

## **Education as Mastering the Art of Living Well**

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Every three years, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) administers a global standardized exam called the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) to 15-year old students in about 70 countries. The OECD then ranks countries based on how its students did on three academic subjects: reading, math, and science. This has become the gold standard for academic excellence in the global education world. Is this truly the highest to which education can aspire? The pivotal thinkers of the great empires, from Aristotle to Confucius, declared that education should be about preparing the whole human being to lead a fulfilling, virtuous life. We believe that students' abilities to fill in bubbles on a standardized exam using a number two pencil does not capture the perennial human aspiration to lead a good, worthwhile life.

And so we have asked, beyond small, short-term interventions: (1) Can well-being be taught at a large scale, and should it be taught in schools? And, (2) does teaching well-being improve academic performance? To answer these questions, we briefly present results from three large-scale randomized controlled trials (RCTs) around the world.

In Program 1, 18 secondary schools (n=8,385 students) in Bhutan were randomly assigned to a treatment group (k=11) or a control group (k=7). The treatment schools received an intervention targeting ten non-academic well-being skills, including mindfulness, empathy, compassion, effective communication, creative thinking, critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, resilience, and decision making. Program 2 was a replication study at a larger scale in 70 secondary schools (n = 68,762 students) in Mexico. The schools were randomly assigned to a treatment group (k = 35) or a control group (k = 35). Program 3 was the last replication study at a larger scale in 694 secondary schools (n = 694,153 students) in Peru. The schools were randomly assigned to a treatment group (k = 347) or a control group (k = 347).

In all three programs, students in the intervention schools reported significantly higher well-being and they performed

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significantly better on standardized national exams at the end of a 15-month intervention. Furthermore, the results for both well-being and academic performance remained significant 12 months after the intervention ended. In all three programs, perseverance, engagement, and quality of interpersonal relationships emerged as the strongest mechanisms underlying how increases in well-being improved academic performance. Following these positive results, all three programs have been taken to a national scale in Bhutan, Peru, and Mexico.

Our results suggest that, independent of social, economic, or cultural context, teaching well-being in schools at a large scale is both feasible and desirable, both for the intrinsic value of well-being, as well as for the instrumental value of well-being: the positive impact of well-being on academic performance, on physical health, and on other favorable life outcomes.

In short, education can and should teach the skills for individual and social flourishing in parallel to the skills for academic performance, as these are not only not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually reinforcing, and rather markedly so. This is, indeed, the highest to which education can aspire: to ignite all facets of human beings' potential to flourish.