

How does the science of wellbeing inform an education strategy across the life course?

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Introduction

Under a life satisfaction lens, the purpose of educating children should be to produce **happy children and happy future adults**, and to benefit society more broadly through spillover effects.

Moreover, investment in education does not stop with children. Research on a number of fronts, including the science of happiness, gives us reason to expand and revise our investments in education.

The sections below link wellbeing interventions for **primary school through to retirement**. In all cases, **non-cognitive skills** like understanding and managing emotions, goal-setting, building lasting and positive relationships, empathy, love, ethics, problem-solving, management, leadership, child-rearing, intimate relationships, mental hygiene, mental first-aid, and self-care play an important role.

The scope of the effort needed **transcends jurisdictional boundaries**.

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The world has changed

Why might we require a re-think about “education” in Canada?

1. Static skills are insufficient; lifelong training is essential; industrial transformations lie ahead
2. Policy objectives are shifting towards wellbeing
3. Longer lifespan requires new life skills at different stages (career progression; retirement)

4. Value of social and emotional skills in workplace: now better understood
5. Insights from science of happiness: e.g., value of social and emotional skills for wellbeing, and the importance of the wellbeing of those delivering services as well as the recipients
6. Insights from epigenetics, neuroplasticity, and intergenerational transmission
7. Appreciation of neurodiversity: benefits to individuals and society from non-cognitive skill training
8. Learning modes shifting to on-line, diverse, and private
9. It's 2021 and we still have persistent inequalities

Does education matter for wellbeing?

Most studies of education have focused on test scores as the outcome, rather than wellbeing.

Interestingly, estimates of the effect of each extra year of schooling on an individual's later wellbeing (life satisfaction) often come out to near zero after other outcomes like income are taken into account (Clark et al., 2019, pp. 51–59), and sometimes even when everything is taken into account!

There are other reasons than individual benefits (i.e., more rational civic participants; less crime; higher productivity, which funds public goods; etc) to pursue education policy, but maybe studies focused on the value of an extra year (quantity of education) are missing the point.

To add further mystery, class size appears to have no effect on scholastic outcomes (Clark et al., 2019, p. 190). Neither do the normal measurable characteristics and qualifications of teachers!

Yet studies reliably show that *which teacher* a primary school student ends up with *does* make a large difference in their outcomes. Moreover, the impact of individual teachers on the **emotional health of children** is larger than the impact on performance in cognitive outcomes like math. The critical difference across teachers may be in the attitudes and non-cognitive skills they impart.

In addition, **impacts on behaviour and emotional health endure over time**, and help academic performance, while the direct effect of an individual teacher on math skills fades quickly.

In summary, teaching non-cognitive (social and emotional) skills to students has immediate and lasting benefits. These benefits are established for wellbeing but they also, astonishingly, benefit subsequent test score outcomes as well, and more so than any intervention specifically targeting cognitive measures.

Action for Happiness school toolkit

The [Keys to Happier Living Toolkit](#) for teachers comes in versions for ages 5–7 and 7–11. These are evidence-based programmes to promote the emotional wellbeing and resilience of children.

They give children the chance to think about the things they can do in their everyday life to improve their own and others' lives. This is the low-investment end of the intervention spectrum, focusing only on the children involved.

Positive Education

This is a formal but highly adaptive and context-dependent wellbeing framework for transforming educational environments to promote wellbeing as a buildable life-long resource (Seligman and Adler, 2019). Seligman, Ernst, et al. (2009) “speculate that **positive education will form the basis of a ‘new prosperity’**, a politics that values both wealth and well-being.”

Examples from the many implementations around the world include the University of Adelaide's teacher education program, which by 2024 will have graduated 750 teachers who will reach over 90,000 students. Another example is from the Bhutanese Ministry of Education, where ten non-academic “life skills” are taught over 15 months for secondary students: mindfulness, empathy, self-awareness, coping with emotions, communication, relationships, creative thinking, critical thinking, decision making, and problem solving.

Experience shows a strong link between **teachers' wellbeing** and the success and satisfaction of students. The implementation of new curricula takes time and starts out focused on teachers. It works best with a whole-school approach, multi-stakeholder engagement, local cultural adaptation, and measurement of outcomes.

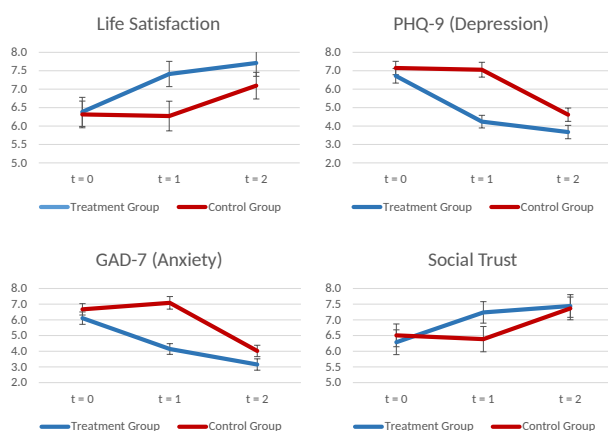
When outcomes are measured, they tend to be extraordinarily positive for standardized test scores (cognitive skills), reduction of risky behaviour, and physical health in adulthood, in addition to improvements in the targeted social and emotional outcomes.

Other schooling initiatives

Numerous other programmes exist in this space (e.g. [toolboxproject.com](https://www.toolboxproject.com)), even though good measurement of the outcomes and controlled experimentation of the interventions are rare. Notable is a recent “Healthy Minds” intervention in high schools (Lordan and McGuire, 2019). A good review of the evidence is forthcoming.

Community randomized controlled trial

In a remarkable RCT, community volunteers taught Action For Happiness’s “Exploring What Matters” 8-session course to groups from the general population (implementation cost £90/pp). The course taught a range of non-cognitive social/emotional skills (habits, skills, attitudes) as well as sharing evidence from the science of wellbeing. Impacts on each of the ONS4 subjective wellbeing measures, as well as on mental health and pro-sociality (compassion, trust, etc) were large and significant. For instance, the effect on life satisfaction was akin to that associated with a 10× increase in income.



Treatment Group was treated between $t=0$ and $t=1$; Control Group was treated between $t=1$ and $t=2$ (Krekel et al., 2020).

Opportunities throughout the life course

We already intervene with “expensive” guidance and nudges in many ways, such as RRSPs and free schooling (which likely save public money in the long run, besides improving lives). Who will provide equitably accessible, reliable, evidence-based advice to each generation on:

- Marriage and long-term relationships
- Saving
- Parenting
- Management skills and workplace relationships
- Retraining, career transitions
- Civic engagement and organising
- Retirement
- Eldercare
- ...

Thorough, formal education in these could go far to reduce inequalities and inter-generational transmission. Note that they also help those who are doing well, as well as those who are not.

Conclusion

Re-inventing our approach to education

1. must embrace the full implications of aiming to improve individuals’ wellbeing and their ability to contribute to others’;
2. implicates all levels of government, leveraging community workshops, public health infrastructure, labour market institutions, and so on;
3. builds a life-long approach to self-improvement and wellbeing;
4. is already well supported by evidence.

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