

On the Hum of a Happy Classroom

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The contemporary early primary classroom in Canada is a vibrant space of learning. An image of a Kindergarten to Grade 2 classroom might be one of children engaged at learning centres, at play, or gathered together at the carpet for shared reading. The room might be decorated in bright colours with children's art displayed on the walls, and with varying degrees of organization or chaos, depending upon the habits of the teacher and how many children are in the class. Amidst this activity, teachers are responsible for all aspects of children's academic, physical, social, and emotional development.

Recent years have seen increased attention to children's social and emotional well-being in the classroom (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). A component of well-being is happiness, the experience of which promotes the development of healthy brain architecture (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004) and school success (Stiglbauer, Gnambs, Gamsjäger & Batinic, 2013). In fact, happiness is so important to a healthy society that the American educational philosopher, Nel Noddings (2003), argues that happiness should be a fundamental aim of education.

This paper presents a short vignette written during a Canadian qualitative study exploring how teachers promote children's happiness at school. Twelve Kindergarten through Grade 2 teachers from five different elementary schools were

asked to describe how they recognize when “all is well” with their students in class. Teachers used the word *hum* to describe the energy of children who are engaged, active, and happy. This paper concludes with a discussion of van Manen’s (2002) observation that *tone* is a subtle dimension of pedagogy, and that a positive classroom tone supports student well-being.

Early March

There is a thin layer of fresh snow on the playground this morning. Children are busy rolling out tiny snowmen as they wait for school to begin, leaving trails of black across the tarmac. The morning bell jangles as I walk down the hallway to the Kindergarten class. It feels like a smiley day. I am not sure why; it just does. I settle into a small chair to await the arrival of the class.

The children arrive, crowding into the cloakroom, squeezing their knapsacks into cubbies, dropping wet mittens on the floor. They are bubbly and filled with chatter. A group of eight children enter the classroom from the cloakroom in advance of the others. They make a beeline straight to the carpet—a cheery mat of fish and lily pads in bold primary colours—and begin to play ‘hop.’ They hop from one fish to the next, laughing with delight. They are in tune with each other as they play. They are not arguing or being bossy, in the way that children can when they are not getting their way. Rather, they hop from lily pad to lily pad, saying generous things like: “it’s my turn,” and “you hop there now!” They are laughing and encouraging each other. There is a sense of ease and exuberance. The rest of the children enter and are drawn in to this energy, each choosing their own activity, pulling tattered toys from under crowded tables, marching off in twos and threes to find a space to claim as their own. The room begins to hum, like vibrations filling the sound box of an acoustic instrument.

This vignette was written during an observation of a Kindergarten class. Afterwards, I fell to talking with the teacher about how she recognizes when “all is well” with her students during learning. The teacher indicated that she recognizes a happy classroom by its *hum*. In this study, all teachers used the word *hum* to describe a tone of energy and feelings associated with children who are engaged and happy. A humming classroom was described in three ways: (a) energetically (e.g., *calm, bubbly, alive*), (b) dynamically (e.g., *chatty, noisy, quiet*), and (c) as a landmark of recognition that children are settled happily into their rhythms of learning. The Kindergarten teacher explained:

“It’s not quiet and it’s not noisy—although a lot of noise can indicate happiness as well—there’s a steady ‘hmmm.’ There’s busy-ness and there’s activity...all sorts of things are going on! Sometimes the hum completely drops and there’s a moment of just quiet...and then it hums again.”

A humming classroom reflects children and adults who are all engaged in their actions and interactions of learning and teaching. Engaged children like what they are doing, are motivated by the options available, and have agency in their decisions. Another teacher explained that she recognizes the hum of happiness in her class when:

“...they’re all busy and engaged. It’s loud, but that’s okay, because there are 28 kids in here. They’ve all chosen an activity. I think choice is a big part of it, they’ve all chosen where they go and what they are doing.”

This finding that a happy classroom *hums* links to van Manen's (2002) observation that tone is a subtle dimension of pedagogy. As teachers, the sounds we create during the day, the language we use to communicate with children, the kinds of activities we plan, and the routines that pattern our days all establish a tone that shape children's experience of school. Of this, van Manen states, "Pedagogy is the ability to actively distinguish what is appropriate from what is less appropriate for young people" (p. 8).

The positive or negative quality of school experiences influence children's sense of happiness and well-being (Michalos, 2007); further, positive emotional experiences enhance motivation to learn (Meyer & Turner, 2006). Findings from this study indicate that a classroom that *hums*—through the energy, interests, engagement, and voices of children—is a landmark that indicates that "all is well" with children as they learn. This results from a teacher who is able to distinguish what is and is not right for the students in her class. And it comes from a teacher who knows children well enough that she is able to navigate, with grace and good humour, the complex world of curriculum, accountability, and bells that can complicate classroom life.

References

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