UCL

Creating a happy learning experience for children

Supporting teachers in overcoming perceived challenges and mental barriers to promote student happiness

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About the research

How do school leaders, teachers, and education professionals in South Korea understand student happiness and well-being and their role in promoting them?

Ensuring the happiness and well-being of students has become widely recognised as a vital approach to tackle pressing social issues such as increasing youth suicide rates, social divisions, and inequality, all of which are prevalent within the highly competitive field of education.

'Happiness Education' initiatives have become increasingly popular and are known by various names, such as positive education and well-being programmes, mindfulness education, and playful learning.

Why South Korea?
South Korea offers an intriguing case study in this context. Despite consistently ranking among the top-performing countries in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) across various subject areas, this achievement has come at the expense of student happiness.

The PISA 2012 assessment included questions on student happiness and satisfaction at school, unveiling South Korea's rankings at the bottom of the league table in these areas.

This research focused on three key areas:
- Exploring the everyday practices in schools to understand how teachers, school leaders, and education professionals perceive the importance of student happiness and their role in fostering it.

- Examining potential obstacles or barriers that may hinder school actors from pursuing their perceived role in fostering student happiness.

- Exploring the aspirations of school actors in fostering student happiness, focusing on what they genuinely are interested in doing.

This research involved:
- Questionnaires completed by 50 teachers, school leaders, and education professionals.

- A total of 10 follow-up in-depth qualitative interviews.

Further details of South Korea's Happiness Education reform are published **here**

Embracing Happiness:

The Goal of Education and School Actors' Perception of Their Role

The research found that, while the vast majority of school actor participants agreed that "happiness" was the foremost aim of education, their understanding of "happiness" and "Happiness Education" differed markedly depending on their beliefs about the role of education and their view of society. Their understandings can be broadly categorised into three typologies: (1) Learning for happiness, (2) Learning about happiness, and (3) Learning through happiness.

Learning *for* happiness

The first typology, "learning for happiness," places its emphasis on the future happiness of students. In this approach, "learning" takes on a broader meaning, encompassing personal growth, the development of relevant competencies, and equipping individuals with the mindset necessary for future happiness.

Out of the 50 questionnaire respondents, an overwhelming majority of nearly 96% (48 out of 50) believed that supporting students in discovering their own meaning and purpose in life as either a very important or utmost goal of education. School actors who shared this belief described their perceived role as offering more opportunities for new experiences, adjusting the curriculum and school programmes to align with students' career interests, "tweaking" their teaching methods, and organising activities that encourage students to contemplate the meaning of life and contribute positively to the entire school community.

Some school actors explicitly described their role as directly informing and explaining to students the purpose of education and guiding them on how to navigate their lives after graduation.

"I think my role as a teacher is to look after these students and explain to them why they come to school and what they can learn at school. Some just go to university because everyone else does and think it is a natural progression. As an elder in life, I think I am the one who should tell them how they should live the rest of their lives."

Emily, Upper secondary school teacher

Learning *about* happiness

The second typology, "learning about happiness," centres around teaching the essence and meanings of happiness, as well as providing insights into its manifestation.

Nearly 94% (47 out of 50) of participants in the questionnaire believed that teaching students the meaning of happiness and fostering a positive mindset for leading a happy life were either very important or utmost goals of education. However, it is worth noting that only a small percentage of 5.4% of the open-ended questionnaire responses specifically mentioned the significance of actively guiding students in learning how to achieve happiness when discussing their perceived role.

Two of the school actor interviewees identified specific competencies they deemed crucial for happiness. Ryan, a primary school teacher, believed in the importance of fostering resilience among students, and the role of school actors as teaching students to perceive challenges and obstacles as building blocks for personal growth, rather than avoiding them. On the other hand, Tonky, a lower secondary school teacher, identified critical thinking as a crucial competency for students to learn about happiness.

"TV programmes these days show people enjoying simple lives in the countryside with stability. Through this, we are brainwashed that we should be content with living within our means and that there is no greater happiness. I think the true sense of happiness can only be achieved when education enables us to open our eyes and realise how many are getting exploited and structurally consumed by the top 0.1-0.2% elite class, and to make efforts to create a more equal and just society."

Tonky, Lower secondary school teacher

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Learning *through happiness*

If the two typologies mentioned above primarily focus on the future happiness of students, the third typology – learning through happiness – focuses on promoting the present happiness of students. This is achieved, for example, through engaging in play-oriented activities.

Approximately 84% (42 out of 50) of questionnaire participants identified enabling students to find enjoyment in their learning and derive satisfaction from their achievements as either very important or utmost goals of education. According to the participants, providing emotional and psychological support in daily school lives was central to this objective.

The practices that teachers described, such as incorporating fun and playful activities into their lessons and encouraging students' autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, all support the idea of "learning through happiness." This approach to learning can help to lower students' psychological barriers to learning and create a happy and supportive learning environment.

" Lower-grade students have a short concentration span and there is quite a large gap in their learning abilities. But nonetheless, you need to teach them altogether; those who are already proficient in the Korean language easily get bored if they are learning stuff they already know, but I cannot teach everyone assuming that they would know the language already. So I would, of course, teach the fundamentals, but add 'fun' and 'challenging' elements to keep everyone engaged. "

Satto, Primary school teacher

Obstacles to fostering student happiness

Only four participants responded that they have not faced any barriers in pursuing their perceived role in promoting student happiness. The rest mentioned that their perceived role in promoting student happiness is often challenged by broadly three factors: personal, institutional, and sociocultural.

Satto, a primary school teacher, mentioned that they felt hesitant to participate in the interview because they did not consider themselves to be a happy person. In fact, nearly 40% of the questionnaire respondents attributed their struggles to:

(i) psychological exhaustion caused by heavy workloads;

(ii) pressure coming from both parents and 'above' over good grades and admission results; and

(iii) high student-teacher ratio and difficulties in building rapport with students.

This suggests that the happiness and well-being of teachers is just as important as that of students, especially for fostering positive teacher-student relationships and the emotional well-being of students.

Several teachers identified the lack of resources and support as one of the biggest barriers to creating a happy and supportive learning environment. However, others focused on more structural sociocultural obstacles, such as the traditional student evaluation system, the exam-oriented curriculum, or cultural norms.

What was notable in their stories was that, although school actors see promoting student happiness as one of their roles, they do not see the current school system as an enabling environment for them to actualise their visions and roles.

Personal barriers

- Lack of time to think deeply about student happiness

- Lack of teacher competence; difficulties in building rapport with misbehaving students

- They themselves are not "happy"

Institutional barriers

- High teacher-student ratio and excessive work duties

- Restriction in resources (e.g. inviting external instructors, purchasing class materials)

- No systematic guidance on how to promote student happiness

Socio-cultural barriers

- Heavy emphasis on academic performance and admission

- Traditional assessment methods and emphasis on relative evaluation over absolute evaluation

- Competition-oriented culture in South Korea

Thinking outside the box: What if?

"If you are given an opportunity to design a programme that promotes student happiness with sufficient support and resources, what would that be?'"

The final part of the research was centred around the aspirations of school actors. Specifically, it explored how they would approach the task of fostering student happiness if the perceived and experienced obstacles were eliminated.

The participants were asked to elaborate on the following:

- Whether the programme would be a one-time event or an ongoing initiative

- The specific elements (e.g. actors, resources) that are essential to the programme

- The programme's main focus and priority.

The responses ranged from teaching students what they want to learn to running a three-year milestone project that gives students both time and opportunities to think, design, and eventually develop their interests. A key finding was the unanimous agreement on the necessity of conducting a comprehensive needs analysis of students.

This imaginative exercise was a new experience for school actors, and it made the participants feel more comfortable and confident in "thinking outside the box" and focusing solely on their aspirations. Most of their answers were surprisingly realistic and cost-effective, and some mentioned that they had been thinking about these ideas for a while but had not had the opportunity to implement them.

Interestingly, although the participants supported, and even strongly emphasised, the importance of giving students more autonomy in their learning processes, they also believed that teachers should play a directive role in guiding those processes. What was also evident was that, while enhancing student autonomy was emphasised throughout, their understanding of "student autonomy" was limited. Many participants perceived their role as granting autonomy to students in deciding what they want to study and creating opportunities for them to explore and pursue their interests. However, other aspects of student autonomy, such as empowering students to take control over classroom management and encouraging them to evaluate their own work and that of their peers, were not thoroughly considered.

Example

Michael's Aspiration: Game-based learning for a Happier Classroom

"What I gathered from other teachers recently is the importance of game-based learning. So these days, I am very interested in games. I do not necessarily mean by 'computer game', but, you know, various games [like card and board games]. I've been utilising various types of games in my after-school programmes, and I noticed how immersed and happy students become. Well, that might be why they are so into computer games. I think introducing game-based learning in each subject would be the key. In short, I would like to come up with a year-long program where students can be happy and have fun no matter what they are learning."

Michael, Lower secondary school teacher

Recommendations for schools and teacher education institutions to foster student happiness:

- Develop a comprehensive framework that offers educators systematic guidance to effectively address and alleviate student unhappiness, encompassing strategies for creating inclusive learning environments, fostering positive relationships with difficult students, and equipping educators with the necessary resources and space to support students' emotional well-being.

- Integrate imaginative exercises into professional development sessions, allowing educators to explore innovative pedagogies.

- Facilitate reflective discussions where educators openly discuss their visions and understanding of student happiness, fostering collective and constructive development.

- Promote collaboration and learning among educators, enabling them to deepen insights and enhance pedagogical approaches for effective promotion of student happiness.