional ethics of teaching. The most fundamental aspects of teaching are the relationships between teachers and their students. Quality of teaching and effectiveness in learning are all predicated on the level of relationships built and the teachers' sense of responsibility to the students in their care (Barnum, 2017; Szabo, 2015).

Standardized Tests and Accountability Measures

A standardized test is a test that is given to students in a very consistent manner. All participants answer the same questions on the test, within the same timeline, and with the same scoring guidelines. Most standardized tests utilize a multiple choice or true /false format. The major kinds of standardized tests are aptitude tests which forecast the potential success ranking of the student and achievement test which are often used to evaluate school effectiveness (Popham, 2012).

In the United States, children begin taking standardized tests in elementary school. A typical student takes 112 mandated standardized tests between pre-kindergarten classes and 12th grade, according to the study results by the Council of the Great City Schools (Hart, Casserly, Uzzell, Palacios, Corcoran & Spurgeon, 2015). This accounts for close to a hundred more tests during their school years than students in other countries who outperform the United States on international exams (Mulholland, 2015; Hinde, 2003; Horn, 2003).

UNDERSTANDING HAPPINESS

The pursuit of happiness is a universal, yet an elusive concept. The school is one of the main contexts of human development and therefore the principle place for facilitating happiness for all children. There is a large and growing body of research which indicates that children experiencing happy emotions are better problem solvers, collaborate better and perform better on cognitive tests overall (Hinton & Schiller, 2015; Jones, 2015). In essence, an examination of scientific data supports the claims that children learn better when they are happy (Hinton & Schiller, 2015).

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