Start with JOY

Designing Literacy Learning for Student Happiness

KATIE EGAN CUNNINGHAM

Foreword by Pam Allyn
“An insightful guide full of stories and research to promote the contentment of children in the classroom. Cunningham’s book about happiness and advocacy for a mind-body connection is more relevant now than ever before!”

—Michael J. Hynes, Superintendent of Schools, Patchogue-Medford School District

“In *Start with Joy*, Katie Cunningham shows readers how you can nourish happiness while still maintaining high literacy standards and getting the results you want—happy students who are readers, writers, and effective communicators. It’s a win-win for all.”

—Jennifer Allen, author of *Becoming a Literacy Leader, Second Edition*

“This book is beautifully written to help teachers visualize what true student happiness looks, sounds, and feels like. After reading Katie’s suggestions, teachers will have a clear pathway for what they can try tomorrow to increase happiness levels. What I love most is that this is not one more thing to fit into the day—it is framed as ways of being with children that can be incorporated into what all teachers are already doing. My hope is that every single student has a teacher who designs with happiness as the main objective and I am grateful that there is now a place to turn to for ideas and support.”

—Gravity Goldberg, author of *Teach Like Yourself: How Authentic Teaching Transforms Our Students and Ourselves*

“This is the book I have been waiting for. Teaching is more than a profession; it is a way of life. Teachers and students alike need to live and learn with greater happiness and joy. With some ‘self-literacy’ strategies as a key goal in every lesson, Katie shows us how to make connections with our learning and with others in more meaningful ways. I believe that connection is at the heart of happiness, and I believe this book is an invaluable tool to help us achieve it.”

—Paula Bourque, author of *Spark: Quick Writes to Kindle Hearts and Minds in Elementary Classrooms*

“If anyone knows how to cultivate a ‘culture of happiness’ in the classroom, it’s Katie. In *Start with Joy*, she challenges educators to ‘prioritize happiness’ by embracing the seven main pillars she’s developed through her extensive research that, used alongside culturally sustaining practices and attention to students’ hearts, minds, *and* bodies, will ultimately lead to more joyful, playful, and purposeful classroom experiences for all.”

—Shawna Coppola, author of *Renew: Become a Better and More Authentic Writing Teacher*
“Katie Cunningham proposes in her new book, *Start with Joy*, that by teaching in ways that value the heart of our humanity—connection, choice, challenge, play, story, discovery, and movement—we pave the pathway to help students become stronger readers and writers. Katie’s book offers readers inspired ideas, compelling research, and a treasure trove of rich, carefully selected children’s literature recommendations to give us a sensible, refreshing road map for breathing life back into our literacy classrooms.”

—Jan Burkins and Kim Yaris, authors of *Who’s Doing the Work? How to Say Less So Readers Can Do More*

“In *Start With Joy*, Katie Cunningham draws on a robust body of research to prove that happiness should be cultivated, observed, and reinforced. By reflecting on the stories, accomplishments, and relationships that bring them joy, students can rely on their own resources rather than outside factors in order to feel happy. Finding boundless happiness in her work with children and teachers, she offers a road map for inviting joy into all literacy learning. When building a collection of teacher resources, start with Cunningham!”

—Suzanne Farrell Smith, author of *The Writing Shop: Putting ‘Shop’ Back in Writing Workshop*

A while ago, a few friends and I discussed what we hoped for in life. After much discussion, we all came to the conclusion that we hope for happiness for ourselves, our loved ones, our students, and each other. So, when I sat down to read *Start with Joy!* I was thrilled! In our increasingly standards-based, testing-focused, stress-inducing school system, happiness is typically neither prioritized nor valued. Enter Katie’s beautiful call to action. Katie’s Seven Pillars will benefit all teachers and students in all classrooms by bringing the focus back to happiness without sacrificing literacy learning. In fact, her practical suggestions and invitations will enhance literacy learning in classrooms— I know it will in mine! I look forward to turning to this text again and again in my work with both students and teachers.

—Christina Nosek, co-author of *To Know and Nurture a Reader: Conferring with Confidence and Joy*
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Stenhouse PUBLISHERS
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To Jack and Matthew,
you have filled my life with joy.
May we have given you
the roots and the wings
to build a happy life.
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I am privileged to write this foreword to such a seminal, important, profound book, written by one of the most inspiring, deeply brilliant literacy leaders I know.

I met Katie years ago when she was a teacher in the classroom, before her years of side-by-side coaching work with teachers, before her masterful leadership at the university level. The very first time we met, her radiance and enormous generosity of spirit were eminently clear and visible to me, and I thought: “How lucky her students are.”

We are all lucky now, for Katie has woven her years of experience in the classroom, in the field alongside teachers at all grade levels, and at the university research level to create for us the simplest of all, yet the profoundest of all, messages we can take and use: happiness matters.

The good news about happiness and literacy instruction Katie shares in this book is that they are deeply entwined. The best teaching of reading and writing is the most joyful. The more happiness, joy, and delight we bring into our teaching, the better and more proficient, more empowered our students will be at reading and writing, storytelling, and sharing.

Katie Cunningham is our “happiness guide” in the world of academic learning. In this journey, she shows us how to create a world in which every student is joyfully skillful and skillfully joyful. She shows us how to make it happen in our schools and classrooms, with our students and with all the children and young adults who cross our paths.

Through her careful, research-based, thorough explanation and exploration of connection, choice, challenge, play, story, discovery, and movement, Katie lays out a path and framework for our own powerful literacy instruction through the focus on joy.

And make no mistake, this book will make you feel good professionally and personally, will inspire you, and will bring delight and wonder to your students and your teaching. Its end goal is powerful student engagement and competence in the skills needed to be proficient, confident readers and writers, and along the way, you too will be changed.

To enable us to use her framework, to implement it in our classrooms, and to share it in our schools and districts most effectively, Katie’s book is arranged in three parts: the seven pillars of connection, the invitations (actual lessons you can try at any time of the year in the context of any unit), and an appendix of resources to use with your students. Each chapter has powerful, compelling stories, research behind the science and impact of happiness, and many hands-on techniques for you to try in your classroom or to share as an administrative leader or coach across a district large or small.
Choice leads to agency, a feeling of control, which develops into the magical sense of “flow” where we are operating smoothly and easily. Katie supports us in getting to a place of comfort and structure in our teaching, while amplifying guided choice for students and in how we present the lessons, so that we can get into a place of “flow.”

From that first day I met Katie, I wanted to work with her, near her, and be inspired by her. In the years that followed, I fulfilled my wish. I saw her and see her changing the lives of teachers, with her humble, generous, invitational spirit. I see her influencing teachers and administrative leaders, coaches and librarians, media specialists, and parents from the ground up: where we are. It feels like magic to work with Katie, and in this book you will have a vibrant, helpful feel for that magic. She embodies herself the often untapped power of happiness. Katie shows us how to bring this superpower into our classrooms and to turn every child, every young adult into a lifelong, skillfully joyful, joyfully skillful reader, writer, and powerful voice in the world.

This book will bring happiness, to you, your teaching, your students, and their learning. Thank you, Katie, for your many gifts, and welcome, teachers, administrators, families, and more, to a hopeful, optimistic world of learning.

_Pam Allyn_
Founder, LitWorld
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the year of writing this book, my friends and loved ones welcomed new babies into the world, celebrated milestone birthdays, reached new professional heights, and were change agents in their communities. At the same time, friends and loved ones lost their jobs, relocated, mourned family members, fought addiction, and battled cancer. I experienced more joy and heartache than in any other year of my life.

Researching and writing about happiness was a relief in many ways, and at times it was a challenge. Throughout the writing process, I had to ask some hard questions of myself: Could I wholeheartedly practice what I was advocating teachers try in their classrooms with students? Could I maintain a daily gratitude journaling practice and stick with it? Could I go to bed each night and do some honest thinking about whether I had helped make someone else happy? Could I open myself up to new connections when there was no guarantee? Could I share my story as a source of strength? Could I find new ways to play in the classroom and with my own children?

Without a doubt, better understanding the science of happiness has made me a better teacher, mother, partner, and literacy leader. It has made me take notice of the incredible things children do as readers, writers, and communicators that for years may have escaped my attention. It has made me more comfortable with my own strengths and the purpose to my work. It has made the teachers and classes I partner with more joyful, laughter filled, and spontaneous.

As the research shows us, connection is everything. Without the connections, questions, and support of others, this book would not have been possible, and I have many people to thank.

To Maureen, my editor and friend, thank you for your heartfelt check-ins and your patience. You knew exactly the places where children themselves needed to be more present in these pages. This book is better, brighter, and more relevant to teachers thanks to your careful eyes and kind suggestions. If my family has given me roots, you have given me wings. Thank you!

To the Stenhouse family, you have trusted me to create something meaningful for teachers, and I hope I have lived up to what I promised. Dan Tobin, thank you for believing in this work and for welcoming me as a part of the Stenhouse family over the years. It has been life changing to be a part of this professional community of giving, thoughtful people. Thank you, Jay Kilburn, Shannon St. Peter, Lynne Costa, Carly Daubach, Lisa Sullivan and the
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To Pam Allyn, thank you for being a mentor and friend this last decade and for contributing your beautiful words through your foreword. You showed me how to be fearless in my beliefs that literacy learning and happiness belong together. Your advocacy that all children have a right to literacy and a right to find happiness is a model of what joyful learning can truly be.

To my teaching friends and soul sisters—Suzanne Farrell Smith, Kristin Rainville, Mary Ann Cappiello, Grace Enriquez, and Erika Dawes. Your ideas about teaching, children’s literature, and childhood have influenced my thinking in countless ways. Most of all, your friendship has been an anchor for me as you listened with intention and offered exactly the right kind of support when I needed it most.

To my Manhattanville College colleagues, especially Courtney Kelly, Mary Coakley-Fields, Vicki Fantozzi, Nikki Josephs, and Sherie McClam, thank you for your friendship and for your inspiring research that unpacks what it means to be truly literate in a world that needs people asking questions about sustainability, diversity, and inclusion. Special thanks to Shelley Wepner for her leadership and support over my years at Manhattanville, making my workplace a professional home. My research students at Manhattanville make me a better teacher and thinker. Kelly Garzone deserves special thanks—for your research on accountable talk and for sharing students’ authentic responses to stories with me. Thanks to Manhattanville College for granting me a sabbatical, which led to the development and much of the writing of this book.

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To the teachers and schools I’ve been fortunate to partner with, thank you for opening your doors and sharing your classrooms with me. To Dr. Monique Reilly and Veronica Mittzenwei, thank you for saying yes to trying five-minute journaling with your students and seeing what happens. Your classrooms are dynamic, powerful models for others, and I am grateful to learn alongside you.
Missy, Stacey, Caitlyn, Ted, John, Elyse, and The Wooster School, thank you for your willingness to try new things in the name of literacy learning and for the happiness you create for children.

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To Elaine Natalicchi, Matt Parkin, Martha Hirschman, and the teachers and children from The Dwight School and Dwight London, thank you for opening your classrooms to me as I sought global perspectives on what happiness looks like as a part of learning. You have created school environments driven by discovery of oneself and the world. It’s easy to see why the children in your care are smiling, sharing, and skipping through the hallways.

To my mom and dad, Karin and Jim Egan, you give your whole selves to the people you love. There’s nothing like a Granny or Gramps. Your love is irreplaceable, and you make our family stronger, kinder, and more hopeful. You taught me that happiness is helping others to live their best lives.

To my sons, Jack and Matthew, thank you for understanding the time I needed to take to write and revise this book. You were the inspiration for these pages and for nearly every decision I’ve made over the last ten years. You show me what happiness looks like when you ask a rival if they are okay on the soccer field or you help a classmate when you see they need a bit of extra kindness from a friend. Thank you for reminding me that taking the time to play is always a good idea. I cherish our basement sessions of ball tag as much as I do our nightly bedtime reading.

Most of all, thank you to my husband, Chris Cunningham, for modeling what a happy life could be. True to your wild reading heart, you were researching the science of happiness and gently encouraging me to take action in my own life for a long time. You gave me The Five-Minute Journal as a Valentine’s Day gift, and it was an act of love that changed my life. You opened my eyes to the ways knowledge about happiness could enrich my life and our family. This book and the life we have built would not have been possible without you.
INTRODUCTION

Whether you are a teacher in the early stages of your career or you are a veteran teacher with years of experience, there are always opportunities to make literacy learning for your students more meaningful and memorable. From my years spent as an elementary school teacher and then years observing and coaching teachers, I found there are seven basic pillars that can link what we know from the science of happiness with what we know about effective literacy instruction. These seven pillars will make your classroom more joyful, playful, and purposeful: Connection, Choice, Challenge, Play, Story, Discovery, and Movement. This book is designed to help you master these pillars so that you can support your students to become stronger readers, writers, and communicators while also helping them learn the critical life skills of how to be happy now and for the future.

Have you ever felt like you’ve taught the “right” lessons, but you wonder whether those lessons mean anything to students? Have you ever felt like the teacher down the hall seemed to have a natural ability to connect with students meaningfully around books and writing in a way that you wished you had? Have you ever laid awake at night thinking about the hopes and dreams you have for your students and how you can better support them to be resilient, compassionate, and self-driven in their own life journey? Have you ever wanted to find a like-minded group of people that also believes that learning how to be happy goes hand in hand with learning how to be a stronger reader, writer, and communicator? Have you ever felt like your teaching needs a jolt of joy to make literacy learning simply more fun? Then this book is for you.

The classrooms I’ve been fortunate to be a part of and the children I’ve met have shaped my thinking over the last twenty years about what it means to be truly literate. And now the research from the science of happiness has given us the tools to thoughtfully take action to make the process of becoming a reader, writer, and communicator supportive of the whole child in our care. Over the course of writing this book, I also looked back at my own life and how literacy learning helped me grow roots for my own sustainable happiness starting in childhood.

I have just a few treasures from my childhood I’ve held on to over the years. One of them is the fourth-grade yearbook that my teacher, Mary Ann Jones, put together for our class. We each wrote a page about ourselves including our favorite songs (“Out of the Blue”—by the ’80s legend Debbie Gibson), our favorite sayings (“What a coinkie-dink”), and what we hoped to be when we grew up (a teacher—likely inspired by Mrs. Jones).
were in a basement classroom off in the corner of the school—typical of what sometimes happens to the new teacher in the building. Yet, Mrs. Jones turned our basement corner classroom into something much more, and perhaps the location of our classroom was a blessing that gave her the freedom to try some things that countered literacy instruction of the time. We were encouraged to read voraciously. We made our own decisions about group work. We wrote about our memories. And we made our own yearbooks like we were seniors in high school and signed them for one another. Years later when I taught fourth grade, I replicated the same yearbook project with my students, and I hope some of my students have held on to the things we made together and see them as childhood treasures as I do. Mrs. Jones was only in our school for one year, but she seemed to be ahead of the times in prioritizing our classroom community as a safe space to find happiness while also enriching our literacy lives. What I remember most from that time in my childhood is a sense of security and comfort with myself, which anchored me before the years of adolescence took hold and self-doubt regularly surfaced. I look at the photo of fourth-grade me and I’m grateful for the roots Mrs. Jones gave me that year, which propelled a sense of confidence, courage, and belonging in me.

Over the years of becoming and being a teacher myself, I was fortunate to be a part of many schools. I’ve taught children who are recent immigrants and who take care of their younger siblings after school, changing diapers and making bottles when their parents are at work. I’ve also taught children who experience enormous economic privilege but wrote in their notebooks about feeling lonely at home. I’ve taught children from all backgrounds who arrive early and stay late, seeking a place to feel belonging and connection. In every school I have been a part of, I have tried to discover everything I could about what makes children thrive in their learning. I’ve asked questions. I’ve read widely. I’ve planned. And I’ve tried new methods. All to deepen my understanding about the childhood roots of lifelong happiness and where that naturally intersects with the
ways we organize, plan, and teach literacy. The more time I spent in other people’s class-
rooms as a coach, the more I began to notice the common threads across classrooms where
children seemed happy in their learning. Often, this was the result of small, intentional
shifts to focus more on joy as a fundamental catalyst for learning. Meanwhile, society at
large has seen an explosion of interest in happiness with science now supporting what
has seemed like common sense.

No longer a mystery, the seven pillars explored through this book will help you
prioritize happiness as an integral part of your literacy instruction. These seven pillars
have become a mental checklist for me every time I walk into a classroom: Connection,
Choice, Challenge, Play, Story, Discovery, and Movement. Where do I see it? Where can
there be more of it? What are the steps to get there? Over the last few years, my pursuit
for seeing what happiness looks like as a part of literacy learning took me back to schools
where I began my teaching journey in New York. From there, I visited schools in London
and partnered with Kenyan teachers. Stepping outside American classrooms gave me a
chance to see and learn about what matters most to teachers in other parts of the world.
I saw teachers playing ping-pong with students during recess. Children led me around
their school gardens and talked about what brought them joy at school. Teachers shared
what was in their hearts. Children left me with hugs. I returned home and was more
committed than ever to make happiness less of a mystery and more of a tangible reality
for all children in any circumstance as a part of literacy learning.

When I’ve presented these pillars or I’ve modeled the practices described in this
book, without exception, I have heard from teachers and school leaders that this focus on
happiness is the work they want to do for their school community. We know happiness
can predict health and longevity. Happiness scales are even being used to measure social
progress. Yet, happiness isn’t something that just happens to you. Happiness can grow
when we make small changes to our own behavior, mindset, and relationships. Twenty
years after my journey as a teacher began and over thirty years since my fourth-grade self
envisioned a meaningful life as a teacher, I feel more hopeful that a focus on happiness
can become as much a priority in our planning and our teaching as skills and strategies
have rightfully become.

I hope this book will change the way you think about teaching and learning. That
you feel more hopeful. More purposeful. More in awe of your students. More knowl-
edgeable about books and stories. More connected to children. More driven to prioritize
happiness. More joyful.
HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is composed of three parts: the pillars, the invitations, and an appendix of resources. I recommend that you begin at the beginning and read it straight through to the end. But, you can also jump to the pillars that intrigue you the most. Each chapter has stories, research behind the science of happiness, and many techniques for you to try in your own classroom. Come back to chapters later that feel most relevant to you and your students. Readers new to teaching will quickly catch on to the pillars and why they are important. More experienced teachers will find something new to try in every chapter that can bring energy and enthusiasm for literacy learning into your classroom. Hopefully you find “aha!” tidbits that you immediately want to try.

The second part of the book has ten “invitations.” These are lessons that you can try at any time of year in the context of any unit. There are children’s literature suggestions and sample teacher talk to help you try an invitation that fits the needs of your class right away. But like any invitation, these lessons are designed for you to improvise and make your own.

Finally, there is an appendix with some tools to help your students tell their story and make literacy learning a time of the day that all students look forward to. Most of all, I hope this book helps you think about your own ways of intentionally teaching toward happiness as a part of literacy learning. Although happiness is about much more than pleasure (the rest of the book will explain), I hope you enjoy the pleasure of reading this book. Light a candle. Pour a cup of tea. Try something new. Have some fun with it. Start with joy.
Chapter 1
Why Happiness?
Why Now?
The noblest art is that of making others happy.

—P. T. Barnum

At the end of A. A. Milne’s (1928) beloved classic, *The House at Pooh Corner*, Christopher Robin has a heartfelt exchange with his dearest friend as he says goodbye to Pooh and, essentially, to childhood itself:

“I’m not going to do Nothing any more.”
“Never again?”
“Well, not so much. They don’t let you.”
Pooh waited for him to go on, but he was silent again.
“Yes, Christopher Robin,” said Pooh helpfully.
“Pooh, when I’m—you know—when I’m not doing Nothing, will you come up here sometimes?”
“Just me?”
“Yes, Pooh.”
“Will you be here too?”
“Yes, Pooh, I will be, really. I promise I will be, Pooh.”
“That’s good,” said Pooh.
“Pooh, promise me you won’t forget about me, ever. Not even when I’m a hundred.”
Pooh thought for a little.
“How old shall I be then?”
“Ninety-nine.”
Pooh nodded.
“I promise,” he said.
Still with his eyes on the world Christopher Robin put out a hand and felt for Pooh’s paw.
“Pooh,” said Christopher Robin earnestly, “if I—if I’m not quite—” he stopped and tried again—“Pooh, whatever happens, you will understand, won’t you?”
“Understand what?”
“Oh, nothing.” He laughed and jumped to his feet.
“Come on!”
“Where?” said Pooh.
“Anywhere,” said Christopher Robin.

Milne reminds us that children often know what brings them the greatest joy—companionship from a true friend, the freedom to make choices about their time, and a sense of possibility. He also subtly reminds us that childhood is fleeting, inestimable, and worthy of deep, intentional care.

When September arrives, we know that the Christopher Robins of our classrooms are in our trust for a limited amount of time each day and year. We mark the hundredth day of school because it’s a reminder that the class has reached a milestone together and that the school year is curving toward completion. Before our eyes, children grow out of their clothing and into new friendships. They lose teeth and get scrapes. They fall down and get back up again. They try new things and set their own goals. They imagine worlds in their minds and tell stories to themselves. They gain new skills, ask thought-provoking questions, and apply new strategies. We hope they will find books that they fall in love with and characters they admire. All of this happens almost by magic. Most importantly, the roots of their happiness begin to take shape.

WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT FOR YOUR STUDENTS?
This book is written with the assumption that children go to school each day to become stronger readers, writers, and thinkers, yes . . . but equally important, they walk into school
and hope to be happy. Think of your own students. Picture their faces in your mind. When you see them smiling, what are they doing? How do you know when they are happy? Then, think to yourself, *What do I really want for my students?* On some days, you may respond that you want them all to be confident, fluent readers or that you want them to find their voice as writers. On other days, you may want them to find books and authors they fall in love with so that they read and keep reading. These are worthy and important goals. But if you consider the question long enough, your reply will likely include one particular word: *happy.* If we take certain steps, we can support students to be successful readers, writers, and communicators while also greatly increasing the chances that they will find joy in learning, and more importantly, that they will be laying the foundation for sustained happiness that they can learn to keep creating for themselves their entire lives.
LOOKING AND LISTENING FOR HAPPINESS

This book is designed as a guide to help you put your students’ happiness at the center of learning without sacrificing the literacy goals you are striving to support your students to achieve. I’m a person who mostly looks and listens for a living. I look and listen for strength, wisdom, and joy in schools. In my school visits, I get to witness extraordinary teachers and school leaders that support the children in their care to not only learn but to find joy in their learning. I meet teachers like Missy, whose kindergarten classroom is driven by a spirit of experimentation. Missy started to realize that some of her students were entering kindergarten already with pressures to read. So, Missy and I partnered to rethink how to launch the school year to make joy the top priority in her literacy instruction from Day One. When I shared with Missy the interactive picture book *Say Zoop!* by Hervé Tullet (2017), she leapt at the chance to try it out with her students. Tullet’s interactive picture books are visually stunning and invite readers to play through a series of simple, colored dots. By following instructions like “whisper oh” and “shout OH,” readers participate in the reading process by making their voices match the size and shape of the dots. Together, Missy and I decided it would be joyful and purposeful to start guided reading in the fall with Tullet’s interactive picture books instead of starting with leveled books. We found that the magic of Tullet’s books created a feeling of joy and a zest for reading that we could never muster through our enthusiasm alone. Setting the tone for guided reading for the year with a book as mystifying as *Say Zoop!* made every student eager for the next guided reading session. As their voices responded to the changing dots with *ohs* and *OHs*, they were engaging in the cognitive work that reading print demands. At the same time, the roots for a year of happiness through literacy learning were being formed. Leveled books came later, but joy came first.

I also meet people like Ted, a third-grade teacher, who begins the school year getting to know every student by finding out about their likes, dislikes, pets, hobbies, hopes, fears, and challenges. Ted is the kind of teacher that his former students gravitate toward because they know he is always available to listen or offer a word of encouragement. One of the first read-alouds Ted does every year is B. J. Novak’s (2014) *The Book With No Pictures*, which introduces his students to the idea that the written word holds a lot of power, that words can be nonsensical, and that words can even be a source of mischief. As Ted reads, the lines of text are designed to ignite collective laughter, and the children begin to learn that this is a classroom where laughter is valued and, in fact, expected.

Missy and Ted recognize that teaching and learning must be driven by joy and purpose. They respond intentionally when learning feels dispirited or they see their class becoming overly stressed. And they recognize that the process of meeting literacy goals must also be a
process that intentionally supports student happiness. Their most trusted method for doing so is to turn to books they know invite students into the learning. They know their students don’t want to be taught at; they want to be a part of.

**SOME BURNING QUESTIONS**

Both in schools and in the general public, we are in the midst of a cultural and scientific revolution. There is a growing interest in the study of happiness and what it means for people of all ages. Books with eye-catching titles like *Flourish* (Seligman 2012), *Drive* (Pink 2009), *Presence* (Cuddy 2015), *Quiet* (Cain 2012), *Mindset* (Dweck 2006), and *Grit* (Duckworth 2016) all explore the factors that influence performance but also sustained happiness. The last decade has seen an explosion of interest in the field of positive psychology, and educators have instituted growth mindset curricula in the hopes of increasing children’s capacities to learn, grow, and persevere. Schools have thoughtfully embedded mindset language and exercises for students to be more optimistic, empathetic, and flexible. Classrooms across the country have instituted brain breaks through engaging videos that prompt children to mimic movements for bursts of physical activity to optimize subsequent thinking. Meditation is becoming increasingly common especially through kid-friendly apps like Headspace. All of this is valuable and important. Yet, when I observe children in school, I wonder what is still missing for many of them to see school as a place consistently driven by and supportive of their happiness.

In her book *Better Than Before*, Gretchen Rubin (2013) writes, “I spend most of my time trying to grasp the obvious—not to see what no one has seen, but to see what’s in plain sight” (3). The diminishing of children’s sustained happiness in school started to feel to me like something that’s in plain sight. So I started to ask myself some questions:

- What is happiness? What does it look like in school? What does it look like in literacy learning?
- In what ways can we make our classrooms more joyful by tapping into students’ hearts and bodies as much as their minds?
- How can we intentionally plan for students’ happiness as well as their understanding? In other words, how can we design our way there?

This book attempts to answer these questions and to give you practical ways to cultivate a culture of happiness in your classroom through an integrated approach to literacy teaching and learning by honoring children’s hearts and bodies as much as their minds. This book is also my response to noticing happiness and life design courses becoming increasingly popular at elite universities including Harvard, Yale, University of Pennsylvania, and Stanford. The
tenets of these courses and the research from these institutions on happiness and well-being have profoundly shaped my thinking and public discourse. Yet, I started to wonder why the strategies that lead to sustained happiness require an Ivy League education. I wanted to take the research on happiness and embed it as a part of literacy learning starting with our youngest elementary school students because all children deserve the possibility of applying happiness techniques to their lives. Literacy instruction as a learning block grounded by stories, sharing, community, and reflection seemed to me the natural instructional space for teachers to integrate happiness techniques.

This book is designed so that you can try new methods and see immediate changes in yourself and your students. In this book, I utilize the concept of an “invitation” as an opportunity to try something with your students. When we receive an invitation in the mail, we immediately feel a sense that we are important at least to the person that sent it. In our classrooms, we can use an “invitations” approach to support students to feel as though they have agency in their own learning process. An invitation is not forced. It is not a requirement. The invitations shared in this book do not replace strategy instruction that has a critical role in literacy instruction. Rather, these invitations complement those strategies to boost student happiness and performance in sustainable ways.

The source of the word *happiness* is the Icelandic word *happ*, which means “luck” or “chance.” It’s the same root for the words *haphazard* and *happenstance*. Yet, children’s happiness cannot be left to chance but rather should be ensured by design. As a field, we have been focused on designing instruction for student understanding for decades. Isn’t it time we designed our instruction for student happiness as well?

**IF NOT NOW, WHEN?**

In 1928, A. A. Milne knew that childhood is a sacred time in its own right. Today, the need for childhood itself to be honored and valued is increasingly urgent. Psychology researcher Peter Gray (2010) explains, “We would like to think of history as progress, but if progress is measured in the mental health and happiness of young people, then we have been going backward at least since the early 1950s.” Several key indicators support Gray’s claim.
According to UNICEF (2007), the children of the United States are the second least happy children in the world as detailed in the UNICEF Report Card on children’s well-being in the twenty-nine wealthiest countries. Rates of depression are ten times higher today than they were in the 1960s, and the average age for the onset of depression is fourteen and a half compared with twenty-nine and a half in 1960 (Gray 2010). According to the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, as many as 60 percent of America’s children feel chronically disengaged from school whether they live in urban, suburban, or rural settings (Klem and Connell 2004). In one study, 61 percent of fourth graders agreed with the statement, “I am happy with my life.” By seventh grade, only 36 percent made the same claim (Klem and Connell 2004).

David Elkind (2007) author of The Power of Play: How Spontaneous, Imaginative Activities Lead to Happier, Healthier Children, offers further startling statistics about the urgency of childhood today. He writes, “At the first ever Surgeon General’s Conference on Children’s Mental Health in 2000, it was reported that ‘growing numbers of children are suffering needlessly because their emotional, behavioral and developmental needs are not being met by the very institutions that were explicitly created to take care of them.’ This may be the first generation of American children who are less healthy than their parents” (x). One such institution is school.

As these and other startling statistics are shared, the need for social-emotional learning in school is getting increased attention. Yet it is often parcelled off as something separate from academic instruction. How we cope day to day with our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and connections to others informs what and how we read, write, listen, and speak. A strong social-emotional self is part of having a strong literacy self. A primary goal of becoming a strong reader and writer is to help one design the life they want to lead. A happy life.

What does a happy life look like? It may look different for each of us but there are some common threads that researchers have found from longitudinal studies. A happy life is associated with feelings of meaning and purpose. A happy life is one where compassion, generosity, and love abound. A happy life is filled with opportunities to feel a sense of accomplishment, taking healthy risks (and succeeding), and failing and trying again. A happy life is one where other people matter.

**HAPPINESS IN YOUR OWN HEART**

Think about your own happiness and where it comes from. Who are the people you love? What are the places you love? What are the things you do that make you happy? What are the small things in life you notice that make you happy?
Turn to a fresh page in a journal or create a new Google Doc and create your own happiness list. Jot whatever comes to mind. It will reaffirm for you the enormous worth in your own life.

Here are some of my jottings when I think of what makes me happy:

1. The sound of Chris, my husband, playing a new song on his ukulele
2. Watching my son, Matthew, climb on boulders in our backyard while acting out stories
3. Talking to my son, Jack, before bed about his day
4. Reading a book with characters I fall in love with
5. The feeling of my “blanket scarf,” a gift from my mom, around my neck
6. Getting a fire going by myself on a winter morning
7. Sitting in the 4:00 sun in the summertime
8. The smell of clementines being peeled
9. Listening to my dad’s voice on a video he’s taken of one of my boys
10. The sound of laughter coming from anyone anytime

My list is about connections and feelings that are basically simple—the people I love being their truest selves, moments of independence and success, being more connected to nature, feeling as though my life has purpose, and that I am needed by others. By listing what makes you happy, you are more able to be wide awake or mindful of what makes you happy. Did you notice that the act of listing what makes you happy immediately makes you happier? You turn your attention more automatically to the sensations that bring sustained happiness.

I recommend starting a list and adding to it when it occurs to you or at a set time in your schedule. A simple place to start this in your classroom is by giving students an opportunity to generate their own happiness lists with reminders at set times in the week to add to their list new things they noticed that made them happy. Building this into a classroom routine helps students visualize the people, places, and moments that make them happy as a habit. In doing so, they can start to learn that they have the power to channel their own happiness, and that in doing so, they can help others grow in their happiness, too.
WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HAPPINESS AND LEARNING

People, everywhere and always, have sought the key to happiness. Aristotle declared happiness to be *summum bonum*, the chief good. Over 2000 years later, the quest for the chief good continues. Yet, what’s new is the growing body of scientific research on what actually makes people happy—and a sense from teachers, administrators, families, and researchers that today’s children are particularly vulnerable when it comes to finding sustained happiness.

When you watch children climbing the steps onto their school bus or walking through the front door of school, they are hoping to have an emotionally enriching and balanced day. Children expect and want well-being at school. They want to be socially connected, to discover new things, and to feel successful thanks to their own efforts. They want to find their purpose.

When you look out into your classroom, what is the emotional temperature of your students? What do you look for? Maybe you look for signs of student engagement like students looking and listening to speakers. Hands in the air. Question posing. You are probably looking for the ways your students feel supported by you and by their peers and by their willingness to ask for help when they need it. You may be noticing the ways that the lesson feels relevant to students and their lives through the ways they talk about what they are learning. Yet, how many of us stop to look for happiness?
Jessica Lahey, a middle school English teacher and author of *The Gift of Failure* (2015), wrote an article for the *New York Times* titled, “Letting Happiness Flourish in the Classroom” (2016). In the article she explains her process of looking for happiness in her classroom: “I stopped looking for happiness long ago. I see it periodically, when the conditions are perfect, and the stars align just so. When happiness strikes in my classroom, I relish it as I would any other rare anomaly, like thundersnow, or a two-faced calf.” I think most of us feel like Lahey when we think about happiness as a priority, especially when faced with an onslaught of new initiatives. So, what does it take for happiness to be a regular sighting, not by chance but by design?

Researchers are looking at happiness in new ways and are finding that emotions are closely related to cognitive, behavioral, motivational, and physiological processes and are also critical for learning and achievement. Dr. Emma Seppala (2017) is the author of *The Happiness Track* and Science Director of Stanford’s Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education. She has found that happy kids show up at school more able to learn because they tend to sleep better and may have healthier immune systems. Seppala explains in the *Times* piece by Lahey, “Happiness is not something we can afford to lose at home or in our classrooms, as it forms the very foundation of deep, meaningful learning.” She further explains, “Happy kids learn faster and think more creatively. Happy kids tend to be more resilient in the face of failures. Happy kids have stronger relationships and make new friends more easily.” Seppala also cautions that we put our children’s happiness at risk when we model the “myths of success: the belief that success is inextricably tied to stress and anxiety, perseverance at all costs, avoidance of personal weakness, and a myopic focus on cultivating expertise in a specialized niche.”

So how can we counter this myth of success in our literacy teaching? We can emphasize strengths while also acknowledging that we all face challenges. We can recognize the signs that learning has become stressful and anxiety producing, and we can counter that by modeling positivity. We can turn to characters that live complex lives but who find happiness by helping others. We can follow up by asking our students every day: “What did you do today that made someone else happy?”

We sometimes assume as educators that students will be happy, engaged, and well behaved in school after they’ve achieved some academic goals. Yet, the skills of happiness and positivity can actually be taught first with the understanding that positive emotions are not simply a phenomenon to enjoy after we have achieved something but are tools we can use to increase our chances of achieving something significant. There are practical ways to foster well-being including the following:
• Develop a positive student/teacher relationship with each student.
• Engage students with relevant, interesting, and compelling lessons.
• Help students identify their strengths—specifically, look for strengths in past experiences, and discuss how to use them in future learning.
• Make students feel special while avoiding empty praise.
• Cultivate hope and optimism by reminding students of previous success from hard work.

These are suggestions we have heard before for good reason. Research reminding us of the benefits of happiness keeps piling up. In many ways, I witness classrooms trying these suggested techniques here and there. But there remains a need to have rituals and routines in place to integrate these techniques into learning itself rather than for them to remain separate. When happiness is seen as something separate from learning, it becomes the first thing to be squeezed out, becoming as regular as thundersnow or the two-faced calf that Lahey describes.

Children are really our best experts on happiness. When we ask kids about what makes them happy and what would make them happier at school, they have simple but profound responses. I often pose to children in schools and in my own life the questions “What makes you happy at school, and what would make you happier at school?” The answers are as varied as children themselves. Some children want more time to read and draw. Not to practice a particular strategy or skill, but simply to read and draw. Other children respond with the hopes of hands-on opportunities like more building time. A frequent response from both boys and girls is the need for more movement and less time sitting on a classroom rug. Many children respond that they want more time outdoors. My oldest son, Jack, responded, “Mom, school would be more fun if we could just talk sometimes and if we were allowed to laugh.” It would be a mistake to assume one certain method, activity, or technique would be best for all children.

Some children will show us through their actions and their words when they find learning joyful. At one of the schools I partner with, I lead an afterschool “litclub” of third, fourth, and fifth graders. All of the children are bilingual learners, and many of them are recent immigrants. The school is located in an area where children are sometimes transient and where food insecurity is a significant challenge. Many of the children live with a single parent, grandparent, or other relative. Our litclub promotes an atmosphere driven by stories, collaboration, and choice.

On the first day I read aloud Eileen Spinelli’s (2008) The Best Story and ask the children what they think the best story is and whether they agree with the characters. One year, a fourth-grade boy named Angel talked back to the text throughout the read-aloud—“That’s
not the best story.” He lay down on the rug and then finally walked away from our circle. He was still figuring out whether he could trust this litclub or whether he could trust me and the others in the group. But as soon as we turned to a discussion of the kinds of promises we could make to one another as members of a litclub, Angel had the first suggestion. He hoped we could have share time when anyone can share something that’s on their mind or something they’ve brought in. After that first afternoon, Angel was the first student to arrive and the last to leave every week for two years. He led our share time and frequently told stories from his life, especially about living with his cousins. He shared his prized Pokemon cards, his comic drawings, and his anime hand-drawn cutout creations. Acknowledging his request for share time was simple. I could have misunderstood Angel entirely in that first read-aloud. I could have chastised him for calling out. I could have seen his departure from our circle as rude. I could have dismissed him from our litclub entirely. I’m grateful that I saw his disruption as fear of the unknown and not as a personal attack. With a little space and the invitation to return and shape our litclub time together, Angel became our strongest contributor. With commitments to one another in place, learning soared. Children read stories, poems, and news articles. They wrote their own narratives and comic books. They created Shadow Puppet digital stories and acted out scripts they wrote themselves. Striving to create a foundation in happiness rooted in understanding of every student can help create the conditions for deep, meaningful learning.
SELF-LITERACY AS A FUNDAMENTAL GOAL OF LITERACY LEARNING

For decades we have been teaching literacy strategies based on what we know about proficient readers and writers. This is important work. Yet, when we reconceptualize literacy strategies as life strategies, then self-literacy, or better understanding yourself, becomes a key goal of every literacy lesson. Self-literacy is the knowledge of your body and your mind and how the two work together to support your thoughts, emotions, movements, and health. Self-literacy is power. It’s nothing short of a miracle that we wake up every morning and our bodies know how to keep our heart beating, our lungs breathing, and our brain working. But we all wake up and experience life differently. When you know yourself, you feel stronger at everything—school, work, sports, friendships, life. When students understand themselves, they can make their way through the world with a deeper knowledge of who they are, who they will be, and how they connect to others in meaningful ways.

Veronica and Monique teach fourth grade in a Title I school outside New York City. Their students are culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse. Some of their students experience homelessness. There are several newcomer students in each of their classrooms learning English for the first time. Nearly one-fourth of their students have special ed intervention. When you walk into Veronica’s and Monique’s classrooms, you see thoughtful instruction, students working in partnerships, and diverse classroom libraries. When I approach children about what they are working on, they say things like “I’m working on my goal as a writer to really grab my reader. I’ve decided to use a question.” and “I’m helping my classmate use Google Translate to help her figure out these directions.” Children are what you might think of as engaged. They have a strong sense of purpose around learning and helping others.

Veronica and Monique wanted to partner with me to explicitly focus on happiness because year after year they witnessed anxiety, stress, and insecurity increase for their students leading up to and during testing season. Veronica and Monique wanted to try something that would be a simple routine that wouldn’t take much class time that the students could ultimately take ownership of each day. We decided to introduce the students to a new five-minute journaling routine. Every day as part of their morning routine, students jotted in their journals responses to the same three prompts:
I am grateful for ________________________.

What would make today great?

I am ________________________.

Then at the end of the school day before dismissal, they jotted down two more responses to the prompts:

___________________________ was amazing today.

Something I learned today ________________________.
Before the journaling project began, we asked students to complete a short survey to
gauge their gratitude about school, their friends and family, their feelings about learning,
and how much agency they felt they had in their day. After only one month (twenty days)
of journaling, we administered the same survey. In that short time, we found that most
students looked forward to school more; felt more proud of themselves; felt more gratitude
toward friends, family, and school; and had a greater sense of agency about their attitudes
and actions such as their willingness to ask a question and their willingness to try something
difficult again. With just five minutes a day and twenty days of the same journaling routine,
we were starting to impact children’s mindsets to recognize the sources of their own happi-
ness. This is consistent with research on habit formation that shows us that it takes twenty
days to change your habits for the long term. As Will Durant (paraphrasing Aristotle) wrote,
“We are what we repeatedly do” (not what we do once in a while) (1926, 87). Additionally, the act of writing down their short responses was critical to the process. To write something down is to make it tangible. To make it known. To commit. Literacy was integral to their happiness development.

When we looked at their journal responses, we started to take notice of the most common responses, but we also took note of things that surprised us. The most common things students were grateful for were not surprising: their friends, family, mom, teachers, having a home, dad, pets, and body. But their gratitude statements also included things like “I am grateful when people respect me” and “I am grateful for making other kids laugh.” These responses showed the understanding that these fourth graders had that making others happy is the greatest source of finding sustained happiness in our own lives. Research shows they’re right.

Perhaps most revealing of all were their “I Am” statements that were as varied as they are. The most common “I Am” statements were: “I am strong”; “I am smart”; “I am grateful”; and “I am a good friend.” We found their responses uplifting and affirming in many ways. The journaling process helped students recognize the good inside of them especially with statements like: “I am a miracle”; “I am trying my best”; “I am ready for anything.” But students also used this as a space to write things that gave us great pause including: “I am trying not to talk” and “I can make it through the day.” When fourth graders authentically reflect that they are trying to make it through the day, there is work to be done to give all students a foundation in the life strategies that can help build a happy life. Literacy learning is a natural pathway to get there.

Strategically and intentionally supporting students to write down their thoughts in this way did not require a big time commitment. It was five minute each day. It did require a belief that daily writing could be a path toward student happiness. It required a commitment to the journaling practice knowing that it could support students with the kind of self-literacy that can lead to sustained happiness.

When I’ve shared this five-minute journaling technique with teachers around the country, they’ve sent me back their students’ responses: “I am grateful for my dog, Gussie Wussie”; “Something that would make today great would be if the sun came out”; “Something that would make today great would be if I got to talk to my cousins”; “I am courageous and daring.” One teacher shared with me that she noticed one girl wrote “I am sad” three days in a row and thanks to the five-minute journaling practice, she knew she needed to approach her to offer help. She also bravely raised the question: But, why haven’t I helped yet? The technique is simple, but the results are profound.
There are other researchers and practitioners engaging in the wholehearted work of linking literacy learning with learning about life. Dr. Martin Seligman, one of the first and leading voices of positive psychology, studied eight classes of middle school students who read *Lord of the Flies* (Golding 1954) and other novels for a literature course. They were then randomly assigned to two groups: one group took eighty-minute classes on kindness and other topics that related to the books and was asked to do three kind deeds in their communities, while the other was given no positive psychology training. Two years later, Seligman, along with other colleagues, looked at how the students who took a year of literature courses infused with positive psychology compared with peers who had literature alone and found a significant difference in their school performance. The courses that incorporated elements of positive psychology linked the literature they were reading to actions students could take in their own lives to focus on the happiness of others. The results showed that the application of positive psychology lessons stuck with the students over time. New habits and mindsets had been formed. Seligman explains, “The kids who had the positive psychology literature courses were rated by their teacher as having higher social skills. Their zest for learning is higher and their grades are better.” The results in many ways replicated what Veronica, Monique, and I found in our study of their fourth graders—that we can design experiences for students that link literacy experiences with sustained, student happiness.

Our classrooms can create opportunities for students to notice what they think, how they act, and how they feel about themselves and to bravely share those noticings as a part of literacy learning. For example, at the start of the school year we can ask students to write, draw, and share things like:

- What three words best describe you?
- What is unique about you that leads to your happiest times?
- What are your strengths, and how can you use them?
When I asked these questions to students in my afterschool litclub, I heard from Monika that “my strengths are my confidence and my risk-taking in meeting new people.” Monika was new to the school that year, but you would never know that looking at her ease with others in the group, especially when it came time to share what books they loved. Dayana told our group that her strength was something we couldn’t see but that was always a part of her—her heart. Lester and Alan opened their notebooks and decided to make “I Am” brainstorm maps that listed words that they felt best described them.

When we give students a chance to self-reflect, we can then leverage this self-recognition by asking the same questions about characters to help deepen students’ understanding of stories. This sparks closer reading, deeper thinking, and more stamina, which are skills we all strive for in our literacy teaching. After writing their own “I Am” brainstorms, Lester and Alan then applied the same thinking to the characters Square and Triangle from the eponymous books by Mac Barnett and Jon Klassen (2017, 2018). This in turn led them to write their own shape stories modeled after Square and Triangle (“Oval and Diamond”) with characters that had equally unique qualities. In reading the boys’ “Oval and Diamond” story, you can see the ways that they show readers that friendship is complicated and sometimes thinking of someone else’s happiness first can lead to finding your own happiness.

Jotting Character Traits
“Oval and Diamond” Story Plan and Writing Based on Mac Barnett and Jon Klassen’s Books *Triangle* and *Square*
In addition to considering their own strengths and the strengths of characters, what if students were supported to notice and pay attention to when they are enjoying what they are doing in school and when they are bored? Or when they are happy and when they are frustrated? Or when they are interested and when they are confused? To simply experience and honor these feelings and reactions and then to note them? That would be self-literacy and metacognition at its highest and most important level—to be aware of your own thought process about yourself and to be aware of the things you love.

What does this look like in the context of literacy teaching and learning? In addition to focusing on recognizing patterns in text, students can also recognize patterns in themselves. Although we have long advocated for readers to find authors, genres, and series that shape their reading identities, perhaps we can do more to support students to acknowledge how their reading is changing their thinking about themselves or others. At the end of every guided reading lesson, what if we asked students, “What made you feel strong today as a reader?” What if we had students high-five their neighbor after independent reading for a job well done? What if when they thought they did something amazing as readers, kids were encouraged to do a power pose that allowed their bodies to shape their minds? What if after a character-driven read-aloud, students created drawings of what was in the character’s heart as well as their own? The possibilities for self-literacy connections are a major emphasis of the framing of this book and the invitations presented.

HAPPINESS AND BECOMING A READER AND WRITER

Linking literacy learning with what we know from the science of happiness is possible. Looking globally can help. In July 2018, the Dalai Lama launched a happiness curriculum for over 800,000 children in Delhi’s Government Schools, pioneering a much-needed response to promote children’s mental well-being. Why? India has one of the highest teen suicide rates. This happiness curriculum is aimed at an education for the heart as much as an education for the mind and includes meditation, mental exercises, and powerful narratives for students to interpret and discuss. This may be the beginning of a global revolution in education to make students’ well-being and the fulfillment of their emotions as important as academic achievement. The pathway to get there is through stories, reflection, and discussion—all critical literacy engagements we can design instruction around.

Yet, in addition to designing curriculum that intentionally embeds stories, reflection, and discussion (all explored more in the pillars to come), we can also change how we give feedback to students based on what we know from the science of happiness. After all, learning to read and learning to write are actually quite hard. A lot of repetition, practice, and hard
work goes into growing our brains as readers and writers. The good news is that our goals of supporting students to grow in their skills and strategies as readers, writers, and communicators can support our goals of helping students grow in their happiness. We want students to be fluent, proficient, self-driven readers. We also want students to find joy now and to develop the roots in childhood of adult happiness. These four simple steps can be used to start bridging literacy instruction with intentional happiness using whatever curriculum might be guiding your instruction by focusing on how you give feedback to students:

- **Step One: Small Moments of Joy**—focus on noticing and naming small moments of joy.
- **Step Two: Look Forward to Practice**—help students look forward to the practice necessary to get good at anything, especially things they care about and are interested in.
- **Step Three: Mastery Comes from Effort**—support students to feel a sense of mastery that comes from effort.
- **Step Four: Positive Recognition**—provide ways for students to garner recognition from their peers and teachers.

What does that look like in practice? Manny is a first-grade reader who is described by his teacher as persistent. He is a social member of the class and enjoys working in reading partnerships. He has worked hard all year to focus during word study instruction so that he now applies his phonics knowledge to read words with greater accuracy and automaticity. He has started to take home books from the Fly Guy series (Arnold 2005) because he thinks they’re funny and because he also knows they are books that challenge him to attend to print. Reading assessments show that Manny’s reading behaviors are strongly associated with using meaning and syntax cues, and he is working on attending to print and applying strategies to figure out unknown words. This is hard work for a first grader when vowel patterns they may not have learned yet start to appear in books. Manny has a teacher who knows a great deal about how she can support her students to find joy in the process of becoming a stronger reader and writer. Here are some of the ways she has focused on applying the science of happiness into her conferences with Manny:
Think about your own literacy instruction. What are places where you can naturally support students to grow in their happiness as readers and writers? Where can you shift your language practices to help students recognize small moments of joy in their growth as literacy learners, the value of practice, and the feelings associated with mastery? And where can you authentically recognize students and build a culture of recognition?

I often took a class list and wrote Recognition at the top. Every time I recognized a student for something positive, I put a check mark by their name. When you start to collect this recognition data, you might start to see that certain students routinely get recognized more than others. What if every child heard their name associated with something positive that came from hard work and strategic practice every day? The chapters to come go beyond these four simple steps, but this is a way to start right now changing your language practices to make happiness formation a core tenet of your teaching.

**DESIGN FOR IT!**

Before I was a teacher, I studied architecture. I learned pretty quickly that I was not very good at drawing but I was good at designing. And every design starts with a problem. As a nation, the research is clear—our children’s lack of happiness is a problem. When faced with the problem of helping our students become productive and happy people, design thinking can help. Designers imagine things that don’t yet exist, and then they build them, and then the world changes. But designing for happiness cannot come from spreadsheets. It has to come from kidwatching, questioning, and intentional planning. This book is here to help.
When you are a designer, you are willing to ask hard questions, and when you are willing to ask those questions, you realize you have the power to design solutions. Here are some hard questions worthy of asking that the chapters to come will help you answer:

• In what ways is connection a driving force in your literacy instruction? Does every student feel connected when they walk in the room? How can connections be strengthened?
• What are the choices you offer students as readers and writers? If more choice is given, what kind of effect would it have on students? What do you need to try to expand the choices they have?
• How do your students typically respond to challenges? How can students be supported to reframe challenges as learners as opportunities?
• How could your language choices shift to help students take ownership of their learning and have a positive narrative about themselves as learners?
• What changes would you hope to instill in your students now and for their future selves, so that they might live lives where happiness matters as much as achievement?

This book is organized to help you answer these questions and to design your literacy classroom as a place where student happiness is as great a priority as their knowledge, skills, and understanding.

Every teacher in this book is a designer. Like other kinds of designers, they don’t think their way forward. They build their way forward. In education, we have frameworks for how to approach problems. One way we do that is through if . . . then thinking. If we do \( a \), \( b \), and \( c \) . . . then, we will get \( x \), \( y \), and \( z \). If we use small-group instruction, then more children will get targeted attention. If we explicitly teach phonics, then more children will gain automaticity as readers. If we model with our own writing, then more children will see themselves as writers. I believe in all of these important if . . . then statements that are worthy of our time, attention, and consideration, and many great books have been written to help us get better at these things. This book represents the biggest if . . . then facing us today. If we want our children to grow up with the roots for lifelong happiness, then our schools must change. Our classrooms must change. Our instruction must change. Our relationships must change. Every chapter has this big idea in mind. Every chapter offers a pillar to stand on to know that you are designing joyful instruction with your students’ happiness and their success as literacy learners in mind.

The seven pillars together can help you design a joyful, purposeful year that you and your students remember as a source of happiness. The first pillar, Connection, is designed to help you set the stage for a year of rich social and emotional connections for your students as a
central part of literacy learning. If connection is why we are here, then it’s the very foundation of our happiness and our classrooms. The second pillar, *Choice*, is designed to offer more specifics about the kinds of choices we can offer students as a part of literacy instruction to let students grow as readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and creators. The third pillar, *Challenge*, is designed to help you motivate students in simple, sustainable ways, so that students consistently tap into their internal motivation to outgrow themselves as literacy learners. The fourth pillar, *Play*, is designed to help you envision the ways literacy learning can be inherently playful across the grade levels. The fifth pillar, *Story*, is designed to help you make stories the heart of literacy learning so that students continuously ask “What’s the story here?” whether they are reading print, digital, or multimedia texts or whether they are reading the interactions they have with others. This chapter will also help your students tell stories from their own lives and from their imaginations, giving them essential skills for making their ideas heard in the world. When we feel heard, we feel recognized. The sixth pillar, *Discovery*, is designed to help you bring a sense of awe and wonder into the literacy learning process. The final pillar, *Movement*, is designed to help you leverage the heart-mind-body connections in your students. Movement is a right for students, not a privilege.

If you want a classroom that prioritizes student happiness as much as their achievement, then this book is for you. At its heart, this book is an invitation to try something new. Hopefully, you have found inspiration in these pages already to try something new. There are many more ideas and invitations to come.
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