

## No quality education without happy learners

The pursuit of happiness is on the global development agenda, but not enough is being done to address learner well-being. UNESCO's 'Happy Schools' framework addresses the disparity.

Blog (/blog) - March 20, 2017 by Mark Manns (/users/mmanns) and Ramya Vivekanandan (/users/RVivekanandan) |



To celebrate the launch of 'Happy Schools! A Framework for Learner Well-being in the Asia-Pacific' UNESCO launched an art contest asking people to 'What does a Happy School look like to you?'. Yonjee Lee, a 12-year-old-student from the Republic of Korea submitted this drawing, with the caption "A happy school is not only education, but also friendship".

CREDIT: © UNESCO/YOONJEE LEE ([HTTP://WWW.UNESCOBK.ORG/EDUCATION/QUALITY-OF-EDUCATION/HAPPYSCHOOLS/HAPPY-SCHOOLS-ART-CONTEST/](http://www.unesco.org/education/quality-of-education/happyschools/happy-schools-art-contest/))

Happiness has captivated great minds since ancient times, with thinkers as varied as Socrates, Aristotle, the Buddha, Confucius, John Locke and Johann Pestalozzi expounding on its nature and the importance of well-being in our lives. And today messages about the importance of well-being, mindfulness, positive thinking and how to live a more meaningful life seem ubiquitous.

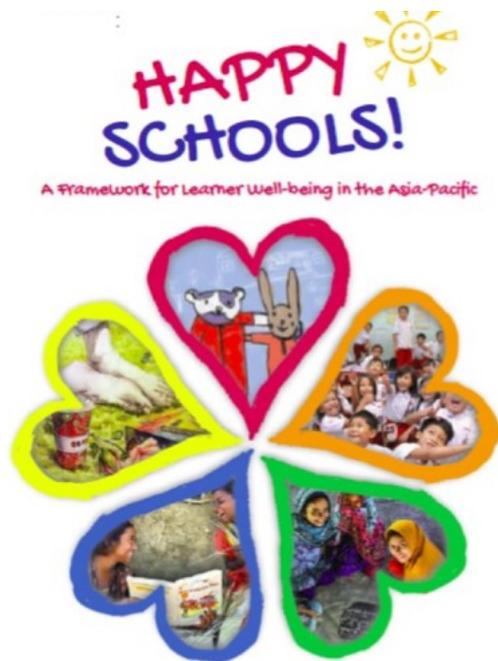
Happiness has also become a dominant policy concern for the global community. The United Nations designated today, March 20, the International Day of Happiness (<http://www.dayofhappiness.net>) in 2012 and identified the pursuit of happiness as "a fundamental human goal" the previous year, while the concept of well-being features across many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Just last month, the World Government Summit held in Dubai included a high-level Global Dialogue for Happiness (<https://worldgovernmentsummit.org/initiatives/global-dialogue-for-happiness>), which examined the issue of happiness from a policy perspective. Speaking at the event, UNDP Administrator Helen Clark (<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/speeches/2017/02/11/helen-clark-keynote-speech-at-the-global-dialogue-for-happiness-where-is-happiness-on-the-global-agenda-.html>) said:

***"Paying more attention to happiness should be a component of our efforts to achieve human and sustainable development."***

But what role does *and should* happiness play in education?

### Introducing the Happy Schools! Framework



Growing evidence suggests that an emphasis on happiness and well-being improves not only life satisfaction, but education outcomes as well. The World Happiness Report (<http://worldhappiness.report/>) (2015) found that countries with higher average life satisfaction also scored more highly on the Human Development Index.

When this was analyzed in terms of education, it was found schools that prioritize learner well-being have the potential to be more effective, with better learning outcomes and greater achievements in learners' lives.

Across the world, several countries have recognized this crucial link and taken measures to address learner well-being. The Kingdom of Bhutan, well known for its Gross National Happiness (GNH) measure of progress, has recently introduced an "Educating for GNH" policy.

The Republic of Korea, lauded for its high scores in PISA and other measures, has responded to concerns that its young people are among the unhappiest in the world due to stress and exams with a "Happy Education" policy that includes a "free semester" system, eliminating exams for one semester of lower secondary school in favor of experiential learning activities.

The United Arab Emirates is also promoting a happiness policy in schools and was the first country to appoint a Minister of Happiness, while the United Kingdom is beginning to offer mental health training and mindfulness lessons in its schools.

## 22 criteria for happiness in school



Building off of such efforts and ongoing research, UNESCO Bangkok, the Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, released **Happy Schools! A Framework for Learner Well-being in the Asia-Pacific** (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002441/244140e.pdf>) a year ago today.

The report draws on a survey, desk study and engagement with school-level stakeholders to put forward a framework for promoting happiness in schools.

comprising 22 criteria across three categories: people, process and place.

The report details each of the criteria and gives concrete examples of strategies that Asia-Pacific schools have taken to meet them. It concludes with suggested next steps, including policy dialogue, advocacy and the exchange of best practices in promoting learner well-being in schools.

### Teachers: the key to learner happiness?

Many of the Happy Schools criteria center on teachers, including: positive teacher attitudes and attributes, teacher working conditions and well-being, teacher skills and competencies, fun and engaging teaching and learning approaches, as well as learning as a team between students and teachers.

This is not surprising considering the evidence supporting the critical importance of the student-teacher relationship. The OECD's 2012 PISA (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/PISA-2012-results-volume-III.pdf>) results noted that "positive and constructive teacher-student relations are associated with better performance in mathematics" and "academic achievement that comes at the expense of students' well-being is not a full accomplishment".

Most teachers and principals acknowledge that the socio-emotional development and well-being of their students is as important as mastery of school subjects and the accumulation of knowledge.

***When students have good relations with their teachers, both their performance and their sense of belonging at school benefit.***



Happy Schools Art Contest submission: "We should play football every day for our good health and happy school days. A female teacher is teaching her students about football to promote a good and healthy life." Nimai Chandr Ghosh, age 56 from India

PHOTO CREDIT: © UNESCO/NIMAI CHANDR GHOSH

The report outlines several strategies toward this goal. Enhanced "teacher skills and competencies" are pursued in the schools of Akita Prefecture in Japan through teacher networks offering peer support and regular communication between teachers. The VNIES Experimental Secondary School in Vietnam organizes weekly seminars for teachers to reflect upon the week's activities and share creative ideas. The notion of "learning as a team between students and teachers" is promoted at the Vidyashilp Academy in India, where textbooks have been replaced by collaborative lesson plans created by teachers and students.

Meeting these criteria will of course require increased teacher training at both the pre- and in-service levels and support. The Institute of Positive Education (<https://www.ggs.vic.edu.au/institute>) at Geelong Grammar School in Australia and the Gross National Happiness (GNH) Centre (<http://www.gnhcentrebhutan.org/>) in Bhutan are among the entities already offering such courses. UNESCO Bangkok is working with these organizations and other partners to design the next phase of the Happy Schools project.

### Road to happiness – and improved education

So on this International Day of Happiness, let us ask the crucial questions: Are schools happy places? What we can do to enhance the well-being of learners

So on this International Day of Happiness, let us ask the crucial questions: Are schools happy places? What we can do to enhance the well-being of learners and other stakeholders?

The Happy Schools framework offers a way to address shortcomings in this regard and put positivity into practice. Let us make happiness a central focus as we implement the Education 2030 agenda and work to ensure "inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all".

This vision will not be realized unless we begin to shift away from traditional measures and instead embrace a diversity of talents and intelligences by recognizing values, strengths and competencies that contribute to enhancing happiness.

*Learn more about the UNESCO Bangkok Happy Schools Project:* <http://www.unescobkk.org/education/quality-of-education/happyschools/>  
(<http://www.unescobkk.org/education/quality-of-education/happyschools/>)

*Join the conversation by connecting with @UNESCO\_AsiaPac on Twitter and UNESCOBKK on Facebook and using the hashtag #HappySchools*

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