



CENTRE FOR EDUCATION ECONOMICS

The achievement-wellbeing trade-off in education

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Background

- The idea that happiness or a ‘joy for learning’ and academic achievement go hand in hand is an important tenet of progressive educational theory.
 - Since ‘deep’, genuine learning is supposed to be exciting and joyful, education that does not live up to these ideals tends to be viewed as ineffective and wasteful.
 - ‘Our old-type school, with its formal subject matter remote from life, made us think of the learning process as laborious and repellent. But in these typical instances life’s inherent learning comes as such without effort, comes in fact automatically and stays on for use’ (Kilpatrick 1945).
 - Pupil-centred methods supposed to lead to more joy for learning.
- ⇒ Progressive theory has come to highlight the relationship between pupil-led learning, enjoyment, and performance as a virtuous circle.

Background

- ‘[P]romoting the health and wellbeing of pupils and students within schools and colleges has the potential to improve their educational outcomes *and* their health and wellbeing outcomes’ (PHE 2014).
- ‘For most of the last century, the widespread belief among policymakers was that you had to get the basics right in education before you could turn to broader skills. It's as though schools needed to be boring and dominated by rote learning before deeper, more invigorating learning could flourish. Those that hold on to this view should not be surprised if students lose interest or drop out of schools because they cannot relate what is going on in school to their real lives’ (Schleicher 2010).
- ‘Education systems should explore solutions that make learning more enjoyable and fulfilling for all students, so that high performance and personal happiness become self-reinforcing goals’ (OECD 2017).

Where does it come from?

- The kernel of progressive thinking can be traced to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile, or On Education*, published in 1763.
- Regular lessons imply a 'barbarous education which sacrifices the present to an uncertain future, loads the child with every description of fetters, and begins, by making him wretched, to prepare for him some far-away indefinite happiness he may never enjoy!' (Rousseau 1889)
⇒ Traditional education destroys children's natural desires and interests.
- Solution: 'Do not give any sort of lesson verbally: [the pupil] ought to receive none except from experience' (Rousseau 1889).
⇒ Both critics and supporters read Rousseau as advocating that the best education ought to entail a happy childhood obtained through freedom.

Where does it come from?

- ‘Child-centred educational theory is a series of footnotes to Rousseau’ (Darling 1994).
 - Progressive education ‘has been used to designate a theory and method of education based on the principles set forth by Rousseau’ (Palm 1940).
 - Émile is ‘the seminal text of the child-centred movement’ (Ravitch 2010).
- ⇒ Cannot escape importance of Rousseau for progressive educational theory and its emphasis on happiness and child-centred teaching.

The misinterpretation of Rousseau

- ‘To suffer is the first and most necessary thing for [Émile] to learn’ (Rousseau).
- Happiness is not joy or pleasure, but human flourishing (happiness \leq live well \leq maintain one’s desires and abilities in equilibrium \leq virtue).
- ‘Emile must learn to accept and endure the suffering that is inevitably part of the human condition – and learning to accept and endure suffering turns out to depend on experiencing it a great deal’ (Mintz).
- Suffering is a pedagogical tool: a by-product of confronting one’s inadequacies – and a powerful source of motivation to overcome them. It is the ‘wellspring of learning’.
- It seems that the progressivists turned Rousseau’s ideas about children’s interests upside down.

The evidence

- Pupils' happiness is the lowest in the classroom and when doing school- or homework. Declines when they are in school and increases when they are not in school (Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter 2003)....
 - ...but more time in school, instruction, and homework raise achievement (Aucejo and Romano 2016; Falch and Rønning 2012; Lavy 2015).
- ⇒ Achievement-school wellbeing trade-off at the very general level.
- External school-leaving exams raise achievement and labour-market outcomes....but have strong negative effects on attitudes toward learning (e.g. Jürges and Schneider 2010; Piopiunik et al. 2013).
 - Mechanism: increases self-reported learning pressure and the amount of homework teachers give to pupils – who also spend more time in the classroom discussing such homework.

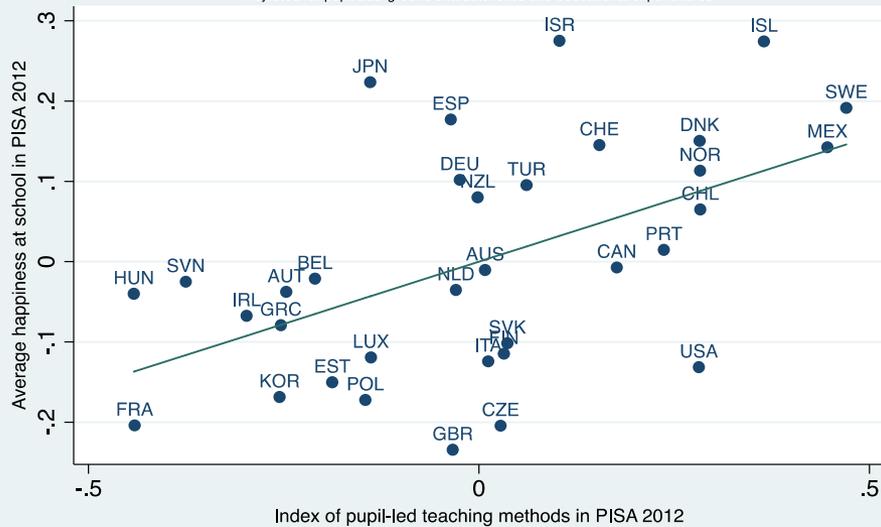
The evidence

- Independent-school competition raises PISA achievement and lowers pupil happiness and other related outcomes (Heller-Sahlgren 2018).
 - Mechanisms: increases parental achievement pressure, amount of homework, and instructional hours....
 - ...while decreasing pupil-led teaching (such as project work)...
 - ...and making teaching more hierarchical and worsening pupil-teachers relations.
- Traditional teaching practices raise achievement but decrease pupil wellbeing and attitudes toward learning (e.g. Clark et al. 2012; Haeck et al. 2014; Algan et al. 2013; Jiang and McComas 2015; Regh 2012).
 - Can be demonstrated using data from PISA 2012, the first PISA survey in which pupils were asked how happy they were at school....

The evidence

Figure 1. The relationship between pupil-led teaching methods and happiness at school

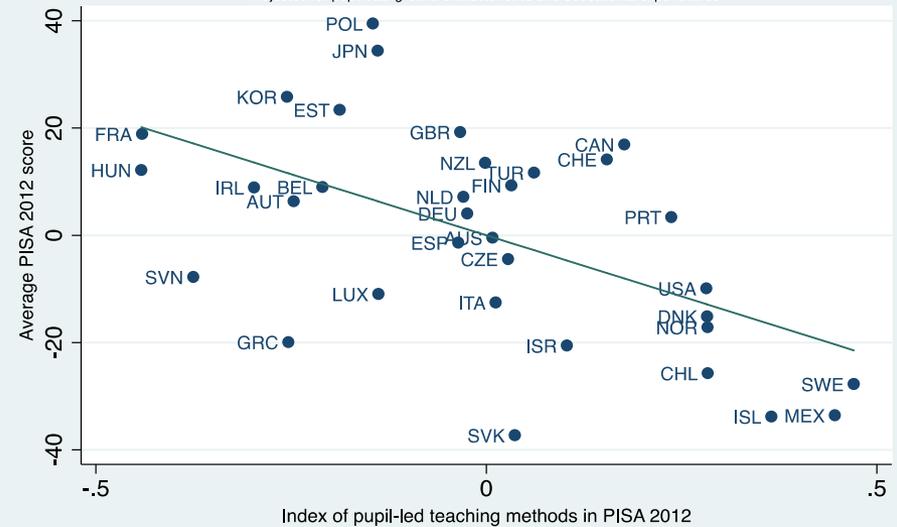
Adjusted for pupil background characteristics and educational expenditures



The relationship is statistically significant at the 1% level

Figure 2. The relationship between pupil-led teaching methods and average PISA scores

Adjusted for pupil background characteristics and educational expenditures



The relationship is statistically significant at the 1% level

A basic cost-benefit analysis

- Should policymakers focus on achievement or should they instead prioritise pupil wellbeing?
 - Recent research indicates that youth cognitive achievement is a much better predictor than wellbeing of adult income...
 - ...but youth wellbeing is considerably more important than cognitive achievement for adult life satisfaction (Layard et al. 2014)
- ⇒ Very tentative! But the attractiveness of different strategies may very well depend on which goals policymakers seek to advance.

Conclusion

- Progressive educationalists argue schooling must be made more enjoyable to be made effective – a view popular in the higher echelons of international policymaking.
- Fundamental assumption that pupil happiness and successful learning go hand in hand stems from a particular reading of Rousseau – which led educationalists to ignore the importance of suffering as a pedagogical tool.
- Evidence supports a trade-off between achievement and pupil wellbeing
- Unlikely to be the only trade-off in education!

⇒ The key lesson is to take the concept of trade-offs seriously in education.