

Education for well-being

Learning about well-being and the good life

All around the world the question of what makes happy has been keeping mankind pondering, from greek philosophers to recent happiness research.ⁱ In the context of looking for a path to sustainable development concepts of de-growth have been linked to reframing ideas of 'the good life' or well-being, from Gross National Happiness in Bhutan to Buen Vivir in Ecuador, from the UN to European states are looking for new indicators to measure well-being beyond material wealth.ⁱⁱ

Subjective well-being is connected to a less material lifestyle, enjoying more leisure, taking care of social interactions, friends and family, pursuing artistic interests and enjoying nature.ⁱⁱⁱ

While it seems to be a promising path for a post-growth society, only few people seem to actively pursue such lifestyle of well-being and opt for a *good life* alternative to the *goods life*. Despite the hurdles to be taken by freeing oneself from influences, temptations and manipulations of a consumer society, taking a deliberate choice is possible. But what does it need to pursue well-being? When, where and how do (young) people actually learn about well-being?

Philosopher Nel Nodding has shown that well-being (or the more simplistic concept of happiness) remains a subject of private concern, to be learned in and from the own family and peers.^{iv} But maybe parents aren't always experts on the topic and often not even a good example of how to care about well-being. The ideas and skills traded seems to be often vague and weak and well-being is a big issue for society, e.g. when looking at the growing rates of depression and other modern health issues.

The educational system seems to have nothing to offer on this topic. In schools kids learn about natural sciences, algebra and grammar, but hardly anything about well-being.

Recently a few approaches have developed and mark a path that could be broadened into a road. Few schools have introduced 'happiness' as a subject and report of the successful „teaching“ of happiness. The subject mainly focuses on social learning.

In the field of non-formal education, single tool-kits present concepts or single activities linked to the topic, but they as well remain rare and are often limited to a cognitive level.^v

A broader approach, that actually reaches far into the realms of de-growth, comes from Canada. Catherine O'Brien has developed an educational concept of "Sustainable Happiness", defined as:

„Sustainable Happiness is the happiness that contributes to individual community and/or global well-being without exploiting other people, the environment or future generations.“^{vi}

These different levels are set in relation and connect personal happiness to the happiness of other – even on the global level: „The conditions under which clothes are manufactured, how far our fruit is transported, the pesticides that are sprayed on the local golf course, all have some impact on and connection to how individuals pursue happiness.“^{vii} Happiness becomes strongly linked to a global understanding and is linked to sustainable development.

In her work with children O'Brien was able to show that the goals of happiness and sustainability are often connected: children prefer to walk or cycle to school because they like to have fresh air and exercise, instead of being brought their parents by car, which would be regarded as the more convenient choice.^{viii} O'Brien concludes accordingly:

„Through an exploration of sustainable happiness we can 'delink' happiness from consumption and discover ongoing opportunities to enhance well-being *and* sustainability.“^{ix}

Education for Sustainable Development and the topic of well-being

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is one of the popular educational concepts, being supported through the "UN Decade of ESD" (2005-2014) and implemented in countless projects worldwide.^x

ESD is focussing on building skills and capabilities (the term 'competences' is widely used) people will need to act responsibly and sustainably in a global society. One could say, that ESD guides people to be able to fulfill 'given needs' in a more sustainable way, but doesn't invite to reflect and question the very needs and wants. One outcome: there are way more educational projects on sustainable consumption than on happiness (which might question consumption on a more fundamental level).

While sparing well-being so far, EDS could be a fertile soil for dealing with the topic of (individual and global) well-being. As the competence based approach promotes various personal and inter-personal skills it could easily be accompanied by an intra-personal level, dealing with issues like 'becoming aware, reflecting and taking care of my own needs'. A 'Happiness-Competence'^{xii} could be added to the portfolio of competences. Inspiration for it could come from concepts mentioned above as well as education sciences.^{xii}

Well-being – a educational bunch flowers

Well-being as topic and/or subject could and should be realised in many settings. It connects to many fields of studies and subjects in school. From philosophy and social sciences, arts, physical education, nourishment and many more.

Core topics it would need to cover are: 1) Psychological and physical well-being of the individual. Knowledge about it and skills to take care of it. 2) Social and political frameworks of well-being: justice, fairness and freedom. 3) Global implications – sustainability and well-being.

Last but not least learning about well-being could bring a new approach on learning about sustainability, sufficiency and de-growth, thus bridging the gap between knowledge and action of individuals regarding sustainable lifestyles.^{xiii} It also could alter the given perception that sustainable lifestyles mean with waiver, limitation, loss.

Making people happy? A Critical perspective is needed!

Learning about well-being and happiness is clearly different from *making* people feel happy. But not in all approaches this seems to be differentiated carefully enough. The subject in school tends to focus mainly on social skills and thus helps kids to learn better. The concept of *Positive Education*, based on findings of Positive Psychology offers another ambivalent approach: while students shall learn about their strength and focus on positive events, as this promotes well-being and health; they shall thus become more resilient against the usual stress they are exposed to.^{xiv}

Here the educational understanding of learning about well-being shows a very limited idea of empowering students. Learning about well-being should be an act of emancipating the individual and needs to be more than making people 'more successful performers' in their environment. It should not be a tool to 'pacify' society. Education for well-being is should not be a form of 'keeping people happy with what is' but could be a cornerstone of a de-growth society.

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