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Authentic Happiness and 21st Century Skills and Habits of Mind

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Previously I introduced the field of positive psychology and specifically the work of Martin Seligman, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania. You may recall that I listed six virtues and twenty-four strengths that Seligman had identified as keys to happiness (the virtues are bolded).

Wisdom and knowledge

Creativity
Curiosity
Open-mindedness
Love of learning
Perspective

Courage

Authenticity
Bravery
Persistence
Zest

Humanity

Kindness
Love
Social Intelligence

Justice

Fairness
Leadership
Teamwork

Temperance

Forgiveness
Modesty
Prudence
Self-regulation

Transcendence

Appreciation of beauty and excellence
Gratitude
Hope

Humor

Religiousness

At this point, it might be helpful to offer a more in depth explication of Seligman's definition of happiness. When I think of happiness, I think of people smiling and laughing. However, I think if any of us contemplates life happiness, we would agree that true happiness is closer to contentment, satisfaction and fulfillment than more fleeting scenes of mirth. So Seligman offers three definitions of happiness:

(a) Positive emotion and pleasure (pleasant life) – this would be the closest to my original definition;

(b) Engagement (the engaged life – the “depth of involvement with one’s family, work, romance and hobbies”);

(c) Meaning (the meaningful life – using personal strengths to serve some larger end).

So the main point here, no surprise, is that true happiness comes from more than just a pleasant life, but depends in fact on being engaged in the activities we pursue and having aspects of our lives that are meaningful, such as our personal relationships while capitalizing on our strengths. You may also recall that “strengths of the heart” such as “zest, gratitude, hope and love” contribute the most to a happy life. These strengths would impart meaning to life.

As I was reading about the virtues and strengths, I was immediately struck by the commonalities between this list and our 21st Century Skills and Habits of Mind. To refresh your memory, here is that list (I feel a little like David Letterman with my lists).

21st century Skills and Habits of Mind

Civic Responsibility

Global perspective and responsibility to community and environment

Understanding of local issues

Character

Empathy

Emotional intelligence

Self-awareness

Respect for self and others

Integrity

Resilience

Curiosity and eagerness to learn

Self-discipline and work ethic

Accountability

Commitment
Courage

Communication
Communication (interpersonal, non-verbal, written and oral, media, visual etc) skills

Foundation of Knowledge (Content)

Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts, and health and wellness

Habits of Mind

Problem solving
Ability to see the big picture, integrated thinking
Application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation
Critical thinking
Organization
Flexibility and adaptability
Creativity, imagination, innovation
Collaborative approach and teamwork
Ability to think under pressure
Gameness for risk taking
Reflection

Literacy

Critical reading and comprehension
Information
Media and Communications
Quantitative
Artistic
Health and Wellness
Kinesthetic

The word “courage” appears on both lists as do “creativity,” “curiosity,” and “teamwork.” “Love of learning” and “eagerness to learn” seem quite similar as do “social and emotional intelligences.” I would argue that “persistence” and “commitment” are related while “self-regulation” would encompass “organization” and “self-discipline.” Likewise, a “global perspective” (the word “perspective” appears on both lists also) and “flexibility and adaptability” imply “open mindedness.” And certainly “empathy” would belong in the broad category of “humanity. “

If we keep analyzing the lists, we’ll probably find more parallels. The point, though, is that many of the character traits and habits of mind that we have identified as important for success in the 21st century are also related to or even the same as virtues and character strengths that

Seligman has identified as critical to happiness. Of course, many of these virtues, habits, strengths, traits – whatever we want to call them – are universal; they would be important for any century not just this one. Indeed, as is so often true, we could have simply relied on Mrs. Holton’s wisdom. Our mission statement states that Holton offers an “education not only of the mind, but of the soul and the spirit.” We can interpret “soul and spirit” in many ways, but certainly kindling a virtue like “humanity,” with the character strengths of “kindness” and “love” constitutes an education of the “soul and spirit.” I would say the same for “courage” and its associated strengths of “authenticity,” “bravery,” “persistence” and “zest”; for “temperance” with its associated strengths of “forgiveness,” “modesty,” “prudence” and “self-regulation”; and for “transcendence” and its associated strengths of “appreciation of beauty and excellence,” “gratitude,” “hope,” “humor” and “religiousness.” All of our 21st century character traits – “empathy,” “emotional intelligence,” “self-awareness,” “respect for self and others,” “integrity,” “resilience,” “curiosity and eagerness to learn,” “self-discipline and work ethic,” “accountability,” “commitment,” and “courage” -- might also inform the soul and spirit.

Another example of Mrs. Holton’s wisdom, the motto, “I will find a way or make one,” encourages the character strengths and traits and habits of mind of “creativity,” “courage,” “persistence,” “resilience,” and “commitment” along with virtually all the other habits of mind – “problem solving”; “ability to see the big picture and integrated thinking”; “application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation”; “critical thinking”; “flexibility and adaptability”; “imagination and innovation”; “ability to think under pressure”; and “gameness for risk taking.”

If we take Mrs. Holton to heart, we will create exemplary 21st century citizens who are likewise happy.