

Education for well-being and happiness

Economic growth brings us more and more material wealth, but doesn't necessarily lead to more happiness and well-being. It actually rather increases stress and undermines a sustainable development. How could we learn about a happy and sustainable life?

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 Buthan to Buen Vivir in Ecuador, from the UN to initiatives of European states – countries are looking for new indicators to measure well-being beyond material wealth.ⁱⁱ

Research shows that subjective well-being is connected with a less material lifestyle: enjoying more leisure, taking care of social interactions with friends and family, pursuing artistic interests, engaging in meaningful (and often socially beneficial) work and enjoying nature.ⁱⁱⁱ

While well-being therefore appears to be a promising path to 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 of influences, temptations and manipulations of the consumer society, taking a deliberate choice for ones lifestyle is possible.

Therefore the question arises: 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 in our society and especilly in the education system well-being remains a subject of private concern, to be learned in and from the own family and peers.^{iv} But probably partens 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 seem to be often vague and weak. Besides outcomes like growing rates of depression and stress amongst young and adult people, the ever growing offerings of the consumer society with entertainment and consumption soothes many voids and needs.^v As the socio-psychological effects are one issue to be discussed, from a perspective of sustainability the ever expanding pursuit of materialistic lifestyles is highly problematic.

Happiness – (not) a topic in education?

The educational system seems to have little to offer on the topic of happiness and well-being. 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 activites linked to the topic, but they as well remain rare and are often limited to the cognitive level.^{vi}



Glück & Nachhaltigkeit

Jochen Dallmer

www.glueckundnachhaltigkeit.de

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.“^{vii}

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.“^{viii} 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.^{ix} 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.“^x

Education for Sustainable Development and the topic of well-being

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has become a popular educational concept, being supported in the "UN Decade of ESD" (2005-2014) and implemented in countless projects worldwide.^{xi}

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



While yet sparing the topic of well-being, ESD 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.^{xiii}

Education for well-being and happiness – an educational bunch of 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 schools. 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 personal well-being and skills to take care of it. Utilizing knowledge from Happiness Research. Reflecting on the material lifestyle and the question of “how much is enough?”.
- 2) Social and political frameworks of well-being: justice, fairness and freedom. How is my well-being interdependent with the well-being of others? How can it be organised?
- 3) Ecology, nature, happiness. Connecting learning about nature and ecology with experiencing the environment as joyful, inspiring and healthy place, nurturing well-being in many ways
- 4) Global aspects – links between sustainability and well-being. From the limits of growth to the chances of international well-being and cooperation.

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.^{xiv} It also could alter the given perception that sustainable lifestyles signify waiver, limitation and loss of quality of life.

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 differentiating this carefully enough. The subject Happiness in schools 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.^{xv}

Existing concepts of 'learning for well-being' also focus on self-improvement and are often embedded in an anthroposophical framework, referring to esoterics rather than science.

Here the educational understanding of learning about well-being shows a very limited idea of empowering students to cope with 'what is'. 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 given environment. It should not become 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 more sustainable planet and opening pathways for a de-growth society.



Jochen Dallmer, September 2014. Berlin.

This essay gives an insight into my ongoing research on the topic of happiness & sustainability. Feedback is very welcome! For more information and my contact details see the website.

Any commercial use of this text only with explicit agreement by the author. Thank you.

References

(As my research is in German most literature used is German too.)

- i McMahon, Darrin (2006): Happiness. A History. New York.
Thomä, Dieter et al. (Hrsg.)(2011): Glück. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch. Stuttgart.
- ii UN (2012): Defining a New Economic Paradigm: The Report of the High-Level Meeting on Wellbeing and Happiness
Martens, Jens (2010): Thinking Ahead. Development Models and Indicators of Well-Being Beyond the MDGs. Berlin.
- iii Seligman, M. (2002): Authentic Happiness.
Paech, Niko (2012): Befreiung vom Überfluss: Auf dem Weg in die Postwachstumsökonomie.
Stengel, Oliver (2011): Suffizienz. Die Konsumgesellschaft in der ökologischen Krise.
Wallacher, Johannes (2011): Mehrwert Glück. Plädoyer für ein menschengerechtes Wirtschaften.
Layard, Richard (2005): Die glückliche Gesellschaft.
Skidelsky, R; Skidelsky, E. (2013). Wie viel ist genug?
- iv Noddings, Nel (2003): Happiness and Education.
- v The growing field of esoterics and religious followings are another issue, that can not be treated here. Similar the effect of availability to political ideologies and extremist movements.
- vi Two examples for such methodological tool-kits are:
"Endlich Wachstum" <http://www.fairbindung.org/bildungaktuelleprojekte/endlichwachstum/>
"All we need" <http://allweneed.lu/Padagogik.htm>
- vii O'Brien, Catherine (2008): Sustainable Happiness: How Happiness studies can contribute to a more sustainable future. In: Canadian Psychology, 2008, Vol. 49, No. 4, S. 290
- viii O'Brien, Catherine (2008): Sustainable Happiness: How Happiness studies can contribute to a more sustainable future. In: Canadian Psychology, 2008, Vol. 49, No. 4, S. 290
- ix O'Brien, Catherine (2005): Planning for Sustainable Happiness: Harmonizing Our Internal and External Landscapes.
- x O'Brien, Catherine (2010): Sustainability, Happiness and Education. Journal of Sustainability Education, Vol. 1, May 2010
- xi Kolleg, N.; de Haan, G.; Fischbach, R. (2012): Qualitätsentwicklung in der Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung: Netzwerke, Kommunen und Qualitätsentwicklung im Kontext der UN Dekade Bildung für Nachhaltige Entwicklung. In: BMBF (Hrsg.)(2012): Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung - Beiträge der Bildungsforschung
Overwien, Bernd (2012): Kompetenzmodelle im Lernbereich globale Entwicklung – Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung. In: Gritschke, Hannah et al. (Hrsg.)(2012): Erkennen, Bewerten, (Fair-)Handeln.
Michelsen, Gerd (2009): Kompetenzen und Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung. In: Overwien, B.; Rathenow, H. (Hrsg.) (2009): Globalisierung fordert politische Bildung.
- xii Brylla, Wolfgang (2010): Einladung zur Glückskompetenz.
- xiii e.g. Klafki, Wolfgang (1996): Neue Studien zur Bildungstheorie und Didaktik. Weinheim.
- xiv Umweltbundesamt (Hrsg.)(2011): Einblick in die Jugendkultur. Das Thema Nachhaltigkeit bei der jungen Generation anschlussfähig machen.
BMU/UBA (Hrsg.)(2010): Umweltbewusstsein in Deutschland 2010. Berlin/Dessau.
- xv Seligman, M. et al. (2009): Positive education: positive psychology and classroom interventions. Oxford Review of Education. Vol 35. No 3, pp. 293-311