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The importance of well-being in education.

Ian Morris

Wellington College, UK.

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**School of Education
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham**

The importance of well-being in education.

Ian Morris, Head of Well-being, Wellington College, UK.

Abstract: The aims of education are a constant source of debate and discussion. This paper proposes arguments to establish well-being as the central aim of education and will also flesh out some ideas of how well-being may be supported both by the curriculum and educational elements outside of the curriculum.

‘Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. And then he feels that perhaps there isn’t.’ (Milne 1989).

For many commentators, education is in a similar position to poor Winnie-the-Pooh; those within are crying out for a different way of doing things but are so busy being dragged along by an existing, unsatisfactory approach that it is often difficult to establish what that new approach might be. One such commentator is John White at the IoE:

‘We should have left this sad piece of nonsense [that schooling is centrally about exam success] behind us with the twentieth century. Its schools were caught up in a regime of getting on, doing ever better, getting more and more efficient – but within a system that had lost sight of what it was about...schools should be mainly about equipping people to lead a fulfilling life.’ (White 2011).

Education in the UK has lost sight of what it is about and the blame for this can partially be attributed to the relatively recent (and well-documented in educational literature) use of measurement of educational outcomes to determine schools’ effectiveness. This is a process that can also be seen in another area of life: economics. In economics, the arguments are well-rehearsed; that the unrelenting focus on GDP as the only measure of a nation’s success has caused governments to lessen their investment in the true ingredients of well-being (such as personal relationships, health, education) preferring to encourage their citizens to become conspicuous consumers in order to feed economic growth, quantifiable in terms of GDP, at a cost both to humans and their environment.

A similar dynamic has taken hold in education. With the laudable aim of raising standards in schools, successive UK governments have turned to the narrow and blunt instrument of using examination results as the measure of success. One corresponding effect is a lack of clarity about the aims of education and the perverse situation where, for many, the measure (exam success) has become the aim. This simply will not do. Our aims for education should be coterminous with our deepest wishes for young people and the lives they will lead; to limit this to a clutch of certificates is to sell education short. It must be about something more.

This paper will argue that ‘well-being’ is that ‘something more’ and that it should be the central aim of education.

Prima facie, it is hard to see why well-being should not serve as the fundamental purpose of our education system, as is argued, again by John White:

'Just how central an aim should universal well-being be? It is, after all, not the only candidate. Supporting the economy is another. So is preparation for citizenship...It is hard to think of any aim, actual or ideal, without some link to personal well-being. Economic goals are not ends in themselves; their point is to help people lead more flourishing lives.' (White 2011).

But we must be clear what we mean by 'well-being.' To guide our discussion of well-being in education, I will rely upon a recent and robust definition of the term. In 2008, The UK Government Office for Science published the Foresight Report into Mental Capital and Well-being, which defined mental capital and mental well-being as follows:

'[Mental capital]...includes [a person's] cognitive ability, how flexible and efficient they are at learning, and their "emotional intelligence", such as their social skills and resilience in the face of stress... [Mental well-being is] a dynamic state in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community. It is enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in their society.' (The Government Office for Science 2008).

So, what needs to be done to realise this aim? One could argue with Claxton (2008), that if we are to make schools centres of genuine, autonomous and meaningful learning, that well-being, or something like it, would be the end product arising from doing something genuinely challenging and worthwhile. Learning, and a love thereof, is one of many routes to well-beingⁱ and the job of schools, in conjunction with parents and communities, is to make as many of these different routes to well-being available to children and teachers as possible.

However, at present, well-being only receives adequate focus in schools through the determined efforts of school leaders, teachers and children despite a system which demands quite different and much narrower things.ⁱⁱ Claxton's vision of learning as an instrument of well-being, rather than an instrument of accountability is far from being realised in many schools. White (2007 and 2011) argues that the English education system has suffered from a curriculum focused on subjects and content, without overarching aims, restrained by a standards agenda which measures the delivery of this content through holding schools accountable to their exam results. The consequences of this have been a serious undermining of the presence of the ingredients of well-being in schools, as Ruth Cigman observes:

'A standards agenda involves identifying and possibly shaming children and schools that fail. The social consequences of educational failure include disaffection, delinquency, violence and so on: the very problems 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.' (Cigman 2009).

There are other consequences. White argues that learning is transformed into work, much of which is exam-focused and heteronomous (i.e. externally devised and imposed), which removes the inherent joy of discovery in learning. Genuine learning not only depends upon many of the ingredients of well-being in the definition cited above, it also leads to them,

creating a virtuous cycle. A related concern is over the confusion of individual aims and institutional ones. When a school sets itself a target to achieve a certain percentage of A grades, it is all too easy for individual children to become lost as means to this end, as expendable statistical contributors to be coerced and manipulated to achieve aims not chosen by them. By reducing learning to a heteronomous process of work, focusing on the accrual of knowledge which results in the acquisition of extrinsic rewards and the potential promise of economic productivity, schools make it much harder for learning and well-being to go together.

White argues that education should be for well-being; that the life of a school should be built upon this aim. It is here that White's view of education differs significantly from the mainstream. He argues that the mistake we have made in the past is to begin with a list of subjects and graft our aims on to them. White believes that the way to truly bring about well-being in education is to start with well-being as the aim, supported by the development of dispositions (i.e. personal qualities, learning habits, virtues) followed by understanding (perhaps through the subjects children currently study) with the two (dispositions and understanding) becoming mutually enriching and leading to well-being.

'The starting point is that [a student] should have the positive qualities needed for a flourishing life. We would not want her to become brilliant at algebra and Latin, but cripplingly anxious, or cynical, or a sadist. First things first.' (White 2011).

This is a genuinely Aristotelian approach to the business of learning.

That this approach may be considered 'radical' by some is a tragedy. Education has been dominated by the insistence solely upon the mastery of a body of knowledge for too long. Of course children need to know about the world they live in, but unless this knowledge is guided by dispositions, which can be encouraged and taught, we leave too much to chance. Qualities such as resilience, persistence, compromise, patience, empathy and kindness are foundational to everything that children do in schools. That they have been considered 'peripheral'ⁱⁱⁱ, or even 'ghastly'^{iv} belies an almost Skinnerian reduction of the role of person and character in learning and a reduction of learning to a caricature of its central role in well-being. It also sets up a false and pernicious dichotomy between 'rigorous academic learning' and what are considered by some to be 'softer' inter-personal skills. The idea that these two components of learning are in some way separable could only come from a place of very little sympathy for a child trying to master the world in which they live.

White is, however, guarded about the idea of separate curriculum provision for 'well-being' because in his view, if education is truly about well-being through the development of dispositions, the need for a discrete subject to teach it would become obsolete and the stranglehold of the subjects would be loosened. I disagree with him. Elsewhere^v I have argued that education should serve two functions; 'education as happiness' and 'education for happiness'.^{vi} What I mean by this is that every process undertaken in schools should be one that has happiness, or well-being, as its aim and that in every interaction be it in the classroom or the corridor, on the stage or the sports field, is one that can meaningfully contribute to the well-being of the members of the school community. This is not at odds with White's arguments. Where we part company is on the need for 'education for

happiness'. There is so much research into human well-being and flourishing that time should be made available to run explicit sessions on what well-being and flourishing comprise and how we can apply learning from this research to the activities that children engage in on a daily basis. Children are as entitled to discover this as they are any other knowledge. Furthermore, skills like emotional management, conflict resolution and finding meaning and purpose are too often expected to emerge through some kind of mysterious osmosis as children encounter the traditional subjects or meet skilful teachers. To assume that learning for well-being would happen across the curriculum, even one with well-being as its aim, when training in 'well-being' is almost completely absent from the education that teachers themselves receive, would be to continue to leave the process to chance. That I have included teachers here is important. When I trained as a teacher, we were told that all teachers are teachers of literacy and numeracy. Quite so. We are all teachers of well-being too. Young people look to their teachers to role model being human and teachers have a duty, not only to help young people to learn, but also to show them by example the sorts of dispositions that will help them learn and flourish.

There is another way of coming down the stairs. Many of us are coming together to argue that with well-being at the heart of education and a proper focus on the dispositions which lead to sound learning and also to being fully human, being a teacher or pupil in a UK school is much less likely to feel like banging our heads on hard wooden steps at the behest of a whimsical Christopher Robin.

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Endnotes:

ⁱ See for example the New Economics Foundation's '5 Ways to Well-being', which directly references learning <http://neweconomics.org/projects/five-ways-well-being>, or Seligman's PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) which could be argued to subsume learning in Engagement and Accomplishment.

ⁱⁱ The explicit requirement to find evidence of the promotion of pupil well-being was removed from the UK schools inspection framework in January 2012. The new framework focuses on pupil achievement, quality of teaching and school leadership and pupils' behaviour and safety. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201212/cmhansrd/cm120123/text/120123w0001.htm>.

ⁱⁱⁱ In proposed changes to the schools inspection framework in 2010, the Secretary of State for education, Michael Gove announced that schools would no longer be rated on what he termed 'peripheral issues', widely thought to be pupil well-being and community cohesion. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-11400774> accessed 14/2/12.

^{iv} Nick Gibb, the then UK schools minister, quoted in Whatever Happened to Happiness, The Guardian, first published 12th January 2012, accessed 06/11/12

^v (In press). Going beyond the accidental: happiness, education and the Wellington College experience. In *The Oxford Companion to Happiness*: Oxford: Oxford University Press.

^{vi} I am aware of presenting 'well-being' and 'happiness' interchangeably here. I use the telic, or eudaimonic understanding of happiness in the article alluded to, which is if not directly, certainly close to being coterminous with well-being.