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Editorial

# Educational Psychological Perspectives on Sustainability Education

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**Abstract:** What is the role of educational psychology in the development of sustainability education? In this editorial article, we argue that human happiness and life satisfaction could be the keys to positive education and adapting to pro-environmental behaviors. We discuss the perspective of sustainable happiness education being the guiding principle of sustainability education. Sustainable happiness education can provide a means to educate people about ways of considering their own well-being and that of others simultaneously, while keeping in mind the sustainability aspect of their actions.

**Keywords:** sustainability; sustainability education; educational psychology; happiness; life satisfaction; pro-environmental behavior

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## 1. From Consumerism to Constructive Behaviors and More

Today's human has the ingredients for a good life and a horn of plenty (cornucopia) when it comes to food, living, commuting, goods, services, and consumption [1]. Furthermore, there is a huge amount of information available to them. Attitudes, values, and behaviors have not, however, sufficiently adjusted to the much-needed sustainable lifestyles, although some progressive steps have been taken.

What is the role of sustainability education? Our aim is to view this question from the perspective of educational psychology. What kind of educational psychological approaches and knowledge are needed to ensure people are aware of the meaning of their own lifestyles and environmental behaviors? It is important to learn to identify the reasons behind, and the often-learned actions involved in, one's own behavior. Not everyone necessarily recognizes the extent to which habits and norms influence their behavior [2,3].

While one key feature of our contemporary life is consumerism [4], which bombards us everywhere from school, public spaces, and transportation to television commercials, new counterforces have arisen, such as minimalism [5], which show we have an increasing awareness of the meaning of the daily choices we make. Uggla [5] calls this type of activity "constructive resistance" (p. 233) to the system. Yet, even the decrease in consumerism itself is not sufficient; instead, and as Revesz and Shahabian [6] remind us, it is merely our moral obligation to ensure a sustainable future, and this is even more important.

A transition to sustainable lifestyles requires changes in societal structures; however, the most important element of taking a new direction is each individual human. People have to learn to make sustainable choices without constantly wanting new and more things [7].

## 2. The Premise of the Change

A happy life is something to which people aspire, as everyone has a need to find their lives satisfying [8]. Pavot and Diener [8] contemplate the role of adaptation with regard to life satisfaction, and state that it is unclear whether there are meaningful individual differences in the strength of the

adaptation process. At a time when there are new pressures relating to sustainability and climate change, the role of adaptation may be one of the more relevant questions of educational psychology. Indeed, Pavot and Diener [8] remind us that an important future area for research on life satisfaction involves predictive studies. For education in sustainable behaviors, it is therefore important to identify the main reasons behind the choices people make sustainability-wise, and how people adjust and react to the current environmental pressures.

Generally speaking, happiness comes from the sense of satisfaction and balance between pleasant and unpleasant emotions [9,10]. Meaningful doing and activities are also important elements in authentic happiness [11]. Cloutier [12] states that happiness is also associated with a strong family and a commitment to spending time with them, meaningful friendships, economic success, high levels of education, freedom of choice, and stable governmental systems and demographic variables. A core question is whether the way to achieve happiness and satisfaction can be found in attitudes that value what we have and pay less attention to what we lack [13]. The ability to appreciate the sufficient could be one of the premises of sustainability education. However, defining sufficient is difficult against the backdrop of striving for economic growth and increasing consumption [14]. Generally, the basis of life satisfaction is quite simple: sufficient shelter, food, clean air and water, and safe social relationships [15]. Interestingly, Oishi, Diener, and Lucas [16] note that the highest levels of happiness are reported by people who have close relationships and do volunteer work, but those who experience slightly lower levels of happiness are the most successful in terms of income, education, and political participation.

The media (and especially social media) is inundated with a variety of campaigns to decrease consumption and promote one's well-being. For example, reduce your consumption of non-renewable resources [17]; make one day a "Buy Nothing Day" [18,19]; shift your consumption of non-renewable resources toward renewable resources [20]; take a "Techno-Fast" [21]; and turn off your electronic devices for a period of time that is appropriate for you. While the campaigns themselves may appear rather superficial attempts to "save the world", from the perspective of educational psychology they serve as a means to influence people's behaviors piece by piece. However, the connection between life satisfaction and these campaigns is anything but simple. In particular, while some may find it rewarding to engage in the aforementioned activities and do their share in the name of pro-environmentalism, others may find the flood of prompts to change one's lifestyle (e.g., on social media) stressful and overwhelming, and even oppressive. To maintain hope, an educational psychological understanding of sustainability is much needed [22].

### 3. Increasing the Sense of Responsibility and Happiness

A profound understanding regarding what is sufficient could promote not only happiness and satisfaction, but also responsibility for oneself, others, and the wider world [23]. By increasing the sense of responsibility felt towards the world around us, one learns to take responsibility for one's friends and others close to us (social responsibility), nature (ecological responsibility), and consumption (economic responsibility). When it comes to behavior, responsibility manifests as active citizenship directed towards sustainability, and thus is a positive development in social participation [24] as the opposite of effortless inactivity [25].

Anyone can be an influence through their own actions, choices, and deliberate solutions. Here, less can be more. In an educational psychological sense, the ability to be satisfied with one's own action and see its positive outcomes may be the most efficient way of promoting sustainable development [26]. We claim that threatening and blaming do not lead to changes happening quickly or successfully enough. Instead, positive thinking and the ability to picture one's happiness and elements of satisfaction in a healthier manner can be the way to achieve sustainable positive change.

The traditional way of analyzing sustainable development is to target attention to economic, environmental, social, and institutional indicators of development. Educational psychology provides a way to link sustainable development with individual lifestyles and choices and the elements of happiness [27,28]. At its best, sustainability promotes happiness, and does not sacrifice it [29].

Education is the best way of enhancing the objective that combines people's striving for happiness and sustainability. Education can increase awareness that sustainability, happiness, and well-being are intertwined both individually and collectively without the need to exploit other people, the environment, or future generations [19]. Likewise, students' participation in and knowledge about pro-environmental behaviors and attitudes can be strengthened [22,30]. It is also worth remembering that the role of the media as an environmental educator and positive activator is significant [31]. Education can strengthen good practices that direct attention from materialistic values to post-materialistic values, such as love and supportive relationships [15,29]. Even the use of money can be directed to doing good. Dunn, Gilbert, and Wilson [32] propose eight principles designed to help consumers get more happiness for their money: (1) buy more experiences and fewer material goods; (2) use money to benefit others rather than yourselves; (3) buy many small pleasures rather than fewer large ones; (4) eschew extended warranties and other forms of overpriced insurance; (5) delay consumption; (6) consider how peripheral features of their purchases may affect their day-to-day lives; (7) beware of comparison shopping; and (8) pay close attention to the happiness of others.

#### 4. Toward Sustainable Happiness Education

Positive education and schools should be used more systematically to bring fresh perspectives on the educational psychology of sustainability in education. Thus, education would focus more on students' well-being, the prevention of malaise, communality, joy, optimism, self-esteem, hope, and other happiness skills to enhance resilience [33–35]. Eventually, positive education would mean a change in values and behaviors, and would lead us towards a more sustainable future [36,37]. Simultaneously, it would strengthen the concept of happiness in sustainable development; the person who makes as many people as possible happy is the happiest [38]. We call it *sustainable happiness education*.

Both sustainability education and educational psychology are intended to contribute to well-being. By leaning on positive psychology, it is possible to discover new tools to promote such educational change, a change that is currently needed for the well-being of students and teachers, and for human and environmental health. The goal could be sustainable happiness [37], "happiness that contributes to individual, community and/or global well-being without exploiting other people, the environment or future generations" [37], which should become a visible and explicit part of teaching and curricula at all levels of education [39–42]. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has already been infused into teacher education [43], and a more recent recommendation from the UNESCO Chair for Reorienting Teacher Education for ESD is to bring well-being into the mix [44].

Sustainable happiness education also sets new expectations for educational leadership [45]. In view of Finland's leadership in education [46,47], it bears noting that the Sitra recommendations are influencing the current Finnish curriculum reform [44]. Canada is also recognized as one of the top-ranking countries for student academic achievement [48], and could readily demonstrate further leadership by advocating education transformation that embraces sustainability, happiness, and well-being.

The goal is for individuals to learn to understand more deeply how to live, be, study, and work so that happiness comes from one's values and respect for one's own and others' well-being, the natural environment, and future generations. This helps us reflect sustainability as a part of our daily activities and decisions. It is reasonable to emphasize that there is a need to move forward from blaming and guilt [49] and to foster positive change and hope [12,22].

Ultimately, it is a question of providing positive support for pro-environmental behavior [50]. However, it is also important to remember that not everyone has the same readiness to act pro-environmentally. For example, people living in developing regions are forced to choose short-term survival strategies instead of environmental objectives [51]. Yet, this should not be used as an excuse not to educate people about sustainability. Sustainable happiness education can provide a means to

educate people about ways of considering their own well-being and that of others simultaneously, while keeping in mind the sustainability aspect of their actions.

Educational psychology for sustainability in education could help us in teaching a new way of life that promotes respect and responsibility. It would also represent happiness education, with its core in ecosocial civilization [52]. It is wise to see ourselves and others' lives as equally valuable, together with establishing harmony with the environment and leading a good life [53].

The articles published in this special issue have been carefully selected to provide a multi-dimensional analysis of what kind of educational psychological perspectives can be taken to sustainability education, what educational psychology means in this sense, and what the future perspectives of education are from the psychological viewpoint.

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