

Developing Successful and Happy Students:

Complementing Learning Programs with Psycho/Social Needs in NYC Schools

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Introduction: the Nature of Happiness and What It Means

“I believe that the very purpose of life is to be happy. From the very core of our being, we desire contentment. In my own limited experience I have found that the more we care for the happiness of others, the greater is our own sense of well-being. Cultivating a close, warm-hearted feeling for others automatically puts the mind at ease. It helps remove whatever fears or insecurities we may have and gives us the strength to cope with any obstacles we encounter. It is the principal source of success in life. Since we are not solely material creatures, it is a mistake to place all our hopes for happiness on external development alone. The key is to develop inner peace.”

The Dalai Lama (*“Forum 2000” Conference, Czech Republic, 1997*)

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Thomas Jefferson (*“The Declaration of Independence”, Philadelphia, 1776*)

“Those who are not looking for happiness are the most likely to find it, because those who are searching forget that the surest way to be happy is to seek happiness for others.”

Martin Luther King Jr. (*Forbes Volume 110, 1972, page 86*)

In these quotes from three leaders of their respective generations, we see the significance the Dalai Lama, Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King Jr. hold for the notion of happiness and how important it is in making people’s lives better. Not often mentioned is the fact that Jefferson substituted the word “happiness” for the word “property” that was originally used in the Declaration of Independence, feeling the latter word limited the true essence of what Americans deserved and were looking for in their newly established country. As an admirer of the philosophers Epicurus and John Locke, Jefferson’s idea of happiness was broader than the idea of the pursuit of individual gain and pleasure. This implies a response to and involvement with community further aligning Jefferson with the Dalai Lama that the individual alone cannot be as content and happy as the person who is connected to and involved with others. Furthermore, the ability and capability to connect to others only happens when a state of self-knowledge first exists. Exposed to the process of knowing “Who you are” – as students - allows them to connect with others in a more healthy way because they are learning to become comfortably centered themselves.

The essence of “Developing Successful and Happy Students” is predicated on the principle that students do not need another program to ensure their success and happiness. Instead acknowledging, developing, and nurturing them individually within

the context of their prescribed course of studies is recommended to offset the over-emphasis on external performance that has compromised students' overall integration into mature and content adults.

In our 24/7 world, the need to go stronger, faster and higher has spilled into all facets of society and education is no exception. The measurement of success “in number of widgets” as to opposed to “having peace of mind”, has necessitated the education system to respond to this cultural and economic phenomenon by training its students to perform ever more vigorously. A revealing article in the New York Times (August 15, 2015) titled “Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace” - The company is conducting an experiment in how far it can push white-collar workers to get them to achieve its ever-expanding ambitions – where no one cares about your work-life balance. (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/technology/inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-in-a-bruising-workplace.html?_r=0)

The present-day striving for success in the work world has compromised students' emotional and social needs in the process. Twenty years ago, the integration of the whole individual was a joint responsibility of family, church, school and community anchors like scouts and 4-H Clubs. The fragmentation of the latter through cultural evolution and changing societal mores has shifted a large weight of social responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the education system – one of the last-serving bastions to our children. Let's be clear here. There is no “wrong” or “right” in this scenario; there is simply reality. And given the circumstances, it falls to NYC educators to be leaders within this paradigm shift of social responsibility. Taking the initiative by focusing on the integral needs of students – at least balancing those needs in tandem with the

pressure to produce successful students for the work world – is crucial. Something’s got to give in the midst of this societal shift and it already has...

Witness the Present Stats - 1

Presently the NYC School Board oversees 1.1 million students in over 1,800 schools.

<http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/default.htm>

Though students are exposed to the latest technologies, teaching methodologies, and course content updates and modifications, and for all intents and purposes should be thriving in such an enabling education setting, many of them are not.

The Wall Street Journal (July 27, 2015) recently reported that there is a rise in the number of adolescents engaged in self-injury, especially cutting. School officials, from high school to elementary levels, are working with adolescent psychologists to train their mental-health staff and teachers to counsel at-risk teens and to educate all students in dealing with stressful emotions.

“The teens, girls and boys, come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and include good students and struggling ones. Many have obvious emotional challenges while others appear outwardly to be thriving,” says Dr. Stephen Lewis, associate professor of psychology and self-injury researcher at the University of Guelph in Canada.

Bullying and violence in schools have increased. The following statistics are alarming:

- Violent school threats have increased by 158% from 2010 to 2011.
- Only 39% of schools in the 2009-2010 school year took serious disciplinary action against a student for special offenses. Actions included out-of-school suspension, expulsion, or transfer to a specialty school.
- In the U.S., 33 school-associated violent deaths occurred in the 2009-2010 school year including homicides, suicides, and legal interventions. Eighteen of these occurred on school property.
- Some of the signs of bullying include: 1) physical marks, such as cuts or bruises, 2) fear of riding bus to school, 3) depression, anxiety, or moodiness lasting more than a couple of weeks, 4) sudden loss of friends.
- In recent years, assault by weapon, cases of intimidation and bullying, and alcohol possession have all more than doubled on school properties.
- Drug possessions at school more than doubled from 2005 to 2011. Teachers confirm that violence may not be spiking, but records are being kept much more accurately than in the past.

(Trump, Ken. "Study Finds rapid escalation of violent school threats." National School Safety and Security Services. Accessed March 4, 2015;
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And only seven weeks into the job as Chancellor last year, Ms. Farina told educators at Stuyvesant High School that suicides among NYC high school students had increased to a rate of a child a week over the two months of her tenure. As reported by The Post, stats from the City Health Department show suicides are increasing. It is now the third leading cause of death for New Yorkers ages 15 to 24. In 2010, 58 people in that age group took their lives, and that number grew to 64 in 2011 and 66 in 2012.

(<http://observer.com/2014/03/schools-chancellor-reveals-startling-suicide-trend-among-new-york-students/>)

Build on *The Framework for Great Schools*

The Framework for Great Schools is a holistic, research-based approach to school improvement endeavoring to “meet the needs of the whole child.” Though student achievement is at the center of this model, that is, to “advance educational attainment by preparing every New York City public school graduate to compete in the 21st century workplace”, there is no direct reference to focusing on the integral (read emotional, social, and spiritual) needs of the individual student.

By mirroring *The Framework for Great Schools* introduced by Chancellor Farina in 2014 with the “Success and Happiness” integration process, it is anticipated that a balance will be restored to what constitutes a successful and happy student – inside and out. There is no need to remove or fragment the good work already taking place in NY schools. Some of the present supports that address aspects of student psycho-social needs include the reference *Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools*; the handbook *Behavior Interventions in a Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtI²)*

Model; general counseling for mental health issues; and the *Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support Workgroups* (PBIS). The key is to leverage this good work by consciously paying more attention to the emotional and social needs of every student to “meet the needs of the **whole** child”.

Why Bring Happiness into the “whole child” Equation?

At one time happiness was perceived to be nothing more than a fluffy emotional state firmly associated with the Pollyannas of the world – those naïve and possibly out-of-touch individuals who had no sense of the “real” world and therefore conveniently left it to reside in clouds of positivity and optimism. Fortunately, present-day thinking, research and scientific measurement have convinced leading thought leaders, behavioral scientists, psychologists and psychiatrists that being happy, that is, “*the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.*” (Lyubomirsky, 2007) affects personal mental and physical health, productivity and an individual’s connectivity to others. When someone is happy, they are not only of benefit to themselves, they are of benefit to others - echoing the words of the Dalai Lama, Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King Jr. at the outset of this article.

Witness the Present Stats – 2

When the Kingdom of Bhutan, a landlocked country in Southeast Asia at the eastern tip of the Himalayas made international headlines as the happiest country in the world, and created the GNH – Gross National Happiness index – that measures the quality of life of its population, happiness took on new significance by the fact that it was now being

measured. An extensive analysis of the GNH index can be found here:

<http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/An%20Extensive%20Analysis%20of%20GNH%20Index.pdf>

Furthermore, the following scientific facts contribute to the importance of happiness in a person's life:

"If you can raise your level of positivity in the present...your intelligence rises, your creativity rises, your energy levels rise... Your brain at positive is 31 per cent more productive than your brain at negative, neutral or stressed."

Psychologist Shawn Achor (*The Happy Secret to Better Work*, TED Talk, 2012)

"Happier workers help their colleagues 33% more often than unhappy ones, and 36% are more motivated in their work."

Joint Research by Wall Street Journal and iOpener Institute, 2012

"Obesity and mental health are intertwined. Because fat tissue is biologically active, it produces cortisol, a stress hormone, as well as inflammatory chemicals, both of which have been linked to mental illness. Cortisol is neuro-toxic. It can act on the brain of vulnerable people – putting them at increased risk for depression. Conversely, people with depression produce excess cortisol. One of the effects is a propensity to accumulate fat round the abdomen."

“62% of the nation’s adult population is either overweight or obese, a trend that’s tracking at an even faster pace among children and adolescents.”

Dr. Valerie Taylor, Psychiatrist, Toronto’s Women’s College Hospital, Canada and

Dr. Arya Sharma, Professor of Medicine/Chair of Obesity Management, University of Alberta, Canada (*Mental Health and Obesity Conference, Toronto, 2014*)

“When we are elevated by other people, it causes us to feel better, to feel happier. It also causes us to behave more virtuously ourselves.”

Louisa Jewell, President of the Canadian Positive Psychology Association (*The Positivity Principle, Ottawa Citizen, 2014*)

“Over the last decade, neuroscientists have identified a 10-section “empathy circuit” in our brains which, if damaged, can curtail our ability to understand what other people are feeling. Evolutionary biologists like Frans de Waal have shown that we are social animals who have naturally evolved to care for each other, just like our primate cousins. And psychologists have revealed that we are primed for empathy by strong attachment relationships in the first two years of life. The good news is, empathy can be developed beyond childhood as an attitude that improves our lives and others’.”

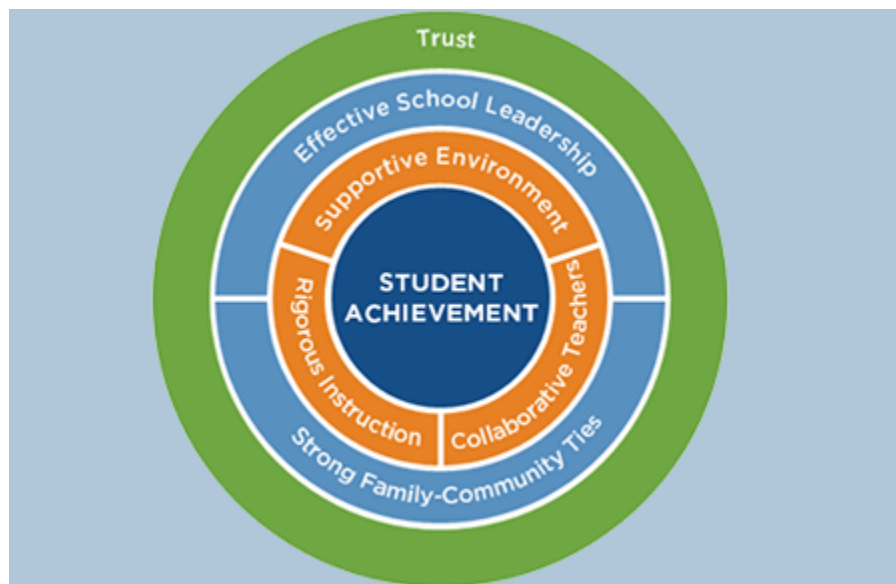
Dr. Roman Krznaric, Founding Faculty Member, The School of Life, London, U.K. (*Six Habits of Highly Empathic People, 2012*)

“What is particularly reassuring is that children do respond strongly to the needs of others...And this tendency should be nurtured. [W]e could build on the natural inclination of young children to help others and their sensitivity to distress.”

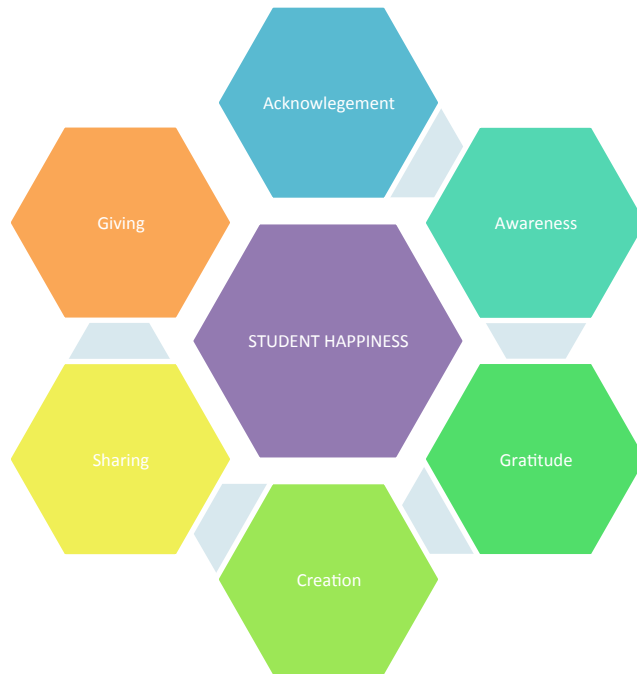
Dr. Keith Jensen, School of Psychological Sciences at the University of Manchester, U.K. (*Restorative Justice in Children*, 2015)

The Happiness Cycle Complementing The Framework for Great Schools

Drawing on the facts presented in sections *Witness the Present Stats – 1* and *Witness the Present Stats – 2*, it can be concluded that introducing *The Happiness Cycle* in a viable way to NYC schools would be beneficial to their students specifically and beneficial to their administrators, teachers and parents generally. Using *The Framework for Great Schools* as a foundation, *The Happiness Cycle* complements and completes the approach to address the needs of the **whole** child.



The Framework for Great Schools



The Happiness Cycle

| The Framework for Great Schools | The Happiness Cycle |
|---|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Trust</p> <p>Everyone works toward the shared goal of improving student outcomes, preparing students for success in school and beyond. Across the school community, there is respect. School staff, parents, students and administrators value each other.*</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Acknowledgement</p> <p>Everyone affirms everyone else in the school community leading to mutual respect and self-respect.</p> |
| Effective School Leadership | Awareness |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Principals lead by example and nurture the professional growth of teachers and staff, developing and delivering the instructional and social-emotional support that drives student achievement.*</p> | <p>Principals and staff through individual self-discovery in turn help students to self-discover who they are as individuals and how important they are.</p> |
| <p>Strong Family – Community Ties</p> <p>School leadership brings resources from the community into the school building by welcoming, encouraging, and developing partnerships with families, businesses, and community based organizations.*</p> | <p>Gratitude</p> <p>School leadership accepts support from community. The act of gratitude for what the school has and giving thanks becomes a practice within the school on a macro and a micro level.</p> |
| <p>Rigorous Instruction</p> <p>Instruction is customized, inclusive, motivating, and aligned to the Common Core. High standards are set in every classroom. Students are actively engaged in ambitious intellectual activity and developing critical thinking skills.*</p> | <p>Creation</p> <p>Instruction is the catalyst for students to create through thinking, speaking, writing and acting. Creating to complete whatever the task, is personally fulfilling and empowering.</p> |
| <p>Collaborative Teachers</p> <p>Teachers are committed to the success and improvement of their classrooms and schools. They have the opportunity to participate in professional development</p> | <p>Sharing</p> <p>Personal fulfillment through the act of creating as encouraged by the teacher, gives the student the confidence to open up and share with others. This relating to</p> |

| | |
|---|--|
| within a culture of respect and continuous improvement.* | others is a closer step to feeling content. |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Supportive Environment</p> <p>The school establishes a classroom and school culture where students feel safe, supported, and challenged by their teachers and peers.*</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Giving</p> <p>When relating to others in a safe and supported culture, the student is able to give of him/herself. S/he willingly affirms others and is happier as a result.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The Happiness Cycle Repeats</i></p> |

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Extrinsic + Intrinsic

* http://schools.nyc.gov/documents/oaosi/cep/2014-15/cep_X320.pdf

As the Happiness Cycle suggests, developing successful and happy students involves an intentional intervention from those who lead to acknowledge and affirm those who learn before any knowledge exchange takes place. Saying “Hi, Sam, how’s it going?” before asking “Did you get your homework done?” is the first step in the process. The act of reaching out and connecting in this way shows a teacher who is “self-aware” – is thinking beyond self. They are then capable of nurturing their students to achieve not only a sense of personal well-being but academic improvement and success as well. In this way, NYC teachers contribute to their school culture and community as a whole, are role models for those they teach, and moreover they benefit personally. As Martin Luther King said, “...the surest way to be happy is to seek happiness for others.”

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The Framework for Great Schools

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