

# Sparking Joy in History Classrooms

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*“Joy spreads. Joy provides strength to a learner to face and surpass difficult situations.”*

*(Rantala, Ukusiautti & Määttä, 2016, p.23)*

## Introduction

In 2017, then-Minister of Education, Ng Chee Meng emphasized the need for joy of learning in schools. In his parliamentary speech, he commented, “We believe in nurturing the joy of learning so that every child can discover his interests, grow his passions, and love what he is doing. School should not just be about doing well in exams. It should be an exciting place to acquire knowledge and skills, where learning is fun and with the necessary rigour” (Ng, 2017, para. 11). For him, the joy of learning is not merely about having fun in the classroom; it should be balanced with academic rigour. Since then, this has become the prevailing view of the Ministry of Education (MOE) Singapore, and reinforced by the current Minister, Ong Ye Kung in the 2018 Schools Workplan Seminar:

We know that students derive more joy in learning when they move away from memorisation, rote learning, drilling and taking high-stakes exams. Very few students enjoy that. It is not to say that these are undesirable in learning; quite the contrary, they help form the building blocks for more advanced concepts and learning, and can inculcate discipline and resilience. But there needs to be a balance between rigour and joy, and there is a fairly strong consensus that we have tilted too much to the former. Our

students will benefit when some of their time and energy devoted to drilling and preparing for examinations is instead allocated to preparing them for what matters to their future (Ong, 2018, para. 29-31).

If we take the Education Ministers at their word, Singapore’s education system will undergo a profound shift away from the primary emphasis on academic results to one that endeavors to instill joy of learning. Calling this new phase of the education system “learn for life,” Minister Ong declared that it is time to focus on “the true spirit of learning” so that education can be “both an uplifting and integrating force” by helping people develop “the skills and knowledge to lead dignified lives, fulfil their aspirations and contribute to society” (Ong, 2018, para. 2). Nurturing joy in learning would entail encouraging students to identify their interests, develop their passions, and focus more on intrinsic motivation than on extrinsic factors, like exam scores.

We might ask why the Ministry is calling for this turn toward joy of learning. It might be due to growing concerns about the “heavy costs” of an intensely competitive and instrumental education system (to produce a productive workforce), and the impact this has on children’s well-being and flourishing in other areas of life (How, 2015). This is a very real concern. However, this turn to joy of learning is also not unique to Singapore; such interventions are being introduced in education systems around the world (Ciarrochi, Atkins, Hayes, Sahdra, & Parker, 2016). For Ahmed

(2010), these developments are part of the “happiness turn,” evidenced by the happiness industry (e.g., the slate of popular works on happiness, joy, well-being, etc.), the positive psychology movement and greater emphasis on positive education (e.g., see Seligman, 2011; World Government Summit, 2017). Ahmed (2010) argues that happiness and joy are often instrumentalized as techniques to shape people’s views and behavior through positive means and reconfigure policies that have focused on economic growth at the expense of happiness. While we believe a focus on joy of learning opens new possibilities for teaching and learning, we also don’t want it to conceal fundamental problems in education or society. An increased emphasis on joy in schooling shouldn’t be used to brush away legitimate complaints, grievances, or discontent. Paying attention to and addressing what causes students and teachers despair, dissatisfaction and anger can be productively channeled and serve as powerful drivers for real educational and social change.

Drawing on these and other perspectives, we ask what might *joy of learning* mean for classroom practice? Can greater emphasis on joy of learning help develop a “true spirit of learning”? What new possibilities are opened up for learning/learners and teaching/teachers by greater focus on joy? What might this look like in history classrooms – a subject often perceived as boring and irrelevant? Can teachers make assessment more meaningful and a joyful experience for students? In this article, we take up these questions to consider what sparking joy might look like in history classrooms.

### Start with Questions

Goodlad (1984) asked over 35 years ago, “Why are our schools not places of joy?” (p.

242). This question encourages us to ask if our own schools and classrooms are places of joy. And, it prompts other fundamental questions about the purposes of school and learning. We begin with the assumption that asking the right questions can enable new possibilities for teaching and learning. Exploring good questions can be a source of great joy; although they often arise from frustrations, problems, and tensions that we experience, questions prompt us to wonder, make sense of experience, to learn, consider the need for change and to grow as human beings. Starting from these premises, we ask you to consider a few from the outset:

- What does joy mean to you? To your students? What is the experience of joy like?
- What sparks joy for you? For your students? Think about a time when you (or your students) experienced joy. What gave rise to this experience?
- Now, think about a time when you (or your students) experienced joy in teaching (or learning) history. Describe this experience. What was this experience like? Why did it happen? What particular conditions gave rise to this experience? What was it about history (as a subject) that contributed to this experience of joy?
- In what ways can you share your experiences of joy with your students?
- What do your students say brings joy to them? What do they find enjoyable in learning?

We hope these are useful questions for educators and students to discuss, to explore what is joyful or enjoyable in learning, even how or why many of us were called to study, learn, or teach history.

We believe history has potential to spark

joy, that it can provide lively, engaging, meaningful learning experiences, and that it adds immeasurable value to life and preparing for the future. What is it that connects us to history as a subject or that continues to be a source of joy in terms of learning or teaching? We consider some possible responses next.

### Sources of Joy in Educational Experience

Random House dictionary defines *joy* as “the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something good or satisfying” (cited in Wolk, 2009, p. 4). According to Archbishop Desmond Tutu (2016), joy comes from within, dependent on our outlook, rather than from external sources, such as wealth, power, or status. It seems to come to us most often when we do things for others, make others happy or serve others in meaningful ways. The Dalai Lama (2016) emphasizes the importance of perspective in having a joyful outlook, the need to see things from many different angles to gain “a more complete and holistic view.” For educators, it requires us to step back from the daily grind and consider the ways joy can be cultivated, fostered, and supported as daily classroom practices. This means no longer seeing schooling as “primarily about creating workers and test takers, but rather about nurturing human beings” (Wolk, 2007, p. 9). We need new perspectives about education to create more space and time for joy in classrooms.

Researchers also have something to say about fostering joy in classrooms. Pekrun and Stephens (2011) note the centrality of emotion in teaching and learning. They identify four “academic emotions” in classrooms: *achievement* emotions, such as contentment or frustration, often linked to achievement outcomes (success or failure); *topic* emotions aligned with learning

subject matter, such as the feeling of empathy in learning about how individuals were affected by events in the past; *social* emotions such as pride or shame, since learning is always situated in social contexts; and *epistemic* emotions that arise from cognitive processing, such as surprise or confusion when confronted with a perplexing historical problem (D’Mello, 2017). Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012) highlight how a challenging problem, question or prompt can initiate surprise, which leads to curiosity and interest, and then enjoyment when the problem is understood and solved. However, anxiety and frustration can also be experienced when the problem is not understood or a solution does not seem possible. Addressing challenging questions or problems, then, can be sources of great joy or frustration, depending on how they are handled in classrooms. These researchers highlight that emotions influence student engagement with subject matter and thus impacts their learning and achievement.

Similarly, teacher emotions play a central role in classrooms. Keller, Frenzel, Goetz, Pekrun, & Hensley (2014) found that the primary source of teachers’ joy was derived from their students’ growth, especially when their students had breakthroughs in learning. Positive relationships with students was another source of joy for teachers. These researchers found that enjoyment is a common emotional experience for teachers. In general, a sense of professional efficacy, the sense that one is being effective in terms of helping students learn while remaining true to one’s beliefs and values, was a source of teachers’ positive emotional experiences.

In examining what contributes to joyful experiences in classrooms, Wolk (2008) argues that school spaces must be inviting

places and encourage student exploration, discovery, and choice (e.g., see Starker & Baidon, 2014 for examples of classrooms designed for these purposes). Student choice and autonomy in learning seem to be crucial factors for joy. Rantala and Määttä (2012) argue that “joy is linked with freedom” (p. 95). Similarly, Kohn (2010) found that students need autonomy, opportunities to express themselves, and the freedom to generate possibilities for their learning, rather than be continually directed by their teacher or an overly prescriptive curriculum. Students need to be given the freedom to make choices, develop a sense of purpose, and be in greater control of their learning.

For teachers, supporting student autonomy is a critical factor in creating joyful and productive classrooms. According to Rantala and Määttä (2012), it is important for teachers to provide the right amount of guidance and support so that students feel they are able to successfully manage learning challenges. This requires teachers to help each student match their abilities with learning tasks and to avoid comparing them to others in terms of what they can and cannot do. Teachers must see each child as capable of performing the task given the necessary support, encouragement and guidance.

Meaningful engagement is key to joyful learning experience. Csíkszentmihályi (1990) describes such engagement as flow, “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it at even great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (p. 4). Characteristics of flow include: working toward clear goals without fear of failure; focused effort with minimal distraction; a balance between challenges and skills; and immediate feedback on one’s actions either from others or as self-feedback as they

monitor their activity.

In sum, what is important in terms of students experiencing joy in learning is that they feel a sense of purpose and agency, that they are able to make choices and direct their learning toward their own learning goals. Rantala, Uusiautti, & Määttä (2012) found that learners “finding tasks meaningful is crucial for the experience of joy” (p. 24). School work has to be perceived to be meaningful, the learner needs to set goals to work toward, and they must be granted opportunities to plan, direct and evaluate their own learning.

### **Embracing Broader Purposes for Education**

If we move *toward* embracing joy as a fundamental element in teaching and learning, it requires *moving away* from the obsession with exam preparation, test results, international comparisons on PISA (as indicators of educational success) and prescribed or transmissive modes of education. Rather than view education as mainly serving economic ends, and of civic education to socialize students into narrow avenues of national affiliation, we might view education as more broadly developing human potential. Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2013) suggest a capabilities approach to broaden conceptions of education through the lens of human flourishing. Education for human flourishing would emphasize the development of capacities for imagination, thought and the senses (e.g., in the arts), multiple notions of affiliation (e.g., the many ways of belonging and participating in social life), and greater agency and political control over one’s environment (whether in the workplace or as a citizen).

The American educational philosopher, John Dewey (1932) challenged teachers to cultivate students’ capacities for joy and happiness by having students focus on what

they could do to improve society and the conditions of others (Fishman & McCarthy, 2010). This required students to focus on social problems, to be critical of current social conditions, and to work toward helping others and social improvement. Dewey (1932) believed that “Education should create an interest in all persons in furthering the general good, so that they will find their own happiness realized in what they can do to improve the conditions of others” (p. 243).

It matters, then, what kinds of educational experience we design for students. King, Newmann, and Carmichael (2015) offer a framework of authentic intellectual work to guide pedagogy and student performance in ways that meet some of the criteria for joyful educational experience outlined above (e.g., a strong sense of purpose to guide learning, meaningful learning tasks, autonomy, engagement in activity at the edge of one’s skills, and learning that enables one to develop their own skills, understandings, and self-fulfillment while benefiting others). Authentic intellectual work emphasizes disciplined inquiry, the construction of knowledge, and the value of students’ work beyond school. This framework requires teachers to design rich tasks around challenging problems or questions, to guide student autonomy in investigating these problems, and ensure that student work has value beyond school or an impact on others, rather than simply be considered for success in school (i.e., for grades).

The pursuit of joy cannot be construed as only an individual experience. Instead, joy in classrooms can be a collective experience, and as noted by the Education Ministers and the scholars cited above, it involves rigor, challenge, a focus on problems. Paradoxically, joy comes from struggle, by confronting reality and investigating problems, by working

together to manage the challenges of authentic intellectual work, and by not being satisfied with current conditions or by imagining new possibilities. But, what might this look like in history classrooms? Next, we explore some suggestions that we hope might spark joy in history classrooms.

### **Suggested Approaches to Spark Joy in History Classrooms**

History teachers can play a vital role in making the learning of history a joyful experience for students. Apart from developing students’ historical knowledge and skills, history teachers can (and often do) cultivate in students a positive attitude towards learning. Below we suggest approaches to spark joy in history classrooms.

#### *Foster Joyful Relationships*

Joy is infectious. To teach with joy, the most essential element is positive interactions and relationships with students (Rantala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2012). Teachers can actively and persistently cultivate positive classroom interactions. Very simply, this requires showing active and ongoing interest in students’ lives and learning. For example, asking students questions about their interests, their aspirations and their experiences, and finding out what they enjoy in and out of school can demonstrate care and concern to students. Honestly exploring what they enjoy in learning history, what they think would make learning history more interesting, engaging and relevant, and checking in with them on a regular basis about these matters not only fosters positive relationships with students, it provides feedback to improve instruction.

Teaching is fundamentally about relationships – one’s relationship to students as well as to subject matter and

how that subject matter relates to students' lives. Putting positive relationships at the center of one's teaching enables teachers to better tap into and leverage students' interests and experiences to make connections with historical topics. A skillful history teacher is able to connect with students in ways that make the study of the past meaningful, engaging and comprehensible to their students through examples, analogies, and explanations that tap into students' prior knowledge and everyday experiences. Such teachers are passionate about history as a subject and its relevance for students. They have positive views of their students, of history as a subject, and continually express enthusiasm and purpose for learning about the past as a way to better understand present-day realities. Put simply, they are able to *relate* the content to present-day realities and students' lives and experiences. They care about and listen to their students and they are passionate about history as a subject and its vital importance in students' lives.

#### *Develop a Sense of Belonging*

Fostering joyful relationships in classrooms contributes to building a sense of the classroom as a vibrant meaning-making community. In history classrooms, this is achieved when ideas, interpretations and perspectives are shared and explored rather than taught in didactic fashion. Students feel a sense of belonging to a community where their views and voice are valued and where they work with others to make sense of the past. For instance, teachers can provide opportunities where students develop their own theories and ideas about the past—why past events happened (causation); why these events might be important (significance); why people might have different perspectives about the past (accounts); how things have changed and stayed the same over time (change and continuity); and explore

alternative accounts about the past or counterfactuals (what might have happened if...). By engaging students in these fundamental questions, students begin to see history as about life (why things happen, how people both shape and are shaped by social conditions, why people might have different perspectives and tell different stories, etc.) and understand the study of history as a means to understand past and current life.

Joy also comes from a sense of belonging to something larger than ourselves and this can come from helping students see themselves (their ethnicity, religion, gender, families, etc.) as continuous with the stories and accounts that are explored in class. Shared stories (of origins, accomplishment, hope and inspiration as well as of tragedy, suffering and injustice) give us a sense of belonging to larger communities that exist beyond the classroom. Students can feel a sense of joy by having opportunities to author and share their own interpretations and stories in the classroom community as well as broader communities (e.g., by using social media). The study of history can thus give students a sense of agency in seeing themselves in stories about the past as well as provide opportunities to tell their own stories. With guidance, students can learn to empathize with those in the past, reflect on what these experiences might have been like, and consider the extent to which these experiences were similar to and different from their own experiences. They feel a sense of being able to participate in and contribute to the classroom community and to communities outside of the classroom.

#### *Give Students Autonomy*

Students experience joy in learning when they have the autonomy to be self-directed learners. This means, however, that teachers and students need to be

comfortable with struggle – not giving in to the feeling that we must help students avoid frustration when they don't get "right answers." In other words, teachers need to think about what it means to be an autonomy supporting teacher that scaffolds autonomy rather than provide procedural scaffolding to answer exam questions, for example. This means giving students options and choice in their learning with appropriate levels of guidance to help them successfully direct their own learning. For example, students would be supported to pursue their own questions to investigate historical topics.

If students generate and follow their own questions about the past, teachers have to be able to guide students through the inquiry process, help them negotiate the many demands of historical inquiry, guide them in looking for information and sources relevant to their study, and teach them how to proceed on their own and manage the many challenges they will face in studying the past. There is an emotional aspect to autonomy that teachers must scaffold as well. This means helping students manage frustration, feeling overwhelmed, and dealing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of multiple perspectives and interpretations. Teachers themselves must learn to manage the emotions that come from working in the ill-structured domain of history which depends on multiple, often competing interpretations, perspectives, and arguments. Creating a classroom culture that supports autonomy will require a significant shift on the part of classroom practice to give students greater autonomy to practice and develop self-directed learning strategies.

*Provide Variety: Experiential Learning and the Arts*

For Dewey (1916) the study of history is an effort to make meaning and to recognize

human connections (e.g., with others, between past and present, etc.). It is an effort to more systematically understand human experience in all of its varieties. And, because human experience is varied, learning about history is best done by providing a variety of learning experiences. For example, students can study works of art as sources that offer insights about the past. Artwork in all of its forms can serve as artifacts of analysis and interpretation that provide evidence about the past. The arts can also be used by students to express their own views and ideas about the past in a creative fashion. Students should be given opportunities to both work with artistic forms of expressions from different periods of history (i.e., music, film, artwork, literature, etc.) to understand the past as well as be able to create their own forms of art to communicate their ideas about the past. The past is both represented in and used as a resource in many forms of creative work.

Experiential learning through fieldtrips or fieldwork (in museums, heritage sites, historical landmarks, etc.) can help students see how history is used to communicate meanings about identity (e.g., what it means to be Singaporean), how the past should be remembered (e.g., through memorials or heritage sites), and future orientations (e.g., reference to "founding ideals" for future plans). By being more aware of how history is used for different purposes, students can better understand why there are historical debates and controversies in the public domain (over matters of identity, heritage, politics, etc.). Through such experiences, students see how history plays a role in everyday life and how particular sites and artifacts communicate meanings about past, present and future.

To spark joy in the learning of history, then, teachers need to reconsider the format of their teaching. Does it incite imagination

and creativity for students? Does it allow for a range of engagements, interpretations and expressions? Apart from expanding their lesson plans to include field trips or the arts, teachers could also find novel ways to spark curiosity, interest and joy during their regular classroom teaching. Teachers cannot be afraid to experiment. At the very least, students tend to be appreciative when teachers try something different to try make lessons creative and enriching.

### *Immerse Students in Authentic Intellectual Work*

Historical thinking is frustratingly “unnatural” (Wineburg, 2001). It requires disciplined ways of reasoning that are challenging and difficult, yet, like other complex forms of thinking and behaving, can bring great joy when learned and applied. To make work authentic, teachers can design tasks that engage students in historical problems and issues that are taken up in public life (e.g., controversies about how the past is remembered), where they are asked to interpret, evaluate and synthesize different sources of information, consider different perspectives, and develop their own explanations and conclusions.

Since thinking in these ways is challenging, teachers must help students see how they also do think in some of these ways already – students do think about why things “happen” (causation), they do assess the importance of various things they encounter (significance), they often use stories (accounts) and evidence to explain things or to justify their thinking. Making these connections can help students see that these ways of thinking also aren’t so alien. However, the study of history provides more sophisticated ways of thinking that can help them be more systematic and rigorous in their thinking and help them make connections between historical

content and personal experiences or public problems (King, et al, 2015).

This requires immersing students in interesting problems. Authentic problems can deeply arouse student interest, motivation, and curiosity in pursuing the subject. Not knowing the right answers, but asking the right questions might be the way forward for our students to experience the joy of learning in history. And, we need to continually ask students what they find to be authentic, interesting and meaningful questions, problems and ways to learn or demonstrate their learning.

### *Make Assessment More Meaningful*

When assessments of students’ learning are made more manageable and meaningful, students may find it a more positive and joyful experience. A productive way to reframe students’ perspectives on assessment is to guide students towards understanding the role and value of assessments in learning: Where am I at in my learning? What have I learnt thus far? Which are areas I need to improve on? How can I improve my learning? Such questions cannot be answered without some form of assessment to gain insight into one’s learning. Just as much as assessments are used by teachers to guide their instruction and provide feedback to students, they are also equally needed for students to take ownership of their own learning.

In routine assessments, teachers provide feedback on each student’s assignment or test. However, very commonly, students tend to focus on the mark or grade received than the feedback for improvement. To circumvent this, teachers may consider holding back the mark and allowing students to undertake self-assessment or peer-assessment using rubrics or level descriptors. At the same time, teachers can ensure that assessments are manageable,

balancing the assessment task to student's abilities to provide the right level of challenge. Meaningful assessment would support student autonomy and engagement and authentic intellectual work, as outlined above.

Assessment should not be the be-all and end-all of school life. Rather, teachers must emphasize the purpose of assessments and link them to learning instead of achievement. They should set realistic assessment standards based on their students' abilities, and refrain from over-testing. Over-testing and an overemphasis on academic grades can be counterproductive. Only when students realize that assessments are necessary for their own learning and development, will they no longer find them daunting or dreadful.

### **Conclusion**

There is a need for studies that examine the sources of joy in history classrooms and in Singaporean educational contexts. Undoubtedly, greater emphasis on joy of learning in history classrooms will remain challenging under the testing regimes that currently exist in schools. However, we believe that some of the approaches suggested above can also lead to enhanced student achievement in the study of history.

There is a need for educators to insist on broader and deeper purposes for education to include joy, human flourishing, and authentic intellectual work that goes beyond the overwhelming emphasis on examinations, test scores and the narrow instrumental purposes of contemporary schooling for economic productivity. And there is a need to talk with students about what they care about and what they find meaningful in their own learning. There needs to be ongoing discussions in schools and society about the meaning and purpose

of education, how schools can better support the development of a fuller range of human talents, capacities and aspirations, and how education might serve broader social purposes.

Greater emphasis must be given to classroom practices that spark joy in the study of history. These include developing passion for history as a subject that is highly relevant to individuals and society, and creating classrooms as meaning-making communities characterized by positive, joyful interactions and supportive relationships. These classrooms would provide a greater range of autonomy and freedom than we currently see in classrooms, where students would have some degree of control to set their own learning goals, identify topics of interest for study, and be offered a variety of meaningful curriculum tasks to learn history.

We believe joy can be derived from rigour, that these are mutually reinforcing aspects of learning in which students engage with authentic historical problems, issues, and questions, are guided to manage the challenging work of historical investigation, and engage in rich learning experiences that help them see how history is a relevant subject for understanding the past, themselves and their society. The spirit of inquiry would infuse the classroom as a location for continual questioning, sense-making, and engagement. And this spirit of inquiry would include asking students about the purposes of their own lives and learning. Teachers would scaffold students' autonomy and help them manage the rigour of exercising their reasoning, expressing their views, and developing their own arguments and conclusions. Giving students greater choice and voice in the study of history in a supportive, positive classroom environment can be a source of joy for both teachers and students.

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