

# HAPPY TALK

How important are joy and contentment at school? Vic Goddard (along with the Twittersphere) has been considering the question...

**D**id you know that March 20th was the United Nations' International Day of Happiness? I'd never heard of it until I was asked to write this piece, and did what I often do – I went to Google, threw lots of words into it and followed leads, discovering along the way that as part of the event, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon spoke at a meeting on 'Happiness and Well-Being: Defining a New Economic Paradigm'. Now the fact that I didn't know about this may very well be a failing on my behalf (was I the only one not aware of it?), however, I'm clearly not the only one who's concerned about taking 'happiness' for granted.

There is a blindingly obvious answer to the question 'is happiness important in a school?' – erm, yes! That doesn't give me much to write about, though, so I asked Twitter what it thought, and the floodgates were open. Thanks to a colleague, @stuartlock, I found out that none other than Dr Anthony Seldon had addressed a conference on this very matter. I was not surprised by the flood of comments that said 'of course it is' but I was surprised by people claiming – again to quote @stuartlock – that 'as an aim it's counterproductive'. Like all topics on Twitter the question got interpreted in different ways and I have to admit, the 'but what actually is happiness?' debate left me trailing in its wake academically.

So, is happiness important at Passmores Academy? It's something we think about and commit energy to, most definitely – but I feel I need to clarify. Happiness doesn't necessarily mean the same as pleasure. The definition that I am most comfortable with comes from the celebrated academic and thinker Dr Seuss.

"Children want the same things we want," he observed. "To laugh, to be challenged, to be entertained and delighted" (thanks to @Mr\_P\_Teach for giving me this gift). Happiness is both a cause and a symptom of well being. The only thing that Dr Seuss missed, in my opinion, was "to feel safe". I tell parents trying to decide which secondary school to send their child to, that my priorities are that students feel safe and happy – because then they will attend, and if they do they will learn by accident if nothing else.

## More than a feeling

What is the atmosphere that even the most challenged or vulnerable young person wishes to be part of and how do we create it when the easiest option would be to focus on the measurable outputs that our schools are ranked by? This is going to sound incredibly dull but I think the key factor is consistency of approach – ensuring all our young people know that if they 'fall over' (behaviourally, emotionally or academically), we will be there to help them up if they need it. The core driver at Passmores for this is that we must have unconditional positive regard for the young people we serve (I thought I was the only person who used this phrase in their school until I spoke to @davewhitaker246 – the head

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of a remarkable special school called Springwell in Barnsley). This theory by Carl Rogers will have as many people call it 'fluffy nonsense' as buy into it, but he says that in order for young people to grow they need an environment that provides them with genuineness (openness and self-disclosure); acceptance (being seen with unconditional positive regard); and empathy (being listened to and understood). That makes complete sense to me and has shaped much of our journey as a school.

I obviously couldn't talk about this topic and not mention the staff and their sense of well being too. As the leader of a group of professionals striving to achieve the absolute best for our community their well being has to be a major part of my work. This doesn't mean endless social events and team building exercises, it means making sure that I listen carefully to what they have to say too and make sure they are able to 'grow' as Carl Rogers outlines.

I can think of no better way to finish this set of musings than with a quote from John Lennon:

"When I was 5 years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy'. They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life."

Case closed, I think.

“WE MUST HAVE UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE WE SERVE...”