

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NURTURING ROLE OF SCHOOLS

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There has been increasing interest in subjective well-being, including child subjective well-being, in recent years. However there has been comparatively little work considering the impact of school and education policies on children's subjective well-being, despite the important roles these areas play in children's lives. This thesis aims to reduce this gap in the literature by investigating the relationship between schools and children's subjective well-being through the quantitative analysis of a range of secondary datasets. This thesis investigates the impact of schools and education policies on children's subjective well-being. Schools are a key area of children's lives, somewhere the majority of children will spend a significant proportion of their childhood, while education policy is considered one of the most significant ways in which governments intervene in the lives of children. As such, at a time when subjective well-being is receiving a considerable amount of policy attention, schools and education policy would appear to be a key area of concern for governments and policy makers seeking to maximise subjective well-being. However education policy in England during the last 30 years has been characterised by frequent and considerable change with little regard for impacts on children's subjective well-being. The nature and extent of these changes has caused commentators and experts to raise concerns about the changes and their impacts on children's lives. Despite this there has been little, if any, shift in policy direction. Those in favour of the changes have argued that they are both necessary and desirable as they will maximise educational attainment and ensure better lives for children as they become adults. Such future oriented priorities have been emphasised as global forces in education, such as the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) surveys, have created an environment of perceived competition between nations in relation to their educational output. The near exclusive emphasis on attainment and the methods that have been adopted in pursuit of attainment in England and other nations, most noticeably standardised testing, accountability policies, and market driven reforms, have all come under criticism for their detrimental impact on children's learning and well-being. This thesis aims to add to this critical literature by demonstrating the importance of schools to children's wider lives; here assessed by considering the impact of schools on children's subjective well-being, and the relationship between subjective well-being and educational performance. This thesis analyses the amount of variance in children's subjective well-being explained by the school that a child attends. It hypothesises that a considerable amount of variance will be explained at the school level given the prominence of schools in children's lives, as well as the arguably challenging policy environment in which schools are operating, referred to briefly above and discussed

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in more detail in the Literature Review. It will also investigate the relationship between subjective well-being and educational performance, which existing evidence suggests is statistically significant and positive. The investigation of this relationship is included in this thesis in order to provide additional evidence to encourage those who maintain a strict attainment focus to consider the other impacts of education policy, even if it is only to ultimately improve attainment.

The primary reasons for the interest in the relationship between subjective well-being and education are twofold, both normative and instrumental. Firstly, if we are truly interested in children's subjective well-being, which as a universal good we should be, then we cannot ignore the potential role education and school plays in this. Schools are one of the largest influences in children's lives and somewhere where they spend a considerable proportion of their lives. Secondly, we know that high subjective well-being is associated with a range of positive outcomes, potentially including academic attainment as well other important outcomes such as health. Therefore understanding children's subjective well-being can lead to improved attainment in schools, better health, reduced engagement in risky behaviours, and other benefits for children and more society more broadly.

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