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## The Happy Child

Health, wellbeing, children's voices and choices have long been areas of interest for me personally. Arriving in my Reception class in my first post as a newly qualified teacher over 20 years ago I knew instantly that the teacher's desk that was a monstrous feature of the space had to go. At a time when the curriculum for under-fives in Wales placed a great deal of emphasis on personal and social development and paved the way for a subsequent reform where the child was front and center of all pedagogical decisions that were made.

Ensuring children feel secure, safe, connected and that they experience a sense of belonging are but few of the essential components of early childhood pedagogies – without these, learning and discovering through play would be challenging. But what of happiness? Is happiness an important consideration for us as we plan our provisions in the hope that our youngest citizens engage actively, with enthusiasm, awe and wonder. I would argue yes – not only important but vital.

Happiness is of course subjective and has been part of the ongoing wellbeing discussion for decades. Wellbeing tends to be the preferred term within documents and policies (probably as it has more gravitas as a concept), however happiness matters especially so when laying the skill foundations, neuronal networks and dispositions for learning. How children feel and the influencers on those feelings of contentment, are key to our work as educators. **Assuming** we know what it is that makes children happy may not be enough.

This has led to a personal EdD journey of finding out from the consumers, how they feel when in their learning environments and what are those things that create feelings of satisfaction and fulfilment. Happiness is a difficult concept to define, researchers often use long and complex explanations to try to unpick the notion. By asking the children themselves it becomes far clearer and succinct. 'It's like feeling warm.' 'Happiness is what I feel when I'm playing with my friends.' 'I'm happy when I choose what I can do today.' 'Being happy is enjoying and having fun'. 'I'm happy when I can share and laugh about things.' 'I'm happy when I discover something new.'

Coming from a strong Social Constructivist standpoint that children are capable constructors of meaning, affirming that they are experts in their own lives underpins their positionality within my current research. They are for the most part the 'more able others' and I am drawing on their expertise in order to better understand their worlds. I'm relying on their scaffolding to take me to my zone of potential development in gaining a greater insight into what makes them happy. Children will of course change their minds in a blink of an eye and what made them happy yesterday may differ from today. By utilising a mixed methods approach of data collection similar to that of the Mosaic approach (Clark) collecting children's drawings, paintings, engaging in discussions and going on sharing walks, a window into the child's world of what it means to be happy in school is unveiled. By revisiting their creations an affirmation is formed – through dialogue a greater knowledge of children's understanding of what constitutes happiness and the influences on that state is better understood.

Having acquired this rich knowledge and subsequently with educators and facilitators, the notion is that this rich information can contribute to and inform future planning. By careful observation and regular discussion, by knowing that what we plan takes account of children's interests and build on prior engagement with activities we can ensure enabling experiences that promote an engaged, inquisitive child.

We have all on occasion got very excited following a trip to the pound shop, beach, woodland, staycation or back in the day car boot sale, planned a multitude of experiences that will enhance our

environments and contribute to children's learning and enjoyment – yes? We have observed and used tick sheets, post its, number lines, traffic lights and a whole multitude of other methods of measuring what we see and perceive to be happy engagement. A child's involvement derives from a desire, a yearning a need and a feeling of contentment where wellbeing is maintained, and happiness resides.

Dialogue and talking are such exciting forms on knowledge acquisition, we are after all talkers and watchers as a profession! Let's use these super powers to observe, to ask, to engage in meaningful dialogue both verbal and non-verbal with our children about what is it that contributes to their happiness whilst in 'this place'. Others may see these early milestones as 'soft skills' these are the solid foundations, the seeds from which children will flourish if the conditions are right. When a plant begins to wilt, we Google it, or change its position, or give it more water or less water or speak to it if you're that way inclined – a plant can't tell you what or how it feels...a child can 😊.