



# STATE-LED EDUCATION REFORM IN DELHI, INDIA A CASE STUDY OF THE HAPPINESS CURRICULUM

DEVI KHANNA AND AMELIA PETERSON

**DEVI KHANNA** is a PhD researcher at the University of Manchester.

**AMELIA PETERSON** is part of the founding faculty at the London Interdisciplinary School.

## Executive summary

The Happiness Curriculum is made up of compulsory 45-minute daily lessons with the aim of developing mindfulness, critical thinking, reflection, and social-emotional skills among students in more than 1,000 government-run schools in Delhi, India.<sup>1</sup> Three units—Exploring Happiness through Learning and Awareness; Experiencing Happiness in Relationships through Feelings; and Happiness through Active Participation—based on a “triad of happiness” and the philosophy of coexistence are taught from nursery to grade 8. This case study outlines the inception, implementation, and impact of the Happiness Curriculum in the context of broader education reforms in Delhi.

Responding to the needs of Delhi’s students, as well as to global trends advancing students’ well-being, the Happiness Curriculum was developed in 2018 by the Delhi government in conjunction with quasi-governmental bodies and five partner NGOs. In line with shifting away from purely academic outcomes to more holistic aims, adjacent education reforms by the Delhi government primed the system both culturally and logistically to accept large-scale interventions like the Happiness Curriculum. These were: investment in education infrastructure; the introduction of mentor teacher programs; the devolution of power and finances to school management committees (SMCs); reflective workshops for the Happiness Curriculum team, school staff, and teachers; and the introduction

<sup>1</sup> This case study is a companion to “[Transforming education for holistic student development: Learning from education system \(re\)building around the world](#)” (Datnow et al., 2022), a summary report that explores the work of building and rebuilding education systems to support holistic student development in six education systems in Singapore, Ireland, Chile, Canada, India, and the United States and in one cross-national system (the International Baccalaureate). While different in many ways, the seven systems bear remarkable similarities in their efforts to (re)build education systems—each is working in policy contexts pressing for academic quality and equity, while also facing additional incentives to support holistic student development.

## BOX 1

The summary report “[Transforming education for holistic student development: Learning from education system re\(building\) around the world](#)” lays out 10 key lessons for transforming education systems, which are all exemplified in this case study. In particular, this case study highlights the need to:

- 1. Build social infrastructure:** Build a social infrastructure that engages stakeholders about holistic student development and the entailments for instruction.
- 2. Distribute leadership:** Develop and distribute leadership for instruction by, among other things, cultivating educator and student agency.
- 3. Support infrastructure use:** Support the use of educational infrastructure in school and classroom practice through professional learning.
- 4. Monitor practice and performance:** Conduct consistent, ongoing monitoring of practice and performance for continuous improvement and professional learning.

of other Mindset Curricula. The implementation of the curriculum was further enabled by the large-scale launch of the intervention and attention to organizing new teacher training processes, including a cascade model, overcoming initial resistance from teachers, and maintaining intensive and recurring training.

The key tensions that emerged from the analysis were between remedial academic teaching and the need for well-being interventions following the COVID-19 pandemic; initial resistance from teachers on the ground against the strong political will of the government launching the curriculum; and the challenge of effectively translating the curriculum to other states in India with poorer resources or geographical differences.

Lessons in large-scale and effective implementation can be drawn, with key lessons of a large-scale launch, a high specification for ease of implementation, clear feedback loops, and material investment being identified in our analysis. At the same time, challenges of running the curriculum during the pandemic and reconciling the differences between a still-existing academic focus with holistic student development, are significant considerations in the design of similar interventions.

## Overview of the system reform

In July 2018, the Delhi government introduced the Happiness Curriculum in all of the 1,024 schools under the Delhi Department of Education, reaching 800,000 students across 20,000 classrooms. This case study describes the journey of the Happiness Curriculum from inception and design to implementation and impact, highlighting the conditions that have enabled the introduction of this large-scale state-level systemic intervention promoting social-emotional learning. Having considered the context and content of the Happiness Curriculum, this study provides four key lessons for policymakers considering curriculum reform to: launch at a large scale; to provide explicit high levels of specification; enable an eco-systemic approach to reform; and build trust amongst key stakeholders through clear communication and face-to-face contact.

### THE CONTEXT IN DELHI AND INDIA

Within India’s constitution, education falls under the “concurrent list,” that is, both central and state

governments can formally legislate on the subject. While the central government sets the general direction of policies and curriculum frameworks for the country, state governments can formulate state-specific policy through legislative acts and rules. State governments also head the administrative setup that executes policy mandates within public schools, leading the service-delivery, enforcement, assessment, and financing of national and state-level education policies within their states (Centre for Civil Society, 2019). Delhi, formally the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi, is administratively a union territory of India whose public services operate similarly to those of a state—it is governed by its own legislature, high court, and an executive council of ministers. The State Department of Education currently covers the administration of 1,040 government schools in 11 administrative districts, across pre-primary, primary, middle, secondary, and senior-secondary levels. This consists of 18 percent of the total schools in Delhi, with the remaining falling under private administration or under the directorate of the New Delhi Municipal Corporation. Despite the relative minority percent of schools, these schools under the governance of Delhi's Department of Education are large and integrated, and include 36 percent of the total student population. In addition to the State Department of Education, autonomous bodies like the State Council of Education Research and Training (SCERT) and the District Institution of Education and Training (DIET) oversee and support education and academic policy formulation and implementation, including curriculum development and teacher training.

The education model in India has traditionally been defined by a structured, content-based curriculum and a competitive, exam-oriented assessment system, both governed by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). Access to higher education is contingent on results from grades 10 and 12 board exams, along with other centralized competitive exams, both rigidly based on rote-learning and memorization. Limited number of seats at reputed institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology, which accepts 1 in 50 candidates as compared to Harvard's 1 in 19 or Oxford's 1 in 6 (Ponnavolu, 2020), further drives up pressures around assessment and exams. A focus on academic outcomes and

rote learning has, in the past, been intrinsic to many reforms within India's education system.

Recent policy frameworks have, however, highlighted a shift away from purely academic and exam-oriented outcomes to an acknowledgement of the need for more holistic development. As early as 2005, the National Curriculum Framework included self-discovery as one of the explicit aims of education and asserted that, "Education must be seen as a liberating process for the learners" (National Curriculum Framework, 2005). Opening with a quote from Rabindranath Tagore's "Civilisation and Progress" about a child's creative spirit and generous joy, the National Curriculum Framework reflected on education reform in India since 1947, the problems of curriculum burden present in 2005, and in turn established a more "child-centred," opposed to "text-book centred" approach to education reform. Following this trend, the 2020 New Education Policy (NEP) stated, "The aim of education will not only be cognitive development, but also building character and creating holistic and well-rounded individuals equipped with the key 21st century skills." The introduction of the NEP has led to the rewriting of curricula at state levels, to incorporate goals of less content-based learning and more emphasis on critical thinking and a learner-centred, discussion-based, holistic education—goals which Delhi's Happiness Curriculum, launched before the NEP, similarly highlights. Programs such as "Learning Without Burden" (Department of Education, 1993), concepts of "child-centered education" and "constructivist learning" (National Curriculum Framework, 2005), and the significance of "value education" (NCERT, 2012) have also been introduced across the country, highlighting a shift in the priorities and aims of education.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF THE HAPPINESS CURRICULUM**

On July 2, 2018, the Happiness Curriculum was launched as a mandatory stand-alone subject across all government-run schools in Delhi. The subject was integrated into the school day from nursery to grade 8, being allocated a regular 45-minute lesson in the timetable. Based on a philosophy of "co-existence," as conceptualized by education philosopher A Nagraj, the Happiness Curriculum considers a "happiness

triad” of momentary happiness (encompassing physical feelings), deeper happiness (feelings within relationships), and sustainable happiness (learning and awareness) to promote “development in areas such as cognition, language, literacy [and also] address wellbeing and happiness of students” (Happiness Curriculum Framework, 2018).

The intended learning outcomes are summarized under four headings:

- The learner becomes mindful and attentive
- The learner develops critical thinking and reflection
- The learner develops social-emotional skills
- The learner develops a confident and pleasant personality.

Aiming for methods using reflective discussion, active participation, and the application of skills, the curriculum framework is codified by four approaches to achieve the above learning outcomes: mindfulness practices to enable self-awareness and regulation of emotions; activities to help put mindfulness into practice within relationships and society; stories to act as reference points to initiate discussions; and expression that is enabled through opportunity for further discussion and shared reflection. Further details on the content of the syllabus are provided in Appendix B.

## BROADER REFORMS IN DELHI

Since their election in 2015, the incumbent Aam Admi Party (AAP) has prioritized the subject of education in Delhi, leading to a series of reforms across the state. In line with shifting away from purely academic outcomes, interventions within public education systems in Delhi have focused on building holistic student outcomes. To create conditions for this change, broader education reforms in Delhi have been integral toward building a system that is primed, both culturally and logistically, to accept change through large-scale interventions such as the Happiness Curriculum. These broader reforms also built logistic capacity within the education ecosystem in Delhi when the Happiness Curriculum was launched. These can be outlined as follows:

- **An investment in infrastructure:** Under the AAP government’s prioritization of education, the share of spending on education increased from 21 percent to 23 percent from 2014-15 to 2020-21, with per student spending increasing from Rs 50,812 (US\$655) to Rs 78,082 (US\$1,006) over that period. This included major infrastructure investments to expand and improve the facilities and appearances of schools, crucially with 8,000 to 12,000 new classrooms added in two waves, and the provision of amenities like blackboards and desks and an increase in sports facilities and libraries in schools. Additionally, there was the creation of specialist schools in Delhi catering to specific subject needs, such as for STEM or for the performing arts. An improvement in infrastructure, the construction of new school and classroom settings, and the widespread provision of facilities were key to instilling pride in the public education system and making teachers and students feel valued: In a 2020 state-wide representative survey of teachers carried out by BCG, 91 percent reported “renewed enthusiasm and motivation” (Bansal & Roy 2021, p. 22).
- **Mentor Teachers program:** Launched in 2016, the Mentor Teachers program brought together 200 teachers following a rigorous selection process. Each teacher was assigned five to six schools to regularly visit and monitor, with their primary role to facilitate communication between the government and schools. This leadership development program signified an organizational shift in the way of working and communicating reforms and was key to ensuring input from stakeholders “on the ground” to create proper feedback loops when implementing any government reform within schools. In 2017, the Mentor Teacher program was extended to the Teacher Development Coordinator (TDC) program to further devolve facilitation and operational tasks.
- **Devolution of financial power to SMCs and heads of schools:** The Delhi model of education under the AAP puts faith and power into the hands of those working within school systems. By increasing the financial powers of SMCs (from Rs 200,000 to Rs 500,000 to 700,000) expenditure decisions that

otherwise took lengthy bureaucratic processes to be approved were fast-tracked. Similarly, heads of schools were given increased financial powers of up to Rs 50,000 for day-to-day expenditure (Bansal & Roy, 2021). While most public sector institutions in India concentrate power at a district level, this shift in the education sector placed schools as autonomous institutions, increasing the confidence and commitment of key stakeholders, as well as increasing the day-to-day efficiency of the system.

- **Jeevan Vidya Shivir (JVS) [“Life Education”] discussions:** JVS workshops are introductory 40-hour workshops that provide discussions on co-existence over co-existence inspired by the Indian education philosopher A Nagraj. The workshops, offered to central department civil servants (including the Education Minister, Education Secretary, Education Director and SCERT officials), principals, and teachers, aimed to encourage reflection in a “meaningful” way and, in light of these reflections, examine the shortcomings of the current education systems. The educational model of co-existence that the workshops discussed partly forms the philosophical basis of the Happiness Curriculum.
- **Mindset Curriculums:** Alongside the Happiness Curriculum, the Delhi government launched two other interconnected curricula: the Desh-Bhakti [“National Pride”] Curriculum and the Entrepreneurship Curriculum. The language of “life readiness” sits alongside conversations of well-being, with the Entrepreneurship Curriculum aiming to inculcate an entrepreneurial mindset in students, enabling them to apply this mindset, along with skills of critical thinking, to career choices. The curriculum runs from grades 9 to 12 and chronologically can be considered an extension of the Happiness Curriculum that runs from nursery to grade 8. The Happiness Curriculum and the Entrepreneurship Curriculum have together been cited by roughly 30 percent of teachers as the key learning-related interventions that have taken place in Delhi under AAP (Bansal & Roy, 2021).

## The reform journey

### FOUNDATIONS OF THE REFORM

The prioritization of education by the Delhi government, highlighted by increased investment and organizational and curriculum reforms as outlined above, laid ground for the inception and implementation of the Happiness Curriculum. For Sisodia, the education minister pioneering the Happiness Curriculum reform, well-being was envisioned as a goal that could be meaningful for all of “his” students and signaled a move away from the competitiveness of the Indian education system that focused purely on assessment and exams. Often considered a brainchild of Sisodia’s, the Happiness Curriculum was thus designed and guided by his vision of what a scalable, effective social-emotional learning program could look like.

At the same time, global conversations around well-being measurement and improvement came into prominence, further reinforcing Sisodia’s resolve to introduce social-emotional learning in classrooms across Delhi. Positive psychology approaches founded in the West and popularized by global programs such as UNESCO Happy Schools (2016) also form a basis of the curriculum content and methodology, while closer to India, Bhutan’s emphasis on Educating for Gross National Happiness (2010) informed Sisodia’s thinking behind the need for similar reforms. The endorsement and enthusiasm of Sisodia, the deputy chief minister of Delhi alongside his role as education minister, led to a strong political will behind the Happiness Curriculum, maintaining momentum and ensuring it remained a priority for the government, as well as other stakeholders involved in development and implementation.

Administratively, the Happiness Curriculum is a collaborative exercise between the Delhi government and five NGOs, called “knowledge partners:” Dream a Dream, Labhya Foundation, Blue Orb, Abhivavak Vidhyalay, and Circle of Life. The establishment of a “consortium” of NGOs with existing expertise in the subject of social-emotional learning, life skills, well-being, and child psychology, and the inclusion of organizations that had been in the field for over 20



years, such as Dream A Dream, and those like Labhya Foundation for whom the Happiness Curriculum was one of their first projects, highlights the well-developed NGO sector within Delhi. This existing skilled ecosystem of NGOs and the receptiveness of the government to forming collaborations served as key system enablers for the reform.

## CREATING THE CURRICULUM

In 2017, the Delhi Department of Education, under the leadership of Manish Sisodia, established The Happiness Curriculum team of dedicated personnel, as part of The Cell for Human Values and Transformative Learning. The jurisdiction of the Cell, positioned under the Delhi SCERT, was that of strengthening the value base of teachers specifically, “so that the delivery of content and ultimately the quality of education can improve.” Within this context, the Happiness Curriculum team consisted of members from the five knowledge partners, civil servants from SCERT and government officials from the wider Department of Education. The knowledge partners brought their own expertise and approaches to concepts of happiness and well-being, as well as their own areas of specialization, such as pedagogy and teacher training or implementation of previous mindfulness and social and emotional learning projects. The large-scale of the intervention meant that despite specific areas of specialization, roles were often spread across team members and organisations, with individuals involved in each aspect and stage of the program from curriculum building to teacher training to monitoring and evaluation. In addition to team members from the knowledge partners and government, mentor teachers and school counselors from government schools were invited to be a part of the team, ensuring that the design of the curriculum was a co-creative process, hearing the voices of those on the ground.

Following an eight-day workshop for members of the Happiness Curriculum team part of the JVS discussions outlined above—the design of the curriculum was approached from both a theoretical and practical lens. From the beginning of the curriculum design process, there was a clear intention (as laid out by Sisodia) to follow the Indian philosopher A Nagraj’s definition of happiness—the content of the curriculum was thus

driven by the idea of happiness to as a state of “no-conflict, harmony, and acceptance” and “co-existence” among the self, family, society, and the environment (Nagraj, 2015). At the same time, evidence from the disciplines of positive psychology and social-emotional learning informed the scientific basis of the curriculum, lending the distinctly Indian curriculum somewhat of a foundation in Western psychological theories. The complexity behind incorporating Western evidence into a decidedly Indian curriculum was also reflected in the decision behind naming the curriculum—“wellbeing,” for instance, was considered too Western a concept and not very relatable for Indian parents and teachers. At the same time, there was a conscious push not to use a Hindi word to avoid potential sectarianism. “Happiness” was therefore a neutral choice, encompassing the traditional ideas of mindfulness and meditative practices taken from India history, along with A Nagraj’s philosophies, and the concept of social-emotional learning as considered from more global perspectives.

Based on this blend, stories, activities, and lessons were discussed by the team and designed into handbooks for different year groups divided into the three units of the curriculum: Exploring Happiness through Learning and Awareness; Experiencing Happiness in Relationships through Feelings; and Happiness through Active Participation. In the first round, there were three teacher handbooks developed: for grades nursery-2, grades 3-5, and grades 6-8. These were then further devolved into each year from nursery to 8.

## IMPLEMENTING THE CURRICULUM

**Launching at a large scale:** A distinguishing feature of the Happiness Curriculum is that it was launched across all 1,024 government-run schools in Delhi all at once, without prior pilot studies being conducted in smaller sub-sections of the city. For Sisodia, this was a key feature to his reform—why would a single one of his students be left out, as they inevitably would be in the pilot study model? This set the narrative of the Happiness Curriculum from the very start as a mandatory, non-negotiable subject rather than a limited, one-off intervention in some schools.

While retrospectively knowledge partners agree with the decision to have launched at a large scale, this

also led to mixed quality of implementation. Extensive groundwork was required by the Delhi government and the five NGO knowledge partners to make schools operationally ready to receive the curriculum, to orient and train teachers, and to effectively integrate it into the school day.

**Facilitative training leveraging Mentor Teachers and Happiness Coordinators:**

In 2018, starting off with only a couple of mentor teachers and volunteers, Dream A Dream designed facilitative trainings with the aim of using a cascading model to deliver the trainings until the very last mile, that is, to the teachers teaching the curriculum at the school level. The Mentor Teachers reform that came into place in Delhi in 2016 provided a useful organizational framework for the cascading model, supporting the implementation of the curriculum. Each teacher teaching the curriculum had a Mentor Teacher to turn to for support and individual training—with one Mentor Teacher for roughly 20 teachers teaching the curriculum. In addition, the appointment of District Happiness Coordinators and a single teacher as a Happiness Coordinator for each school facilitated this cascading training model. Happiness Coordinators and some Mentor Teachers received training centrally and were in turn responsible for supporting others in their school to implement the curriculum and for getting feedback on how different resources were working. Meanwhile, teachers on the ground also received a one- or two-day training workshop from Dream A Dream; however, this was a one-off and most of their training for the Happiness Classes comes from consistent ongoing coaching from Mentor Teachers. While the cascading model reduces the burden on top and allows for clearer communication lines, there is also a loss of information and specificity the lower down the model one goes. Understandings of pedagogies, for instance, appear clearer at the level of Happiness Coordinator than for schoolteachers (SCERT, 2022), as seen below in the section “A Shift in Pedagogy.”

**Overcoming resistance from teachers:** Teachers and school staff are key catalysts within the reform, with their buy-in as implementers integral to the smooth functioning of the curriculum on the ground. However, in the view of those supporting implementation, there was an initial hesitance in the uptake of the

curriculum. Certain knowledge partners mention that schoolteachers were new to the idea and need for social and emotional training, and did not recognize its benefits. Other knowledge partners reference that teachers were overburdened with existing academic subjects and that they, as well as heads of schools, found it difficult to find the time and capacity to fit an extra subject into the school day. Dream A Dream reports that to overcome the initial resistance from the teachers and from the heads of schools, targeted work was required to orient teachers toward the benefits of the Happiness Curriculum—this included workshops to show the value of elements, such as empathy, mindfulness, and gratitude being taught to the students. While there was this focus on teachers’ attitudes, there was less direct approach to heads of schools, which some implementers felt left an administrative gap, making it more difficult for schools to fully accept the curriculum.

**Maintaining intensive and recurrent training:** A notable challenge in consistent and sustainable training is the quick turnover of teachers in government schools. Career progression often means that teachers who are appointed Happiness Coordinators do not remain in place for long stretches, transferring to different roles or schools, and when new teachers take their place, they have to start their own training, as well as the training of the teachers under them, from scratch. The close specification present in the curriculum, with the inclusion of materials and activities, is meant to make it easier to implement with relatively little training. Nevertheless, the central team recognizes that training is still necessary and the training model is a work in progress. Currently, the cascade model and the identification of facilitators is the first step in a training that imparts best practice on pedagogy, content, and feedback spread across the year. Following this, consistent training and feedback is also maintained through open lines of communication, with learning circles established through WhatsApp or other group communication ICT-enabled tools. These enable observation across schools and teachers and, on the basis of feedback received, next sessions are planned accordingly.

## IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

From March 2020 to the end of the year, schools across India closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF, 2021a). When infections rose in early 2021, many schools closed once again, bringing the prolonged closure for many schools to up to 82 weeks. This has led to a clear loss in learning, with 90 percent of students on average having lost a language specific ability and 82 percent having lost a math-specific ability (Azim Premji University, 2021). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds have been at greater risk of learning loss (Banerji & Wadhwa, 2021).

At the same time, COVID-19 brought about a mental health crisis in the country—the disruption to routines and education, as well as economic and health concerns, have left young people afraid, experiencing chronic stress, and at greater risk for psychological problems (UNICEF, 2021b; Patra & Patro, 2020). This effect of the pandemic showcased the urgent need for an intervention like the Happiness Curriculum. In offering online Happiness Classes that persisted even throughout the school closures, a space was provided for students, as well as their parents, to reflect on the difficult time, share their feelings, and practice mindfulness. The pandemic highlighted the interconnections of social-emotional learning and well-being with other parts of life, with reports of students using aspects of the Happiness Curriculum at home to help them cope with everyday stressors.

However, the transition of the Happiness Classes into the digital sphere came with its own challenges. Teachers expressed the impossibility of maintaining emotional connection with children during online classes (The Economic Times, 2020; Bansal & Bahl, 2022). Significantly, with only 1 in 4 children having access to digital devices and internet connectivity (UNICEF, 2021b) and the digital disparity even wider in urban versus rural areas, the reach of the curriculum was limited. Over 166,000 students in Delhi’s municipal and government schools were reported as “missing” from schools during the first COVID-19 lockdown, reasons for this being the sudden shifts of families back to their homes in villages leaving them unable to access school online (Ifthikar, 2021). Efforts at reaching the entire student body and keeping up the

“true essence” of the Happiness Curriculum was thus considered inadequate in the face of the challenges of the pandemic.

Even after schools reopened, the pandemic brought a new challenge. While on the one hand, the young people’s well-being loss has highlighted the need and effectiveness of the Happiness Curriculum, on the other, the learning loss has received greater importance in the return to schools. By treating the tension between academic and well-being outcomes as zero-sum, remedial teaching in academic subjects has often come at the cost of Happiness Classes. Knowledge partners comment on the pressures put on individual teachers specifically, who, in an attempt to make up for lost time, may choose to use part of the 45 minutes that would usually make up a Happiness Class in the morning for subjects like math, science, or English.

## SCALING UP BEYOND DELHI

Since its launch in 2018, versions of the Happiness Curriculum have spread to other states in India. Supported by the Labhya Foundation, the state of Uttarakhand in the north launched an adapted version of the Happiness curriculum under the name Anandam Pathyacharya, running in 15,000 schools across the state. Telangana, in the northeast, is also working with an NGO partner to introduce the Happiness Curriculum there. In the state of Jharkhand, a consortium of NGOs is working on Project Sampoorna, a social-emotional learning intervention that, like the Happiness Curriculum, aims to integrate health and wellness programs across schools in all of the state’s 19 districts. In Uttar Pradesh (a state with 130,000 primary schools as compared to Delhi’s 1,000), a pilot project of a “Realization Curriculum,” adapted from the Happiness Curriculum approach, was developed in 2019-20 involving 120-150 schools across 15 districts; 32 teachers worked on developing materials for children in grades 1 to 5. An interest in well-being and on holistic outcomes for children has spread across the country, with state governments reaching out to the Happiness Curriculum team in Delhi to ask for advice on interventions and the potential transferability of the curriculum framework. This interest has been heightened post-pandemic, as seen by the quick uptake of the curriculum in 2021 by the Tripura state government.



The Labhya Foundation, which worked with the Uttarakhand state government on the adaptation of the Happiness Curriculum, believes it is the replication of the process of the Happiness Curriculum that is essential rather than the actual product. Here, the “process” encompasses the co-creation activities done with school teachers and counselors to arrive at curriculum content, the model of cascading teacher training, and the integration of feedback loops between school staff on the ground and other stakeholders in the development and implementation of the curriculum. Working with people from within the school systems, such as heads of schools, guidance counselors, and teachers—while a long process—is even more important when contextualizing the curriculum within a new cultural setting. Translating curriculum content into the regional languages is only the first step toward localization, Labhya Foundation emphasizes. In Telangana for example, out of 41,337 schools in the state, about 70 percent are under government mandate (Jeyaranjan, 2017), including 160 residential tribal schools under the Telangana Ministry of Tribal Welfare. The context of tribal schools is vastly different than any of the schools covered by the Delhi Happiness Curriculum. A needs analysis of the state and system is required before embarking on curriculum design and implementation to account for different needs even within states.

Apart from cultural difference, geographical constraints in different states often present challenges in implementation. The geographical distribution of schools in Uttarakhand, which has a hilly terrain, is very spread out, leading to a lower quality of last-mile delivery and implementation. Without the Mentor Teacher programs that run in Delhi, other states rely on district-level teachers as the facilitators between schools and government. However, with districts and schools spread far apart, the communication is not as effective as that of Delhi.

Delhi is a small setting with a relatively large budget, a well-established NGO ecosystem, and a proactive government that prioritizes education. In contrast to this, states like Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, with larger geographical, cultural, and economic disparities, present unique challenges in establishing similar interventions. Knowledge partners believe that it is

the process of creating the intervention that is most effectively transferred across state borders, rather than the final intervention itself. The diversity of the states within India, and even of regions within a state, require constant attention to localized content and a collaborative process with the state that it is produced in, for, and by. This requirement for a high level of state involvement and commitment is the limiting factor on the extent and pace of spread across India, as it depends on state governments choosing to orient toward broader educational outcomes.

## NEXT STEPS

Bringing about systematic reform toward the prioritization of well-being in a system where academic and assessment-focused outcomes are the norm is challenging—and requires a long time of working parallel to the existing system and norms. However, the affirmation and endorsement of new goals of education in policy documents vastly help with legitimization—following the Happiness Curriculum, the 2020 National Education Policy (NEP)’s focus on holistic outcomes encouraged broader national conversations around well-being and increased the reception of other states to programs like the Happiness Curriculum.

Knowledge partners emphasize that the goal of the curriculum development and implementation process is government adoption; as NGOs, the knowledge partners work alongside the education system but acknowledge that for it to really become integrated, the final goal is for the government to own the program and for NGOs to comfortably and confidently transition out. Recognizing that this is a long-term goal, knowledge partners estimate at least a 20-year period of working together before a complete government adoption of the curriculum design, training, and administration process is possible.

The curriculum is currently undergoing its third iteration and review, drawing on feedback from happiness coordinators. Following the disruption that came with the pandemic, one of the goals is to come back to the original conceptions of face-to-face learning that the curriculum was based on, incorporating new revisions from stakeholders, as well as assessment bodies and evaluation reports.

Looking beyond Delhi, along with the states that have already created adaptations, Delhi has received visits from ministers from Kerala, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu interested in the curriculum. There also has been interest from other countries, in particular from Nepal and Afghanistan, as well as some other countries in Southeast Asia and in Africa. The Happiness Curriculum team is now focused on creating an “international cell of happiness,” which can act as a point of dissemination for the ideas and approaches of the curriculum.

## Impact on daily life in schools

The narrative set by the government through a large-scale launch and the mandatory uptake of Happiness Classes meant that the Happiness Curriculum was given equal attention to academic subjects. There was a focus on ensuring that the classes happen every day and that the concepts of well-being and happiness are treated by teachers and students as important aims of education.

### A SHIFT IN PEDAGOGY

The four approaches of Mindfulness, Activity, Story, and Expression represent a shift from typical pedagogies taught in other subjects during the school day. For teachers, the shift away from an assessment-based system and the emphasis of the Happiness Curriculum on reflective, collaborative methods of learning was a new pedagogical approach to classroom management. Teachers were afforded autonomy that they may not have had before, with a more fluid approach to teaching and learning encouraged. Often, this meant that there was a lot of unlearning of traditional, more rigid attitudes to be done—the idea of a curriculum without an exam to prepare for at the end was considered novel. This unlearning was supported by the training and workshops delivered through the five NGO knowledge partners and the Mentor Teachers.

Specific pedagogies that the curriculum encouraged were not always followed uniformly, however. For example, in the Stories section of the curriculum,

while reflection between students and teachers is recommended as a way to come to joint conclusions around lessons, 75 percent of teachers believed that they needed to explicitly share word lessons with students during classroom delivery, which is at odds with the intention of the curriculum. This number reduced significantly amongst Happiness Coordinators at 53 percent (SCERT, 2021, p. 30). This mismatch suggests the need for clearer orientations of teachers toward specific pedagogies, as well as a difference in understanding and learning when it comes to Happiness coordinators and schoolteachers. The pedagogies within the Activities and Expression sections appear to have been more clearly understood by teachers, with 80 percent of Happiness coordinators and heads of schools and 76.5 to 77.5 percent of teachers agreeing that they understood the intent behind the Action and Expression pedagogies. For the students, Expression, which places an emphasis on children sharing their thoughts and expressions, has shown a shift in their confidence within Happiness classes and within other lessons in the school day as well.

Similarly, a shift in how teachers viewed the curriculum and the education system came with a shift in their practice not only in the 45-minute Happiness Class lessons themselves, but in other subjects they taught. Anecdotal evidence, based on feedback from teachers, suggests that methods used in Happiness Classes are being implemented in math and science lessons—for instance, starting the lesson with some mindfulness practices or encouraging reflection and discussion as tools to understand the content of the math or science curriculum. Similarly, an increase in reflective practices across classrooms and lessons and the idea of nonjudgemental safe spaces to have discussions around the content of different curriculums, also strengthened student-teacher relationships. According to Happiness Curriculum team members based at The Cell for Human Values and Transformative Learning, relationships between teachers have also changed: The training model using Mentor Teachers and Happiness coordinators encourages open lines of communication and increased connections, while between different subject teachers, Happiness activities have become a topic of discussion and collaboration.

## GREATER CONNECTION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL

The design of the Happiness Curriculum lends itself to increased parental engagement within school systems. At the end of each story and activity, teachers instruct students to go home and share what they did in school that day with their families. The next day, there is space for the students to further these discussions by sharing their families' inputs and reactions. Furthermore, the content of the curriculum is designed to reflect on the role of individuals within society, and integrally, within their own families. During the pandemic, children reported having practiced parts of the Happiness Curriculum alongside their parents, involving them in activities and stories, and reported stronger relationships as a result.

Parents are considered key stakeholders in effectively moving toward the goals of the curriculum, as they are part of the child's life and therefore part of the school ecosystem. As part of the broader educational reforms ongoing in Delhi, the increased governance and financial power given to SMCs reflected an increased involvement of parents, as well. "Mega parent teacher meetings" were introduced as a platform for welcoming parents into schools and encouraging discussions between teachers and students. The changing nature of relationships among stakeholders in the school system, including those between parents and teachers, has been a significant improvement by parents: 73 percent of parents credited the interaction with teachers and their increased commitment as one of the fundamental shifts in the system (Bansal & Roy 2021, p. 25). Parents are increasingly aware of what is happening in the curriculum, and the majority are supportive, although it has not been the most visible change: in a BCG 2020 parent survey, only 7 percent explicitly refer to the Happiness Curriculum as an example of positive change, compared to 87 percent who referred to infrastructure changes (Bansal & Roy 2021, p. 24).

## Assessing the impact of the reform

The Happiness Curriculum has clear student-oriented goals, including the three key outcomes of relationships, emotional resilience, and learning motivation. Less tangibly measurable, it has certain system-oriented goals, including a shift in mindset and attitudes toward well-being as an educational aim. Developing assessments to measure progress toward these goals is integral to improving the program in the future. However, knowledge partners emphasize the importance of a nuanced approach to assessment, especially when considering the student-oriented goals—it is important for happiness classes to remain free of any grades and exams, making the measurement of progress more challenging. Prior to the pandemic, Dream A Dream, in partnership with Brookings, was in the process of developing a formative assessment tool, which was paused in 2020. This work has now restarted, with nascent stage considerations including observation-based assessment methods, filled in by teachers, rather than formal academic marking systems.

Internally, different knowledge partners are taking their own approaches to assessing the impact of the reform. Labhya Foundation has identified a small number of "model schools" to work with, tracking cohorts receiving the Happiness Curriculum over the course of years. Considering the large-scale launch of the curriculum across all schools in Delhi, Labhya Foundation's model schools offer a deeper, granular insight into the workings of the Happiness Curriculum. The goal of the monitoring and evaluation of model schools is to consider an eight-year journey of the child, gathering longitudinal data and evidence from the ground up.

While more in-depth evaluation of impact is still some way off, there are some indicators from existing surveys. In a 2020 state-wide survey conducted by BCG, 87 percent of teachers reported that the Happiness Curriculum has "had a tangible impact on students" (Bansal & Roy 2021, p. 43). Even when considering purely academic systems, the interconnection of well-

being and attainment has been highlighted—in terms of the overall impact of reforms in Delhi, of which the Happiness Curriculum is part, the share of grade 10 students passing the externally assessed CBSE board exams increased from 69 to 82.6 percent from the 2017/18 to the 2019/20 year (Bansal & Roy, 2021, p. 21).

Moreover, while quantitative measures of outcomes are being developed for evaluation purposes, the curriculum itself advocates that teachers use more qualitative ways of recording their students' development: "The Happiness Curriculum is designed in a way that focuses on the process rather than the outcome. The results of the process might take time to appear. The journey for each student will be different and unique. This assessment should be done with humility and integrity and more qualitative than quantitative manner." (SCERT, 2018, p. 27).

## Lessons for policy

### START AT SCALE

A striking feature of this reform is that it was introduced to the entire state of Delhi at once. At the time, some partners felt that a pilot would have been desirable, but the Ministry was keen that it should become mandatory as soon as possible. In hindsight, partners agree that starting at scale was the right choice: While the quality of implementation was very mixed, the scale meant that there was quickly a sufficiently large number of teachers who were mastering the curriculum and developing good practice. This provided the foundation to build from, as these teachers fed into cycles of iteration and improvement.

This strategy of going wide but shallow is in contrast to transformation efforts that rely on creating hubs, pilots, or model schools. Instead of creating a fully-fledged version of what a new paradigm of education looks like, it seeks to give a much larger number of people just a little idea and rely on the catalytic efforts of making a small change at scale. A consequence of this—the founders hope—is that even if the curriculum itself does not survive a change of the party in power, there will be sufficient memory in the system that its impact could continue.

### ...AND MAKE IT MODULAR

To achieve this scale, the Happiness Curriculum is a reform designed for implementation: Due to the high level of specification of activities and the fixed duration of happiness lessons, the reform could slot into the daily lives of schools without requiring other changes. While the outcomes observed so far in Delhi are most likely dependent on the wider infrastructure and capacity building investments that have taken place, the curriculum can at least be introduced without these, as the experience of other states indicates.

In this modular form, the Happiness Curriculum is just one component of the effort to shift the focus of education from competition to coexistence. Proponents know that it cannot achieve this transformation alone. But it is a key first step—a wedge—that has managed to create impact at scale: In every school in Delhi, there are teachers who are now familiar with a different way and different purpose for their classes. As the curriculum is not taught by specialists but by regular teachers, these teachers can then bring some of that approach and philosophy into their other classes. Moreover, parents and students across the state have experienced the curriculum, can talk about it with each other, and use it as a touch point for what a different kind of education means.

### ENABLE AN ECOSYSTEMIC APPROACH TO REFORM

The design and implementation of the Happiness Curriculum was a logistical and operational effort on the part of civil servants from the Delhi government, key team members from the NGO knowledge partners, and teachers and staff from schools. A rich NGO system, with existing skills and experience in social-emotional learning implementation and teacher training, meant that the government learned from experts in the field. At the same time, the NGO knowledge partners emphasized the need to listen to civil servants who knew the intricacies of the system they were working within. This collaborative process allowed for individuals to benefit from each other's expertise, with the team also considering schools as part of the same ecosystem. Establishing clear feedback loops and communication links with teachers and involving

school staff in the design and creation process from the beginning signified that the Happiness Curriculum team was not removed from the practicalities on the ground. Rather than approaching schools from afar as another layer in a hierarchy, the state government's ongoing interactions with the NGO knowledge partners, the Mentor Teachers, and District Happiness coordinators created a stronger ecosystem to support ongoing implementation and revision of the curriculum.

## **BUILD TRUST THROUGH COMMUNICATION AND CONTACT**

The structures for the implementation of and revisions to the curriculum rely on face-to-face contact: between class teachers and Mentor Teachers; Mentor Teachers and Happiness Coordinators; and between Happiness Coordinators and the department. The structure of SMCs also enables lines of communication between parents and the department. Feedback can therefore take a nuanced form, and does not rely on chasing survey responses or on teachers taking time out of their busy days to submit written reflections.

Sisodia himself has modeled the value of face-to-face learning. He aims to visit several schools each week and talk to children about their learning. He makes a point of not referring to particular reforms by name but trying to understand from the children's perspective what is making an impact for them and what they still need. The additional impact of this approach is that it contributes to developing pride among the profession. Sisodia recognizes the power of praise and has been known to send personal birthday messages.

Overall, the key reformers describe a philosophy that education cannot be "forced;" it is important to treat people well and with trust. This could be described as an approach that relies on the "carrot" more than the "stick," but more than that, it is one that recognizes that teachers as well as students are complex beings whose feelings need to be taken into account.

## **MONEY MATTERS**

The promise of prioritizing education by the Delhi state government was tangibly evidenced by its material investment into the education sector. Twenty-two

percent of the budget of the Delhi state government is allocated toward education—this is higher than the national average allocation of 15.8 percent and higher than that of other states who are replicating the Happiness Curriculum processes, such as Uttarakhand (18.2 percent), Uttar Pradesh (13.3 percent), and Telangana (6.24 percent).

Broader education reforms that laid the ground for the implementation of the Happiness Curriculum were also a result of increased investment in the sector. Certain capacity-building structures relied on a new shared distribution of finances, with schools and parents getting more autonomy through a new, devolved financial structure. This allowed faster decisionmaking processes, as well as increased sense of engagement and confidence, that led to the wider acceptance of the government's Happiness Curriculum reform.

## **Conclusion**

The Happiness Curriculum has largely been hailed as a success by the Indian media and public. Efforts to replicate the curriculum in states beyond Delhi are a further testament to its popularity, though these efforts have come with their own unique challenges, not least due to the geographical, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the country. This case study has identified certain enabling conditions of the success of the Happiness Curriculum in Delhi, while also highlighting key points of tensions and subsequent considerations for policy. While the implementation of the curriculum is still in relatively nascent stages and the reform journey has partly been interrupted by the pandemic, the Delhi government and the knowledge partners have seen clearly the need for the curriculum and the impact it has had on students. Currently undergoing its third iteration and review, the approaches and aims of the Happiness Curriculum will continue to grow and establish themselves in the education landscape of Delhi and beyond.



# References

- Azim Premji University (2021). Loss of Learning during the Pandemic. <https://azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/publications/2021/report/loss-of-learning-during-the-pandemic>
- Bansal, S. & Roy, S. (2021) School Education Reforms in Delhi, 2015-2020. Boston Consulting Group. <https://www.bcg.com/school-education-reforms-in-delhi-2015-2020>
- Bansal, S. & Bahl, D. (2022) India Needs To Learn - A Case for Keeping Schools Open. Boston Consulting Group. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2022/challenging-government-school-closures-in-india>
- Banerji, R. & Wadhwa, W. (2021). The Indian Express. 'Learning loss' in the pandemic, explained: The case of elementary schools in Karnataka. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/learning-loss-in-the-pandemic-explained-the-case-of-elementary-schools-in-karnataka-7521512/>
- Care, E. Talreja, V., Ravindranath, S., Sahin, A. (2020). Development of student and teacher measures of Happiness Curriculum factors. Dream a Dream and Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/development-of-student-and-teacher-measures-of-happiness-curriculum-factors/>
- Center for Civil Society (2019). Reforming Education Governance in India: Policy Blueprint for Separation of Powers. <https://ccs.in/sites/default/files/research/sop-with-cover.pdf>
- Das. A., Teotia, A., Ravindranath, S., Talreja, V. & Bhat, S. (2022) Building social and emotional skills of children in Delhi: Insights from the Happiness Curriculum. In Smart, A., and Sinclair, M. (Eds.) NISSEM Global Briefs: Educating for the social, the emotional and the sustainable. Volume III: SEL in context. (pp. 184-205)
- Das, A., & Ravindranath, S. (2022). Happiness Curriculum: Theory, Practice and Way Forward. Dream a Dream. <https://dreamadream.org/financialstype/research-outputs/>
- Department of Education. (1993). Learning without Burden. Report of the National Advisory Committee Appointed by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (Yashpal Committee Report). Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi.
- Iftikhar, F. (2021). 166k students in Delhi fell off grid as schools moved online. The Hindustan Times. 4th February 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/166k-students-in-delhi-fell-off-grid-as-schools-moved-online-101612385072733.html>
- Jeyaranjan, J. (2017). Aspects of Education in Telangana. In Telangana Social Development Report. Government of Telangana.
- Nagraj, A. (2015). Philosophy of Human Behaviour, Jeevan Vidya Prakashan, Amarkantak.
- Patra, S., & Patro, B. K. (2020). COVID-19 and adolescent mental health in India. The Lancet Psychiatry, 7(12), 1015.
- Ponnavolu, V. (2020). How India's competitive exam-prep treadmill ground to a halt.
- BBC News. 22nd December 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201214-why-indias-competitive-testing-treadmill-never-stops>
- SCERT (2018). Happiness Curriculum. State Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi [Accessed 2019 reprint].
- SCERT (2022). Impact of the Happiness Curriculum: An Evaluative Study for heads of schools and teachers. Cell for Human Values and Transformative Learning State Council of Educational Research and Training, Delhi.
- The Economic Times (2020). Not going digital: Teachers, parents find online education inadequate & ineffective. [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/not-going-digital-teachers-parents-find-online-education-inadequate-ineffective/articleshow/79254641.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/not-going-digital-teachers-parents-find-online-education-inadequate-ineffective/articleshow/79254641.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

UNICEF (2021a). COVID-19: Schools for more than 168 million children globally have been completely closed for almost a full year, says UNICEF. Press Release. 10th March 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/india/press-releases/covid-19-schools-more-168-million-children-globally-have-been-completely-closed>

UNICEF (2021b). UNICEF report spotlights on the mental health impact of COVID-19 in children and young people. Press Release. 5th October 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/india/press-releases/unicef-report-spotlights-mental-health-impact-covid-19-children-and-young-people>

## Appendix A: Methodology

Key sources:

- Existing reports and evaluations (listed in references)
- Interviews conducted in 2017, 2019, 2022, including with:
  - » Anil Teotia Ji, Head of the Happiness Curriculum Project at the Ministry of Education, Delhi Government
  - » Vishal Talreja, Dream a Dream
  - » Richa Gupta, Labhya Foundation
  - » Angana Das, Dream a Dream
  - » Sreehari Ravindranath, Dream a Dream
  - » Swati Chaurasia, Dream a Dream
  - » Manish Sisodia, Deputy Minister and Minister of Education, Delhi government

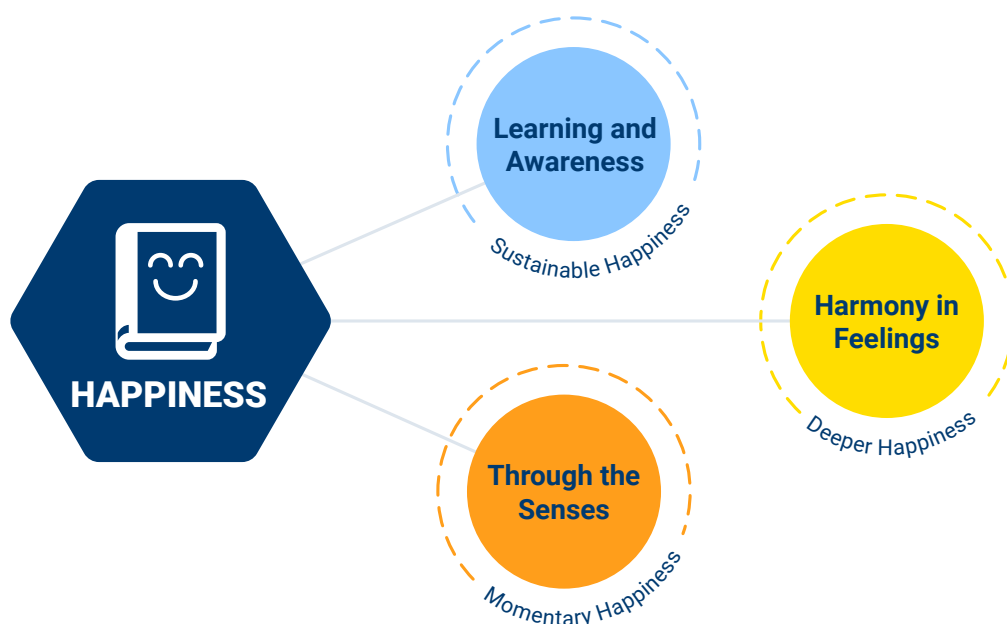
The objectives of the happiness curriculum are:

- To develop self-awareness and mindfulness among learners
- To inculcate skill of critical thinking and inquiry in the learners
- To enable learners to communicate effectively and express themselves freely and creatively
- To enable learners to understand their expectations in relationships, develop empathy, and ensure healthy relationships with family, peers, and teachers
- To enable learners to apply life skills to deal with stressful and conflicting situations around them
- To develop social awareness and human values in learners to engage in meaningful contribution in society
- To develop holistic approach to education in a universal context.

The content of the syllabus is made up of three units, with specific modules under each:

## Appendix B: Details on the Happiness Curriculum framework

The Happiness Triad that the Happiness Curriculum is based on is as follows:



## **UNIT 1: EXPLORING HAPPINESS THROUGH LEARNING AND AWARENESS**

- M1: KNOWING MY NEEDS
- M2: HARMONY IN THE SELF
- M3: HAPPINESS MY GOAL
- M4: WHY EDUCATION

## **UNIT 2: EXPERIENCING HAPPINESS IN RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH FEELINGS**

- M5: HOW SIMILAR ARE WE
- M6: HARMONY IN RELATIONSHIPS
- M7: UNDERSTANDING VALUES IN RELATIONSHIPS
- M8: COOPERATION AND COLLABORATIVE LIVING

## **UNIT 3: HAPPINESS THROUGH ACTIVE PARTICIPATION**

- M9: LIVING IN AN INTERCONNECTED SOCIETY
- M10: COEXISTING WITH NATURE

These modules have been designed in a spiral approach for all classes, with each subsequent theme connecting with the previous one and increasing in depth as the child progresses forward to the next class.

The Happiness Curriculum Framework is published by SCERT: [http://www.edudel.nic.in/welcome\\_folder/happiness/HappinessCurriculumFramework\\_2019.pdf](http://www.edudel.nic.in/welcome_folder/happiness/HappinessCurriculumFramework_2019.pdf)

# Acknowledgements

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.

Brookings gratefully acknowledges the support provided by the BHP Foundation and the LEGO Foundation.

Brookings recognizes that the value it provides is in its commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment.



# BROOKINGS

1775 Massachusetts Ave NW,  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 797-6000  
[www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu)