

Progress must not leave behind learner happiness

EDUCATION

GWANG-JO KIM

Growing up in rural Korea during the 1950s, our local schoolhouse was the centre of my life.

By modern standards, it would seem rustic and overcrowded, a bare wooden building set amid rice paddies and with classes of well over 70 students at a time. As humble as the conditions were, the school was rich with opportunities to learn, explore nature and form bonds with friends and teachers. It was a place for exploration and wonder, an inexhaustible fountain for young minds thirsty for knowledge. My time there set the course for the rest of my life and looking back the only word that seems to adequately capture that period for me is, simply: happiness.

That schoolhouse is long gone, of course, and my country as it is now would be unrecognisable to my young eyes, having undergone the type of major transformation that has taken place to varying degrees

throughout the Asia-Pacific. And as our region has transformed, so too have the learning environments in which our young people find themselves.

Parents understandably want to give their children an edge in this changing world with no guarantees. Education systems in Asia-Pacific are striving to respond to increasingly fierce competition between countries within the region and beyond.

But the burden of all of these mounting expectations falls squarely on the shoulders of our region's learners (as well as their parents and teachers), making their school lives stress-filled, test-focused, competition based — and far from happy.

Today, on the International Day of Happiness, I call for a shift away from such approaches and towards an education that prioritises students' well-being and holistic development. Our ongoing "Happy Schools" initiative aims to do just that.

In 2011, the United Nations General Assembly recognised the pursuit of happiness as a "fundamental human goal." Since then the issue has gained prominence, with a number of global initiatives and measures now looking at well-being and several countries developing specific policies on happiness.

The notion of well-being is also reflected across the Sustainable Development Goals, while in regard to education, international assessments such as PISA are focusing more on linkages between happiness and the quality of education.

Unesco's report, "Happy Schools: A Framework for Learner Well-Being in the Asia-Pacific", is the first of its kind to offer a comprehensive framework detailing criteria for what constitutes a "happy school"; the relationship between happiness and the quality of education, and innovative approaches that put the well-being of learners as well as all members of the school community first.

The Happy Schools framework covers

22 areas in three categories: People, process and place. The first category, people, focuses on relationships in schools and communities, emphasising respect for diversity as well as the critical role of teachers, their working conditions and well-being as well as attitudes and skill level.

The role of teachers is also emphasised in the process category, which looks at teaching and learning approaches that can enhance learners' sense of well-being, such as emphasising teamwork, promoting extracurricular activities, etc.

Place covers not only the physical environment of the school, ensuring accessible open and green learning and playing

spaces, for example, but also its atmosphere, as reflected through such criteria as school vision and leadership and an environment free from bullying.

The late His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej said: "The ultimate aim [of education] should be for each individual to be able to make the best use of his or her potential, to benefit oneself and others in harmony and without conflict or harassment."

This vision of education as a force for personal betterment and societal advancement "in harmony and without conflict" is embedded in Unesco's constitution and the mission that drives all of our work in Asia-Pacific and around the world.

Our organisation seeks to build peace in the minds of all those we serve, a mission that grows in urgency with each passing year — the seeds of that peace are planted in youth and must be carefully harvested throughout children's school years. The Happy Schools framework then offers not only a blueprint for more effective education, but ultimately for a better world.

Gwang-Jo Kim is the Director of Unesco Bangkok, the Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau of Education.

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bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1217741/progress-must-not-leave-behind-learner-happiness



Gwang-Jo Kim is the Director of UNESCO Bangkok, the Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau of Education. (Photo via Unesco.org)

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The Happy Schools framework covers 22 areas in three categories: People, process and place. The first category, people, focuses on relationships in schools and communities, emphasising respect for diversity as well as the critical role of teachers, their working conditions and well-being as well as attitudes and skill level.

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