



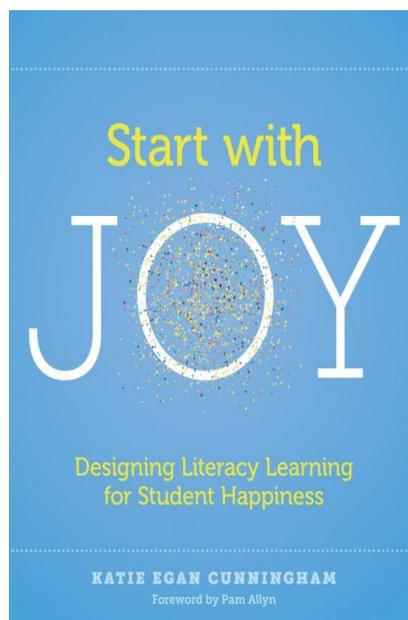
Egan Cunningham, K. (2020). *Start with joy: Designing literacy learning for student happiness*. Stenhouse Publishers.

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Katie Egan Cunningham's *Start with Joy*: invites educators to prioritize students' happiness and make joy the common thread of daily literacy instruction. Through the exploration of what she calls the "seven pillars," the author encourages educators to make happiness a priority in their planning and teaching. She claims that joy is the catalyst for learning and that when instruction is designed around students' happiness, students find learning to be more purposeful and engaging. The author uses the seven pillars of connection, choice, challenge, play, story, discovery, and movement as a blueprint for educators in designing daily literacy routines and instructional practices that develop students' happiness alongside their knowledge and skills.



Egan Cunningham has been an educator for more than 20 years in various roles, such as a classroom teacher, literacy specialist, and consultant. Now an associate professor at Manhattanville College, she believes that happiness must be a priority in the educational environment. She argues that when teachers design literacy with joy in mind, learning becomes more authentic and memorable for students. The stories she tells in connection with the research and strategies she provides are ones from her personal experiences, making the content both meaningful and relevant to educators in a variety of contexts.

The author observes that factors influencing student performance, such as happiness, have been frequently explored in the last 10 years. She discusses how schools have responded to the findings by instituting growth mindset curricula, yet a focus on components of joy and happiness are still not present in our U.S. classrooms. Referencing research published by UNICEF, she states that children in the US are among the least happy children in the world. Elkind (2007) says that this is largely because institutions like schools are not meeting the behavioral, emotional, and developmental needs of the students they serve. While this finding has given way to social emotional learning curricula in districts and schools, the author believes it is often “parceled off as something separate from academic instruction” (p. 8).

Citing researchers such as Hone et al. (2014) and Seligman (2011) who have concluded that happiness is often associated with feelings of purpose and meaning, Egan Cunningham argues that this same happiness can be found in literacy instruction that is intentionally designed around students’ emotions and interpersonal connections. Fredrickson (2001) and Suldo (2016) believe that positive emotions yield positive outcomes. When experiences produce positive emotions, individuals are more likely to face challenges, demonstrate flexibility, and connect with others. Stiglbauer et al. (2013) found that positive experiences in schools result in students who feel more connected to others, are confident in their academic abilities, and find value in their education. Suldo explains that these positive emotions at school often lead to an upward spiral in overall happiness and well-being. Egan Cunningham bases her book on these findings and provides educators with applicable literacy strategies and resources to foster positive emotions and experiences in classroom environments.

This book is structured into three parts: the pillars, the “invitations,” and an appendix of resources for the reader. The first part of the book provides an understanding of the foundational pillars for educators as they design literacy instruction and practices with happiness in mind. Each pillar is supported by stories, strategies, and research to encourage educators to implement these core principles in their own classrooms and everyday practices. The second part of the book includes invitations, or supplemental lesson plans, connected to the pillars that are designed to help students reclaim meaning and joy in the learning process. The third part of the book is an appendix that provides a variety of teaching tools such as journaling prompts, happiness story frames, and media recommendations to engage students.

Throughout the book, the author extensively describes each of the seven pillars (connection, choice, challenge, play, story, discovery, and movement) that foster purposeful and engaging literacy instruction. The personal stories coupled with classroom applications invite educators to visualize and determine how the resources provided might be utilized with their own students to foster joy in the classroom.

Connection is the need to create opportunities for students to connect and engage with others. Citing evidence showing that happy people have plenty of quality relationships in their life, Egan Cunningham argues that literacy instruction can be designed in a way that builds relationships and makes others feel valued.

When students have *choice*, higher levels of motivation and engagement are displayed. This pillar focuses on the belief that teachers can design instruction that facilitates and fosters student choice to help drive student autonomy and agency.

Educators need to design literacy instruction that encourages students to take on their own *challenges* and find purpose in the learning process. Deci (1975) explained that sustained attention and engagement are often connected to autonomy and the ability to focus one's attention on what matters most. While the author recognizes that educators cannot abandon the curriculum and standards, she recommends that educators create space for students to set clear learning goals for each lesson.

Through *play*, children build their imagination, navigate social interactions, learn to problem solve, and find joy. Egan Cunningham claims that play "activates iterative thinking and an engaged brain" (p. 90). She believes that play leads students to see the power of practice. When students engage in repeated practice, they experience a sense of mastery. It is this feeling of mastery that builds self-esteem and motivation in the learning process.

A *story*-centered classroom fosters students' abilities to share their narrative with others. Egan Cunningham states, "When children have a foundation in narrative and how stories work, they are able to devote brain power to the important nuances of stories that help us deepen our understanding" (p. 102).

The goal of an inquiry-driven classroom is to foster opportunities for students to wonder, *discover*, notice, and explore. Reading books that leave us thinking or asking questions encourages students to discover new information and ways of understanding. Through the pillar of discovery, the author recommends that educators model how they ask questions to propel their own understanding and support students in asking questions to discover things about themselves and the world they live in.

The final pillar stresses the importance of designing instruction with *movement* in mind. Egan Cunningham believes that incorporating intentional opportunities for students to use their bodies helps strengthen students' connections to stories and the characters in them. She also claims that joy, meaning, and purpose increase when students have both a physical and mental presence with content.

Though this book is easily navigated with practical strategies and applications for educators, secondary educators may note some weaknesses. Many of the strategies, lesson invitations, and resources are geared to elementary students and educators, potentially leaving many secondary educators to ponder how the concepts and strategies could be modified and

adapted to their learning environments and the needs of their students. In addition, though the mentor text list is extensive and high quality, the focus is on children's literature, making opportunities for older students to connect to the characters and their experiences more challenging.

Start with Joy creates a pathway for educators to explore routines and instructional practices with the emotional needs of students at the forefront. This book will likely prompt educators to consider the current literacy practices they are implementing and how they might redesign routines and procedures to lead with joy and student happiness. As educators look to make these adaptations, Egan Cunningham provides a plethora of instructional strategies and resources that educators could modify and apply in their classrooms. As educators look to welcome students back into traditional learning environments, they must consider the emotional and psychological distress the pandemic has caused. Students will be seeking opportunities to connect with others and engage in hands-on opportunities to play and discover the literacy world around them. Teachers can redesign literacy instruction that keeps the needs and interests of students at the core. This book offers a unique perspective with practical approaches to consider when designing purposeful and meaningful instruction that fosters happier lives.

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About the Reviewer

Jennifer Lemke has been an educator for 16 years serving as a classroom teacher, literacy interventionist, new teacher mentor, and literacy instructor. Her literacy passions and research focus on student engagement, multicultural literature, and literacy integration. She is currently an assistant professor at the University of Nebraska-Omaha.



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