

Promoting Learner Happiness and Well-being

Background

The pursuit of happiness has always been the aspiration of all human beings.¹ In recent years, a growing global movement for happiness has been driven by mounting global challenges that are undermining happiness in wider society; namely income inequality, growing intolerance, environmental degradation and unprecedented technological advancement. In schools, learners are also facing the repercussions of such challenges in a world that is more competitive, stress-fueled and test-focused than ever before. At the same time, a growing body of research has highlighted the crucial relationship between happiness and educational quality, whereby schools that prioritize learner well-being have the potential to be more effective, with better learning outcomes and greater achievements in learners' lives.²

The Happy Schools Project was launched by UNESCO Bangkok in June 2014 with the aim of promoting happiness in schools through enhanced learner well-being and holistic development. The main outcome of this project was the 2016 publication *Happy Schools: A Framework for Learner Well-being in the Asia-Pacific*.³ The report features a framework of 22 criteria for a happy school under three broad categories: 1) People, 2) Process, and 3) Place. Later that year, UNESCO and the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI) hosted a regional policy seminar on the theme of "Happy Schools for a Happy Education" in Seoul, Republic of Korea, bringing together a group of education policymakers and practitioners for dialogue.

This thematic brief is a summary of the Happy Schools Project, highlighting key findings from the main publication, including policy recommendations from the aforementioned seminar.

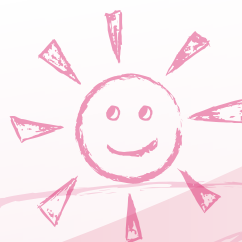
Happiness and Education

Dating back to ancient philosophies, happiness has always been a fascinating subject of human enquiry. Various definitions of happiness among ancient thinkers such as the Buddha, Aristotle and Confucius, along with thinkers from the Enlightenment era, up until the science of Positive Psychology today, all share similarities that are at the heart of the Happy Schools concept. **Positive Psychology** has been coined the 'science of happiness' and recognizes a number of 'character strengths' that enhance happiness such as creativity, perseverance, kindness and teamwork (Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

Positive Education embraces the relationship between education and well-being and is defined as the 'double helix' of academics coupled with character and well-being (IPEN, 2016b). Within these concepts of happiness, three important linkages are found:

1. Happiness is something collective that is obtained through friendships and relationships.
2. Education is essentially holistic and multidimensional.
3. Education can lead to happiness, but can also be a source of happiness in and of itself.

Therefore, ***we can learn to be happy, but we can also be happy to learn.***





Global and Regional Policies

Happiness is now reflected in the global policy agenda as well. In 2011, it was recognized as a fundamental human right in a United Nations General Assembly resolution. One year later, another resolution declared that it would be celebrated through an International Day of Happiness, which falls on 20th March each year. There have also been increased efforts to measure countries' levels of happiness and well-being through global indices including the World Happiness Report and the Happy Planet Index. According to the 2016 World Happiness Report, happiness is now increasingly considered as a 'proper measure of social progress and a goal of public policy'.⁴ Similarly, efforts have also been made to measure student happiness through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in its 2015 assessment. Here PISA examined the link between well-being and learning outcomes through student performance in school, their relationship with peers and teachers, their home life, and how they spend their time outside of school.⁵

At the national level, countries have increasingly placed happiness and well-being as a specific goal in their national and education policies, or have included elements relating to happiness in their policy frameworks. Examples include Bhutan's 2011 policy of *Educating for Gross National Happiness*, the Republic of Korea's 2013 policy of *Happy Education for All*, as well as Singapore's introduction of *Social and Emotional Learning*, to name but a few.⁶ While some countries have introduced such policies to emphasize local cultural values and their importance in sustainably developing their countries, others have developed policies in response to national concerns regarding the excessive emphasis on academic domains of learning and the consequent rising levels of stress among learners.

Happy Schools Framework and Criteria

The Happy Schools project carried out a survey with school-level stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents and school principals to identify what constitutes a happy school. The survey obtained these perspectives by asking four questions: 1) What makes a school happy?,

2) What makes a school unhappy?, 3) What can make teaching and learning fun and enjoyable?, and 4) What can be done to make all students feel included?

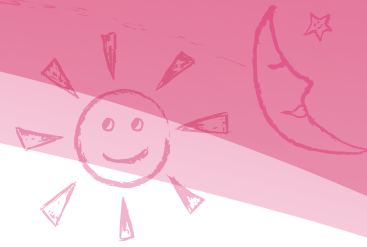
The responses to these questions showed the importance of three main characteristics: 1) People – the people and the relationships that are built within the school and the learning process are of utmost importance; 2) Process – a fun and engaging atmosphere that allows students and teachers to be creative, collaborative and free; and 3) Place – a warm and friendly school environment completes the positive values that People and Process bring, and allows for a "Happy School".

The Happy Schools Framework (see Appendix 1) was constructed based on these findings, capturing the voices and perspectives of school-level stakeholders regarding what constitutes a happy school. The framework is made up of 22 criteria, falling under the three categories: People, Process and Place. Many of these criteria overlap across the three categories and mutually reinforce each other. The 2016 UNESCO-KEDI Asia-Pacific Regional Policy Seminar allowed education stakeholders to identify what challenges, opportunities and policy implications can be associated with the Happy Schools Framework, and some of their examples are included below.

People

Friendships and relationships in the school community ranked as the most important factor 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. For example, in **Australia**, the **Geelong Grammar School's** focus on Positive Education aims to build positive relations between students and teachers and encourages students to "engage" in the learning process. Positive education emboldens teachers with the motto of "Learn to Live it", allowing teachers to create the proper environment for well-being and happiness.

Stakeholders indicated that **positive teacher attitudes and attributes**, which include characteristics such as kindness, enthusiasm and fairness, allow teachers to serve as inspiring, creative and happy role models



for learners. In addition, **positive and collaborative values and practices** are very important in making schools happy. Such values and practices include love, compassion, acceptance and respect.

Process

There is a need to create 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. In **Thailand**, some schools attempt to balance the education process by limiting academic study and only allowing activity/project-based learning from 2:00pm onwards. This allows for more student-centred learning to occur.

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 more importantly 'learning without worrying', so that mistakes are valued as part of the learning process. This also relates to **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.

Despite high academic achievement in the **Republic of Korea**, learner stress and disinterest in learning was causing deep social issues. With the new policy of Happy Education for All and the "Free-Semester Program", students in middle school are free from mid-term and final exams for one semester. This allows teachers and students a more holistic learning approach, where they are free to collaborate and engage in learning. In addition, teachers are exempted from the archetypal form of classroom instruction and can freely carry out more innovative teaching activities.

Place

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. In **Indonesia** for example, schools

are envisioned as a park — a place that has strong values and is an integral part of students' growth.

A **secure environment free from bullying** was also ranked as important by respondents. The findings identified strategies that included more shared learning and playing activities, which enable learners to interact and better understand one another, thus reducing conflict and tensions.

The need for **school vision and leadership** was also highlighted, showing how happiness can be prioritized through school vision statements, mottos or slogans in order to create more positive school atmospheres. For example, in Akita, **Japan**, schools have positive mottos and slogans, such as "**Be a child with dream and self-motivation, let's make a happy school together**", which creates a unified vision of education for the whole school.

Challenges

Several challenges remain however. As people are the building blocks – and positive relationships are crucial for the success of Happy Schools, school leaders and teachers need to embrace a paradigm shift in how education can embrace learner well-being.

First, this includes clear visions of quality education in order to balance an overcrowded curriculum and exam-focused system. This forces teachers and students to cram too much content into limited hours, limiting creative and engaging activities for learning. A shift to new strategies of learning can balance the curriculum, engage students, and make learning more enjoyable.

Second, effective teacher training is an issue. There is a lack of clearly articulated training and development programmes in terms of learner well-being and happiness in education. In addition, teachers are ill prepared to bring these values into the classroom, having traditionally been prepared to deliver content. Preparing engaging lessons, and providing learners more freedom, creativity, and ownership in their learning process, is crucial for schools and teachers to improve motivation, both of teaching staff and for students.



Third, ensuring a safe and nurturing environment is important. School bullying and poor infrastructure continue to allow key relationships to either fail to form or to degrade and become difficult to repair.

Finally, a lack of community partnerships and involvement of parents and stakeholders and/or poorly communicating the visions and goals of schools for the community can limit positive gains in creating happy and healthy environments at schools.

Policy Recommendations and the Way Forward

To effect any change in current policies and practices, both the report and the policy seminar outlined the need for a number of considerations. These included prioritizing happiness and learner well-being within/ across education policies, introducing a new generation of ‘positive teachers’ and ensuring that the values, strengths and competencies which can develop and nurture happiness among learners are recognized and evaluated as part of curriculum and assessment efforts. These can be considered vis-à-vis some specific recommendations including the following:

- Continuous **policy dialogue** to see how countries can implement the Happy Schools Framework in their local context.
- An **advocacy campaign** to change attitudes with regard to the meaning of a ‘good quality’ education.
- **Effective and continuous teacher training and professional development** to ensure that teachers are competent and bring positive attitudes and attributes to the learning process. In this regard, the Happy Schools Framework could be translated into a teacher training toolkit aiming to build the capacity of teachers, teacher-trainers, and professional development programmes.
- Allowing for a **balanced curriculum** that embraces learning and creativity, in addition to the accumulation of knowledge, and reduces the focus on exam-oriented achievement.

- Providing more **ownership and autonomy** to school leaders, teachers and students, to improve implementation of curricula, management of classrooms, and to increase interest and engagement in learning.

- Sharing **promising and innovative school practices** across schools, countries, and regions in order to identify strategies for reaching the 22 criteria in the Happy Schools Framework.

- Utilizing the Happy Schools Framework as a **measure of the quality of education** that encompasses learner well-being.

The Happy Schools Framework offers a different vision of the quality of education – one in which learners’ unique talents, strengths and abilities are appreciated, recognized and celebrated. Evidence indicates that prioritizing happiness and well-being can result in higher academic achievement, which unfortunately, has been undervalued by a predominant focus on ‘numbers’ or test scores as indicators of the quality of education. Education policies and practices can be shaped to promote holistic learner well-being in addition to academic success. In fact, happiness and well-being are a crucial component leading to quality education and high learner achievement.

Overall, Happy Schools asks us to question a number of existing policies and practices with regard to curricula, pedagogy and assessment, in order to review how they enhance happiness and well-being through school systems and beyond.

References

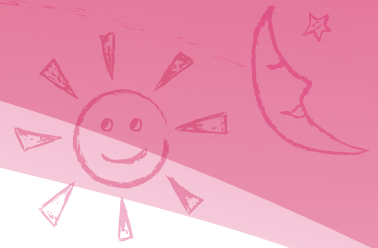
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The Happy Schools Criteria



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