

A CURRICULUM OF GIVING FOR STUDENT WELLBEING AND ACHIEVEMENT – ‘HOW TO WEAR LEATHER SANDALS ON A ROUGH SURFACE’

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The whole world is not nice!

Sitting in my office, reading the feedback that my pre-service teaching students hand in at the end of every semester, I was given a challenge. A student praised the way that I conducted classes and my positive attitude towards students and life in general but ended the comments with the words: ‘... *but the whole world is not nice, man!*’

The challenge that this student gave me was to reconcile the fact that one can be positive and well meaning but that that doesn’t mean that the world will reciprocate. The entire semester I had been showing my students what the research tells us about the effects of positive emotions and notions of values education and community service. Now this student pointed out a possible flaw in my rationale for teaching this to beginning educators, and arguing, as I do, that perhaps we need to be aware of these dimensions in order to increase the general wellbeing of students. If the whole world is not nice, perhaps we can indeed set children up for much disappointment and even assist in the development of a type of ‘naive happiness’ that some are warning against (Forgas 2007; Schnall et al. 2008; Hamzelou 2010).

The state of childhood: A reflection of us all

In positing the view that it is beneficial to teach children to think positively and act generously even when this doesn’t guarantee reciprocity from their surroundings, I will provide some background information about the larger context. There is now sufficient and, in my view, incontrovertible evidence-based research on the topic to be concerned with the health and happiness of young people (see especially Stanley in Childs et al. 2008; World Health Organization 2008). Obesity and allergies have been on the rise for some time. Mental health problems also affect a lot more now. Depression and suicide rates have risen steadily in the past

60 years. Violence, antisocial behavior and binge drinking among young people are now so prevalent as to be viewed by some as the norm rather than the exception. Moreover, all of the above phenomena are now being observed in younger age brackets across the full spectra of socio-economic strata and demographics.

The innocence of children is also becoming increasingly harder to protect in our highly visual and readily accessible virtual world. Violent and sexually explicit images have been shown to have a disturbing effect on the development of children (Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009), while Internet filters in schools and in homes remain an imperfect Band-Aid solution at best. No doubt comparable to most Western countries, by the time they are eleven, American children will have seen 8,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on TV (Huston et al. 1992), while nearly 3,500 studies worldwide show a clear correlation between violent behavior and exposure to screen violence (Grossman and DeGaetano 1999).

The obvious challenges facing the present state of childhood (which I take to include the teenage years) in turn have ramifications for educators and parents and, in many ways, our society in general. The teacher attrition rate, particularly among entry-level teachers, is high in most Western countries (Ewing and Smith 2003), with many teachers and researchers citing behavior problems and student discipline as the main reason for leaving the occupation. Problem behavior is also a major cause for concern in parents and a common reason for family unrest. While problem behavior in children can have many triggers, a common denominator seems to be underlying states of unhappiness and lack of wellbeing (Dolan et al. 2008).

What does all this mean for educators, parents and society in general? What can be done to turn the statistics around? Surgery for obesity seems extreme, and curative therapy against depression is uncertain at best. Bans against alcohol and other unhealthy practices often seem to make those activities even more interesting to young people. Working with teachers and parents on a regular basis, I can also testify to the fact that there is no silver bullet or universal panacea with which to cure stressed carers of children either. We seem to have few answers to our current problems – at least not if we only look toward remedial strategies.

Values education, quality teaching and service learning

Because curative practices are uncertain at best, more and more educational settings are looking to preventive measures for increasing children's wellbeing and resilience. Notions of values education, character education, resilience education, positive education, civics education, social emotional learning, etc. are being implemented in many countries at the moment. While these initiatives each have their own emphases and research traditions, they all share the hope that through preventive measures we can increase children's general wellbeing, resilience and better judgment.

A comprehensive meta-analysis of the literature (see Lovat et al. 2009) reveals that notions of values education are predictive of increased individual and

communal wellbeing, pro-social behavior and classroom ambience (Benninga et al. 2003, 2006; Berkowitz and Bier 2004, 2007; Deakin Crick et al. 2004, 2005; Billig 2007). We now also have a body of evidence that links pro-social behavior with academic success (Wentzel 1991a, 1991b, 1993, 1996; Juvonen and Wentzel 1996; Caprara et al. 2000; Welsh et al. 2001). In other words, when combined with the tested and tried tools of quality teaching (Lovat and Toomey 2007), which ensures that educators do not revert to outdated models of transmission teaching or moral inculcation, notions of values education and social emotional learning become intrinsically linked to wellbeing, pro-social behavior and academic success. As a result, this type of education should no longer be seen as a moral imperative but rather a pedagogical imperative (Lovat et al. 2009); that is, quality teaching that explicitly addresses human and social values creates not only happier and more pro-social learners but also *better* learners.

There are those who argue that efforts to increase children's happiness assume that happiness is always a good thing, and it is true that there are studies that show that happy children can be less objective and overly preoccupied with self-gratification (Forgas 2007; Schnall et al. 2008; Hamzelou 2010). To fully understand this phenomenon, however, the work of Martin Seligman is of importance in highlighting that happiness is not just about self-gratification inspired happiness (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2002a, 2002b, 2008). Seligman identifies three types of happy living: the 'pleasurable' life, when we gratify our senses (e.g. enjoying an ice cream); the 'engaged' life, when we engage our signature strengths in activities that makes us lose track of time (e.g. sport); and the 'meaningful' life, which is when we are something for others (e.g. peer tutoring). The important point to note here is that when we are happy from having meaning in our lives, we are often still using our signature strengths but for a higher purpose than our own gratification. While sensory pleasure and engaging activities are not to be dismissed, we enjoy higher and steadier levels of happiness and recuperate more easily from trauma when our lives also contain meaning.

The educational significance of this is twofold. Firstly, it is clear that the studies that have shown negative effects of being happy have focused on the type of happiness that primarily comes from pleasure, in which case it also makes sense that we can become more selfish if exposed to pleasure, because it actually focuses us on our own senses (in many ways this is a challenge facing our modern way of living in general). Even happiness deriving from engagement can, on its own, house an inherent risk of making us more insensitive to others (e.g. a teenager who is engaged in a computer game for hours). However, with happiness that stems from having meaning in our lives, which is defined as deriving from being something to others, we notice that this level of wellbeing by definition *connects* us to others.

Realizing the qualitative differences between states of happiness in turn highlights the second significance: that notions of values education and social emotional learning are potentially more transformative when they incorporate not only explicit teaching and learning about individual values, emotions and self-awareness but also activities involving service or giving to others – the meaningful

life. This is a particularly effective form of values education, often referred to as ‘service learning’, which is when children serve others while learning the curriculum. For example, while studying the effects of drought in Australia (learning), a class might raise funds for relief packages to drought-stricken farmers (service). Again, the literature is very clear about the effects of this type of values education: service learning is predictive of increased individual and communal wellbeing, as well as academic improvement (Conrad and Hedin 1991; Billig 2000; Lovat et al. 2009). In fact, service learning is one of the types of values education that seems to have the biggest positive impact on, especially, marginalized students (Lovat et al. 2009).

Towards a curriculum of giving

Understanding that giving to others can connect the different levels of happiness with the most important level of meaning – being something for others – we also begin to understand that ‘happiness’, per se, is not really what we are after in schools. What we are after is a type of wellbeing, as defined by having a meaningful life, and to which many students are seldom exposed. Since the Second World War, spending power has tripled in most Western countries, while levels of happiness and psychological wellbeing have remained flat and even reduced, according to some sources (see especially Seligman 2002a). Many teenagers, when asked, do not want to give, probably because many of them have never experienced the *opportunity* to give (Townsend 1992).

Yet it is noteworthy that even when the giving is ‘enforced’, as in the case of service learning, the benefits remain: students who are exposed to service learning end up volunteering more afterwards (Post and Neimark 2007). In schools, giving, or service, is also a strong predictor of increased mental and physical health into adulthood and reduced adolescent depression and suicide risk (Dillon et al. 2003). Other studies confirm that giving has a significant impact on teenagers’ mental health, increasing their happiness, hopefulness and social effectiveness (Billig 2000, 2007; Csikszentmihalyi 2002; Scales et al. 2006). One study (Oman and Thoresen 2000) even found that giving reduces mortality significantly; it followed almost 2,000 individuals over the age of fifty-five for five years, and those who volunteered for two or more organizations had a 44 per cent lower likelihood of dying – 14 per cent lower than those who exercised four times a week.

In a word, the research is quite clear: one of the healthiest things we can do is to give, as this leads us to being healthier, happier and possibly even living longer. This is why I prefer talking about the need for a theory and a curriculum of giving, as opposed to simply service learning, because I think the former better denotes the intrinsic value of giving and service, and that such practices will be of benefit *in and of themselves*, whether or not they are tied to the ‘normal’ curriculum. By considering how we as teachers can allow regular opportunities for children to have meaning in their lives via a curriculum of giving – and by being familiar with the research on giving – we are more likely to value the underlying benefit

of giving, and not merely see it as a means to an end. Giving, as a principle of living, can be embodied in almost any situation and of itself has immense value to individual and collective wellbeing.

Having been an advisor and researcher in several of the Australian Government’s values education projects (2004–2010), I have also personally experienced the benefits of giving, particularly as they relate to children and teenagers. Using the qualitative research methodologies of action research and meta-analysis of efforts in more than 300 schools all over the nation, one of the key findings in the Australian Values Education Final Report (Stage 2) was the recommendation that educational settings ‘develop relevant and engaging values approaches connected to local and global contexts that offer opportunities for real student agency’ (AGDEST 2008). In my experience of values education in Australia, the incorporation of giving into units and lesson plans have been the most transformative way of ‘connecting students to local and global contexts’ and creating ‘real student agency’ – in other words, creating meaning in the lives of students. What follows are the beginnings of a framework for educators to implement a Curriculum of Giving.

Four dimensions of giving

I have through my research on values education in Australia (e.g. Nielsen 2005; Lovat et al. 2009) come to appreciate four dimensions in which we as educators can engage learners in giving. These four dimensions encompass a continuum from self-compassion to altruism, from micro to macro cosmos (see Table 15.1).

Studies have shown that self-compassion can have a significant positive association with self-reported measures of happiness, optimism, positive affect, wisdom, personal initiative, curiosity and exploration, agreeableness, extroversion and conscientiousness (Neff and Vonk 2009; Neff et al. no date), which is why I see giving to self as an important aspect of giving; for example, we all know that it is hard to give to others if we don’t have a surplus from which to give.

As to my use of ‘altruism’, I am here not concerned with whether innate altruism exists or not. My use of the term is purely within the understanding that when we as humans give to others, the research indicates that it is one of the healthiest things we can do for our individual and collective wellbeing – whether

Table 15.1 Four dimensions of giving

| <i>Self-compassion (micro)</i> | | <i>Altruism (macro)</i> | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| <i>Self</i> | <i>Relationships</i> | <i>Communities</i> | <i>Life</i> |
| Self-soothing | Acts of kindness | Relief aid | Gratitude |
| Flow | Courtesy | Petitions | Awe |
| Savoring | Peer tutoring | Clean-ups | Poem/prayer |

or not altruism is a spiritual quality, or simply a Darwinian ‘survival’ mechanism, useful for social capital.

I will now provide elaboration and examples of each of these dimensions. I do so in the belief that it does not matter so much that we do not know exactly why giving works, but that it is important to know that it does work and what it may look like in educational settings.

Giving to self – ‘know thyself’

Schools I have worked with have implemented notions of positive psychology to help students know and appreciate themselves more. In this type of education, children have been learning about Signature Strengths (Seligman 2002a), Flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2000) and Savoring (Bryant and Veroff, in Seligman 2002a). What this does is help students to know and appreciate their innate qualities (Signature Strengths), how they can ‘get lost’ in activities (Flow) and enjoy the pleasures of life with moderation and awareness (Savoring).

Some schools have also taught students how to deal with trauma and notions of ‘catastrophic thoughts’, which is what we all can experience at times when an incident sets off a sequence of negative thoughts that spiral our optimism and hopefulness downwards. Seligman (2002a) taught ten year olds how to dispute catastrophic thoughts and how to energize themselves, cutting their rates of depression in half as they went through adolescence. Teachers I have worked with confirm the impact of explicitly teaching how to deal with difficult thoughts:

I’ve been working with [a student] for over 12 months – his father died as the result of an accident a few years ago, and he’s really been struggling to overcome it ... We started talking about bliss, and flow, which gave him an opportunity to talk about his memories of his dad in a pretty positive way ... He really finally opened up to me and a couple of other boys ... by the fire one night after everything had wound up. It was incredibly brave, and incredibly empowering. It was at this stage that I introduced the phrase from *Tuesdays With Morrie* – ‘Death ends a life, not a relationship’ to him – and that was a mantra that allowed him to work through some pretty tough thoughts. At this stage he stopped having recurring nightmares about his father’s death – and through this ‘talk’, he was able to engage fully with a counselor, which made great breakthroughs for him also. It took a long time, but the turnaround in this kid has been significant ...

(Teacher, male, ACT)

It might be argued that teaching positive psychology for the ‘self’ is not really giving, but, again, I would argue that it is important that we see giving as existing on a continuum from self-compassion to altruism. Without giving to the self, with wisdom and awareness, what the self needs, it is hard to give effectively to others. Such a view also sheds light on a long-standing debate in education as to whether

skills or self-esteem is more important to build up in order for the other to develop. What has been missing in this debate is the important ingredient of altruism, or a 'wellbeing psychology', because if we add this dimension we realize that one can have all the skills and self-esteem in the world and still be a bully. Self-esteem and skills, in themselves, cannot achieve a satisfactory support of the other, because they both depend on being situated in a psychology of human wellbeing – if they are to be of benefit *to* human wellbeing.

This in turn explains why bullies can have both high and low self-esteem, whereas people who stand up for victims of bullying overwhelmingly have high self-esteem. The data on self-esteem and skills, on its own, is conflicting, as people with high self-esteem and high skill sets still appear to be susceptible to becoming bullies, alcoholics, drug users and depressed. In contrast, the data on altruism is consistently linked to wellbeing and pro-social behavior (see especially Post and Neimark 2007). Indeed, self-compassion is much more predictive of positive affect and wellbeing than self-esteem (Neff and Vonk 2009; Neff et al. no date), again underlining the relevance of viewing the self as part of an altruistic continuum that stretches from the micro to the macro cosmos.

Many great teachers throughout history have argued the importance of 'knowing thy self' and that true knowledge is intimately linked with virtues (e.g. Socrates). It seems that we now have research that supports this view, which is why a curriculum of giving must start in self-awareness and self-compassion. As the above story illustrates, the language and concepts of positive psychology are particularly useful tools to this end.

Giving to relationships – from 'me' culture to 'we' culture

The more obvious way of giving for many children will be to give to their most immediate relationships, such as family, friends and peers. With this dimension, it is not so difficult to conceptualize what constitutes giving; the challenge for teachers is to allow regular opportunities for giving, since traditionally this has not been an issue that teachers have felt should concern them. As noted, however, many children do not have regular opportunities to give, and so it has become increasingly important that educational settings allow for such opportunities.

Schools I have worked with have incorporated notions of respect, courtesy and acts of kindness into classroom and schoolyard interactions. Rudolf Steiner Kindergartens, in particular, are exemplars of allowing regular and routine acts of giving for younger children. In these settings, one will often see children setting the table for morning tea and helping staff prepare it. Afterwards, some children might work in the garden, weeding and picking salad and vegetables for lunch. At lunchtime, others are again at the centre of washing, cutting and preparing the food. In the afternoon, one might see some children tidying up, folding blankets and doing other household tasks.

In older grades, some schools have explicitly focused on a particular value related to giving, such as respect or integrity, with noticeable results:

In grade six I was, I guess, a bully. And I used to bully an overweight kid ... and I only did it cos my friends were doing it ... it didn't really feel right, but I did it anyway cos I didn't know what respect was, I didn't know what integrity was ... Once we had a semester on ... respect and learned what it was, [the bullying] pretty much just stopped ... [I] stopped hanging out with the mean kids.

(Year 10 student, male, ACT)

This student quote is significant because it exemplifies the power of explicit values education, providing the outer support to nourish what for many is already present inside – even if only as a quiet ‘voice’. By being supported to consciously know what integrity was, this student realized that it was what he had felt inside him all the time, and that not following this inner voice made him feel ‘not right’. In other words, explicit values education provided the supportive ‘nudge’ to become more fully in the outer psyche what he was already expressing to himself in his inner psyche.

As one senses in the above data, there are many ways to give within the dimension of children's immediate relationships, but a crucial factor is whether such learning opportunities are allowed and catered for. Whether taught explicitly or implicitly, such a curriculum could reverse trends toward the ‘me’ culture, as opposed to a ‘we’ culture, that some warn against (see, for example, Brooks 2008).

Giving to communities – expanding the ‘consciousness’

It is good to expand children's consciousness even further by allowing them opportunities to give to a wider circle than just their immediate relationships. Giving to the local and global community helps transform a child's natural egocentricity toward more empathetic and global states of consciousness.

In one of the schools I worked with, two teachers, who team-taught two grade 3–4 classes, decided to let the values of care, compassion and responsibility guide a unit called ‘Cool Kids 4 a Cool Climate’. One of the teachers had the students writing a diary as if they were a drought-stricken farmer. For children of this age, the results were dramatic:

Dear Diary, Today is Friday, another busy day. The earth is all dry and very deeply cracked. The poor old sheep dog is too thirsty to round up the sheep and the cows are so skinny you can see their rib bones. I have to shoot them tomorrow. I am out of water to feed them so I think it is best ... I don't know what to do. Should I sell the property of not?

(Year 3–4, student, ACT)

Having developed empathic links, students were then involved in collecting relief packages for drought-stricken farmers. One of the teachers reported:

The culminating activity ... was for the children to list ways to show that they care about the effects of drought on our community. From this list they chose, as a group, one idea to put their words into action. They chose to collect tinned food, blankets, toys and books to donate to the Country Women's Association (CWA) to go to drought affected farmers in our area. Over the space of five weeks they developed a plan, allocated jobs, and organized posters and newsletter articles. They collected over 350 tins, numerous blankets, four boxes of clothing, as well as toys and books. A representative from the CWA collected the donations and the children received a letter of appreciation. I wish I could include the photo we took of the children with their collections so you could see the look of pride on every face ...

(Teacher, female, ACT)

As with the other dimensions of giving, the advantage of a hands-on approach to developing generosity, empathy and compassion is that this can happen without moralizing. Through giving to others, children can experience wonderful subtle emotions that would never come about through theoretical learning alone. In many respects, giving enables children to scale Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and reach the self-actualization pinnacle (Maslow 1943).

Giving to life – reconnecting with the 'sacred'

A good example of giving to life is gratitude for life itself. Interestingly, similar to the health benefits deriving from overt giving, studies have shown that 5–15 minutes of gratitude will cause a shift in the nervous system to a calm state, called 'parasympathetic dominance', which is where heart, breathing, blood pressure and brain rhythm are synchronized, and where beneficial hormones increase and stress hormones decrease (see Rollin McCraty in Post and Neimark 2007).

My own research on giving is consistent with the broader research on the topic. With the consent of my pre-service teachers, in recent years, I have assigned tasks to them that have had direct impacts on their wellbeing. To validate this finding, I have randomly selected approximately a third of the 200 students that I have the pleasure of teaching each semester to do a random act of giving every day, another third to keep a daily gratitude journal, and the last third to 'just' learn about positive psychology (control group). The activities of giving and gratitude are voluntary and not assessed, but I ask all students to take a wellbeing survey (<http://www.australianunitycorporate.com.au/community/auwi/Pages/default.aspx>) at three points in the thirteen-week semester. Each time I have conducted this research, the gratitude and giving groups increased their wellbeing, while the control groups only maintained their original level of wellbeing (Nielsen 2010).

In other words, gratitude, as an example of 'inner giving', seems to produce similar health benefits as overt giving, and it therefore makes sense to view acts like gratitude, reverence, awe, prayer, etc. as ways of giving to life itself – no matter

what one perceives 'life' to be in terms of ideology and beliefs. Schoolteachers have also told me about the noticeable effects of introducing this type of giving:

The Year 12s of 2008 had been a truly energetic, passionate and community spirited group. Early in the year I planted the seed with the student leadership team that they could make a great impact on younger students if they were willing to show just how much school had meant to them and how thankful they were ... They chose the theme of thanksgiving for their final mass. In the past, themes have been along the lines of friendship, journey, taking flight etc. Just in choosing this theme they had already changed the tone and feel of how they were to finish as a year group. In preparing for the mass they had many discussions as a team and as a whole year group about what they were grateful for and how they would like to show that gratitude ... I believe that these expressions of thankfulness transformed the community ... But most importantly these students had experienced the power of giving thanks ... In my memory, this was the most pleasant experience in a school of a Year 12 group leaving the community and upon reflection I now see that by embracing the value of gratitude, they were able enter into the experience with authentic joy and appropriate expression.

(Teacher, female, suburban NSW)

Giving to life can take many forms, illustrating that giving can be a principle of life that we, ideally, have the opportunity to engage with in almost any situation. As such, it seems to be a state of mind (and heart), which has parallels with notions of Flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2000) and Bliss (Seligman 2002a). Just as Flow and Bliss activities might be precursors to developing the kind of self-awareness and appreciation that could underpin, for example, drug education, so does giving to life – through gratitude, mindfulness, reciting poems or prayers – seem to build an awareness and a 'presence' (see Tolle 2005) that is of benefit to students in all pursuits of life.

Wearing 'leather sandals'

You can't cover the whole world in soft leather to make your journey smooth and comfortable, but you can wear leather sandals.

(Buddhist saying)

With the above elaboration on giving to life itself, I have come full circle in terms of how I would respond to the student whose feedback challenged my teaching with the statement '*... but the whole world is not nice, man!*' This is what I would now say to this student: being generous and striving for positive thoughts and emotions has immense value to the self, whether or not the world reciprocates. One cannot cover the whole world in smooth and soft leather, but

one can wear leather sandals so that at least the space that one is occupying is still soft and comfortable. The other thing to note, of course, is that the more we all wear ‘leather sandals’, the more the world in turn will be a ‘smoother’ and more ‘comfortable’ place. Moreover, being positive and generous are not mutually exclusive to being discerning and effective; increasing our ‘meaningful’ wellbeing (as opposed to just ‘pleasurable’ happiness) seems to make us *more* capable, productive and creative (Isen et al. 1991; Seligman,= 2002a; Post and Neimark 2007).

I have in this chapter used a mix of research and philosophical deduction to argue the importance of developing a curriculum of giving and thus a new view of education. In this view, we realize that things like standardized testing, normative assessments and school league tables are only very limited, and often constricting, measures of quality education. If individual wellbeing and social cohesion are the horses that pull the cart of academic competencies, then it seems that governments around the world are trying to put the cart in front of the horses.

Schools that see the wellbeing of students to be the responsibility of all staff, not just the Chaplain or school counselor, have students with higher levels of wellbeing *and* academic achievement (Spratt et al. 2006; Lovat et al. 2009). Often I am puzzled about the fact that this doesn’t seem to be rocket science, and yet testing and quantitative measuring seems more and more oppressive to teachers trying to focus on what really matters. What really matters is a whole person approach to education, in which academic success is seen as a by-product, however important. Learning how to wear leather sandals – how to give to self, others and life itself – seems to be an essential ingredient in becoming such a whole person.

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