

OPINION

The pursuit of happiness – and of education

Frank Furedi

TEN years ago I would not have envisaged that I would need to lecture or write about happiness. Nor would I have imagined that political parties and governments would be enthusing about policies promoting happiness as the big idea of the 21st century.

Happiness has become the objective of a powerful crusade. Its advocates insist on making us happy whether we like it or not. Richard Layard, leading prophet of this crusade, has stated that it needs "a cadre" of "specialist teachers acting as proselytes and high priests of the movement" to see through the "educational revolution".

The prominence achieved by the happiness campaign is underwritten by some important cultural forces.

It resonates with the growing influence of anti-consumerism. In recent years consumerism has acquired negative connotations. Numerous cultural commentators including Clive Hamilton argue that it leads to acquisitiveness and greediness, and that it makes people depressed and unsatisfied. Consumption is frequently represented as a threat to the environment and the argument of the happiness crusade about shifting focus from economic wealth to spiritual wellbeing converges with the prevailing ethos of restraint. The sacralisation of happiness is boosted by the growing tendency to idealise the environment. Finally, the happiness crusade can draw on the cultural resources provided by Western society's obsession with psychology and therapy. In a world where the problems of society are continually recast as that of individual psychological deficits, the goal of happiness acquires a redemptive character.

But probably the most important driver of the happiness movement is the powerful mood of moral disorientation that prevails in Western societies. Western culture finds it difficult to give meaning to everyday experience through a language that clarifies what is good and bad or right and wrong. Such a mood of disorientation continually creates a demand for meaning. Layard understands this, which is why he says: "Clearly, I am talking about a movement of moral reform."

However, it is not so much a moral as a moralising project. The triumph of this movement will not be based on the growth of moral conviction but on the successful application of techniques of behaviour management. Policymakers rely on the institutionalisation of cognitive behavioural therapy, rather than on the clarification of the moral challenges that face us, to make us happy.

The crusade aims to normalise what has been, until now, a rare and fleeting experience: that of the state of happiness. Until now this grotesque commodification of the emotion of happiness bordered on the inane. Governments and officials can't teach us to be happy. Happiness is a state of mind that comes about through experiences that give us a special feeling of accomplishment or meaning about our

lives. No one can help us to be happy, which is why policies that rely on the activity of therapists are far likelier to encourage us to conform to officially sanctioned forms of emotional behaviour.

Probably the most disturbing dimension of the happiness project is its focus on the emotional management of children. There is a reason for this. If you can get your hands on impressionable kids you are far likelier to succeed in influencing their emotions than when they become adults.

Schools provide an ideal laboratory for the happiness experiment. Many educators have embraced the happiness agenda as a solution to the problems facing schools. In recent decades officials and education experts have sought to solve the problems afflicting the classroom through opting for the tools of behaviour management. Increasingly the focus is on children's wellbeing, "emotional literacy" and self-esteem.

Since the project of colonising children's internal world began, the ambitions of therapeutic education have gone from strength to strength. Yet decades of silly initiatives designed to raise children's self-esteem have not improved children's wellbeing and the new proposals designed to make pupils happy will also fail to realise their objectives. Worse still, therapeutic education encourages introspection, which distracts children from engaging with the world.

Perversely, the ascendancy of self-esteem education in the classroom has been paralleled by an apparent increase in mental health problems among children. The relation between the two is not accidental. Children are highly suggestible and the more they are required to participate in wellbeing classes, the more they will feel the need for professional support.

The teaching of emotional literacy and happiness should also be viewed as a cop-out from tackling the fundamental problems confronting schools. When many schools find it difficult to engage children's interest in core subjects such as reading, science and maths, it is tempting to look for non-academic solutions and therapies.

Many educators find it more comfortable to hold forth about the importance of making children feel good about themselves than to teach them how to read and count. At the very least this therapeutic orientation serves to distract pupils and teachers from getting on with the job of gaining a real education.

Teachers, of course, have always hoped their work would inspire their students and make them feel good about learning and life. But until recently happiness was not seen as an end in itself or something that could be promoted on its own terms. Everyday experience suggests that not everything that has to be learned can be taught. How to feel well is not a suitable subject for classroom teaching. Why? Because genuine happiness is experienced through the interaction of the individual with the challenges thrown up by life.

Teaching happiness to children, or adults for that matter, is also a morally dubious proposition. It is entirely acceptable for a teacher to tell your child what to do and what not to do. But is it really a teacher's job to instruct your child what to feel? The attempt to manage children's internal life is a highly intrusive enterprise with potentially authoritarian implications. How we feel and manage our emotions should

not be subject to policies implemented by so-called experts on behalf of confused officials.

It was Immanuel Kant who pointed out that making a man happy was quite different from making him good. The experience of history shows us that a good life is not always a happy one. People are often justified in being unhappy about their circumstances and surroundings. Discontent and ambition have driven humanity to confront and overcome the challenges they faced. That is why people such as the Controller in Brave New World want us to live on a diet of "feelies" and "scent organs". That is also why we should be suspicious of a crusade whose success depends on the colonisation our internal life.

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