

Quality Education News

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Dear Supporter of Quality Education

Is your school a happy school?

"When the children are happy in your class, you'll be happy with the work that they do." Those wise words were given to a student teacher during a teaching practice session at a school. The student wanted to know from an elderly grey-haired teacher her secret in getting her learners to do such good work.



It's not only in a classroom that when a person is happy, good work gets done. It applies in almost any setting when someone is asked to do a task.

There's no need here to repeat those statistics that show how poorly South African children do in so many schools. Countless articles have been written on the reasons why. Then, of course, there have been hundreds of articles offering solutions.

Could a core solution be that if there's a focus on making children and their teachers happy to be at school, the improved results will follow?

Many schools could benefit by stop making the marks achieved in the never-ending grind of tests and exams, their main focus. Far too often, the good reputation of a school for many adults rests on a narrow criterion such as outstanding academic results. Would it be better to give more attention to simply making everyone happy to be at school?

In 2016 UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) did research on what can be done to make schools happier learning environments. Through extensive reading, the researchers pinpointed the main factors that made

for a happy as well as high-achieving work force. The researchers were also good listeners. They listened to the voices of the stakeholders: the general public, parents, principals, school support staff, students and teachers.

The listening was done in almost 30 countries of the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. The focus was: What makes a school a happy school?

Five main factors were identified. In rank order they were:

Table 1 Top five factors for a happy school

1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th
Friendships and relationships in the school community	Warm and friendly learning environment	Learner freedom, creativity and engagement	Teamwork and collaborative spirit	Positive teacher attitudes and attributes

The researchers narrowed all the responses into three broad categories. They are people, process and place. Each will be discussed briefly in this newsletter.

In late December this year and early January next year, the media will be overloaded with news of spectacular and shocking Grade 12 results across the land. Schools will be ranked from the best to the worst in every district, region and province. It's the time for the annual ritual of trumpeting the triumphs of some schools and deploring the disasters of others. Public humiliation of children and teachers is a guaranteed by-product of this media saga.

In the midst of this narrow media focus on academic performance, which are the schools where the children and the staff are the happiest? Such schools are more deserving of being on the front pages of the newspapers and leading the seven o'clock TV evening news.

Let's make as our first priority, happy classrooms and happy schools.

Sincerely

Richard Hayward

Acknowledgement

Google: Happy Schools UNESCO Data base (PDF format)



This newsletter is edited by SAQI and distributed to those schools benefiting from their participation in the MySchool programme. MySchool acts as a conduit which raises and delivers essential funding for education and social development on a sustainable basis. This enables members of the community to participate in the future development of our nation.



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EVERY SWIPE COUNTS

First category area of happy schools: People

The best team doesn't win nearly as often as the team that gets along best.
Rob Gilbert

In the People category, the focus is on human and social relationships amongst everyone in the school community. Six criteria were identified in a happy school.



1 Friendships and relationships in the school community

2 Positive teacher attitudes and attributes

3 Respect for diversity and differences

4 Positive and collaborative practices and values

5 Teacher working conditions and well-being

6 Teacher competencies and skills

The most important of the six criteria according to the research findings is the level of friendships and relationships. This criterion is arguably the biggest factor in determining whether or not a school is a happy place.



An interesting finding around this criterion is that friendships and relationships don't simply happen. There's a need for deliberate action. There's a need to build into the school day and yearly calendar, "social time and/or social learning time".

An unfortunate but true example of a lack of social time is to be

found in a Gauteng school. The school has only one fifteen-minute break during an almost seven-hours of teaching every day. As a staff member at the school wryly pointed out to me, "I'm a friendly person but after I've poured myself a cup of tea in the staffroom, there's little time left for me to be friendly with anybody!"

School leadership and management need to ensure that there are those events for plenty of social interaction outside the classroom. Cultural and sports events help nurture friendships and positive relationships. So do outreach programmes where children visit and sing at old-age homes or get involved with a community project such as clearing litter.



Lack of parental involvement is a challenge facing many schools. Parents seem reluctant to get involved and participate in their children's education. One obvious explanation is our 21st century hectic life pace. Yet there are solutions.

In the Japanese village of Higashi Naruse, the attendance rate at parent meetings is 120% with grandparents and other relatives being made to feel most welcome. Amongst the villagers, 18% of them are registered as school volunteers. The villagers assist the staff with sports coaching and learning activities.

Regular social events for staff members and also - on occasion - for the parent community, are further ways of creating a happy school.



Second category area of happy schools: **Process**

Every now and then go away, have a little relaxation, for when you come back to your work your judgement will be surer. Go some distance away because then the work appears smaller and more of it can be taken in at a glance and a lack of harmony and proportion is more readily seen.
Leonardo da Vinci



The process of teaching and learning impacts hugely as to how happy children and teachers are at school. Learning can be enjoyable, exciting and stimulating. The quality teacher uses methods that "tune in" to the way that children learn and what interests them. This teacher makes learning an interactive adventure of new discoveries. As far as school - funding permits, modern technology such as iPads and smartboards are used to add interest to the learning experience.

Yet the reverse can be true. Learning can be deadly dull. The teacher in such a classroom is usually textbook - bound and plods page by page until the syllabus is covered. Children are passive receivers of the knowledge pontificated by the font-of-all-wisdom teachers.



A defining difference between a happy and not-so-happy school is the attitude towards exams and tests.

Yes, it's important for children to achieve academic success but there's much more happening in a happy school. The teacher's role is much more than get children to jump over academic fences. The children's non-academic skills and competencies are developed too. Their artistic, creative and physical development receive attention. The children gain confidence, have respect for themselves as well as others and learn how to successfully manage the daily challenges.

In the not-so-happy school, learners are often defined by how they perform in academic work. Be a high achiever and you're a success. Be a struggler and you're seen as a failure. So often, the work load is horrendous at such schools. At the end of a long day at school, the child has an arduous mountain of work to climb at night. Then there's the weekend work. Don't forget the projects that fill up most of the holidays!

In the Process category, the focus is on teaching and learning methodologies that can develop the children's sense of well-being.



- 1 Fair and reasonable workload
- 2 Collaborative spirit and teamwork
- 3 Engaging and fun teaching and learning approaches
- 4 Learner freedom, creativity and engagement
- 5 Sense of achievement and accomplishment
- 6 Extramural activities and school events
- 7 Learning as a team amongst students and teachers
- 8 Engaging, relevant and useful learning content
- 9 Mental well-being and stress-management



Third category area of happy schools: Place

The challenge of leadership is to be strong but not rude; be kind but not weak; be bold but not bully; be thoughtful but not lazy; be humble, but not timid; be proud but not arrogant; have humour but without folly.

Jim Rohn

The school leadership team has a huge part to play in making for a happy school. When the team members are warm and friendly, they help set the tone. They are vigilant in looking for signs of bullying whether at child or adult level. (It's to be remembered that instances of bullying are realities even in the most caring of organisations.)

Simply because a school has beautiful landscaped gardens, lush lawns and magnificent buildings as well as sports fields, do not guarantee happiness. A poor school might have very few physical resources but it could be a most happy place. Imagine, for example, Donald Trump leading a wealthy school and Thuli Madonsela, a poor one. Which school would you prefer to be at?!



The Place category looks at physical environment and school atmosphere (organisational climate) criteria that - if dealt with - make for happier schools.



- 1 Friendly and warm learning environment
- 2 Secure environment free from bullying
- 3 Open and green learning as well as playing areas
- 4 School leadership and vision
- 5 Positive discipline
- 6 Good health, nutrition and sanitation
- 7 Democratic school management

Obviously, not all the above criteria mentioned in the Place category can be realised right now in South African schools. There are still schools that use pit toilets; there are thousands of overcrowded classrooms. About 90% of schools have no libraries nor media centres. Yet as the years go by, state and private-sector funding are dealing with these challenges.



We can't become what we need to be by remaining what we are.
Oprah Winfrey



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Dr Richard Hayward, a former principal of two Gauteng public schools, facilitates professional development workshops. Eleven of his programmes are endorsed by SACE and earn Professional Development (PD) points. The workshops are done under the aegis of SAQI. For more details, please contact Richard on 011 888 3262 or at rpdhayward@yahoo.com. Poor schools are sponsored.



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