

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness: Reframing our Goals for Education

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Walk into many school buildings and one of the first things you'll see is the motto emblazoned over the door, or in the front hallway, proclaiming **Knowledge, Responsibility and Community** as the goals for education in those hallowed halls. These kinds of mottos have replaced the more plain-spoken **Reading, Writing and Arithmetic** of the olden days. And really, if we were going to be honest about what goes on in many schools, it might say, **Tedium, Obedience and Complicity**. Let's face it. Too much of schooling is just plain boring and the big idea is to learn how to be a functioning computer chip in the offices of the global economy.

Instead, I want to propose that we emblazon **Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness** over those entrance doors. And who could object? These are the principles of the framers of the Declaration of Independence. If these are the core convictions of our democratic republic, shouldn't they serve as the Common Core for education? Millions of American schoolchildren, memorize those first paragraphs of the Declaration, but how many of them actually live it? In these times of partisan gridlock, perhaps Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness in schools could serve to bind us together in shared purpose.

My most favorite TED talk is given by Logan LaPlante, then 13 years old, explaining his educational philosophy. At the time that he gave the talk, he'd been homeschooled for three or four years and so doing the talk was actually an element of his education. He was living his education, not just ingesting knowledge in preparation for his eventual Life. He starts his talk saying that when you're a kid, adults are always asking you what you want to be when you grow up. They want to hear you say something like astronaut or neurosurgeon. Instead, Logan says that his answer is, *"I want to be happy."* What a novel idea! Pursuing happiness as an organizing principle for education.

Similarly, one of my other favorite educational movies is called Children Full of Life about Hiroshi Takimoto, a 4th grade teacher in a conventional Japanese public school. He is a much-loved teacher, respected for his ability to balance rigor and fun, discipline and freedom. He is sensitive to the emotional needs of children. The movie opens with him walking into his classroom on the first day of school. The children, obediently sitting at their desks, cheer when he walks into the room. This is the second year of having Mr. Takimoto as a teacher for many of these children, so they understand his philosophy. He starts the day by asking, "What's our goal for this school year?" The children chorus back, *"To be happy!"* What a novel idea.

To be sure, it's not all puppies and roses in his classroom. In the first episode of this five episode series, one of the students' grandmother dies. When Kimoto shares his journal-writing about the death, it spawns a conversation about the death of loved-ones in the other children's families. Some children are overwhelmed with grief. Mr. Takimoto has to retrieve a boy crying in the bathrooms sobbing about his dead grandmother. Another child, Mikuyu, reads, a journal entry about her father who died when she was three years old. She chokes up as she's reading. And the remarkable thing is that Mr. Takimoto takes it all in stride. There's space in the day to allow these painful feelings to bubble up, get expressed in the children's writing, generate empathy in the other children for their classmates who are sad. Mikuyu, who has been unable for years to talk about her pain, winds up bringing in an architectural drawing of her father's to share with the class. Her classmates ooh and ahh over it and she beams with pride. Her grief, expressed through her writing, gets transmuted into honoring and appreciating her father. This process is delicately managed by Mr. Takimoto who understands that education is about pursuing happiness.

What would education look like if pursuing happiness was one the true goals of schooling. Logan says, *"Adults expect you to go to school, go to college, get a job, get married, and then you'll be happy. But it doesn't work that way. Why shouldn't education be about learning to be a healthy and happy lifestyle all the way through your life? I don't get it."*

Instead, Logan cites the work of Dr. Robert Hartz, one of many folks writing about the science of happiness, a burgeoning field. There's a wildly successful MOOC right now being offered by two Berkeley professors on the science of happiness too in which they focus on the neurophysiology of happiness. (Hmm, perhaps you can grow up to be both a neurosurgeon and happy?) In any case, the idea is we know something about happiness, the founders enshrined the pursuit of happiness as a core principle, so let's get about turning schools into places where students learn to become happy, rather than becoming bored, or disaffected. Hartz identifies eight contributors to creating a realized, happy state of mind: **exercise, diet and nutrition, time in nature, contribution and service, relationships, recreation, relaxation and stress management, religion and spirituality.** Logan goes on to illustrate how he does all of those things in his homeschooling project. Creating a character for a Chataqua event, learning primitive wilderness skills, doing an internship in a local outdoor gear manufacturing business, skiing on powder days, developing a spiritual relationship with the natural world that surprised him.

"All well and good for homeschooled kids," you counter, *"but is this really practical in public schools?"* Not only possible, I respond, but happening right now. I could discuss all eight of Hartz's principles, which would be schoolish and boring, so let me just provide a few examples some novel school programs that illustrate four or five of these intentions in practice.

There's a new movement afoot in the education of young children—nature-based early childhood education. It's a commitment to having children outside in all weathers for a goodly chunk of the day. This flips most educational models on their head. The norm is indoors being educated 5 ½ hours a day, outside being frivolous ½ hour a day. Instead, let's think about the outdoors as a provocative learning environment, a place to learn to read, do math, develop grit and perseverance. This movement has flourished in Europe over the past four decades. In Germany, there are more than 1000 Forest Kindergartens, many of which have no indoor facilities, but rather simply a tent, shelter or yurt for a fire and protection from the elements. The four and five year olds are outside for the whole of their three, four or six hour day. And early research shows that they are healthier and have better physical and language development than their mostly indoor peers. Not only are they no worse for wear, they appear to be better off.

In the spirit of this idea, public school Kindergarten teacher Eliza Minucci in Quechee, Vermont decided to implement a Forest Fridays program a few years ago. They mostly did regular curriculum four days of the week, and then were outdoors, in a forest classroom a 15 minutes walk up into the woods, on Friday. Year-round. In true postman fashion. Neither rain nor snow nor hail (except in extreme circumstances) discouraged their going. Parents loved it. One mother commented,

"We have noticed that she has become increasingly more responsible at home and is taking it upon herself to do jobs that will help out. She is more confident in knowing she can take initiative to help instead of waiting to be asked to do something. I really, really wish the school would consider adding forest curriculum to upper grades. I think that it would be great if all kids in the school could spend one-half to one day per week outside. This might provide an opportunity for kids in different grades to work together on projects out in the forest."

What goes unsaid here, but is clearly suggested, is that Forest Fridays makes her child happy. And happiness emerges from the **exercise, time in nature, relationships, and recreational opportunities** that this program provides. Moreover, it engenders responsibility, initiative, and confidence in children. These are some the attributes that Paul Tough identifies as contributing to school success in *How Children Succeed*.

Let's go a bit deeper into what this looks like. My wife, Jennifer Kramer, a 6th grade teacher in Guilford, Vermont took inspiration from this program and implemented it this past year with her 22 challenging students, a third of them with Individual Education Plans. The previous year, she and her students had

been inspired by Logan LaPlante's talk and had spent a good chunk of the last two weeks of the year out in the forest and engaged in community projects. For this year, and for this particularly rambunctious class, she wanted a year-round experience. So out they went on Friday mornings, a mile-long walk down through the village to a little known piece of conservation land, the Weeks Forest, along a beautiful stretch of Broad Brook. They'd eat lunch in the woods and be back at school for the last 1½ hours of the day. There's a recent American Radioworks program about both of these Forest Fridays programs.

In the beginning, Jen said, "I thought it was going to be school in the forest. We'd tromp out there with measuring tapes and figure out the flow rate of the stream, or learn about forest management from the forester responsible for the property." But after a few weeks, I realized there was something more important going on. They were learning, or in some cases relearning, to love being in the forest. And, to a person, they were happier. For some of them, this was the only day during the week they enjoyed school."

What did they actually do? They waded in the stream, made crowns and bracelets, excavated a fire pit and cooked over the fire, made shrines for dead birds, built bridges, constructed forts. They'd go off on explorations to find the cellar holes of the 19th century Mineral Springs bottling plant. In the winter, they sledged in hidden meadows, tracked animals, had snowball flights. In Hartz's terms, **exercise, time in nature, and recreation** became a regular part of their school week.

When they got back to school they'd write in their journals and by the end of the day they were exhausted—exhausted in that good, post vigorous exercise kind of way. Jen used the Map My Walk app on her smart phone a number of times—she and the students walked more than 5 miles on many of these Fridays.

The forts became a village, the village of Guilforts, and each fort developed it's own clan, in response to an ongoing fable-like story that Jen told. (Sixth graders are definitely not too old for stories.) The villagers collected quartz stones from the stream to serve as their currency. Peeled bark from fallen trees became a prized natural resource since it was an effective rain-proofing material for fort roofs. Children from hunting families brought in venison so they could have a lunch of deer stew and stick bread.

The eagle, moose, coyote and bear clans each devised their own face paint pattern, applied with a black paint made from fire pit charcoal. They crafted their own chants, made totem flags, shaped totem animal snow sculptures in the deep mid-winter to guard their forts. The creation of the clans led to the deepening of **relationships** that couldn't happen in the classroom. Students had to problem-solve, work out disputes, collaborate on technical innovations. And they had to contribute their labor to the service of the whole—collecting the tinder for fires, agreeing about how to minimize environmental impact, developing contracts for how to keep everyone safe. In these ways they were addressing the **contribution and service** aspect of Hartz's formula; they had to participate in shaping a social contract and then contribute to its maintenance.

This spring, after winter floods washed away their tree bridge across the stream, a dad came with his chain saw and worked with a group of boys to design and build a new bridge. Now this is real STEM education! And they were actually making a contribution to the life of the Guilforts community. The dad also taught whittling and so there was the need to create a set of rules and guidelines for when, where and how whittling could happen. (Isn't it sad that this inherent part of childhood, learning how to use a pocket knife, has become verboten? Some of the happiest moments of my life have been sitting around a fire whittling a hot dog stick or a spoon or a small wooden box.)

As an end of the school year project, all of the students in each clan wrote a Pourquoi story, a story about how the moose got its antlers, or how the coyote got its howl. Those stories have been turned into scripts and they will be enacted at the clan sites in the woods for younger students in the school during one of the

last weeks of the school. These stories are truly place-based; they've emerged from the rocks, hemlocks and mud of Guilforts, have been shaped by the collective imaginations of the clan members, and capture the happiness of being immersed in the natural world.

"All well and good," you counter again, *"but can these children really afford to spend almost a day a week cavorting in the woods? Sure, happiness is a good thing but what about their math test scores? What about getting prepared for college?"* It's important to understand that it's not all fun and games in this 6th grade classroom. In fact, Jen is respected throughout the district as a demanding teacher, conscientiously aspiring to address the Common Core in her curriculum. They engage with chewy non-fiction text. Students writing improves significantly in her class. And because of the journal writing spawned by Guilforts, some students who labored at writing before are writing profusely now. Since Jen was previously a middle school social studies teacher, she teaches the Industrial Revolution and the Civil War as mandated in the district guidelines. She uses a lot of the Engage New York math curriculum, as well as engaging the students in lots of home grown, sometimes multi-step problems.

**If it's a mile from school down to the trailhead and it takes us 20 minutes to walk there, how many miles per hour are we walking?*

**For snack out in the woods today, if each person is going to want 6 ounces of lemonade and there are 25 people going, how many gallons of lemonade are we going to need. And how many quart containers are we going to need to transport that down there?*

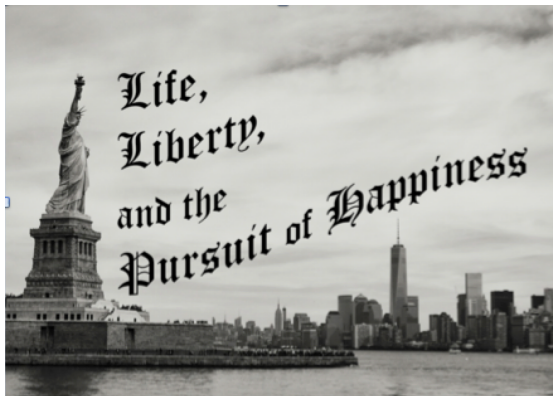
The results? The school uses AIMS web testing to assess children's math skills at the beginning and end of the year. This class has been one of those bad rap groups. *"Oh wait till you get this group. Not like anything you've seen before."* The children's math test scores have been remarkably immutable—21% of the students proficient at the end of 3rd grade, 27% proficient at the end of 4th grade, 26% proficient at the end of fifth grades, 71 % proficient at the end of 6th grade. What? 71%! That's a fairly substantial change. Yes, Jen is a particularly good math teacher, but could it be that one of the variables is that being out in the woods one day a week, (getting **exercise**, having **time in nature**, developing closer **relationships**) makes them better math students? At least we can say that these students are both happier and they have better math scores. And it doesn't appear that one day of happiness in the woods has detracted for their math learning. Seems like this is a win-win situation. Children are developing more grit, perseverance, confidence, sense of place, happiness and their test scores are improving. What's not to like?

In our headlong rush for global competitiveness, preparing students for college, increased rigor, we've lost our balanced perspective on educating for the head, hand and heart. It's all head, no hand and heart. But if we can keep their hands busy and make their hearts full, they'll be happier and smarter. It's time to revive the Pursuit of Happiness as an integral component of our national educational agenda.

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