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Happiness and a Sense of Achievement: A Qualitative Pedagogical Exploration in a Japanese Elementary School*

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This paper presents an empirical qualitative research on happiness and education. Case study data of Third-Graders in an Elementary school in Japan will be analyzed. It will be shown that the students' happiness in school is associated with what we call 'a sense of achievement'. Their specific sense of achievement will be reconstructed: It refers to the acquisition of practical skills and being able to use these skills; it is linked to tasks which include a moderate challenge; it is related to a process in which different feelings are embraced; and it has an important social dimension. Such a detailed and complex analysis is a necessary addition to quantitative happiness research and provides important insights for a pedagogical exploration of happiness. It demonstrates that a 'sense of achievement' may significantly vary from what is usually referred to as 'achievement' in the realm of education, namely the grading of students' performances. On a methodological level, the paper reflects the difficulties of translating qualitative interviews from Japanese into English and points toward the necessity to consider bodily expressions in discussions on language and translation.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will present our joint empirical research on happiness in school, and discuss it in regard of the topic of this symposium, language and problems of translation. Our considerations derive from a qualitative empirical study on happiness and education that we conducted in a third-grade class in Tai-Elementary School in Osaka. We carried out participating observations in the classroom, videotaped the classes and finally conducted semi-structured interviews with a group of students and one of teachers. In this paper we mainly focus on the interview with the students. In general, our questions were quite open because we wanted to find out what would be relevant *for the students* when they considered the issues of our inquiry. The interview was, of course, held in Japanese. But since we are an international research team, the interview needed to be translated. However, translation is a difficult task, as the following example from the beginning of the interview may demonstrate:

Interviewer: What do you think 'happiness' is? When you hear the word 'happiness', or 'happiness'...? (Girl A interrupts the interviewer.)

Girl A: What does 'happiness' mean?

Interviewer: It means 'happiness'.

Obviously, this translation makes no sense. In fact, we will only be able to understand this dialogue when we examine the Japanese language in more detail. A reader who speaks Japanese will immediately recognize the problems of translation by looking at the original version of the interview.

- インタビュアー： じゃあ、幸せってなんやと思う？幸せっていう言葉とか幸福っていう言葉とか聞いて…。
- 女A： 幸福って何？
- インタビュアー： 幸せのこと。

It should be noticed that in the Japanese version two different words, ‘shiiawase’ and ‘koufuku’ are used that are both commonly translated as ‘happiness’ in English. While ‘shiiawase’ is frequently used in daily conversation and refers to a more subjective, short-term experience of feeling good, ‘koufuku’ typically belongs to the world of written language and refers to a long-term orientation of happiness (Mathews, 2006, p. 147). With this knowledge as a background we are able to translate the conversation again:

- Interviewer: What do you think ‘shiiawase’ is? When you hear the word ‘shiiawase’ or ‘koufuku’?
- Girl A: What does ‘koufuku’ mean?
- Interviewer: It means ‘shiiawase’.

Now the translation makes more sense, we assume; but actually, this is not a ‘true’ translation any more, since it contains Romanized Japanese words. It becomes clear that a translation of the interview into English is only meaningful when we take into consideration the particularities of the Japanese language.

But the problem of translation does not stop here. In the example above, the girl’s question indicates that she does not understand the word ‘koufuku’. The interviewer, as a response to the question, offers what could also be called a form of translation: she explains the word ‘koufuku’ with the word ‘shiiawase’. It turns out that though both speak Japanese, they do not really understand each other; presumably this eight year old girl has not yet heard of ‘koufuku’ because this word usually appears only in written language, as we already noted. Thus, not only is it difficult to understand each other when people speak different languages. Understanding may also be challenging between speakers of the same language. In general, this is the case when the speakers have a different background of knowledge, like, in our case, between adults and children.

Having pointed out these obstacles to translation, we nevertheless attempt to present our research. We will present both the original Japanese version and the English translation of the interview, so that at least the Japanese readers will be able to compare these two. However, the main body of our paper will be in English.

ON HAPPINESS AND EDUCATION

A growing body of literature is directed towards the promotion of happiness in education. Main references for thinking about the connection of happiness and education are philosophical enquiries and psychological studies, with psychology providing empirical evidence on happiness and philosophy giving us a means for reflection on happiness and education (see, as most distinguished examples, Barrow, 1980; Noddings, 2003). Too seldom, however, genuine pedagogical problems are addressed in this literature, like the relationship between happiness and teaching methods or between happiness and learning processes.

The vast majority of existing empirical happiness research is using a quantitative approach; the qualitative approach, in contrary, has only been applied to the study of happiness in very recent times (Mathews 2006; Mathews & Izquierdo 2009). Furthermore, the qualitative research on happiness that has been carried out so far does not have an educational focus. Our study thus not only is explorative in the sense that any qualitative research is explorative (Merriam 1988, pp. 5-21), but also in the sense that it explores possibilities of applying the qualitative approach in the study of happiness in relation to education.

We conducted our study in order to discover the ways in which students experience happiness in school. In reviewing the transcript of the audio taped interview we found that one of the major topics which the students talked about can be grasped with the term 'a sense of achievement'. Of course, in the interview the students mentioned various other topics that relate to their experience of happiness in school; these topics could be reconstructed under several different categories (as, for example, 'friends'). However, we want to focus on only one aspect of their considerations and analyze it in some detail. Thus, in the following we will reconstruct the notion of the students' sense of achievement. Before we examine the interview, let us briefly discuss the terms 'achievement' and 'a sense of achievement'.

'ACHIEVEMENT' AND 'A SENSE OF ACHIEVEMENT'

In the realm of education, the word 'achievement' usually refers to the performances of students in terms of grades. Students' grades can be seen as reflecting the outcome of specific learning processes that the students have gone through; the grades are meant to reflect their 'achievement'. This usage of the word 'achievement' is, for example, reflected in the term 'achievement gap', which refers to the differences between students of different social backgrounds in terms of grades. However important this view is, it focuses on the endpoint of a process rather than on the process itself, and we may say that it is partial. Moreover, this notion conceptualizes 'achievement' only in quantitative terms and does not capture the quality of the experience of having achieved something. Therefore it is important to introduce the word 'sense of achievement', which is distinguished from the word 'achievement'. The term 'sense of achievement' is proposed by Koyasu (2010) in a fairly open way so that it leaves space for further elaboration on the basis of a qualitative analysis. By using the term we refer to the students' subjective experience of achieving or having achieved something rather than to 'objective' numbers.

CASE STUDY: THE SENSE OF ACHIEVEMENT OF FIVE THIRD-GRADERS

The interview took place at the students' classroom after school had finished. In the interview participated five children, four girls and one boy. They were at the age of eight to nine years. While we talked with the students, the teacher came into the room and did some paperwork at another table. Altogether, the interview lasted for about 80 minutes. We will reconstruct their notion of 'a sense of achievement' in four divisions.

1) *A practical sense of achievement*

The interview begins as follows:

- Interviewer: Now I'd like to ask you when you feel happy or glad, or when you have fun at school.
- Everyone: (severally) When I am playing with my friends. PE, Art, and Computer classes. When I can create a beautiful artwork in Art class.
- Girl A: When I learn something new in PE class. I feel very happy when I learn a new thing and succeed in doing it.

- インタビュアー： 今から少しみんなに聞きたいのは、みんなが学校にいて、幸せやなって思うときとか、よかったな、楽しいなと思うときとかってある？
- 口ぐちに： 友達と遊んでいるとき、体育、図工、パソコン、図工できれいにできたとき。
- 女 A： 体育で、新しいのを習ったときとか。新しいのを習って、できたらすごうれしい。

In the beginning, the students just drop some school subjects; then they give short explanations why they associate these subjects with happiness.¹ We see, hinted in the phrases 'can create' or 'learn something new ... and succeed in doing it', that their experience of happiness is related to what we call a sense of achievement. How is this sense of achievement characterized?

First of all, although the students talk about 'succeeding' in several school subjects, they do not refer to being graded. Rather, 'succeeding' refers to 'doing it' and it thus has a practical orientation. They feel happy not because they are evaluated well in terms of 'objective' numbers but because they acquired a new practical ability. Another comment refers to being able to 'create' something 'beautiful' and thus also shares the practical orientation, adding to it an aesthetic dimension. Both comments have in common that the students' sense of achievement refers to the acquisition of a new practical skill. In this sense, the word 'to learn' that girl A uses does not refer to

the cognitive realm; the students' sense of achievement is not based on a new understanding or theoretical knowledge. Moreover, in the words 'When I can create a beautiful artwork', happiness is linked not only to the practical knowledge the students acquire, but also to the use of this knowledge in order to produce a concrete and pleasurable outcome. The artwork is a sensible and lasting evidence of the newly acquired practical skills. For the students, having achieved to produce it is associated with happiness.

2) *Crossing the border between inability and ability*

Other parts of the interview suggest that for the students happiness is especially related to the shaky grounds where one is at the threshold of being able to do something.

Interviewer: Any other things? Besides a marble roller coaster and Art class? Have you ever had fun or felt happy in other classes?

Girl B: When I can catch a ball when we are playing dodge ball in PE class.

Girl A: Yeah, when I can catch a ball thrown by a good player.

Girl B: Yes. I feel so happy then.

インタビュアー： 他になんかある？ビー玉コースターとか図工の他に？他の授業とかで、例えばよかったなーとか、幸せやなーとか思ったことは？

女 B： 体育のとき、ドッチボールでとれた時幸せや。

女 A： うん、強い人のボールとかとれた時。

女 B： うん。めっちゃうれしいな。

First of all, the girls' statements again demonstrate their practical orientation which we have already reconstructed above. Moreover, the phrase 'when I can catch a ball *thrown by a good player*' shows that the girls relate happiness to being able to do something which is notably difficult; if it were a normal or even a bad player who threw the ball, the happiness of catching the ball might be not as high as if it is a 'good player'. This indicates that the more challenging the task is that they accomplish, the more happiness they associate with their achievement.

However, even if a certain challenge is important for the students to experience happiness, the tasks must not be too difficult. This is demonstrated in the following passage:

Girl A: Once we were separated into two groups [I was happy]. One played dodge ball, and the other played kickball.

Interviewer: You mean it was fun because you were separated?

- Girl A: A girls' team will lose if we have a game against a boys' team. But we can't tell the result in advance if we have a game against another girls' team.
- Interviewer: Do you mean it is good if boys and girls have a game separately?
- Girl A: It's not fun to have a game against boys because they are better at catching a ball than girls.
- Girl B: We can throw a ball a lot [= we have a lot of chances to throw a ball] when we have a game between two girls' teams. We don't know which team will win when girls' team have a game against another girls' team [= when two girls' team have a game against each other]. But it is obvious that boys will win when we have a game between boys' and girls' teams.

- 女 A : ドッチとキックベースに分けてやったこともあったな。
- インタビュアー : それは分けてやるのが楽しいん？
- 女 A : 男対女やったら負けるけど、女対女やったらわからへん。
- インタビュアー : じゃあ、男と女と分けてやるのがいいんや。
- 女 A : 男のほうが女よりとったりできるから、面白くない。
- 女 B : 女子対女子やったらいっぱい投げれるようになるから。女子対女子やったらどっちが勝つん？ってなるけど、男子対女子やったら絶対男子が勝つもん。

What's interesting is the girls' argument for their preference to play against other girls rather than against boys; it is not based on negative emotions against boys but on the sense of being incapable of ever winning against them. In order to enjoy the game the girls need to feel that they have a reasonable chance of winning. Thus we see that the students associate happiness with their efforts of accomplishing difficult tasks whereby these tasks should not be too much beyond their abilities.

- Interviewer: Please tell me the whole story of the situation or experience where you felt happy at school. Tell me everything you remember, from start to finish.

...

- Girl A: When I could do a double backward jump while I was jumping rope in PE class. When I could do the jump 17 times for the first time.

- インタビュアー : 学校にいるときの状況や経験したことのなかでなんでもいいから、幸せに感じたときのことで思い出すことを全部最初から最後まで話してみて。思い出すこと全部。

...

女 A : 体育のときに先生に後ろ二重跳びを見せたとき、初めて 17 回できたとき。

In this statement, the words ‘for the first time’ also indicate the difficulty of the task which has been accomplished; the girl had never before succeeded in doing it, and it is especially the time when she was able to do it for the first time which she associates with happiness. The girl had—in a quite literal sense—jumped across the border which lies between not being able and being able to do something.

Reflection on these data makes clear that in this interview, ‘a sense of achievement’ is not a simple sense of satisfaction. Their sense of achievement does not refer to a definite endpoint of a learning process; rather, what the students’ statements hint is that their sense of achievement is linked to the experience of a trial at the very threshold between inability and ability.

3) The transformation of emotions

In the interview we also found that the students’ sense of achievement is not only associated with happy feelings, but also with different emotions. In the process of achieving something, the emotions change. The passage below, in which the students talk about a concert that they played in a civic hall on a parents’ visiting day is a notable example. We cite only the second part of their story; in the first one they told us that this concert was a big and formal occasion for them. They had practiced for this concert for a long time ahead.

Interviewer: You were glad because you practiced every day, your parents came to the concert, and you played music in front of them in such a big hall, didn’t you?
Everyone: That’s right.
Girl B: I was happy. I also felt nervous, but it was fun once I did.
Interviewer: I see.
Girl B: I felt nervous at first, but once I started playing I could relax.
Interviewer: OK. Did you ever not want to practice?
Girl A & B: No.
Girl B: But I remember that playing the recorder was tough. It was really difficult. There were so many parts, you know.

インタビュアー : それだけ毎日毎日練習して、そんな大きいところでお父さんもお母さんも来てくれてやったのがよかったな—って思ったんやな。
一同 : 思った。
女 B : うれしかったもんな。どきどきするけどやったら面白い。
インタビュアー : なるほどな。

- 女 B : 最初はどきどきするけど、やりだしたら普通になってきたから。
- インタビュアー : あー。でも、練習のときとかはいややなって思うこととかはなかった？
- 女 AB : なかった。
- 女 B : でもリコーダーは大変やった覚えがある。めっちゃ難しかったな。いっぱい出てきたもんな。

What the students' comments suggest is that the happy experience they talk about is not only associated with joy or pleasure, but it is also accompanied by strain and tension. 'Feeling nervous' and 'being happy' are closely linked in the students' statements, indicating a *process of feelings* during the activity. More exactly, the nervousness that girl B felt in the beginning of the concert disappeared after the start and made room for 'relaxation' and an experience of 'fun'. The words 'tough' and 'difficult' in the end of this extract indicate that in finally performing the concert the students had a sense of achievement; in performing the concert they had enlarged the limits of their abilities.

In this example, the students' sense of achievement is related to a *process* in which their emotions undergo a transformation. The hard times that they have before the concert (practicing hard, nervousness) *change into* the experience of happiness. We may say that their sense of achievement is related to a process in which a variety of different feelings is dynamically embraced.

4) The social dimension of the students' sense of achievement

At last we will show that there is an important social dimension in the students' sense of achievement. Let us look at the following extract which concerns the students' way of studying.

- Interviewer: Now please tell me about how you study. What is the best way for you to study? Studying alone, with friends, or in a group? How can you study effectively?
- Boy: Studying with friends.
- Girl A: Especially in Art class. I can work on it alone, too. But if my friends help me, it is more fun and I can create a better one.
- Girl B: Working/studying with my friends helps me to understand better.

インタビュアー : じゃあ、勉強でいちばん勉強やりやすいやり方ってどんなん？一人でやるとか、友達とやるほうがよくできるとか、グループでやるときとか、どういうときが勉強やりやすい？

男 : 友達どうしでやったとき。

- 女 A: 図工がやりやすい。一人でやってもできるけど、友達に手伝ってもらったりしたほうが、楽しいし、きれいにできるから。
- 女 B: 友達どうしやから余計にわかりやすい。

Again, the students' statements refer to the process of achieving something. Studying with friends enhances two things for the students; firstly the experience of happiness itself ('it is more fun'), and secondly the sense of achievement ('I can create a better one')—which is, as we already discussed, also a source of experiencing happiness. These statements suggest that the students' sense of achievement has an important social dimension. Considering this point we may say that their happiness is not only experienced individually; rather it appears to be a common and shared feeling. From this point of view, we see that happiness is not only concerned with an individual accomplishment of a task.

To this analysis of the importance of group work for a 'happy learning', we would like to add a consideration which derives from our video material. During the time of our observation of the classes, the students once were asked by the teacher to draw posters for an upcoming school festival; for this task the students could gather in groups of two to four children. According to our observations many students felt very happy when they did this work in groups. A screenshot from our video material may demonstrate this:



Screenshot: students laughing in the classroom

In this picture, several students are laughing. Especially the boys in the middle of the picture seem to have a lot of fun; two of them even bend their upper parts of the body to the sides while laughing which indicates a high level of happiness.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

We began this paper with the question in which ways happiness is related to specific pedagogical issues, such as the connection between happiness and different teaching methods or the relation between happiness and processes of learning. Now, after the analysis of the interview, we can draw the following conclusions.

The students associate happiness in school with what we call 'a sense of achievement'. This sense is complex and specific. It refers to the acquisition of *practical skills* and *being able to use these skills in a creative and aesthetic way*;² it is linked to tasks which include a *moderate challenge* in which the students are on the *threshold between inability and ability*; it is related to a *process* in which *different feelings* are embraced; and it has a *social dimension* in the sense that the students prefer to learn with their fellow students.

Coming back to our discussion of the terms 'achievement' and 'a sense of achievement' this result means that the students' sense of achievement is not related to their being graded. Furthermore, their happiness is neither associated with a final endpoint of a learning process nor with a stable state after having accomplished a task.

Since we analyzed only one interview with students, further research needs to be done in order to explore differences between students of different age, sex, social background, or culture concerning their experiences of happiness in school and their senses of achievement. Nevertheless, our findings provoke a discussion on a position about happiness and education that is widely taken. There are several educational programs drawing on the ideas of 'positive psychology' that suggest that in order to enhance happiness by education, the teachers should 'teach' the students how to achieve happiness (see, for example, MacConville, 2008). But our research indicates that such 'Happiness Lessons in School' (Suissa, 2010) may not be as necessary as some authors advocate. In order to enhance the students' happiness, we do not necessarily need to teach them happiness; rather, learning processes themselves can enhance the students' happiness, even if this learning is not directly concerned with happiness. Our interview shows that there is a case that happiness comes 'indirectly' with the 'sense of achievement'. Of course, in this regard it will be important to consider that there are various ways to let the children undergo learning processes. In our interview, the students associate happiness especially with challenging practical, creative, and sportive learning processes that they have never undergone before and which they especially like to undergo together with their fellow students. A task for a pedagogy that aims at enhancing the students' happiness thus needs to further elaborate in which ways happiness is related to different ways of teaching and learning.

At the end of this paper we want to come back to our initial problems of translation. In the following, we outline two considerations for a further discussion.

- (1) Cross-cultural qualitative research faces specific problems of translation. In qualitative interviews respondents usually use a colloquial form of language. In speaking, they do not necessarily follow the grammatical rules, they often

do not finish their sentences ‘correctly’, and they use metaphors which refer to the specific experiential space of the speakers’ social environment (cp. Bohnsack, 2003). Thus, qualitative cross-cultural research that aims to present the richness of people’s meaning-making to an international audience needs to be very careful in translating interview transcripts.

- (2) At one point of our considerations we referred to a photo and briefly interpreted the laughter of the students as an expression of happiness. That is, we tried to understand the bodily expressions of the students on the photo. Here we come to an issue that is too often neglected in considerations on language and communication; it is the significance of the body, as expressed in gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice and postures. Research on this topic suggests that some bodily expressions like joy, anger, or fear are universally understood while others make sense only to people of a common cultural background (cp. Kendon, 2004; Blaschke & Mattig, 2011). Thus, at least in the case of the latter, not only verbal language, but also bodily expressions need to be ‘translated’ in some way if we want to understand each other.

NOTES

- * This research was conducted on 8th and 9th of January 2009 in connection with a subproject of the Global COE Project *Revitalizing Education for Dynamic Hearts and Minds*. This subproject is lead by Prof. Shoko Suzuki (Kyoto University) and Prof. Christoph Wulf (Free University of Berlin); it is directed towards a cross-cultural examination of happiness in Germany and Japan. We wish to express our gratitude to Mr. Satoru Akai, principal of Tai-Elementary School and Mrs. Harumi Oda, the teacher of the third grade in whose class we could conduct our research.
- 1 Although it is quite interesting, we leave aside the first answer which relates to friendship in school and rather concentrate on the other comments.
 - 2 This focus on the practical side of learning may be due to the students’ age (according to Piagetean research they are in the ‘concrete operational phase’).

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