

Teaching well-being and happiness

Can prep and junior schools teach well-being and happiness? Debra Farhi investigates



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Matthieu Ricard, the renowned French Buddhist monk, asserts that well-being is characterised by serenity and fulfilment, a state that pervades and underlies all emotional states.

Felicia Huppert, Emeritus Professor of Psychology and Director of the Well-being Institute at Cambridge University, maintains that well-being is a "a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively."

Should we be teaching well-being in schools and is it a concept that can indeed be taught? Many argue that 'values education' is something that is the domain of families and centres of worship such as churches, synagogues and the like. Neil Hawkes, the founder of values-based education, argues that schools do not operate optimally in 'values neutral mode.' Young people spend a great proportion of their lives at school and values education can complement and when necessary, compensate for what is missing at home.

According to the 2007 Unicef Report Card studying child well-being in rich countries, the UK scored last overall among 21 industrialised countries and came last in three of the categories measured: relationships, behaviour and risks, and subjective well-being.

In 2010, the coalition government brought in the SEAL Programme which covered five main areas: social awareness, managing feelings, motivation, empathy, and social interactions. Even David Cameron admitted that the UK's well-being cannot be judged by GDP alone but rather "well-being is about the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our

culture, and above all, the strength of our relationships."

According to the Office of National Statistics study in personal well-being in 2012/13, London had the lowest average rating for life satisfaction and the highest average for anxiety. Hence, from a moral, ethical and legal perspective, we should be teaching well-being.

How then do we teach well-being? Teaching mindfulness, a subject which has become increasingly popular, is the means through which many independent and maintained schools are accomplishing this. Mindfulness, according to Jon Kabat-Zinn, the father of mindfulness in medicine, "is being aware of the present moment without judgment or resistance." Dr John Teasdale, renowned psychologist from Cambridge University, explains that the aims for our students should be more than simply functional such as increasing exam results, increased memory retention etc, but rather we should have more ambitious goals for them such as greater self-understanding by instilling values such as tolerance, patience and self-awareness.

The Mindfulness in Schools Project (MISP) founded by Chris Cullen, a former teacher at Hampton School, and Richard Burnett, a current teacher at Tonbridge School, did just that by creating a mindfulness programme for schools. In 2007, they launched the 'b Programme' which simply means "stop, breathe and be!". The programme is incorporated in PSHE lessons once per week over nine weeks and each lesson is 40-45 minutes.

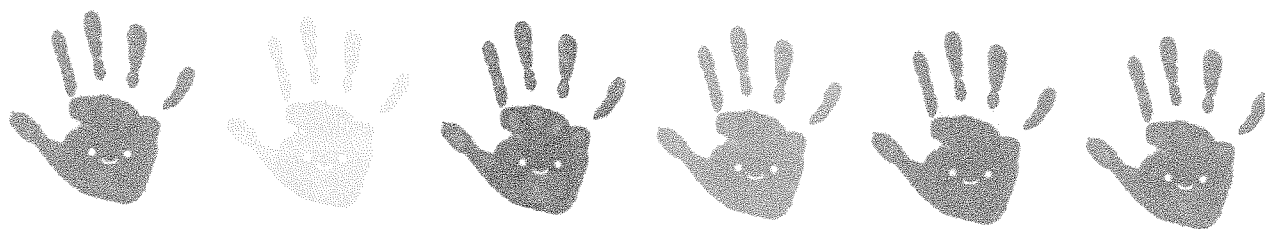
The course encompasses aspects such

as: developing a non-judgemental attitude, taming our wandering attention, recognising stressors, being fully present, developing a witness conscious, applying mindfulness in all facets of our life and embracing our dark emotions. The programme advocates tools such as beditations (lying down meditations), mindful walking, '7/11 breathing', and encouraging .b texts among pupils.

Unfortunately, some Heads associate mindfulness as being 'hippy-dippy', mystical or weird. However, this is a way of living which has been around for 2600 years. Numerous research studies have confirmed that mindfulness correlates positively with immune function, working memory, resilience, physical changes in the brain, emotion, attention, self-esteem and longevity. Moreover, mindfulness training is being sought by leading companies such as Google, Apple, KPMG, as well as sports athletes and the NHS.

Nevertheless, they are adamant that in order for pupils to learn well-being, they need to be taught by those who experience it and have incorporated it into their day to day lives. A prerequisite to the course is the need to complete a .b Foundation course or MBSR course (mindfulness-based stress reduction course) over an eight-week period. Once completed, individuals need to demonstrate that they have incorporated tenets of the course into their everyday lives over a six-month period.

Mindfulness allows for emotion regulation and self-awareness through a secular approach. In light of the success of the .b programme around the world



(it is taught in 12 countries), the *paws.b* programme was developed by Rhian Roxburgh and Tabitha Sawyer, primary teachers from Ysol Pen Bryn Primary School in north Wales in conjunction with a mindfulness trainer from Bangor University in Wales as well as Cullen and Burnett. The course incorporates the same concepts as .b except it is targeted for children aged 7-11 years of age. Roxburgh and Sawyer integrated and piloted the programme in the National Curriculum subjects as well as PSHE lessons. After several weeks, they noticed students fought less and the degree of academic improvement was significantly higher in those students who benefited from the course. Moreover, they were often asked for recommendations from parents who were keen to continue the practice at home. They said it wasn't necessarily "plain sailing, however, most children do get it straight away and very few reject it." The full programme is due to be rolled out to other schools over the next few months.

Dr Neil Hawkes, founder of the International Values Education Trust and former Headteacher at West Kidlington School, Oxfordshire, once a failing school in virtually all respects, transformed his school by teaching values in every aspect of the school. Each month a new value was studied and incorporated into each subject. For example, in English lessons, students could reflect on why Jack, the main antagonist in *Lord of the Flies*, should be forgiven. Hawkes explained that "values became the platform for which curricular, policy, organisational and pedagogical decisions were made." As a result, this had a positive impact on all educational measures (objective and subjective); the only explanation given by the Ofsted Inspector was the effect of the school's values-based programme. It was highlighted by Lord Layard as a role model for

schools to follow in his report for the Children's Society.

In the trend to educate our children with ethical values, the Dharma School, an independent school in Brighton which bases its instruction entirely on Buddhist principles (rather than Buddhism as a religion), has the majority of its pupils from families that do not practise the Buddhist faith. Parents are attracted to the school because of the Buddhist teachings such as conflict resolution through compassion, interdependence and community, universal responsibility and mindfulness in thought, feeling and action. Rather than imposing discipline through regimented rules, students learn self-discipline as an important quality to develop in themselves; they will be respected to the degree to which they respect others.

Elena Alexe, Head of PSHE at Northwood Prep, explained that their PSHE programme was completely revamped in the last two years using Carol Cattley and Jini Lavelle's Goodwill teaching guide: mindfulness for schools and the well-being curriculum developed by Dr Llona Boniwell. The tenets of positive psychology were encompassed by teaching guided meditations, mindfulness through activities such as eating and walking, and gratitude letters to pupils' parents (read privately at school). The traditional topics such as road safety, drugs, citizenship, etc, though still relevant, had a less significant emphasis and were branded under a separate Life Skills course.

After attending the recent 2014 Mindfulness Conference, the Dragon School, which currently integrates concepts from the Family Links Nurturing Programme, also plans to overhaul their school-wide pastoral programme in the next academic year.

Paul Jackson, Head of Humanities at Brooke House School in Leicestershire, teaches mindfulness in his RE lessons and explains the distinction to being mindful and "mind full" to his students. I spoke to one of his Year 8 pupils, who explained that doing a meditation increased her concentration and energy in her subsequent lessons.

As rising mental health issues soar among our youth and our teachers, it is obvious that chasing league table results is not the answer. Without a sense of well-being in ourselves, it is not possible to nurture well-being in others. Believing that gap can be fixed with more sport, drama or an on-site psychologist is not the answer. Dr Martin Seligman, a champion for positive psychology, states that "flourishing is experienced deeply and is not dependent on things, it's simply a way of being." Schools should foremost offer opportunities to enhance a student's emotional, physical and spiritual well-being and provide them with a sense of purpose that will take them beyond the school gates.

Professors Alan Krueger and Daniel Kahneman from Princeton University claim that "the belief that high income is associated with good mood is widespread but mostly illusory", yet, interestingly we are still striving for more. Our society has conditioned us to believe that happiness lies outside ourselves and that it can be acquired through more money, power, approval or even love. Seeking validation from people, places or things always puts us in a position of wanting where we inevitably relinquish our own power. All wealth, peace and joy is within us; true abundance is a state of consciousness and our divine essence. Whatever is missing in our experience is not based on what hasn't been given to us but what we haven't discovered or yet activated within ourselves.