Happiness
and the teaching of values

A major purpose of schools must be to help develop good and happy people – especially at a time when growing numbers of children are suffering from emotional disturbance. **Richard Layard** argues that we need a new cadre of teachers specifically trained to teach values and the ways to happiness.

ver since I first read Jeremy Bentham, I have been convinced that the best society is one with the greatest happiness and (especially) the least misery. I have become even more convinced of this since modern neuroscience has shown that happiness and misery are objective phenomena and that what people say about themselves provides a great deal of evidence about what they actually feel.

So what do people say? It is not very encouraging. Despite huge increases in living standards, people in Britain, Japan and the United States report themselves no happier today than people did 50 years ago. Moreover, a variety of studies of depression and anxiety disorders in different countries suggest that these problems have probably increased in prevalence.

Evidence for Britain certainly indicates big rises in emotional disturbance. For example, the proportion of 16-year-olds with serious emotional problems rose from 10% in 1986 to 17% in 1999 (Collishaw et al, 2004). A study based in the West of Scotland showed similar changes over that period (West and Sweeting, 2003). And the latest research by Stephan Collishaw and his colleagues, which covers the whole country and comes right up to 2006, shows that things have continued to worsen.

So what is going on? In the most careful study of patterns of happiness, economist John Helliwell has used four

It should be an explicit aim of each school to train character and provide moral education

waves of the World Values Survey done in 46 countries over the last 20 years. He takes as his 'dependent variable' the average happiness in a country and explains 80% of the variance by six variables, four reflecting ethical values:

- The perceived trustworthiness of individuals.
- The trustworthiness of government and the courts.
- The community involvement of individuals.
- The divorce rate.

Individualism and the fall in trust

I want to focus particularly on the trustworthiness of individuals. Each survey respondent is asked 'Do you think most other people can be trusted?' The proportions saying 'yes' vary enormously and are highly correlated with the results of a Reader's Digest experiment, which left wallets in the streets of different countries and then counted the number of wallets returned to their owners. Trust is very high in Scandinavian countries, and this helps to explain why these countries generally come out as the happiest countries in surveys.

Similar findings about personal decency emerge from a survey that asked 11-15-year-olds 'Are most of your classmates kind and helpful?' 70% or more said 'yes' in Scandinavian countries, but the figures were considerably lower for some other countries: 53% in the United States, 46% in Russia and 43% in Britain (UNICEF, 2007).

The sad fact is that in Britain and the United States, there has been an extraordinary fall in trust since 1960: from roughly 56% of the population trusting most other people to only 30% today. Levels of trust in Britain are particularly low among young people: only a quarter say 'yes' when asked if they trust most other people (Park et al, 2004). By contrast, there has been no fall in trust in any other European country since 1981 when the data were first collected. My explanation of this is the huge growth of individualism in the

United States, which has washed across the Atlantic like a tsunami, hitting Britain first and the rest of Europe much less, so far.

By individualism, I mean the view that a person's main goal should be to make the most of themselves or, more vulgarly, to be as successful as possible compared with other people. Put that way, it is of course a zero-sum game, and if that is what people value, there is no way our society can become happier. To do that, we have to move to a positive-sum game in which we each care positively about the well-being of others.

Learning the ways to happiness

How can we do this? I think it requires an educational revolution in which a central purpose of our schools is to teach young people about the main secrets of happiness for which we have empirical evidence. Among these 'secrets', I would include:

■ If you care more about other people relative to yourself, you are more likely to be happy (Lyubomirsky et al, 2005).
■ If you constantly compare yourself with other people, you are less likely to be happy (Schwartz et al, 2002).
■ Choose goals that stretch you, but are attainable with high probability (Nesse, 2000).
■ Challenge your negative thoughts, and focus on the positive aspects of your character and situation (Seligman, 2002).

For every subject – including the teaching of values – we should know from controlled trials what teaching methods work best

These are not exactly novel thoughts. They are, if you like, the 'perennial philosophy', but rigorously established by modern psychology. The first principle is about compassion to others; the others are about compassion towards yourself. The principle of compassion for others cannot of course be based on self-interest – if it is, it will fail. Rather, it has to be realised through deliberate cultivation of the primitive instinct of empathy, which is latent to a varying degree in each of us.

These principles may seem obvious but they are not easy to put into practice.

Learning hard things takes an enormous effort. How can we expect people to learn to be happy without massive amounts of practice and repetition? Good parts of traditional religions (especially Buddhism) involve just such practice, but what institutions do we have today that can play this basic role?

I believe it can only be done by schools. Parents of course are crucial. But if we want to change the culture, the main organised institutions we have under social control are schools. So what should they do? Though I was once a school teacher, I certainly don't have a complete answer, but let me first report two suggestive experiments and then draw out some general principles.

The Penn Resiliency Project

The first example is one of a number of programmes designed to build character, which have been subjected to controlled trials. The Penn Resiliency Project was designed by Professor Martin Seligman, the founder of 'positive psychology'. In it, 15 11-year-old students spend 18 classroom hours on such issues as understanding their own emotions and those of others, and developing concern for others. They are taught by one teacher, who has been trained in the method through eight hours of online self-study and 10 days of face-to-face training.

The programme has now been evaluated in 11 different studies and, except in one school where the training was inadequate, it has reduced the rate of teenage depression over the next three

years by on average one half. It has also reduced bad behaviour by one third (Reivich et al, 2005).

I believe this programme is an object lesson in how our educational system should develop. It has always amazed me how little the scientific method is applied in the classroom, except perhaps in the teaching of reading and number. In the last three years, I learned a lot about the results of psychological therapy, all of which are based on controlled trials – and I have become even more amazed at the scarcity of proper evaluation in education.

If something as sensitive as psychological therapy can be scientifically evaluated, surely the same should apply to classroom education? For every subject, we should know from controlled trials what teaching methods work best. And this applies as much to the teaching of values as to anything else.

The other lesson that emerges from the programme is the importance of detailed and systematic training of the teachers. As has been found with psychological therapy, the effectiveness of a given teacher will vary enormously according to how well they have been trained. We no longer need to rely on the inspired amateur.

Of course, controlled trials are one thing; delivery on a large scale is another. Having read these findings, it seems to me worthwhile to introduce the programme on a large scale in Britain. Compared with small-scale controlled trials, when half the children are excluded, large-scale delivery to every child in a community should have

bigger effects per child because each child taking the programme would interact with other children who had also taken it.

If this applied to all the children in a city, it should be possible to modify the whole youth culture of that city. I was therefore thrilled that the very imaginative local authority of South Tyneside has decided to implement the programme in all its schools, while Manchester and Hemel Hempstead are using it in a dozen further schools. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) are paying for a full-scale evaluation.

If the programme is as successful as we expect, we hope it can contribute significantly to the first year curriculum for Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) in secondary schools, and can then be followed by programmes with older children.

Values schools

The second experiment began in West Kidlington primary school in Oxfordshire and has now been copied in at least a dozen state primary schools that call themselves 'values schools'. The basic aim is to give the children control of their emotions by familiarity with uplifting ideas and the practice of silent reflection (Farrer, 2000)

The school has adopted 22 key value words – words like 'honesty', 'hope' and 'respect' – each taking a turn as the 'word of the month', with which teaching and discussion continually connect. Silent reflection is practised daily at the end of school assembly, and at the beginning of

most classes. The key question children are asked is 'What am I like when I most like myself?' Ancillary questions are 'What makes me happy?' and 'How can I make other people happy?'

Four principles of reform

With these two practical examples in mind, let me offer four principles that should govern the role of schools in character-building.

First, it should be an **explicit aim** of each school to train character and provide moral education. Teachers should stand for clear values and, when asked about moral questions, should make clear what they believe. It is not enough to treat moral issues as interesting topics for debate. It is more important to train up the emotions that support moral action than the intellectual skills involved, though of course both matter.

Second, each secondary school should have **specialists** in PSHE (or, as the subject might more appealingly be called, 'life skills'). And while the whole school should reflect the values taught in PSHE, there must be full-time professional leadership. It is no good having it taught mainly by part-timers without specialist training, though they can certainly help. This is one of the most difficult subjects to teach, and most people who teach it should have taken it as a specialism in their training. Without a cadre of specialist teachers acting as standard bearers of the movement, there is no chance of the educational revolution we need.

Third, there is no chance of success
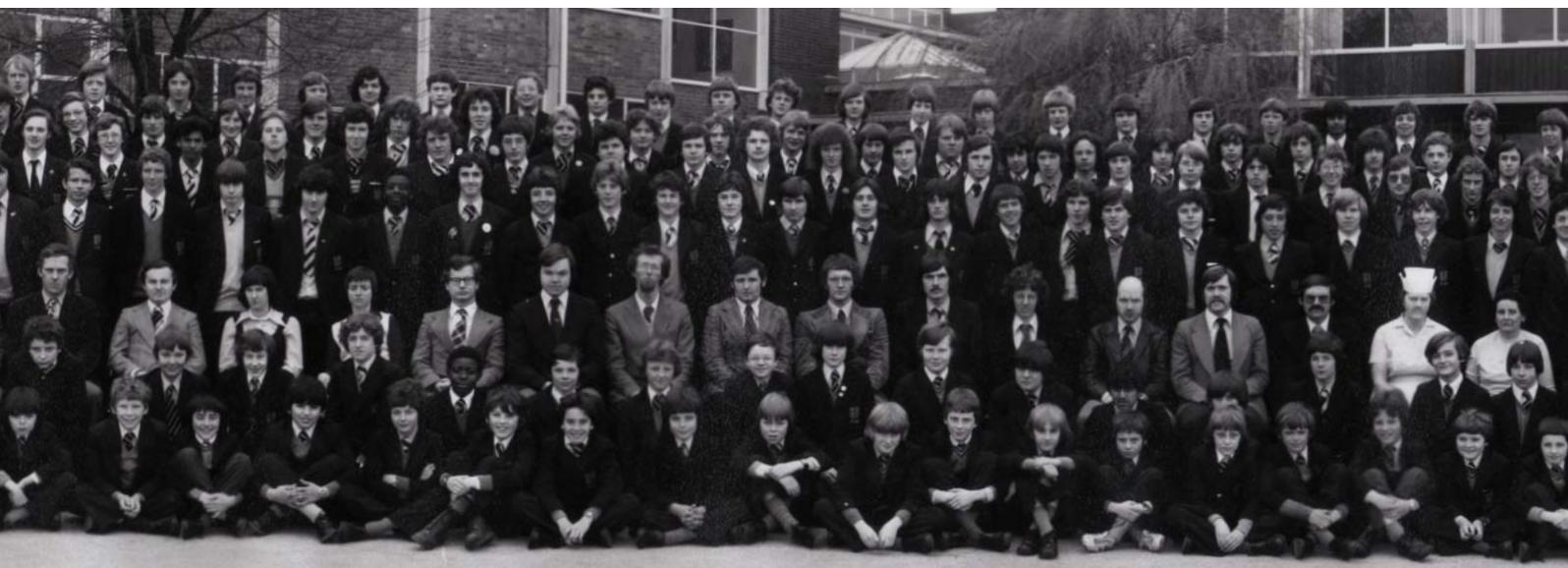
unless the movement is grounded in science. We live in a scientific age, and, although pockets of fundamentalism remain, only **science** can and should persuade the young about the routes to a happy society. Now for the first time we have in positive psychology a science that provides the underpinning for morality and personal liberation.

Fourth, **the curriculum** should include: managing your feelings; loving and serving others; appreciating beauty; love, sex and parenting; work and money; a critical approach to media; political participation; and moral philosophy. The DfES has been active in curriculum development in this area, and the SEAL programme (social and emotional aspects of learning) is well-grounded, with excellent materials at primary school level.

But what I am proposing is something more campaigning and more high profile. We need a government commitment to producing a major specialism in this area, with a serious teacher training programme. Moreover, PSHE should continue up to age 18, and include projects that are graded by the school. It should also feature in the head teacher's report for every university applicant.

Do we need it and can we succeed?

Clearly I am talking about a movement of moral reform. Do we need it, and can it succeed?

Let me remind you where we started. I think we have a pretty good society compared with most that have existed.

But we have not become happier in the past 50 years. We have made enormous progress in the mastery of nature but none in the mastery of ourselves – and if we want to make further progress in well-being, it has to come mainly from the latter. If we think we cannot afford the time because of the threat of global competition, we had better take an introductory course in economics.

On top of that general case, there is the specific worry these days about young people. Concerns about their behaviour has led to the Prime Minister's 'respect' programme, which so far has been more repressive than preventive. What I am suggesting would contribute significantly to prevention – and there is serious scientific evidence that young people are becoming more disturbed.

So what are our chances of success? Some people would say they are weak. Some programmes in schools focused on particular problems like drugs have had little success though there is some evidence that wider programmes based on the whole ethos of the school are more effective (Bonell et al, 2007; Weare and Gray, 2003).

But I am talking about something bigger than a programme; I am talking about the reversal of a major cultural trend towards increased consumerism, increased inter-personal competition and increased interest in celebrity and money.

Many people assume that cultural trends go on in the same direction forever. But that is not my reading of English history. I see something more like cycles:

We need to create a profession of fully trained PSHE teachers, giving evidence-based teaching that changes lives

increased Puritanism in the sixteenth century giving way to increased licence from around 1660; then from around 1830, increased Puritanism again and the growth of Victorian values; and in the twentieth century, again increased licence. So why not in the twenty-first century a shift away from 'anything goes' – or at least a shift towards a more compassionate society?

But how plausible is the education system as the main catalyst of change? Well, it has been so in the past. Universities played a major role in the

Puritan revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Thomas Arnold of Rugby did more than anyone to convert the middle classes to Victorian values. Today, more people spend more of their life in the education system than ever before – so it is the natural catalyst for change. 50% of young people say that their main ambition is to be happy: it's the most commonly stated ambition and very sensible too (Park et al, 2004). Let's help them.

I have no doubt that new institutions will also develop for adults. In California, the psychologist Paul Ekman has suggested chains of 'compassion gyms', where you train your mind in compassion, just as you train your body in the physical gym. I also hope that the churches will do more to help people train their minds in the mental disciplines that we know can lead to serenity and compassion.

But from a public policy perspective, we must start with schools. This is a good moment. People are worried about young people from many angles. We have good tools with which to help them. The key need is to create a profession of PSHE teachers, who give evidence-based teaching that changes lives, and that goes on to 18.

Further reading

Chris Bonell, Adam Fletcher and Jim McCambridge (2007), 'Improving Schools Ethos May Reduce Substance Misuse and Teenage Pregnancy', *British Medical Journal* 334: 614-17.

Stephan Collishaw, Barbara Maughan, Robert Goodman and Andrew Pickles (2004), 'Time Trends in Adolescent Mental Health', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 45(8): 1350-62.

Frances Farrer (2000), *A Quiet Revolution: Encouraging and Sharing Positive Values with Children*, Rider.

Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King and Ed Diener (2005), 'The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect', *Psychological Bulletin* 131: 803-55.

Randolph Nesse (2000), 'The Evolution of Hope and Despair', *Journal of Social Issues* 66: 429-69.

Alison Park, Miranda Phillips and Mark Johnson (2004), *Young People in Britain. The Attitudes and Experiences of 12-19 Year Olds*, DfES Research Report No. 564.

Karen Reivich, Jane Gillham, Andrew Shatte and Martin Seligman (2005), *A Resilience Initiative and Depression Prevention Program for Youth and their Parents*, Penn Resiliency Project.

Barry Schwartz, Andrew Ward, John Monterosso, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Katherine White and Darrin Lehman (2002), 'Maximizing versus Satisficing: Happiness is a Matter of Choice', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83: 1178-97.

Martin Seligman (2002), *Authentic Happiness*, Free Press.

UNICEF (2007), *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries*, Innocenti Report Card 7.

Katherine Weare and Gay Gray (2003), *What Works in Developing Children's Emotional and Social Competence and Wellbeing?*, DfES Research Report No. 456.

Patrick West and Helen Sweeting (2003), 'Fifteen, Female and Stressed: Changing Patterns of Psychological Distress over Time', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 44(3): 399-411.

The government should commit to producing a major specialism in this area within the postgraduate certificate of education

Professor Lord **Richard Layard** is director of CEP's research programme on well-being. His book *Happiness – Lessons from a New Science* was published in 2005.

This article is an edited version of the 2007 Ashby Lecture, which he delivered at the University of Cambridge on 2 May.