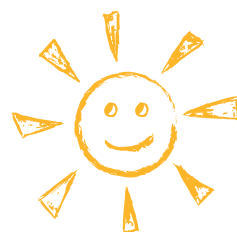




United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Bangkok Office
Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau
for Education



HAPPY SCHOOLS!

A Framework for Learner Well-being in the Asia-Pacific





Executive Summary

All human beings aspire to be happy, and as the philosopher Aristotle is often cited to have said: ‘Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence’ (Crisp, 2000). Indeed, all human endeavours, starting from birth and throughout life, are pursued to this end, and require for happiness to be embedded within them. The schooling experience is perhaps the most influential of these endeavours in terms of shaping the course of our lives. Schools that can promote happiness, referred to in this report as ‘happy schools’, are key to ensuring better well-being, health, and achievement as well as success in future life and work. Education systems must also value the unique strengths and talents of learners by recognizing that there are ‘multiple intelligences’ that each deserve equal importance (Gardner, 1993). As such, promoting learner happiness and well-being in schools does not imply that learning be made easier or require less effort, but rather, that such approaches could help fuel a genuine love of learning in and of itself.

A number of external and internal factors are undermining learner happiness, which influence the way that we view not only the quality of life but also the quality of education. Firstly, external factors such as increasing inequality, growing intolerance and the rise of violent extremism are all creating unhappier societies. As a result, schools are also facing increased cases of bullying from within, while at the same time increasingly becoming a target of violent attacks from outside actors. Our fast-paced world driven by technological advancement has also become rife with competition and ‘information overload’, leading to an endless race where we increasingly focus on ‘the numbers’ – whether in terms of a country’s economic development or in terms of educational outcomes. Secondly, internal factors within school systems such as poor learning environments, insensitivity of educators, obsolete curricula as well as an overemphasis on academic content and test scores, are all contributing to creating unhappier schools. Unfortunately, those elements that are recognized as contributing to enhancing happiness, whether in schools, life or work, are rarely counted as part of the equation.

In recent years, however, happiness has been recognized, both in global agenda-setting as well as in countries’ development and education policies, as an important goal to be pursued. Notable examples include the 2011 United Nations General Assembly Resolution devoted to happiness, and the references to well-being throughout the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Growing efforts to measure happiness have also coincided with increased efforts to measure the quality of education, for instance through global indices and international student assessments.

In view of the important relationship between happiness and the quality of education, in June 2014 UNESCO Bangkok launched the Happy Schools Project. **This report presents the Happy Schools Framework and aims to bring these two elements together by calling for education systems to shift away from traditional measures and to instead embrace a diversity of talents and intelligences by recognizing values, strengths and competencies that contribute to enhancing happiness.** Or in other words, it calls on the need for education systems to ‘measure what we treasure’: ‘If you treasure it, measure it. If schools do not measure the well-being of their



children but do measure their intellectual development, the latter will always take precedence' (Layard and Hagell, 2015). Aimed at influencing policymakers as well as engaging the school level, it is hoped that this report and the Happy Schools Framework therein will provide an integral reference in view of rethinking conceptions of the quality of learning so as to look beyond strictly academic domains.

This report presents the findings of a study based on several research methods, including a desk study, a survey, a seminar and a workshop with school-level stakeholders. It explores the global and regional context in terms of theories of happiness and global initiatives, and how happiness is reflected in the development and education policies of selected countries in the Asia-Pacific region. It then presents the main outcome of the study: the Happy Schools Framework, which consists of 22 criteria for a happy school, as well as examples of strategies for reaching each of the criteria in schools.

Global and Regional Context

Theories of Happiness

Dating back to ancient philosophers until today, happiness has always been a fascinating subject of enquiry. An examination of the various definitions of happiness among ancient thinkers such as the Buddha, Aristotle and Confucius, along with thinkers from the Enlightenment era until the present day, can identify a number of similarities that are at the heart of the concept of Happy Schools. Firstly, happiness is seen as something that is collective based on positive friendships and relationships. As outlined in *The Dhammapada*, or teachings of the Buddha, 'happiness is having friends when the need arises' (Fronsdal, 2005, p. 80). Secondly, they identify happiness as something that can be learnt, as well as learning being a source of happiness in and of itself, which is achieved through being virtuous and by enhancing relevant values and competencies (Beebe, 2003; Yao, 2003). Finally, they also recognize that education is something that is essentially multidimensional (Newman, 2010; Jowett, n.d.).

Thinkers of the Enlightenment such as John Locke and Johan Pestolazzi also examined the multidimensional nature of education noting that education should ensure learners' cognitive, emotional and physical development (Aldrich, 1994; Brühlmeier, 2010). The Positive Psychology movement which was founded in the 1990s and is often referred to as the 'science of happiness', recognizes a number of 'character strengths' that enhance happiness such as creativity, perseverance, kindness and teamwork among many others (Peterson and Seligman, 2004), and has also been a notable development. Based on Positive Psychology, Positive Education is defined by the International Positive Education Network as the 'double helix' of academics coupled with well-being and character (IPEN, 2016b), with evidence showing that 'more well-being is synergetic with better learning' (Seligman et. al., 2009).



Global Initiatives

Happiness is today at the top of the global policy agenda, with the United Nations General Assembly's 2011 Resolution recognizing 'the pursuit of happiness as a fundamental human goal' (United Nations General Assembly, 2011). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also promote well-being across the various goals and targets. SDG4, the goal dedicated to quality education, captures many aspects of great relevance to the concept of Happy Schools. In particular, Target 4.7 is dedicated to the acquisition of knowledge and skills that can promote sustainable development through education for global citizenship and a culture of peace. The emphasis on skills relating to human behaviours and characteristics such as creativity, empathy, teamwork and communication, mirror the 'character strengths' identified in Positive Psychology as those necessary for enhancing happiness and well-being. These are also reflected in UNESCO's concepts of Learning to Live Together and Learning to Be. While Learning to Live Together focuses on 'understanding of others', Learning to Be focuses on the 'richness' of the learners' personality and expression (Delors et. al., 1996; Faure et. al., 1972).

Other global initiatives have also sought to measure happiness and well-being. These include efforts to measure countries' levels of happiness and well-being through global indices such as the *World Happiness Report*, the Happy Planet Index, the World Values survey and the Better Life Index. Similarly, in an effort to measure student happiness and explore the link between happiness and learning outcomes, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), one of the main measures of international student learning achievement, included indicators on student happiness in its 2012 assessment, and will explore the link between well-being and learning outcomes in 2018 (OECD, 2015a).

Happiness in Policy

In recent years, various countries have made happiness either a specific goal of their development and education policies or have included elements relating to happiness in their policy frameworks. This report briefly examines the policies of five such countries: Bhutan, Japan, Republic of Korea, Singapore and Vanuatu, which each have a unique interpretation of happiness and well-being.

Bhutan is renowned for its policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and in 2010 developed a GNH index, featuring indicators that measure various aspects of education and psychological well-being. Bhutan's 2011 policy of Educating for GNH seeks to use education as a means to achieve GNH and places importance on sustainability and protection of the environment while also promoting the concept of 'Green Schools for a Green Bhutan' (Drapka and Dorji, 2013).

In **Japan**, the Cabinet Office established the Commission on Measuring Well-being in 2010 and conducted its first Quality of Life Survey in 2012 in response to growing national concern over mental health issues and high levels of stress, including among children. According to results of the 2010 National Livelihood Survey, the main cause of stress among respondents aged 12-19 years old was reported as related to academic performance and examinations (Ministry of Health, Labor



and Welfare [Japan], 2010). In education, the 2007 Revision of the School Education Act had already represented a major shift in the focus of education with many aspects of great relevance to the concept of Happy Schools (MEXT, 2011). In particular, the principle of ‘Zest for Living’ – referring to balance between academic prowess, a well-rounded character and mental and physical health - is found in national curriculum guidelines (MEXT, n.d.).

Despite the **Republic of Korea** being one of the highest performing countries in PISA, the 2012 results also showed that Korean 15-year-olds report being the unhappiest among all participating countries (OECD, 2013). Experts believe that this stems from high student workloads in preparation for high-stakes exams, and also from pressure parents put on their children to obtain high grades (Korean Institution for Health and Social Affairs, 2013). The pressure to succeed is viewed as driven by an increasingly competitive society, which as a consequence, has led to a lack of importance placed on ‘non-academic’ skills that encourage students to develop ‘healthy and moral personalities’ both in school and at home (Lee, 2012). Recognizing these issues, the Government of the Republic of Korea developed the policy of ‘Happy Education for All: Creative Talent Shapes the Future’, which introduced initiatives such as the ‘exam-free’ semester, character building and violence-free schools, with the aim of increasing happiness and well-being among learners (Ministry of Education [Republic of Korea], 2013).

In **Singapore**, a similar concern over high levels of student stress in schools has been observed, with some commonly referring to the education system as a ‘pressure cooker of stress’ (Hill, 2010). In recognition of the issue, the Ministry of Education introduced Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) which is integrated as part of the Character and Citizenship Education Syllabus (Yeo, 2011; Ministry of Education [Singapore], 2012). Furthermore, a recent addendum to the 2016 President’s address highlights the priorities for education, which include the need to develop ‘a passion for learning’ among children and to ‘reduce the excessive focus on academic results’ by providing a more holistic education that is inclusive of all needs and backgrounds (Ministry of Education [Singapore], 2016b).

In **Vanuatu** happiness and well-being appear to be reflected more in terms of peace and sustainability. Named as the world’s happiest country in the 2006 Happy Planet Index, Vanuatu has developed a National Curriculum Statement that promotes happiness in schools and aims to develop a number of competencies that underlie the philosophy of Learning to Live Together (Ministry of Education [Vanuatu], 2010). Subsequently, in 2012, Vanuatu also piloted the Alternative Indicators of Well-being for Melanesia in 2012, in order to reflect Melanesian values based on factors such as resource access, cultural practice and community vitality (MNCC, 2012).

A comparison of the countries’ policies reveals that while Bhutan and Vanuatu developed their policies so as to emphasize local cultural values and the importance of these in sustainably developing their countries, the other three countries, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Singapore, developed their policies largely in response to national concerns regarding the excessive emphasis on academic domains and the consequent rising levels of stress among learners. Regardless of the motivation for the policies, however, all of the countries concluded that education should be ‘holistic’, such that it promotes a balance between the academic, social and emotional, and physical domains.



The Happy Schools Framework

The Happy Schools Framework was constructed based on the findings of the study, aiming to capture the voices and perspectives of school-level stakeholders regarding what constitutes a happy school. The framework is the heart of this report, and aims to inform policymaking from these school-level perspectives in a bid to revolutionizing education from the ground up (Robinson and Lou, 2015).

The Happy Schools Criteria

The results of the Happy School Survey provided the basis for identifying the 22 criteria for a happy school under three broad categories: People, Process and Place. The survey received over 650 responses from students, teachers, parents, school principals and support staff from across the Asia-Pacific region, who shared their views on what can make schools happy or unhappy places, what can make teaching and learning fun and enjoyable and what can be done in schools to make all students feel included. The criteria presented in Figure 1 provide a summary of the entire Happy Schools Framework. Many of these criteria overlap across the three categories of People, Process and Place, and mutually reinforce each other.

The feedback compiled through the Happy Schools Seminar highlighted many promising and innovative practices being implemented in schools, and provided examples of strategies that schools can use to reach each of the criteria. The following describes some of these examples under the three categories of People, Process and Place.

People

The first category of People refers to all human and social relationships among members of the school community. **Friendships and relationships in the school community** ranked as the most important factor among respondents in terms of what makes a happy school, with the findings identifying school practices that encourage parental involvement, foster interactions and friendships between students of different grades, and school activities that directly involve community members.

Another important criterion for happy schools in this category is **positive teacher attitudes and attributes**, which include characteristics such as kindness, enthusiasm and fairness, and the role of teachers in serving as inspiring, creative and happy role models for learners. Respondents saw a need for schools to take this criterion into account in teacher recruitment and evaluation, so as to place more emphasis on teacher personality, attitude and ethics when hiring and assessing teachers.

Respondents also ranked **positive and collaborative values and practices** as being a very important criterion in making schools happy. Such values and practices include love, compassion, acceptance and respect. Strategies for promoting these values and practices include visual reminders displayed as posters or illustrations; and 'dual-purpose learning', whereby various values, strengths and competencies are highlighted and promoted within the context of an academic topic or subject.

Figure 1. The Happy Schools Criteria



People

-  Friendships and Relationships in the School Community
-  Positive Teacher Attitudes and Attributes
-  Respect for Diversity and Differences
-  Positive and Collaborative Values and Practices
-  Teacher Working Conditions and Well-being
-  Teacher Skills and Competencies



Process

-  Reasonable and Fair Workload
-  Teamwork and Collaborative Spirit
-  Fun and Engaging Teaching and Learning Approaches
-  Learner Freedom, Creativity and Engagement
-  Sense of Achievement and Accomplishment
-  Extracurricular Activities and School Events
-  Learning as a Team Between Students and Teachers
-  Useful, Relevant and Engaging Learning Content
-  Mental Well-being and Stress-Management



Place

-  Warm and Friendly Learning Environment
-  Secure Environment Free from Bullying
-  Open and Green Learning and Playing Spaces
-  School Vision and Leadership
-  Positive Discipline
-  Good Health, Sanitation and Nutrition
-  Democratic School Management



Process

The second category of Process encompasses teaching and learning methodologies that can enhance learners' sense of well-being. The various criteria under this category, include creating a more **reasonable and fair workload** for students due to a growing imbalance between study and play which places an emphasis on memorization in order to prepare for exams.

Another important criterion under this category is **learner freedom, creativity and engagement**. Accordingly, a happy school should allow for learners to express their opinions and to learn freely without the fear of making mistakes, or as frequently cited by respondents to the survey, 'learning without worrying' so that mistakes are valued as part of the learning process.

This also relates to the criterion **useful, relevant and engaging learning content**, which calls for the content of curricula to reflect contemporary and relevant issues, with guidance for teachers on how to make these issues relevant to learners' lives. According to 14-year-old Nguyen Ngoc Van Thao from VNIES Experimental Secondary school (Viet Nam), who participated in the Happy Schools Seminar, there is stark contrast between the learning content that is assessed and learning content that is useful in everyday life. In her words:

What do you think about a student who gets ten out of ten on a civic education exam about honesty, but has actually cheated in the exam to get such high marks? Or we learn biology to protect our environment – some students get really good marks in biology exams, but they litter trash in the street! We must emphasize that the main purpose of studying is to improve our real life and to help our countries develop. We are not learning to be a genius or to make our brains bigger! We always say 'knowledge is power', but according to the American author Dale Carnegie, 'Knowledge isn't power until it is applied'.

Place

The third category of Place refers to contextual factors, both in terms of the physical environment and the school atmosphere. Among the criteria under this category, a **warm and friendly learning environment** ranked as the second most important factor for a happy school overall, with the findings indicating the need to place more emphasis on greetings and smiles, as well as introducing music, creating more open classrooms and colourful and meaningful displays, thereby creating a more positive school atmosphere.

A **secure environment free from bullying** was another criterion ranked as important by respondents, with findings identifying strategies such as the installing of a 'buddy bench' as well as enabling learners to interact and better understand one another through shared learning and playing activities.

The need for **school vision and leadership** was also highlighted, with examples from schools participating in the seminar showing how happiness can be prioritized through school visions, mottos or slogans to create more positive school atmospheres.



In terms of the physical environment, respondents also cited the need for more **open and green learning and playing spaces** to enhance learner happiness and well-being. Suggested strategies include establishing relaxing and creative spaces, having a school garden, as well as making use of outdoor spaces so that learners can connect with nature while also engaging in investigative or physical learning activities.

Reflections, Next Steps and Conclusions

Reflecting on the research findings presented throughout this report, various theories and policy efforts demonstrate that happiness is defined as a human purpose, with education and learning recognized as a fundamental vehicle to enhancing happiness and well-being. This calls on the need for education systems to embrace alternative forms of learning that allow for learners' unique talents and strengths to shine, while at the same time recognizing that happiness is something collective that can be promoted through learning experiences that foster friendships and relationships among the school community.

The report also tells us that all human beings can learn to be happy, but they can also be happy to learn through the fostering of a genuine love of learning which can also lead to a sense of achievement and accomplishment. Evidence presented in the report also shows that prioritizing happiness and well-being can result in higher academic achievement, which unfortunately, have tended to be undervalued by a continued predominant focus on 'numbers' or test scores as indicators of the quality of education. In addition, even if education systems were to focus their policies in purely economic terms, in view of technological advancement, the human 'competitive advantage' lies in the very values, strengths and competencies that are envisioned as enhancing happiness and well-being, and which cannot be replaced by machines.

This report therefore outlines two levels of intervention needed in order to make schools happier places: the policy level and the school level. Such interventions include considerations such as prioritizing happiness and learner well-being as part of education policies, introducing a new generation of 'positive teachers' as well as ensuring that the values, strengths and competencies which can develop and nurture happiness among learners are recognized and evaluated as part of assessment efforts.

A number of next steps can also be identified, with the findings presented in this report suggesting an important call for policy dialogue, whereby the findings could be scaled up and translated into succinct conclusions and recommendations at the policy level. With regard to the school level, a number of selected strategies for reaching the criteria in this report also provide a starting point for the collection and dissemination of strategies that can be accessed and used by schools.

At the same time, the over-focus on 'numbers' highlights the need for further advocacy to raise awareness and help change attitudes with regard to the meaning of a 'good quality' education, in order to give more public recognition to the importance of happiness and well-being in schools in



a world driven by quantitative measures, benchmarking and competition. The relevance of many of the issues examined in this report also indicates the potential of the Happy Schools Framework to be scaled up, adapted and applied in other regions beyond the Asia-Pacific. Given growing efforts to measure both happiness and educational quality, the Happy Schools Framework could also present the basis for an integral measure of the quality of education.

This report has highlighted the importance of learner happiness and well-being by outlining the concept of Happy Schools based on theoretical and policy perspectives, as well as based on the voices of school-level stakeholders collected through primary research methods.

Within the global and regional context, references to happiness and well-being are increasingly present, whether through the SDGs and Education 2030 (SDG 4), initiatives such as IPEN or through the policies of the five countries examined in this report. This indicates that educational quality and school happiness are inseparable, and that happiness and well-being should not only be considered an objective for education systems, but also as the means for higher educational outcomes and success in future life and work.

The Happy Schools Framework, with its 22 criteria under the three categories of People, Process and Place, and examples of strategies to reach each to the criteria, aims to provide insight as to what school-level stakeholders identify as important for enhancing happiness and well-being in schools.

Overall, the findings indicate that there is a clear need for more time and space in schools, whether in terms of time allocated for extracurricular activities or for the preparation of fun and engaging learning approaches, or in terms of space for learners to express themselves more freely or make use of more open and green spaces for learning.

This report, therefore, calls upon decision makers at both the policy level and the school level to create more time and space for a type of learning that can enhance learner happiness and well-being, in the hope of inspiring happier learners who can contribute to happier societies, and ultimately, to a happier world.