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Why the world needs Happy Schools

Happiness in and for learning



People Pillar - The Chartered College of Teaching



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www.unesco.org/en/education-policies/happy-schools



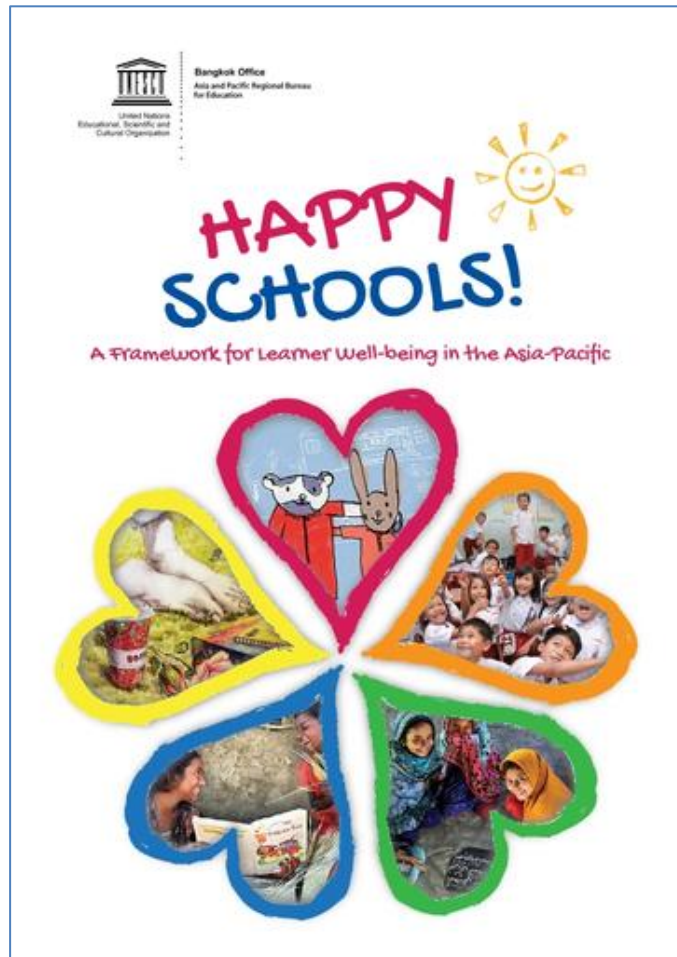
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Education
2030 

Happy Schools: A brief history



People

- Friendships and Relationships in the School Community
- Positive Teacher Attitudes and Attributes
- Respect for Diversity and Differences
- Positive and Collaborative Values and Practices
- Teacher Working Conditions and Well-being
- Teacher Skills and Competencies

Process

- Reasonable and Fair Workload
- Teamwork and Collaborative Spirit
- Fun and Engaging Teaching and Learning Approaches
- Learner Freedom, Creativity and Engagement
- Sense of Achievement and Accomplishment
- Extracurricular Activities and School Events
- Learning as a Team Between Students and Teachers
- Useful, Relevant and Engaging Learning Content
- Mental Well-being and Stress-Management

Place

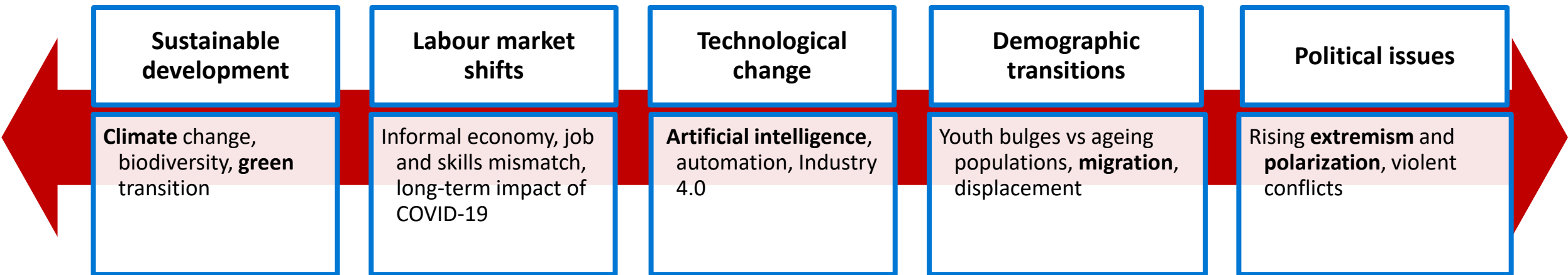
- Warm and Friendly Learning Environment
- Secure Environment Free from Bullying
- Open and Green Learning and Playing Spaces
- School Vision and Leadership
- Positive Discipline
- Good Health, Sanitation and Nutrition
- Democratic School Management

There is a global crisis in learning and wellbeing

- **One in 7** adolescents aged 10-19 experiences a mental disorder ([WHO, 2021](#)).
- **One in 3** learners worldwide is bullied at school every month ([UNESCO, 2019](#)).
- **70%** of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries cannot read a basic text ([World Bank, 2022](#)).
- **272 million** children and youth were out of school globally ([UNESCO, 2025](#)).
- Over **one in 10 young people and adults** (739 million) worldwide still lacks basic literacy and numeracy skills – two-thirds of whom are women ([UNESCO-UIS, 2025](#)).
- **1 in 5 young** people are neither in employment, education, nor training ([ILO, 2024](#)).
- **50 million** more teachers are needed to solve the global teacher shortage before 2030 ([UNESCO, 2023b](#); [UNESCO, 2024](#)).
- By 2030, **only 4 in 10** countries will have enough teachers for universal primary education, and **fewer than 1 in 5** for secondary education ([UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024](#)).

Schools are a reflection of our societies...

....And our societies are in multiple transitions.



Schools and society interface in multiple ways and at different levels.

...Schools not only respond to changes in society, they also shape the societies we want to see



Education in Crisis Situations

Partnership for Transformation



Addressing the Learning Crisis

Assuring and improving quality of learning for all



Transform the World

Greening Education Partnership



Digital Learning

Assuring quality public digital learning for all



Advancing Gender Equality

Empowerment in and through Education



Financing Education

Inventing More, More Equitably and Efficiently

“The schools of the future, whether formal or informal, physical, or virtual, must evolve to become more inclusive, safe, healthy, and stimulating learning places.”

and happy?



UN Secretary-General António Guterres at the Transforming Education Summit, 2022



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The nexus of happiness and learning

PHILOSOPHICAL

- ① Across time and location, philosophers identify happiness as a core purpose of life and education
- ② Holistic learning and development of the whole-person

NORMATIVE

- ① UN Resolution 65/309, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Right to Education
- ② 2023 Recommendation on education for peace and human rights
- ③ SDG 3 (health and well-being) and SDG 4 (education)

SCIENTIFIC

- ① Human brain learns best through active, engaging, socially interactive, iterative and joyful pedagogies
- ② Empirical studies indicate positive relationship between happiness and achievement

Empirical research shows that happiness leads to better...

Learning

Teaching

Health &
wellbeing

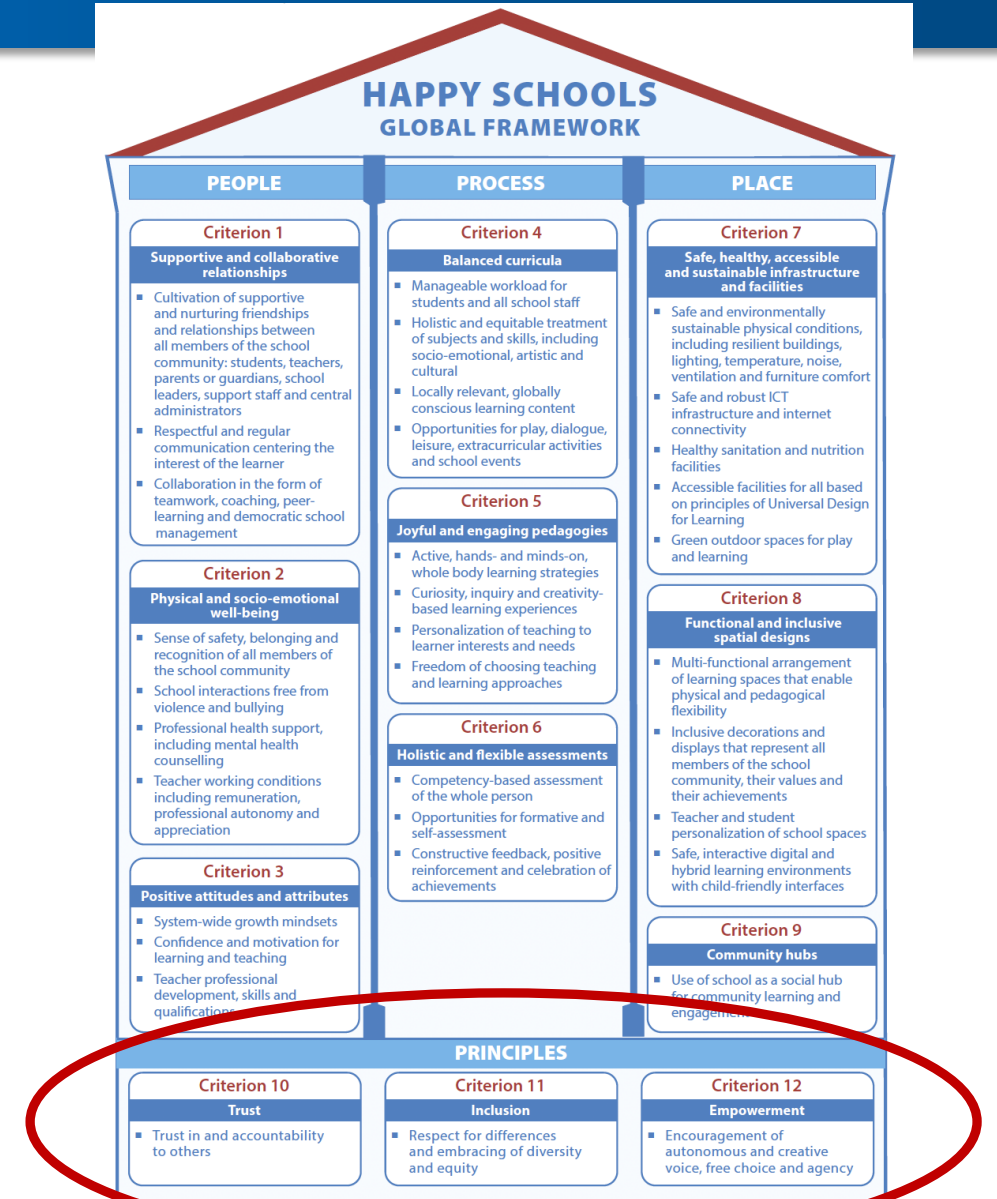
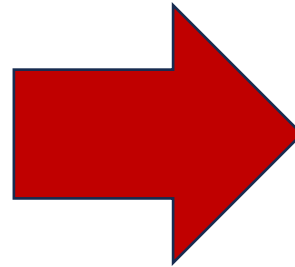
Economic
productivity

Social
integration

Lifelong
resilience

...so why are so many schools unhappy places?

The Global Happy Schools Framework

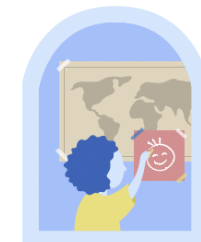
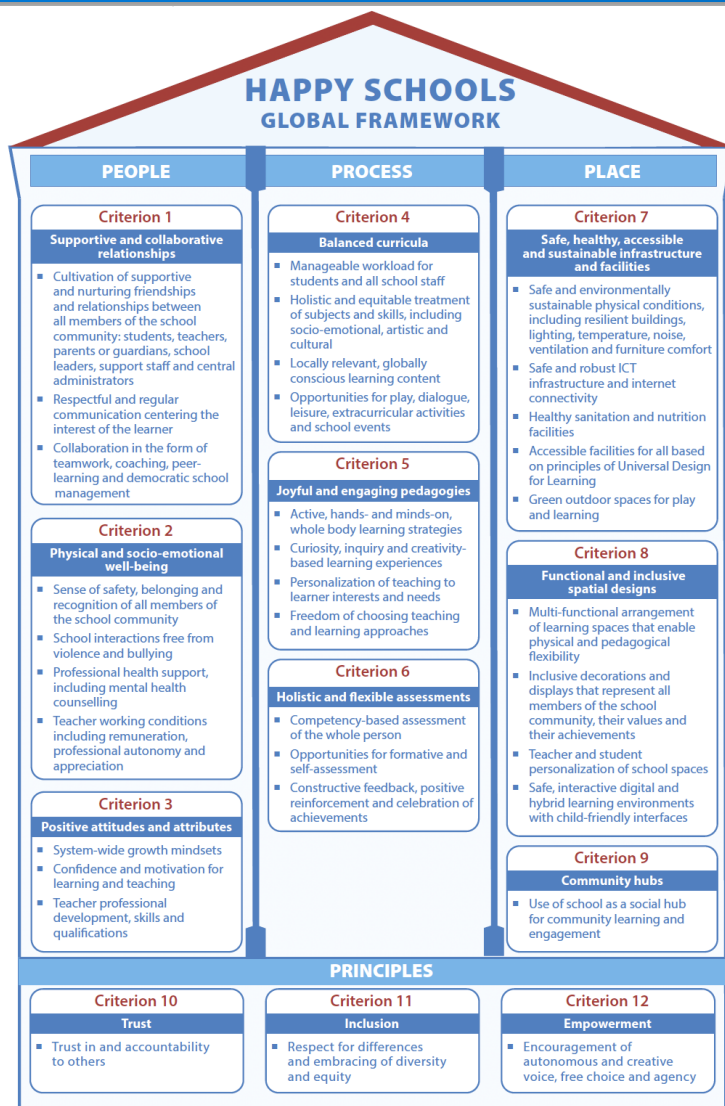


Global Happy Schools Framework

<https://youtu.be/t96wdjL11Gc>



The global Happy Schools framework



Criterion 1

Supportive and collaborative relationships

Criterion 2

Physical and socio-emotional well-being

Criterion 3

Positive attitudes and attributes

Criterion 4

Balanced curricula

Criterion 5

Joyful and engaging pedagogies

Criterion 6

Holistic and flexible assessments

Criterion 7

Safe, healthy, accessible and sustainable infrastructure and facilities

Criterion 8

Functional and inclusive spatial design

Criterion 9

Community hubs

Criterion 10

Trust

Criterion 11

Inclusion

Criterion 12

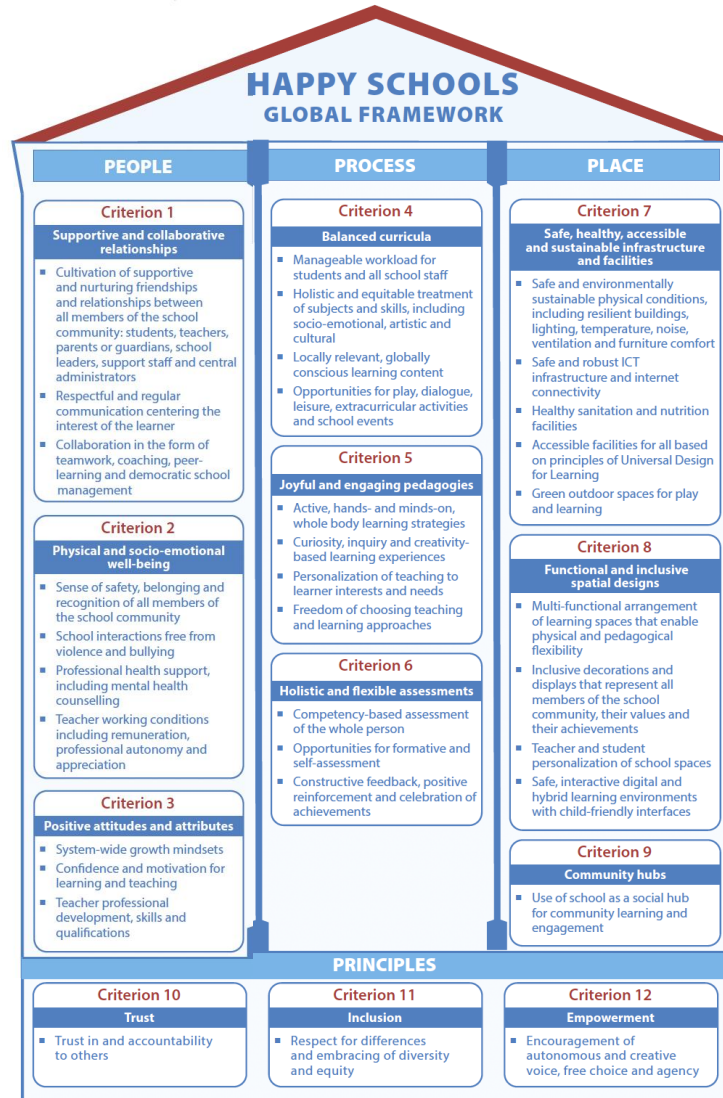
Empowerment



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The global Happy Schools framework



Criterion 1

Supportive and collaborative relationships



Criterion 2

Physical and socio-emotional well-being



Criterion 3

Positive attitudes and attributes



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People: Supportive and collaborative relationships

Criterion 1

Supportive and collaborative relationships

- Cultivation of supportive and nurturing friendships and relationships between all members of the school community: students, teachers, parents or guardians, school leaders, support staff and central administrators
- Respectful and regular communication centering the interest of the learner
- Collaboration in the form of teamwork, coaching, peer-learning and democratic school management

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)

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).



*Regular and collaborative engagement between **teachers, students and parents or guardians***



Improved teaching and learning.

Relationships in Happy Schools

Student-Student	Students practice respect, tolerance, and empathy with each other, contributing to improved classroom behavior, school safety, peer learning, and a sense of belonging in the school community.
Student-Teacher	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.
Student-Parent	Students engage their families in their learning experiences, encouraging participation in school activities, teacher conferences, and extracurricular activities.
Teacher-Teacher	Teachers build collaborative environments allow for the sharing of best practices, reducing the feeling of isolation, improving retention rates, and supporting continuous professional development.
Teacher-Leader	Leaders respect the autonomy of teachers' pedagogical practices and collaborate to address challenges such as behavior issues, curriculum adjustments, or community involvement strategies.
Teacher-Parent	Teachers communicate with parents regularly, work together to address students' individual needs more effectively, and encourage parent involvement in student learning.
Leader-Manager	Leaders encourage open dialogue among staff, ensure alignment between school management and policy frameworks, prioritize knowledge generation, and participate in public debate on education.
Human-Technology	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.



Adapted to changing world – how it impacts human relationships

Criterion 2

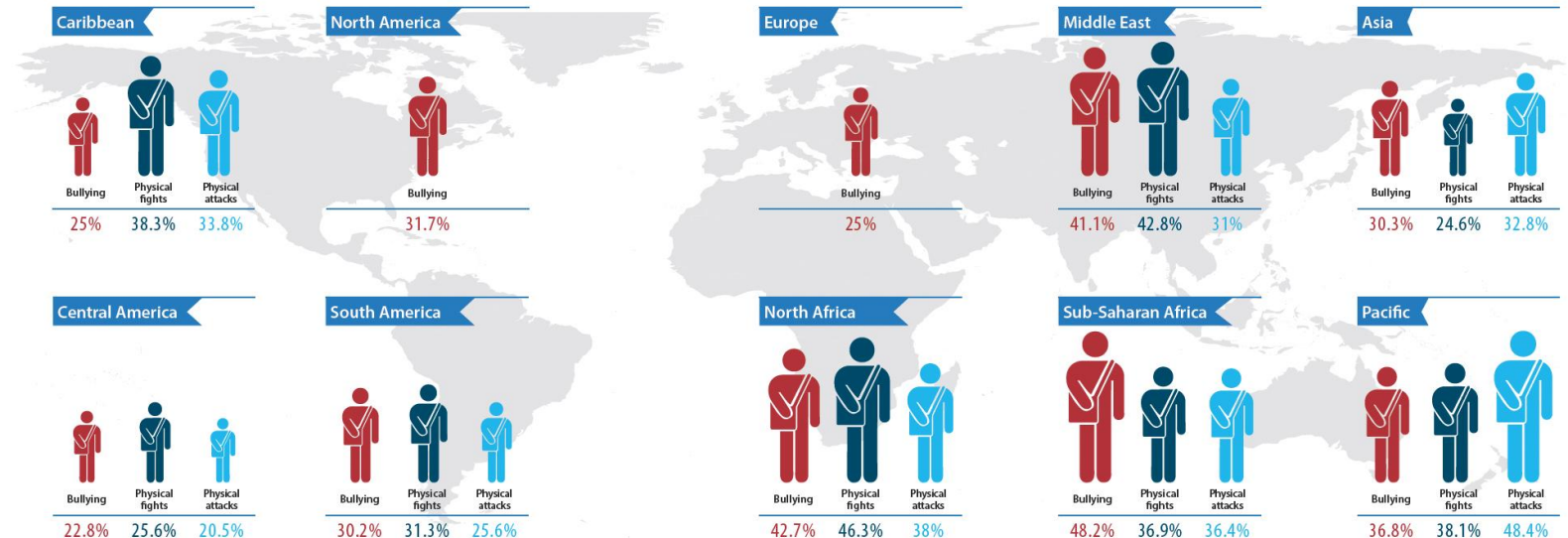
Physical and socio-emotional well-being

- Sense of safety, belonging and recognition of all members of the school community
- School interactions free from violence and bullying
- Professional health support, including mental health counselling
- Teacher working conditions including remuneration, professional autonomy and appreciation

When learners are not physically and socio-emotionally well, their cognitive functioning and learning are impacted negatively.

BUT

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



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

Bullying, Cyberbullying, Gendered differences

PISA 2018 showing that learners who were frequently bullied were more likely to skip school or have lower scores in reading (OECD, 2019a).

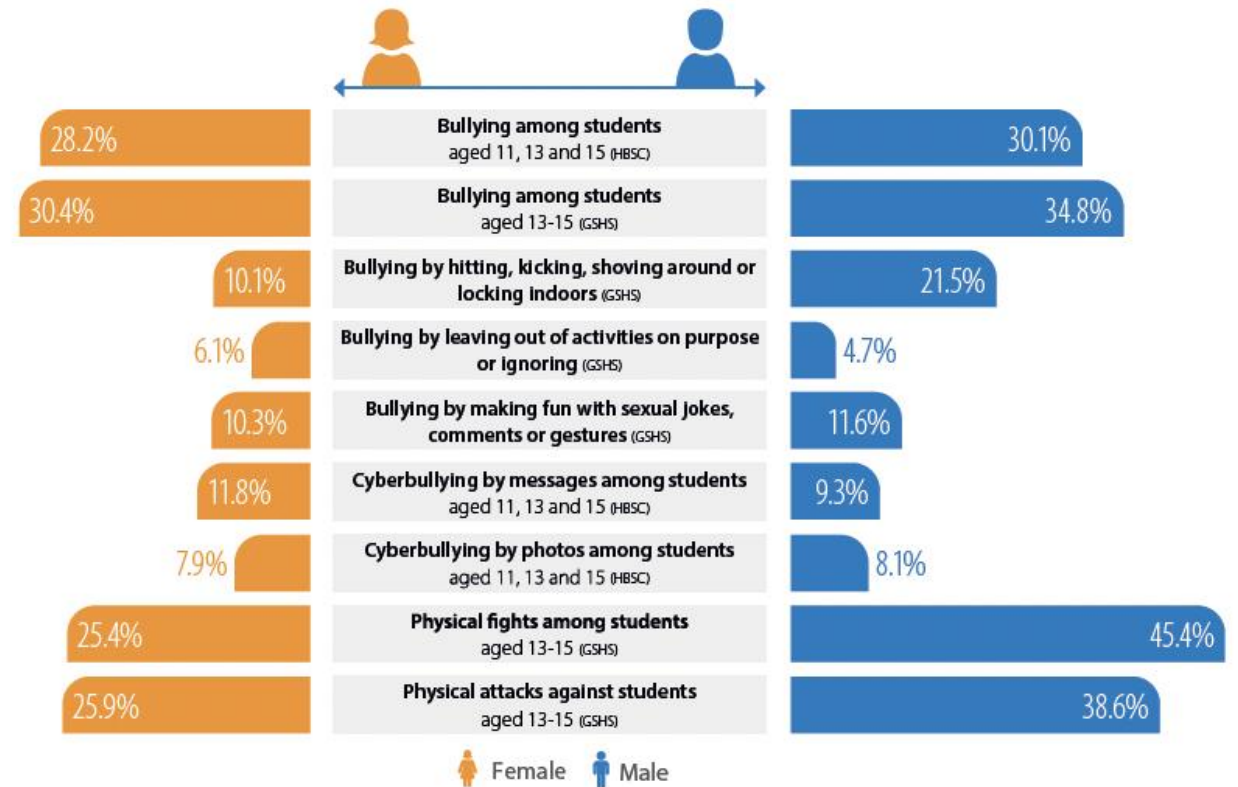


Fast-growing technologies, digital spaces



Rapid increase in cyber-bullying

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



Source: UNESCO (2019), p. 25.

Teacher well-being and burnout

While teacher well-being is critical per se, it is also vital in creating happy and supportive learning environments. Yet it has remained less explored in global studies.

Happy Schools Framework

*Critical
concepts in
teacher well-
being*

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

*Contributing
Factors to
Teachers'
Unhappiness*

- 1. Low salaries*
- 2. Heavy workloads*
- 3. Crowded classrooms*
- 4. Insufficient professional development opportunities*
- 5. Lack of professional autonomy and voice*

Emphasis on: Teacher working conditions including remuneration, professional autonomy and appreciation; relationships and voice

*What else
would you
add?*

Criterion 3

Positive attitudes and attributes

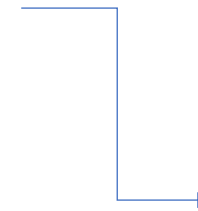
- System-wide growth mindsets
- Confidence and motivation for learning and teaching
- Teacher professional development, skills and qualifications

- **Shared positive attitudes among the school community are essential for creating Happy Schools.**
- 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 .
- Attitudes influence behaviors, positive attitudes; and attitudes can develop into attributes—sustained personal qualities and capabilities.

Confidence

Self-esteem

Self-efficacy



Motivation

Engagement

Outcomes

Positive Attitudes and Attributes

Learners' self-concept is influenced by the attitudes of teachers and peers BUT traditional school structures may not support all learners in developing a positive self-concept.

Factors influencing learners' self-concept and attitudes:

- Students with special needs often report lower academic self-concept (al Zyoudi, 2010).
- Peer acceptance improves self-concept and academic performance (Jan Pijl & Frostad, 2010).
- Socio-economic background impacts confidence; low-income students may feel less capable (Wiederkehr et al., 2015).
- Gender norms influence self-efficacy(Wang & Lu, 2023; Huang, 2012):
 - Girls may doubt themselves in STEM subjects.
 - Boys may struggle with confidence in language arts.



Recommendations

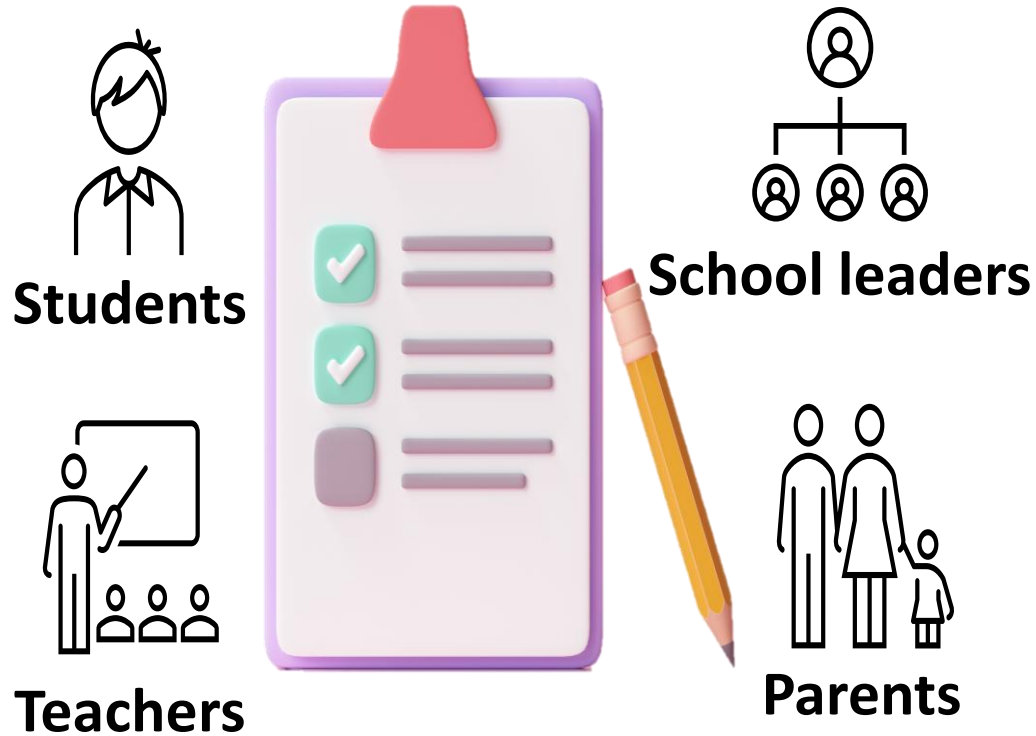
People

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.

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.

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.

Happy Schools Diagnostic Toolkit



- The Happy Schools Diagnostic Toolkit operationalizes the Happy Schools Framework
- It is a school-level questionnaire designed to improve the conditions of learning. It identifies strengths, weaknesses, and priority areas for improvement within individual schools.
- It is designed as a flexible assessment that allows schools to review overall results for each stakeholder group, to set priorities based on their specific needs and capacities, and to co-design a Happy Schools Improvement Plan.

What does participation entail?

- No cost to schools
 - One-hour preparatory webinar with UNESCO
 - 1-3 intact classes (students + parent/caregiver) of the target grade
 - All teachers + school leadership.
 - Participation is voluntary and based on informed consent/assent.
 - Participants may skip questions or stop at any time.
 - Results are anonymous and confidential
 - Students complete in a supervised session with privacy safeguards
 - Adults complete at a convenient time
- It is not a school inspection.
 - There is no individual-level reporting; results are aggregated per school and respondent level.
 - It is not used for school rankings or school comparisons.
 - It does not measure individual “happiness” of students and teachers.



Why participate in the pilot study?

The Happy Schools Diagnostic Toolkit supports schools to enhance the conditions that foster learning, promote a positive school climate, the well-being of students, teachers, and school staff, and strengthen parental and community engagement.

1. Online questionnaire

Questionnaire takes 20-30 minutes to complete

2. Brief school report

A concise school-level overview across the 12 dimensions (anonymized and confidential)

3. Comprehensive report

A more granular breakdown across all 12 dimensions and 34 sub-dimensions

4. Dissemination workshop

Online workshop to present results and provide guidance on co-creating a Happy Schools Improvement Plan

School recruitment has started!

Thank you! Additional resources & Stay in touch

- [Happy Schools Website](#)
- [The global report](#)
- [Webinar series](#)
- [Happy Schools LinkedIn group](#)
- [Happy Schoos video](#)

To participate in the pilot study
or for more information, write to
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Stay in touch



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<https://www.unesco.org/en/education-policies/happy-schools>

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