

The exploration of the philosophical concept of happiness and its implication to education



Reflection Piece

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Abstract

The pursuit of happiness appears to be a common goal for people all over the world. However, their orientation towards happiness might be different, and this has a huge impact on whether they are happy or think they have achieved happiness. Many research have found that people who orientate their pursuit of happiness towards eudaimonia (finding meaning in life and tasks) and engagement (doing something that one enjoys greatly and driven by intrinsic motivation) are happier. Teachers' happiness has been an area of study in happiness research, and their level of happiness has direct effect on their motivation and volition, which in turn has indirect effect on their students' learning outcomes. Due to the cascading effects and implications to teaching and learning, threats to happiness in teaching are discussed in this article, and some suggestions are provided for further exploration.

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Introduction

In 1990, Martin Seligman led the positive psychology movement and wrote a book on *Learned Optimism* (Seligman, 1990). He is also an author of *Authentic Happiness* (Seligman, 2002). Ever since then, there is a huge growth of happiness research. If happiness can have positive effect on people, it then behoves us to find out more about it, and even to the extent of understanding how happiness can be achieved. What makes people happy? We know of anecdotes of *rich* poor man and *poor* rich man. Those anecdotes tell us that a poor man can be rich, not in monetary terms, but in other aspects such as a fulfilling and contented life. On contrary, many rich men can be very wealthy but very poor spiritually and emotionally. So, what constitutes happiness? In today's context, many people seem to be in the pursuit of material things and earning more money with the aim of leading a comfortable life, staying in big houses and driving luxurious cars. What kind of orientation to happiness do they have? Does this type of orientation lead to happiness? Are there alternative orientations to happiness? Which type of orientations to happiness should we have? These are just some of the questions that will be discussed in this essay.

Further, to contextualize, the author would also like to place the focus of the pursuit of happiness for teachers and students per se, and explore the implications in education field. The author's stand is that the pursuit of *true* happiness should be oriented to finding meaning and having opportunity to experience "flow" in the activities that one enjoys. Teachers will find their *true* happiness if they find their work meaningful. Students will be *truly happy* if their learning journey is meaningful to themselves and when they experience "flow". To do so, teachers have the power to help students learn happily. The essay will surface some implications for teachers, policy makers, and educational leaders with regard to the sustaining of teacher happiness and student happiness. Teachers' happiness can either directly or indirect affect students' happiness, which in turn has effect on the learning outcomes and academic achievements.

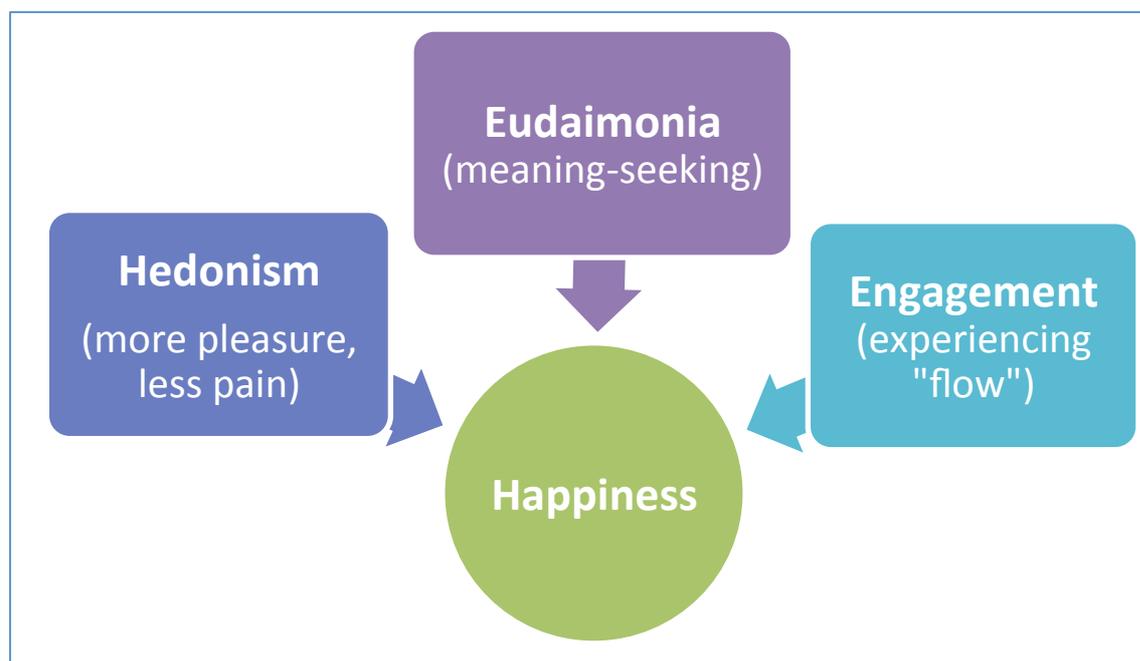
The concept(s) of happiness

Happiness is an abstract concept that has no standard definition till today. However, many researchers have been studying on the meaning of happiness over the years, and most of them converged and agreed that there are three orientations to happiness: (a) hedonism, (b) eudaimonia, and (c) engagement (Csikzentmihalyi, 1997; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993).

Three orientations to happiness

Figure 1 shows the three orientations. Hedonism emphasizes on maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain (Chan, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993). On the other hand, eudaimonia focuses on the meaning in life that one seeks while developing one's skills and talents to achieve a sense of fulfilment (Chan, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993). For the orientation of engagement, it is the experience of "flow" characterized by the flow theory by Csikszentmihalyi (1997). Being in "flow" means losing all track of time, completely immersed in the activity, and it usually happens when one is intrinsically motivated to do something which s/he enjoys greatly.

Figure 1. Three common orientations that people take in their pursuit of happiness



“Measuring” happiness by past and recent empirical studies on happiness

Since happiness is an abstract concept which cannot be measured directly, researchers seek indirect means of “measuring” the level of happiness of individuals such as through the level of life satisfaction based on the assumption that being satisfied with life is more or less a telling sign of the happiness level one has achieved in life.

In a study done with adults in 27 nations, Park, Peterson, and Ruch (2009) found that out of the three orientations to happiness, engagement and eudaimonia (meaning) showed more positive correlation with the prediction of life satisfaction than hedonism. Park et al.’s findings concurred with Peterson et al. (2005)’s research findings that eudaimonia (meaning) is more powerful than hedonistic pleasure as a predictor of life satisfaction. Past researches from a decade ago have also shown that individuals with higher materialistic orientations are less happy and less satisfied with life (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Richins & Dawson, 1992).

In a recent study done with 145 Chinese school teachers in a graduate education program at Hong Kong, Chan (2013) found that individuals with character strength such as gratitude and forgiveness have positive affect, and high correlations to the prediction of life satisfaction. This finding suggests that besides the orientations to happiness being able to affect the predictability of life satisfaction, personal values also play an important role. Since Hong Kong is very much influenced by Confucian teachings, the Chinese teachers there most likely have a widespread belief that a righteous person should always express gratitude (报恩) and to show benevolence (仁), one must be able to forgive (宽恕) (Yu, 2009, as cited in Chan, 2013). As posited by Chan, forgiveness together with gratitude would lead to benevolence, which in turn could restore social harmony. Social harmony, according to Fishman and McCathy (2010), is also one aspect that could lead to happiness in individuals.

Bergsma and Ardel (2012) ventured into the investigation of possible relationships between wisdom and happiness. In their study, Bergsma and Ardel operationally defined wisdom as “an integration of cognitive, reflective, and compassionate personality characteristics” (p. 483). Their findings showed that individuals who score high in wisdom have more gain in happiness. They suggest that wise individuals might have placed their focus more on eudaimonic well-being instead of hedonic happiness. Their finding supports other research studies done by other wisdom researchers (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008, as cited in Bergsma and Ardel; Staudinger & Gluck, 2011, as cited in Bergsma and Ardel). Another possible reason to explain why wisdom appears to correlate positively with happiness might be because the development of wisdom per se is rewarding and joyful. This joyful and rewarding experience can even allow one to experience self-transcendence (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005). In this view, the finding of Bergsma and Ardel seem to provide more support that eudaimonia orientation of happiness is a better way to promote happiness as well as having the possibility to sustain it in a longer run.

Happiness and education

Students’ orientation to happiness

In a research study by Gabriele (2008), she found that the most of the high school students in her study endorsed hedonism as their orientation to happiness, followed by eudaimonia (meaning), and the least with engagement as their orientation. Her findings concurred with that of Peterson et al. (2005)’s study which found that young adults also endorsed hedonism more than the other orientations to happiness. This could be a result of media influence that made young adults equate happiness to pleasures of drinking, eating and sexual involvement (Gabriele, 2008). Unfortunately, hedonism did not contribute to their academic life in any positive or negative way.

In addition, Gabriele also found out that engagement-oriented happiness was positively correlated with all of the educational variables but mostly non-academic areas. Students are more involved in activities like community involvement and extracurricular activities. A possible reason is that those are the activities they enjoy most and experience “flow” in involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). When students are engaged in activities which they are interested in, they will be so intrinsically motivated to perform the tasks, and this single-minded immersion may cause them to lose the track of time during that period. Also, during that process of performing or learning the tasks which they enjoy, the experiencing of “flow” will cause them to be energized with positive feelings, causing them to feel very happy and contented after the performance of the activities. This experience of “flow” might even cause them to repeat similar activities or tasks in the future.

Another noteworthy finding by Gabriele is that eudaimonia (meaning) positively correlates with all of the educational variables and significantly contributed to academic motivation and clarity of career planning. The students who find a purpose in life tend to accomplish much and find it easier to set goals for their future. Perhaps this also calls for more reflective practices for the students in their process of learning, so that they will have metacognitive knowledge of their learning. Further, the development of students into independent and self-directed learners is actually one of the desired outcomes of education (Ministry of Education, 2013a). If helping students to find meaning in life can increase their academic motivation and happiness, and lead to the development of self-directed learners, then eudaimonia should take precedence in education.

In summary, Gabriele’s research findings suggest that if we hope to have students achieve academic success and other educational variables, teachers should find ways to lead the

students to endorse engagement and eudaimonia (meaning) as orientation to happiness because hedonism does not do anything to promote educational success. Quoting from Plato (as cited in Peterson, 2006, p. 3), “The chief purpose of education is to teach young people to find pleasure in the right things.”

Implications for teachers

Taking on Gabriele’s research findings and suggestions, teachers should help students broaden their conception of “pleasure” through exploring the concept of “happiness” which entails multiple meanings. All individuals desire happiness, so do the students. Teachers should seek ways to provide opportunities for students to have enough locus of control and sense of ownership of their work so that learning is owned by the students and is meaningful to them. If students take ownership and responsibility of their own learning, there will be higher chance that they will be more engaged in their work, and have more opportunity to experience “flow” – joyful and enjoyable untimed period that positively energize the performer. Too often students cannot see why they need to do what they do in school or learn what they learn in school. Teachers will have to assist students in the construction of relevance in their lives so that they will find meaning in their life, knowing that there is a purpose to what they do and be more compelled to be more involved in their academic life. In a long run, hopefully, students will then associate learning as engaging, enjoyable and meaningful. Thus, endorsing engagement and/or eudaimonia (meaning) orientation to happiness can also lead to the positive dispositions and attitudes which we hope to achieve in the desired outcomes of education (Ministry of Education, 2013b).

In 2010, Fishman and McCarthy extended the eudaimonia orientation to happiness to more than targeting individuals. Unlike Gabriele’s argument that engagement and eudaimonia orientation to happiness can enhance academic success of individuals, Fishman and McCarthy (2010) take on a broader “community” view towards happiness. As proposed by Dewey (1932, as cited in Fishman and McCarthy), this “community” view challenged the teachers to “cultivate students’ capacities to identify their happiness with what they can do to improve the conditions of others” (p. 3). Dewey’s concept of happiness is much broader and targeted at not just happiness achieved at individual level but also at a social community level. To simply put, it is eudaimonia at social level. It appears to be an altruistic behaviour, however, Dewey argued that only if students can think for others at all times, they will be less self-conscious of themselves, and gain the highest happiness level because they are able to “help” others. In their article, they described Dewey’s concept of ethical love as a means for social reform, and the concept of happiness as the highest form of happiness which stem from ethical love. Although ethics and love seems to be incompatible when they are juxtaposed, Dewey believes that “all thinking rests upon feelings and emotions” (Williams, 1982, p. 127, as cited in Fishman and McCarthy). Dewey’s aim is to help students develop character in two ways: (a) being sensitive that their words and actions will have impact on others, and (b) to be able to take the perspectives of others and take the interests of others impartially. The main belief held by Dewey is that because humans are social creatures, we have a deep need for harmony with others and nature, and this need is often not developed in our current social institutions. The challenges that Fishman and McCarthy foresee in implementing Dewey’s concept of ethical love and happiness in schools today is due to the culture that often rewards competitiveness over cooperation and stresses high-stakes testing instead of character building. If we ask ourselves, “How can we help students to both earn a living and also to shape a life worth living?”, maybe we will have more determination to take up Dewey’s challenge to alter the climate and culture in our classrooms. Starting small is always better than not starting at all. To go against a culture norm is not easy, but if teachers were to have an aim in education to develop positive dispositions and values in their young learners within

their classrooms to be sensitive to others, to care for people around them, to respect people regardless of their status, age, or any difference they may see, the teachers are actually not too far from the aim that Dewey has which can lead to a social reform slowly but surely. In my view, this is a challenge that is possible to be undertaken, and it takes only teachers who see the aim of education as more than having academic achievement, and question about other aspects of education, such as the values in education. Of course, as their aims and values change, their curriculum and pedagogy in education will also change so that their whole philosophy of education is coherent as aligned in all aspects.

Teachers' happiness and job satisfaction

A recent research with Dutch teachers showed that the teachers' job satisfaction is positively correlated with their self-reported quality of teacher-student relationship (Veldman, van Tartwijk, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2013). Their findings are congruent to some past research studies with regard to the importance of teacher-student relationship (Betoret, 2006; Chang, 2009; Klassen & Chui, 2010; Split, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Using the research findings as a backdrop, and making the assumption that teachers who have relatively strong and good relationships with their students must have invested time and effort to build those relationships, how would that lead to the increase in teachers' job satisfaction? If we view job satisfaction as one aspect in which we can gain insight of the teachers' level of happiness, we could basically infer from the research, and conclude that the better the quality of teacher-student relationship, the higher the level of happiness in teachers.

As Bullough and Pinnegar (2009) beautifully described, "It is in such moments of happiness, of loving and being loved, that teachers find most meaning in their work and value in their lives..." (p. 253). The quote from Bullough and Pinnegar's article has an element of eudaimonia, the meaning orientation of happiness. They also suggested that "Happiness emerges for teachers in those moments when they are fully engaged in meaningful activities with students, when they sense what they are doing represent their best performance, their fullest expression of the goodness of teaching" (p. 245) and "eudaimonia sustains teachers" (p. 253). They view teaching as a form of human flourishing activity, which I personally agree. Bullough and Pinnegar also described that many pre-service teachers were drawn to teaching for the very basic fact that they like children or that they enjoy interacting with young people, and they know for themselves that the experience of teaching and interacting with the students is affirming and gives them an experience of personal fulfilment. That could explain why some teachers felt that they were "called to teach" (p.246). In this context, teaching is not seen as a merely a job to get by, but more of a vocation. I find Bullough and Pinnegar's description so aptly describing many teachers whom I know. If teaching is an experience of personal fulfilment, and this eudaimonia sustains the teachers like an energy cycle, if the system within the teachers' working environment does not provide the teachers with such experience of personal fulfilment, the energy cycle will be broken and might result in burn-out in the teachers.

Threats to happiness of teaching

In Bullough and Pinnegar (2009), the authors also argued strongly against having hierarchically organized and highly structured disciplinary knowledge which uses rules to govern the schools like an organization. This is because such practice often stifles teachers and does not take into account of how to genuinely love a student. They quoted a philosopher, Stephen Toulmin, who noted, "in the professional activities of tightly structured disciplines, conformity is more highly valued than originality; or rather, originality is tolerated only for as long as it reinforces the core values of a department" (p. 242).

In Singapore government schools, teachers are assessed using the Enhanced Performance Management System (EPMS). The EPMS is a competency-based performance management system that spells out the knowledge and skills requirements as well as the professional characteristics appropriate for each of the three career tracks (Ministry of Education, 2003). In the EPMS, competencies are identified in the three performance dimensions: professional practice, leadership and management, and personal effectiveness. The professional practice will provide “evidences” of how a teacher will nurture the whole child and provide quality learning. The leadership dimension will provide “evidences” of how a teacher cooperates and collaborates with fellow colleagues, or parents or other stakeholders. The last dimension of personal effectiveness will provide “evidences” of knowing oneself and others. Though the EPMS may appear very organized and structured to track the “achievements” of the teachers, it clearly lacks an affective dimension that can “track” the development of certain positive dispositions of students or improved behaviours of the students which could result from the care and concern that the teacher has given. Also, all that is written is based on what the teacher has done but there is no voice of the students found in the evaluation of performance. Since many loving and caring actions of the teachers cannot be quantified as numbers or grades, would that mean that these actions are of little value because they won’t be assessed? Most of the focuses during the meet-up with the reporting officers tend to be placed on the quantifiable results. Targets would be set for achievement scores of students for mid-year and end-of-year, and they should be met lest the teachers will be questioned and viewed as incompetent. As objective as the EPMS intended to be, I feel that it might not be as valid as it claims to be because it is not able to “measure” what it intends to evaluate – the holistic performance of the teacher. To accurately evaluate a teacher’s performance, we should return to the fundamental questions of “what is the aim of education?” and “What is the value of education?” If Singapore’s desired outcomes are to produce learners who are confident, self-directed, active contributor, concerned citizen (Ministry of Education, 2013a), and developing the 21st century skills and competencies are important in this time and day (Ministry of Education, 2013b), then shouldn’t the evaluation of students’ learning cover these skills, competencies and affective domains instead of only asking teachers to set targets for mainly examination results?

Another point that I would like to make is the reliability of the EPMS. If it is only assessed by one reporting officer who assessed based on what is written, sits in once or twice yearly to observe the lessons, and judge the overall performance of the teacher, wouldn’t it be more reliable if students have a say in their teachers’ performance and teaching capacity if they are the directed recipient? The students usually know when a teacher genuinely cares for them and are able to assess how well their teachers can teach them based on how much they can understand their teachers. Very often, research has also shown that what the teachers perceived may not be what the students feel or think. So, giving the students a voice in assessing their teachers might put relationship-building back to the focus in classroom teaching and learning.

How do we measure a loving teacher who is skilled enough to make a difference in the change of behaviour of a student? Just as Bullough and Pinnegar mentioned in their article, it is not quite possible to create a rubric that can produce valid and reliable results based on inspection to determine skilled loving performance of the teachers. If the EPMS is only focusing on the amount of work a teacher does and what examination grades or achievements the students get at every semester, it would be unlikely for schools to move towards the targeted desired outcomes and achieving the 21st century skills and competencies for the learners because in a practical sense, teachers will only do what is evaluated so that they can survive in the schools. Also, the comparisons with other teachers and obtaining a grade which pre-determine their future teaching career can affect their work performance and level of

motivation. With the pressure to conform and accountability-focused, teaching can no longer be a eudaimonic experience and “this undermines the very dreams that inspire teachers to teach in the first place” (Bullough & Pinnegar, p. 254). This might be the very root cause of the leaving of many passionate and skilled teachers. They left because their happiness level is affected, not because they no longer like teaching.

Implications for policy makers and educational leaders

As Bullough and Pinnegar has asserted, “Ignoring or misconstruing the nature of teacher happiness and well-being is certain to lead to massive institutional failure” (p. 254). Nichols and Berliner (2007, as cited in Bullough and Pinnegar) described the new system that manage teachers’ performance being based on the assumption that pressure and threats of punishment motivate teachers, and that holding teachers accountable for their students’ scores on high-stakes tests will improve teaching or force the lazy teachers to work harder. Nothing can be further from the truth that when a teacher is fearful and overwhelmed by students’ test scores, s/he would not empowered to use innovative ideas to teach to engage students but would rather use the traditional drilling method to ensure that students produce results which have no significant meanings to their learning. This loss of teachers’ agency, according to Bullough and Pinnegar, undermines teachers’ happiness. Teacher agency, according to Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2012), is the ability for teachers to make changes to their pedagogies, and it is greatly affected by three broad areas – (a) teachers’ past personal and professional experiences, (b) teachers’ present working environment and resources available, and (c) teachers’ future goals which include their aim, value and philosophies in education. Teachers often experience tensions between what they want and what the schools want. These tensions sometimes render the teachers powerless to become agents of change even if they are willing to. Those tensions can affect their happiness. If the teachers are not happy in their teaching, how would they be able to model the eudaimonia and engagement orientation to happiness to their students? Hence, if policy makers and educational leaders understand that the creation of eudaimonia experience is so important for teachers, effort must be made to provide teachers with such experience so that the energy cycle will continue endlessly to sustain the teachers, and no amount of stress will deter them from what they love doing.

Furthermore, Sutton and Wheatley (2003) also observed that the emotional state of teachers influence their thinking about teaching in varied ways positively or negatively. Bullough & Baughman (1997, as cited in Bullough & Pinnegar) also found that teachers’ feeling about their work can affect their motivation, goal setting and expectations they hold for their students. If schools are seriously looking at improving the quality of teaching and learning, then the primary concern should be to create conditions within the work of teaching that are more likely to lead to teacher happiness. Providing teachers with opportunities to experience eudaimonia should be one main consideration in any school improvement effort (Bullough & Pinnegar).

On school-based level, the school culture can reward cooperation rather than competition among teachers. Since it is already part of the nature that teachers need to work collaboratively in designing and planning of activities for the school, any rewards can be given to the whole team. By rewards, I do not mean to make different teams compete for one single reward such as “best team of the year”. By rewards, I mean to take notice and show appreciation of any teams of teachers for their effort and time, no matter how small it may be. The shift of focus from “I” to “we” within the school culture can promote and encourage more collaborative work among the teachers in the future. Also, at school-based level, they can have their own appreciation day where everybody, teachers and/or students, writes a note of appreciation to whoever they feel has helped them. It would be even better if this can be a

school culture that takes place throughout the whole year. There is no need to wait till annual Teachers' day to appreciate teachers. The appreciation can be in any form of encouragement notes, cards, small gifts which are thoughtful and useful for teachers. There is a dearth of acts of appreciation from school leaders to the teachers in local context. Although there might be arguments that teachers are supposed to contribute to the schools they are in, however, this "taking for granted" view is detrimental to school improvement, and should be minimized as much as possible.

Very often, most teachers tend to think and do things for their students, and not for the school. Despite sounding quite narrow-minded, it is understandable if we think about their role in their teaching career – they are in the teaching profession as a "teacher" but not a "school leader". So, from the teachers' perspective, students are their direct stakeholders whom they are responsible and accountable for. Hence, they will be more than willing to do their part to contribute if the tasks are personally meaningful to them, and that they believe it can contribute to the students' holistic education. If not, they will question why they need to do the "extra work", packing their already-busy schedule when they can instead spend the time doing something more meaningful and deemed worthwhile. Ultimately, any program or activity done will still be shown as the school's website as the school's initiative but not as individual teacher's work, so, why not let teachers have more choice and voice in suggesting what they think is worth their time doing for the benefits of their students instead of forcing and assigning tasks to them just so that the EPMS looks busy?

Another suggestion would be to re-evaluate EPMS to ensure that it is both valid and reliable. Students should be involved in evaluating their teachers since they are the direct recipient and one of the stakeholders of education. Age of the students should not be a problem if a well-crafted rubric is provided. This will ensure fair evaluation of teachers, if need be. Of course, a better option is to make EPMS an evaluation by itself with no effect on teachers' promotion opportunity and performance bonus so that it remains as a "formative assessment" to guide teachers to set targets and track their competency levels for improvement. Using EPMS to push "lazy" teachers to work harder is not a valid reason for penalizing many others who are working their best for their students but not get recognized just because they have channelled their energy and time to help students in other aspects which they find more meaningful. With the threat of career prospect and monetary benefits, any such evaluation is detrimental to both the teachers' intrinsic motivation and happiness. It is not going to empower and encourage the teachers to become loving and nurturing. No one can be happy when they are constantly in fear. Empowering and enabling teachers should be the key to support and improve quality teaching. And, of course, raising teachers' happiness through providing them with eudaimonia experience (and not stifling it) is one sure key to succeed based on the empirical research findings. This orientation to happiness will have direct benefit to the teachers and indirect benefit to the students. As a whole, the education fraternity will benefit. With teachers' happiness raised, the rate of turnover of teachers will decrease, the desired education outcomes for students will be easier to achieve, with eudaimonia and engagement as orientation for happiness, students will not only achieve higher achievement scores, they will also be able to develop 21st century skills and competencies needed to face the challenges in the future.

Conclusion

Based on Dewey's proposal of ethical love and other happiness research, personal happiness does not contradict altruism. In fact, happy people are able to give more to others (Post, 2005, as cited in Barker & Martin, 2009). In the similar vein, happy teachers will be able to give more to the students and teach them well (Barker & Martin, 2009). For this simple reason, in

any school improvement program, promoting teachers' happiness should take priority due to its implications and effect on students' learning outcomes which includes the intended and unintended outcomes.

Furthermore, should we envision to foster independent learners who will commit to lifelong learning, cultivation of eudaimonia and engagement orientation to happiness must be done at classroom level as well as school-wide level. If teachers are only to impart knowledge and skills according to what is going to be tested, it is not possible for students to experience eudaimonia and engagement and associate schooling experience as happiness. Instead of targeting at observable grades and numbers, maybe it is better to start targeting at the non-observable aspects such as character-building, love for learning, resilience and the other positive traits and make them observable "results" of the desired outcomes of education.

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