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Teaching Happiness: The Role of Positive Psychology in the Classroom

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Abstract

Happiness can be defined in various ways, and characterizing traits that reflect sustained

happiness in an individual can be a daunting task. For the purpose of this paper, I propose that

contentment regarding the past, satisfaction in the present, optimism about the future, as well as

cultivating individual strengths and virtues will result in sustained happiness. Using findings

from and relating to the field of positive psychology, I will suggest that these qualities can be

fostered in students and will benefit students individually and ultimately society as a whole.

Historical roots play an important role in human life as a whole and historical analysis has resulted in an interest in why human beings behave in the way they do and how actions of the past can bring a clearer view to how people behave in the present. The study of human life starts as early as time and the pursuit of happiness has been a source of fascination throughout centuries. Aristotle defined happiness roughly as the product of rational desire, a complete and sufficient good in and of itself (Crisp, 2000). His examination and dedication to the study of human virtues and morality and their basis in human happiness have been referred to throughout centuries by individuals and researchers when studying one of humans' ultimate goals; to achieve happiness. A relatively new field of psychology finds its basis here, and contemporary psychologists have expressed a growing interest in the topic. The field of positive psychology focuses on improving the general quality of life in individuals, as opposed to improving upon supposed human flaws, which has been the goal of traditional psychology. The findings of positive psychology attempt to disprove the hedonic treadmill theory of human happiness, which suggests that every individual has a set point of happiness, which is close to neutrality, that changes for short periods of time, reflecting life circumstances , but eventually returns to neutrality. Contrasting this view, studies show that different individuals have different set happiness point, and most people claim their usual state of happiness is above neutral. Also, certain life events and circumstances can lastingly improve or decrease an individual's happiness set point (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006). Martin Seligman (2002) says that individual happiness is a reflection of each individual's set happiness points, life circumstances, and factors under voluntary control. Fortunately, factors under voluntary control can be improved upon and also taught to individuals, including students in the classroom. These qualities under voluntary control include strengths in virtue and character, improving upon individual signature strengths,

as well as finding happiness in the past, present, and future by examining one's own basic human thoughts, actions, and reactions. Happy people are kinder to others, less materialistic, as well as more likely to demonstrate self control (Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Frederickson, 2006) (Polak & McCullough, 2006) (Fishbach & Labroo, 2007). These attributes along with others that happy people contribute to society suggest that a happier society overall will be beneficial to the greater good. Using the field of positive psychology, one can improve upon individual happiness as well as teach to others the qualities which will lend themselves to this. Hence, specific qualities emerging from the field of positive psychology combined with previously existing educational theories such as Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences can be taught to result in individual's sustained happiness and should be implemented into school curriculums in the United States to result in a more productive, harmonious, just, and merciful society.

The separation of church and state presents itself as a detriment to the theory that positive psychology should be implemented in curriculums across the nation. Since a core aspect of these teachings involves virtues, one might argue that the concept is too ambiguous and albeit, abstract, to apply transversely. However, most psychologists agree that virtues have trait-like qualities, concern what kind of person one is, as opposed to what one ought to be, are malleable, have moral qualities, and most people possess some but not others (Wong, 2006, p. 134). Seligman, as a profound researcher in the field of psychology, recognizes the importance of this discernment and his findings help assure that the field of positive psychology and the virtues, which make up some of the foundation of the field, have a solid basis in research. As a testament to his commitment to the field, Seligman was the 31st most frequently cited psychologist in introductory psychology textbooks throughout the 20th century (Haggbloom, 2002, p.146). His

findings suggest that six virtues, consisting of twenty-four core strengths, can be applied across cultures and religion around the globe. Seligman and his colleagues based their theory on ancient traditions which are widely recognized as having the most enduring impact on human civilization; China, South Asia, and the West. These traditions encompass the religions of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Athenian philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). These virtues and strengths, while not concretely defined across the globe, are found to permeate basic human differences to the point which one can conclude their similarities outweigh their differences, when taken out of specific cultural contexts. These virtues include wisdom, courage, justice, humanity, temperance, and transcendence (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). Together, they incorporate twenty-four different strengths, creating clusters that are ultimately important factors in achieving sustained happiness (Seligman, 2002).

Wisdom can be defined as "Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge" (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005, p. 205). The strengths within this include curiosity, interest in the world, love of learning, judgment, critical thinking, open-mindedness, ingenuity, originality, practical intelligence, street smarts, social intelligence, personal intelligence, emotional intelligence, and perspective (Seligman, 2002, p. 140-160). In their book, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, Peterson and Seligman cite different researchers and authors defining wisdom and they ultimately conclude that wisdom is a virtue which is a type of knowledge involving how one deals with and perceives the conditions that life brings fourth, as well as how one shares such knowledge with others (Peterson, Seligman, 2004, p. 39). Courage can be defined as "Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal" (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005, p. 205).

Courage includes the strengths of valor, bravery, perseverance, industry, diligence, integrity, genuineness, and honesty (Seligman, 2002, p. 140-160). Peterson and Seligman go beyond this definition to describe three different kinds of courage; physical, psychological, and moral courage. Hence, courage is not simply an external act but internal as well and consists of doing what is right, even when one has a lot to lose (Peterson, Seligman, 2004, p. 36). The next virtue, justice, can be defined as "Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life" (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005, p. 205). Justice includes the character strengths of fairness, equity, and leadership (Seligman, 2002, p. 140-160). Opposing the Western view of justice as simply equity, positive psychology defines justice as a notion of what is fair by the nature of the situation. The next strength, humanity can be defined as "Interpersonal strengths that involve 'tending and befriending' others" (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005, p. 205). These strengths include kindness, generosity, loving, and allowing oneself to be loved. Humanity can be differentiated from justice in the aspect of fairness. As applied to humanity, fairness doesn't play as strong a role; demanding that one be virtuous even when it is seemingly unfair to do so. The fifth virtue is temperance, which can be defined as "Strengths that protect against excess" (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005, p. 205). With temperance come self-control, prudence, discretion, caution, humility, and modesty. This is a form of self-restraint which ultimately is beneficial to one or others and in practicing it; one is monitoring the intake of the bad and the output of the good. Lastly, transcendence can be defined as "Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and thereby provide meaning" (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005, p. 205). This in essence, is the belief in a purpose or meaning beyond oneself. The strengths of transcendence include appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, optimism, future-mindedness, spirituality, sense of purpose, faith, religiousness, forgiveness,

mercy, playfulness, humor, zest, passion, and enthusiasm (Seligman, 2002, p. 140-160). This virtue is not synonymous with religion or spirituality and "reminds us of how tiny we are but simultaneously lifts us out of a sense of complete insignificance" (Peterson, Seligman, 2004, p. 39).

Among all of these strengths, which are under the six categories of virtues, each person has "signatures strengths" which they display strongest. Signature strengths are representative of personality as well as learning style. There are specific ways in which to measure these strengths including the *Clifton Strengths Finder*, and the *VIA Signature Strengths Inventory*. The *Strengths Finder* identifies an individual's talents and continues as the person integrates their talents into a view of the self. The *VIA Signature Strengths Inventory* is an online assessment to measure positive traits and virtues (Foster & Lloyd, 2007, pp. 32-33). In addition to this, the *Behavior Emotion Rating Scale* measures children's strengths in five different areas (Wong, 2006). Aside from these specific tests to discover students' strengths, it would be fairly easy for the classroom teacher to discover students' strengths in their own way, especially taking into account the amount of time a teacher spends with his or her students. Once each individual's strengths have been found, the object is to exercise these strengths daily in order to achieve maximum happiness. Signature strengths should be used as frequently as possible in as many settings as possible. In a recent study, it was found that in large corporations, only 20% of the employees felt that their strengths were being utilized in the position they held. The problem this presents is that people perform at their most productive levels when first their strengths are discovered, and then utilized in creative ways (Kerfoot, 2005). This same rule applies in the classroom, where teaching should aim to help students discover and utilize their strengths in order to find authentic and sustained happiness. Students will perform at their most productive levels if they are

excelling in what they're doing because it utilizes their signature strengths. While it is not logical to suggest that every different student's strengths can be utilized in every lesson, lessons should be planned so that throughout each school day, each student is able to utilize their strengths multiple times. Along with utilizing a student's strengths to help them learn more efficiently, this provides for opportunity for the students to develop and grow in strengths that they may be weaker in when lessons lend themselves to other students' strengths. Also, since all strengths falls under the category of a virtue, students will become more virtuous through this, on a global perspective.

Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is a testament to the argument of signature strengths. Gardner proposes eight different "intelligences" which students possess, whereas students excel in certain intelligences and have weaker abilities concerning other intelligences. The intelligences Gardner cites are linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic (Gardner, 1993). Linguistic intelligence has to do with strengths with words. Students whose strengths lie in linguistic intelligence are usually good at reading, writing, as well as speaking. Students can strengthen their linguistic intelligence by having debates, keeping journals, taking notes, speaking about what they have learned, reading, playing word games, etc. Logical-mathematical intelligence is valued most highly in Western culture, traditionally. Intelligence and standardized testing is a reflection of this kind of intelligence. Logical-mathematical intelligence allows an individual to easily process logical problems including abstractions, reasoning, and problems involving numbers. Naturally, students with strengths in logical-mathematical intelligence tend to excel in math, with computers, as well as scientific investigation. Beneficial ways to strengthen mathematical intelligence include using computers to do graphs and calculations, keeping

organized, asking questions to test reasoning skills, math games, as well as interpreting data. Spatial intelligence has to do with visualizing and manipulating objects. A student with strong spatial intelligence will be good at puzzles as well as direction and putting things together. To strengthen this intelligence, students can draw diagrams, do puzzles, as well as take objects apart and put them back together. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, according to Gardner, involves movement. Students whose strengths are bodily-kinesthetic excel in activities which involve moving around, such as sports. These students enjoy doing rather than seeing in order to learn. In order to strengthen these intelligences, students should move around while learning, as well as work hands on as often as possible. Musical intelligence involves rhythm, pitch, harmony, and the emotional power of music. Students who have a strong musical intelligence can often play instruments, sing, or compose music as well as have a strong auditory memory. To strengthen this intelligence, students can memorize using song as well as rhythm, or listen to music while learning. Interpersonal intelligence involves interaction with others. Students who have strong interpersonal intelligence have a good understanding of others' feelings and motivations as well as work well in a group. To strengthen this intelligence, students can be involved class discussions as well as group work. Intrapersonal intelligence involves self-reflection as well as self-awareness. Students who have a strong intrapersonal intelligence work best alone as well as have a strong awareness of their own goals and motivation. To strengthen this intelligence, students can take more responsibility in their own learning by being given more independence as well as by being given time to reflect on their own learning. Lastly, naturalistic intelligence has to do with nature as well as one's surroundings. Students with strengths in this intelligence enjoy connections to nature in their learning. This can be strengthened by learning outside as well as relating learning to real life situations (Gardner, 1993).

Applying the Multiple Intelligence Theory in the classroom has become very popular, as it is child-centered, rather than curriculum centered education. In fact, a good number of books have been published citing ways to implement the multiple intelligence theory in the classroom. From this, Gardner's theory has been implemented across the nation and internationally in a variety of ways (Baum, Viens, Slatin, 2005). A representative book, "Engaging Learners in Your Classroom" by Hues cites one example of incorporating all intelligences in a lesson. The lesson is entitled "My family", and the spatially oriented learner paints or draws each family member, the mathematically intelligent learner creates a graph comparing all of the families in the classroom, the student with a strong musical intelligence creates a tape of their family members singing a song and then asks the class to guess which family member it is, bodily kinesthetic learners role play, naturalistic learners discuss roles of the family as compared to roles of animals in nature, linguistic learners describe their family members and roles out loud or in writing, intrapersonal learners arrange photos or drawings of family members and write about them, and interpersonal learners do a show and tell to a group about their family members (Hoerr, 2006). Further, each student could do each of these activities in order to strengthen his or her weaknesses as well. In his 2006 book, "Multiple Intelligences; New Horizons," Gardner mentions the Key School in Indianapolis as an example of multiple intelligences in the elementary classroom. The founding principles of the school provide that each student "Should have his or her multiple intelligences stimulated each day." (Garder, 1993, p. 114). Since the project is relatively new, a perfected method of assessment has not yet been determined, however preliminary results seem promising. Teachers report heightened motivation in students, more appreciation of self, as well as more self-reflection on growth and development, and a positive effect on individuals who had previously been considered at risk (Gardner, Hatch, 1989, p. 5)

Gardner's theory can be combined with the concepts presented by Seligman and colleagues in the field of positive psychology in order to create a more positive environment in the classroom as well as an improvement in society overall. As Baum says in her book, "Multiple Intelligences in the Elementary Classroom," it is fundamental to first identify the strengths and interests of the students in order to properly apply the multiple intelligences theory. To do this, the teacher must gather information about students as well as document evidence of such strengths and weaknesses (Baum, 2005). In order to combine the multiple intelligences theory and positive psychology, one must do the same thing, keeping in mind the virtues of positive psychology, the strengths which lie within such virtues, as well as the eight strengths detailed by Howard Gardner. Students should be observed in a variety of different contexts including social situations such as recess and lunch as well as during every different subject at school. This will provide a more complete assessment of the students' strengths in different contexts, which can then be compared to the list of strengths compiled by the two theories. Charts as in **Figure 1** and **Figure 2** are examples of simple observation charts which could be utilized.

Figure 1

	Weak	Average	Strong	Comments
Linguistic				
Mathematical				
Naturalistic				
Bodily-Kinesthetic				
Spatial				
Musical				
Interpersonal				
Intrapersonal				

Figure 2

Virtue Cluster	Comments
Wisdom	
Courage	
Justice	
Humanity	
Transcendence	
Temperance	

In combination with the observation chart, it is of course an option to distribute a previously mentioned strengths finder test, or a test designed by the teacher in order to further discover students' strengths. Once the students' individual strengths have been taken into account, lessons should be planned likewise in order to properly provide the best learning atmosphere for each student. This observation process should be performed at the beginning of every school year and before meeting each student, the classroom teacher should have the data available regarding the student's strengths in previous years. Observations will continue throughout the year as teachers get to know their students better and students become more comfortable with their teacher. In the first three to four weeks of school, the teacher should have enough information about each student recorded to begin planning for their needs in future lessons. Students' strengths will overlap and there is no reason that every student's strengths cannot be utilized multiple times throughout a school day.

As discussed in the example lesson given previously about families, where Gardner's multiple intelligences theory is utilized, it is a fairly simple task to reorganize a lesson in order to include the eight intelligences according to Gardner. In order to then add the virtues and clusters of strengths along with this, a teacher has to study each cluster in order to realize that most are built into the school day already, and those that aren't can be easily introduced. As a refresher, **Figure 3** presents the six virtues and twenty-four strengths which correspond.

Figure 3

Virtues	Strength Clusters
1. Wisdom and Knowledge	1a Creativity 1b Curiosity 1c Open-mindedness 1d Love of learning 1e Perspective
2. Courage	2a Bravery 2b Persistence 2c Integrity 2d Vitality
3. Humanity	3a Love 3b Kindness 3c Social intelligence
4. Justice	4a Citizenship 4b Fairness 4c Leadership
5. Temperance	5a Forgiveness and mercy 5b Modesty 5c Prudence 5d Self-regulation
6. Transcendence	6a Appreciation of beauty and excellence 6b Gratitude 6c Hope 6d Humor 6e Spirituality

Easily, a teacher can encourage students to utilize these strengths more by encouraging their

positive actions. Many are already present in school curriculums today, as a given. Therefore, for

the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the most crucial; gratitude, forgiveness, appreciation,

self-regulation, and hope.

Emotions about the past have a strong effect on an individual's present and future

happiness. People who are bitter about the past carry feelings of regret, or angry feelings about

events that have passed, into their present. This can be associated with negative effect,

unhappiness, and depression (Sanna, 2006). Many individuals tend to believe that their past will

determine their future, and therefore let it control them. However, it has been proven that

negative events occuring during childhood show little evidence of correlating with adult

happiness. Using positive psychology, people can be taught to change these feelings about the

past into contentment and satisfaction (Seligman, 2002). In order to do this,the strengths that

must be cultivated in individuals are gratitude and forgiveness.

Studies have found that gratitude is one important quality that can improve an

individual's overall happiness (Polak & McCullough, 2006). Grattitude reflects an appreciation

for life. According to Polac and McCullough (2006), gratitude in individuals can result in

increased vitality, happiness, satisfaction with life, hope and optimism. This strength can be

nurtured and taught by promoting positive self talk, identifying nongrateful thougths and

replacing them with grateful thoughts, and self-examining one's life day by day as well as

thinking about how it can be more fulfilling (Snyder & Lopez, 2005). In the classroom, teachers

can promote positive self talk and gratitude simply by having students write down at the end of

each school day or for homework five things they were grateful for that day and why as well as

five things they could improve upon. Studies have proven that reminding oneself to be grateful in this manner helps in coping with hard life events as well as promoting overall happiness and well being (Snyder & Lopez, 2005).

While gratitude amiplifies the good memories regarding the past, forgiveness will transform negative emotions into more neutral emotions allowing more positive thoughts in the present and future. The harmfulness of holding on to negative emotions is exemplified in leaders of nations who remind their people of harmfulness brought on by others in the past and preach revenge. This has been present across nations throughout history, often times leading to deadly wars (Seligman, 2002, p. 76). Forgiveness, for the purposes of this paper, does not mean reconciliation and is more geared toward the release of negative feelings for the victim than pardon for the perpetrator. Several factors regarding forgiveness have been studied including personality traits linked to forgiveness, the social-psychological factors that influence forgiveness, and forgiveness as linked to well-being (Snyder & Lopez, 2005). The steps involved in learning how to forgive can be taught, including recalling the hurt objectively, empathizing, being altruistic, commiting to forgiving, and holding on to it. Programs working on individuals using this methodology have been studied and resulted in less anger and stress as well as more optimism and forgiveness and better overall health (Seligman, 2002). Since it is natural for a victim to avoid the person or event that causes them pain or anger, recalling is the first of these steps and important in being able to forgive. The way to overcome the fear or the anger towards this event in the past is to recall the event and visualize the event and recall the hurt event fully and as objectively as possible, which could take time. Next, empathize with the person or event and see it through the wrong-doers eyes. The purpose of this is to look at the event through a perspective which the victim can live with and let go of. After this, the goal is to be altruistic,

recalling a time when the victim has been forgiven and how that felt. Giving this gift of

forgiveness in the mind should be for the wrong-doers own good, as a gift to him. This goes

along with the fact that helping others will allow us to feel better about ourselves. After giving

this gift, the next step is to commit to it, either by writing it down or saying it out loud to

someone. This will lead the victim to being able to hold on to forgiveness, since they have made

a commitment to it. When memories about this even surface again, the goal is for the victim to

be able to view it objectively and remind themselves that they have forgiven (Worthington,

2003). Judging by studies done, this method of forgiveness can be taught and yields results,

proving that it can be taught in the classroom as well, by explaining and practicing each step.

After learning how to accept and be happy about the past, prolonging happiness in the

present is important to teach as well. In the present, there are two types of pleasures; bodily and

higher. Bodily pleasures consist of immediate, momentary pleasures which come from the

senses. Higher pleasures are similar, but connect more with the cognitive thought process, are

more complex, and vary in intensity. Ways to increase these pleasures in everyday life can be

taught. These ways include spacing them out, becoming aware of each pleasure and savoring it,

sharing it with others, taking mental images, self congratulating, sharpening perceptions by

taking notice to detail, as well as becoming immersed by each pleasure (Seligman, 2002, pp.

104-108). Next, a concept underlying positive psychology which will lead to a more fulfilling

life in the present moment is called "flow." Flow refers to activities which are rewarding in and

of themselves, disregarding the end product. It relates to intrinsic motivation, which is not

necessarily happy as fulfilling, which will lead to happiness. Flow concerns activities that one is

doing and matches them with skill, making that activity worthwhile in and of itself, and

establishing a sense of purpose (Nettle, 2005). Where a person finds flow is dependent on the

individual, however opportunities for people to find flow can be implemented. A school in Indianapolis is trying to foster flow in their students by presenting them with opportunities to choose and engage in activities related to their own interests and then pursue these without demands or pacing and supporting children's selection and enjoyment of activities that challenge them. This school is fostering flow by introducing the values of flow and intrinsic motivation into the school more generally (Snyder & Lopez, 2005, p. 99).

Optimism is a reflection of how individuals think about and perceive the events that happen in their lives. The possible origins of optimism include genetics, environment, criticism, as well as life experiences. Hope involves an individual's set of beliefs and ability to produce routes to achieving goals they have set. Optimism and hope about the future are the next set of qualities that can be taught, in part, in order to improve individual overall happiness. Some people are naturally more pessimistic than others; however optimism is a trait that can be improved upon, yielding many positive effects on individual lives. Learned optimism trains people to recognize their own self-destructive thinking and become disputers of this (Snyder & Lopez, 2005, p. 5). Optimism can be learned through recognizing and then disputing pessimistic thoughts (Seligman, 2002). This can be incorporated into the classroom through modeling optimistic thinking as well as discussing pessimistic thoughts when they come up in the classroom and suggesting other ways to think about them. Students can practice learned optimism on their own after being taught and watching a teacher model methods of disputing pessimistic thought. Seligman's ABCDE model of optimism can easily be taught and modeled in the classroom, explaining adversity, recognizing the negativity of pessimistic thoughts, thinking about the usual consequences of those thoughts, disputing this belief, and showing the positive effects of what happens when this thought is successfully disputed. Hope can be learned through

hopeful stories, such as certain children's books and fairy tales, or one's own life stories, as well

as discussions about how hope can be incorporated into one's own life. Hope can and has been

incorporated into the classroom, in which a teacher reads stories of high-hope to children and

then conducts a classroom discussion on how to bring such qualities into their own lives. Studies

have shown that hope can be improved in individuals using such methods and also in

intervention programs geared toward improving overall psychological conditions in children

(Snyder & Lopez, 2005, p. 668).

Hundreds of books have been written and purchased promising consumers a fresh start, a

new direction, an exact recipe, and the key to happiness. If there is one way to put this industry

out of business, it lies in our youth. Children absorb information like sponges, and the

elementary school years are a critical component to what a student will accomplish in the rest of

his or her life. In addition to the general curriculum, teaching should aim to improve what will be

students' overall quality of life. Using positive psychology and the theory of multiple

intelligences to acknowledge each individual student's strengths will help them to learn better

while improving upon their weaknesses. Also, students can be taught basic human strengths

which will allow them to accept their past, appreciate the present, and remain optimistic about

their future. While this task may seem daunting, with proper teacher education regarding the

subject and dedicated implementation of a new curriculum catering to these ideas, America will

be looking at a brighter future. Happier citizens will also be more virtuous in the sense that their

education will have been based partially on the six virtues represented in positive psychology,

which span across religion and culture on a global perspective. As mentioned previously, the

basis of happiness for this paper is Aristotle's definition, or the product of rational desire. This

then, is the ultimate "good." This curriculum idea can help instill the proper values in students

which will lead them to this sort of happiness. The product of such can only be good for the

future of society, since our youth will define the future of this nation. While many of these

strengths and values will be taught in the home, students from less privileged homes will also be

able to learn and excel, with a solid moral background in the school system. The object, then, is

to improve the individual enough to overcome cultural challenges which can lead to unhappiness

and negative life choices. The curriculum ideas presented lend themselves to authentic and

sustained happiness in students, which will be beneficial for the greater good of society as a

whole and should be implemented nationwide.

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