

# Why the world needs happy schools

Global report on happiness in and for learning



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# SHORT SUMMARY

## How 'Happy Schools' benefit quality learning

Seeing a teacher smile. Hearing students laugh. Feeling a hug from a friend. Smelling fresh air. Tasting a nutritious school meal. These five senses can stimulate happiness at school and improve the learning experiences, outcomes and well-being of students.

Through the 'Happy Schools' initiative, UNESCO is placing happiness at the core of the transformation of education. It encourages education systems to recognize happiness as both a means to and a goal of quality learning. The initiative is informed by a growing evidence base linking happiness with better learning, teaching, well-being and overall system resilience.

This report presents the UNESCO global Happy Schools framework consisting of 4 pillars – people, process, place and principles – and 12 high-level criteria to guide the transformation of learning. It offers a holistic model for embedding happiness into education policies and cultivating it in schools through systemic changes.

The report illustrates how the 'Happy Schools' initiative aims to create top-down and bottom-up transformation, encouraging governments to recognize happiness as a core objective of education. It supports the scaling of promising practices of joyful learning from the school to the policy level.

**'Happy Schools'  
consist of 4  
key pillars:  
people, process,  
place and  
principles**



**unesco**

*"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed"*

# Why the world needs happy schools

Global report on happiness in and for learning

# Foreword

Every parent wants their child to learn, thrive and be happy at school. Yet the belief that academic achievement and rigor cannot coexist with joy and excitement in schools continues to steer the policies of many education systems. This misconception translates into school practices that prioritize performance in narrowly selected areas, treating the happiness and well-being of both students and teachers as an added bonus rather than a fundamental objective.

This publication counters this belief by reviewing the intrinsic relationship between happiness and learning. Studies show that joyful school environments that foster engaging pedagogies and supportive relationships can enhance teaching and learning experiences leading to better outcomes. But to create and sustain such school environments, we need not only to transform schools, but also education systems. This means reimagining education to better align with the demands of the 21st century, focusing on the holistic development of individuals and their capacity to meaningfully engage in society.

The Happy Schools framework draws from findings in the learning sciences, including neuroscience and cognitive psychology, to advocate for the global recognition of the link between happiness and learning in education policy. It identifies twelve key areas – spanning from relationships to curriculum to spatial design to realign education systems toward happiness in and for learning.

The new framework is primarily designed for K-12 education, but its approach can be replicated to create happy early childhood centres, happy vocational schools, happy universities, ultimately feeding into happy workplaces and happy communities.

Our hope is that this report will spark a global movement towards happiness in education where every member of the school community realizes their full potential. We believe that when young students are nurtured by joyful learning experiences in their school environments, they become empowered adults capable of engaging positively with themselves, with others and with the world around them. After all, the foundation of peace lies within the minds of the next generation.



Stefania Giannini  
Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO

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# Executive summary

No matter the location or education level, schools can and should be fundamentally joyous places. At best, schools stimulate happiness through all five senses: seeing a teacher smile, hearing students laugh, feeling a hug from a friend, smelling fresh air, tasting a nutritious school meal. Schools bring together people of all ages, backgrounds and disciplines to a degree found in few other community spaces. This diverse community is bound together by a sense of shared purpose to teach and to learn. However, many school systems around the world have overlooked a core component of this purpose: to cultivate happy, lifelong learners. Without stimulating joyful school experiences, schools will not develop students who love to learn nor teachers who love to teach – and who feel happy to continue teaching and learning lifelong.

## The case for cultivating happiness *in and for learning*

### A double crisis in learning and well-being

Today, challenged by a **double crisis in learning and well-being**, many schools are far from being places of joyful learning. Millions of children are still out of school, teacher shortages are widespread and learning outcomes are alarmingly low and unequal across the world. At the same time, children and youth today grapple with unprecedented levels of unhappiness and anxiety, and worrisome rates of suicide and bullying. Many students are disengaged from learning and early school-leaving rates are on the rise. Meanwhile, teachers face overwhelming levels of stress and burnout, and many are leaving the profession in growing numbers globally.

Worldwide, education leaders at all levels – from schools to national governments – face the daunting task of deciding how best to address these hardships amidst rising pressures on the education sector to solve societal and political problems. In many places,

policies aimed at improving education quality and participation have had unintentional consequences on schools, many of which are high-stress, competitive environments where happiness and collaboration are not sufficiently valued.

The double crisis in learning and well-being is exacerbated by long-term underfunding in education, the COVID-19 pandemic, disruptive changes in technology and, in many places, natural disasters, conflict, and the resulting displacement of communities. At the **Transforming Education Summit** (TES) in 2022, the global community came together for a collective questioning of the purposes and processes of learning, calling for drastic change and reimagining to address the twin crisis of equity and relevance in education.

### An imperative to integrate happiness into education policy

An **evidence base** of global research shows that learning is a social and emotional process and that happy school environments, joyful learning and a positive psychology of school actors are key levers to improve learning experiences and outcomes. Education systems cannot afford to view academic excellence and happiness as competing priorities and need to start recognizing the **link between happiness and learning**.

The purpose and goals of education systems are decided in policies. Although many countries have committed to improving holistic development and well-being in schools, few have concretely and comprehensively integrated happiness into national education policy to improve the quality of learning and teaching. Happiness in schools must be seen as a systemic concern which cannot be solved with an occasional classroom activity that treats the symptoms of larger issues.

## SCHOOLS

250 million children out of school

44 million teachers needed to  
fill the gap

Stress, burnout, attrition

Heavy workloads, high-stakes exams,  
rigid learning pathways

Violence and bullying

## SOCIETY

763 million illiterate adults

Jobs and skills mismatch

Declining mental health and well-being

Disruptive technological change

Rising extremism

**Schools shape the societies of the future that we seek.** However, many education policies continue to promote traditional methods of instruction based on one-way knowledge transfer from teachers to students, distance between teachers and students, and linear learning pathways. In today's world of rapid change, such rigid school structures are ill-suited to many needs – academic, social-emotional, economic – of learners and communities. They may not be fit for purpose for the kinds of active, engaging, meaningful, socially interactive, iterative and joyful learning endorsed by a growing body of scientific evidence on how the human brain learns best. Nor do they cultivate some of the most valued skills in life and the global economy, including creativity, adaptability, collaboration, critical thinking and empathy. Schools should support the types of teaching in the way that human brains learn best, and which allow communities to cultivate a breadth of outcomes that our societies need to thrive, including peace, equity, social justice and sustainable development.

### The 'Happy Schools' initiative: A pathway to positive education transformation

As a key follow-up to TES, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is proposing the 'Happy Schools' initiative to place happiness at the core of countries' education system transformation journeys. The initiative encourages education systems to recognize **happiness as both a means to and a goal of quality learning** by positioning happiness as a key lever for improving learning experiences and outcomes. The Happy Schools initiative **does not define or**

**measure happiness at the individual level.** Rather, it aims to improve the conditions – physical, social, pedagogical and professional – of schools to ensure they are spaces where all can flourish, experience daily joy, grow in knowledge, and practise empathy and resilience.

'Happy Schools' started as a regional initiative in 2014 in UNESCO's Bangkok office. This report is part of UNESCO's endeavour to scale up Happy Schools into a global movement towards happiness in and for learning, given its growing global relevance in the post-pandemic world. To support this movement, the global Happy Schools framework provides a model of the type of happy learning environment that would meet the many needs – academic, social, emotional, economic – of individuals, communities and societies of today and tomorrow. The framework offers a **holistic model for embedding happiness into education policies** and cultivating it in schools through systemic changes.

Promoting happiness in schools does not imply that other needs, such as infrastructure and safety, are unimportant. Nor does it mean that learning must be made easier or less demanding, or that every moment at school must be gamified or overflow with positivity. After all, overcoming negative emotions and challenges is part of life and learning. Rather, it means that **happiness need not be a distant goal**, postponed until schooling is over and work begins, and that joy, laughter and delight can permeate everyday school experiences, part and parcel of learning and teaching.

## The nexus of happiness and learning

The link between happiness and learning can be understood from scientific, philosophical and normative policy perspectives. The formulation of the pillars and criteria of the global Happy Schools framework drew from key lessons within each of these dimensions, making it an evidence-informed, values-driven and rights-based model.

### Philosophical foundations

The Happy Schools approach was formulated taking inspiration from a wide range of philosophies from around the world that link happiness and learning.

- Across time and location, philosophers identify happiness as a **core purpose** of life and education.
- Philosophers emphasize that relationships, community, personal freedom, character and skill development, exploration and learning are key sources of a happy life. Accordingly, schools – where many of these elements converge – are **inherently suitable spaces** for cultivating happiness.
- Education philosophers specifically promote **holistic learning**, which focuses on the development of the whole-person – academically, socially, emotionally, physically, and morally – for fostering happiness and flourishing.

### International normative foundations

The Happy Schools initiative is anchored in United Nations normative instruments and common goals both within and beyond education.

- The pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal and should be part of the global policy agenda as per **resolution 65/309** of the United Nations General Assembly entitled ‘Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development’.
- Happy school environments can help uphold the Right to Education, as enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights to

provide free and compulsory quality education for all individuals globally.

- Happy school environments can help uphold the various **Rights of the Child**, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), safeguarding children’s entitlement to non-discrimination, development, protection from violence, access to leisure and play, and others.
- Happy school environments help advance the **1966 Recommendation** concerning the Status of Teachers and the **1974 Recommendation** on Education for Peace and Human Rights, International Understanding, Cooperation, Fundamental Freedoms, Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development.
- Happy school environments contribute to advancing the **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on quality education and SDG 3 on well-being.

### Scientific foundations

The Happy Schools initiative and its holistic framework are derived from a growing body of research in positive psychology and the science of learning. While studies exploring the link between happiness and learning are ongoing and nuanced, findings reveal several benefits of positive environments and attitudes for improved teaching and learning.

- **Positive psychology** shows that humans need to experience positive emotions, have good relationships, engage in meaningful activities, and feel a sense of accomplishment and competence to feel happy. Feeling happy, in turn, facilitates individuals to increase their focus and expand their creativity, leading to increased performance in tasks.
- **Neuroscience** demonstrates that the cognitive and affective areas of the brain are connected and that people therefore perform better at tasks towards which they have positive feelings and

attitudes. Positive emotions play a key role in improving essential mechanisms of learning, such as motivation, attention and memory.

➤ **The science of learning** establishes that optimal learning environments and pedagogical strategies are those that are active, engaging, meaningful, socially interactive, iterative and joyful. Learner and teacher joy and engagement are important pedagogical vehicles to motivate better and deeper learning.

➤ **Empirical research** investigating the correlation between student happiness and academic achievement indicates a positive relationship between the two constructs, suggesting that happy students achieve well and achieving students are happy.

➤ Positive environments can not only improve learning, but also strengthen the **resilience** of school communities and individuals in the face of challenges due to the strong relationships and trust that such learning spaces can cultivate. Happy school environments can inclusively support the learning and well-being of disadvantaged students, contributing to **improving educational inequities**.

➤ The research on happiness and learning has **limitations**, including the lack of studies across age groups and geographies, as well as the complexity of comparatively measuring learning and happiness, which can vary in meaning across contexts.

## The global Happy Schools framework

Based on these scientific, philosophical and international normative rationales, the Happy Schools framework posits that happy learning environments can be unpacked into four key pillars: people, process, place and principles. Each of these pillars contains 3 high-level criteria, as illustrated in Figure 1, which are each supported by research from around the world. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to enhancing the link between happiness and learning, and so the Happy Schools framework remains intentionally high-level to render it flexible and easily adaptable to different education systems with varying needs.

➤ The **people** pillar aims to enhance the interpersonal relationships, physical and socio-emotional well-being and positive attitudes and attributes of the actors within school communities: students, parents, teachers, school leaders, support staff, central managers and community members.

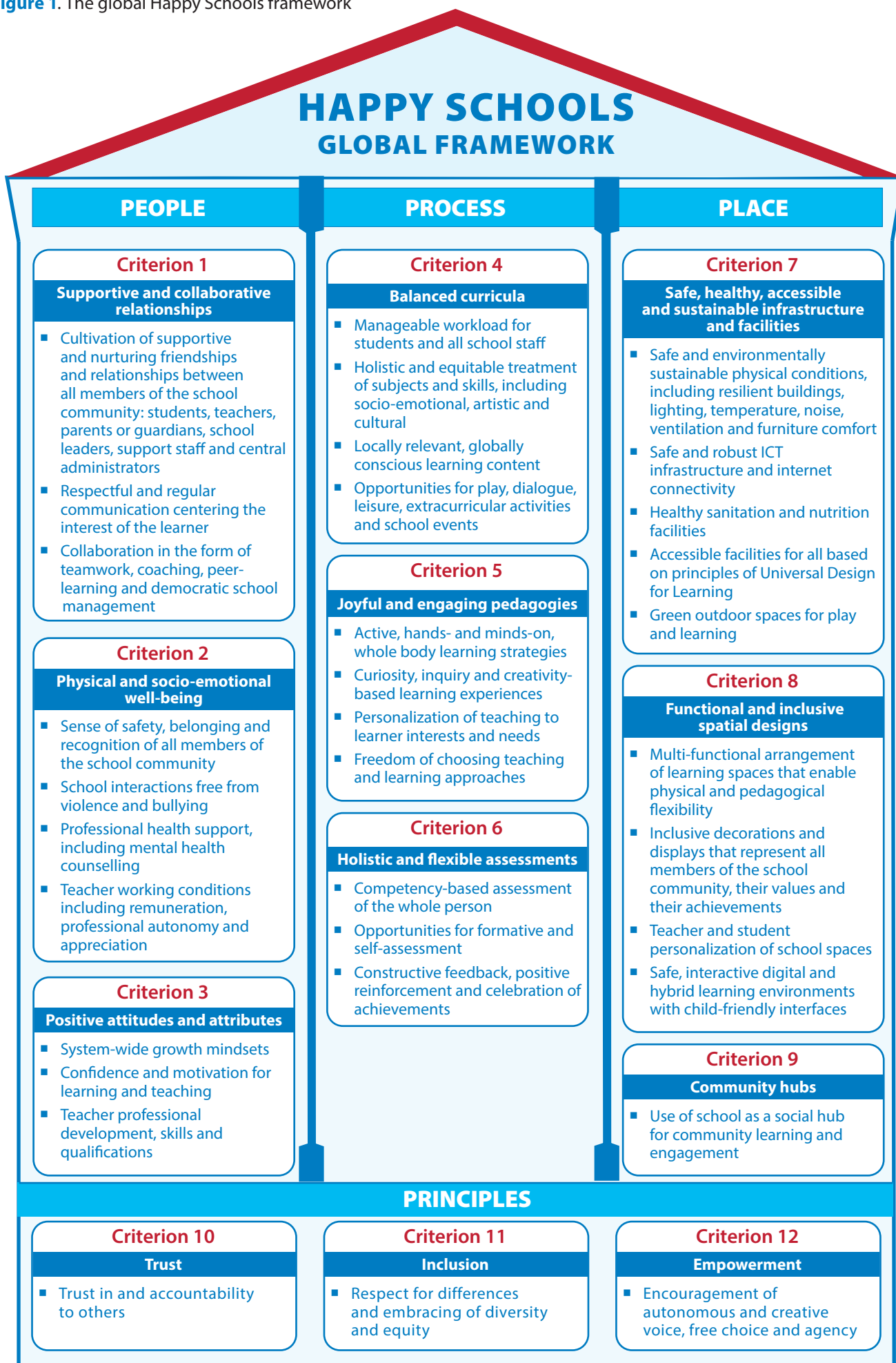
➤ The **process** pillar targets transforming curricula, pedagogy and assessment systems to leverage happiness and daily joy in schools, including through activities such as recess, sports, arts and extracurriculars that enhance teaching and learning experiences.

➤ The **place** pillar intends to transform both physical and digital spaces to make schools healthier, safer and more inclusive community hubs.

➤ The **principles** pillar emphasizes the fundamental values that bind together school communities and enable the realization of the people, process and place pillars.



**Figure 1.** The global Happy Schools framework



Source: Based on UNESCO (2016).

## Implementations of Happy Schools around the world

Multiple countries including Portugal, Viet Nam, Yemen, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand have launched national Happy Schools initiatives. All these countries have approached the Happy Schools framework from different entry points, including through teacher training, school leader professional development, socio-emotional learning interventions,

relationship building and more. These cases demonstrate that the framework is versatile, flexible and relevant in diverse contexts, including crisis and emergency ones. UNESCO encourages Member States, organizations or individuals interested in transforming their education systems, to take the framework and transform it into context-specific initiatives.

## A call to action to engage with Happy Schools

The Happy Schools initiative advocates for **top-down** and **bottom-up** transformation of education systems, simultaneously encouraging governments to recognize happiness as a core objective of education, while scaling up promising practices of joyful learning from the school level to the policy level.

There are four main routes to engage with the UNESCO Happy Schools initiative to advance the reorientation of education systems towards happiness:

### 1. UNESCO-supported national Happy Schools projects:

UNESCO Member States may choose to approach UNESCO to receive technical support to adapt the global Happy Schools framework to their national education system and to develop national initiatives.

### 2. Government-, school-, and partner-led Happy Schools projects:

Materials and tools produced as part of the UNESCO Happy Schools initiative are global public goods. Countries, as well as interested organizations, schools and educators, are encouraged to use these materials to self-initiate, lead and implement their own Happy Schools projects at varying levels.

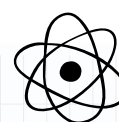
### 3. Advocacy-based engagement with Happy Schools:

Instead of adapting and implementing the Happy Schools framework, countries, organizations and individuals may choose to focus on the advocacy route to promote the integration of happiness in education policies or, more generally, to raise public awareness about the link between school happiness and quality education.

### 4. Evidence-based engagement with Happy Schools:

Contribute to the growing body of scientific literature that explores the links between happiness and learning, in particular through launching new research studies and projects that include evidence from international surveys.

From policy-makers to school leaders to teachers, UNESCO encourages all to join Happy Schools in partnership and commit to making schools happier places for learning, being, doing and living together. If we want happy lifelong learners and teachers, and if we want resilient and collaborative societies, then **we need happy schools**.



Riccardo Mayer/Shutterstock.com\*

# Defining a 'Happy School'

## Happiness



There exists a wealth of terms closely related to **happiness**, including health, well-being, flourishing, fulfilment, contentment, satisfaction and joy. In the literature, happiness is often categorized under two types: eudaimonic and hedonic (Delle Fave, 2020). **Eudaimonic happiness** refers to a sustained sense of fulfilment and satisfaction derived from living a meaningful and purposeful life. This type of happiness can also be called '**flourishing**' and it is similar to **well-being**, which the World Health Organization (WHO) defines as 'quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose,' as well as closely related to **health**, defined as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being' (WHO, 2021a).

But happiness also has a fleeting, unfixed nature, known as **hedonic happiness**, describing a passing emotional state in which an individual experiences positive emotion. The 'happy' in 'Happy Schools' equally embraces both the eudaimonic and hedonic facets of happiness. Therefore, pulling together the wealth of related terms, 'happy' delineates a sustained state of well-being and flourishing, a stable sense of fulfilment and satisfaction, as well as daily experiences of joy and positivity. The terms 'well-being' and 'joy', frequently employed in the report, are thus not synonymous with happiness but rather respectively representative of the eudaimonic and hedonic components encompassed within this report's use of the word 'happiness'.

However, happiness is ultimately a **subjective concept**, viewed differently across people and cultures. Therefore, the Happy Schools initiative does not provide a fixed, universal definition of happiness, nor does it prescribe indicators or standards to measure happiness at the individual level. The global Happy Schools framework underlines the key conditions – physical, social-emotional, pedagogical, and professional – for **school happiness**, which contribute to schools becoming spaces where all can flourish, experience daily joy, grow in knowledge, and practise empathy and resilience. Taking the high-level framework as a guide, UNESCO empowers policy-makers and school communities to form their own contextual understandings of happiness and to steer their own initiatives.

## Schools



This report views **schools** as 'centres of society in their own right, bringing together a range of social goods and services that support the well-being of individuals, families, and communities' (UNESCO, 2021, p. 94). In this sense, schools are not just buildings insulated from the outside world, but living social and community centres – in both physical and virtual forms – for learning and well-being. As microcosms of society, they are not only places of cognitive (academic) learning, but also places of social, emotional, physical and moral development.

## Happy Schools



UNESCO views a 'Happy School' as a **space that supports the learning, health, well-being and daily joy of the entire school community**. In essence, a Happy School is a space that brings together the conditions that enable school community members to embody positive attitudes and attributes that support lifelong learning, such as collaboration, communication, understanding, empathy, motivation, engagement, curiosity, resilience and empowerment. A Happy School cultivates happiness both 'in' and 'for' learning - happiness 'in' learning entails making happiness an integral part and a central goal of the learning process itself, while happiness 'for' learning involves leveraging happiness as a means, a vehicle to enhance learning experiences and outcomes.

## Introduction

# The case for happiness in and for learning

### Key messages

- **A double crisis:** Education systems around the world are under stress from many sources, with a persistent learning crisis and a growing well-being crisis that impacts all members of school communities, including students, parents, teachers, school leaders, support staff and central managers.
- **Comprehensive policies:** It is imperative to develop holistic policies that systemically address both crises together to help resolve many challenges facing schools and society today, including early school leaving, poor learning outcomes, teacher attrition, school bullying and violence.
- **Rethinking quality education:** Tackling the learning and well-being crises together requires us to rethink our assumptions about quality education. Instead of viewing happiness as a trade-off with academic success, we should position it not only as a core purpose of education, but also as a pathway to improved learning, enhanced well-being and fewer disparities.
- **Holistic education:** Although many countries have introduced holistic development as a goal of education, this goal may not translate into policies and practices that allow schools to balance academic performance and employability with personal, social and civic competency development to foster virtuous cycles of happiness and lifelong learning.



## A double crisis in learning and well-being

The urgent need to improve learning outcomes and education participation rates has dominated the global education policy discourse for decades. Education leaders face growing pressure to make swift, sweeping progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, 'to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.

With just six years left to reach SDG 4, demands on policy-makers to improve quality and equity in their education systems are sky-high, intensified by staggering statistics on the **persistent crisis in learning and teaching**:

- 250 million students are out of school (UIS, 2023).
- 44 million teachers are needed to solve the global teacher shortage (UNESCO, 2023a).
- 70 per cent of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries cannot read a basic text (World Bank, 2022).
- 763 million adults cannot read or write (UIS, 2023).

“The crisis in education requires us to fundamentally rethink its purpose and curricula. The schools of the future, whether formal or informal, physical, or virtual, must evolve to become more inclusive, safe, healthy, and stimulating learning places.

Vision Statement of António Guterres,  
UN Secretary-General, during United Nations  
Transforming Education Summit (2022)

Until recently, the international community had not collectively reckoned with declining well-being and mental health in schools. The COVID-19 pandemic propelled a previously non-priority issue in education onto the sector's centre stage: **our children and youth are unhappier and more anxious than ever** (Helliwell et al., 2023).

- The pandemic triggered a 25 per cent increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide, with young people and women the worst affected (WHO, 2022a).

- One in 7 10-19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder, accounting for 13% of the global burden of disease in this age group (WHO, 2021b).
- Every 11 minutes, a young person dies by suicide (UNICEF, 2021), which is the fourth leading cause of death in 15–29-year-olds (WHO, 2023).
- One in 3 learners is bullied in school every month, and cyberbullying is globally widespread (UNESCO, 2019).
- 1 in 10 students on average who took the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 reported not feeling safe at school (OECD, 2023a) and lack of safety and boredom were cited among top reasons for missing school (OECD, 2023a).
- Disadvantaged students' sense of belonging at school has been deteriorating since 2018 on average across OECD countries (OECD, 2023a).
- The 2018 TALIS report showed that teachers who experience 'a lot' of stress at work are more than twice as likely to want to leave teaching in the next five years (OECD, 2020a).

Faced with pressure-filled, performance-dominated education discourses, school violence and discrimination, growing political and social divisions, global conflicts, climate disasters, disruptive digital technologies, and a disconnect between education and the world of work, the promise that education systems will set students up for future success has been cast into question in recent years (Miner, 2020). Millions of students around the world are leaving school early, and dropout rates in higher education are on the rise (UNESCO, 2023b).

Teachers have also been hit hard by drastic changes in their work environments and expectations, creating widespread concern over their well-being and, by extension, the quality of teaching. In an educational environment characterized by poor working conditions, heavy workloads, large class sizes, limited resources, and insufficient professional and psychosocial support, it is no surprise that teacher and student well-being is at a worryingly low level.

low point (UNESCO, 2023a). Declining mental health, combined with pressures to recover rapidly from pandemic learning losses, is exacerbating teacher and student burnout.

## An imperative to integrate happiness into education policy

Today, the crisis in both learning and well-being is causing a collective questioning of the purpose and processes of education. At the **Transforming Education Summit (TES)**, convened by Secretary-General António Guterres in 2022, the global community came together to call for drastic change and a collective reimagining. The ‘new social contract’ (UNESCO, 2021) would allow us to think differently about the means and goals of education, to ensure that school systems set up lifelong learners to flourish in the ever-evolving 21st century. The Summit crystallized a global realization of the disconnect between the needs of young people and the systems that are failing to support them: ‘Today, however, beset by twin crises of equity and relevance, **education as we know it is no longer fit for purpose**’ (United Nations, 2023a, p. 2).

An analysis of 143 national statements made during the TES reveals that 84 countries have committed to improving mental and physical health in schools (UNESCO, 2023c). However, few indicate concrete and system-wide transformations to operationalize these commitments. As many countries face early school leaving, chronic absenteeism, school violence, heavy workloads, declining student well-being and learning outcomes, and teacher burnout and shortages, it is more critical than ever to respond to structural and systemic educational challenges by adopting **comprehensive policy approaches** that address both learning and well-being. Happiness can be at the heart of this education transformation agenda as a key lever for better learning, teaching and well-being.

“At the TES, out of 143 countries that submitted national statements of commitment, 84 (59 per cent) highlighted the need to support mental and physical health in schools; however, very few articulated concrete measures to do so.

(UNESCO, 2023c)



### Australia's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

“Reflecting on the global pandemic, we recognize the importance of prioritizing student and staff mental and physical well-being in quality education delivery and ensuring resilient education systems.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

However, many educational systems view happiness as a competing priority – or even a luxury – against academic progress and student productivity. In many places, policies aimed at improving learning outcomes often focused on accountability, control and limiting non-academic learning, through measures such as frequent assessments, strict attendance monitoring, school report cards, incentive pay, elimination of extracurricular activities, reduced recess time and longer class time for core subjects. These measures have had unintentional consequences on schools, many of which are high-stress, competitive environments where happiness and collaboration are not sufficiently valued. Indeed, the 2023 World Happiness Report concludes that schools have a ‘standing start’ in promoting positive well-being, but that ‘they do not always take advantage of it’ and that even before the pandemic, the well-being of young people in many countries was on the decline, especially among girls (Helliwell et al., 2023).

A growing body of global research shows that learning is a social and emotional process and that positive school environments, joyful learning and a positive psychology of school actors are key levers to improve learning experiences and outcomes (e.g. Côte-Lussier and Fitzpatrick, 2016; Hackman, 2022; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2022; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). Promoting happiness in schools does not imply that other needs, such as infrastructure and safety, are unimportant. Nor does it mean that learning must be made easier or less demanding, or that every moment at school

must be gamified or overflow with positivity. After all, overcoming negative emotions and challenges is part of life and learning. Rather, it means that happiness need not be a distant goal, postponed until schooling is over and work begins, and that joy, laughter and delight can permeate everyday school experiences, part and parcel of learning and teaching.



### Japan's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

“The future of society and individuals lies in education. We promise to continue to make our utmost efforts to realize the different types of happiness of each individual, including all children around the world, and the well-being of society as a whole.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

Educational priorities have often been shaped by sequential and linear thinking that defines the order in which educational choices must be made. In 1943, American psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed the theory of a hierarchy of needs – often visualized as a pyramid – which posits that needs such as ‘belonging’ and ‘self-esteem’ can only be addressed once physical and safety needs are met. In education, this type of thinking translates into the idea that policies must first tackle basic needs, such as **school infrastructure** and meals, before considering the issue of happiness in learning spaces. Critics of Maslow’s pyramid argue that this sequential consideration of needs prevents a holistic view of learners and deters the development of **integrated strategies to satisfy their needs** (Rojas et al., 2023).

While Maslow’s hierarchy suggests a linear progression, real-life experiences often involve the fluid and simultaneous pursuit of multiple needs. For example, even in challenging circumstances, people may seek higher-level needs like social connections or personal growth alongside lower-level basic needs. Neglecting higher-level needs can have detrimental psychological implications, even if physiological and safety needs are met. Nevertheless, pursuing happiness without addressing basic needs would be a naive endeavour. Basic physiological needs, such as food, shelter and safety from violence, are crucial for

happiness; difficult socio-economic circumstances can therefore hinder the achievement of individual and collective well-being. Overall, it is vital to adopt an integrated approach that acknowledges the **interconnectedness of various needs and the possibility to pursue them simultaneously**.

To make happiness an integral part of addressing our educational needs, we must undergo a shift in paradigm. A number of researchers across the fields of education, development, psychology and the science of learning are reimagining Maslow’s pyramid in different forms, for example, as a circle where different needs are interconnected in time and space and can be addressed simultaneously (e.g. Sosteric and Raktovic, 2020; Kopsov, 2019; Chung, 2017; Nain, 2013). This report builds on such models, envisioning happiness as a thread that is woven into a web of all educational needs, rather than relegated to the background while waiting for other needs to be met.

As O’Shaughnessy (2015, p. 32) puts it, ‘**The old dichotomy that you can have happy children or successful children is wrong. A true education provides not one, or the other, but both**’. Our education systems can no longer afford to treat learning as a trade-off for happiness. Ensuring happy school environments is an essential part of achieving the diverse range of each country’s needs and goals for its education system.



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## Purpose and organization of the report

As a key follow-up to TES, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is proposing the 'Happy Schools' initiative to place happiness at the core of countries' education system transformation journeys. The initiative encourages education systems to **recognize happiness as both a means to and a goal of quality learning by promoting happiness as a key lever for improving learning and teaching experiences and outcomes**. The Happy Schools initiative aims to improve the conditions – physical, social, pedagogical and professional – of schools to ensure they are spaces where all can flourish, experience daily joy, grow in knowledge, and practise empathy and resilience.

This report is part of UNESCO's effort to **advocate for global recognition of the link between happiness and learning in education policy**. Addressed to policy-makers, educational decision-makers and educators around the world, the report seeks to demonstrate the importance of happiness in and for learning, and to outline a global Happy Schools framework that serves as a holistic model for embedding happiness into education policies and cultivating it in schools through **systemic changes**. 'Happy Schools' began as a regional initiative in 2014 in UNESCO's Bangkok office (UNESCO, 2016). Acknowledging the global relevance and timeliness of the Happy Schools approach, notably in the post-pandemic world marked by declining learning and well-being, UNESCO (2022a) decided to scale up the initiative globally.

To revise the regional framework for global applicability, this report scans the international literature and existing initiatives for evidence of the synergistic relationship between happiness and learning, establishing the need for whole-of-system, comprehensive approaches to structural challenges to quality education and the well-being of school communities. The global framework complements and combines related areas like physical and mental health, social-emotional learning, joyful learning, child-centred learning and positive education under one overarching umbrella. It expands beyond learner happiness to encompass a system-wide perspective that includes the happiness of teachers, school leaders and all members of the school community.

**Chapter 1** explores the links between happiness and learning from philosophical, normative and scientific perspectives. It starts with an overview of philosophical thinking on the relationship between happiness and learning, followed by an outlining of international normative instruments that affirm the importance of happiness in and for learning. The chapter then explores the scientific evidence on the relationship between happiness and learning by reviewing both theoretical and empirical multidisciplinary research from the fields of psychology, the science of learning and comparative education. Given the nascent, ongoing nature of the research in this field, as well as the methodological challenges intrinsic to studying a subjective concept such as happiness, this chapter also reviews the limitations of the scientific literature on happiness in and for learning.

**Chapter 2** presents the global Happy Schools framework, which revises the regional framework by adding a fourth pillar (principles) to the original three (people, process and place) and reduces the 22 criteria to 12 high-level criteria to make the global framework more flexible and easily adaptable to different education systems with varying contexts and needs. The chapter explains the rationale behind the core criteria presented, supported by empirical research and case studies.

**Chapter 3** describes cases of implementation of UNESCO's Happy Schools framework, including from Portugal, Viet Nam, Yemen and the regional initiative's pilot countries of Japan, Lao PDR and Thailand.

The report **concludes** with a call to action for adopting holistic, top-down and bottom-up approaches to improving school happiness, offering the global Happy Schools framework as a starting point for policy-makers at all levels to implement initiatives that leverage the link between happiness and learning. Recognizing the plethora of existing programmatic interventions that are relevant to components of the Happy Schools initiative, the report's **Annexes** compile a compendium of relevant projects, frameworks and resources that have inspired and informed UNESCO's approach.

A photograph of two young girls in an outdoor setting. The girl on the left, wearing a light blue shirt and denim overalls, is holding a magnifying glass over her eye and smiling. The girl on the right, wearing a red and blue plaid shirt, is looking at a small notebook and writing with a blue pen. In the background, a man in a blue shirt and sunglasses is partially visible, and the scene is set against a backdrop of green foliage.

## Chapter 1

# The nexus of happiness and learning

## Key messages

**Philosophical foundations:** A wide range of philosophies from around the world underscore the interconnected nature of happiness and learning.

- Across time and location, philosophers identify happiness as a core **purpose** of life and education.
- Philosophers emphasize that **relationships, community, personal freedom, character and skill development, exploration and learning** are key sources of a happy life. Accordingly, schools – where many of these elements converge – are inherently suitable spaces for cultivating happiness.
- Education philosophers specifically promote **holistic learning**, which focuses on the development of the whole-person – academically, socially, emotionally, physically, and morally – for fostering happiness and flourishing.

**Normative foundations:** The United Nations has produced many normative instruments and common goals both within and beyond education that strengthen a rights-based case for happiness in and for learning.

- The pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal and should be part of the global policy agenda as per **resolution 65/309** of the United Nations General Assembly entitled ‘Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development’.
- Happy school environments can help uphold the **Right to Education**, as enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights to provide free and compulsory quality education for all individuals globally.
- Happy school environments can help uphold the various **Rights of the Child**, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), safeguarding children’s entitlement to non-discrimination, development, protection from violence, access to leisure and play, and others.
- Happy school environments help advance the **1966 Recommendation** concerning the Status of Teachers and the **1974 Recommendation** on Education for Peace and Human Rights, International Understanding, Cooperation, Fundamental Freedoms, Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development, by fostering teacher happiness and well-being as well as holistic development that nurtures flourishing, peaceful societies.
- Happy school environments contribute to advancing the **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on quality education and SDG 3 on well-being.

**Scientific foundations:** The relationship between happiness and learning is the focus of a growing body of research in positive psychology and the science of learning. While studies exploring this link are ongoing and nuanced, findings reveal several benefits of positive environments and attitudes for improved teaching and learning.

- **Positive psychology** shows that humans need to experience positive emotions, have good relationships, engage in meaningful activities, and feel a sense of accomplishment and competence to feel happy. Feeling happy, in turn, facilitates individuals to increase their focus and expand their creativity, leading to increased performance in tasks.

- **Neuroscience** demonstrates that the cognitive and affective areas of the brain are connected and that people therefore perform better at tasks towards which they have positive feelings and attitudes. Positive emotions play a key role in improving essential mechanisms of learning, such as motivation, attention and memory.
- **The science of learning** establishes that optimal learning environments and pedagogical strategies are those that are active, engaging, meaningful, socially interactive, iterative and joyful. Learner and teacher joy and engagement are important pedagogical vehicles to motivate better and deeper learning.
- **Empirical research** investigating the correlation between student happiness and academic achievement indicates a positive relationship between the two constructs, suggesting that happy students achieve well and achieving students are happy.
- Positive environments can not only improve learning, but also strengthen the **resilience** of school communities and individuals in the face of challenges due to the strong relationships and trust that such learning spaces can cultivate. Happy school environments can inclusively support the learning and well-being of disadvantaged students, contributing to **improving educational inequities**.
- The research on happiness and learning has **limitations**, including the lack of studies across age groups and geographies, as well as the complexity of comparatively measuring learning and happiness, which can vary in meaning across contexts.

## Philosophical links between happiness and learning

### World philosophies of happiness and learning

The relationship between happiness and learning has been the subject of philosophical contemplation for thousands of years. Against the prevailing cultures surrounding them that viewed happiness as a privilege, prominent philosophers from Aristotle to Confucius maintained that happiness was achievable by *all*. This section considers philosophies of happiness and learning across time in different parts of the world. It does not provide a comprehensive review of all existing philosophies, but rather offers a brief discussion of those that inspired and eventually led to the development of the Happy Schools initiative.

In their attempts to understand the nature and source of happiness, many thinkers have emphasized the role of **education, training, learning, teaching and knowledge**. The Buddha argued that happiness was achievable by **training the mind** to think positively and overcome desires (Fronsdal, 2005). Socrates believed that happiness was obtainable

and teachable by **learning how to direct one's desires** away from physical pleasures and towards knowledge and wisdom (Silver, 2013). Aristotle viewed happiness as 'the whole aim and end of human existence' (Egbekpalu, 2021, p. 82) and argued that **cultivating ethical virtues** through education would help individuals reach this goal. He believed that an education conducive to ethics and happiness needed to address the whole person, including through intellectual, moral and physical growth. Confucius, for his part, underlined the **joy of learning**, or the happiness that can be found in the learning process, through his rhetorical question: 'To learn [and] in time to practice, is that not joy?' (Dietz, 2010, p. 222).

Alongside education and learning, many philosophers argued that happiness could also be found in **friendships, relationships and community**. Confucius identified friendships and wider societal harmony as pathways to happiness through yet another question: 'To have friends come visit from afar, is that not also happiness?' (Dietz, 2010, p. 222). The Buddha stated that 'happiness is having friends

when the need arises’ (Fronsdal, 2005, p. 80), arguing that happiness is collectively shared rather than individually experienced. This collective nature of happiness was also prominent in the deep-rooted southern African philosophy of **Ubuntu**, which maintains that an individual’s happiness is inextricably intertwined with the happiness of others in the community (Naudé, 2011). **Holistic indigenous perspectives** like that of the Anishinaabe also emphasize the importance of relationships, not just human but also with nature and the living world, which are sources of happiness as well as learning in themselves (Morcom, 2017).

The idea that happiness is connected to both community and learning naturally carried over to the modern era, aligning with the establishment of schools as spaces combining learning and community. Modern thinkers began to focus on the role of education and schooling in achieving personal and societal happiness. Enlightenment thinker John Locke, coiner of the phrase ‘**the pursuit of happiness**’, saw education as pivotal to pursuing happiness, and specifically underlined the importance of practical learning (Silver, 2013). Drawing from Locke, thinkers from France’s Rousseau to Italy’s Montessori argued that an experiential and **holistic approach** to education was essential to children’s happiness and flourishing. Pestalozzi, the Swiss ‘father of modern pedagogy,’ advocated for learning that engages ‘head, heart and hand’, or cognitive, emotional and physical development in tandem (Brühlmeier, 2010).

American philosopher Dewey (1916) viewed education as the cornerstone of **democratic well-being**, and believed that learning should develop individuals’ ability to be active, reflective and engaged participants in democracies. Brazilian educator Freire (1968, 2000) also believed in the role of education in the achievement of liberation and happiness by helping individuals cultivate **critical consciousness**. Contemporary 21st-century philosophers have continued to tie threads between happiness and education: in their ‘**capabilities approach**’, Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen and American philosopher Martha Nussbaum argue that happiness depends on individuals’ capabilities and opportunities to achieve the life they desire, and stress the role of education in expanding those capabilities (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007).

Notwithstanding their diverse time spans, cultural backgrounds and geographic locations, philosophers have emphasized the importance of happiness as a core purpose of life and connected it with education for millennia. They have argued that learning and community – embodied jointly in schools – play an essential role in helping individuals and societies achieve happiness. These philosophers also share the idea that holistic learning, specifically, can help individuals flourish and be happy.

## UNESCO’s philosophy of holistic learning

With a mandate to promote peace and international cooperation through education, UNESCO has long grounded its educational philosophy in the importance of lifelong and lifewide holistic learning for human flourishing (UNESCO-MGIEP, 2022). Holistic learning encompasses the education – the **academic, social, emotional, physical and moral** development – of the whole person. This philosophy of holistic education was first powerfully articulated by UNESCO in 1972 with the publication of the **Learning to Be** report (also known as the ‘**Faure report**’), a pivotal document that redefined the goals of education by emphasizing lifelong learning (Faure et al., 1972). The report highlights the importance of education in fulfilling human needs. Influenced by some of the key voices of the time like Paolo Freire and Amartya Sen in its vision of both the economic and democratic purposes of education, it argues that learning should encompass personal development, promote social responsibility and provide opportunities for realizing an individual’s full potential.

The Faure report was followed in 1996 by the **Learning: The Treasure Within** report, which proposed a holistic vision of education around four dimensions: learning to be, learning to know, learning to do, and learning to live together in a lifelong perspective (Delors et. al., 1996). The report especially emphasizes ‘**learning to live together**’, recognizing the role of education in building inclusive and peaceful societies. This fourth pillar, therefore, promotes learning that fosters empathy, intercultural understanding and respect for diversity.

6 We urge decision-makers to promote a broader and holistic vision of education that is founded upon the principles of peace and human rights and one that enables every young person to lead a fulfilling, motivated, enjoyable and quality life.

Excerpt from Youth Declaration on Youth Declaration on Transforming Education (United Nations, 2022b)

The 2021 UNESCO *Futures of Education* report, entitled 'Reimagining our future together: a new social contract for education', reiterates the need to transform education to respond to the challenges of the 21st century and address issues related to digitalization, global citizenship, sustainability and equity. The report envisions a future where education is more equitable, responsive, inclusive and adaptable,

bridging gaps to promote social justice, cohesion and resilience in a rapidly changing world.

To translate this philosophical work into core programmes and projects that support the needs of Member States, UNESCO (2014) defines three key skill categories that should be nurtured for holistic development: **foundational** (traditionally academic skills like literacy and numeracy), **specialized** (technical, professional or artistic skills required for specific tasks and jobs) and **transversal** (generic, soft and higher-order skills used in a wide variety of situations, including interpersonal and critical thinking skills). Moreover, the range of core programmes in UNESCO's Education Sector – from 'Global Citizenship and Peace Education' to 'Youth Literacy and Skills Development' – illustrates its institutional **philosophy of holistic education**, in which academic, technical and social-emotional learning all play key roles to bring about human flourishing and harmonious societies.

## International normative links between happiness and learning

In addition to philosophies, the importance of happiness in education, and indeed in development more broadly, is firmly rooted in consensus established by the international community. UNESCO and the United Nations have driven the adoption of many international standard-setting instruments both within and beyond education that strengthen and enshrine the right to well-being and quality education, such as conventions, treaties, frameworks for action, declarations and recommendations. While normative instruments range in their legally-binding force, they nevertheless form the basis for political, moral and legal authority to uphold the relationship between well-being and quality education.

Happiness has been growing in importance on the global policy agenda. In 2011, the landmark United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) **resolution 65/309**, entitled '**Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development**,' recognized the inadequacy of gross domestic product (GDP) in reflecting the happiness and well-being of people, and encouraged the creation of broader measures of progress that went beyond economic indicators (UNGA, 2011). The passing of this resolution set the pursuit of happiness on the global policy agenda as a fundamental human

goal (UNGA, 2011). This resolution later resulted in the establishment of the International Day of Happiness on 20 March, as well as the publication by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) of the *World Happiness Report* every year since 2012. The reports offer a yearly ranking of the happiest countries in the world, arguably fuelling motivation to prioritize happiness in national policies (Helliwell et al., 2023).



### Argentina's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

6 We reaffirm the holistic concept of quality of education, which must be related to inclusion, the expansion of lifelong learning opportunities and the welfare conditions of teachers and students.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

A rights-based perspective offers additional grounding to position happiness as a key lever for better and more holistic learning experiences and

outcomes. The **Right to Education**, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, states that ‘Everyone has the right to education’ (UNGA, 1948) and forms the basis for ensuring free and compulsory *quality* education for all. A body of scientific evidence, which will be explored in detail later in this chapter, indicates that happy learning spaces can be key levers for better and more holistic learning experiences and outcomes, and can therefore be viewed as a vehicle to uphold the right to quality education.

Notably, promoting happiness in education systems actively advances the principles enshrined in two significant normative instruments in Education: the **1966 Recommendation** concerning the Status of Teachers, along with the **1974 Recommendation** on Education for Peace and Human Rights, International Understanding, Cooperation, Fundamental Freedoms, Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development. Improving teacher happiness through pedagogical autonomy, collaborative school management, sense of recognition, adequate training and feedback can contribute to realizing the 1966 recommendation to strengthen the status of teachers. The 1974 Recommendation concerning Education for Peace, revised in 2023, upholds education’s role in contributing to peaceful and just societies, poverty eradication, gender equality, health and well-being, climate change awareness and prevention, and understanding between nations and peoples. Cultivating happy school environments and relationships – with oneself, other people and the planet – can contribute to nurturing the positive skills and attitudes at the basis of education for peace, sustainable development and global citizenship.

In addition to the normative instruments in Education, the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** (UNCRC), likewise provides a firm basis for prioritizing happiness in schools. This convention safeguards children’s rights to non-discrimination, development, freedom of thought and expression, privacy, protection from violence, and access to leisure and play, among others. When considering the links between happiness and learning, schools that are designed to be joyful and inclusive learning spaces are well placed to support the achievement of many of the rights outlined in the UNCRC.

Beyond binding rights frameworks, a range of non-binding international normative works further strengthens the case for synergistic approaches

to bolstering happiness and learning. As a key component of happiness, well-being is firmly established in the **SDGs for 2030**. For example, **SDG 3** strives to ‘ensure good health and well-being for all at all ages’, while **SDG 9** on ‘industry, innovation and infrastructure’ states the importance of infrastructure in promoting human well-being (United Nations, n.d.). Indeed, countries are increasingly recognizing the importance of well-being to the development of their economies and societies.

**SDG 4** on ‘quality education’, which is often said to be the basis for achieving all other SDGs, does not contain many explicit references to happiness or well-being. Yet the happiness and well-being of students and teachers are crucial for the achievement of quality education, just as quality education is essential for the achievement of the societal and individual well-being targeted in SDG 3. Even though countries are increasingly focusing on well-being and happiness, the link between happiness and improved learning remains understated in national education policies (Helliwell et al., 2023).

However, normative concepts and education philosophies alone cannot serve as the basis for developing evidence-based policy approaches linking happiness and learning. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a review of both the theoretical and empirical research from the science of learning and international and comparative education disciplines in order to devise a comprehensive framework that outlines the key criteria of happy education systems.



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## Scientific links between happiness and learning

Despite centuries of ongoing discussion on the topic, scientific investigations of happiness and learning only began in earnest in the 20th century, through advances in psychology and neuroscience, as well as the social and educational sciences. Today, the philosophical and normative understanding of the link between happiness and learning is grounded in a growing body of empirical studies and internationally recognized theoretical frameworks.

### Positive psychology

While psychology has historically emphasized human weaknesses and mental illnesses, the discipline experienced some shifts turn of the 20th century, with psychologists like William James, Abraham Maslow and Marie Jahoda formulating more optimistic and positive approaches (Rathunde, 2001). Austrian psychologist Jahoda (1958) argued that the absence of mental illness was not a sufficient indicator of well-being, and started researching characteristics that make people healthy, rather than ill.

Widely considered the pioneers of the field of 'positive psychology' in the 1990s, Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi shifted how we define human 'flourishing' from the absence of negative emotions and experiences to the presence of positive ones. Positive psychology is 'the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Happiness, as perceived through the lens of positive psychology, extends beyond momentary pleasure and incorporates a more profound and enduring state of well-being.

Positive psychology research over the past decades has identified elements that contribute to happiness. It shows that happiness is not as dependent on socio-economic status or wealth as previously thought; rather, it is heavily impacted by **social connections and relationships**. This is reflected in the multi-dimensional approach to happiness proposed by American psychologist and educator Martin Seligman, whose 'PERMA' model of happiness consists of five essential elements:

- **P**ositive emotions: experiencing joy, gratitude and other positive affective states.
- **E**ngagement: being fully absorbed and immersed in meaningful activities and experiences.
- **R**elationships: strong social connections and meaningful relationships.
- **M**eaning: a sense of purpose and fulfilment derived from serving something greater than oneself.
- **A**ccomplishment: the pursuit of goals and achieving a sense of competence and mastery.

'Engagement' is also a core component of other learning science theories that have inspired educational models and approaches for decades, including the 'flow' theory of Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990). This theory describes a state of optimal human experience, where individuals are optimally challenged by an activity and thus fully immersed and engaged in it. In this state of 'flow', people experience a deep sense of focus, timelessness and enjoyment, often losing track of the outside world. When in flow, individuals' happiness and sense of satisfaction as well as creativity, performance and productivity are enhanced. The flow theory has had a significant influence on designing educational programmes, including digital ones, that optimize learner engagement and satisfaction (dos Santos et al., 2018).

Another relevant theory is 'broaden and build', proposed by American psychologist Barbara Fredrickson (2004). In connection with the 'positive emotions' element of the PERMA model, the broaden-and-build theory suggests that positive emotions play a pivotal role in expanding an individual's cognitive and emotional repertoire. It argues that while negative emotions narrow an individual's focus and abilities, positive emotions broaden awareness and encourage exploration and creativity. This expanded perspective allows individuals to build psychological resources, such as resilience and perseverance, that enhance their overall well-being and prepare them to face adversity. The theory emphasizes the importance of cultivating positive emotions as a means not only to experience more immediate joy

and happiness, but also to develop valuable long-term psychological strengths.

The self-determination theory (SDT) presents connections with the ‘relationships’, ‘meaning’ and ‘accomplishment’ elements of the PERMA model. Developed by Ryan and Deci in the 1980s, SDT emphasizes the innate human need for autonomy, competence and relatedness to flourish (Ryan and Deci, 2017). The theory posits that individuals are most motivated and satisfied when they have a sense of control over their choices (autonomy), when they feel capable of achieving their goals (competence), and when they experience meaningful connections with others (relatedness). Schools are important places where individuals can fulfil these three needs from a young age, by developing their independence, building their competence and creating meaningful connections.

## The science of learning

To understand the links between happiness and improved learning, it is necessary to go beyond positive psychology and explore the **science of learning**, a multidisciplinary field focused on understanding how learning happens and how the human brain learns best. The field combines insights from a range of diverse yet related fields, including the neurosciences, comparative education, psychology, robotics, machine learning, and others (Meltzoff et al., 2009; Sawyer, 2014). One of the main findings of the science of learning is that learning is a social and emotional process (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Nasir et al., 2021).

### Links between happiness and the learning process

**Neuroscientific** research, in particular, has established that learning tasks require individuals to use areas of the brain specialized in social and emotional activities (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). This is because the thinking and the feeling areas of the brain are inextricably wired to the cognitive areas (Ereksan, 2014): cognitive memory, for example, is directly connected to affective experience. An overview of social and emotional learning in the 2023 Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR) thus

concludes that ‘it is essentially impossible to perform a cognitive task without experiencing positive or negative emotions towards it, and people perform better on cognitive tasks towards which they have a positive attitude’ (UNESCO, 2023b, p. 279).

Research does indeed show that experiencing positive emotions like joy, enthusiasm and curiosity helps improve learning (e.g. Diamond, 2013; Jirout et al., 2022; Løvoll et al., 2017; Low et al., 2016; Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). From a neuroscientific point of view, positive emotions play a key role in improving essential mechanisms of learning like motivation, attention and memory (Li et al., 2020): brain imaging and neurobiological experiments show how positive emotions activate specific sections of the brain that can enhance learning and cognitive processing (Machado and Cantilino, 2016; Hinton et al., 2008; Burgdorf and Panksepp, 2006).

### Box 1. Positive education

Education specialists saw the potential of positive psychology to be incorporated into schools, leading to the establishment of positive education as a sub-discipline of positive psychology. Seligman et al. (2009) declared positive education as ‘education for both traditional skills and happiness’ driven by the need for addressing depression, increasing life satisfaction, and better learning. In the same paper, the authors conceived of positive education as the basis for a ‘new prosperity’ that would allow education to drive both wealth and well-being (Seligman et al., 2009).

Although ‘positive education’ gained prominence in the late 20th century, the idea that education should be a vehicle for holistic human development encompassing a much wider objective than pure economic productivity had existed for centuries, as evidenced by the many philosophical approaches. However, the merging of this thought with empirical science gave rise to a host of evidence-based models. Positive education models embrace (although not exclusively) character education that cultivates key traits that contribute to a happy life, mindfulness-based education that integrates mindfulness practices into daily learning to decrease stress and increase focus, and social-emotional learning models that aim to nurture learners’ emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships.

On the other hand, certain **negative emotions**, such as anxiety, sadness or stress, have been shown to disrupt learning (Tan et al., 2021). For example, UNESCO-MGIEP (2020) highlights the detrimental effects of stress on learning processes, indicating a shift from flexible cognitive learning to rigid, habit-driven behaviours, ultimately hampering memory and overall learning outcomes. Notably, stress and anxiety related to exams critically impede students' cognitive functioning and abilities. Stress hinders cognitive ability and tends to increase cognitive difficulties, disrupting aspects of memory retrieval and consolidation (Bueno, 2021a). Studies find, for example, that maths anxiety is related to poorer maths performance and notably affects girls (Szűcs, 2019). Maths anxiety can stem from various sources, including negative experiences in classes, anxiety passed down from teachers and stereotypes about gender and ability (Beilock et al., 2010; Szűcs, 2019), highlighting the crucial role of positive school environments in fostering healthy and successful relationships with math learning. PISA 2022 results show that a one-point increase in maths anxiety is associated with a decrease of 18 score points in maths achievement on average across every education system that took part in the survey, regardless of student and school characteristics (OECD, 2023b).

At the system level, if the **school climate** is stressful, punitive, overly competitive, and exclusionary, students may suffer from poor mental health, higher rates of anxiety and depression. Poor mental health and well-being lead to increased school absenteeism (Lawrence et al., 2019; van den Toren et al., 2019), as youth with anxiety and depression tend to avoid school. Frequently bullied students are more likely to skip school, whereas students who value school and enjoy a more positive disciplinary climate are less likely to do so (OECD, 2020b). Staying away from school for a prolonged time can in turn lead to a further deterioration of learners' mental health (Kearney, 2008). Conversely, students who value school and enjoy a more positive disciplinary climate are less likely to skip or drop out of school (OECD, 2020b).

However, **not all positive emotions lead to improved learning, and not all negative ones lead to diminished learning**. Positive states of relaxation or leisure may hinder the learning process, while negative emotions like disappointment or

competitiveness can motivate some learners to work harder, own up to their mistakes, and increase their aspirations (Pekrun, 2014). The Happy Schools initiative is not about eliminating negative emotions or healthy competition. Rather, it is about creating an environment that engages teachers and learners through positive emotions, encouraging them to overcome negative emotions, collaborate to achieve more together, and develop resilience.

The emerging understanding of the **interconnection between cognitive and emotional brain functions** emphasizes the pivotal role of emotional factors in facilitating effective learning experiences. Overall, learning scientists suggest that to achieve powerful learning, educators must engage learners' minds and hearts at the same time (Erekson, 2014). Growing evidence also underlines the connections between mind, heart and the entire body, demonstrating that learning experiences are enhanced through activities that engage learners' whole body beyond the brain (González-Grandón, 2023; Munro and Coetzee, 2011).

Eminent developmental psychologist Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and her team conducted a comprehensive review of the science of learning research and identified six principles of pedagogical practice that encourage better learning at all ages: 1) **active**: students are fully involved, both mentally and physically, in their learning by asking questions, engaging in deep reflection, participating in discussions, and actively using their bodies to manipulate objects or complete tasks; 2) **engaged**: students filter out distractions and focus their attention on the task at hand; 3) **meaningful**: students connect their learning to their own experiences, interests and prior knowledge; 4) **socially interactive**: students interact and collaborate with peers and see information through another's perspective; 5) **iterative**: students repeat tasks and revise hypotheses; and 6) **joyful**: students feel positive emotions and have playful experiences (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2022; Zosh et al., 2018).

### Links between happiness and learning outcomes

The idea of a **trade-off** between academic achievement and happiness has been a common discourse in empirical research. For example, one notable cross-comparative study (Heller-Sahlgren,

2018) uses data from the OECD's PISA 2012 to argue that students' well-being and achievement do not go hand-in-hand, and that policy-makers need to decide which of the two should be prioritized. However, a growing body of **empirical research challenges the dichotomy between academic achievement and well-being**. In a response paper to Heller-Sahlgren (2018), Clarke (2020, p.1) argues that 'far from being incompatible, children's well-being and achievement are positively associated'. Indeed, an older study (Kirkcaldy et al., 2004) using PISA data from 30 countries finds a significant association between subjective well-being and academic achievement, notably reading achievement.

### Box 2. Measuring happiness: How is happiness measured in empirical studies?

The transition towards a scientific understanding of happiness in the latter half of the 20th century was accompanied by a need to measure happiness. American positive psychologist Ed Diener was particularly influential in this area, coming up with the notion of 'subjective well-being' (SWB) to measure happiness empirically. Because happiness is a subjective concept, SWB relies on individuals' own evaluation of their happiness through surveys rather than objective external measures. Although people's ability to provide accurate answers about their happiness can be questioned, Diener (2009) argues that individuals are the best judges of whether they are happy and that, in general, people are happy if they think they are.

SWB is a compound measure of happiness combining different understandings of happiness reviewed previously, notably hedonic views (happiness as a pleasant mental or emotional state) and eudaimonic views (happiness as a good life of flourishing and fulfilment). As such, SWB looks at three specific components to measure a person's happiness: (1) positive affect (the experience of pleasurable feelings like joy or hope); (2) negative affect (the experience of painful feelings like sadness or anxiety); and (3) life satisfaction (an assessment of how well one's life is going, how it measures up to one's aspirations and goals in general or in specific domains). The first two components are known as affective or emotional evaluations, while the third is a cognitive evaluation of happiness. SWB can be measured through various questionnaires and scales, including the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, the Satisfaction with Life Scale, and the OECD's SWB Guidelines.

Another recent cross-country study (Högberg, 2023) using data from five waves of the PISA, as well as from the 'Health Behaviour in School-aged Children' study – with data spanning over 18 years and including more than 1 million pupils in 45 countries – finds no, weak or inconsistent empirical support for a trade-off between individual well-being and individual achievement, or individual well-being and country-level achievement. In fact, PISA 2022 results reveal that the **most resilient education systems** during the COVID-19 pandemic were those that were able to maintain learning performance, well-being and equity, demonstrating that it is possible – and necessary – to uphold the three at the same time (OECD, 2023a).

Beyond PISA studies, meta-analyses and systematic reviews of several other studies on this topic show an overall trend of significant and positive relationship between happiness and academic achievement (Bücker et al., 2018; Clarke, 2020; Kaya and Erdem, 2021). For instance, Kaya and Erdem's (2021) meta-analysis pulling together 81 independent samples that examine the link between students' **well-being and academic achievement reveals a significant positive correlation between the two variables**. The correlation is robust across all well-being domains, academic areas, scale types and country development levels, while the effect size – the magnitude of the relationship between the two variables – differs across domains of well-being. Notably, **cognitive, social and subjective well-being show the most substantial effect on academic achievement** compared to other well-being domains like physical or spiritual. Consequently, Kaya and Erdem (2021) suggest that schools should focus on enhancing learners' social relations and life satisfaction to boost academic achievement. Recent data show that only 67 per cent of students across OECD report being satisfied with their lives average (OECD, 2019a), which only further emphasizes the importance of this focus area for schools.

While substantial evidence indicates a positive relationship between academic achievement and happiness, **establishing the direction of this positive relationship remains challenging**. Findings point to a reciprocal and synergistic relationship whereby happiness leads to higher achievement and higher achievement leads to happiness, reinforcing

each other and creating what educators call ‘**the good circle**’ (Ng et al., 2015).

### Links between happiness and learning equity

Less-privileged and marginalized groups are likely to report **lower levels of happiness** and life satisfaction, as well as **lower achievement**. Children and adolescents from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to succeed in school than their counterparts from higher socio-economic backgrounds, and tend to have worse mental health and socio-emotional functioning (Broer et al., 2019). Research shows that happy school climates and socio-emotional interventions can benefit the well-being, academic achievement and long-term life success of disadvantaged students (e.g. Ajayi et al., 2022; Hackman et al., 2022). Joyful and supportive educational environments notably help disadvantaged learners develop resilience, one of the key characteristics leading low SES learners to succeed in school, as indicated by PISA results that reveal high levels of academic achievement among resilient disadvantaged students (OECD, 2019b; OECD, 2011).

Indeed, the evidence suggests that principles like optimism and engagement are not only aligned with improved achievement, but also with key indicators of **system resilience**. UNESCO’s International Bureau of Education (IBE) partnered with the International Brain Research Organization (IBRO) to translate key neuroscience research on learning and the brain for educators, policy makers and governments. Exposure to positive, enriching and healthy environments, along with a sense of agency, optimism, social values and self-efficacy, and pedagogies that support these behavioural characteristics, strengthen resilience during schooling and can increase learning achievement and well-being, especially for the disadvantaged (UNESCO and IBRO, 2021). Similarly, an evidence synthesis on holistic approaches in education concludes that **holistic development** is connected to improved academic achievement as well as better social and economic outcomes, while being a buffer against adversities (INEE, 2023). Policy frameworks that synergize happiness and holistic learning can therefore present a pathway to increasing resilience and **improving equity** in education.

Happiness can also help tackle **gender inequalities** in education. Research shows that girls often

suffer from higher rates of anxiety and depression overall (WHO, 2022a), specifically greater anxiety and tension related to tests, notably in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects (UNESCO, 2017a). Test anxiety translates into lower performance and confidence (Szűcs, 2019). For example, PISA 2015 results show that girls have lower self-efficacy in science and mathematics than boys, a difference that has remained largely unchanged since 2006 (OECD, 2015). Anxiety around mathematics and science subjects may not only result in decreased performance among girls, but also an underrepresentation of women in STEM domains in the workforce (UNESCO, 2017a). Promoting positive relationships within the school community, a sense of belonging, collaborative work and joy in STEM classes can help increase girls’ interest, engagement and self-efficacy in STEM subjects. Thus, happiness can be a pathway to enhancing girls’ engagement in STEM at school and in the workforce, contributing to a **more balanced female representation** in the domain.

On the flip side, **boys’ disengagement from education** has been a growing problem around the world (UNESCO, 2022b). While girls face barriers to accessing primary education, boys encounter increasing challenges at later stages. Globally, there are 88 men enrolled in tertiary education for every 100 women; in 73 countries, fewer boys attend upper-secondary education, while the opposite is true in 48 countries (UNESCO, 2022b). Not only are boys more likely to leave school earlier, they also tend to perform worse than girls. For example, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results show that boys have been consistently scoring lower in reading than girls over the years (Mullis et al., 2023). This phenomenon is worrying, since boys’ disengagement from education often has a direct impact on their future earnings, **causing a cycle of poverty** (UNESCO, 2022b).

Moreover, research suggests a strong relationship between male educational achievements and other social and behavioural issues, such as violence, poor health outcomes and social unrest (e.g. Martins-Silva et al., 2022). While the causes of boys’ disengagement from education are multifaceted, school environments are known to play a major role in engagement, including through factors such as student-teacher relationships, peer learning, and a sense of inclusiveness and fairness (e.g. Welmond and

Gregory, 2021; Coelho et al., 2020). UNESCO (2022b) also emphasizes that harsh discipline, gender norms, corporal punishment and other forms of violence can hinder boys' academic achievement, leading to higher absenteeism and dropout rates in schools worldwide. Happiness can therefore be leveraged to **re-engage boys in education** and keep them in school.

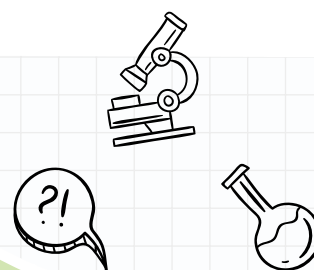
## Limitations and knowledge gaps in the science of learning and happiness

While there is research suggesting a positive relationship between happiness and learning achievement, the data remains mixed, with some studies suggesting a negative or ambiguous relationship, or no relationship at all. Until the early 2000s, happiness and learning were researched in different strands of literature; only recently has the relationship between the concepts emerged as a research focus. The lack of a scientific consensus on their relationship can therefore be attributed, at least in part, to the **nascent nature of literature on this topic**, with the lack of substantive research as one of the major limitations of this field.

Moreover, the underlying details of the relationship between learning and happiness remain unclear.

Little is known about the underlying mechanisms of the 'good circle', including possible third variables mediating or moderating the intensity and strength of the relationship between happiness and achievement (Bücker et al., 2018). Moreover, variables like intelligence, age, socioeconomic status and family background can confound the relationship between happiness and learning, although studies find positive associations even when controlling for these variables (e.g. Crede et al., 2015; Ng et al., 2015). The complex link between the two constructs, therefore, must be further disentangled through research. More research is also needed across developmental ages, since most studies focus on specific age groups and grades.

Aside from more research, the design and enhancement of measures is another area of research in itself. Investigations of happiness also need to address and reflect the **complexity of conceptualizing and measuring this concept** (Ludwigs et al., 2019). As noted previously, happiness is commonly measured using subjective well-being surveys and questionnaires. While this subjective measure is attractive because it gives voice directly to the individuals whose happiness we intend to measure, some scholars criticize its accuracy.



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Response bias in surveys is a phenomenon where participants' answers are influenced by factors such as social desirability that lead to inaccurate or skewed data. For example, Logan et al. (2008) found that children who were high in social desirability under-reported depression and anxiety symptoms. Are people happy just because they say they are? Is measuring people's happiness at a point in time reflective of their general happiness? Is there a generally stable happy state, or is happiness an ever-changing state – and, if so, is happiness measurable at all? Such questions do not prevent the study of happiness, but should be considered in the methods and theoretical frameworks adopted for research on the topic, especially when studies are comparative and international in scope.

The importance of carefully disentangling measurements of happiness is clear when considering levels of measured happiness. The existence of a positive correlation between happiness and learning does not automatically (and simplistically) mean that 'the higher the happiness point, the better the learning' – in fact, this might not always be the case. For example, on average across OECD countries, students who reported being dissatisfied with their lives scored five points lower in reading than students who were more satisfied with their lives (OECD, 2019a). However, findings also show a trend towards poorer reading performance among students with both very low *and* very high levels of life satisfaction, as well as very low and very high levels of positive feelings towards reading. This suggests that the **relationship between happiness and reading is curvilinear rather than linear**, increasingly positive until a certain point and decreasing thereafter (OECD, 2019a). Studies measuring happiness should therefore pay close attention to the nuances of happiness levels and their links to learning.

Studies must also take into account the **multidimensionality of happiness**. As seen earlier, happiness is made up of several components, including hedonic (affective and emotional) and eudaimonic (cognitive) elements. Empirical research must disentangle these components from one another to gain a better understanding of the relationship between happiness and learning. Current research suggests that the happiness-learning link is more or less pronounced depending on the dimension of happiness

### Box 3. Measuring learning: How is learning measured in empirical studies?

Learning is conventionally measured by looking at learning outcomes using indicators that assess a student's knowledge, understanding, skills and competences in specific subject matters through standardized tests and examinations (Caspersen et al., 2017). Other measures of learning include participation, attendance and behavioural observations, often used to gauge a student's engagement in and attitude towards learning. Most of the research on the link between happiness and learning seems to measure learning through learners' academic performance, as evidenced in GPA or scores on a specific test (Clarke, 2020).

measured. Some research finds that achievement is more associated with cognitive components of happiness than affective ones. For example, a study (Steinmayr et al., 2016) of 11th-grade students in Germany found a clear correlation between grade point average (GPA) and the cognitive component of SWB, but not the affective component. Another study (Klapp et al., 2023) with Swedish 6th-grade students found that high cognitive well-being – reflected in students' positive perception of their intellectual capacity – was associated with high academic achievement. The same study, however, found that psychological well-being was negatively related to academic achievement: students who experienced more school-related stress performed higher than students who experienced less stress.

Another study (Ng et al., 2015) of middle schoolers in the United States of America revealed positive and reciprocal causal relations between students' life satisfaction and grades, controlling for potentially confounding variables like demographic covariates. The study concluded that rather than undermining academic achievement, **life satisfaction was synergistic with better school grades**. For every 1 standard deviation in life satisfaction, the study expected a .07 standard deviation increase in GPA. However, the same study found that negative and/or positive affective experiences in school did not moderate the association between GPA and life satisfaction, suggesting that **momentary affective experiences may not have a significant impact on academic performance or life satisfaction**.

Such findings underscore the importance of recognizing the multidimensionality of happiness. Yet the findings do not necessarily indicate that the cognitive (eudaimonic) component of happiness influences achievement more than the affective (hedonic) factor across all school levels and age groups. Research demonstrates the importance of affective or hedonic happiness in the achievement of younger students in elementary school and below (Clarke, 2020), showing that different ‘types’ of happiness affect children’s achievement differently at different points of their development. Hedonic happiness, as exemplified by positive experiences and emotions, seems to be more important for younger students’ learning and achievement, while eudaimonic happiness plays a more important role for older students. Thus, **developmental stages** are another element worth disentangling in the research on happiness and learning.

Just like happiness, **‘learning’ is also a complex and multidimensional concept**. It is often viewed through learning outcomes and measured through academic achievement on tests and exams. There exist multiple ways of measuring learning achievement, and the type of measure used can impact the link established between happiness and learning. Clarke (2020) notes the need for an objective measurement of achievement, especially when making cross-country or cross-school comparisons. Furthermore, there is a need to expand our understanding of learning outcomes and achievement beyond grades, to include other forms of assessing and measuring learning. Beyond learning outcomes, the learning context, environment, inputs and

processes can be emphasized, and taken as indicators of good learning and achievement, too.

## Translating the research into a policy framework

Despite the limitations and knowledge gaps, science provides emerging evidence for the positive link between happiness and learning: happy, joyful learning environments support quality teaching and learning and can help improve outcomes. Considering the evidence from scientific as well as philosophical and international normative perspectives, it is clear that happiness must become a more integral part of our understanding of quality learning.

The next chapter will present the Happy Schools framework, a holistic and system-wide model that supports countries in reorienting their education systems towards happiness in and for learning. The framework, as we will see, was built by combining previous models with emerging global research on the link between happiness and learning. Four key dimensions emerged as central factors contributing to school happiness: the relationships, well-being and attitudes of people at schools, the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of teaching and learning processes, the conditions of physical and virtual places in schools, and the fundamental values and principles that serve as the bedrock for positive learning environments and experiences. These 4 pillars of people, process, place and principles form the structure of the next chapter, which will use scientific evidence to rationalize the selection of each pillar’s 3 high-level criteria.



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## Chapter 2

# The global Happy Schools framework

If schools are to be the vectors for high-quality learning experiences that cultivate 21st century skills, resilience and a life-long zest for learning, they need to be happy environments that prioritize holistic, deep and joyful learning. Sustaining such environments in the long-term requires a commitment to embedding the critical link between happiness and learning into the **foundation and goals** of quality education at all levels of the system. Chapter 2 of this report presents a holistic and system-wide tool to do this: the Happy Schools framework.

Teachers and educators around the world grasp first-hand the importance of fostering joy, engagement and collaboration in schools. Many also know how to bring happy values and climates into their classrooms. Nevertheless, teachers and school leaders may feel little agency in determining which values to cultivate, as these must often mirror the principles imbued in the regional and national policies that permeate every level of the education system. Policy-level decisions that prioritize academic achievement without due attention to teacher and student well-being can prevent educators from creating the intended happy environments that motivate deeper learning, instead trickling down into heavy workloads, rigid learning and professional development pathways, and accountability practices that may drive distrust (Bormann et al., 2022). These **negative side effects** can create tensions between learners, teachers, parents and school leaders, harming mutual respect and stunting academic, professional and social-emotional growth (e.g. Steare et al., 2023; Verger and Skedsmo, 2021; Finnigan and Daly, 2016).

Given the impact of policy decisions in schools, it is systemic policy levers that must be pulled to transform schools into happy places. As such, UNESCO's global Happy Schools framework is a tool that supports policy-makers and educators to steer system-wide educational culture towards happiness as a key lever for achieving better and wider learning experiences and outcomes. The framework underlines key conditions – physical, social, pedagogical, professional – for schools to become communities where all can flourish, experience daily joy, grow in knowledge, and practise empathy and resilience.



### Italy's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

6 Aware that a transformation of the education system towards a more inclusive, fair and quality school could be achieved only through a whole-of-government approach but also through the mobilisation of main stakeholders, we will continue implementing participated programming processes, involving not only central and local authorities but also students, parents, teachers and the whole local communities, adopting a whole-school and whole-of-society approach, connecting the local to the national level and vice versa.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

The framework consists of four pillars – **people, process, place and principles** – to transform education policy and practice by positioning happiness as a means to and a goal of quality learning. By focusing on happiness within the school community, policy-makers and educators can improve both learning and well-being, as well as bolster the overall resilience and relevance of the wider education system.

The Happy Schools framework originated in UNESCO's Bangkok office, where a regional framework was developed based on cross-country surveys with students in the Asia-Pacific region. The framework, published in 2016, consisted of three pillars for a happy school – people, process and place – and 22 criteria. UNESCO launched a **global scale-up** of the Happy Schools initiative in 2022, and the regional framework has been under revision since then to include a fourth dimension of '**principles**', a stronger focus on the implications of **digital technology**, and a reorganization of the 22 criteria into **12 high-level criteria**.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Annex 2 provides the regional Happy Schools framework as a point of reference for comparison.

The new global framework stems from a review of educational philosophies, normative policy instruments and scientific evidence from across the globe that underline the importance of happiness in and for learning, as explored in Chapter 1 of this report. The framework is also informed by multiple initiatives around the world that promote holistic educational approaches that combine happiness and learning. Descriptions of some these initiatives are found in the Annexes to this report.

To ensure broad applicability, the criteria set in the framework are deliberately overarching, allowing adaptation to diverse local contexts and the myriad conceptualizations of schooling, teaching and learning. They should, therefore, not be viewed as a rigid checklist, but rather as a **flexible framework**. Adapting this framework to local needs involves a careful process utilizing the foundational concepts as a base and incorporating practical details to operationalize its implementation in diverse educational settings. The key aspects of each pillar of the framework are as follows:

➤ The **people** pillar aims to enhance the interpersonal relationships, well-being and positive attitudes and attributes of the actors within school communities: students, parents, teachers, school leaders, support staff, central managers and community members.

➤ The **process** pillar targets transforming curricula, pedagogy and assessment systems to leverage happiness and daily joy in schools, including through activities such as recess, sports, arts and extracurriculars that enhance teaching and learning experiences.

➤ The **place** pillar intends to transform physical and digital spaces to make schools healthier, safer and more inclusive community hubs.

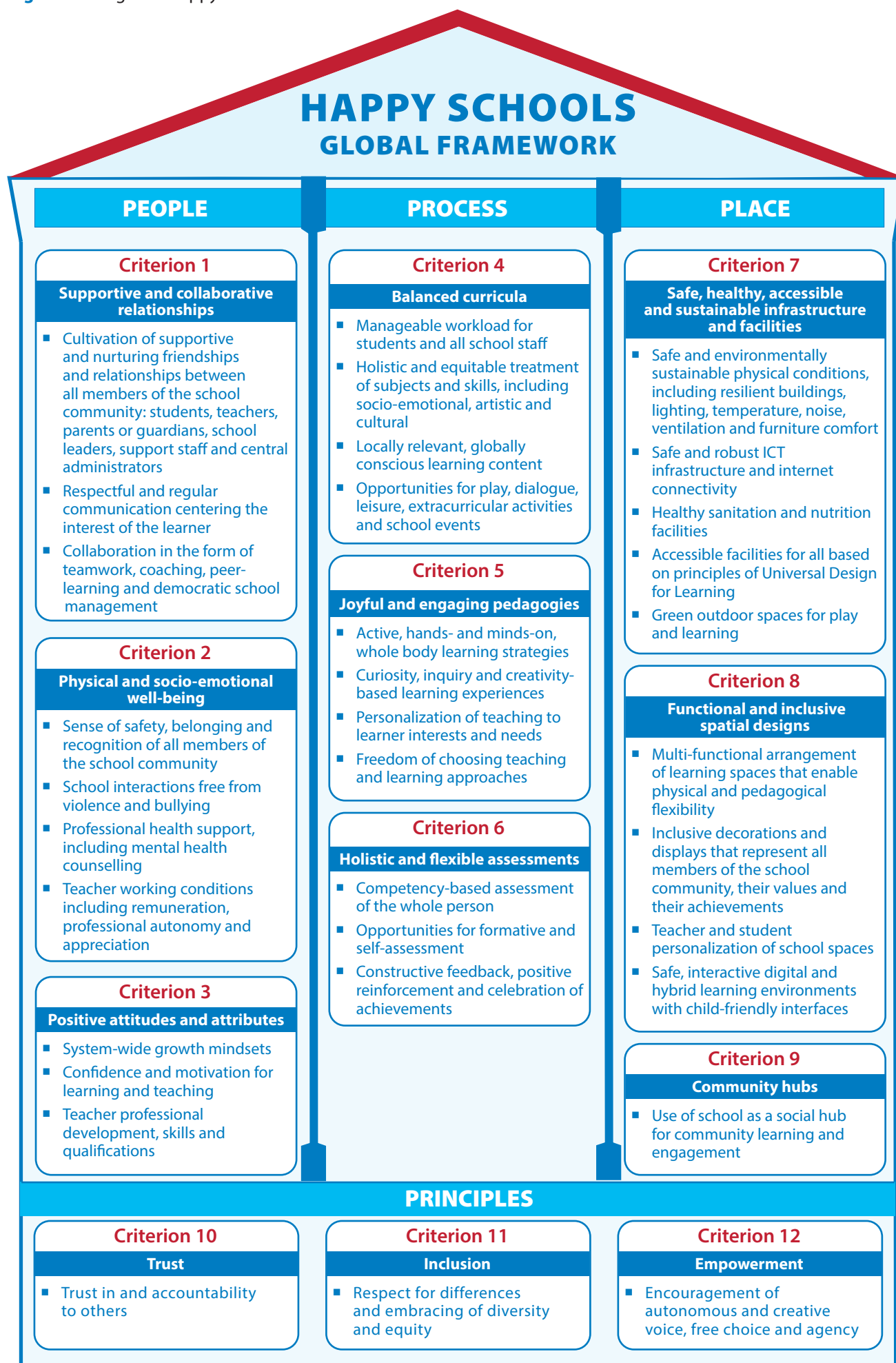
➤ The **principles** pillar emphasizes the fundamental values that bind together school communities and enable the realization of the people, process and place pillars.

These four pillars are interconnected rather than isolated, with some criteria cutting across several dimensions. Happy Schools can only be fostered through a **systemic approach that considers the interplay between the four pillars**. Such an approach understands that interactions between *people* form the foundation of transforming educational *processes*; *places* shape the well-being of *people* and the conceivability of different educational *practices*; educational *processes* construct the attitudes and mindsets of *people*; and the *principles* we hold inform our everyday interactions, educational choices and spatial designs. The rest of this chapter will zoom into each of the four pillars of the Happy Schools framework, presenting the key criteria to promote system-wide happiness in and for learning (as displayed in Figure 1).



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**Figure 1.** The global Happy Schools framework



Source: Based on UNESCO (2016).

## People pillar

The people criteria focus on the interpersonal relationships, well-being, attitudes and attributes of the main actors within school communities.

### Criterion 1

Supportive and collaborative relationships

### Criterion 2

Physical and socio-emotional well-being

### Criterion 3

Positive attitudes and attributes

### Criterion 1

Supportive and collaborative relationships

The *World Happiness Report*, published yearly since 2012, consistently highlights **quality social relationships** as one of the strongest predictors of happiness in life. The first report, published in 2012, found that ‘while basic living standards are essential for happiness, after the baseline has been met happiness varies more with quality of human relationships than income’ (Helliwell et al., 2012, p. 9). The latest report, published in 2023, confirms ‘the massive role of social connections in promoting well-being and the corresponding power of loneliness to reduce it’ (Helliwell et al., 2023, p. 22). Having social support, or ‘someone to count on in times of trouble,’ is essential for general life satisfaction, as well as for building resilience in times of crisis (Helliwell et al., 2023, p. 8). Moreover, according to the longest-running study of all time on happiness – the Harvard Study on Adult Development – ‘close relationships, more than money or fame, are what keep people happy throughout their lives’ (The Harvard Gazette, 2017), and loneliness is more dangerous for health and well-being than smoking, drinking or obesity (Waldinger and Schulz, 2023).

Happy Schools should therefore be scaffolded by a web of positive relationships between students, teachers, parents and guardians, school leaders, central managers and community members. In fact, the 2016 regional study on Happy Schools showed that the number one factor for happiness – and unhappiness – was relationships. Based on more than 4,000 survey responses from the Asia-Pacific region, ‘friendships and relationships in the school community’ emerged as the number one factor for a happy school, while ‘bad relationships’ was ranked

as the fifth most common reason for unhappiness in schools (UNESCO, 2016).

Although relationships between all school actors are important to school happiness, regular and collaborative engagement between teachers, students and parents or guardians is central to improving teaching and learning.



### Argentina's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

‘Caring tasks are part of the task of educating: caring, teaching how to take care of oneself, and how to take care of others.’

(UNESCO, 2023c)

**Students and students.** Student-student relationships make critical contributions to students’ healthy social-emotional development. Alongside helping students to create meaningful friendships and receive emotional support, peer interactions provide a unique context for children to learn sought-after soft skills in today’s world, such as empathy, cooperation and problem-solving (Pepler and Bierman, 2018; Ramani, 2012). In addition to promoting social-emotional development, research shows that healthy student-student relationships and peer social acceptance promote higher academic achievement (Kiuru et al., 2019; Wentzel et al., 2021). Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of ‘zone of proximal development’ describes the range where a student is able to perform a task, but only with support from a

more knowledgeable peer or teacher, highlighting the power of social interaction in promoting learning. As such, Happy Schools should encourage frequent and meaningful interactions between students through peer learning activities, collaborative projects and group play.

**Students and teachers.** Conflictual student-teacher relationships are often associated with student underachievement (Ansari et al., 2020; Furrer et al., 2014; Raufelder et al., 2013). Conversely, research consistently shows that positive, communicative student-teacher relationships yield higher academic outcomes owing to increased student engagement, motivation and participation in learning activities (Sahlberg and Walker, 2021). At the secondary-school level, student engagement has been shown to grow increasingly when the number of positive teacher-student relationships outnumbered the number of negative relationships across subjects (Martin and Collie, 2019). Research also finds that having even one dependable, supportive adult in a child's life, such as a teacher, can help counteract the effects of negative experiences on cognitive functioning (Bueno, 2021b). This highlights the positive role supportive relationships with teachers can play in a student's development and learning.

PISA 2018 results show that teacher shortages, which may diminish opportunities for building strong relationships between students and teachers, influence learning outcomes more than teacher qualifications (OECD, 2019c). Moreover, PISA 2022 results find that **students learn best from teachers they love**, and that the strength of student-relationships is particularly critical during times of educational disruption (OECD, 2023a). Teachers should therefore build close connections with their students, taking time to get to know their backgrounds, interests and needs. Evidence points to the positive influence of having teachers from similar backgrounds, such as same-race teachers, on minority students' academic outcomes, pointing to the importance of cultural fit between students and teachers (Redding, 2019). Improved student-teacher relationships are not just beneficial for students, but also for teachers themselves: conflictual relationships with students can cause stress for teachers, whereas having close relationships with students leads to higher levels of accomplishment, satisfaction,

motivation and enjoyment of teaching (Corbin et al., 2019; Spilt et al., 2011).

**Parents or guardians and students.** The relationship between students and their parents and families plays a central role in their happiness and learning. Decades of research indicate that parental involvement with schooling positively impacts student achievement (Castro et al., 2015; Fan and Chen, 2001), and some experts suggest that schools must actively engage parents more because "parental engagement is the best lever we have for school improvement and closing the achievement gap" (Goodall, 2017, p.1). A literature review on the impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment clearly shows that if parents have a positive attitude towards learning, they have a positive impact on schooling outcomes, regardless of their own education levels or ability to help with school-related learning (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). PISA 2018 data reveal that 'academically resilient' students receive more support from their parents' than other students (OECD, 2019b). This study defined resilience as found in those students who come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds but perform in the top quarter of students in their country, indicating that collaboration between students and parents plays a key role in improving learning outcomes and learning equity. Moreover, PISA 2022 results show that, in all countries with available data, students who enjoyed more support from their families reported higher life satisfaction, greater sense of belonging at school and more confidence in their capacity for self-directed learning (OECD, 2023a).

**Teachers and parents or guardians.** Parents and teachers are co-educators, and teachers can support parents to develop positive attitudes towards learning and engage actively with their children's schooling. Active communication between teachers and parents and participatory engagement with school activities are positively related to student achievement. Conversely, teachers' stress from managing parent communication, as well as their lack of perception of respect from parents and guardians, are shown to negatively impact student achievement (Fu et al., 2022). Regular communication between teachers and parents is therefore a critical criterion of Happy Schools to build trust, transparency and

mutual understanding between these two groups of actors who are central to learners' lives. Importantly, however, this communication must respect work-life boundaries of both teachers and parents.

**School leaders.** School leaders are the linchpin of the micro and macro levels of education systems. They are responsible for building and managing relationships with a wide range of stakeholders, from students, parents and teachers to administrators, district managers and union leaders. In particular, strong communication between school leaders and teachers is critical, to ensure that teachers are given the autonomy they need to develop an authentic, confident teaching practice, ultimately leading to better teaching and learning (Liebowitz and Porter, 2019). However, this trust cannot be built without respectful, communicative relationships between teachers and their school leaders, who often serve as pedagogical coaches and professional mentors. Communication and collaboration not only allows school leaders to develop their own successful relationships, but also to provide explicit training to teachers on building rapport with students and parents through team-building activities, professional development, classroom observations and feedback mechanisms (Lasaster, 2016). The frequency of feedback and classroom observations by school leaders can have a significant impact on the quality of teaching (Gil-Pareja et al., 2021).

**Teachers and staff.** Having healthy relationships between school staff is also important for teacher well-being. In Australia, for example, teachers who were very satisfied with their working relationships were about 70 per cent less likely to leave their position than those who were very dissatisfied (Cui and Richardson, 2016). A school's staff comprises not only teachers and school leaders, but also a wide array of support staff for student services. 'Support staff' refers to school personnel who are not teachers, including teaching assistants, learning specialists, nurses, psychologists, counsellors, coaches, technicians, and administrative and security officers (Littlecott et al., 2018). These community members play critical roles in supporting the well-being of students and teachers alike. Therefore, engaging support staff in daily school life and encouraging their close collaboration with teachers is central to creating Happy Schools.



### Guyana's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

“The Government of Guyana commits to supporting students' and teachers' health, nutrition and psychosocial well-being... The acceleration of training in gender-responsive approaches to support counselling for schools' counsellors, welfare officers and their liaison officers will be the conduit for psychosocial support to children, while counsellors and spaces will be identified for teachers.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

Research shows that learning support staff have a positive impact on student achievement, allowing learners to receive prompt attention and individualized help (Navarro, 2015). Non-teaching staff also contribute to decreasing drop-out and keeping learners in school (Lee-St, 2018). For instance, there is evidence to suggest that as the number of nurses in schools increases, the number of student absences decreases (Gottfried, 2013). Support staff members play a crucial pastoral role in learners' lives, forging caring and trusting relationships with them and getting to know their lives outside of school, often in ways that teachers do not always have the time or professional training to do (Littlecott et al., 2018).

Support staff ultimately aid teachers, too: by lessening teachers' workload and responsibilities, they contribute to improving teacher well-being and teaching quality. The research shows that investing in support staff grants teachers more time to focus on their teaching instead of administrative, medical or special learning matters (Navarro, 2015). A case study regarding the impact on teachers of student support interventions reveals that teachers who collaborate with student support staff gain a new awareness of students' out-of-school lives, develop more adequate classroom management strategies and feel more supported overall (Sibley et al., 2017). Thus, encouraging close collaboration between teachers and support staff allows schools to garner the expertise of each and create synergies to better serve students.

Increasing the engagement of support staff in the school community must go hand in hand with extending the necessary recognition and training to exercise their roles effectively. Far beyond paperwork or medical examinations, support staff are in direct communication with students, answering their questions and collectively offering support on mental health, course choice, career paths and more. As such, support staff increasingly provide students with services that remain under-recognized (Hu et al., 2016; Flynn et al., 2015). Just like teachers, they can experience stress and emotional burnout, especially since they often work with the most vulnerable students (Bettencourt et al., 2022). School policies should therefore ensure that support staff providing student services receive support themselves.

**Humans and technology.** Humans' rapidly evolving relationship with technology profoundly influences well-being and learning at school, while permeating and shaping all other social relationships. For example, 45% of students participating in PISA 2022 reported feeling nervous or anxious when they did not have their digital devices near them, correlating with lower life satisfaction, resistance to stress, emotional control and mathematics performance (OECD, 2023a). An overdependent relationship with technology can thus have negative impacts on mental health. Recent studies, moreover, show that replacing in-person social interactions with digital technology and

social media is correlated with increased loneliness and depression (UNESCO, 2023a; OECD, 2023a). Humans cannot thrive or flourish in isolation; self-determination theory establishes relatedness as a basic human need, for 'the human brain expects access to social relationships that mitigate risk and diminish the level of effort needed to meet a variety of goals' (Coan and Sbarra, 2015). As a result, the problem of loneliness and social isolation in relation to technology is increasingly recognized as a public health problem and a policy priority, though not always for the education sector or young people specifically (WHO, 2023).

It must be recognized that digital devices can offer convenience, safety and connectedness, with social media being a crucial space for forming social relationships among the youth (Allen et al., 2014). However, technology and social media can also facilitate violence and discrimination, for example through cyberbullying. Schools must therefore navigate this digital landscape adeptly, fostering a balance between digital and in-person interactions and providing timely human support. In fact, PISA 2022 results show that 30% of students on average across participating countries report being distracted in their mathematics lessons by digital devices (OECD, 2023a). At the same time, the same survey reveals that students who spent up to one hour per day on digital devices for learning activities in school scored higher



on average in mathematics than students who spent no time. Hence, schools must reckon with the dual nature of technology – both a catalyst for learning and well-being, but also a potential disruptor requiring careful management.

Table 1 captures the essential descriptors of positive relationships between core school actors as envisioned in a UNESCO Happy School.

**Table 1.** Happy Schools interpersonal relationships at a glance

<b>Student-Student</b>	Students practice respect, tolerance and empathy with each other, contributing to improved classroom behaviour, school safety, peer learning and a sense of belonging in the school community.
<b>Student-Teacher</b>	Teachers show a genuine interest in students' academic growth and lives outside of academics. Students respect their teachers as professionals, and teachers help students feel cared for and heard.
<b>Student-Parent</b>	Students engage their families in their learning experiences, encouraging participation in school activities, teacher conferences and extracurricular activities. Likewise, parents support their students' school engagement and active participation in activities.
<b>Teacher-Teacher</b>	Teachers build collaborative environments allowing the sharing of best practices, reducing the feeling of isolation, improving retention rates and supporting continuous professional development.
<b>Teacher-Leader</b>	Leaders respect the autonomy of teachers' pedagogical practices and collaborate to address challenges such as behavioural issues, curriculum adjustments and community involvement strategies.
<b>Parent-Teacher</b>	Teachers and parents are co-educators, communicating regularly, working together to address students' individual needs more effectively. Parents actively engage with schooling and in student learning.
<b>Leader-Manager</b>	Leaders encourage open dialogue among staff, ensure alignment between school management and policy frameworks, prioritize knowledge generation and participate in public debate on education.
<b>Teacher-Support staff</b>	Student-service support staff — such as social workers, nurses, service providers, coaches, and administrative and operations staff — work collaboratively and develop holistic strategies to support learners' growth.
<b>Human-Technology</b>	All school stakeholders prioritize social human interactions, ensure the safe and inclusive use of digital technology, and use it as a tool to enhance learning experiences and effective communication.

Source: Authors.

## Criterion 2

### Physical and socio-emotional well-being

While positive relationships contribute to improving students' learning and well-being, unhealthy interactions between members of the school community – based on stigma, bias, violence, bullying, exclusion or mistreatment – can do just the opposite. Negative social interactions leave neurobiological traces that have detrimental effects on learning (Sheridan and McLaughlin, 2016). Research finds that adverse environmental conditions in childhood, such as negative parenting or trauma, lead to epigenetic modifications that may impair the cognitive functions necessary for learning and building a stable personality. Maltreatment has been found to affect

the development of both behaviour and the brain, leading to poorer working memory, attention and self-control, all elements that are essential to the learning process (Coch, 2021). In other words, when learners are not physically and socio-emotionally well, their cognitive functioning and learning are impacted negatively. Teachers and school staff should be aware of the impact of developmental trauma on school outcomes and adopt trauma-informed practices in their work, the need for which has been underscored in reviews of interdisciplinary research (Thomas et al., 2019). Ensuring physical and socio-emotional

well-being for all members of the school community is therefore a foundational criterion of the ‘people’ pillar.

### Student well-being, safety and belonging: violence and bullying free school interactions.

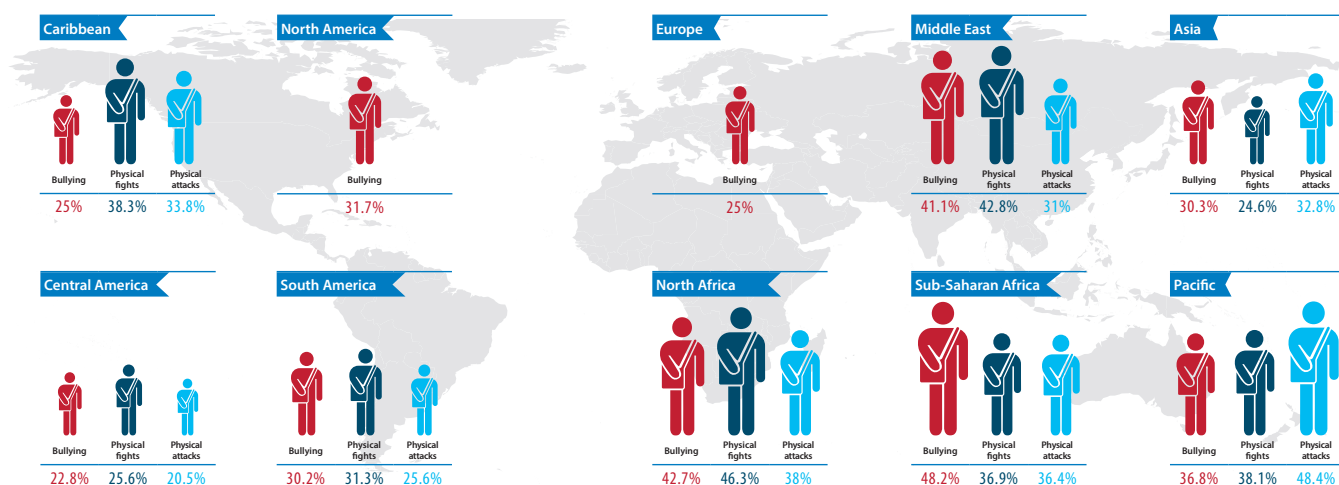
Violence at school is a widespread issue and can have severe, long-lasting impacts on learners’ physical and mental health, as well as their educational outcomes (UNESCO, 2019). School violence encompasses ‘physical violence, including corporal punishment; psychological violence, including verbal abuse; sexual violence, including rape and harassment; and bullying, including cyberbullying’ (UNESCO, 2017b, p. 8). It is primarily experienced by learners – though teachers are not exempt – and may be perpetrated by other learners, teachers or community members.

“In 144 countries, nearly one-third of pupils say they have been physically assaulted at least once this year.

Audrey Azoulay, November 2023, on the occasion of the International Day against Violence and Bullying at School, including Cyberbullying (UNESCO, 2023d).

As shown in Figure 2, bullying and physical attacks are globally widespread. According to a UNESCO (2019) study on violence and bullying in schools, **one in three** students aged 11 to 15 is bullied every month by peers or teachers. Bullying refers to patterned aggressive behaviour that involves unwanted, negative actions, and an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim (UNESCO, 2019). Moreover, over 36% of learners experience a physical fight with their peers and almost one in three has been physically attacked at least once in a year (UNESCO, 2019). The effects of bullying on learner well-being can be potentially life-threatening and can affect learners later in life: a recent analysis of suicidal behaviour in adolescents from 28 countries revealed that bullying was associated with a 44 per cent increased risk of suicidal behaviour (Peprah et al., 2023). At the global level, the WHO’s largest review of world mental health since the turn of the century revealed that 14 per cent of the world’s adolescents were living with a mental disorder and that bullying and victimization are major causes that can lead to suicide (WHO, 2022b).

**Figure 2.** Percentage of students who were bullied, in a physical fight or physically attacked, by region



Source: UNESCO (2019), pp. 16-17.



### Botswana's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

6 We acknowledge that students experiencing or observing violence in and around schools and other institutions of learning face significant challenges impacting their learning experience and outcomes. As such, we commit to strengthening prevention and response to all forms of violence at the school level, online, and in emergency settings ... Psychosocial support and mental well-being of learners has become a critical element in improving the performance of teachers and learners.

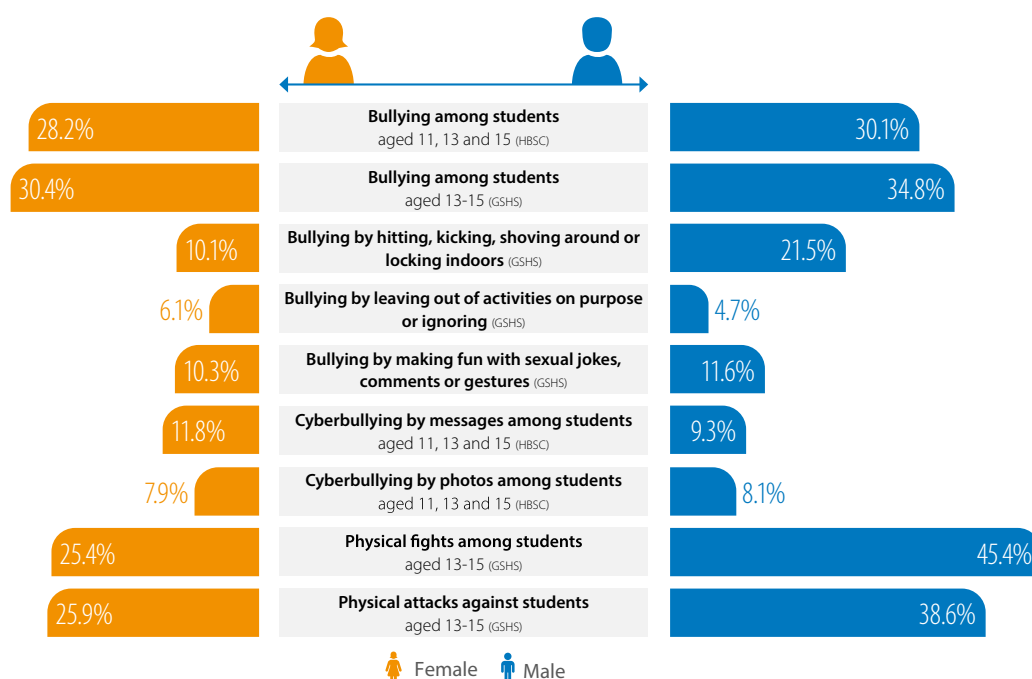
(UNESCO, 2023c)

Bullying also harms learning outcomes, with data from PISA 2018 showing that learners who were frequently bullied were more likely to skip school or have lower scores in reading (OECD, 2019a). For example, the average PISA 2018 scores of learners bullied, including

cyberbullied, about every week are between 40 and 85 points lower than those who are never exposed to bullying (European Commission, 2023). PISA 2022 results further confirm that, on average across OECD countries, students who reported feeling safe and were not exposed to bullying or risks at school performed better and enjoyed a greater sense of well-being, belonging and life satisfaction, as well as higher confidence in capacity for self-directed learning (OECD, 2023a). Overall, the growing use of digital technology in education is adding complexity to the social dynamics between educational actors, both expanding opportunities for communication and collaboration and introducing risks related to cyberbullying, as well as isolation and safety. Although the latest UNESCO report on school bullying (2019) revealed that one in ten students has been cyberbullied, this rate is surely on the rise as the global digital divide narrows and youth device ownership increases (UNESCO, 2023b).

UNESCO's report on school violence (2019) also reveals that both girls and boys are affected by bullying and school violence, albeit in different ways, with boys experiencing more physical bullying and girls experiencing more emotional bullying (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Percentage of boys and girls affected by different types of school violence and bullying



Source: UNESCO (2019), p. 25.

In fact, gender norms play an important role in perpetuating bullying and violence. Gender discrimination makes girls more vulnerable to certain types of violence, notably sexual violence, while some evidence suggests that boys are more likely to experience corporal punishment (UNESCO, 2023e). Moreover, children from poor or minority backgrounds, and those whose sexual orientation, gender identity or self-expression does not conform to traditional norms, are disproportionately affected by school violence (UNESCO, 2023e).

Building Happy Schools, therefore, requires recognizing and transforming social and gender norms that lead to bias, stigma, discrimination and violence – and, by extension, to decreased well-being and learning. Some learners may face barriers to well-being and learning due to gender and other intersecting identities, including race and disability; the ‘place’ pillar will further discuss how to create more inclusive educational spaces.

It must be noted that teachers can play an important role in perpetuating and normalizing violence. They can perpetrate bullying themselves through public shaming, or by targeting specific students through verbal, physical or sexual abuse. Although the global prevalence of physical violence perpetrated by teachers is low, this is not the case in all regions, as corporal punishment is still legally allowed in 68 countries (UNESCO, 2023b). The effects of such practices are reflected in a global study which revealed that in 9 out of 63 countries (14 per cent), over 90 per cent of students reported experiencing corporal punishment at school (Gershoff, 2017).

Conversely, teachers can also play a role in identifying signs of distress, violence and abuse among their students and act as a first point of contact for them to access further support if needed. Schools should therefore employ prevention strategies against bullying and other forms of violence, by promoting anti-violence campaigns and training teachers and school staff to push against biases and discrimination. In addition to preventive measures, schools should provide response mechanisms through professional support and mental health counselling when violence and bullying incidents arise.

**Teacher well-being and burnout.** While learners’ well-being has received growing attention, the well-

being of teachers has remained less explored in global studies. According to Falk et al. (2021), there are four critical concepts when it comes to measuring teacher well-being:

1. Self-efficacy (their belief in eliciting desired outcomes for their students)
2. Job stress and burnout
3. Job satisfaction
4. Social and emotional competence



### Honduras’ s TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

6 Promot[ing] access to health and wellbeing services, socioemotional and psychosocial care for our teachers is key.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

Teacher well-being is vital to creating a happy and supportive learning environment. Happy, healthy teachers are a crucial point on the pathway to developing lifelong learners because they will bring joy into their classrooms and spread a love of learning. Experts argue that teachers are the top in-school factor influencing learner achievement, belonging, satisfaction and flourishing (Adler and Seligman, 2019). Indeed, studies have shown a strong relationship between teacher well-being and student achievement, with teacher exhaustion resulting in lower levels of achievement among students (Granziera et al., 2023).

Teachers’ ability to have a positive impact on their learners relies on their own ability to be well. For teachers to be compassionate and effective instructors, they must first feel physically, mentally and social-emotionally well enough to teach. During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were hard hit by drastic changes to their work environments and workload expectations, leading to widespread concern regarding teacher well-being and – by extension – the quality of teaching. But teachers’ well-being has been a concern since long before the pandemic, owing to **low salaries, heavy workloads** that include non-teaching responsibilities, **crowded**

**classrooms** that are hard to manage, **insufficient professional development** opportunities, and a **lack of professional autonomy and voice** in decision-making (UNESCO, 2023a).

These **challenging working conditions** are amplified by **violence against teachers**, especially against female teachers and in crisis contexts (UNESCO, 2023a). Indeed, although teachers may sometimes be the perpetrators of bullying, they are also frequently the victims of violence at schools. Recent evidence from the International Barometer of the Health and Wellbeing of Education Personnel (I-BEST) shows that in ten countries surveyed from different regions, 25–33 per cent of teachers have experienced violence personally (Education and Solidarity Network, 2023). Additionally, high rates of stress, the need for training, a heavy workload and a normalization of violence at work were reported across all the countries surveyed.

In addition to physical well-being, teaching can also impact mental well-being. Teaching entails caring for children, managing a classroom, communicating with families, resolving disputes, and more, therefore necessitating teachers to perform high levels of emotional labour. Emotional labour is defined as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” to fulfill job requirements (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). Studies indicate that race and gender significantly influence the extent of emotional labour, with female teachers and teachers of color often engaging in higher levels of emotional labour (Berheide et al., 2022). Teachers of color may encounter more discrimination necessitating additional emotional management (Kalim, 2022), while female teachers often face heightened social expectations to demonstrate care and empathy, leading to increased emotional burdens and caregiving labour (Li et al., 2022). These gendered social dynamics of care thus extend to the teaching profession, reflected in a higher concentration of female teachers in early childhood education and care and their declining representation in each successive level of education (UNESCO, 2023c).

Together, these challenges in teachers’ working conditions fuel increasing teacher burnout, stress and anxiety, decreasing job satisfaction. According to the WHO, burnout is an occupational phenomenon caused by chronic workplace stress based on feelings

of energy depletion, mental distance or negativity from one’s job, and reduced professional efficacy (WHO, 2019). In the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *the Teacher Well-being Index*, published by the non-governmental organization Education Support since 2017, is based on an annual survey of education staff across the country (Education Support, n.d.). According to the 2022 index, 75 per cent of education staff (senior leaders and teachers) are stressed, 36 per cent have experienced a mental health issue, and 78 per cent experienced symptoms due to their work; 59 per cent have considered leaving the profession, with 68 per cent citing the volume of their workload as the main reason for doing so (Education Support, 2022).

Burnout and the lack of attractiveness of the teaching profession have led to a global crisis in teacher attrition and teacher shortages. UNESCO’s highlights from the *Global Report on Teachers* reveal an urgent need for 44 million primary and secondary teachers worldwide by 2030 (UNESCO, 2023a). Seven out of ten of these teachers are required at the secondary level, and there is a need to replace over half of the existing teachers leaving the profession. **Sub-Saharan Africa** is especially affected, with an estimated need for 15 million new teachers by 2030. In **OECD countries**, high levels of teachers leaving the profession have led many countries to implement national strategies for teacher retention (Viac and Fraser, 2020). It is estimated that up to 53 per cent of new teachers leave teaching within the first five years (Adler and Seligman, 2019). For example, the European Commission has already identified 13 European countries that already or will soon face an overall shortage of qualified teachers (Viac and Fraser, 2020).

Given these worrisome trends in teacher burnout and widespread shortages, it is critical for education policies to actively prioritize teacher well-being. Besides better remuneration, optimized workloads, increased professional development – including for digital transformation – and more supporting staff, the Happy Schools initiative encourages democratic approaches to **school management** and **social dialogue** that offer teachers opportunities to collaborate with school leaders and central administrators in decision-making on educational processes and management, providing them with a sense of ownership and control over their teaching.



### Georgia's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

Georgia will draw special attention to improve the education governance approaches. To this end, it is planned to support establishment of a holistic approach for school management based on democratic principles in order to encourage creation of learning environment and services that is oriented on student health, her/his personal growth, career guidance, safety and well-being.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

Beyond the working conditions at school, improving teacher well-being and remedying shortages requires

a systemic, societal approach that raises **the status of the teaching profession** in society, making teaching an appealing profession to choose and maintain (UNESCO, 2023a). Finland historically ranks high in international large-scale assessments like PISA (OECD, 2023b) and has been named the happiest country in the world on the *World Happiness Index* for the fourth year in a row. In addition to elements like the prioritization of play and recreation in schools, the fundamental respect for the teaching profession, and the high autonomy and trust granted to teachers in Finnish society and culture, are key to explaining system-wide happiness and success in

Finland (Sahlberg, 2014). Raising the social reputation of the teaching profession and augmenting respect for teachers, therefore, constitute stepping stones to improving teacher well-being and hence the quality of teaching and learning outcomes.



## Criterion 3

### Positive attitudes and attributes

Shared positive attitudes and attributes among all members of the school community are integral to creating Happy Schools. An 'attitude' refers to the sum of beliefs that influence one's judgement, evaluation and feelings about an idea, entity or person. The importance of attitudes in education derives from the underlying premise that attitudes predict behaviour, meaning that people who hold a positive attitude towards something also perform positive behaviours related to it (Lipnevich et al., 2016). Attitudes can translate not only into behaviours, but also into attributes, a person's sustained qualities and capabilities. Until recently, the impact of attitudes on teaching and learning outcomes was unresearched, with beliefs and feelings perceived as secondary variables (Pekrun, 1990). However, since the growth of positive psychology in popular discourse, the importance of attitudes towards learning and well-being has been the topic of increased investigation (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Learners' attitudes, perceptions and beliefs about themselves, their self-worth and their abilities – also known as **self-concept** – have been particularly

shown to impact learning and well-being. Concepts like confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy sit broadly within the category of self-concept and affect learning motivation, engagement and outcomes. Research shows that students who are confident in their abilities and have 'perseverance and passion for long-term goals' are more likely to achieve academic success and develop resilience (Duckworth et al., 2007). In a recent study by Klapp et al. (2023), students who felt they could manage their academic activities tended to perform better compared to those who felt they could not; in fact, this *belief* in ability was identified as more important for students' academic achievement than their actual cognitive ability. Having a positive self-concept is therefore an integral ingredient for boosting learning and well-being.

Learners' self-concept is closely tied to **other people's attitudes** and beliefs about them, notably those of teachers and peers. School environments and structures may not always be suited to making students feel confident, as those whose capabilities may not conform to traditional schooling or assessment methods may struggle to feel engaged,

proud or self-assured. This is especially true of students with special needs, as the literature has found that all over the world, learning disabilities are associated with low reported academic self-concept (al Zyoudi, 2010). Studies find that peer acceptance of students with learning disabilities can lead to improved self-concept, and in turn, higher achievement (Jan Pijl and Frostad, 2010). Gender and socio-economic background can also impact learners' self-efficacy. There exists evidence that students from low-income families may feel less academically confident (Wiederkehr et al., 2015), and that girls may doubt themselves in STEM subjects and boys in language arts (Wang and Lu, 2023; Huang, 2012), suggesting that **gender and social norms** play an important role in shaping attitudes towards self and others.

While school environments might not always nurture positive attitudes, these can nevertheless be deliberately cultivated and taught in classrooms by developing specific mindsets and practices (Dweck, 2002). The literature reveals that a key to creating positive attitudes is developing a **growth mindset** – the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through dedication, effort and perseverance, enhancing confidence, self-efficacy, grit and resilience (Bashant, 2014; Duckworth and Seligman, 2005). Individuals with a growth mindset see challenges as opportunities to grow; they embrace learning and understand that mistakes are steppingstones towards improvement. This mindset contrasts with a fixed mindset, where abilities are seen as innate and unchangeable. Adopting growth mindsets, and educating students about them, is an important step towards developing motivation and resilience to overcome learning challenges. As learners understand that intelligence is malleable, they can increase their intrinsic motivation – one of the strongest predictors of academic achievement – and improve their learning outcomes (Blackwell et al., 2007; Ng, 2018).

PISA 2022 results show that, on average, participating students who were intellectually curious, persistent to pursue goals and able to regulate their emotions in the face of challenges outperformed their peers (OECD, 2023a). The previous round of PISA in 2018 revealed that possessing a growth mindset was a

stronger predictor of academic success than available resources for low-income students (OECD, 2021). Growth mindsets were associated with larger score gains for girls compared to boys, and for immigrant students compared to non-immigrant students (OECD, 2021), suggesting they can help mitigate the negative effects of social and economic inequalities on learning. In fact, a study by Paunesku et al. (2015) in an American high school demonstrated that a brief intervention, consisting of having students read an article on the brain's ability to grow, had the most positive impact on students at risk of dropping out.

Positive attitudes and growth mindsets impact not only learners' development, but also teachers' professional development. The Schools and Teachers Innovating for Results (STiR) Education initiative focuses specifically on the role of intrinsic motivation in improving the quality of teaching. Despite the established importance of motivation in educational research on learning, teacher motivation receives little attention in educational programming. The STiR initiative aims to ensure that 'every child is taught by a motivated teacher' (McIntosh, 2023), by delivering professional development to teachers using the three pillars of Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory:

- **Autonomy:** the sense that you can change something.
- **Mastery:** the sense that you can improve.
- **Purpose:** the sense that you are connected to your work and others around you.



#### Sri Lanka's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

“We commit to ensuring sector-wide professionalization of teaching and improvement of teachers' well-being with the firm belief that motivated, empowered, and effective teachers are the key to recovering and transforming education and its system and quality of learning for better learning outcomes.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

By cultivating these three attitudes and attributes, the professional development sessions aim to reignite teachers' intrinsic motivation, thereby improving teaching practice. The trainings have reached over 550,000 teachers in India, Uganda and Indonesia in the past decade, wielding positive impacts on teacher and learner attitudes, as well as learning outcomes. For example, in Delhi, STiR teachers were significantly more likely to develop a growth mindset compared to non-STiR teachers, while in the Karnataka State of India, a 55 per cent increase was observed in children's self-esteem in class after a two-year period of STiR interventions (STiR Education, 2023). Robust professional development trainings are therefore key to fostering the positive attitudes and attributes, including skills and competencies, that good teachers possess.

Overall, cultivating positive attitudes through growth mindsets among members of the school community can enhance teaching, learning and well-being. Similarly to growth mindsets, other mindsets for collaboration, empathy and peace can also be taught

and nurtured deliberately in schools (Setiadi, 2020). The type of mindset conducive to positive attitudes in schools depends on the specific context and needs. Some highly competitive education systems might want to focus on collaborative mindsets, while conflict-ridden systems may want to focus on peaceful mindsets. The bottom line is that the positive attitudes and attributes necessary for creating a happy school can be cultivated, taught and learned through systemic mindset changes and professional trainings: it is indeed possible to 'train your mind, change your brain' (Begley, 2007).

However, mindset changes alone are not enough to create positive attitudes and happy climates in schools. Expanding the processes and metrics that allow students to feel academically successful, and to share their successes with their peers to develop confidence and pride, can create positive ripple effects for both individual growth and inclusion in school communities. The process pillar will further elaborate on practices and learning systems that foster positivity, growth and happiness.



Bart Verweij/World Bank

## Process pillar

The process criteria focus on how to transform curricula, pedagogies and assessments to leverage happiness and daily joy in schools, including through activities such as recess, sports, arts and extracurriculars that enhance teaching and learning experiences.

### Criterion 4

Balanced curricula

### Criterion 5

Joyful and engaging pedagogies

### Criterion 6

Holistic and flexible assessments

### Criterion 4

Balanced curricula

Curriculum is a central component of education systems, giving direction not only to *what*, but also *how* students learn and teachers teach. Far from trivial, curricular choices shape everyday life at school and play a central role in making schools happy – or unhappy – spaces. The first criterion of the process pillar, therefore, is the need for a **balanced curriculum** that is **manageable** in terms of workload, **holistic** in terms of developing the whole-person, and **relevant** to learners' interests and backgrounds. The Happy Schools framework does not focus on curricular content *about* happiness, well-being or related concepts, which is not sufficient in itself to make schools happy places. Rather, it emphasizes the systemic processes, practices and designs of curricula that are conducive to joyful learning.

First and foremost, a balanced curriculum implies a **manageable workload** for students and teachers. Yet **curriculum overload** is an increasingly common phenomenon across the world (OECD, 2020b; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2010). Overload occurs when new subjects are added without others being removed (OECD, 2020b). Also known as curriculum overcrowding, it has several downsides, ranging from incomplete coursework to increased stress, impacting teaching, learning and well-being in major ways (Pope et al., 2015). In many education systems across the world, curriculum overload is closely related to **curriculum expansion** as new topics and skills are integrated in response to new societal demands, resulting in content that exceeds the time available for instruction.

Research shows that excessive content can cause **cognitive overload**, hampering students' cognitive abilities and full absorption of the material (Garnett, 2020). It can also lead teachers to gloss over the material or even **not complete** entire sections, ultimately resulting in poorer teaching and learning – this is particularly evidenced in African education systems (Olugbenga, 2023; Dawal and Mangut, 2021; Majoni, 2017). In turn, the uncovered content is often transferred to students' personal after-school time as excessive homework – which can negatively impact student well-being – or is taught through private tutoring – which can deepen educational disparities as higher-income families are more likely to use such services (Bray, 2021; Zhang and Bray, 2020).

Curriculum overload may also result in **diminished well-being and happiness** in learners and teachers. Extensive research has taken place on the effects of work overload in the workplace, but surprisingly less so in education (Smith, 2019). Most of the existing research on the topic concerns higher education contexts and suggests that academic overload leads to academic **stress**, negatively impacting learners' well-being (e.g. Koudela-Hamila, 2022; Kamel, 2018). The little research done at the upper-secondary level also shows a negative relationship between academic overload and mental and physical health: as the academic workload increases, the percentage of mentally healthy students decreases (Biswas, 2015); conversely, as the academic workload decreases, students' quality of life increases (Ismail, 2022). Similarly, the research with teachers reveals that unsustainable workloads lead to

**burnout** (Lawrence et al., 2019) and are associated with teachers' decisions to leave the profession (Torres, 2016).

Thus, while curricular updates are necessary to address 21st-century needs, it is paramount to **'unload' curriculum** to make the workload more digestible, manageable and sustainable for both students and teachers. This can be done by removing classes or units, or merging and creating synergies between those that overlap to create more integrated and interdisciplinary learning experiences (Drake and Reid, 2018). Unloading the curriculum can also allow increased time for **rest, free play, conversation and recess**, which are crucial for learning and development.

Unloading is also important to allow teachers space to rest, reflect on their teaching and attend **professional training** to improve their practice. It should be noted, however, that curriculum work is not teachers' only workload, since they also have administrative and other responsibilities within their schools (Stacey et al., 2020). Thus, reducing the curriculum overload should go hand in hand with **alleviating other responsibilities**, so that teachers have time to plan their lessons during the workday.

While addressing an overloaded curriculum is a critical step to achieving a balanced curriculum, it is not enough. A balanced curriculum also needs to be **holistic** and treat **different subjects on an equal basis**. Content-related imbalance occurs when, owing to a lack of time or cultural norms, the curriculum focuses disproportionately on certain areas at the expense of others, leading to **high- and low-priority subjects** (OECD, 2020b). High-priority subjects are often the 'traditionally academic' ones, such as reading, writing and mathematics, which are assessed in high-stakes examinations. Subjects like the arts, music or physical education are often given low priority and are the first ones to be dropped from the curriculum when time is limited. Such stark hierarchies between subjects prevent the holistic development of learners and reduce their opportunities to explore their interests and talents. Resolving curriculum imbalances can open space for a wider range of subjects.

In addition to tackling a diversity of subjects, a balanced curriculum must also maintain an

**equilibrium between different skills**. Education systems are responsible for much more than developing academic skills or preparing learners for the world of work (Winthrop and McGivney, 2016). Today, we expect education systems to shape engaged citizens who will help maintain and improve their communities in a rapidly changing world. Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2016) provide a science-based framework of 6Cs highlighting six critical skills for the successful development of children: collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking, creative innovation, and confidence. A balanced curriculum should emphasize the **mutually reinforcing nature of cognitive and non-cognitive skills** by targeting the development of the whole person, learner and citizen, with an emphasis on social-emotional learning and soft skills like the 6Cs.

Incorporating space for **conversation, discussion, and dialogue** into the curriculum is essential for nurturing both cognitive and socio-emotional skills like active listening, empathy, effective communication, self-reflection and perspective-taking (Elias et al., 2022). Exploring current issues, sharing perspectives and experiences and reflecting on topics such as social justice and peace can help instill democratic values and foster the development of active citizenship skills crucial in today's world (Ucan et al., 2023).



#### Chile's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

“We must promote a flexible and contextualized curriculum for the comprehensive development of student-centered learning, which recognizes the territorial, cultural, and psychosocial diversity that is expressed in each educational community, that promotes an active agency of the teacher in its implementation, and that focuses on learning for the 21st century.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

Moreover, to reinforce 'non-academic' skills, a holistic curriculum must consider 'extracurricular' activities that are crucial in helping learners develop life

skills, form social connections and boost learning motivation (Shaffer, 2019). The research shows that activities that take place before and after formal school hours, such as breakfast schemes, and sports and arts clubs, generally yield positive outcomes for learners and can support children at risk of academic, emotional or behavioural interventions (Hill, 2020; Yu et al., 2020).

Finally, curricular content, materials and activities must be **relevant and meaningful**. The research shows that students learn most effectively and joyfully when they can connect their learning to their past experiences, family and cultural backgrounds and personal interests (Hirsh-Pasek, 2022). Culturally relevant (or responsive) education is an approach that incorporates students' cultural backgrounds, experiences and perspectives into the learning process to promote meaningful engagement and academic success (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Studies connect this type of education to positive student outcomes across content areas (Aronson and Laughter, 2016; Cherfas et al., 2021). Curricula - and pedagogies - should therefore be grounded in local contexts and themes, while also ensuring global relevance in the 21st century. A relevant curriculum tackles not just the globally or societally dominant cultures and values, but also the diversity of learner cultures and identities. The Happy Schools framework does not focus on curriculum content. Many other UNESCO programmes, including Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship, can be consulted to craft learning content that is relevant to learners' backgrounds and to the 21st century.

The IBE, UNESCO's institute specializing in curriculum development, provides a curricular vision comprising five dimensions (UNESCO-IBE, n.d.):

- **Systemic:** The curriculum is a dynamic organism of interdependent components and actors. All elements of the curriculum, from the content to the teaching methods and assessment strategies, are interconnected and influence one another.
- **Endogenous:** The curriculum is rooted in the local, sociocultural, and historical context for a common vision for the future promoting cultural diversity, encouraging critical thinking and self-reflection, and empowering learners to better understand and appreciate their own unique cultural identities.
- **Inclusive:** All students, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, language, disability or other characteristics, are provided with equal opportunities to learn, participate and succeed in school.
- **Participative:** The curriculum ensures the participation of all actors in the education system.
- **Holistic:** The curriculum emphasizes the interconnectedness of knowledge and the importance of educating the whole person, and developing students' intellectual, emotional, social and physical abilities.

Some of these dimensions overlap with the idea of a 'balanced curriculum' necessary for the creation of Happy Schools.

## Criterion 5

### Joyful and engaging pedagogies

The process of learning is one that should be enjoyed, and in which the learning experience matters as much – if not more than – academic results. While individual social and emotional (SEL) programmes and mindfulness interventions enhance positivity in the classroom (Corradino and Fogarty, 2016), they are not enough to sustain happy and effective learning. Rather, transforming learning experiences requires a system-wide rethinking of the methods and practice of teaching. The second criterion of the process

pillar therefore encourages **joyful and engaging pedagogies**.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the research shows that experiencing positive emotions like joy, enthusiasm and curiosity contributes to enhancing learning. The literature strongly suggests a reciprocal relationship between engagement and academic achievement: engaged students achieve well, and achieving students are engaged (Lei et al., 2018; Heffner and Antaramian, 2015). Engagement refers to the extent of

attention, focus, curiosity and interest that students show when learning (Abla and Fraumeni, 2019). According to Gallup, engaged students are 2.5 times more likely to report receiving excellent grades and doing well at school, and are 4.5 times more likely to be hopeful about the future (Gallup, n.d.). At the same time, the results from the Gallup World Poll also indicate that 24 per cent of students are ‘actively disengaged’ and 29 per cent are ‘not engaged’ in school (Gallup, 2018). Hovering at 30 per cent, teacher engagement is similar yet slightly lower than the average employee engagement (33 per cent), with higher levels of engagement among primary than among secondary teachers (Gallup, 2018).

While interest, curiosity and engagement partly come from a person’s internal drive and motivation, it is also promoted by the school environment and the pedagogies employed (Blinkoff et al., 2023a), including in digital learning environments. In fact, a study by Pietarinen et al. (2014) suggests that engagement is not an individual attribute, but is rather socially constructed and nurtured in the classroom and in the school. The authors found that students’ engagement is dependent on their well-being, the quality of their daily interactions and the pedagogical practices employed in school (Pietarinen et al., 2014). Teacher engagement was also found to be a key driver of student engagement, reflecting how aspects of teacher well-being mirror those of learner well-being (Gallup, 2018). Given the strong connections between effective learning and positive emotions and attitudes like joy, enthusiasm, curiosity, interest and engagement, it is crucial to ensure that classroom pedagogies bring about these positive emotions.

In truth, a wide range of available pedagogies can make teaching and learning more joyful and engaging. This report uses the broad categories of ‘active’ and ‘learner-centred’ to describe such pedagogies, recognizing there exist many types of teaching that lead to positive and effective learning experiences. Promoting active and learner-centred pedagogies does not mean entirely excluding more traditional forms of teaching methods. It is important to recognize the value of teaching techniques like direct instruction and memorization which are especially important when the learning goal is for students to acquire subject knowledge - a prerequisite for a breadth of 21st century skills like critical thinking

(Stockard et al., 2018). One teaching method is not inherently better than another. The question, rather, is about what teaching method is most appropriate for what learning goal. Happy Schools should provide teachers and educators the autonomy and qualifications to craft their pedagogical style and adapt it to learning goals and student populations.

Ultimately, the Happy Schools framework promotes pedagogies that serve the following vision: a joyful classroom where students have a voice in what they learn and how, are directly engaged in their learning through hands-on and minds-on activities in combination with direct instruction, are encouraged to think critically and creatively, get to work collaboratively with peers and teachers, and have some one-on-one time with teachers to receive personalized support and feedback.

**Active learning pedagogies** encourage learners to experiment, participate and reflect, empowering them to actively construct knowledge and bridge theoretical concepts with tangible, practical applications (Lutsenko and Lutsenko, 2022). Active pedagogies revolve around **interactive, experiential, hands-on and minds-on, whole-body** activities. They promote **curiosity, inquiry and creativity**, pushing learners to investigate, ask questions, solve problems and explore different options through innovative, rather than prescribed approaches (Cattaneo, 2017). Active pedagogies also encourage **cooperative and collaborative** peer- and group-learning activities alongside individual study, to help students forge connections, learn from peers and build social skills (Johnson and Johnson, 2018).

Active pedagogical methods have been shown to improve students’ learning outcomes and enjoyment of learning (Aji and Khan, 2019; Bonawitz et al., 2011; Crimmins and Midkiff, 2017; Scogin et al., 2017). For example, one case study comparing experimental and conventional ways of teaching 10th-grader students about the equation of a circle reveals that students taught in the experimental class, who got to learn through practical examples and to apply their learning to real-life situations, not only achieved better mathematical results, but also showed more interest in the learning topic than students taught in the conventional control class (Tong et al., 2020).



### Estonia's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

6 Ensure enough competent and motivated teachers and heads of schools, and access to a diverse learning environment and a learner-centered approach to learning and teaching.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

To incite joy and engagement, pedagogies also need to be learner-centred. Rather than only relying on the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the learner, learner-centred pedagogies turn knowledge into a negotiation between teachers and students (Keengwe and Onchwari, 2016). Here, teachers focus on learners' interests, objectives and needs to carry out their teaching. Learners, in turn, have a **voice** in influencing the content, activities and pace of learning. Learner-centred pedagogies put **choice and agency** at the core of the learning process, personalizing the experience to students' needs and interests (Shah, 2020). Learners have a degree of freedom to choose what they study and how they will be assessed. Thus, learner-centred pedagogies not only help engage students but are also more inclusive and responsive to the diversity and differences between them, especially when embedded in local contexts (Schweisfurth, 2015). Learner-centered pedagogy is crucial for teachers to strike a balance between challenging their students without overwhelming them, aiming for that optimal joyful state of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) that enhances focus and productivity.

Research on the effects of learner-centred pedagogy suggests positive impacts on academic outcomes, psycho-emotional outcomes, student confidence and self-efficacy, as well as human relationships at school (Bremner et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021). One study, carried out in Rwanda, finds that learner-centred approaches explained more than 75 per cent of the increase in classroom engagement (Nsenga and Andala, 2022), while another study in Spain found that student participation in learner-centred sessions increased by 20 per cent compared to teacher-centred sessions (Markina and Garcia Mollá, 2022). Despite its

benefits, however, **learner-centred pedagogy is not widespread** in global classrooms – especially in low- and middle-income countries – owing to a persistent understanding of education as a teacher-led process (Sakata et al., 2022). In PISA 2022, on average across OECD countries, almost 40% of students reported that, in most lessons, the teacher does not show an interest in every student's learning or does not continue teaching until students understand the material (OECD, 2023a).

The broad categories of active and learner-centred pedagogies can manifest in a variety of specific teaching techniques, including in flipped-classroom, Socratic-method, problem-based, project-based, inquiry-based, case-based, place-based, play-based and game-based teaching and learning. For example, **'flipped classroom'** is a teaching strategy in which students get acquainted with learning content outside of class, freeing class time for interactive and higher-order thinking activities, as well as for more personalized support from the teacher. In **project-based learning**, students investigate a complex question or challenge by working on it for an extended period, often in interdisciplinary ways. The **Socratic method** engages learners through a series of thought-provoking questions, encouraging them to think critically, articulate ideas and engage in reasoned dialogue. **Place-based learning** directly connects learning to local environments, utilizing community resources and spaces to deepen the understanding and relevance of educational material. **Play-based learning** integrates play activities in teaching to enable learners to explore, experiment and discover concepts naturally. **Gamification** uses structural principles from successful multiplayer video games to create engaging learning experiences that include clear goals, challenges, progression systems, feedback mechanisms, social interaction and rewards, fostering motivation, immersion, and individualized learning paths. These varieties of pedagogies – especially those that are new and innovative – must be integrated into both pre-service and in-service **teacher training**, so that educators are equipped with concrete techniques to translate active and learner-centred pedagogical approaches into reality.

**Play-based learning** is increasingly recognized as an effective learning method that brings together the many aspects of active and learner-centred

pedagogies. Learning through play has been shown to improve students' learning outcomes while also encouraging holistic development (Blinkoff et al., 2023b; Hirsh-Pasek, 2022). The LEGO Foundation recently conducted a desk review of 350 studies from around 40 countries with different geographies and income levels on the impact of learning through play. The study found that play supports the development of holistic skills across childhood, including cognitive, social, emotional, physical and creative skills (Zosh et al., 2022).

Despite its demonstrated benefits for learning, play is still rarely positioned as a priority in educational decisions globally. A research study by PANEX-Youth looking at the impact of COVID-19 on young people in England revealed that play and leisure were by far the most ignored aspects of young people's lives in terms of the national government response (Andres et al., 2023). The study found that not being able to play

and have access to leisure were connected with not socialising and interacting with others, thus having detrimental impacts on young people's development and mental wellbeing.

Playful, active and learner-centred pedagogies do not imply that learning is freely shaped by the learner. Learning scientists (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2022; Zosh et al., 2018) offer a helpful distinction between different types of play in the form of a spectrum ranging from free play, through guided play, to playful instruction (Figure 4): free play is initiated and directed by the child, playful instruction is initiated and directed by the adult, and **guided play** is initiated by the adult and directed by the child under adult supervision. Studies testing the impact of different types of play conclude that guided play is the most effective form of playful pedagogy for learning (Fisher et al., 2013; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2022; Nesbitt et al., 2023).

**Figure 4.** Learning through play as a spectrum



Source: Zosh et al. (2018).

In early childhood care and education (ECCE), it is widely understood that playful, positive environments have a crucial role in supporting effective learning and development (Sahlberg and Doyle, 2019). However, principles like joy, engagement, play and creativity often lose pedagogical attention as children grow up and enter formal kindergarten (K)–12 schooling. The pressures of high-stakes exams and lesson planning to match learning targets and curricular expectations often overshadow the principles that support positive learning experiences. Why are these principles often encouraged in ECCE, but often less in K–12 education? As ECCE covers children aged 0–8, the sector overlaps with the first years of formal schooling. To ensure smooth and synergistic transitions between sectors, ECCE pedagogical approaches and policy frameworks

can be applied throughout K–12 – especially in primary, which directly overlaps with the ECCE sector.

“When we look at preschool, this is old news, this is the traditional way of working with children between three and six: they work in projects, they work in groups, they circulate in their class, they go outside, they learn in the nature, and they learn inside, they play, and they learn by playing.”

H.E. Mr Joao Costa, Minister of Education, Portugal, at the 2022 UNESCO World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education in Tashkent, Uzbekistan (UNESCO, 2022c)

## Criterion 6

### Holistic and flexible assessments

The prevailing culture of competition, high-stakes exams and academic excellence continues to be a main source of unhappiness for learners. The weight of expectations, and the burden of potential failure, can be detrimental to their well-being and take away the joy of learning. With this in mind, assessments do create motivation for learners, teachers, schools and even national governments to strive towards excellence and have a benchmark. Assessments, moreover, help validate learning, inform teaching practice, ensure accountability for results and provide evidence for policy-making (UNESCO, 2017c). Rather than doing away with assessments, the Happy Schools framework suggests transforming how we assess learning. The third criterion of the process pillar, therefore, encourages **holistic and flexible approaches to assessing learning**.

Assessments in education are powerful tools. What figures in assessments often ends up dictating what is taught and learned, with ‘teaching to the test’ a common phenomenon in many education systems to this day. Assessment choices matter as much as curriculum and pedagogy. As Layard and Hagell (2015, p. 19) put it: ‘if you treasure it, measure it’. If we only measure the acquisition of traditional academic knowledge, however, we cannot claim to treasure joyful whole-person learning. We cannot promote learners’ holistic development without promoting a **holistic assessment** of their learning. This requires broadening our understanding of assessment to consider learners’ progress towards attaining **competencies, skills and attitudes** that enable them to critically think about, apply and use learned knowledge; this is usually called ‘**competency-based**’ assessment (UNESCO-IBE, 2023). A holistic assessment also involves looking at learners’ **social and emotional competencies** in

addition to cognitive and intellectual ones, assessing both hard and soft skills (UNESCO-IBE, 2023).

Making assessment holistic means not only broadening *what* is assessed, but also the ways in which it is assessed. Education systems must expand the forms of assessment used to allow learners to demonstrate their competencies on a variety of occasions and in different ways, breaking away from one-size-fits-all approaches. While written individual exams have long been the educational convention, assessments should also come in other formats, including oral, digital, project-based and group work. Moreover, high-stakes summative assessments continue to dominate the assessment landscape.

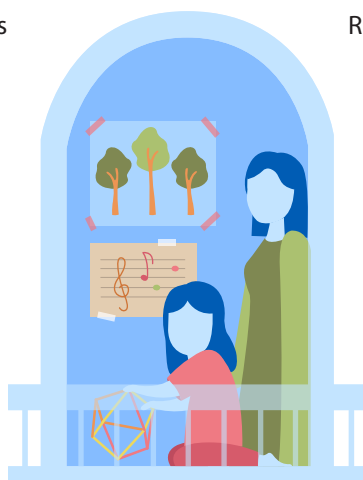
**Summative assessment** is an evaluation conducted at the end of a learning period to measure students’ comprehension, knowledge and skills attainment against predetermined criteria. While summative assessment is an important way of demonstrating learning, it is crucial to diversify assessment methods, notably through formative and self-assessment, to increase learner engagement and empowerment over the learning process. This is also an inclusive approach because students with special learning needs may benefit from having a variety of modes of demonstrating learning.



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**Formative assessments** are low-stakes continuous evaluations of learning designed to provide both students and teachers with feedback to improve their learning and teaching strategies. When implemented properly, formative assessments have been shown to yield promising learning gains, especially for low-achieving students (IIEP-UNESCO, 2023). **Self-assessment**, on the other hand, refers to a process where individuals evaluate and reflect on their knowledge, skills, abilities or performance, often against specific criteria or goals. It prompts learners to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, set goals for improvement and self-regulate their thoughts, feelings and actions to achieve those goals (Andrade, 2019). It allows learners to gain a greater sense of control over their learning process, as well as greater confidence and belief in their capability, which can help alleviate assessment stress and anxiety (Panadero et al., 2017).

**Positive feedback and reinforcement** are essential elements of assessment systems. Positive feedback involves assessing learners' work by acknowledging their strengths and providing constructive suggestions for improvement. Positive reinforcement refers to proffering rewards, praise or encouragement in response to positive work and behaviour, to increase the likelihood of it being repeated in the future. Research shows that 'teachers who regularly provide feedback to their students regarding the accuracy or appropriateness of their responses and their work have higher achieving students. The most effective feedback provides constructive information, praise and encouragement as appropriate and is immediate and specific' (Wiseman and Hunt, 2013, p. 152). Positive feedback and reinforcement foster motivation and confidence in learners' abilities to continue progressing, and are therefore key to creating supportive and holistic assessment systems conducive to growth (Sieberer-Nagler, 2015).



### Chile's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

“We must change the educational accountability model, focused on the sanctioning and categorization of educational achievements, and move towards an evaluation system focused on the accompaniment and development of capacities in educational centers, which is a tool to improve pedagogical decision-making in each community, and which can promote comprehensive learning centered on the needs and interests of students.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

The different forms of assessment for Happy Schools can be summarized as **assessment 'of', 'for' and 'as' learning**. Assessment of learning focuses on measuring what students have learned, often through tests or exams. Assessment for learning involves ongoing evaluation that informs teaching, using assessments to guide instruction and support students' continuous progress. Assessment as learning puts students in charge, encouraging them to reflect on their learning processes, set goals and self-assess their progress, ultimately fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter through self-reflection and self-regulation.

In addition to being holistic, assessment systems also need to be **flexible**, meaning they have the ability to adapt to the diverse needs and situations of learners. Rigid education systems tend to provide a single prescribed path to assessment and qualification, often manifesting as a one-shot, national high-stake academic examination. Within such inflexible frameworks, not passing an assessment can prevent learners from passing a class, or even from graduating and subsequently realizing their full potential. Students who are unable to adhere to this rigid path find themselves excluded from the system, leading to early school dropout and the associated risks of unemployment and social exclusion in the long term (European Training Foundation, 2019; UNESCO, 2012).

Notions like ‘failing school equates failing in life’ or ‘you cannot secure a job without a university degree’ are vestiges of rigid education systems.

Conversely, flexible assessment systems broaden educational opportunities for learners and offer **multiple pathways to success**. Such systems provide multiple learning routes, so that those who fail a grade or drop out have productive alternative routes, and those who simply wish to change educational paths are empowered to do so. This flexibility relieves the pressure on learners to adhere to a single path to success and ensures they do not encounter educational dead ends, promoting the idea that there is always an alternative. Flexible assessment systems are designed to address the diversity of student needs, offer options to change paths and reengage those who were previously excluded, thereby helping to **improve educational inequities**. Flexible assessment systems are the cornerstone of flexible education systems, which are vital in a rapidly changing world beset by numerous crises. Flexible systems can more readily adapt to challenges and promote **lifelong learning opportunities**.

Developing flexible assessment pathways implies systemic transformations, including establishing

robust **recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA)** systems to allow individuals like early school leavers to have their skills and competencies assessed, recognized and transferred (European Training Foundation, 2019; UNESCO, 2012); developing technical and vocational training programmes, preparatory courses and microdegrees as viable alternative qualification mechanisms (European Training Foundation, 2019); and facilitating transitions across educational courses, institutions and levels by creating multiple entry, exit and re-entry points, and blurring the boundaries between formal, informal and non-formal education (Wang, 2023).

In its current form, assessment is a significant source of distress for learners, but also families and community members, who are all impacted by the harsh and competitive assessment system. Teachers are especially affected by this system, notably by performance-based evaluations equating student achievement with teacher success. The prevailing assessment system is not conducive to the happiness and well-being of the school community and is arguably a major reason for unhappiness, disengagement and burnout in schools. Developing holistic and flexible assessment and learning policies is therefore a priority in creating Happy Schools.

## Place pillar

**The place criteria target the transformation of physical and digital spaces to make schools healthier, safer and more inclusive community hubs.**

### Criterion 7

Safe, healthy, accessible and sustainable infrastructure and facilities

### Criterion 8

Functional and inclusive spatial design

### Criterion 9

Community hubs

### Criterion 7

Safe, healthy, accessible and sustainable infrastructure and facilities

Only when they are embedded in adequate places and spaces – both physical and digital – will positive interactions between people and engaging educational processes produce Happy Schools. Innumerable studies show that well-being and quality learning depend on whether students and educators have access to sound school infrastructures and facilities (Barrett et al., 2019). The first criterion of the ‘place’ pillar, therefore, pertains to safe, healthy, accessible and sustainable school infrastructure and facilities that support cognitive, physical and socio-emotional well-being.

First and foremost, school infrastructure must be built soundly, and abide by **safety and health** standards. This includes choosing safe locations and using non-toxic, quality and resilient materials to build schools. Safe and healthy infrastructure also means using the right materials and resources to create conditions that are conducive to learning, incorporating properties like acoustics and noise, air quality, lighting, temperature and classroom size (Higgins et al., 2005). For example, studies find that classrooms that are too hot or too cold can cause learners discomfort and divert the brain’s focus into maintaining the body’s temperature rather than learning (Wargocki et al., 2019). Bad classroom acoustics can hinder intelligibility of speech, decrease concentration and interfere with learning (Minelli et al., 2022). Overcrowding can also occur when the number of students in a class is larger than what a classroom is designed to accommodate, leading to potentially unsanitary and unsafe conditions (Uduku, 2015).

To sustain proper conditions like lighting, temperature and ventilation, school infrastructure must be underpinned by adequate **power supply** systems, with classrooms having access to electricity and, in an increasingly digital world, internet connectivity. Based on data tracking progress towards SDG 4 (Our World in Data, 2023), the proportion of schools with access to electricity ranges from 75 per cent at the primary level and 90 per cent at the upper-secondary level; in other words, 1 in 4 primary schools in the world still lacks electricity. Globally, only 40 per cent of primary, 50 per cent of lower-secondary and 65 per cent of upper-secondary schools are connected to the internet (UNESCO, 2023b). Access to adequate infrastructure remains highly unequal, with 70 per cent of people in rural sub-Saharan Africa lacking electricity. This is a major challenge to the development of the infrastructure and facilities that form the basis of Happy Schools.

Outdoor infrastructures and facilities are as important as indoor ones: access to safe and **green outdoor** spaces can improve physical and mental health and well-being at school. A systemic review of 464 studies on the subject from 2012 to 2017 McCormick (2017, p. 3) found that a growing body of research associated access to green space with ‘attention restoration, memory, competence, supportive social groups, self-discipline’; such access also ‘moderates stress, improves behaviours and symptoms of ADHD and was even associated with higher standardized test scores’. If access to such spaces is limited in the school’s natural environment, the inclusion of greenery and plants in learning spaces can improve their air quality and aesthetics, with positive impacts

on well-being. Student responses analysed for the 2016 Happy Schools report show that green spaces had particularly positive impacts on students' sense of happiness at school.

Furthermore, school infrastructure and facilities need to be sanitary, protecting and promoting the health of learners and educators. The WHO's Global Schools Health Policies and Practices Survey considers five key components of school health (WHO, 2022c):

1. Healthy and safe school environment
2. Health services
3. Nutrition services
4. Health education
5. Physical education

**Clean and hygienic** facilities are critical to creating conducive learning environments. Sanitary spaces and access to clean water minimize the risk of spreading illnesses and waterborne diseases, potentially reducing student and staff absences due to sickness that impede teaching and learning progress. While some empirical studies do find that water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions have a positive effect on reducing rates of illness and school absences (e.g. Trinies et al., 2016), this correlation is not consistent in the literature (e.g. Dreibelbis et al., 2013). However, schools that teach WASH may generate positive ripple effects within the local community, improving health and well-being beyond the school staff and students (Anthonj et al., 2021).

School meals and approaches to **nutrition** are key factors in ensuring that schools are healthy places. The food served at school can have a significant impact on students' physical health, cognitive functioning, social-emotional states and lifelong habits. Diets rich in essential nutrients can improve behaviour in the classroom by reducing fatigue and irritability, and enhancing concentration and academic performance (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 1996). While the quality of school meals may not significantly impact the quality of teaching, research indicates that a well-balanced meal can promote cognitive development in school-aged children (Bryan et al., 2004). In PISA 2022, an average of 8% of students in the OECD area reported not eating at least once

a week in the past 30 days because there was not enough money to buy food (OECD, 2023b). This figure is even higher in low-income countries, with more than 40% of children living in severe food poverty in certain regions (UNICEF, 2022). Therefore, school nutrition programmes that provide free or low-cost meals can improve social equity by ensuring that all children have access to healthy meals at school regardless of their economic backgrounds, minimizing disparities among students related to food access and improving school attendance overall (Devereaux et al., 2018).

“There is growing international recognition of the relationship between education, health and well-being: well-nourished, healthy and happy learners learn better, while poor health and well-being has a detrimental effect on school attendance and academic performance, with long term and intergenerational impacts. Interventions to address health, nutrition and well-being are among the most effective (and potentially cost-effective) approaches available to governments and non-governmental organizations seeking to transform education systems’

Transforming Education Summit Discussion Paper 4 ‘The Case for School Health and Nutrition: Investing in the Condition of the Learner’ (United Nations, 2022c, pp. 1–2)

For schools to be happy places, it is not sufficient for infrastructures and facilities to be safe and healthy. They need to be **accessible** to all students and staff, without discriminating based on gender, ethnicity, needs or abilities. SDG 4 states the need to ‘build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all’ (United Nations, n.d.). Accessible and inclusive design is referred to in the architectural literature as **universal design for learning** (UDL). UDL was initiated with the idea that designing spaces that support learners with disabilities can support the diverse needs and learning styles of every student in a classroom, disabled or not (Edyburn, 2021). This

goal builds on the United National Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, whose Article 24 posits that State Parties will ensure that ‘effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion’ (UNGA, 2006).

#### Box 4. WHO and UNESCO’s Health Promoting Schools

In 2021, the WHO and UNESCO launched the initiative ‘Making Every School a Health Promoting School’ through the development and promotion of global standards for Health Promoting Schools (HSP). HPS are schools with a strengthened capacity to be healthy settings for living, learning and working. They promote positive development and healthy behaviours such as balanced nutrition, physical activity and fitness, recreation and play, and prevention of tobacco use. The initiative reflects a whole-school approach, comprising healthy school policies, curricula, environments, communities and health services. Although the WHO introduced the concept of HPS many decades ago, this aspiration is yet to be achieved, given that few countries have implemented HPS at scale. HSP can be a useful framework for accompanying the realization of the Happy Schools criteria on sanitary and healthy school spaces. In addition to physical health, the HSP framework also addresses mental health, and can be used to address bullying and violence.

In practical terms, UDL means that the **needs of people with disabilities**, including mobility challenges and visual or auditory impairments, are considered when designing physical spaces, for example by providing ramps, elevators and accessible restroom facilities, as well as accessible learning materials. Important progress has been made in adapting school infrastructure and materials to students with disabilities between 2015 and 2020 – especially at the primary level, where UDL increased from 43.5 per cent to 48 per cent, but the share remains low (Our World in Data, 2023). UDL also addresses gender in school infrastructure and facilities, through **gender-inclusive and gender-sensitive** accessible spaces. Gender-inclusive spaces are environments designed to accommodate and welcome individuals of all gender identities, while

gender-sensitive spaces respond to the specific needs and concerns of individuals of different genders. Privacy is especially important when considering gender-sensitive spaces at school, particularly changing rooms, restrooms and nursing spaces. Globally, the proportion of schools with access to single-sex basic sanitation stands at 77 per cent at the primary level and 89 per cent in the upper-secondary level.

Unfortunately, even the safest, healthiest and most accessible school infrastructure can fall victim to crises that transcend the walls of a school building – which is why it is all the more important to ensure that school infrastructures are **sustainable and resilient**. The COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters and frequent attacks on schools can interrupt schooling and educational continuity. According to the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), over 3,000 attacks on schools were documented in 2022, representing two-thirds of all attacks on education (GCPEA, 2022). These attacks include targeted violent attacks by state armed forces or non-state armed groups, as well as ‘indiscriminate attacks due to airstrikes, shelling, or armed combat,’ with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali and Palestine each experiencing over 400 (GCPEA, 2022). A 2023 report by Education Cannot Wait (ECW) states that threats of violence and insecurity in Central and West Africa alone have forced the closure of over 13,000 schools for the 2023/24 school year (ECW, 2023).

Although schools alone cannot solve the crises of armed conflict or climate change, they can be prepared to respond to them by ensuring that school infrastructure is **resilient to natural disasters and conflicts** common in the region and includes emergency contingency plans. In collaboration with central administrators, they can also ensure that their infrastructure is **green** and eco-friendly, operating on renewable and sustainable means when possible. UNESCO is currently developing a Quality Standard on Green Schools, which addresses climate change through green schools’ teaching, facilities, operations and governance (UNESCO, 2023f).

Moreover, accessible, functional and affordable **digital learning ecosystems** improve the resilience of school environments, by ensuring the continuity of learning through crises that may prevent instruction in the physical school space. COVID-19 made it clear

that there exists no adequate substitute for in-person learning; however, digital learning opportunities are increasingly seen as a key component of school contingency plans and emergency readiness for an unpredictable future (UNESCO, 2023b).

Therefore, both digital and hybrid learning spaces need to be treated with the same care for quality, security and maintenance as physical learning spaces. Security, privacy, accessibility and sustainability are design principles that apply to both physical and digital spaces, including in terms of protecting students' rights; strengthening **cybersecurity** mechanisms; upholding accessibility standards for inclusive digital content; and the consistent and timely upgrading and debugging of software or repair of hardware. Quiet **digital attacks** are damaging school communities worldwide. Cyberthreats are on the rise

in the education sector, representing 5 per cent of all ransomware attacks and 30 per cent of all security breaches in 2022 (UNESCO, 2023b). These attacks come at a cost: a staggering **US\$3.86 million** per critical data breach in education (International Business Machines Corporation, 2023). When a school's e-learning or e-management platforms are compromised, learning is interrupted, administrative functions are prevented, and the privacy of sensitive stakeholder information is put at risk. Therefore, a Happy School for better learning is a school that treats cybersecurity as a key concern in the design of digital learning and e-management solutions, prioritizing the training of the education workforce on cybersecurity and even partnering with digital experts to assist school staff with limited digital expertise (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019).

## Criterion 8

### Functional and inclusive spatial designs

In addition to adequate infrastructure and facilities, it is important to consider whether school spaces are **optimally designed** for learning. Studies show that the design of physical learning spaces has an impact not only on well-being (Hughes et al., 2019), but also on learning outcomes (see Tanner, 2009; Barret and Zhang, 2009). However, the literature on the potential effects of school design on teaching and learning is generally eclipsed by studies related to the people or process pillars (Baker and Bernstein, 2012). This may be in part because studies on the effects of school design on school performance can be seen as controversial, in that they highlight inequalities between under-resourced and well-resourced school systems (Ariani and Mirdad, 2016). For example, in systems struggling to procure basic infrastructure elements such as electricity, tables and chairs, as well as sufficient classroom space, bathroom facilities and basic technology, it may seem that school design is not a priority or relevant. However, there exist several ways to create happier learning spaces through **small, cost-effective changes** to classroom layouts, which can have a powerful impact on learner well-being and cater to the collective preferences and creativity of the school community.

The design of physical spaces conducive to learning and well-being is not simply a matter of the size of a school's indoor and outdoor space, or a school system's resources to procure furniture, technology and materials. Rather, it is a question of how school systems organize and utilize the resources available to them, allowing different types of pedagogical practices that respond to the specific needs of teachers and learners. It also involves recognizing that classroom design is **not a 'one-size-fits-all'** model, consisting of rows of desks and chairs that face a board for direct, teacher-led instruction. The second criterion of the place pillar, therefore, emphasizes flexible, functional and inclusive spatial designs that can adapt to the needs of students and the contextual conditions.

To support the learner-centred, active pedagogies described in the process pillar, the physical spaces of Happy Schools should be **flexible and functional**. Flexible school spaces are multifunctional, allowing a **diversity of uses**, ranging from **academic to social and extracurricular**. This flexibility is especially effective in resource-limited contexts, enabling the space's identity to change according to the needs of the students, subject or activity, by simply rearranging the layout of the furniture (Neuman, 2018). Such

spaces can stimulate learners to experience different forms of learning, put several skills and competencies into practice, and form different types of connections with others, including outside core academic settings. Within the classroom, for example, several flexible furniture arrangements can enhance collaborative and engaged learning, such as discussion circles and U-shaped or clustered table formations. Dedicated spaces for learner well-being can also be incorporated into larger spaces, such as a reading corner or meditation space where learners can go to self-regulate when experiencing strong feelings (La Marca and Longo, 2017). Integrating **technology** – even simple, recycled or low-cost technology – can also improve the space’s flexibility by facilitating a variety of possible pedagogical approaches and classroom activities (Imms and Byers, 2017).

School designs that integrate decorations and displays that are inclusive and representative are cost-effective ways to create Happy Schools. This can be accomplished through simple tactics such as physically displaying the work of students and teachers – including creative work – contributing to a more inclusive, joyful and empowering learning atmosphere (Cheryan et al., 2014). Representation in design and decoration can promote gender-transformative education, by presenting diverse representations of gender-challenging limiting stereotypes in posters, photographs and other visual elements throughout the school space. For example, including representations of female pioneers in STEM in school spaces could encourage more young girls to study STEM subjects; likewise, images of men as teachers or caregivers could improve the current gender imbalance in these areas (Dele-Ajayi, 2020). Similarly, diverse representations of culture, traditions and practices can help create a more inclusive learning environment.

Inclusive designs can help create supportive school climates where learners and teachers feel they belong and are excited to attend school, increasing engagement at school, decreasing absenteeism rates and enhancing learning outcomes (Lynch et al., 2012; Konold et al., 2018; Côté-Lussier and Fitzpatrick, 2016). Inclusive design also entails collaborative design: to ensure that a space meets the social and emotional needs of learners, teachers, staff and the wider community, it is vital to include their voices in the planning and design of physical school spaces.

All learning is situated, meaning that one’s experience of learning is shaped by the environment in which it takes place (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In today’s world of expanding technology, it is critical to remember that digital learning is situated, too. Digital learning does not just happen to an individual or within the walls of a classroom, but within multiple realms—both virtual and real—that are mediated by the various school actors discussed in the people pillar. However, digital and blended learning spaces are highly complex, for the learning space is simultaneously expanded into homes and reduced to a screen. Therefore, hardware and software creators and designers (of learning platforms and personal devices) need to jointly ensure that the virtual spaces they create embody the same principles as physical spaces.

The design of digital spaces can create joyful learning environments that are engaging and **inclusive**, thereby improving learning outcomes. Digital learning platforms should promote user-friendly interfaces, interactive and adaptive content, and social features such as discussion or collaboration tools (United Nations, 2023b). The meaningful use of digital tools with these capabilities can help teachers enhance their inclusive, evidence-based pedagogical practice, by providing differentiated instruction and opportunities for asynchronous learning, promoting self-expression and student choice, broadening access to culturally relevant resources, integrating **multilingual** and **disability** support, and supporting individual learning progress tracking and feedback. Overall, digital learning spaces that are carefully used and designed can provide dynamic, interactive and personalized learning experiences that support the vision of a Happy School.



## Criterion 9

### Community hubs

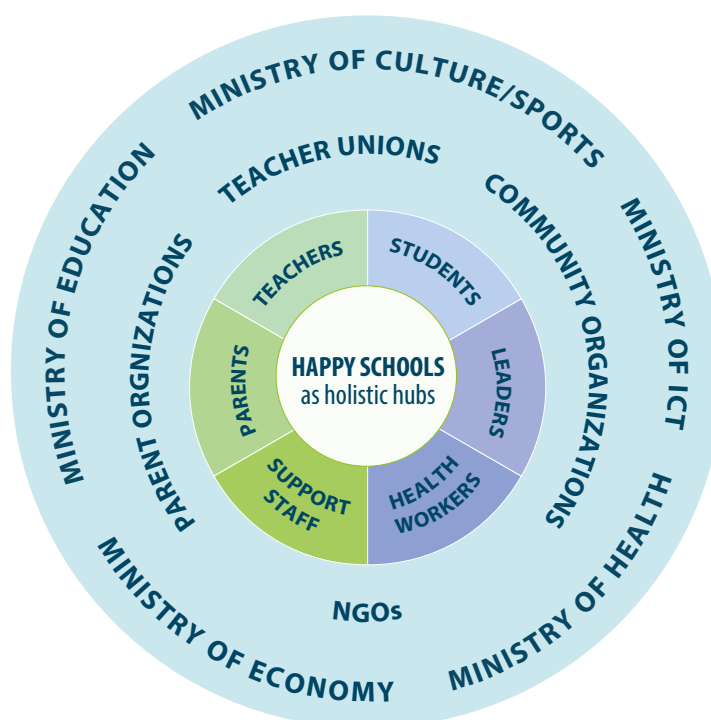
Happy Schools envision the evolution of the school site into a **community hub** that serves as a center not just for student learning, but also for community engagement, well-being and shared activities that extend beyond traditional academic functions. The suggestion that schools should act as community hubs is not new. Dewey, for example, believed that schools should be considered a 'genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons' (Dewey, 1915, p. 13). This thinking also aligns with UNESCO's rethinking of education as 'a common good that belongs to the community and that the community is supposed to preserve' (UNESCO, 2015, p. 45).

Schools can better support learning and well-being when responsive to, and engaged with, the surrounding communities. Evidence from community schools in the US highlights that broadening the role of schools into community hubs can contribute to building connections, resilience and empowering communities, while also reducing dropout rates and

risky behaviours and improving student achievement – notably through increasing the involvement of families in school life (Heers et al., 2016; Johnston et al., 2020).

The idea of schools as community hubs acknowledges that schools are not isolated from the outside world but deeply shaped by the surrounding communities they are part of, with students spending a significant portion of their time outside of school and in those communities. This notion also recognizes that schools alone cannot cater for all learning and well-being needs and must collaborate with the broader community to address the needs of their learners inclusively, equitably and holistically. Grounded in a systems approach, Happy Schools therefore integrate out-of-school spaces and actors into the learning ecosystem, comprised of not only students and teachers but also a broader network of families, school leaders, support staff, health workers, educational administrators, local organizations, public institutions and private actors (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Systems approach to Happy Schools as holistic community hubs



Source: Authors.

The expanded role of schools as community hubs facilitates two-way interactions where community resources enrich school learning and school resources contribute to community development (Cleveland et al., 2023). On the one hand, the vision of schools as two-way hubs means that learning is not confined to schools and can happen in partnership with the community. This can materialize through students utilizing community resources such as libraries and museums to enrich their learning experiences, or teachers integrating hands-on activities rooted in community spaces and practices that help students understand how academic concepts apply to their context. Moreover, collaboration with local organizations and businesses can facilitate vocational training, teacher training workshops or career services for students. Positioning the community as a partner in the learning experience can enhance learning and teaching experiences overall by making curriculum and pedagogy more collaborative, interactional and culturally relevant.

On the other hand, the vision of schools as two-way hubs means that schools are not confined to student academic learning. Happy Schools are places for the holistic development and well-being of the wider community. As Phasha et al. (2017) write regarding inclusive teaching spaces in Africa, we must not think of learning sites as designed for the individual learner but for universal learners, thereby 'seeing schooling as community', where 'mutual interdependence is respected as an ideal and a virtue.' In a practical sense, this could mean that the school opens particular spaces – such as community gardens, technology centres, fitness facilities or libraries – to families of students and staff for specific activities, such as adult education, vocational training, workshops, fundraisers and volunteering, service and safety programmes, community meetings, or cultural and sporting events.

Happy Schools can support the right to (informal) education for the neighbourhood's diverse residents by providing digital literacy training, arts workshops, language classes for families and adults, including marginalized groups. In some cases, schools have seen their role stretched beyond the provision of the right to education

to include the fulfilment of other rights, including access to food, play, leisure and health, particularly for disadvantaged populations (Adams, 2019; Cupertino et al. 2022; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). In addition, schools can offer wider forms of care, civic participation and social cohesion for communities, offering opportunities for learning to live together and learning to be (Andres et al., Forthcoming). Schools may be key sites to promote citizen participation, especially given that young people tend to be under-represented in terms of local decision-making.

The use of the school space by the broader community can have transformative impacts on teaching, learning and well-being. Encouraging parents and community members to feel part of the school community strengthens the support network around students and contributes to an engaged and explorative educational environment that can navigate through unpredictable crises. Here, digital technologies can play a crucial role in facilitating community connections and open learning mechanisms, further enhancing the effectiveness of schools as community hubs. Particularly in times of crisis, schools as community hubs can play a vital role in supporting vulnerable communities and maintaining social cohesion. The PISA 2022 findings indicate that, during crises like COVID-19, resilient education systems designated schools as hubs for social interactions, such as peer-to-peer tutoring and staff support for students (OECD, 2023a).



The Jusoor school in the Beqaa area of Lebanon is an example of community hub where community members, including refugees, come together. The Jusoor school is a form of adaptive, temporary urbanism aimed at creating geographies of reconciliation between refugees and host-community members and enhancing refugee-to-refugee relationships (Andres and Kraftl, 2021). The school is the result of a participatory construction process that engaged all stakeholders to create a form of space agency that concretized a sense of ownership, transforming the school into a hub not only for education but also for social inclusion and community well-being through events, empowerment activities, social gathering and food distribution.

The UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities features many other examples of schools acting as community hubs. Indeed, the pillars of the Happy Schools initiative resonate with the major building

blocks of a learning city, such as 'revitalizing learning in families and communities' by 'establishing community-based learning spaces' and 'motivating people to participate in family and community learning' (UNESCO-UIL, 2015). However, any plan to transform schools into community hubs must include strong security strategies that ensure the safety of all students. A recent study on the feasibility of schools transforming into community hubs posits that some schools may not be ready for such a transformation, and that geographic misalignment between schools and student homes may create obstacles to the common understanding of community (Andres et al., Forthcoming). Moreover, instead of being imposed by heavy policies, the creation of such a hub would be more impactful when initiated with a bottom-up approach, whereby school communities themselves decide on the goals and mechanisms of the initiative to improve everyday resilience.



## Principles pillar

**Guiding a shared vision for Happy Schools, the principles pillar focuses on fundamental values that bind together school communities and enable the realization of the people, process and place pillars.**

### Criterion 10

Trust

### Criterion 11

Inclusion

### Criterion 12

Empowerment

Principles can be understood as **overarching values guiding our actions, interactions and decisions**. They help bring together individuals and groups to work towards a shared goal. Nation-states, organizations and companies all have sets of principles, and so do schools. Indeed, many schools have a motto, a maxim, or a shared list of values and rules that are adopted by members of the school community, as well as visually displayed around the school. Having such a list of values can play a fundamental role in shaping the school culture and contributing to positive interactions and experiences at school. It also helps create a strong sense of community, binding individuals together through shared ideals and a common vision.

So, what are the principles of a 'Happy School'? Acknowledging the diversity of value systems around the world, the Happy Schools initiative does not prescribe a fixed list of 'principles for happiness' to follow. At the same time, it recognizes the usefulness

of principles and values in formulating and realizing a common vision for happiness in and for learning. The 'principles' pillar, therefore, provides three broad categories of principles – **trust, inclusion and empowerment** – which can each be associated with a range of values across the world. The names of the principles are not as important as the ideas they represent, and can be replaced by culturally and locally relevant terms evoking similar ideas.

Whichever terms are chosen to represent each principle, they need to be commonly agreed upon by the members of the school community, articulated explicitly in education policies as well as school rules, and reflected in all measures pertaining to Happy Schools. These principles act as a glue holding together the three other pillars of the Happy Schools framework by shaping the interactions between people, the learning process, and the educational spaces and places.

### Box 5. Values and countervalues for Happy Schools in Portugal

A study carried out in Portugal analyzed the application of the original UNESCO Happy Schools framework in the country (Viegas, 2022) and concluded that an additional pillar was needed to describe the 'values' necessary for a Happy School. The analysis of the questionnaire carried out in Portugal, with the questions "What contributes to a happy school?" and "What contributes to an unhappy school?", allowed to outline both the values and the countervalues for a Happy School (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Key values and countervalues for a Happy School

Values		Countervalues	
Respect	Freedom	Autocracy	Indifference
Safety	Motivation	Demotivation	Aversion
Inclusion	Empathy	Bureaucracy	Disrespect
Equality	Creativity	Discrimination	Lack of teamwork
Friendship	Communication	Lack of cooperation	Negative environment
Cooperation	Teamwork	Judgement	
Participation	Integration		
Care	Joy		

Source: Adapted and translated from Viegas (2022).

The research findings on values and countervalues for Happy Schools are reflected in different ways under the three overarching principles of trust, inclusion and empowerment. While cooperation, communication and teamwork come under the 'trust' principle, respect, equality and empathy are part of 'inclusion', and freedom, motivation and creativity relate to 'empowerment' (Viegas, 2022).

## Criterion 10: Trust

### Trust in and accountability to others

Within the vast body of literature exploring trust, diverse perspectives converge on the idea that trust is a key ingredient of well-functioning organizations or, as Forsyth et al. (2011, p. 111) call it, ‘the glue that holds an organization together’. In education, trust underpins all interactions within the school community, as well as the communication and collaboration mechanisms and governance structures of the wider education system. Trust operates at the **interpersonal, interorganizational and institutional levels** (Niedlich, 2020). In their book about Finland’s world-class schools, *In Teachers We Trust*, Sahlberg and Walker (2021) suggest that trust is the secret ingredient behind the success of the Finnish education system.

Despite its importance for happy and successful education systems, trust remains an elusive concept, with several different definitions. The Happy Schools framework defines the principle of trust as **confidence placed in someone’s ability, integrity and goodwill, built through consistently reliable, honest and transparent behaviour**. This principle operates as a dual thread, intertwining the act of trusting others and the imperative to be trustworthy and accountable oneself. Trust therefore encapsulates a **reciprocal exchange** – it is *given* but also *earned*, by demonstrating rigorous, committed and transparent behaviour and work.

This twofold aspect of trust should be reflected throughout the school community to enable the flourishing of healthy relationships, joyful learning experiences and safe spaces. Trust should unfold within **interpersonal** relationships in schools, where families trust teachers to nurture their children’s growth and teachers, in return, exhibit transparency and diligence in their practices by communicating with families and putting learners’ interests at the centre of their decisions. Similarly, students should trust in the goodwill of their teachers so they can

feel safe and confident to make mistakes and take chances, while teachers should trust in the potential and abilities of their students. Moving beyond the interpersonal into the **interorganizational** realm, school leaders should entrust teachers with autonomy to lead their classrooms and design their lessons, acknowledging their expertise and professionalism. Similarly, central managers should trust school leaders to lead their schools effectively. Finally, for a school system to flourish, trust should extend beyond the school walls into **institutional** trust, with community members believing in the efficacy and purpose of the education system.

If trust is not reciprocated with trustworthy behaviour, it can fade away and hinder the realization of happy school environments. Individuals and groups within the school community must therefore be accountable for their behaviour and work. But accountability should be built carefully and intelligently. Unlike traditional accountability measures that often rely heavily on standardized tests or narrow metrics to gauge success, ‘**intelligent accountability**’ (Didau, 2020; O’Neill, 2013) takes a more comprehensive view. It involves using a broader range of assessments, including **qualitative** measures and **contextual** insights. This approach recognizes the complexity of the educational process and seeks to capture the multifaceted nature of learning, teaching and institutional performance. Instead of assigning blame and punishment like punitive forms of accountability, intelligent accountability emphasizes the importance of constructive feedback, reflection and continuous improvement.

Trust in others and accountability to others should therefore be held as high principles within education systems. Only by being able to trust others and being trustworthy themselves can members of the school community work together to create Happy Schools.

### List of values related to TRUST

Collaboration, cooperation, teamwork, open communication, transparency, accountability, integrity, ethics, peace, honesty, commitment, rigor, diligence...

## Criterion 11: Inclusion

### Respect for differences and embracing of diversity and equity

In its broadest sense, inclusion is about embracing diversity and creating environments that actively value and engage all people, regardless of differences in background, abilities, perspectives and identities. Equity is a related concept that targets systemic inequalities and seeks the fair distribution of opportunities according to the barriers individuals may face due to their backgrounds or circumstances. In a Happy School, the two values go hand in hand to foster fair learning environments where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

Initially employed in the context of special education and students with disabilities, the term ‘inclusion’ in education has now expanded to include individuals of all backgrounds (Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2017). The principle of inclusion in the Happy Schools framework, therefore, embodies the belief that **all individuals, regardless of their differences in abilities, identities or characteristics, have the right to access, fully participate and thrive in education.**

Inclusion is interpreted in policy and academic literature in multiple ways, ranging from the specific placement of students with disabilities in mainstream school spaces to the overarching principle of respecting diversity within the school community (Florian, 2008). The lack of consensus on a normed interpretation of the term across cultures and languages presents challenges for comparative researchers both nationally and internationally (D’Alessio and Watkins., 2009). In the context of this report, inclusion is interpreted at the highest level to mean a respect for diversity and differences that manifests in practices that propel equity, empathy and safety, among other values listed below.

While access to education is a necessary component of inclusion, promoting this principle is not enough in itself. Beyond access, inclusion involves designing educational environments that meet the varied needs of different members of the school community, which requires an intersectional approach to inclusion that considers gender-, language- and other identity-specific needs. At its core, inclusion revolves around creating spaces – physical, academic, cultural, social

and emotional – where all individuals feel welcomed, respected, supported, and empowered to be themselves and be happy.



### Qatar's TES National Statement of Commitment (excerpt)

“Enhancing the concept of education as a public good, and re-imagining educational institutions to ensure inclusion, equality, equity, and well-being for all segments of learners of diverse backgrounds.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

The inclusion criterion is a fundamental force that charges the realization of the people, process and place criteria through an approach based in an ethic of care and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This entails going beyond simply acknowledging diversity or embedding accessibility features into school buildings, and involves the integration of inclusion into spatial design, teacher-training practices and school cultural mindsets. UDL asserts that teaching, learning and school spaces – both physical and virtual – should leverage a multitude of methods to promote belonging and support all learners, including, but not limited to, learners with disabilities. Intentionality and consistency are paramount to the inclusion criterion, for the literature suggests that if physical classrooms are not specifically designed – and their teachers specifically trained – to practice inclusion, then neither the spaces nor the teachers will inherently yield inclusive educational experiences for all students (Graham and Slee, 2008). Moreover, international policy recommendations on digital learning increasingly stress the need for intentional improvement to the accessibility, safety and relevance of digital learning spaces through an ethics-by-design approach, or else digital technology risks exacerbating layers of division rather than fostering inclusion (UNESCO, 2022d; World Bank, 2020).

Overall, the principle of inclusion should be reflected in all aspects of creating Happy Schools, beginning with relationships within the school community that are built on respect and understanding, rather than exclusion or discrimination. As stressed by ethicists of care and education theorists Nel Noddings and bell hooks, inclusion is a core component of the positive attitudes and supportive relationships (people pillar) that contribute to personal and collective happiness through an understanding and embodiment of care, commitment and respect towards others in our daily lives. In her book *Happiness and Education*, Noddings (2003) posits that teachers need to be educated in and for happiness to channel pedagogies of care and inclusion into their daily teaching practices. Hooks (2003) similarly argues that knowledge of

what happiness means to underprivileged children is central to inclusive teaching, which requires valuing and respecting the needs, hardships and sources of joy faced by each learner. She acknowledges that this type of holistic, inclusive pedagogy can be demanding on teachers, which underscores the importance of ensuring that the school places and processes enable teachers to inclusively support their own well-being and the varied needs of their students.

To ensure that inclusion flows through all pillars, schools should concretely encourage the practice of tolerance, patience and empathy, as well as an openness to understanding different perspectives and engaging in dialogue.

### List of values related to inclusion

Equity, equality, diversity, belonging, respect for difference, social justice, intercultural understanding, dialogue, open-mindedness, tolerance, awareness, patience, kindness, empathy, care, dignity, safety...

## Criterion 12: Empowerment

Encouragement of voice and choice

Empowerment refers to the idea that members of the school community are supported in **gaining autonomy, thinking creatively and amplifying their voices to engage meaningfully with their surroundings and drive school decisions in innovative ways**. Upholding empowerment as a principle allows education systems to nurture individuals who have a say over their lives and can achieve their aspirations to be happy and fulfilled (Robbins et al., 2002). The UNCRC's Article 12 gives children the right to have their views given due weight in all matters affecting them. This right to pupil voice, in particular, is a multifaceted concept, which Lundy (2007) posits contains four elements in order to be deemed meaningful: space, voice, audience, and influence. In essence, learners must be given the *opportunity* to express a view, they must be *facilitated* to express their views, their views must be *listened to*, and their views must be *acted upon*, as appropriate. The Happy Schools framework adopts this conception of voice to shape its definition of empowerment.



Côte d'Ivoire's TES  
National Statement of  
Commitment (excerpt)

6 Strengthen social dialogue in order to promote a serene school climate that is conducive to learning and fosters cohesion within the educational family.

(UNESCO, 2023c)

Empowerment aims to instil a sense of agency, granting individuals the power to shape their educational journey. Empowered learners are intrinsically motivated, curious and engaged, embracing and practising creativity, innovation and imagination in their daily activities. Empowerment is not just about nurturing knowledgeable minds but also cultivating confident, adaptable and self-assured individuals, poised to make meaningful contributions

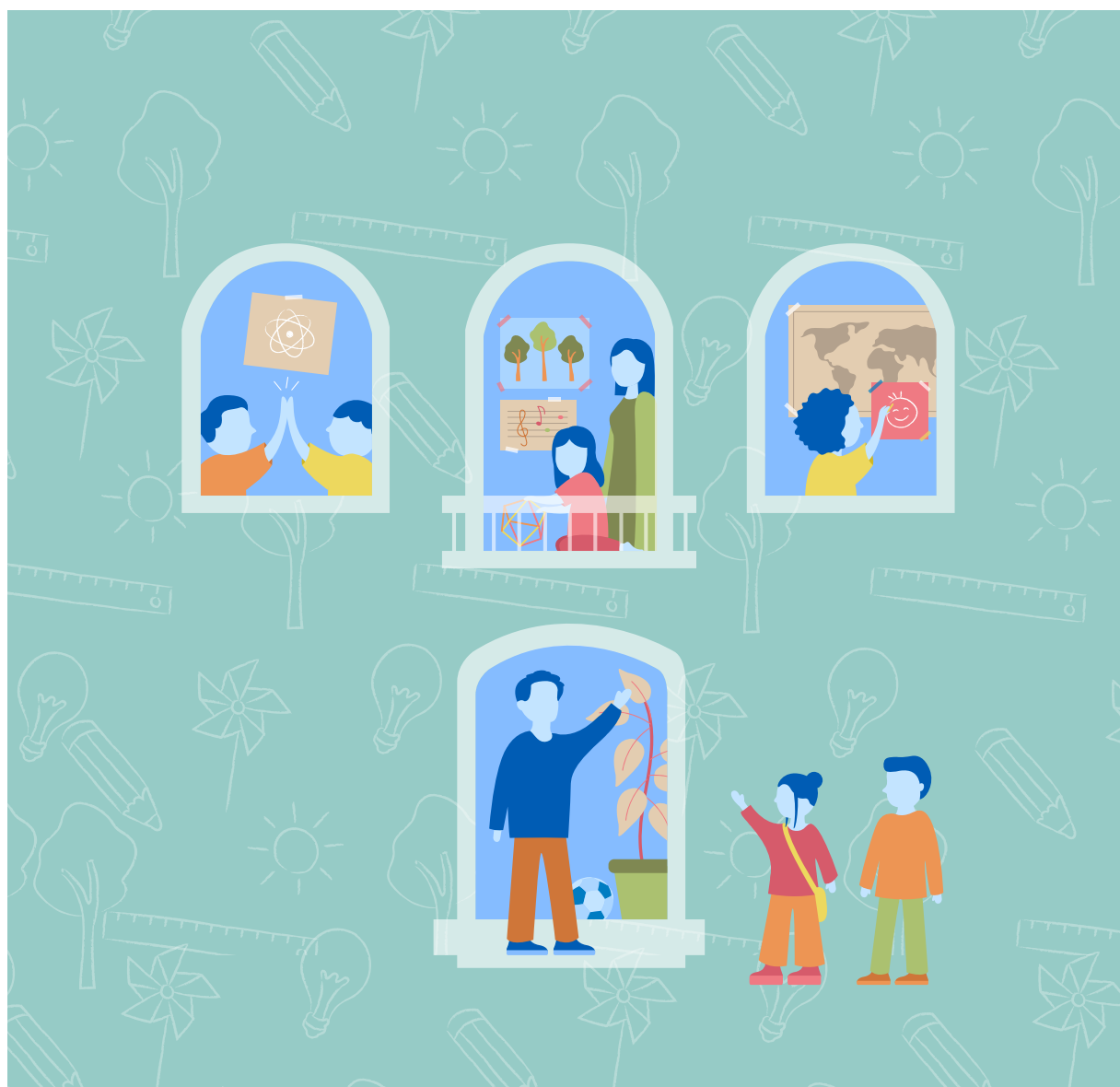
to society. Empowered individuals can confidently embrace challenges, persevere and be resilient when faced with today's ever-evolving circumstances.

Like trust and inclusion, the principle of empowerment should be infused in all pillars of the Happy Schools framework. Interactions between individuals and groups should recognize the autonomy and capability of the other, with teachers taking their students' agency seriously and school leaders amplifying teachers' voices through participative school management. Learning and

teaching processes should empower learners to be creative, explore, make mistakes and persevere through them. Educational places must empower all learners rather than confine or restrict them, providing inclusive spaces where all can feel safe, as well as dedicated spaces (like teacher or student rooms) that give individuals a sense of ownership. The principle of empowerment upholds individuals' and communities' power to transform their lives and environments, and is therefore a catalyst for bottom-up systemic transformations towards Happy Schools.

### List of values related to empowerment

Independence, autonomy, agency, choice, voice, critical thinking, creativity, imagination, innovation, engagement, motivation, curiosity, exploration, playfulness, confidence, growth, perseverance, resilience, adaptability, flexibility...





## Chapter 3

# Implementations of Happy Schools around the world

The Happy Schools framework provides a foundation for building Happy Schools projects and policies. Alone, the framework resides in the realm of the conceptual – the vision for what a ‘good school’ should look like to fit present and future needs. But what do Happy Schools look like in practice? This section describes 4 projects that are using the Happy Schools framework to design and implement interventions that leverage school happiness as a key lever for better learning, teaching and well-being.

Although this section reviews initiatives that have specifically engaged with the Happy Schools framework, the report acknowledges the plethora of programmatic interventions that target happiness and learning. An overview of some of the most synergistic initiatives are summarized in case studies in the Annexes, including relevant frameworks and projects from UNICEF, the OECD, the European Union and other organizations.

## Happy Schools in Portugal

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Driven by international trends focusing on well-being in education, the Portuguese Directorate-General for School Administration (DGSA) – a unit of the Ministry of Education – initiated the Happy Schools Programme in 2020, in partnership with Atlântica University Institute. The aim of the programme is to prioritize the well-being of teachers and non-teaching staff as well as students and, by extension, parents and guardians, in order to address the contributions of happiness to academic performance. By promoting positive learning environments and supporting the well-being of educational stakeholders, the initiative seeks to promote overall happiness and engagement in schools (Dias, 2021).

The Happy Schools Programme offers the training course ‘Tools to Build a Happy School: Teachers, Leadership and Educational Organizations.’ Modules touch on diverse themes, including the importance of emotional salary in teaching - the non-financial benefits that teachers receive from their workplace contributing to their well-being, such as socio-emotional support, free trainings, leisure spaces, balanced work schedules and recognition awards. At the end of the training course, the DGSA applies an evaluation survey completed by program participants. The programme successfully completed six Level 1 courses, with more than 200 education professionals participating. The seventh edition of the Level 1 course is currently being prepared and an exclusively practical Level 2 course is also foreseen.

The Portuguese Happy Schools programme also involved the creation of a diagnostic tool to assess school happiness levels, grounded in UNESCO’s criteria and adapted to the Portuguese context.

The survey tool is registered and authorized by the government’s Directorate-General for Education on its digital platform for School Survey Monitoring. It has four versions tailored for students, teachers, non-teaching staff and parents/guardians. In its first round of application to graduates of the training course in November 2023, it was found that the participating 845 teachers are less happy at school than they are in their personal lives, and that they feel little recognized for their work, report low salaries and find there is excessive bureaucracy at school (Dias, 2023). The results of this diagnostic survey tool then allow school leaders and teachers to develop strategic plans for interventions in their schools to improve happiness.

The Happy Schools Programme has received positive feedback and results. UNESCO collaborated with the Portugal team to disseminate a survey through the DGSA database of all students and teachers in Portugal. The survey received 2,042 teacher responses and 115 school principal responses. Findings revealed that 91.8 per cent of participating teachers experience joy in observing their students learn and progress, 79.7 per cent take pride in creating positive classroom settings, 68.5 per cent feel happy when teaching, and 72.2 per cent feel hopeful about the future. Accreditation by the Scientific and Pedagogical Council for Continuous Professional Development has enhanced the programme’s value, contributing to teachers’ career progression.

The focus on well-being has promoted positive and engaged learning environments, leading to improved overall happiness: 99.1 per cent of the 115 school principals recently surveyed prioritize creating a happy school culture, 97.4 per cent consider their

school a safe and caring place, 90.4 per cent report a positive overall school climate, and 86.1 per cent prioritize student and teacher well-being.

With 55.4 per cent of teachers aspiring to provide a more engaging curriculum and 75.7 per cent of principals intent on promoting creativity, innovation and personalized learning, the project team aims to continue advocating for political support and refining the training course based on survey feedback. By demonstrating the project's positive impact, the team envisions wider adoption and integration of happiness principles across Portugal's education system.

As part of the Happy Schools Programme, Portugal is developing a 'Happy School Seal', awarded to schools in recognition of their fulfilment of a set of happiness standards (Dias, 2024). However, coming up with precise and objective criteria for a school to receive this seal has not been an easy task. This is arguably a remarkable initiative that could be replicated and scaled in other countries, and could possibly contribute to creating a global Happy School standard.

### Box 6. Building the evidence base for Happy Schools in Portugal: Structural Equation Model and Cartaxo Case Study

The Happy Schools Portugal research project, hosted by the Portuguese Open University, engages three key stakeholder groups: teachers and staff, parents and students. The first phase of the research consists in testing and validating the ability of the Happy Schools model developed by the research team to measure happiness in the Portuguese educational context. The model was built upon UNESCO's 2016 regional Happy Schools framework for Asia-Pacific and other relevant publications and consists of 22 criteria for school happiness. Findings from this first phase provide insights into the state of happiness among the key stakeholders - teachers and staff, students, and parents - as well as into specific factors contributing to their happiness or unhappiness.

**Teacher and staff happiness.** Based on 10 years of research with 2,500 teachers and staff, key findings reveal that they feel happier in the role they perform rather than in the institution they work for (Dutschke et al. 2024; Dutschke et al. 2019). Their happiness mainly comes from workplace relations, self-fulfillment, and leadership, while unhappiness is due to (lack of) acknowledgement, respect, sustainability and work-life balance.

**Student and parent happiness.** Based on 5 years of research with around 2,700 students and 1,400 parents, **results validate 19 out of the 22 criteria of the UNESCO Happy Schools framework** in the Portuguese context (Gramaxo et al., 2023; Gramaxo et al., 2023). Participants highlight the importance of friendships, good teachers, opportunities for freedom and creativity,

useful and relevant content, fun and engaging learning strategies - among others - for happiness. They also underline values like creativity, innovation, trust, tolerance, respect for diversity and differences as key to happiness, closely aligning with the new principles pillar proposed by UNESCO (2022). In terms of unhappy school characteristics, students identify workload as a significant contributor to unhappiness, while parents emphasize negative teachers' attitudes.

Moving into the second phase of the project, the research team plans to develop Structural Equation Models to further analyze factors influencing school happiness, as well as to propose theoretical frameworks and concrete strategies to enhance school happiness. The project will conduct a pilot study in Cartaxo, Portugal, hosted by Autónoma University in collaboration between the Cartaxo City Council and 19 participating schools. The project will apply separate surveys to students, parents, teachers, and staff, enabling a holistic understanding of school happiness. Based on results, and with a co-creative methodology involving the four stakeholders, contents and a strategic happiness plan will be proposed and presented to the community.

The culmination of the project will be a half-day live event in May 2024, where students will present key findings, proposed actions, and contents to the community of Cartaxo. This participatory approach aims to foster collaboration among stakeholders and promote the cultivation of a happy school culture.

## Happy Schools in Yemen

In 2022, UNESCO and the non-profit Al-Awn Foundation for Development teamed up to launch Happy Schools in Yemen. In a country whose education system is stifled by ongoing conflicts and natural hazards, focusing on happiness at school could seem like a lofty dream, disconnected from the dire reality many students, teachers and parents face daily. However, during the first year of piloting the Happy Schools approach, a hopeful truth has begun to take shape: school happiness is a powerful engine for quality education and joyful learning in crisis zones and a vehicle to strengthen the stability and well-being of school communities.

The ongoing conflict since 2014 has crippled Yemen's education system, with nearly 3,000 schools destroyed or repurposed for sheltering internally displaced persons (Global Education Cluster, 2022). Over 2.7 million children – nearly a third of the total student population – are out of school, and millions more are at risk of losing their learning opportunities because teachers have been irregularly paid for years, and in some cases, have been victims of violent attacks (UNOCHA, 2023). As more and more classrooms are pulled into zones of conflict, generations of children have been deprived of opportunities for cognitive and social-emotional development and of the community support that successful school systems create.

The Happy Schools project in Yemen seeks to support holistic schooling through cost-effective, human-centred interventions. The first phase of the project was the adaptation of the global Happy Schools framework to Yemen's national context. With support from Al-Awn Foundation and the UNESCO regional office for the Gulf States and Yemen, the Ministry of Education formed a national team to lead the adaptation of UNESCO's global Happy Schools criteria into a Yemen-specific framework for positive and inclusive school environments.

During the pilot phase of the Yemen project, school leaders from the Yemen National Team translated the framework into activities and teaching approaches in three schools in the Hadhramaut governorate. Activities were developed with contributions of teachers, seen as core players in the process of transformation to Happy Schools. Teachers were trained on the fundamentals of positive psychology, which they used to design their classrooms through rearranging the classroom layout, adding student-made decorations and increasing students' opportunities to share their work with each other, among other activities.

Teachers who took part in the pilot project explained that these small inexpensive changes had a positive impact on students' relationships with each other (UNESCO, 2024). Moreover, they noticed fewer unwanted behaviours, an increase in participation and creativity, and even to some extent, a reduction in cases of anxiety and fear of exams thanks to the reassurance they received from their teachers.

These preliminary findings provide a promising case for scaling this initiative to encompass more schools and geographical areas in Yemen. However, implementing projects at national scale in Yemen during times of crisis presents considerable challenges. Scarce resources, competing priorities and logistical hurdles can hinder progress and diminish the perceived importance of the initiative.



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## Happy Schools in Viet Nam

Since 2019, the Ministry of Education and Training and Viet Nam Education Union have supported a 'Happy School' model, based on UNESCO's Happy Schools initiative. The **Viet Nam Innovation of General Education Foundation (VIGEF)** contributes to the development of Happy Schools in Viet Nam through its '**Principal - the Sower of Happiness**' initiative. This project aims to provide training to 10,000 school principals nationwide, to enhance their awareness and skills in building Happy Schools.

Led by VIGEF, the training programme aligns with Viet Nam's comprehensive educational reform, which positions happiness and holistic student development as the ultimate goals of the country's education system. The reform focuses on shifting from an excessively knowledge-based education system centred on high academic pressure to a holistic understanding of students' development that considers their well-being and social-emotional competencies. The initiative aligns with UNESCO's Happy Schools framework while paying due attention and respect to the unique characteristics of local schools and communities.

Recognizing their crucial role in driving school transformation, the Vietnamese initiative aims to develop the leadership capacity, skills and mindsets of school principals to empower them to bring happiness into their schools. It recognizes principals as key agents for transforming school culture and values; creating a positive working environment for teachers; enabling communication and connection between different members of the school community; and mobilizing and utilizing available resources to improve their school and ensure a safe, friendly and sustainable learning environment.

The initiative focuses on enhancing school leaders' capacities and practices, so that they can gradually implement Happy Schools principles within their educational institutions. The training programme is delivered in a blended learning style, combining one day of offline training with three to six months of online self-study. The online sessions allow participants to share good practices, ideas and

inspirations about Happy Schools; the offline sessions are designed for self-study, with the support of learning resources and learning management systems. The training is delivered by VIGEF in collaboration with major regional universities (e.g. the Can Tho University, the University of Science and Education, the University of Danang and the Hanoi Pedagogical University No.2) and some technology companies (e.g. Genetica Asia, VietTel and AEGlobal).

The project's first phase in 2022 had a wide-reaching impact, touching 1,200 school principals in seven provinces and cities. The second phase (September–December 2023) trained an additional 3,000 principals in 13 provinces and cities in the Mekong Delta. The third and fourth phases (October 2023–January 2024) targeted the training of more than 3,000 principals in 15 provinces in Central Highlands and central cities, and over 3,000 principals in 15 provinces and cities in the north of Viet Nam.

The VIGEF-Happy Schools Network currently has over 10,000 members, consisting of trained school principals and dedicated experts, scientists and passionate educators who have made significant contributions to building Happy Schools in Viet Nam. UNESCO collaborated with the Viet Nam team to disseminate a survey through VIGEF's database of school principals. The survey received 355 school principal responses which showed that most view their school environment (66.3 per cent) and overall school climate (74.9 per cent) positively, and strongly believe that students perform better (72.6 per cent) and learn better (75.6 per cent) when happiness is prioritized in schools. Creating a happy and supportive school culture, therefore, **ranks as a top priority for 73.6 per cent of principals.**

The project has deepened the understanding of policies and practical conditions in various localities, facilitating coordination and consultation with stakeholders to direct investments and promote the spread of Happy Schools. The project's compact operating model has demonstrated its significant influence and potential for easy replication and expansion.

By collaborating with various stakeholders, Viet Nam aims to further disseminate Happy Schools throughout its educational landscape. The country plans to continue developing the programme by providing in-depth training on leadership skills for principals. It also plans to train teachers in teaching skills for Happy Schools, including through instruction on emotional intelligence, positive discipline, and collaboration with parents and the community. Viet Nam also aims to create practical models for Happy Schools to be used in diverse settings across the country.



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### Box 7. Eurasia Learning Institute's Happy Schools Project in Hue, Viet Nam

Inspired by UNESCO's Happy Schools framework, the Switzerland-based Eurasia Learning Institute (ELI) has been implementing a Happy Schools Project in the Thua Thien Hue province of Viet Nam since 2018, in partnership with the Ministry of Education and the University of Hue. The project consists of training teachers in ways to leverage happiness in their teaching through a 'model of care.' The model is made up of three modes of care: care for self, care for others and care for nature. By training teachers to integrate these elements into their teaching activities, the project aims to increase both teachers' and students' well-being and happiness at school.

The first phase of the project involved training teachers from nine pilot schools, ranging from primary to higher-secondary level (ELI, 2023). Teachers first received a foundational module introducing them to the topic and then participated in three other modules, each covering one mode of care. The training took place over one school year and was accompanied by classroom coaching

to support teachers in implementing what they had learned during the modules.

Hue University provided a scientific assessment of the impact of the Happy Schools Project in the pilot schools (Tran et al., 2023). Assessments found that students who were part of the Happy Schools Project had significantly better social and emotional skills, higher levels of life satisfaction and lower levels of psychological distress than students who did not participate in the programme. Moreover, the evaluation of the programme revealed positive changes in students' perceptions of their teachers' social, emotional and management skills, well-being and energy levels.

Building on the success of the pilots, ELI intends to expand the Happy Schools Project to various other locations in Viet Nam and has been developing another Happy Schools Project in Switzerland (ELI, n.d.).

## Asia-Pacific Happy Schools Pilots

UNESCO's multisectoral office in Bangkok first launched the Happy Schools Project to address growing concerns regarding academic pressure and stress in the Asia-Pacific region (particularly caused by high-stake standardized tests), resulting in lower levels of learner happiness (UNESCO, 2016). The regional report *Happy Schools: A Framework for Learner Well-Being in the Asia-Pacific* initiated a global conversation, encouraging countries to take up the framework within their national contexts. The framework, which initially comprised 22 criteria under the pillars of people, process and place, also provided implementation strategies for a wide variety of contexts. It was received with great interest by a number of countries, who have since gone on to incorporate Happy Schools within their national context, either on their own initiative or as a UNESCO pilot country within and beyond the Asia-Pacific region.

The Happy Schools framework pilots in Japan, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand envisioned transforming the education systems by placing student happiness, well-being and joy of learning at the core of the educational experience. Their vision was to create positive and nurturing learning environments that prioritize the holistic development of students and foster emotional, social and academic growth. By promoting Happy Schools, these countries aimed to shift the focus from high-stakes testing to a comprehensive approach that embraces the happiness and well-being of learners, teachers and all stakeholders involved in the educational process.

The implementation of the Happy Schools framework pilots in the three countries has yielded positive results. Participating teachers and school leaders reported a stronger commitment to fostering happy learning environments and cultivating growth mindsets among students. Positive relationships with parents and colleagues have been nurtured, leading to a more supportive educational community. The initiative has heightened awareness about the importance of learner well-being and happiness in the educational process, and inspired discussions about aligning national and school priorities for enhanced social, economic and individual development.

During the pilot phase, the countries encountered some difficulties in effectively communicating and implementing the Happy School concept with stakeholders. Uncertainties arose regarding the precise definition of a 'Happy School' and how to measure happiness at the school level. Additionally, the need to localize the concept of happiness to align with diverse languages, cultures and value systems emerged as a significant challenge. Ensuring consistent emphasis on happiness throughout the entire school day, rather than solely during extra-curricular or non-academic activities, remains an ongoing concern.

Building on the experiences and insights gained from the pilot projects, Japan, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand are committed to refining and adapting the Happy Schools approach to suit their unique educational contexts. They aim to create a widespread culture of happiness and well-being within their education systems, expanding the initiative to encompass more schools and regions. The next steps involve further collaboration with national partners and stakeholders to expand the impact of Happy Schools, ultimately transforming the educational landscape for the better. These countries aspire to create a Happy School wave that will embrace all schools, fostering a positive educational environment that benefits students, teachers and the entire community.

## Conclusion

# Sparking a global movement towards happiness *in* and *for* learning

If we want to tackle the double crisis of learning and well-being, we must recognize and leverage the relationship between learning and happiness to address the compounded educational challenges of our time. As this report has argued, happiness and academic excellence are not competing policy priorities. Rather, happiness can serve as a key lever for better and wider learning experiences and outcomes, as well as for improved teaching, well-being and overall system resilience. Based on the science of learning, there seem to be many convergences between what leads to school happiness and what leads to effective learning. This is also backed up by empirical studies supporting the positive relationship between happiness and a wide range of better learning outcomes. These scientific findings are complemented by strong philosophical and normative bases for recognizing happiness *in* and *for* learning.



## A call to action

Through its Happy Schools initiative, UNESCO calls on educational decision-makers to position happiness as both a **means** to and a **goal** of quality learning.

### Leverage happiness as a means to improve quality learning

Drawing on research from multiple fields, this report argues that **happier students learn better** and are more likely to keep learning on a lifelong continuum. In a virtuous cycle, positive learning outcomes are also shown to produce happier and more resilient students. As technology and labour markets change, learners will increasingly need to reskill and upskill throughout their lives. Happy Schools can play a key role in fostering a **lifelong love of learning**, rather than a sense of relief that a student's educational journey ends upon completing formal schooling.

A similar logic applies to teachers: **happier teachers teach better and are more likely to keep teaching**, deepening their pedagogical content knowledge, progressing along their career pathways and strengthening their relationships with students, families and school staff. Given the research showing the importance of teaching quality on student performance, a happy school environment that enhances teacher well-being, retention and effectiveness will improve the overall quality of teaching and, by extension, of learning.

In addition to student and teacher performances, happiness can also be a vehicle for improving **equity and resilience** in education systems. At the TES, the global community committed to reorienting education towards resilience (United Nations, 2023a). In an unpredictable world, Happy Schools support the ability to make mistakes and work collaboratively to learn from them to develop resilience. Building resilience relies on having experiences that could be uncomfortable, that could entail an inherent amount of risk, or that could provoke negative emotions. Happy Schools are not at odds with experiencing risk or negative emotion, nor do they aim to erase challenges. On the contrary, Happy Schools leverage happy school environments and relationships to build positive characteristics and strengths – personal, school-wide and system-wide – to overcome challenges when they arise.

### Recognize happiness as a goal of quality learning

Not only is happiness a means to improve quality and equity in education, it is also **a goal in and of itself**. As the previous sections have shown, happiness has often been seen as a core purpose of education – and life. Education philosophies espouse a range of goals for formal school systems, broadly grouped under three categories: **economic, individual and democratic** flourishing (Biesta, 2006; Aspin and Chapman, 2001). Some systems configure education to promote economic empowerment and prepare students to thrive in the knowledge economy and global market demands. Others frame the purpose of education as the humanistic development of an individual's personal aims, goals, subjective well-being and life satisfaction. Many systems emphasize the democratic dimension of education in teaching and learning about rights and freedoms, and addressing shared concerns collectively for social well-being. UNESCO's Happy Schools framework embeds core aspects of each of these categories in its vision of schools as happy places to learn to learn, to know, to do, to be and to live together.

The Happy Schools approach accounts for the necessity to adapt skills to realize the **economic purpose** of education. Traditionally, school policies have promoted one-way knowledge transfer from teachers to students, distance between teachers and students, and linear learning pathways. In today's world of rapid change, such rigid school structures are ill-suited to many needs – academic, social-emotional, economic – of learners and communities. They may not fit for purpose for the kinds of active, flexible, interactive, joyful learning endorsed by a growing body of scientific evidence on how humans learn best. Nor do they cultivate some of the most valued skills in life and the workplace, including creativity, adaptability, collaboration, critical thinking and empathy. UNESCO's 'Futures of Higher Education' project determined that **resilience, critical thinking, adaptiveness, global citizenship and creativity** rank among the most important abilities required to navigate these transitions (UNESCO-IESALC, 2023). The core holistic learning approach of UNESCO's Happy Schools initiative reflects these necessary skills for the future of work in the knowledge economy.

The Happy Schools approach also plays a role in bringing to life the **personal and social purposes** of education. It focuses on cultivating happy individuals and societies through building empathy, self-regulation, open-mindedness, collaboration, trust, inclusion and social action to advance the SDGs. As loci of both academic and social education, schools convey the values young people will grow to valorize. Schools can be vectors for fostering active global citizenship and cultivating empathy, or conversely, for spurring polarized extremism and fear of difference (Biesta, 2016). It follows that the decisions around what is taught in schools, how it is taught, and how it is measured are keys to forging a peaceful, just and sustainable future grounded in goodwill.

## Happy Schools as an accelerator to achieve SDG 4

By promoting happiness as a means to and a goal of quality learning, the Happy Schools initiative seeks to advance progress towards **SDG 4**: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Happy Schools positions happiness as a lever to improve teaching and learning

quality, contributing to reaching target **4.1**: All learners complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning. The initiative also addresses targets **4.a** on ensuring safe and inclusive learning facilities and environments (especially through the ‘place’ pillar) and **4.c** on increasing the supply of qualified teachers (notably through the ‘people’ pillar).

By fostering happy school communities, Happy Schools contributes to the formation of positive and fulfilled individuals and societies who can embody attitudes and skills such as collaboration, empathy, curiosity and resilience, which are at the basis of education for peace, sustainable development and global citizenship. The initiative therefore also feeds into target **4.7** on ensuring all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development and global citizenship. Beyond advocating for a ‘feel good’ curriculum, Happy Schools targets system-wide transformative changes that are needed to promote social justice. By bridging the academic and socio-emotional targets of SDG 4, Happy Schools underscores their interconnectedness and advocates for their simultaneous pursuit under a comprehensive approach.

## Policy recommendations

Policies need to recognize happiness as a core purpose of the education system and a fundamental means for cultivating lifelong and lifewide learning. The four conclusions below synthesize the criteria of the Happy Schools framework into high-level policy recommendations.

### People



To create and sustain happy schools, a comprehensive policy approach should first prioritize cultivating positive relationships among all stakeholders within the educational ecosystem. This entails:

1. Fostering collaborative and communicative connections and regular engagement between all members of the school community – including, students, teachers, parents, school leaders and central managers – to enhance students’ performance, engagement, sense of belonging, confidence and overall well-being.
2. Employing holistic approaches to school management that prioritize student, teacher and school staff well-being, by implementing bullying and violence prevention strategies and by addressing issues of teacher burnout and shortages through policies that optimize teacher workload, provide opportunities for collaboration and staff support, and offer professional development.
3. Emphasizing the teachability of happiness and positive self-concept in classrooms through skill development and targeted practices, including broader metrics for academic success to encompass not only traditional achievements but also personal growth, fostering confidence and pride among students.

## Process



Policies must create happy learning and teaching processes by transforming curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to embed skills, competencies and activities that develop the whole person and are contextually relevant. This entails:

4. Advocating for a balanced curriculum that is manageable in terms of workload, holistic in developing the whole person, and relevant to learners' interests and backgrounds, including through strategies to 'unload' the curriculum and allocate time for play, extracurricular activities and non-academic skill development.
5. Promoting active pedagogies focused on interactive, experiential, learner-centred and hands-on activities that foster curiosity, inquiry and creativity, and provide a structured balance between child-directed initiatives and adult supervision such as through playful learning.
6. Encouraging holistic and flexible approaches to assessing learning that move away from rigid, one-size-fits-all examinations, providing opportunities for self-assessment and formative assessment with feedback to accommodate different learning styles, abilities and individual progress.

## Place



A comprehensive policy approach is needed to shape the physical and digital learning spaces that create propitious learning environments and promote well-being, engagement and joyful learning. This entails:

7. Promoting the well-being of learners and educators by investing in safe, healthy, accessible and sustainable infrastructure and facilities, including access to outdoor and indoor green spaces, nutritious school meals, and clean and hygienic equipment.
8. Designing physical and virtual learning spaces that prioritize flexibility and inclusion through multi-functional classroom arrangements, personalized and representative decorations and child-friendly digital interfaces.
9. Promoting the evolution of schools into community hubs that contribute to the holistic development and well-being of the broader community by positioning parents and community members as partners in the learning experience.

## Principles



Educational policies must emphasize core principles like trust, inclusion and empowerment that feed into all ensuing policy, programme and reform decisions. This entails:

10. Fostering trust by prioritizing intelligent accountability measures that set rigorous yet achievable expectations and provide students, teachers and school staff academic and professional autonomy, as well as growth opportunities through constructive feedback.
11. Promoting inclusion and equity by celebrating the abilities, interests and backgrounds of all members of the school community and by intentionally designing spaces and curricula that accommodate diverse needs, especially of the disadvantaged.
12. Supporting empowerment by facilitating all members of the school community to express views, make choices and practice creativity, allowing them to develop into confident individuals who participate in school life and contribute to educational decision-making.

## Looking to the future

### UNESCO's role: Connecting national policies and local practices

UNESCO encourages Member States, organizations or individuals interested in transforming their education systems, to take the global Happy Schools framework and transform it into context-specific initiatives. Case studies demonstrate that the framework is versatile and flexible, implementable in diverse contexts, including crisis and emergency contexts like in Yemen. Many teachers, schools and organizations are already putting elements of the Happy Schools approach into practice through programmes and interventions. In such contexts, the UNESCO initiative seeks to scale existing efforts through aligned policy approaches that create conditions in which all schools *nationwide* can promote happiness.

While this report provides high-level policy recommendations, the Happy Schools initiative advocates for **top-down** and **bottom-up** transformation of education systems, simultaneously encouraging governments to recognize happiness as a core objective of education, while scaling up promising practices of joyful learning from the school level to the policy level. Leveraging its international stature, UNESCO stands ready to facilitate the exchange of Happy Schools initiatives horizontally across countries and vertically between policy programmes and grassroots practices. Notably, the **UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet)** will play a pivotal role in strengthening ground-up movements of happiness in and for learning.

### Ways to engage with Happy Schools

There are four main routes to engage with the UNESCO Happy Schools initiative to advance the reorientation of education systems towards happiness:

1. **UNESCO-supported national Happy Schools projects:** UNESCO Member States may choose to approach UNESCO to receive technical support to adapt the global Happy Schools framework to their national education system and to develop

national initiatives (see Annex 3 for an example of how to build a pilot national Happy Schools project).

2. **Government-, school-, and partner-led Happy Schools projects:** Materials and tools produced as part of the UNESCO Happy Schools initiative are global public goods. Countries, as well as interested organizations, schools and educators, are encouraged to use these materials to self-initiate, lead and implement their own Happy Schools projects at varying levels.
3. **Advocacy-based engagement with Happy Schools:** Instead of adapting and implementing the Happy Schools framework, countries, organizations and individuals may choose to focus on the advocacy route to promote the integration of happiness in education policies or, more generally, to raise public awareness about the link between school happiness and quality education.
4. **Evidence-based engagement with Happy Schools:** Contribute to the growing body of scientific literature that explores the links between happiness and learning, in particular through launching new research studies and projects that include evidence from international surveys.

From policy-makers to school leaders to teachers, UNESCO encourages all to join Happy Schools in partnership and commit to making schools happier places for learning, being, doing and living together. If we want happy lifelong learners and teachers, and if we want resilient and collaborative societies, then **we need happy schools**.

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# Annexes

## Annex 1

# Education initiatives for happiness and well-being

The Happy Schools framework was developed and expanded based on the many past and ongoing initiatives across the world aiming to improve happiness and learning through holistic and comprehensive approaches. While the cases below differ from the Happy Schools initiative, they share similar purposes and illustrate concrete ways in which happiness can be leveraged for learning.

## Global education initiatives for happiness

### CASEL framework for SEL

Social and emotional learning (SEL) focuses on nurturing students' emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills and overall well-being. It aims to equip individuals with the tools and competencies to understand and manage their emotions, develop empathy and strong relationships, make responsible decisions and navigate the social complexities of life successfully. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization dedicated to advancing SEL research and practice, has developed a framework to promote SEL in schools and classrooms. The CASEL model outlines five core competencies for SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

This model recognizes SEL as a process for learners to 'apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions' (CASEL, 2020). The model emphasizes how SEL branches out beyond the learner to impact classrooms, schools, families and communities. Based on this understanding, teaching happiness and well-being to learners would result in happier societies and a happier world.

### UNESCO MGIEP's Model for SEL

UNESCO has also developed SEL standards in recognition of its many benefits for learners and teachers (UNESCO, Forthcoming). For learners, SEL helps improve personal and social skills, prosocial behaviour, prosocial attitudes and academic achievement while reducing conduct problems, emotional distress, bullying and aggression, and drug abuse. For teachers, SEL helps improve the classroom and school climate, as well as teachers' well-being, sense of personal accomplishment and social-emotional competence while reducing emotional exhaustion, stress and anxiety (UNESCO, Forthcoming).

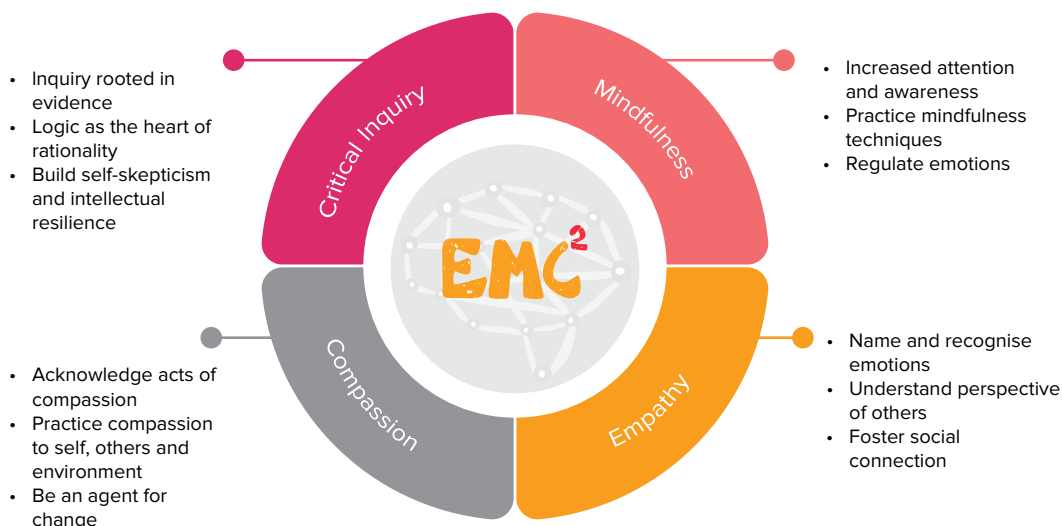
UNESCO's Mahatma Gandhi Institute for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) believes in providing learners, youth and teachers with the socioemotional competencies to navigate challenges thrown up by education systems. MGIEP does this by mainstreaming SEL in education systems, with the main vision of building kinder brains. It uses the EMC framework (see Figure 6), which builds competencies like empathy, compassion, kindness, mindfulness and critical enquiry through the various courses offered at the institute (UNESCO-MGIEP, 2020). These competencies need to be built – they are not a given. With practice, the skills become valuable for navigating challenges both inside and outside education systems. MGIEP advocates that to be truly happy, one first needs to show compassion

to oneself, others and other living beings. SEL is an essential element for disrupting current – and in many instances, outdated – education practices through an evidence-based approach, with practical tools

to help improve and sustain happiness leading to human flourishing.

There are many SEL Frameworks and an example of one from MGIEP is depicted in the figure below.

**Figure 6.** UNESCO MGIEP's EMC<sup>2</sup>



Source: UNESCO-MGIEP (2020), p. xxxiii.

## UNICEF Child-Friendly Schools

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has been promoting Child-Friendly Schools (CFS) for decades. The CFS framework supports educational environments for holistic learning and development with the child at the centre, and as such is a key vehicle for driving the UNCRC within the education context. Rooted in a rights-based approach, the CFS model embraces a multidimensional concept of quality education that goes beyond academic achievement and addresses the total needs of the child (UNICEF, 2009).

In pursuit of a multidimensional understanding of quality education, the CFS model cuts across sectors to address learner well-being comprehensively, touching upon physical infrastructure, health, nutrition, safety, security, pedagogy, teacher training, psychological well-being and community involvement, among other elements.

The CFS model also looks beyond the school. The focus is on the needs of the child as a whole, not

just on the school bits that educators traditionally feel responsible for, but equally on the school community in which institutions of learning are located. The framework therefore acknowledges the interconnectedness of a child's schooling and the broader family or community dynamics that impact learning and development, holistically.

The CFS model is not rigid with a preset number of defining components. Rather, it is flexible, contextual and adaptable, driven by certain broad principles and the vision of safe, healthy and protective educational environments staffed with trained educators, equipped with adequate resources and offering conditions appropriate for learning.

Within this flexibility therefore lays the basis for adaptability across multiple contexts and needs. For example, Nigeria's CFS model laid emphasis on gender dimensions given the adverse experiences of female learners, while the Philippines' adaptation focused on school effectiveness. Mongolia, on the other hand, placed more emphasis on policy and child rights (UNICEF, 2009).

## Regional education initiatives for happiness

### OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills & Schools+ Network

As an intergovernmental organization working mostly with high-income countries, the OECD has developed two initiatives that are particularly relevant to promoting happiness in education. The first is the international Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES), which identifies and assesses the conditions and practices that advance or hinder the development of social and emotional skills. The SSES measures 16 different social and emotional skills among students aged 10 and 15. Some of the assessed skills include optimism, empathy, trust, cooperation, curiosity, creativity and tolerance – all closely associated with the principles of Happy Schools. Moreover, the SSES collects data from students, parents and teachers on home factors, school factors, environmental factors, and other background characteristics and life outcomes to understand the conditions that lead to and flow from social and emotional skills. The SSES approach is similar to that of Happy Schools in its efforts to assess and promote social and emotional skills for quality education and life outcomes.

The second OECD initiative on happiness and learning is the new OECD Schools+ Network. This network aims to connect and empower schools to share innovations and build evidence towards spurring ‘system-level changes to enhance students’ learning and well-being’ (OECD, n.d.). Meeting the challenges of the 21st century means that schools must be empowered to play a more central and active role in leading improvements in education. As a ‘network of networks’, Schools+ will bring together major education networks and organizations to put schools at the centre of education design, with a view to responding to common challenges and inspiring advances in classrooms, schools and policies. Schools+ participants are united around three core objectives:

- ✎ Foster exchange: provide a space for education networks to learn with and from each other on the leading practices to support schools.

- ✎ Drive structured learning and innovation: advance schools’ knowledge by identifying grassroots innovations, and facilitating co-creation and evidence generation on common pressing challenges.
- ✎ Inform policy: leverage schools’ innovations and expertise to better inform education policy across countries.

In 2023–24, Schools+ participating networks are joining forces to examine new approaches to classroom practice (how teachers teach) and ways to bring classroom innovations to scale. This will include examining new pedagogical approaches to cognitive engagement, social-emotional support, classroom interaction, quality of subject matter, assessment and feedback. Schools+ aligns with the principles of Happy Schools in its commitment to improving learning and well-being, creating greater collaboration between school actors and the wider system actors. Schools+ is also committed to innovative pedagogies and creating a bridge between global research and classroom innovations so they can be understood and adapted to local contexts.

### The European Union’s Pathways to School Success

The European Education Area (EEA) aims at facilitating learners and educational staff mobility, cooperation and communication, and collaboration among European Union (EU) Member States and stakeholders, so that high quality, innovative and inclusive education and training, supporting economic growth and high quality employment opportunities, as well as personal, social and cultural development, become the reality in all Member States and regions across the EU. The EEA initiative helps Member States work together to build more resilient and inclusive education and training systems.

Mental health among children and young people has become a major issue in Europe, with alarming statistics: roughly nine million adolescents (aged 10 – 19) are dealing with mental health challenges and

one in five adolescents (aged 11-17) reported feeling unhappy and anxious about the future. Meanwhile, 24 per cent of teachers in Europe report that their job hurts their mental health, and 22 per cent that it hurts their physical health.

Two flagship initiatives within the EEA focus on well-being issues at school. First, the 2022 Council Recommendation on 'Pathways to School Success' calls on EU Member States to implement integrated and systemic strategies towards ensuring better educational outcomes for all learners, by simultaneously addressing early leaving from education and training, promoting better achievements in basic skills and well-being at school. The new policy framework proposed by 'Pathways to School Success' outlines a set of prevention, intervention and compensation measures that aim to:

- Place learners' needs at the centre of teaching, learning and assessment practices.
- Support schools in developing a 'whole-school approach', where all members of the school community and external stakeholders engage actively and collaboratively to promote learners' educational success.
- Help school leaders, teachers, trainers and other staff develop knowledge, skills and competencies, as well as have more time, space and support to work with learners at risk of exclusion, underachievement and early leaving.
- Remove barriers to improving equity and inclusion in education and training systems.
- Strengthen evidence-informed policies by promoting data collection and monitoring systems at the national, regional and local levels.

The Commission is actively supporting the implementation of the Recommendation through funding opportunities, peer learning and exchange of information between EU countries and stakeholders (through the dedicated EEA Working Group on Schools, Pathways to School Success sub-group), and developing and sharing good practices and resources.

Second, a dedicated a dedicated Expert Group on supportive learning environments for groups at risk of underachievement and for supporting well-being

at school was set up in March 2023. The Group is exploring how to promote whole school approaches to well-being and mental health at school and is developing guidelines for policy-makers and schools, expected to be published in May 2024. The guidelines will be accompanied by a self-assessment tool, as well as examples of inspiring practices and resources, which will also be shared through the European School Education Platform and its European Toolkit for inclusion and well-being at school.

Both initiatives by the European Union are strongly aligned with the Happy Schools approach in their focus on improving school well-being in a holistic, systemic manner.

## Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics

The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA PLM) is another regional – or in this case, subregional – initiative whose focus on improving assessment and evaluation processes echoes the philosophy of Happy Schools. SEA PLM is a learning assessment and capacity-building programme designed by and for Southeast Asian countries to improve learning outcomes in basic education. As a comparative learning assessment, it includes domains such as reading, writing and mathematics, but also global citizenship (UNICEF, 2019). Survey questions on global citizenship address learners' tolerance and empathy, asking them how much they have learned about those different from themselves and how they have learned to solve disagreements with classmates peacefully; all of these aspects relate to many aspects of the Happy Schools initiative. So do the background questions, which include asking learners whether they like school, feel safe at school, and feel that they belong and can make friends easily (UNICEF and SEAMEO, 2020). By considering the social and emotional aspects of learning, SEA PLM expands the definition and assessment of learning outcomes aligned with the principles of Happy Schools.

## The Happiness Project, Project Everyone (Türkiye, Indonesia and Pakistan, China, Sweden, Germany)

The Happiness Project is a SEL programme for schoolchildren aged 6–12 years old. It was developed by Project Everyone, in partnership with Wall's Ice Cream, to support SDG 3 on good health and well-being. The programme is based on five key ingredients for happiness: creativity, connections, movement, kindness and gratitude (The Happiness Project, 2023).

These five ingredients then informed five modules of a happiness programme that asked learners to define for themselves; undertake short challenges and actions to incorporate happiness in everyday life; create a happiness project through design thinking, peer learning and skill exchange, enabling learners to identify happiness heroes; and celebrate as a whole-school community through a happiness festival.

The initiative places strong emphasis on students building strong relationships with their peers, as well as developing teacher-student relationships. The Happiness Project teaches children that emotions are feelings that come and go, like the waves of an ocean. The modules encourage children to see happiness as an emotion that sits among a puzzle of other emotions, rather than an emotion that should be felt all the time.

A core component of The Happiness Project is empowering students to see themselves as agents of change. One of the learning activities enables students to go through a design-thinking process to identify a barrier to community or class happiness then creatively brainstorm and develop solution, using the tools they have learned throughout the project.

To date, the Happiness Project has impacted 250,000 children in Türkiye, Indonesia, Pakistan, China, Sweden and Germany and plans to expand to Ecuador, Mexico and Brazil in 2024. It is administered in partnership with local delivery partners in each country, who are responsible for engaging with schools, training educators and contextualizing the learning activities to the local contexts, in close communication with Project Everyone.

A review of the pilot programme in Pakistan, where it was delivered to 5,000 students and 50 teachers in 25 schools, shows promising results in terms of both well-being and learning. The impact report found that learners had improved their sense of self and social awareness, as well as their peer-to-peer relationships, teacher-student relationships and problem-solving skills, and had developed healthier lifestyles beyond the classroom.

In a survey of teachers, more than half reported that over 80 per cent of learners showed higher levels of motivation to learn, while noticing an impact on their own happiness and wellbeing as a result of teaching The Happiness Project. Parents, for their part, observed higher academic outcomes in their children since starting the programme and improved behaviours at home (The Happiness Project, 2023). Further research into the impact of The Happiness Project is in process, with initial findings expected by the end of 2024.

## Parents Engage (Netherlands, Germany, Greece, Italy, Cyprus and Türkiye)

The Parents Engage programme trains teachers for parental engagement while supporting parents in engaging with the schooling and learning of their children. It was born from an EU-funded Erasmus+ partnership of seven organizations from the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Germany, Greece, Italy, Cyprus and Türkiye.

The programme focuses on supporting teachers' skills development with a primary focus on fostering productive relations with migrant and refugee families, supporting migrant and refugee parents to be involved at their children's schools, improving education, reducing early school leaving and supporting disadvantaged migrant and refugee children in primary and secondary education. Implementation experience shows that the approach is also suitable for fostering family-school relations in general as well as inclusion of diverse groups with various disadvantages. While the programme primarily focuses on teacher training, it also offers a tool for teachers to support parents, especially disadvantaged parents in their role as educators. The programme has 3 main pillars:

✎ A teacher training programme aiming at competence development in parental engagement, working with people with diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, and designing the best local solutions promoting an action research approach to explore local needs and specificities.

✎ A mobile/tablet app for parents that comprises of two main parts. It provides answers to basic questions parents - especially newly arrived migrants - frequently ask teachers who often cannot answer, ranging from birth registration to education, health and financial support, or national customs and traditions.

✎ A set of research-based policy recommendations that are grounded in the research done by the partnership as well as the experiences of piloting the programme.

The programme offers tools for the implementation of the People pillar of the Happy Schools framework by encouraging engagement between teachers, parents and students. It also supports the realization of the Process and Place pillars by promoting holistic approaches to learning and schooling that include family and community involvement. Finally, the programme also helps translate the Principles pillar into reality by focusing on inclusion of disadvantaged communities into school life as well as proposing policy recommendations.

## National and subnational education initiatives for happiness

### Educating for Gross National Happiness (Kingdom of Bhutan)

“The State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness.

(Royal Government of Bhutan, 2008, p. 18)

Since the 1970s, the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan has been promoting and gradually using gross national happiness (GNH) to track its development. GNH is an alternative happiness-based approach to development that expands beyond economic indicators and incorporates non-economic elements to measure national progress. The GNH index measures the collective happiness and well-being of the Bhutanese population through nine equally weighted domains, including education, psychological well-being, community vitality, environmental conservation and good governance.

The GNH approach is also reflected in the country's education system. In 2009, Bhutan designed a nationwide policy named 'Educating for GNH', which establishes the role of education in promoting both individual and societal happiness. The policy aimed

to infuse GNH principles into the curriculum, teacher training and schools (Drukpa, 2016; Chitra and Gurung, 2021).

✎ With support from positive education experts Adler and Seligman, Bhutan developed a GNH-infused curriculum for grades 7 to 12. The curriculum focused on ten non-academic 'life skills' to be fostered across subjects. The list included self-awareness, coping with emotions and interpersonal relationships – skills linked with enhanced happiness and learning outcomes, as discussed in Chapter 1 (Adler and Seligman, 2019).

✎ As part of the policy, teachers and principals across all schools in Bhutan received training on GNH-inspired teaching. On the one hand, educators were introduced to meditation practices to improve their own well-being and teaching strategies. On the other hand, they engaged in discussions about positive school environments, positive discipline and holistic skill assessment to enhance their students' learning experiences.

✎ The Green Schools framework was furthermore designed to transform schools in line with GNH. 'Green' in this case does not just refer to nature, but is 'a metaphor that stands for anything that

sustains life and living beings' (Powdyel, 2014, p. 11). Indeed, the framework promotes holistic, lifewide and lifelong learning that goes beyond

cognitive goals, embraces the social-emotional aspects of life and fosters a lasting love of learning (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7.** The eight elements of Bhutan's Green Schools

<b>Natural Greenery</b> keeping school spaces green, preserving and learning from nature	<b>Social Greenery</b> learning to live together and learn together by building relationships and understanding	<b>Cultural Greenery</b> celebrating cultural values and beliefs through arts, language and philosophy	<b>Intellectual Greenery</b> nurturing and appreciating the gifts and abilities of all
<b>Academic Greenery</b> building joyful and fun learning processes, encouraging a love for learning and school	<b>Aesthetic Greenery</b> cultivating a taste and an appreciation for art and beauty in life	<b>Spiritual Greenery</b> creating space for spiritual experiences and learning that foster inner drive and resilience	<b>Moral Greenery</b> nurturing the ability to make the difference between right and wrong, good and bad

Source: Based on Drakpa and Dorji (2013).

'Educating for GNH' was a pivotal educational reform with visible influences on subsequent educational policies in Bhutan. The country's 'Education Blueprint for 2014–2024', for example, continues to promote the vision of 'Educating for GNH' by emphasizing student well-being, a reduced teacher workload and a positive school culture (Ministry of Education [Bhutan], 2014). Furthermore, although the specific focus on 'Education for GNH' has waned over the years, its principles endure through educators who continue to apply the knowledge gained from the training in their respective schools. Anecdotal cases reveal that the reform programme has transformed schools into safer and more inclusive learning environments. 'Educating for GNH' has also had concrete a positive impact on student achievement. An evaluation by Adler and Seligman (2019) revealed that student performance on national standardized exams showed a standard deviation increase of 0.53 after the implementation of the life skills curriculum. This finding led the authors to argue that 'teaching students these life skills may make them more receptive to learning academic material and may enable them to better deploy their academic skills when taking standardized exams' (Adler and Seligman, 2019). Overall, the increase in learning outcomes in Bhutan not only demonstrates the value of happier school environments for better

learning, but also underscores the importance of strong political support in implementing Happy Schools frameworks.

### The Happiness Curriculum (Delhi, India)

The Happiness Curriculum is a government-led initiative by the Government of Delhi, produced by the State Council of Educational Research and Training and supported by a strong political will and commitment to happiness and well-being (State Council of Education Research and Training, Delhi, 2023).

The curriculum was designed to be locally relevant for state schools in the Delhi context, to accommodate learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. It promotes student happiness and well-being by focusing on social and emotional skills, and adopts four main pedagogies:

1. mindfulness
2. reflective stories
3. interactive activities
4. expressiveness

These pedagogies were applied through 35-minute happiness lessons in the morning, where a non-judgemental space allowed students to express

themselves, reflect on their emotions and share how they feel.

Following the implementation of the happiness curriculum, research showed a number of positive results among learners and teachers. Learners were reported being more self-aware and mindful of their actions, with a greater capacity to self-reflect and change their behaviour.

Teachers showed a change in attitude that had a positive impact on classroom dynamics, such as higher student engagement and deeper connection with students. Overall, the study showed that the curriculum resulted in consistent increases in social and emotional well-being across different categories (State Council of Education Research and Training, Delhi, 2023).

## Annex 2

### Previous Happy Schools frameworks

#### Regional Happy Schools framework for Asia-Pacific (UNESCO, 2016)



Source: UNESCO (2016), p. XIII.

## Global Happy Schools framework (2022)



### Principles

- School-wide culture of learning, creativity, and innovation
- Trust, tolerance, and cooperation between community members
- Respect for diversity and differences
- Commitment to rigor, engagement, and joy in all learning spaces



### People



#### Central Managers:

Include happiness of school community as a factor in monitoring system success



#### School Leaders:

- Promote schoolwide positivity and growth mindsets
- Coach, collaborate with, and allocate planning time to teachers to create joyful learning environments



#### Teachers:

- Invest in empathetic relationship-building with students
- Bring personal joy to work to share with students
- Believe in potential of each student
- Build partnerships with parents



#### Students:

- Feel a sense of belonging in the school building
- Engage in peer learning and school activities



#### Parents:

- Pursue partnerships with teachers based on listening, understanding, and sharing knowledge
- Sustained engagement in student learning



#### Community:

- Hold each other accountable for prioritizing joy in every school day



### Process\*

- Manageable workload
- Mitigation of assessment stress
- Innovative pedagogies and assessment strategies
- Curiosity, inquiry, and creativity-based learning experiences
- Locally relevant, globally conscious learning content
- Responsive and timely feedback loops
- Managing stress and emotions through self and communal reflection
- Regular celebration of peer achievement
- Freedom of choice in personalization of teaching and learning experiences
- Extracurriculars, sports, arts activities, and school events



### Place

- Teacher and student personalization of school spaces
- Multi-functional learning spaces that enable physical and pedagogical flexibility
- Principles of Universal Design for Learning<sup>4</sup>, including disability access
- Healthy, environmentally sustainable physical conditions, including lighting, temperature, noise, ventilation, furniture comfort, and nutrition
- Safe, engaging, interactive digital and hybrid learning environments
- Frequent use of communal outdoor space for unstructured play
- Use of school as a community learning and social center

Source: UNESCO (2022a), p. 16.

## Annex 3

# An example of how to build a pilot national Happy Schools project

Sample breakdown of activities and timeframe for building a national Happy Schools project in 12 months		
<b>Phase 0</b> Establish a national Happy Schools team and framework	<p>Establish a national team for Happy Schools with designated project leads.</p> <p>Organize peer-learning meetings with countries experienced in implementing the Happy Schools framework (e.g. Portugal, Viet Nam, Yemen).</p> <p>Draft a national Happy Schools framework fit for the needs and priorities of the country context.</p>	1 month
<b>Phase 1</b> Knowledge-sharing and development of pilot Happy Schools Project	<p>Organize a series of workshops with diverse stakeholders to develop a pilot Happy Schools Project. The workshops should aim to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• introduce the UNESCO Happy Schools initiative to stakeholders</li> <li>• set clear objectives, timeline and deliverables for a national Happy Schools Project</li> <li>• refine the national Happy Schools framework</li> <li>• develop a diagnostic tool for each pillar of the Happy Schools framework to assess the state of Happy Schools practices in schools</li> <li>• create a Happy Schools module to train stakeholders in each of the pillars of the national Happy Schools framework</li> <li>• designate schools to conduct a pilot project</li> </ul>	2 months
<b>Phase 2</b> Stakeholder capacity-building	Train stakeholders of the pilot study in the 'Happy Schools module', available both in-person and online, to enhance their professional readiness, enabling them to embrace and disseminate Happy Schools in their respective roles.	2 months
<b>Phase 3</b> Situational analysis	Using the national Happy Schools framework and diagnostic tool developed, undertake a situational analysis in designated pilot schools to understand the current state of Happy School practices in those schools, in collaboration with teachers, school leaders, national project leads and UNESCO.	1 month
<b>Phase 4</b> Design of tailored Happy School activities	<p>In collaboration with teachers, school leaders and national project leads, design tailored Happy School activities and practices to be followed by all stakeholders.</p> <p>Obtain guidance for activities from the <i>UNESCO Happy Schools Guide and Toolkit</i>, and translate the document to the country's language if needed.</p> <p>Keep exchanging best practices among stakeholders during this phase to craft effective activities.</p>	2 months
<b>Phase 5</b> Implementation of activities and data collection	<p>Introduce the carefully crafted Happy School activities into the designated pilot schools.</p> <p>Actively oversee the implementation of the activities and ensure real-time data collection of their impact.</p>	3 months
<b>Phase 6</b> Evaluation of pilot Happy School Project	<p>Analyse data collected from pilot schools to evaluate the impact of the Happy Schools Project.</p> <p>Using the data analysis, produce a report to be presented to the Ministry of Education to scale up the Happy Schools Project throughout the country.</p>	1 month

# Why the world needs Happy Schools

## Global report on happiness in and for learning

### How 'Happy Schools' benefit quality learning

Seeing a teacher smile. Hearing students laugh. Feeling a hug from a friend. Smelling fresh air. Tasting a nutritious school meal. These five senses can stimulate happiness at school and improve the learning experiences, outcomes and well-being of students.

Through the 'Happy Schools' initiative, UNESCO is placing happiness at the core of the transformation of education. It encourages education systems to recognize happiness as both a means to and a goal of quality learning. The initiative is informed by a growing evidence base linking happiness with better learning, teaching, well-being and overall system resilience.

This report presents the UNESCO global Happy Schools framework consisting of 4 pillars – people, process, place and principles – and 12 high-level criteria to guide the transformation of learning. It offers a holistic model for embedding happiness into education policies and cultivating it in schools through systemic changes.

The report illustrates how the 'Happy Schools' initiative aims to create top-down and bottom-up transformation, encouraging governments to recognize happiness as a core objective of education. It supports the scaling of promising practices of joyful learning from the school to the policy level.

