THE AMBIGUITY OF HAPPINESS EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF POSITIVE EDUCATION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

The theme of happiness has always captured people’s minds; however, the problem of happiness education has been scientifically actualized only recently, primarily within the framework of positive psychology. Along with Noddings’ (2003) philosophical educational project the inextricable connection between education and happiness was demonstrated by positive psychology, which, in their turn, influenced the choice of our references. It was stated that the objectives of education should not be limited to preparing students for a job market; they should also address happiness education. Note that this approach, by and large, corresponds to the standpoint of Dewey who believed that education was not preparation for life; education was life itself (see: GARCÍA & JOVER, 2019). Undoubtedly, most of the good teachers, while not speaking directly about happiness, imply happiness in their work, as the idea of happiness is inherent in pedagogical goal-setting both as an initial and a resulting idea of educational work (SCHURKOVA & PAVLOVA, 2004). Yet, happiness has never been so clearly postulated as the main goal of educational work.

Therefore, the main theoretical and methodological core of our work consists of the ideas of the founders of positive psychology and education: Martin E.P. Seligman, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Barbara L. Fredrickson and Christopher Peterson, as well as the interpretation of these ideas and their critical analysis by such researchers as R. Bergman; T. Bozkurt; J. Ciarrochi et al; L. Jackson & C. Bingham; K. Kristjánsson; M.A. White, etc.

Our essay is a theoretical study, so the following research methods were applied: comparative analysis, conceptual and dialectical analysis, analysis of scientific literature on a research problem. The aim of the article is to study the ambiguous nature of happiness education through the prism of positive education and its critical analysis.

THE BASIC APPROACHES TO HAPPINESS

The theme of happiness as the highest human good has always received considerable attention both in philosophical discourse and from the general public. The studies of happiness are built on two approaches rooted in the philosophical tradition: hedonic and eudaimonic. The former originated with Aristippus and the Cyrenaic school (5th century BC), which identified the way to happiness as the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of any painful experiences. The approach was further developed in the concepts of J. Bentham and J.S. Mill. Bentham introduced the notion of ‘moral arithmetics,’ believing that happiness could be calculated by measuring the amount of pleasure and pain. Mill, in his turn, was a proponent of ‘qualitative utilitarianism,’ differentiating between purely physical (‘lower’) and spiritual (‘higher’) pleasures. That way he tried to depart from the oversimplified hedonism. He suggested that education should be used for cultivation of higher desires, including the desire for happiness of others (CEKIĆ, 2018).

The hedonic approach to happiness encounters several obstacles, both theoretic and practical, among which Buss (2000) points out the following inclinations of people: 1) They quickly become accustomed to pleasant situations; 2) They evaluate themselves and their life circumstances through social comparisons; 3) Their response to gains and losses is different (the evolutionary past prompts us to act more emotionally when we encounter losses rather than when we deal with gains); 4) unpleasant or painful memories (sadness, fear, anger) are inherited from our evolutionary past for the sake of survival. The eudaimonic approach is rooted in the Aristotelian philosophical tradition and humanistic psychological theories (A.
Maslow, E. Fromm, G. Allport, C. Rogers), the influence of which can be observed in positive psychology. Eudaimonia is more encompassing than hedonism, as it identifies happiness with full realization of the human potential, with personal growth; at the same time, it is interpreted by scholars ambiguously and, therefore, controversially.

While philosophers and theologians prefer to view happiness in terms of ethics, a virtuous life, rather than an emotional state, psychologists, economists, and sociologists tend to view happiness as a mental state (e.g. satisfaction) of well-being (Blessinger, 2012). As a result, the notion of ‘happiness’ was replaced by the notion of ‘subjective well-being’ (SWB), which through Ed Diener’s works gained widespread use in the scientific community. The concepts built on it are regularly discussed in the Journal of Happiness Studies. Yet, this term (being midway between hedonism and eudaimonia) is not perfect; being an integral index of affective balance and life satisfaction, it implies one-sidedness and fails to measure significance of human life through its completeness, involvedness and meaningfulness.

**THE MODELS OF WELL-BEING IN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY**

A more elaborate concept was needed. Criticizing philosophical concepts of happiness for monism and accusing SWB of subjectivism, positive psychologists seek scientific neutrality and objectivity through adopting a multidimensional approach to measuring well-being. In their opinion, unidimensional indices, such as satisfaction with life, strongly depend on the individual’s mood during the survey and disguise the full-size picture. Therefore, Seligman (2011) identified five independently measurable elements of well-being: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment, that are denoted by the acronym PERMA. By 2018, there were two more claimants as elements: physical health and control, but as Seligman (2019) himself admits, he is not yet ready to fully recognize them.

Although M. Seligman does not use the notion of eudaimonia, the pathos of the PERMA model involves the same: the transition from the subjective-evaluative perception of happiness and well-being to more objective perception (Leontiev, 2020). Later, the PERMA model was modified into a number of other models, including those that are consistent with school requirements and are made taking into account the parameters that are significant for adolescents and young people.

For example, Kern et al. (2016) introduce the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being, which assesses five positive psychological characteristics (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness). The second model is the PROSPER (Positivity, Relationships, Outcomes, Strengths, Purpose, Engagement, and Resilience). The PROSPER framework has several similarities to Seligman’s PERMA model, but includes two additional components: Strengths and Resilience (Noble & McGrath, 2015). Entering the educational arena, positive psychology starts modeling the so-called ‘positive education,’ where, similarly to Aristotle (1985), Noddings (2003) and Brighouse (2006), happiness (or well-being) is postulated as the fundamental goal of education.

**POSITIVE EDUCATION**

Seligman et al. (2009, p. 293) define positive education as “education for both traditional skills and for happiness.” White (2016, p. 2) defines it “as a blend of evidence-based learning from the science of positive psychology and best practices in learning and teaching.” Seligman et al. (2009); Waters (2011) conclude that positive education provides an antidote to the runaway incidence of depression, serves as a way to increase life satisfaction, enhances social cohesion and civic citizenship, promotes an aid to better learning and more creative thinking.

The proactive nature of positive education, as expected by its founders, will teach an individual as early as possible to perceive vicissitudes of life as challenges rather than problems (Shevchenko, Antonenko & Safonova, 2020). This proactivity, “which metaphorically addresses to prevent the fire before it breaks out” (Bozkurt, 2014, p. 454), is provided by the emphasis of positive education on positive emotions and such positive traits as moral character traits and resilience. The VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth) promotes moral character traits; the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP) promotes resiliency (Seligman et al, 2009); ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihaly, 2014) and the broaden-and-build thesis (Fredrickson, 2001) promote positive emotions.
Positive psychology functions at three distinct but interacting levels (BOZKURT, 2014): 1) subjective (individual emotions and experiences); 2) individual (six classes of virtues (the ‘High Six’) underlying 24 subordinate empirically measurable character strengths: Wisdom/Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence); 3) societal (“positive (‘enabling’) institutions, such as democracy, strong families, and good schools” (KRISTJÁNSSON, 2012, p. 89)). These are the three actual pillars of happiness (flourish). The limitation of positive education is that it focuses on the first and second pillars of happiness (which imply a change in personality), and not on the third pillar.

Kristjánsson (2012, p. 92) explains “this prioritization of positive traits and emotions over the creation of schools as positive institutions” the fact that “personal change - through individual effort or through small-scale initiatives - is usually easier to administer than large-scale political transformation.” In the meantime, considering the young age of positive psychology in general and positive education in particular, it is too soon to accuse it of not having used up the repertoire of all its three pillars.

THE CRITIQUE OF POSITIVE EDUCATION: HAPPINESS IN EDUCATION IS ALWAYS A GOOD THING?

Jackson and Bingham (2018, p. 6) pose “the question of happiness from a direction contrary to common sense. Is it necessarily the case that happiness in education is always a good thing?” The ambiguity of this question is revealed more clearly when trying to answer it beyond the individualized understanding of happiness. The problem is that an excessive emphasis on happiness can overshadow another highly important function of education – focus on social justice.

The happiness discourse offered by positive psychology is interesting and appealing to the general public, as it proclaims that happiness is available to anyone, as demonstrated by ‘the happiness pie chart’ (LYUBOMIRSKY, SCHKADE & SHELDON, 2005), only 10% of the dispersion of individual happiness is circumstantial; it is a relatively small percentage as compared to the contribution of an individual, which accounts for 40%. As a consequence, the idea arises that the possibility to be a happy person (happiness is equated to economic success) depends on the person himself, his will, desires and ambitions.

No doubt that the intense self-disappointment was the reverse side of the indoctrinated belief in the ability to overcome or benefit from adverse (including global) economic, political, and social circumstances by using one’s own efforts and will power, and it needed ‘therapy’ (MATT, 2020). A ‘therapeutic gospel’ (in the terminology of Eva Moskowitz) convinces that 1) “happiness should be our supreme goal”; 2) “our problems stem from psychological causes”; 3) “the psychological problems that underlie our failures and unhappiness are in fact treatable and that we can, indeed should, address these problems both individually and as a society” (MOSKOWITZ, 2001, pp. 2-3).

These statements, acting as a remedy, worsen the disease, making people feel guilty for their failure and inability to be fairly happy. The “hidden history of pessimism in a culture of optimism” (SANDAGE, 2005, p. 82) is being formed. This is also true for the school, which, as a “microcosm of the wider neoliberal culture” (STANDISH, 2018, p. 1238; see also GOMES, PIRES & SILVA, 2020), contains the virtues and flaws of the modern approach to happiness. The school becomes an environment that guides students towards achievements. To neutralize the tension and stress caused by an over-emphasis on achievements, therapeutic interventions are introduced. Hence the popularity of the so-called therapeutic education, which is sharply criticized in the book The dangerous rise of therapeutic education (2008) by Ecclestone & Hayes.

Intrinsically, therapeutic education aimed to improve the self-esteem of students, to build trust between them and teachers, to manage stress, and to prevent bullying is useful. However, in the opinion of K. Ecclestone and D. Hayes, it replaces the essence of education, moving away from truly school matters. It also creates and supports students’ self-perception as fairly unstable, vulnerable, and weak beings. “All this is an expression of cultural disillusionment with ideas about human potential, and it replaces real commitment to education with forms of social engineering.” (STANDISH, 2018, p. 1238). The result is an unbreakable vicious cycle.
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The distinctive feature of the modern construct of happiness is the duty to be happy rather than the right to happiness or the possibility to be happy. Consequently, happiness acquires the nature of a mandatory requirement. The consequences of such obligation are addressed in the book *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (2009) by Barbara Ehrenreich, who advocates the cultivation of realism, not optimism.

Responding to her criticism, Seligman (2011) draws a distinction between two realities: sociopolitical reality derived from and dependent on social consciousness (which he, following George Soros, refers to as ‘reflexive reality’) and physical reality, which is independent of desires and expectations of people. He sees Ehrenreich’s formal error in the fact that she “confuses optimism that does not influence reality with optimism that does influence reality.” (SELIGMAN, 2011, p. 223). There is another error: “She confuses optimism and hope with ‘sugar-coating’ and ‘denial of understandable feelings of anger and fear.’” (SELIGMAN, 2011, p. 223).

Talking about reflexive reality, he denies the ‘reality principle,’ which, in his opinion, is applicable only to the other reality. However, he is not sincere when ignoring the fact that people’s capabilities of influence (management and control) on the reflexive reality differ radically, depending on the scope of power, wealth, privileges, education, etc. While ordinary people have to settle with psychological adaptation to the reality, the elite can adapt the reality to serve their interests. People’s capabilities are also unequal in respect of the physical reality, though it is more ‘resilient’ and uncontrollable. This can be clearly seen when we encounter its adverse events – diseases, natural calamities and disasters. Thus, we assume that although Ehrenreich’s errors detected by M. Seligman do exist, they do not neutralize the overall message delivered by the book.

Along with B. Ehrenreich, McDonald & O’Callaghan (2008), Denison & Avner (2011), Binkley (2014), Reveley (2015) inspired by Foucault’s ideas arrive at the conclusion that the ethos of happiness, which is offered by positive psychology, is directly linked with neoliberalism, and is used for justification of the political and economic status quo based on radical inequality. However, uncovering the retransmission functions of positive education in respect of neoliberalism, Reveley (2015) urges to be cautious and not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Thus, positive education triggered not only enthusiasm about its capabilities, but also serious objections.

THE CONTEXTUAL REORIENTATION OF POSITIVE EDUCATION

Following Ciarrochi et al (2016), we propose to reorient the attention of positive education from content to context – cultural and historical. It will also allow for a sociological perspective that considers the tension between individual agency and social structure. Certainly, representatives of positive psychology do not completely deny the role of the context and its influence on the behavior; however, while acknowledging its significance, they, in fact, disregard it so much that the context becomes invisible.

Both (content- and context-focused) approaches recognize the significance of happiness for people, but they have no agreement about the ways of achieving happiness. Here, we deal with the old debate reproduced on the new platform: What comes first and what is more important – the environment or the personality. The position taken in this debate, which is still on the agenda of social and humanitarian sciences, determines the way to achieve happiness: through changing of the environment or through character education. By all means, supporters of both positions are wise enough not to go to extremes.

M. Seligman does not think that the responsibility for behavior and the possibility to be a happy person should be shifted onto external circumstances. The same is true about education. Previously, ‘punitive pedagogies’ blamed students for ineffectiveness of education (division into dummies and smarties); now the responsibility is passed to “the teachers, the schools, the classroom size, the textbooks, the funding, the politicians, and the parents for the failure of the students – putting the blame on anything or anyone but the students themselves.” (SELIGMAN, 2011, p. 101).
Amidst the massification of education when schools are no longer able to select students who meet their standards (giving an advantage to those who were initially motivated), the above trend is gaining strength.

Learning and teaching are a two-way process; therefore, though the teacher’s efforts and delivery techniques are important, but, as rightly noted by Seligman, the student's willingness to study should not be brushed off. He believes that the character is not less important than intellectual abilities of a student. Therefore, rather than correcting curriculum requirements (as it was offered by Noddings (2003) to the benefit of academically low-performing students) to match the level of such students (rather lazy than intellectually weak), it would be more practical, in M. Seligman’s opinion, to improve their self-discipline.

M. Seligman is right in his opinion that students must take responsibility for their actions, including academic performance, though we do not think that the impact of the environment should be neglected. Educational drive can hardly be expected from the student whose classmates bully ‘nerds,’ while society has no demand for intellectuals. Developing strong personality traits (including self-discipline and resilience) in that environment will most likely contribute to questionable (including deviant) achievements rather than to academic progress. No doubt, there are one-of-a-kind people who will pursue knowledge and perfection despite the resisting environment. For example, Russia is proud of M. Lomonosov, though it tends to forget that the scientific and technical progress became possible not so much due to the efforts of talented loners, but because of developing conditions favorable for advancement of science and education.

Therefore, the representatives of the context-focused approach are right when they do not seek to give a moral assessment of certain character traits as initially good or bad. Instead, character strengths are viewed as patterns of behavior that occur in a specific situation, in the context of which they are either constructive or destructive, adaptive or maladaptive (CIARROCHI et al, 2016).

We also agree with N. Noddings that character education can be easily incorporated into the context of ideological indoctrination. The fact is that a major feature (and drawback) of character education, “is its dependence on a strong community with a consensus on core values” (NODDINGS, 2002 apud BERGMAN, 2004, p. 158). But what values and virtues are to be deemed commonly accepted in modern society falling short of consensus? Confessional schools are not challenged by this question, but we cannot make public schools follow their rules. Besides, “a strong community is not necessarily a good one. Noddings reminds us that ‘fascist and totalitarian states have been especially enthusiastic about character education’” (NODDINGS, 2002 apud BERGMAN, 2004, p. 158). Thus, character building, like any powerful tool, can be a double-edged sword.

This is also true of the other methods of positive education, the fundamental ambivalence of which is revealed by James Reveley, who invokes “the Platonic notion of pharmakon, being both poison and cure” (REVELEY, 2014, p. 84). The ambiguity of positive education, which often escapes the attention of its advocates, is rooted in its dual potential: Being meant to prepare young people for life in the neoliberalism environment, it also provides them with a set of emotional and cognitive skills, which can be easily used for confrontation against this regime.

**SUMMARY**

We sought to explore the ambiguous nature of happiness education. For this purpose of our study, we have exposed extremes of dichotomies governing the main ideas of happiness (including in positive education): hedonic/eudaimonic, subjective/objective, active/passive, individual/social. Educational philosophers contrast the hedonistic and eudaemonic approaches as, respectively, ‘a poor concept of happiness’ and ‘a rich concept of happiness’ and warn against introducing the first concept into educational discourse (GUILHERME & SOUZA DE FREITAS, 2017). We agree with this viewpoint. While we see the hedonism and eudaimonia opposition in the educational field as appropriate, we question other dichotomies.

In this article, we tried to demonstrate the wrongfulness of the opposition between two concepts of happiness: 1) the subjective concept asserting that happiness depends solely on
efforts of an individual, on their mindset, and 2) the objective concept claiming that happiness depends on external factors. The first concept prevailing in the present-day social and humanitarian discourse (including in positive psychology) mirrors the response to the common perception of happiness as success and good fortune, a stroke of luck, which puts emphasis on passive waiting. However, the subjective approach, while psychologizing and individualizing the perception of happiness as the state supposedly achievable independently of the surrounding world, glorifies fighters and condemns losers. The ‘fight’ is presented as the only right process that deserves support and praise. This connotation is extremely unfair and humiliating towards the ‘defeated’ who become stigmatized even though the victory was absolutely unachievable.

In the educational field, it actualizes the need for the so-called ‘therapeutic education,’ which, as we demonstrate, is a remedy that can worsen the disease. Most importantly, the subjective concept tends to neglect problems of structural injustice in society. In the meantime, matters of social justice are as important and essential as development of the felicitological ability (the ability to be happy) in education. The educational discourse should not be built on obscuring or ignoring the fact of existence fragility and unequal opportunities people have for stabilizing that fragility. On the contrary, the discourse should enhance understanding of this fact, for example, through studying humanities and literature. Without awareness of fragility there will be no empathy, tolerance, acceptance of inclusion, differences, imperfection. When the social aspect of unequal opportunities is neglected, education tends to promote combating symptoms of social injustice through such palliative measures as volunteering instead of focusing on its roots’ eradication.

In this case, we support Noddings’ (2003) opinion claiming that happiness education should go hand in hand with unhappiness education – the capacity to see, to share and, if possible, to alleviate the suffering of others. Thus, the commitment to either of the two concepts is ethically reductive and overlooking the richness and ambiguity of life. The conclusion is that happiness education is possible only when happiness is not narrowed down to either of the two concepts.

Another, though not less important, aspect of ambiguity of happiness education is the risk of imposing the idea of happiness on a child when this idea is posited by someone else and is inspired by political considerations. Felicitological education can be easily incorporated into the context of ideological indoctrination, as continuously alerted by such recognized experts as N. Noddings, M. Boler and S. Ahmed. Deconstructing educational and cultural policy that addressed happiness, Boler (1999) and Ahmed (2004; 2010) uncovered the established practice of imposing ‘appropriate’ emotions and beliefs regarding the common good and ‘own’ well-being. Their criticism challenges the universality of fundamental approaches to conceptualization of happiness and justice.

But the good news of our study is that, strange as it may seem, the very dual potential of positive education methods contains a cure for the negative consequences of the idea of happiness promoted by it.

REFERENCES


The ambiguity of happiness education in the context of positive education: A critical analysis

A ambigüidade da educação da felicidade no contexto da educação positiva: uma análise crítica

Resumo
O objetivo do artigo é compreender o lugar e o significado da felicidade no discurso educacional. A análise revela a ambivalência da implementação da educação de felicidade. Como comprovamos em nosso artigo, a educação para a felicidade em uma forma tão truncada está repleta das seguintes dicotomias: subjetivo/objeto, ativo/passivo, individual/social. Como argumentamos no texto, tal forma de educação de felicidade permite neutralizar essas e outras possíveis consequências negativas da compreensão da felicidade que promove.


Abstract
The article aims to analyze the place and significance of happiness in educational discourse. The analysis reveals ambivalence of happiness education, following positive education patterns. The ambivalence stems from the fact that happiness is narrowed down to the first component of the following dichotomies: subjective/objective, active/passive, individual/social. As we explain in our article, such clipped happiness education may involve the following consequences: necessitating ‘therapeutic education’ for students; neglecting matters of social justice; imposing ideas of happiness on a child through ideological indoctrination. Yet, we can conclude that the dual potential of positive education methods makes it possible to offset the above and other adverse consequences of the promoted idea of happiness.

Keywords: Education. Happiness. Pedagogy. Positive psychology. Well-being.

Resumen
El objetivo del artículo es la reflexión sobre el lugar y el significado de la felicidad en el discurso educativo. Durante el análisis, se revela la ambivalencia de la implementación de la educación de la felicidad (‘happiness education’) en esquemas de educación positiva. Esto se debe al hecho de que la felicidad se reduce a la primera parte de las siguientes dicotomías: subjetivo/objeto, activo/pasivo, individual/social. Como argumentamos en nuestro artículo, la educación de la felicidad en tal forma tiene las siguientes consecuencias posibles: la necesidad de una ‘educación terapéutica’ para los estudiantes; el menosprecio de las cuestiones de la justicia social; la imposición del concepto de felicidad incorporado en el contexto del tratamiento ideológico. Pero, como señalamos al final, el potencial dual de los métodos de educación positiva permite neutralizar estos y otros posibles efectos negativos de la comprensión de la felicidade que se propaga.