



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

UNESCO Bangkok
Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau
for Education



Happy Schools Project

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EDUCATION POLICY AND REFORM UNIT, UNESCO BANGKOK



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Background

Throughout the 20th Century, education discourse was commonly geared towards preparing learners for the world of work, especially in the context of growing economic development and competition. But now well into the 21st Century, are we satisfied with this? Or should we expect more from education systems in a world of rapid change along with increasing mobility, life stress, inequalities and environmental concerns? As symptoms of ‘unhappiness’ begin to emerge, these questions reflect the need for education systems to reposition the school as more than a service for educational instruction, but rather, an environment which allows for social and emotional growth and development. We regard schools that ensure such well-being and holistic development of learners as ‘Happy Schools’.

In 2011, the UN General Assembly recognized happiness as a fundamental human goal in its resolution 65/309 entitled “Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development”, and in 2012 a high-level meeting led by the Government of Bhutan was held at the UN Headquarters in New York entitled “Happiness and Well-being: Defining a New Paradigm”¹. With its first edition prepared for the meeting, the annual *World Happiness Report’s* 2015 edition argues that happiness is now increasingly considered as a “proper measure of social progress and goal of public policy”². As we embark on a new international development agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals launched in New York in September 2015 also reflect the notion of well-being within and across various goals and targets³. According to Jeffery Sachs, one of the World Happiness Report’s editors: “The aspiration of society is the flourishing of its members”⁴. So then why not apply the emphasis on individual well-being as a way of measuring school performance?

The importance of the socio-emotional aspects in learning has been increasingly recognized and well supported in the fields of positive education and positive psychology. The founder of positive psychology Martin Seligman views happiness within school through the interplay of Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment (PERMA), all of which are essential to living a happy life both within and beyond formal schooling. In positive psychology, dispositions towards gratitude, kindness, teamwork and perseverance – developed based on the theory of PERMA - are considered character strengths that underpin both learner happiness and performance⁵. Such school environments contribute to improved critical thinking and problem-solving skills, enhanced self-confidence and enhanced capacity to cooperate with and work well with others⁶.

Touching upon this concept, the Happy Schools Project seeks to foster individual well-being and holistic development and to advocate peace through education nationally, regionally and globally. A UNESCO study which focused on Learning to Live Together (LTLT)⁷, a concept which stands at the core of UNESCO’s

¹ UN Stats. 2013. Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development. Note by the Secretary General. Sixty-seventh session of the UNGA (Accessed 28 September 2015).

[http://unstats.un.org/unsd/broaderprogress/pdf/Happiness%20towards%20a%20holistic%20approach%20to%20development%20\(A-67-697\).pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/broaderprogress/pdf/Happiness%20towards%20a%20holistic%20approach%20to%20development%20(A-67-697).pdf)

² UNSDSN. 2015. World Happiness Report 2015. <http://worldhappiness.report/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/04/WHR15.pdf>

³ UN. 2015. Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. (Accessed 29 September 2015).

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

⁴ UNSDSN. 2015. World Happiness report 2015. Press Release. <http://worldhappiness.report/news/2015/04/23/world-happiness-report-2015-ranks-happiest-countries/> (Accessed 23 September 2015)

⁵ VIA. 2014. Character Strengths. (Accessed 22 April 2014). <http://www.viacharacter.org/www/Character-Strengths/VIA-Classification>

⁶ Ashdown & Bernard, 2011; Aubrey et al., 2012; Schultz et al., 2011

⁷ UNESCO Bangkok. 2014. Learning to Live Together: Education Policies and Realities in the Asia-Pacific Region. (Accessed 22 April 2014). <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002272/227208E.pdf>

mandate to promote peace through education, recognizes that multivariate threats to peace and security in the 21st Century require of all people a tremendous capacity for empathy, respect for diversity and tolerance in our increasingly interconnected world. This is reflected in the UN Secretary-General’s Global Education First Initiative, which identifies the fostering of Global Citizenship as one of the three global priorities. Arguably, developing these skills and values is not possible without first instilling individual well-being and holistic development within the school environment.

Until now, there has been limited effort to document and compare how well countries promote, uphold and foster learner well-being and holistic development. The UNESCO study on LTLT found that while numerous policy and curriculum goals associated with LTLT-related competencies exist, there was no robust instrument to monitor how well such policy and curriculum intents translate into the reality of schools. Following on from the LTLT study, the Happy Schools Project analyzes the ways in which interactions among students, teachers and the school community contribute to individual well-being and holistic development. Based on the preliminary findings drawn from project activities, namely an ongoing desk study, workshop, survey and seminar, an initial criteria of what may constitute a Happy School is presented in Table 1 under three broad themes: 1) People: referring to social relationships, 2) Process: referring to teaching and learning methods, and 3) Place: referring to environmental factors.

Table 1. Initial criteria

People	Process	Place
Friendship with other students (of the same or across grades)	Teamwork learning (help and support from other students)	Outdoor playing and green spaces
Good relationship between students and teachers	Learning content is useful for daily life	Creative visual displays
Helping students with special needs	Reasonable workload (homework and exams)	A warm and friendly learning environment
Support from local community	Freedom to express opinion in school and in the classroom	Comfortable for students with different needs and backgrounds
Parental encouragement	Interesting and engaging learning activities	Good nutrition
School Leadership	Frequent feedback from teachers	School is safe and free from bullying, stress and competition
	Extra-curricular activities	
	Learning outside the classroom	

This initial criteria will be further adapted in the development of a Happy Schools Framework. This framework will examine other relevant concepts such as the Child-Friendly School (CFS) Model established by UNICEF. While this model takes a rights-based approach founded on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, with a particular focus on the school environment and community, the Happy Schools Project aims to further build upon the CFS model by further exploring the psycho-social and emotional dimensions of learning to promote happiness within the school context and to focus on the contribution of the schooling experience to learner well-being, growth and development. It is hoped that once published, the Happy Schools Framework can contribute as an alternative reference for schools that looks beyond strictly academic outcomes when it comes to measuring the quality of learning in schools in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Given that these criteria may hold relevance beyond the region as well, we may also choose to explore the global suitability of the framework at a later stage.

Objectives

1. Promote the importance of happiness in schools;
2. Document and share proven practices in promoting happiness in schools from the perspectives of students, teachers and relevant education stakeholders; and
3. Establish a Happy Schools Framework consisting of criteria and strategies for learner well-being and holistic development.

Activities (Completed/Ongoing)

1. Preliminary desk study (Ongoing)

An ongoing desk study has been conducted by UNESCO Bangkok since June 2014 to map various definitions and potential criteria for a Happy School to contribute to the development of the Happy Schools Framework. This desk study involves the review of positive education and positive psychology literature, with a particular focus on the socio-emotional dimensions of learning, existing educational concepts and related initiatives from UNESCO and other relevant organizations.

2. Discussions with ASEAN teachers and students (Completed)

A two-hour workshop was held in November 2014 to lead group activities and discussions with teachers and students from ASEAN countries to gather their views on what contributes to a Happy Schools. The findings were used to develop an initial criteria for Happy Schools (Table 1).

3. Online survey (Completed)

An online survey was developed aiming to collect views from students, teachers and other relevant stakeholders on what constitutes a Happy School in the Asia-Pacific region. The online survey, made available between January-May 2015 in English, Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Korean and Russian, collected more than 650 responses. The initial findings of the survey can be found in the following:

http://www.unescobkk.org/fileadmin/user_upload/epr/Quality/Happy_Schools_Project/UNESCO_Presentation_Happy_Schools_Seminar.pdf

4. Happy Schools Project webpage (Ongoing)

A dedicated webpage for the project has been set-up on the UNESCO Bangkok website with project background information as well as a dedicated page for the Happy Schools Seminar held in June 2015. The webpage is to be further developed to present findings from the Happy Schools Framework as web content, as well as other resources relevant to the project:

<http://www.unescobkk.org/education/quality-of-education/happy-schools-project/>

5. Happy Schools Seminar (Completed)

The Happy Schools Seminar was held at NIST International School in Bangkok, Thailand from 4 to 5 June 2015 by UNESCO Bangkok bringing together representatives from selected schools (e.g. students, teachers, school principals) from five countries: Bhutan, India, Republic of Korea, Thailand and Viet Nam. Through engaging and innovative activities, school representatives shared their experiences, perspectives and proven practices in ensuring learner wellbeing and holistic development. The seminar concept note and presentations can be found on the seminar webpage:

<http://www.unescobkk.org/education/quality-of-education/happy-schools-project/happy-schools-seminar/>

Based on the initial criteria (Table 1), the objective of the seminar was to build a Happy Schools Framework that can help implement the concept of 'Happy Schools' in a diversity of contexts through:

- a. Discussion and shared understanding of the criteria that promote the concept of 'Happy Schools', and
- b. Discussion on the strategies, as well as the ways and means for schools to meet each of the criteria.

Activities (Planned)

1. Happy Schools Framework (In progress)

Based on the evidence gathered through the desk study, survey results and the outcomes of the seminar, the Happy Schools Framework will present the criteria for a Happy School, as well as the strategies to reach that criteria. The Framework, which is tentatively scheduled for publication in March 2016, will also feature best practices from selected schools, all well as the broader context of pertinent policy issues in the Asia-Pacific region. While the framework will not focus in depth on specific countries, it does draw examples from selected schools and policies from various countries, in particular from Bhutan, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, Thailand and Viet Nam. The framework will undergo internal and external review by experts in order to validate the findings as well as the criteria. It will be published as a regional report, with short summaries of thematic sections presented as web content on the project webpage to be more accessible to the general public.

2. Photo competition

A regional photo competition will be organized, with shortlisted images to be featured in the Happy Schools Framework report and at the launch event.

3. Report Launch: International Day of Happiness

The Happy Schools Framework will be launched to coincide with the International Day of Happiness (20 March 2016) in Bangkok Thailand.

4. Advocacy Materials

Various advocacy and communications materials will be prepared in order to promote the Happy Schools Framework both for the launch event as well as to be featured on the webpage (<http://www.unescobkk.org/education/quality-of-education/happy-schools-project/>).

How can you get involved?

1. Provide **recommendations of schools** which explicitly work to promote happiness and that match the initial criteria presented in Table 1, so that the project team may approach them for gathering best practices and other project activities.
2. Offer **recommendations of experts** who may be familiar learner and school well-being in the fields of education, psychology and economics, among others, who may provide advice and review of the Happy Schools Framework and other project activities.

3. **Share relevant information**, whether publications, policy documents and initiatives, that are relevant to the concept of Happy Schools.
4. Favorably explore the possibility of **establishing partnerships** with the project team, whether in joint initiatives or **financial support**.
5. Consider **collaboration** in order to scale up/implement the Happy Schools Project at school/country level as well as expansion to other regions.

Contact Persons

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