

Fall 2024 Glassman Distinguished Speaker - Samina Mishra: A Report

By Mary Schellenberg



Samina Mishra (in the center) at Evergreen Terrace, reading one of her books to children

Samina Mishra was the University Honors Program's Glassman Speaker for the Fall semester of 2024, where I was able to meet her and ask a few questions about

her life and career. Mishra grew up in Delhi, India where she was taught many literary works from the West, and more specifically, many of Enid Blyton's works: a British writer whose works are largely popular and translated into many different languages.

Growing up in India, Mishra developed a strong love for Indian cinema, especially the Hindi film industry; this love blossomed in film school and led to her career as a filmmaker. Her most recent documentary, "Happiness Class," stems from Mishra's



personal interest in childhood experience, and the film dives headfirst into the classrooms of Delhi. This arena of the school resonates with her particularly, as she teaches art to children at both elite and working-class schools. Additionally, she educates teachers with techniques to listen to children's voices; voices that are either denied or ignored by adults.

Samina Mishra's documentary "Happiness Class" follows the establishment of the *Happiness Curriculum* by the government of New Delhi in its schools. The curriculum was inspired by His Holiness, the Dalai Lama with the goal of assisting children's ability to deal with the stress and challenges of life. Mishra found herself enjoying listening to children and used it to develop an understanding of children's experiences – and in the context of this film, a way of educating them. Her film then springs from the question: *What does it mean to turn childhood experience and perspective into curriculum?*



Through the course of the film, we meet children from varied backgrounds. There are Afghan refugee children, Muslim children forced to deal with Islamophobia, and struggling working class children. Yet, their concerns and joys remain, even as they flow from one society to another, childlike and filled with hope. One of Mishra's long-term commitments has been to listen to how children, many of whom are now displaced, understand citizenship. On a smaller scale, the documentary introduces the objective nature of happiness, and just how large of an influence the parents and home-life of a child

shapes their view of happiness. In this way, “Happiness Class” asks its audience why it is important for children to be happy, and how the audience themselves can be happy also.

“Happiness Class”

Curriculum is almost always designed from the position of an adult, but the film “Happiness



Class,” directed by Samina Mishra, investigates what happens when Happiness Curriculum is looked at from the perspective of a child.

The documentary begins by stating that the Happiness Curriculum instituted in Delhi was launched in 2018 and hoped to develop

more compassionate citizens. Not only do the children in the documentary seem to enjoy the Happiness Curriculum, but they understand its importance. Siddhant, a student in grade eight, explicitly states that education is important, though education looks different for him; this introduces the objective nature of both education and happiness. In one moment of the film, a teacher demonstrates a breathing technique in class with his eyes closed. She explains that the day’s activity involves “enjoying ourselves,” and asks the students “what [they] like and what’s good for [them].” The young boys provide some serious and silly responses like these: video games, fruits, troubling old people, drinking alcohol, and cutting trees. This activity highlights the meditative style of activities Happiness Curriculum involves, as well as the students’ reaction to this teaching. It is then these varying answers from students, as well as interviews from citizens on the street, that reflect the objective nature of happiness.

The documentary spends time interviewing random individuals on the streets of Delhi, all of which have mixed views on happiness. Many are sad, some are happy, some explain that money is what makes you happy, and others relate money is the root of sadness. While there is a great focus on making oneself happy, even the concept itself cannot be applied to everyone. To emphasize this, a guest teacher in the school system relates her procedure of a mid-day cool down as a part of the curriculum. Though true, she is fighting to have time for *herself*. Swati, another teacher, explains the everyday battle of teaching, and how education goes beyond teaching schoolwork; it is teaching *everything*. It is interesting to note the teachers' focus on students, while they themselves are either unhappy or struggling. In a similar manner, another teacher explains how parents also lack happiness, especially as fifteen out of twenty-five of them are working. They are suffering from the burden of work, highlighting the threat of children feeling like education is a burden itself. Unfortunately, seventeen out of twenty-five of the students in a classroom in the documentary claim to not feel passionate about happiness. So, what makes them feel that way?

While the film introduces the benefit of education and a happy child, it also shows what is behind the scenes in their lives; one child in the documentary details getting in trouble for sitting when they were supposed to be relieving tension and freshening their minds; this student expresses that when they begin to think of tests and marks, they are consumed by tension. Another child notes pressure from his parents to “study, study, study.” So, even when students utilize techniques and methods incorporated into Happiness Curriculum, the issues they are struggling with at home, or the focus of their mind during such practices, are not instantly corrected. One powerful image the documentary uses is of a textbook flipping continuously as voices grow louder in the background, only for the sound to abruptly stop and the child to lay his

head on his desk. The outside influence on these children is strong, *but* that reinforces their need for mindful thinking or quiet moments.

Muhammed Mustaqim, a father and built-in teacher, explains how he educates his children at home in hopes of them earning an education he was not as fortunate to receive. He claims, “education helps with anything.” Again, his hope is for his children to move beyond him, a life-long member of the working-class. Mustaqim’s background influenced his need to educate his children, paralleling the way one’s background impacts their views and feelings of happiness. For students like Farhan, who moved from Afghanistan to Delhi to study, happiness is *necessary*. That is something the documentary emphasizes, especially through its animation that resembles the crayon-art of students within the documentary. The film is a door onto the stage of real-life, and these animated crayon-art images appearing incrementally throughout the film remind the audience that this is a story of children; real-life children and outcomes. In this way, emphasis is placed on just how impressionable children are. Some speak of war, injuries, and fighting, all of which they were exposed to at young ages. One child even states, “one person has to stop, or it’ll never end.” Even this small excerpt reinforces the need for children to forget such serious troubles.

The film “Happiness Class” frames happiness through the lens of school children, though it includes the necessary feature of understanding and including the home lives and backgrounds of such children; without this, the audience would fail to truly understand how happiness is both objective and necessary for everyone. This is demonstrated through one exercise for “self-expression” that involves the class, both teacher and student, reciting gratitude statements. Acknowledging similarities between adults and children is necessary, as they both struggle and fight for happiness. Similarly, the parents of children who attend the “School of Excellence”

relate how their children go to school happy and return home happy. Although true, their parents are stuck worrying about kidnappers as their children walk home, and the father works a grueling overnight shift to provide for his family. What can be commended in this case, is the family and state's emphasis on education, especially as it benefits the children's happiness. But, it seems there is a universal need for happiness; something this curriculum aspires to and is maybe just starting to provide for children and their teachers.

Afterword

After the showing of Samina Mishra's film at, the audience was able to ask her questions which I feel provide extra information on the making of the film, when it was filmed, reasons behind various artistic additions, and Mishra's personal thoughts and feelings regarding the documentary. These questions are listed below with a summarized version of her answer.

Q: Children are so performative, especially with social media's growing popularity and influence, so how did you capture them authentically?

A: One gives up the idea of authenticity when they put a camera in someone's face. Therefore, it is more meaningful if you can see the context in which the children answer. Although true, she still struggled and dealt with how to convey a frame in which these conversations took place - and not just illicit responses the audience would feel are emotional and/or meaningful. All of the first conversations with children were shot on Mishra's iPhone.

Q: Can you explain the animation?

A: While thinking of what the film would be, she planned interviews, stylized shots, and animations. COVID-19 shut things down after the rough cut was complete. This meant she could

not shoot anymore as schools had shut down. Because of this, animations filled the gap and became *her* voice. She worked with an animator and wanted organic animation - similar to what already appeared in the film: child-like drawings (stick figures and crayon/pastel art).

Q: How do grownups find happiness/ apply this documentary to themselves?

A: Mishra has found the benefit of mindfulness and meditation of sorts, though an overreliance on it, and the claim that it will solely resolve your problems, is not the appropriate solution for happiness. She does believe a sort of pause in our everyday life is helpful. She says working with children helps us cope with the news we see nowadays. Because children have their whole lives in front of them, who would be more hopeful than them? No one.

For more information on the Samina Mishra's documentary "Happiness Class," email happinessclassdocfilm@gmail.com. You can also find the documentary on YouTube by going to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAdXUV1g7Ps>