

Teachers' awareness of happy schools with UNESCO items: A case study of a primary school in Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract:

This article provides the practice of primary teachers' awareness of happy schools through a survey questionnaire based on 22 items from the UNESCO criteria on happy schools. Their opinions were shared after a number of workshop activities that teach the practice of happy schools in Quan Hoa primary school, Cau Giay district, Hanoi. To add more research detail, the authors performed an in-depth interview with the vice principal. The research results showed that primary teachers' awareness was at a good level (100% agreed). Twenty-seven teachers in this workshop gave a detailed and reflective explanation of happy schools. Then, the authors provided a number of suggestions to spread the idea of happy schools in practice, within primary schools in particular, and for all schools in general, according to the UNESCO items, which are on the move in regulations and curricula at the Bureau of Education and Training of Hanoi these days, especially in the context of the 2018 National Education Curriculum implemented since the 2020-2021 school year.

Keywords: awareness, Hanoi, happy schools, primary school teachers, UNESCO items.

Classification number: 3.2

1. Introduction

The quality of education depends a lot on the educational environment as school is not only a place where learners feel safe and ready to learn, but also happy to learn. There have been a number of studies on happy schools and building happy schools. Given the learners' well-being in schools in general since the first decade of the 21st century, the works on happy schools that have been launched are now quite popular all over the world [1-4] with an example of such an organization being the Eurasia Learning Institute for Happiness and Well-being [5].

Vietnam has been on the move of educational innovation [6] as demands for education quality are ever increasing. In Vietnam, more and more educators care so much for the students' comfort in

every education level that there was a number of international conferences on happy schools [6, 7]. Some research has been conducted in high schools on such issues as student well-being [8], teachers' awareness of mental health [7], and the research on primary schools as well [9].

These days circular signed by the authorities in Hanoi city [10] and its districts [11-13] have paid attention to the practice of happy schools through firmly encouraging this model and sustainably setting up in the entire city [14].

In another aspect, the shift of learning styles (from kindergartens to primary schools) has become so strong that it may take the children some time to adapt to it [6, 15]. Meanwhile, the 2020-2021 school year was such a challenging time for primary school teachers due to it being the very first

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year that the 2018 General Education Curriculum (GEC) was officially launched nationwide [16]. It might take the primary school teachers, especially the grade 1 teachers, a lot of time to prepare lesson plans and training workshops for all the new changes in that school year [17]. It is essential to care for the teachers' mental health, for the reason why happy school emerged in practice was to keep the school staff and students mentally and physically healthy.

2. Literature review

2.1. Happiness

Before exploring the concept of happy schools, it is important to understand the terms happiness and well-being. Happiness can be defined as being a human emotional state after satisfying an abstract need. It is a high-level emotion. In mankind, it is deeply human and is often affected by reason. Happiness is associated with the notion of joy in life. It can be achieved by overcoming needs and wants, equanimity, a peaceful mind, or a positive thought. Buddhism believes that happiness is not only central to the individual being, but also something to share with others. This is based on our need for positive relationships in life [18].

Happiness has always been a fascinating topic of human inquiry. There are a number of different ways to identify this word. Many people define happiness as eating a delicious meal or buying a gorgeous dress, while others believe that happiness is when things are on the right track. These are all amazing experiences to be cherished. However, they are not happy. Happiness is when your life fulfils your needs. Happiness is a feeling of contentment, it comes when you feel satisfied and fulfilled [3]. Happiness is hard to achieve and even harder to maintain, but the pursuit of happiness has always been the aspiration of all human beings [1]. Each individual has a unique preference based on their ages, experiences, or sex.

We all know that not all children who go to school feel happy as they become used to being with their parents at home, and, when they have to go to school with lots of strangers and without

parents, they become scared. Furthermore, in schools, learners are also facing the repercussions of such challenges in a world that is more competitive, stressful, and test-focused than ever before [4]. Some students feel lonely in their class, with no one to talk to, while others feel scared of studying because they do not understand the lessons and get bad marks. That is why we need to create a happy environment for students all over the world. A happy school is where everyone can live happily, in which the happiness of learners is considered the highest goal. A happy school is a place where happy teachers and students all comprehensively develop and be themselves in a safe, friendly, and loving learning environment [4].

2.2. Description of happy schools

The meaning of the phrase happy school can be understood as a place where there is no school violence, no violations of teacher ethics, and no acts that offend honour, dignity, or body of teachers and students. A happy school is a place where teachers, students, as well as parents are happy during the process of teaching and learning. A happy school is a place where love between teachers, between students, and between teachers and students is cherished and fostered daily. In addition, a happy school must be a safe place for teaching and learning activities; a place where there is no violent behaviour. In addition to transmitting knowledge, skills, and attitudes to students, a happy school should also focus on educating students to build a beautiful soul. All separate emotions and the creative personalities of teachers and students must always be respected and not mechanically impose the stereotypical, old-fashioned, and outdated way of education.

Happy schools form connections between students, teachers, and parents. A happy school makes everyone feel like they belong to a community where they feel welcomed, where they are safe, and where they can be themselves [2]. Happy schools will help each individual to be happy, feel safe, live as themselves, and be inspired to shine. When teachers and students love to go to school, they teach and learn better and students are more creative, productive, healthier,

and confident. Moreover, teachers are better at their jobs and are no longer under pressure, which makes the school a happy place to teach and learn.

Factors like negative learning environments, unkind teachers, no longer useful content, an overemphasis on academic content, and a high focus on academic results can result in decreasing student well-being or making schools unhappy. Moreover, these contribute to student mistrust, competition, bullying or violence, worries about making mistakes or expressing personalities. Therefore, instead of just being a means of educating, education systems need to address these issues by being an environment that promotes both the growth and development of their learners. It was found that by improving learners' happiness, individuals would be more motivated to contribute to more peaceful and happier societies. This reflects the need for education systems to become a place of true happiness. From there, students will find interest and joy in learning. School will become the second home for students.

2.3. Practice of happy schools all over the world

Happy school projects have been put into practice in recent years. In developed countries, importance is placed not only on attending school but also feeling happy when you are at school. Happy schools are really important to each individual such as students, teachers, and staff. Countries including Bhutan, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, and Vanuatu have recognized happiness as a goal of their development and education policies.

Under Bhutan's vision of development, happiness is highly prioritised. Gross National Happiness (GNH) is the philosophy, which was founded by the Fourth Druk Gyalpo [Dragon King] of Bhutan in the 1970s. This philosophy guides the government of Bhutan. The concept of GNH is based on four aspects, which have been further elaborated into nine domains of well-being. These four pillars include good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation and environmental conservation. Bhutan's 2011 national policy of educating for GNH emphasized

the role of education in promoting happiness and well-being. The policy aims to infuse GNH through content and teaching with the vision of an educated and enlightened society of gyalong gakid pelzom [happiness and peace for all nations for the realization of all things good and virtuous] [19], which means the society should be at peace with itself, at peace with the world, and built and sustained by idealism and the creative enterprise of its citizens. The policy underscores elements such as collaboration between students, families, and societies; sustainability; community service; and practices that allow students to refresh the spirit. In addition, infusing GNH through content also helps one to consider students' emotional and academic outcomes.

Happiness and well-being were stated to be a growing concern in Japan, which resulted from a great frequency of mental health problems and high levels of stress. A survey [20] revealed that Japan ranked 22nd among 160 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which uses three dimensions: health, empowerment, and labour market participation in 2017. A survey of 495 Japanese students in junior secondary schools reported academic-related stress was found to negatively relate to feelings of self-growth and academic motivation [21]. The stress may also come from high levels of bullying. These high stress levels were reflected in Japan's suicide rate, which is ranked the highest in the world. Therefore, Japan's education policies reflect the growing concern for happiness and well-being. For example, the 2007 School Education Act placed an emphasis on having a positive attitude towards learning, encouraging individual uniqueness, promoting senses of empathy and self-reliance, and fostering global citizenship while preserving culture and tradition. Additionally, the national curriculum development guidelines emphasise the importance of well-balanced development.

The Akita and Fukui prefectures prioritised the concept of happiness in their sub-national policies and plans. Akita prefecture's strategy allowed students to reach learning goals through

relationships and collaborative problem solving, and through developing relationships with people from all backgrounds, etc. Likewise, Fukui prefecture encouraged the provision of physical and psychological help to eliminate bullying and make sure that children were well-nourished. It also promoted trust in schools and participation in sports and outdoor activities. The priority these prefectures put on happiness and well-being may result in higher academic performances as Akita and Fukui are among the highest-performing prefectures in Japan's national examinations.

The Republic of Korea has the second highest suicide rate in the world. A survey [22] revealed that 15-year-old Koreans reported being the unhappiest among all participant countries. It found that the two highest reasons for stress among students aged 9-11 were exams, homework, and difficulties in their relationships with their parents because of their academic performance. Rising school violence and bullying were also growing issues in the Republic of Korea. An analysis showed that while more than 60% of students hoped to rest at home after school, less than 6% reported doing so. Furthermore, while almost half of the children reported that they wanted to play with peers after school, only around 23% reported doing so in reality.

The government of the Republic of Korea developed a clear policy on promoting happiness in education with the slogan "Happy education for all, creative talent shapes the future". Three key education policies were introduced in the Ministry of Education's plan for 2014 including the Free Semester System, the Integrated Curriculum of Liberal Arts and Science to nurture Creative Talent, focus on humanities, arts, sports, and character-building through activities and clubs, and their Violence-Free Safe Schools Policy.

2.4. Criteria of happy schools

In June 2014, UNESCO Bangkok launched the Happy Schools Project to find out what makes for a happy school based on the voices of students, teachers, parents, and others at the heart of the

school community. The 2014-2015 research study produced the Happy Schools Framework, which consists of 22 criteria for a happy school that are grouped into 3 broad categories of People, Process, and Place [4].

The category of *People*: Human and social relationships within the school community all fall into the first category of People. Friendships and relationships in the school community are considered the most important factor in making a happy school. The project respondents felt that friendship and relationship should be built on trust, respect, and tolerance, while school society should include people from all backgrounds and treat everybody equally. Positive teacher attitudes and attributes are another important criterion in terms of making a happy environment. This criterion refers to characteristics such as kindness, enthusiasm, fairness, and teachers' roles in motivating learners or being creative and happy role models.

The category of *Process* includes ways of teaching and learning that can promote a student's sense of well-being. Creating a more reasonable and fairer workload is an important criterion under this category since it avoids the growing imbalance between study and play. In addition, a happy school should allow students to express their own opinions and learn without worrying about making mistakes. Another important example of criterion under this category of process is that the learning content should be useful and applicable in order for students to realise relevant issues in real life.

The *Place* category refers to the school environment and its atmosphere. Under this category, the importance of a warm and friendly learning environment is highly emphasised through its second rank of criteria contributing to a happy school. Respondents also considered an environment free from bullying a key to making a school happy. For the physical environment, it was found that respondents placed an emphasis on open and green learning and playing spaces. This criterion is believed to promote learners' happiness and well-being.

3. Methodology

The author conducted this research with qualitative and quantitative methods. In terms of qualitative methods, we compiled a large number of documents on happy schools, the practice of this model all over the world, along with lists, comparisons, and analyses of (1) the definition of happy schools, (2) how happy schools have been described theoretically and practically, and (3) UNESCO items of happy schools and their performances given globally.

In terms of quantitative, we the authors conducted a training workshop for all the staff (27 teachers) of the Quan Hoa primary school, Hanoi, with the following targets: (1) to provide grounded information on happy schools with 22 items divided into 3 categories given by UNESCO, (2) to survey the participant teachers' awareness on these items, and (3) to obtain their reflection of the practice of happy schools in primary school. We also interviewed two school managers of Quan Hoa primary school (Hanoi) whose answers provided (i) practice of happy schools from the perspective of an educational manager, (ii) their analysis on the practice, and (iii) their managerial solutions regarding the school practice.

4. Practice of primary school teachers' awareness: reflection in Hanoi, Vietnam

We did a mini workshop of happy schools for teachers in Quan Hoa primary school, Hanoi, prior to the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year (Table 1, Figs. 1, 2).

Quan Hoa primary school, located in Cau Giay district, Hanoi city, was established in 1993. Though this primary school does not have a very large area, it has a long history of establishment and development with considerable pride. This primary school is claimed as one of the most well-equipped and modern schools in the area with 22 classrooms and other facilities like a hall, a lab, a library, a medical room, and a standard school kitchen. In terms of the staff, 100% of the staff are qualified with 65% of the teachers being well-qualified and well-granted by the Bureau of Training and Education of Hanoi. In terms of

the learners, more than 80% of them have good academic achievement. Meanwhile, there are many extra-curricular activities for students to ensure their comprehensive development [23].

Results given by the mini workshop of happy schools.

In terms of school teachers, 100% of participant teachers highly agreed with the 22 items in the UNESCO framework and 100% participant teachers had a full reflection of 22 items (divided into 3 categories) in the UNESCO framework.

The school teachers had diversified ways to verbally and illustratively express the three categories of happy school description.

Three of the four groups chose safety, love, and respect as their own words to describe the happy schools model that should be fostered in Quan Hoa primary school, Hanoi, from this school year on. The other group chose respect, happiness, and joy, and their explanation for these words have little difference from the prior three groups. We the researchers would like to show the argument by asking the teachers' opinions both individually and in teamwork. The teachers in this primary school have had such good consolidation and commitment to adapting the happy school model in their school.

In terms of the school managers' opinions, they confirmed the importance of happy school practice in their school.

"Practically expression of the saying 'everyday going to school, every happy day here' is to engage our school in the happy school model. That means everyone who goes to school, working, staying, or leaving with the happy things. The most important point is that the positive energy should be rooted in the staff themselves" (said Ms. Hoang, Principal of Quan Hoa primary school).

From the answers in the interview, the two school managers supposed the practice of the happy school model exposed step by step in this school with initial considerable achievements. They collected the feedback from teachers, parents, caregivers, and primary school students as well.

Table 1. The agenda of mini workshop on UNESCO items of happy schools in Quan Hoa primary school in the 2020-2021 school year (dated August 4th, 2020).

No.	Content	Method	Facilities	Notes
1	Warm-up			
2	Introduction of happy schools: its model and its practice all over the world	Presentation and illustrations	Slides, videos	
3	Introduction of 22 UNESCO items of happy schools	List of 22 items (divided into 3 categories)		
4	Discussions amongst participant teachers	Group work	Paper, pens, colour crayons	Products after discussion in each group should be illustrated in their own way
5	Reflection	Individual work/ "Lightening" thinking	whiteboard	- Each group choose 3 words to describe their concept of happy schools - Sharing of their practice at workplace is reflected by 3 categories in UNESCO framework of happy schools
6	Closing ceremony	Speech		



Fig. 1. Illustration of mini workshop in Quan Hoa primary school, Hanoi.

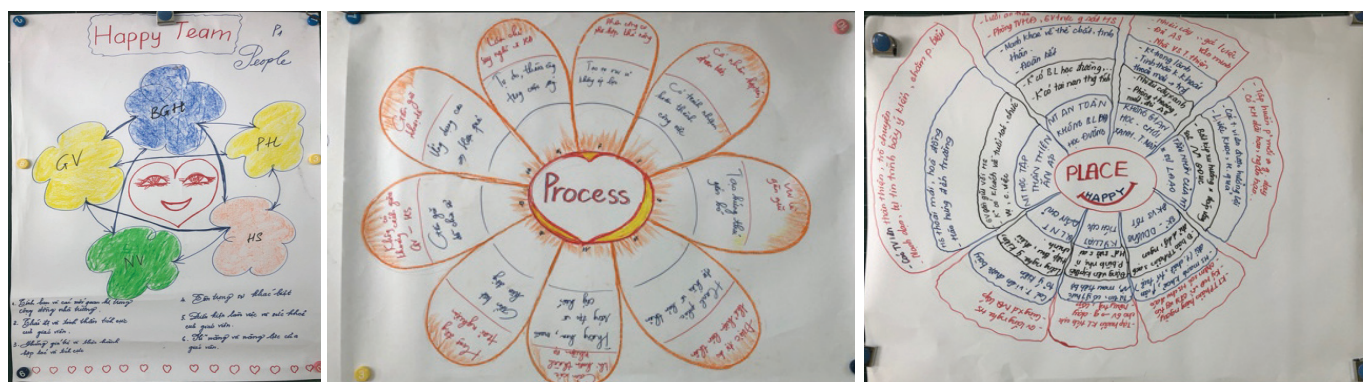


Fig. 2. Group-work products after teacher discussion at the mini workshop of happy schools in Quan Hoa primary school, Hanoi.

“Especially after this mini workshop, we have had insights of happy schools. That is, given in three categories, reasonably we might reflect this framework with its 22 items. Furthermore, we have had firm basis for deploying this model in reality in the next steps” (said Ms. Nguyen, Vice principal of Quan Hoa primary school).

Through the opinions concerning the practice of the happy school model in this primary school, we would like to suppose a number of recommendation to enhance teachers’ awareness of happy schools in particular and spreading this happy school model nationally in general.

5. Recommendations

Firstly, building a safe and friendly learning environment is the first issue that schools need to pay attention to in order to become a happy school. That includes a number of tasks, such as:

Ensuring physical safety, especially physical classroom safety.

Facilitating the school and the working conditions for the teachers, paying more attention to equipment for classrooms and departments.

Providing a system of handwashing faucets to ensure hygiene and disease prevention.

Checking and ensuring teaching facilities, regularly inspect and repair facilities to ensure safe learning and working conditions like electrical systems and equipment, firefighting systems, and other factors posing risks to students and school staff (water tank cover, trees in school area, railings, doors, tables and chairs, etc.).

Focusing on keeping school facilities clean and building a model of a civilized workplace with eco-friendly toilets, etc.

Ensuring safety criteria of food preparation, proper inspection of delivering and receiving food products, examining invoices from food suppliers, ensuring proper hygiene in food processing, distributing to every class, and distributing to each student. Taking all practical steps to prevent diseases like COVID-19, dengue fever, etc., from contaminating or spreading.

Ensuring school safety and discipline. Taking measures to prevent fraud, kidnapping, abuse, and school violence.

Ensuring mental safety and building a friendly learning environment.

Developing, publicising, and strictly implementing the Code of Conduct at schools.

Providing creative, innovative “experience programs”, life skills education activities, extracurricular activities, social activities, charity programs for community, fun, entertaining activities, cultural activities, safe sport and physical activities that are healthy, friendly, fair, age appropriate, and suitable for physiological and psychological characteristics of primary school students.

Taking good measures of preventing and tackling school violence.

Decorating schoolyards, school corridors with plants, flowers, etc., making flower arrangements and building more flower beds in the schoolyard.

Decorating classes, and providing bookshelves contribute to a happy learning environment.

Secondly, happy school means providing teaching and educational activities properly

For schools: Propagating and disseminating the purpose and meaning of building a happy school to officials, teachers, and staff. Establishing an operation committee to build a happy school, assigning tasks to members of the steering committee. A plan should be well prepared to build a model that is suitable for school conditions. Planning teacher training sessions on the happy school project and developing the criteria for supporting a happy school model equivalently in that school.

Encourage officials, teachers, and staff to strictly follow government laws and the regulations of the Sector and the Code of Conduct at schools. Make positive changes in teachers’ awareness, ideologies, and lifestyles to help them provide positive teaching methods and improve their pedagogical skills.

When assigning tasks to officials, school managers, teachers, and staff need to do it in a fair, reasonable, and appropriate way that suits each individual's ability. Officials, teachers, and staff need to be encouraged to actively participate in competitions, writing applied action research, etc., in order to prove their abilities in front of colleagues, parents, and students. Practicing and building courage and experience or acquiring more knowledge and skills. School managers need to assess and evaluate each individual's performance and effort equally and reasonably.

Promptly disseminate documents, regulations on teacher ethics, behaviours inside and outside schools, behaviours in pedagogical council meetings, and trade union activities and professional activities. Provide activities on teacher ethics and ensure that teachers strictly follow the Codes of ethics.

Continuation of the following campaigns: "Each teacher is an example of self-study and creativity"; "Democracy - Discipline - Love - Responsibility"; "Hanoi teachers help students with difficulties"; "Building a cultural school - Exemplary teacher - Elegant student"; and the award "Hanoi teachers are dedicated and creative" including content innovation and providing specific content and criteria for teachers and schools to implement in accordance with current conditions.

Organising seminars and training workshops to help teachers share experiences in pedagogical situations. Creating short videos of pedagogical behaviours at schools.

Acknowledgement, honour, and prompt commendation of individuals or groups who spend great amounts of effort.

Effective implementation of the process of building a happy school. From there, we share the role models who contribute well to the process of building happy schools.

Promptly detect and handle situations to prevent violent behaviours, violations of teacher ethics, or things that offend honour or dignity or threaten teachers and students' lives.

For teachers: Strictly follow the guidelines, policies, and laws of the Government as well as the regulations of the Sector and the Code of Conduct at schools. Having a proper awareness of the importance of building a happy school thereby having a positive teaching method and good pedagogical behaviour skills.

Teachers need to improve their standard behaviours, have good ethics, love teaching, be dedicated, take care, respect students' emotions, actively change their teaching methods, and move from content-oriented approach to ability-oriented approach. In addition, they need to change their behaviours and attitudes to each other, to parents, and to students in a friendly way but still within the framework of school discipline.

Teachers need to behave appropriately based on their current pedagogical situations and ensure that the regulations related to teacher ethics and student educations are implemented effectively. Teachers need to test and evaluate in accordance with individuals' abilities and not to put pressure related to workload or knowledge onto students. Teachers must understand and respect each student, thereby helping them progress [24].

Teachers need to perform well in school psychology counselling, equip themselves with basic but essential skills such as listening, asking questions, or providing feedback, etc., to help students deal with the difficulties they face in the process of learning.

Build a "loving classroom" with many activities that evoke excitement and create closeness with students such as sharing what you want to say, spreading positive energy, happy activity hours, etc. Teachers not only provide knowledge, but they also provide students with opportunities to have fun and relax. They give students opportunities to express their thinking and to show their abilities and creative skills based on each individual's age. Focus on emotional education for children, for example, all their feelings and creative personalities should be respected (not strictly imposed and stereotyped

in an old-fashioned, outdated way of education) to make teachers and students feel happy during the teaching and learning process and spread that feeling to parents and society.

For the staff: Strictly following the School Code of Conduct. Having a proper, friendly attitude to officials, teachers, parents, students, and a dedicated attitude to work. Constantly learning to improve qualifications and professionalism in student care, security and order insurance, and environmental cleaning, etc. Successfully completing all assigned tasks and combine with others to build a model of a happy school.

Thirdly, it is very necessary to build friendly relationships inside and outside school

Providing educational activities related to happy schools such as organising educational activities that connect students with themselves will help them properly behave, recognise their feelings, adjust their emotions, and achieve positive goals.

Organising educational activities that connect students with others. For example, by helping students behave with others properly, to develop empathy with others, to know how to positively maintain relationships, and to be responsible for themselves.

Providing educational activities to connect students with the natural environment, for instance, students should learn to respect and protect the environment while living in harmony with nature.

Building a learning environment that shows:

(i) *Care:* Teachers care about each other and about students while students care about each other.

(ii) *Sharing and compassion:* People share feelings with others at work when there is joy, sadness, or difficulties, which creates closeness and cohesion.

(iii) *Trust:* Teachers trust other colleagues and students and vice versa thereby avoiding suspicion and jealousy.

(iv) *Support:* Managers, teachers, staff, and students support each other in mental aspects by sharing and helping one another.

(v) *Generosity:* Teachers tolerate others including students while students tolerate each other; therefore, all mistakes should be taken lightly. Effectively encourage parents to make them feel responsible enough to actively participate in the educational process.

Create good relationships between staff, teachers, and parents of students by providing opportunities for parents to participate in different educational activities of the school, to participate in dialogues with school leaders, and to experience extracurricular activities alongside their children. Parents are promptly informed of their children's activities through electronic messages or phone calls.

Research gap

Despite the fact that much attention has been paid to happy schools recently, the work available on this subject have mainly been only theoretically illustrated to a certain extent. Because the feelings of happiness and well-being among nations are quite different from each other, the 22 items of UNESCO have been generally regarded within a recommended criteria system. There are not any works that specify these 22 items in detail even with critical national or local characteristics. This paper has already given a showcase of the practice of a happy school in a primary school setting. Thus, the solutions and context of this article are recommended to this school by its staff. We look forward to expanding this kind of research in the future, which demonstrates the practice of happy schools in Vietnam when the component research is all collected.

6. Conclusions

The model of happy schools has obviously been considered a promising future of schools globally and nationally in Vietnam in particular. The requirement and obstacles in the new context, practically and psychologically, especially regarding the status of the "new normal" these days, also give us opportunities to spread values and mindfulness to teachers contributing to this model. Despite the newly set and launched UNESCO items of happy schools, its effectiveness, in fact, as well as teachers' awareness and adaption, considerably show brilliant potential implementation over a larger portion.

CRediT author statement

Nam-Phuong Nguyen: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Validation, Writing; Van-Thang Le: Data collection, Conceptualisation, Methodology, Validation, Writing and Editing; Huong-Giang Nguyen: Data curation, Visualisation, Editing; Thi Thanh-Hang Nguyen: Data analysis, Visualisation, Writing.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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