

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

Chris Barrington-Leigh
McGill University
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Chris.Barrington-LeighMcGill.ca
lifesatisfaction.ca
research.wellbeing.mcgill.ca

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.

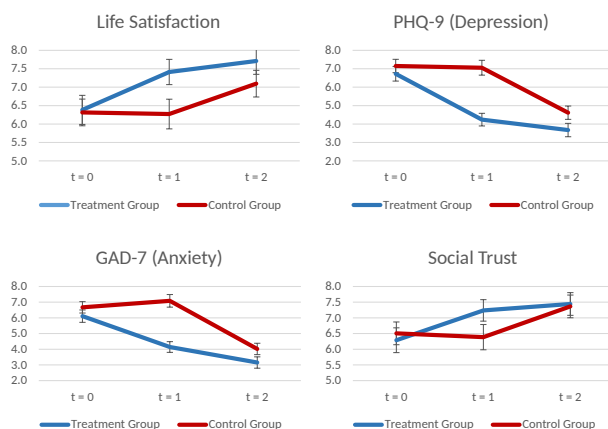
When outcomes are measured, they tend to be extraordinarily positive for standardized test scores (cognitive skills), reduction of risky behaviour, and physical health in adulthood, in addition to improvements in the targeted social and emotional outcomes.

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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Other briefs in this series

BRIEFING NOTE (V. 2024-01-12, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

What would a pan-jurisdictional wellbeing-budgeting framework look like?

Chris Barrington-Leigh
McGill University
July 2020

Chris Barrington-Leigh
McGill University
research.wellbeing.mcgill.ca

Introduction

Wellbeing budgeting is attractive because it promises to be able to integrate accounting of benefits, and risk decrease, across agencies and across jurisdictions. A sensible conception of human wellbeing, rooted in individual experience, does not change the meaning of wellbeing to which jurisdiction is asking. In this and it does not matter for wellbeing which jurisdiction was responsible for a positive change. Successful wellbeing outcomes of policy are essentially based across jurisdictional levels, as well as across traditional domains of policy.

In addition: (a) Capacity and resources with jurisdictional level. (b) The ability to compare and benchmark with peer municipalities and provinces is an important feature when building measurement frameworks. (c) Leaving with local government to research and derive its own framework, when there would be the end by policy of community, would be a costly inefficiency. And (d) no local jurisdiction can generate enough evidence or expertise to provide it with the knowledge on how policies will affect wellbeing having some consistent indicators across the country provides a common evidence base for wellbeing budgeting.

All this is to say that the shared responsibility and funding for many factors influencing wellbeing make collaboration, coordination and even a shared vision important. An ideal wellbeing budgeting framework in Canada could be designed to serve all jurisdictional levels, while allowing local governments to choose the indicators that are most relevant to their own context. The framework could also offer all jurisdictions a toolkit (or several) for program measurement, and a toolkit for decision-making.

This note outlines some regional features of an integrated wellbeing budgeting framework. It also explains why along with supporting wellbeing efforts to a given level of government is important. And it suggests how to use a wellbeing dashboard.

Desirable features

A pan-jurisdictional offering will offer (but not require) a shared menu of measurable indicators, and the the foundation for a common discussion across multiple traditional policy locations where comparable measures of success were difficult to find. Some good features include:

- Separation of domains of responsibility and supports of wellbeing from policy action
- Ability of indicators of wellbeing to be compared at different geographic scales
- Peer comparability across provinces to measure success
- Common evidence base for choosing wellbeing-supporting policy. Local regions can leverage expertise elsewhere.
- Integration and synergy of accounting of public benefits across jurisdictions

BRIEFING NOTE (V. 2024-01-12, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

Integrating a wellbeing budgeting framework with existing priorities and commitments

Chris Barrington-Leigh
McGill University
July 2020

Chris Barrington-Leigh
McGill University
research.wellbeing.mcgill.ca

Introduction

Aligning policy under an overall quality of life framework is attractive for several reasons. It should help to correct from long-standing policy bias towards a market growth orientation. It may help to align work across agencies and to build more integrative policies. It should help to communicate government's ultimate goals and its accountability to the best interests of Canadians.

Objective measures can inform us about trends of income and employment and housing in a society, but they can never tell us what it feels like to be poor or rich, to be unemployed or employed, to be in a private space, or to be alone in a house. By going otherwise to existing efforts across departments and agencies, a life satisfaction approach is likely, first of all, to respond and engage outcomes-based policy-making in terms of existing objective measures. It also provides a way in that it can provide both intuitive meaning and analytic valuation to any array of objective goals.

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SDGs

The SDGs and their measurement framework are a set of goals, the focus to risk, with no intended way to prioritize across them. Nevertheless, the risk to create an index which combines all of these goals requires policy-makers with a design-governance perspective.

There is a tendency to create indices of progress or wellbeing, which combine multiple, disparate outcomes with varying arbitrary weights, leaving them indistinguishable upon scrutiny, even after attempting rational public and political attention. While, such indices often surface, i.e., add together, measures related to human experience with measures related to ecological goals. An example is the single (linked) indicator created to track the highly influential U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is a sum of 100 numbers, all treated as equally important, which cover the disparate ideas captured by the SDGs. (In this and other 2020 notes, the index for SDG goal 12 (responsible consumption and production) is used.)

BRIEFING NOTE (V. 2024-01-12, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

Has COVID changed everything? Opportunities and priorities in the pandemic and recovery

Chris Barrington-Leigh
McGill University
August 2020

Chris Barrington-Leigh
McGill University
research.wellbeing.mcgill.ca

Introduction

What decision confront governments when it comes to COVID-19?

- How to trade off among income, unemployment, mental health, physical health, public confidence, and other factors? "What price should we assign to lives?"
- How to balance the wellbeing of different groups, including young and old, health workers and others?
- How to act in the face of uncertainty? and how to evaluate costs now and costs over the next decade?
- How to weigh death versus quality of life?

While the states are enormous and the uncertainties bounding, this crisis in some ways presents a perfect example of the value of a life satisfaction framework which can integrate the expert priorities of epidemiologists, macroeconomists, and others.

This document has some starting thoughts for reflection on wellbeing budgeting in the (post-)pandemic context, but it is a short presentation.

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- Costs to terms of wellbeing 2
- Data 3
- Death 3
- We are social beings 3
- Non-cognitive skills 3
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What's been learned?

There may be new broad public awareness on issues such as:

- What matters:** People may generally have new reflections on what matters most in life, what was missing during the pandemic, what is essential.
- Depression:** suffering has varied based on traditional predictors of disadvantage. The following have been publicly highlighted: ability to distance at work, ability to work from home, security of employment, pre-existing health, access to healthcare, housing security, housing density, violence at home, health knowledge and practice, discrimination (see Abuse-looking groups) household

BRIEFING NOTE (V. 2024-01-12, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

How can sustainability enter a budgeting framework for human wellbeing?

Chris Barrington-Leigh
McGill University
August 2020

Chris Barrington-Leigh
McGill University
research.wellbeing.mcgill.ca

Introduction

Facing a choice of the economy vs the environment is a notorious false dichotomy. It is politically driven and represents a debilitating source of cognitive dissonance for the general public. Framing our actions as responsible choices is, naturally, simplifying. Regardless of the true risks we face, humans need a positive vision of the future to liberate our most creative, analytic, empathetic, open, and pro-social sides.

Fortunately, insights about human wellbeing provide for future trajectories which are both positive and feasible (Barrington-Leigh, 2017). Nevertheless, these potential benefits of life satisfaction framing can be lost when measures of progress take on conflicting goals, undermining our ability to proceed for either wellbeing or sustainability.

A key challenge is that uncertainty about long term outcomes can overwhelm decision processes in the short term. Calculating or articulating budget tradeoffs between near-term benefits and the most uncertain (likely) and long-run outcomes is doomed to fail when it is not possible to precisely quantify the latter side of the equation. Stranding such issues together presents productive resource allocation from happening in the present, largely by collating objective and dividing supporters.

This note outlines some potential approaches to incorporate sustainable wellbeing and norms across essential policies. It focuses on shaping the notion of wellbeing, and its practical application, appears from a historical approach to ecological concerns. This framework focuses on promoting the compelling objective of wellbeing, while separating out the most pernicious long-run consequences. More (non-technical) detail is available in a 20-page paper:

Why life satisfaction?

Life satisfaction, or eudaimonia, is a positive state of mind. Life satisfaction is associated with energy towards the problems in the first Trump election and with large-scale voting in France.

Based on what is known about the determinants of life satisfaction, it seems feasible to engineer a society with high life satisfaction but which is running down the resources left for future generations. If government policy is to shift towards an accountability to human wellbeing, how do we incorporate ecological health and sustainability into our objectives?

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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. However, investment in education does not stop with children. Research on a number of fronts, including the science of happiness, gives us reasons to expand and revise our investments in education. The science behind life wellbeing encompasses 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, low anxiety, problem-solving, management, leadership, child-rearing, intimate relationships, mental hygiene, mental first-aid, and self-care play an important role. The scope of the affect-related neuroscience jurisdictional boundaries.

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Why might we require a rethink about "education in Canada"?

- State skills are insufficient: lifelong training is essential: educational transformations is ahead
- Policy objectives are shifting towards wellbeing
- Longer lifespan requires more life skills at different stages (lower programme, re-orientation)
- Most studies of education have focused on test scores as the outcome, rather than wellbeing.

Does education matter for wellbeing?

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

BRIEFING NOTE (V. 2024-01-12, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

Review of Department of Finance Canada's "Toward a Quality of Life Strategy for Canada"

Chris Barrington-Leigh
McGill University
April 2021

Chris Barrington-Leigh
McGill University
research.wellbeing.mcgill.ca

Introduction

In July 2021, in cooperation with the federal budget, the Department of Finance released the work of a Quality of Life Strategy for Canada. (The name of Finance, QoL, is an excellent fit from a long time, taken from some lectures for the Ministry of Finance.)

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- Identification 2
- Measurement 2
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Previous efforts

It is worth looking back to the first life wellbeing measurement framework put together at a research office by the Canadian federal government, for example in 2008:

- The Survey of Canadian Quality of Life (2008-2010)
- The SDG and Wellbeing in Canada (2016-2018) used to be widely (mis)interpreted
- The Wellbeing Index (2019-2020)
- Measuring the Wellbeing of Canadians: A Vision Wellbeing Framework (2020)

The Review is an attempt, not only to expand but to correct approaches to the role of a broad quality of life framework. The objective is to face the government's own quality of government. To make a, in total, the current effort effective, it is, in some ways, to be better.