

## **THE HAPPY SCHOOLS PROJECT IN THUA THIEN HUE PROVINCE: IMPACT EVALUATION**

*TU-ANH THI TRAN\**, *PHUOC CAT TUONG NGUYEN*, *HONG-VAN THI DINH*  
*University of Education, Hue University*  
*QUYNH-ANH NGOC NGUYEN*  
*RMIT University Vietnam*

**Abstract:** The Happy School Project in Thua Thien Hue province has been established and implemented as a measure to address social-emotional and mental health problems in today's society in general and in schools in particular. The article presents research results to assess the impact of the implementation of the Project on students and teachers in participating schools, thereby, provides suggestions for the expansion of the Project to other schools. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used with students and teachers of participating schools. Research results show that implementing happiness-based activities positively impacts the social-emotional competencies and mental health of students and teachers.

**Keywords:** Happy Schools Project, impact evaluation, Thua Thien Hue province, social-emotional competencies, mental health.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, stress) have dramatically increased in adolescents and young adults during the last three decades, compared to older or younger individuals and this is at an enormous cost (Blomqvist et al., 2019; Collishaw & Sellers, 2020). In line with the general global context, a significant minority of Vietnamese students suffer from anxiety disorders, depression and other mood disorders, behavior problems, and drug and alcohol addiction (The General Department of Police - Ministry of Public Security, Vietnam, 2015). It is estimated that 8% to 29% of Vietnamese children and adolescents experience general mental health problems, and more than three million children need mental health services. However, only about 20% receive medical support and treatment from professionals (UNICEF, 2018). The rate of depression in students (16%) is higher than in the general population (4% to 6%). If in the past, most Vietnamese people suffering from depression were between 60 and 65 years old. Now depression tends to be rejuvenated at ages 15 to 27 (UNICEF, 2018). Therefore, there has been increasing concern around the country about the well-being of students (Dinh et al., 2020). Promoting young people's well-being is also regarded as a critical investment for the future to prevent poor mental health, reduce disease burden and improve physical health (WHO, 2019).

In another vein, there is increasing recognition that teachers play a crucial role in maintaining a well-being culture among their students (Roffey, 2012; Guess & Bowling, 2014). "*Pupil well-being and teacher well-being: Two sides of the same coin*" (Roffey, 2012). We cannot separate student well-being from teacher well-being. Well teachers promote well students (McCallum & Price 2010). However, teaching has been ranked as one of the highest stress-evoking professions from a database of 26 occupations (Johnson et al., 2005). Studies found unprecedented levels of stress and dissatisfaction among teachers and principals, teachers and students, with over half of teachers reporting great stress at least several days a week (Brackett et al., 2010; Chang, 2009). A study in Vietnam by Pham (2018) showed that only nearly 4% of teachers did not show signs of occupational stress, up to 90% showed signs of low-level occupational stress, and more than 6% showed signs of severe stress. A recent study by Tran et

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\* Liên hệ với tác giả: tuanh.tran@yahoo.com

al. (2021) on 217 preschool and primary teachers revealed that 12% of teachers experienced severe burnout in all three “personal, interpersonal and occupational” domains.

Teachers with burnout or stress find it more difficult to manage poor student behaviour. They may use reactive and punitive responses that contribute to an adverse classroom climate and poor student-teacher relationships (Osher et al., 2007; Yoon, 2002). Student misbehavior and teacher stress can form a vicious cycle difficult to interrupt (Yoon, 2002). Accordingly, students of a burnout teacher also report high levels of stress, negative perceptions of their school environment, and problems in the social, emotional, and behavioral areas, such as bullying, conflicts with peers, and externalizing and internalizing mental health problems (O’Connell et al., 2009). Therefore, promoting positive well-being in teachers will contribute to their healthiness, longevity and productivity in their life and career, which later brings many educational and psychological benefits to their future students.

In this context, there should be a balanced focus on the well-being of both teachers and students (Dinh et al., 2020; Pham, 2018), not only concerning how it may impact students’ academic achievement, engagement with school and psychological resilience but also at the policy level, examining whether and how education systems prioritize teacher and student well-being. However, mental health issues are still seen only as the responsibility of the medical health sector. Consequently, current mental health programs in Vietnam tend to focus only on clinical and medical aspects rather than on early detection and prevention efforts and participation with other sectors, especially the involvement of schools (UNICEF, 2018).

Theoretically and practically, promoting Vietnamese teachers’ and students’ well-being by implementing preventive care-based intervention programs in school settings could be feasible (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2020). Before 2018, some projects aimed to develop care-based and social and emotional competencies for students and teachers (e.g. “*A call to care*” in Vietnam by Mind and Life Institute and “*Friendly schools, active students*” by the MOET). However, these projects suffered from the following limitations: (1) lack of solid theoretical framework; (2) lack of a system of exercises in accordance with the theoretical framework; (3) only focus on students, lack of training to build school leaders’ and teachers’ care capacities as a precursor to student programming; (4) lack of the implementation in all three levels of general schools (from primary to high schools); (5) lack of project evaluation.

This Happy Schools Project aims to fill that gap by (1) building a theoretical framework to build happy schools through developing three components of care for students: self-care, care for others and care for nature and the planet; (2) building a system of practical exercises corresponding to the theoretical framework; (3) organizing training to improve the competencies of school teachers and leaders: competencies to practice and embody care-based values and competencies to organize care-based activities for students; (4) organizing the implementation of the Happy School Project (from primary to high schools) and evaluate the effectiveness of the Project.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This model is built on conceptual and empirical research in socio-emotional learning (SEL) and contemplative teaching and learning (CTL, especially mindfulness and compassion methods).

### 2.1. Social and Emotional Learning

“Social-emotional learning (SE) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” (CASEL, 2008). Accordingly, The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) outlines that social

and emotional competence includes five core interrelated competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Human history and learning science have suggested that a child’s success or failure is not only determined by cognitive skills; social-emotional competence as the outcome of SEL is believed to contribute significantly to students’ ability to succeed in school, careers, and life (Taylor et al., 2018). SEL can positively impact the school climate and promote academic, social, and emotional benefits for students. Specifically, previous meta-analysis studies showed that SEL is empirically found not only to improve academic achievement but also to improve academic achievement and increase prosocial behaviors, improve student attitudes toward school, and

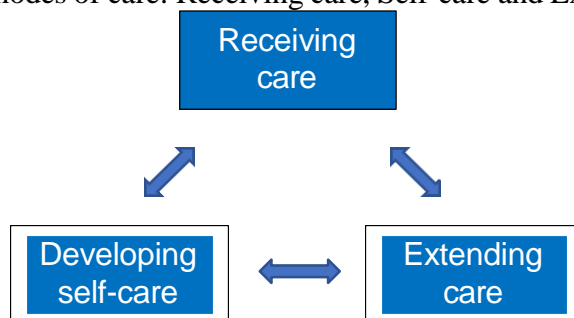


reduce depression and stress among students (Taylor et al., 2017; Wiglesworth et al., 2016). Very recently, in Vietnam, a study by Dinh et al. (2021) also showed that adolescents with higher levels of social and emotional competencies tended to experience less internalizing and externalizing problems. Therefore, for the past decades, with the establishment of the CASEL -the leading authority in advancing social-emotional learning in education, there has been growing recognition of the need for SEL in teaching and learning worldwide. Nowadays, various universal SEL programs have officially been implemented to improve students’ social-emotional and academic skills from

preschool through high school (Jones & Kahn, 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015). A number of investigations, including large-scale experiments, support the notion that targeted SEL interventions can improve the social-emotional attributes of the classroom, facilitate students’ social-emotional and academic well-being and enhance prosocial attitudes and behavior, better mental health (e.g., Brackett et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2010; Raver et al., 2011).

## 2.2. A Pedagogy of Care

The Mind and Life Institute (MLI, 2014a) reflects the relational nature of care through a framework of three interdependent modes of care: Receiving care, Self-care and Extending care.



The practices of receiving care include the recognition and re-experience of the moments we are connected with, cared for, supported and loved by other people and other things. The self-care mode refers to the skills of being attuned to the body’s wisdom, managing stress and difficult emotions, holding thoughts and feelings in an accepting mode of awareness, promoting cognitive flexibility and openness to experience, and taking better care of needs. In the extending care mode are skills related to seeing others more deeply, connecting with their potential beyond our limited thoughts, empathizing, and showing compassion to beloved ones and strangers (MLI, 2014a).

Building on the available evidence, comprehensive school-based interventions fostering the simultaneous development of all modes of care (receiving care, self-care and extending care) should be implemented (MLI, 2014b). MIL’s “A call to care” program started in the USA in 2013. Some one–year pilot planning projects later were also implemented in primary schools in Bhutan,

Israel, and Vietnam. The official evaluation of this “Call to care” program has not been officially documented. Still, the efforts of MIL in building a program to promote new, interdisciplinary approaches for cultivating students’ care competencies should be highly appreciated. Nevertheless, in her PhD project, Nguyen (2021) recently applied this model to her intervention study and successfully proved its effectiveness in a Vietnamese school setting.

Besides, the care training programs for students to take root and flourish must be embedded and held within communities of care. It is required that the model does not only integrate the three aspects of care but rather integrates teachers and students in the same program, aiming for the relational co-development of these caring capacities and the creation of a caring environment. Ultimately, for further success in promoting the well-being of students, future integration might include the effect of parents and adults in surrounding communities (MLI, 2014).

### **2.3. Theoretical Framework of the Happy School Project**

The Project is based on the theoretical framework that Happiness can be achieved if students have the opportunity to learn and practice three modes of care:

- Self-care: Teachers and students learn to develop their full potential knowledge, skills, talents and creativity.
- Care for others: Learn to live in harmony with others, create meaningful relationships, become responsible citizens and thus contribute to a happy society.
- Care for nature: Learn to respect and protect our fragile environment and live in harmony with nature.

Looking at three modes from the perspectives of the SEL model proposed by CASEL, we can identify the following:

- *The first two competencies relate to self-care*
  1. Self-awareness: knowing what we feel and why. Self-awareness may look like: identifying emotions; Having an accurate self-perception; Recognizing strengths; Self-confidence; Self-efficacy.
  2. Self-management: what to do about those feelings. Self-management may look like: impulse control; stress management; self-discipline; self-motivation; goal-setting; organizational skills.
- *Competencies 3 and 4 relate to care for others*
  3. Social awareness: knowing what other people think and feel and understanding their point of view. Social awareness may look like: perspective-taking, empathy, appreciating diversity and respect for others.
  4. Social skills: combining these skills to create harmonious relationships. Social skills may look like: communicating, listening, cooperation, resisting negative pressure, resolving conflicts, and supporting one another
- *The last competency – responsible decision-making - can be applied to all modes of care but is especially important in our relation to the environment and the planet*
  5. The ability to make good decisions in life and act responsibly, based on a systems thinking approach. It may look like: analyzing situations, outcome evaluation, identifying and solving problems; personal reflection; ethical responsibility.

## **3. EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE HAPPY SCHOOLS PROJECT**

### **3.1. Evaluation Objectives**

This evaluation is guided by formative and summative evaluation questions linked to the stated program objectives of the Happy Schools Project. The two program objectives are: (1) to

understand the school-wide impact of implementing the Happy Schools Project for participating schools, (2) to expand the Happy School Project to new schools in the city and other cities.

### **3.2. Research Questions**

Grounded in the program's theory of action, the evaluation is designed to address three basic questions:

- (1) What happiness-based activities are being implemented in the schools?
- (2) What is the impact of the Happy School Project program on the social and emotional competencies and mental health of the students of the participating schools?
- (3) What is the impact of the Happy School Project program on the social and emotional competencies and mental health of the teachers of the participating schools?

### **3.3. Evaluation Methodology**

Evaluations are designed to address both program implementation (formative evaluation) and outcomes (summative evaluation) and are question-driven. The evaluation design involves a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods, such as standardized measures, tests, and focus groups.

#### **Quantitative evaluation**

Quantitative evaluation is based on the compiled findings from the following 05 studies conducted by students and teachers of Cao Thang and Huong Vinh High Schools. 4/5 studies won the top prizes in the *Science and Technology Competition of Thua Thien Hue Province* from 2018 to 2021. In implementing these intervention studies, the teachers and students were supported by the lecturers from the Department of Psychology and Education, University of Education, Hue University in terms of theoretical and methodological issues and by the ELI team in terms of practical issues in the intervention sessions.

1. Nguyen, T. D. P., Pham, T. U. T & Nguyen, T. D. (2018). *Developing non-violent communication skills for high school students in Hue City*. 1<sup>st</sup> Prize Science and Technology Competition of Thua Thien Hue Province, 2018.
2. Nguyen, T. D. P., Mai, T. D. H & Nguyen, T. D. (2019). *Say NO to plastic waste: A project to promote care competencies for nature*. 1<sup>st</sup> Prize Science and Technology Competition of Thua Thien Hue Province, 2019.
3. Nguyen, T. D. P., Pham, T. U. T & Nguyen, T. D. (2020). *Developing empathy skills to improve mental health for high school students*. 1<sup>st</sup> Prize Science and Technology Competition of Thua Thien Hue Province, 2020.
4. Nguyen, L. N. H, Tran, K. H & Vo, T. P. T (2021). *Application of listening skills to improve mental health for high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Third Prize Science and Technology Competition of Thua Thien Hue Province, 2021.
5. Luong, N. Q. T., Phan, N. P. U & Tran, T. L. (2021). *Practicing emotional self-awareness skills among high school students: A solution to cope with psychological difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic*.

#### **Qualitative Evaluation**

##### **Materials**

The University of Education, Hue University Team developed the interview protocol. The interview protocol conducted with students consists of 4 questions:

- (1) What happiness-based activities are implemented in your class/ school?

(2) What changes have you noticed about yourself in terms of your (i) self-awareness (ii) emotion management (iii) social awareness (iv) relationship skills (v) attitude and behavior toward the environment; (vi) mental health?

(3) What changes have you noticed about your teachers in terms of their (i) self-awareness (ii) emotion management (iii) social awareness (iv) relationship skills (v) attitude and behavior toward the environment (vi) their mental health?

The interview protocol conducted with teachers consists of one question, that is the above Question (3).

The questions are designed to obtain detailed information about participants' understanding of and attitude toward the Happy School Project, its implementation, and its impact on students and teachers

### ***Procedures***

Interview with students: 24 students from two Elementary Schools (Phu Cat and Thuan Thanh) and two Secondary Schools (Duy Tan and Tran Cao Van) were invited to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted on the 25 and 26 May 2022. Two evaluators from the University of Education, Hue University, conducted interviews. The average focus interview lasts approximately 45 minutes.

Interview with teachers: 8 core teachers participating in the Happy School Project from 06 schools were invited to be interviewed. The interview was conducted online on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023, by one evaluator from the University of Education, Hue University. The interview lasted approximately 90 minutes.

### ***Sample***

Four schools (Phu Cat and Thuan Thanh Elementary Schools, Duy Tan and Tran Cao Van Secondary Schools) participated in the student focus group interviews. Six students (whose lead teachers and teachers participate in Happy School Project) were randomly selected in each school, making one independent group. The Happy School Program Coordinators scheduled each interview with students.

### ***Data Analysis***

Qualitative analysis is conducted on the interview transcripts. Categories are developed based on the interview protocol. The interview transcriptions are then coded for those categories. Once interviews are coded into their categories, themes and sub-themes are developed to describe caring practices and their outcomes.

## **3.4. Findings and Discussion**

### ***3.4.1. Quantitative evaluation***

As mentioned above, the quantitative evaluation of the Happy School Project in Hue City was compiled from the 05 experimental studies conducted in Cao Thang and Huong Vinh High Schools, which aim to assess the impact of happiness-based activities in school settings on social and emotional competencies and mental health of students. The happiness-based activities in these intervention studies cover three components of the- Happy School framework (self-care, care for others and care for nature).

Table 1 shows study characteristics for each study (e.g. sample sizes, study design, participant description, duration times, and intervention components...). Table 2 provides an overview of each study's theoretical framework, measurements and outcomes.

### **Study designs**

Study designs and materials in the intervention studies do not differ significantly. 05 studies compare the SEL outcomes of students in the experimental groups before they took part in a SEL program to participants in the control group who did not participate in any SEL programs. Longitudinal assessment time points were similar. All intervention studies assessed participants at two points: At baseline before and after the intervention programs; the duration ranged from 3 months to 4 months.

### **Study participants**

Participants in these studies included only high school students. Samples sizes across all included studies varied from 78 to 294 participants. All studies had sample sizes greater than  $N = 50$ . All studies obtained ethical approval from consent forms for students and parents.

Table 1. The characteristics of five quantitative studies

First authors (year)	Settings	Participants		Study design (evaluation)	Module	Experiment group	Control group	Random assignment
		N (Ex/C)	Age					
Nguyen, Pham & Nguyen (2018)	Cao Thang High School	111 67/44	10th grade	A quasi-experimental Pretest-Posttest	Care for others: Non-violent communication	Semester-long: 8 sessions (3 hours/ session) (August – November/2018) - Practicing mindfulness - Exploring and sharing their strengths and weaknesses - Self-empathy –empathy - Kindness and gratitude - Empathetic/deep listening - Overall steps of non-violent communication - Non-judgement observation and rephrasing - Recognizing and expressing emotions - Identifying and expressing needs - Identifying and expressing demands	Did not take part in any happiness-based activities	No
Nguyen, Mai & Nguyen (2019)	Cao Thang High School	294 (255/44)	10-11 <sup>th</sup> grade	A quasi-experimental Pretest-Posttest	Care for nature	Semester-long: 4 main activities (August-November, 2019) - Learning about plastic waste - Actions for the environment: Design for Change: (1) making paper bags from spare sheets of paper and giving them to the street vendors in front of school gates and the school canteen; (2) “Mondays without plastic waste campaign” in the schools - Green Creativity Competition (creating things from plastic waste)	Did not take part in any happiness-based activities	No
Nguyen, Mai & Nguyen (2020)	Cao Thang High School	131 89/42	10-11 <sup>th</sup> grade	A quasi-experimental Pretest-Posttest	Care for others: Empathy	Semester-long: 05 sessions (3 hours/ session) (from August – November 2019) - Practicing mindfulness: self-empathy - Empathy - Empathetic/deep listening - Non- judgement observation - Empathy in actions: fundraising for poor students in the school and poor people in the nearby community, especially those from flooded areas	Did not take part in any happiness-based activities	No



Tran, Nguyen & Vo (2021)	Cao Thang High School	143 99/44	10 <sup>th</sup> - 11 <sup>th</sup> grade	A quasi-experimental Pretest-Posttest	Care for others: Listening skills	Semester-long; 05 online sessions; 3 hours/session - Learning about listening (overview) - Prating Mindfulness (lean to listen to self) foundation for empathetic/deep listening - Distracted listening - Factual listening - Empathetic/deep listening * Keep a diary to assess their level of listening for consecutive 30 days	Did not take part in any happiness-based activities	No
Luong, Phan & Tran, 2021	Huong Vinh	78 (39/39)	11 <sup>th</sup> grade	Action research Pretest-Posttest	Self-care: Emotional self-awareness	Two months (October – December): 8 sessions, 3 hours/session - The role of emotional self-awareness - “Stop-Observation-Action”: the correlation between the body with emotions. - Stop: the correlation between emotions with thinking - Observation: Aspects of observation - Observation: Events and our interpretation - Observation: Emotions and Needs - Actions: Appropriate solutions for specific problems - Sharing: Applying emotional self-awareness to cope with stressful events	Did not take part in any happiness-based activities	Yes

Table 2. Summary of social, emotional and mental health outcomes across 05 studies

Study	Standardized Measures	Other methods of collecting data	Outcomes (improved)
Nguyen, Pham & Nguyen (2018)	The Verbal Aggressiveness Scale –(VAS - Infante and Wigley, 1986) The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985)	Student, teacher interviews	- Decreased aggressive verbal behavior - Increased non-violent verbal behavior - Increased life satisfaction
Nguyen, Mai & Nguyen (2019)	Questionnaire of Perceptions, Attitudes and Behavior toward Plastic Use (developed and validated by the authors)	Student, teacher interviews	- Increased positive perception, attitude and behavior toward plastic use
Nguyen, Mai & Nguyen (2020)	- The Basic Empathy Scale (Carré et al., 2013) - Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ-11-17- Goodman, Ford, Simmons & Gatward, 2000) - The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985)	Student, teacher interviews	- Increased emotional and cognitive empathy - Decreased emotional and behavioral problems - Increased prosocial behavior - Increased satisfaction with life
Tran, Nguyen & Vo (2021)	- Active and Empathetic Listening Scale (AELS- Bodie, 2011; Drollinger, Comer, & et al., 2006) - Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ-11-17- Goodman, Ford, Simmons & Gatward, 2000) - The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) - The Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983)	Student, teacher interviews	- Increased factual listening level - Increased empathetic listening level - Decreased distracted listening - Decreased perceived stress - Decreased emotional and behavioral problems - Increased prosocial behavior - Increased satisfaction with life
Luong, Phan & Tran (2021)	- The Coping Strategies Inventory Short Form (Addison et al., 2007) - The Emotional Self-Awareness Scale (Kauer et al., 2012)	None	- Increases in communicating emotional knowledge to others and oneself - Increases in emotion-focused engagement coping strategies - Decreases in problem-focused disengagement coping strategies

### Study methodologies

To achieve the second aim of the review—to evaluate the methodological rigour of studies—each study was assessed if they met a set of 11 methodological rating items using a score of 1 or 0 (Table 3), adapted from Nieminen (2016).

Table 3. Criteria of Methodological Validity of Intervention Studies

1. Theoretical framework is defined.
2. The study has been conducted in an educational context.

3. Participants were randomized into different groups.
4. The demographic makeup was heterogeneous.
5. Research data were sufficient ( $n \geq 200$ ).
6. Measurements were wide-ranged, objective and age-appropriate.
7. A small number of participants discontinued ( $< 20\%$ ).
8. Duration of follow-up at least one month.
9. The intervention is described precisely and in detail.
10. In the pre-test, the differences between groups were small.
11. Data collection has been similar between the intervention and control groups.
12. Points in total.

The intervention studies reviewed included quite similar components and involved 10- to 11<sup>th</sup>-grade students in a school environment. All intervention programs were firmly supported by a theoretical framework and objective and age-appropriate measurements. Their sample was rather heterogeneous, composed of students of different genders and ethnicities. The drop-out rate was shallow for both the intervention group and the control group. The homogeneity of variances assumption was also evaluated and reported in most of the studies.

However, 4/5 of the evaluated intervention studies were not randomized (Researchers had to assign students whose teachers and head teachers belong to the Happy School Project into the experimental group) or used insufficient sizes (4/5) and did not include follow-up sessions (5/5). 4/5 had measurements that were standardized and adapted mixed methods (self-reported data, student and teacher interview...).

Table 4. Methodological Validity of the Intervention Studies

Reference	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Nguyen, Pham & Nguyen (2018)	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	8
Nguyen, Mai & Nguyen (2019)	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	8
Nguyen, Mai & Nguyen (2020)	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	9
Tran, Nguyen & Vo (2022)	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	8
Luong, Phan & Tran (2022)	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	8

Findings from 5 studies suggest that happiness-based activities intentionally implemented in school settings provide unique advantages and improve students' social and emotional competencies and mental health. By practicing SEL skills such as non-violent communication, deep listening, empathy, emotional self-awareness and pro-environmental behavior, students can develop crucial life skills beyond academics, increase their prosocial behaviors and life satisfaction, and reduce their psychological distress and perceived stress. With science-based evidence, scaling up these programs, therefore, is very promising. However, of course, high-quality research of interventions that contain comprehensive data sets, objective, age-appropriate, wide-range measures – validated behavioural (vs. self-reported or reported by others), and long-term follow-up needed focus on demonstrating the benefits and effectiveness of the happiness-based activities on students' social and emotional competencies and their mental health.

### 3.4.2. Qualitative evaluation

**Question 1:** *What happiness-based activities are implemented in your class/ school?*

The following Table 5 describes the happiness-based activities that are being implemented in the class or school based on the focus group discussion with students.

Table 5. Happiness-Based Activities Implemented in the Schools

Module	Activities	PS1	PS2	SS1	SS2
<b>M1 Self-care</b>	Mindfulness (the bell of mindfulness, getting in touch with the breath, other kinds of breathing exercises, deep relaxation, mindful sitting, mindful walking, mindful movements)	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Recognizing and identifying emotions and needs	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Emotion regulation/management	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Gratitude nurturing (gratitude trees, 03 positive things)	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>M2 Care for others</b>	Morning/Afternoon greetings	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Emotion sharing	✓	✓	✓	
	Deep listening, empathy	✓		✓	✓
<b>M3 Care for nature</b>	Tree observation			✓	
	Keeping the classrooms and environment clean (picking up trash)	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Reducing plastic waste (plastic bags, foam boxes...); making paper bags; waste sorting	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Planting and taking care of trees			✓	
	“Green Sundays”			✓	
	Living being network				✓
	Mindful walking on the Happy Path		✓		
Fridays without plastic waste		✓			

Note: PS1: Primary School 1; PS2: Primary School 2; SS1: Secondary School 1; SS2: Secondary School 2

As can be seen from Table 5, a wide variety of activities cover all three modules (Self-care, Care for others and Care for nature), in which happiness-based activities in Module 1 seemed to be more focused. It is advisable to priorly focus on self-care competencies, which play a firm foundation in developing social awareness and care for nature competencies among students (Mind and Life Institute, 2014a, b). In this way, students can effectively take care of others by being their best self and clearly distinguish “rescuing” from “caring”.

In terms of Module 2, morning/afternoon greetings are commonly implemented. According to a widely cited study by Allday and Pakurar (2007) and a recent study by Cook et al. (2018), this very simple practice is a wonderful way to build strong relationships between teachers and students, and students’ self-confidence. They allow students to feel seen by teachers. Hearing their name makes them feel that someone cares about speaking to them as an individual and makes them feel valued. Besides, empathic listening activities are also implemented. The benefits of empathic listening have been so far recognized, such as building trust and respect, enabling the disputants to release their emotions, reducing tensions, encouraging the surfacing of information, and creating a safe environment that is conducive to collaborative problem-solving (Petersen, 2020; Sugimori et al., 2020).

In terms of Module 3, reducing plastic waste (plastic bags, foam boxes...), making paper bags and waste sorting are more focused. Plastic waste is fast becoming a widely recognized problem. While it is an important material for our economy, providing multiple benefits to modern-day living, plastic can take thousands of years to biodegrade (Luo et al., 2022). Reducing plastic waste will reduce the contamination of the environment, soil, air, and water. Indeed, there are many simple ways to reduce plastic waste. The focus on this activity, therefore, is feasible and satisfactory.

**Question 2:** *What is the impact of happiness-based activities on students’ social and emotional competencies and mental health?*

The summary of students' social, emotional, and mental health outcomes is presented in Table 6. As can be seen from Table 6 regarding the self-care component, the improvement in emotional awareness and emotion management competencies are reported by all participants.

Table 6. Summary of social, emotional and mental health outcomes of students

Thematic category	Sub-theme	Characteristic phrases	PS1	PS2	SS1	SS2
Self-care	Emotional self-awareness	“pay more attention to my feelings”, “name emotions”	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Self-awareness	“understand my thoughts, strengths”, “more confident”			✓	
	Emotion expression	“feeling relaxed when expressing my emotions”, “easily share with others” “not shy any more”	✓			✓
	Emotion regulation/management/control	“find a quiet place, and take deep breath when being angry and anxious/nervous/overwhelmed”, “not hit or kick friends”, “find a tree shadow and wait until getting calm”, “try not to affect others when I am in negative mood”, “count from 1 to 50 to calm the anger”, “calm overexcitement”, “think about positive things when I am angry”...	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Gratitude	“grateful to mom and family” “grateful to sunshine for giving me light”, “grateful to teachers”, “grateful dad for taking me to school”...	✓	✓		✓
Care for others	More friendly communication with other people	“more gentle with friends”, “no more hit, kick”, “forgive them when they do wrong things to me”, “talk to friends later when the anger is over”...	✓			✓
	Better listening	“become good listener”, “keep quiet and listen”, “no judgement”, “no interruption”, “can learn from their knowledge”, “wait until my turn”	✓		✓	✓
	Becoming more empathetic	“can feel their feelings”, “care about others’ feelings, not only my feelings as before”; “help old people”, “touched by others’ crying”, “understand others”...	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Knowing how to care for others	“make birthday cards and present to beloved ones”, “comfort my friends when they are sad”	✓			
	Feeling connected with friends and teachers	“more hugs”, “gestures to express love to friends and teachers”, “easily share with friends”, “understand each other”, “shared feelings”, “feel confident to share”, “dare to say what I could not say before”... “dare to make mistakes”	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Better relationships and communication with others	“know how to say thank you and sorry”, “think the consequences of my actions, not to hurt others”; “returns lost things”, “say what I really need and want to others”	✓	✓	✓	✓

<b>Care for nature</b>	Better awareness of protecting environment	“get to know the most visible impacts of plastic debris”, “share this knowledge with others”, “get to know how to reduce, reuse and recycle”...	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Better behaviors to protect nature	“pick up waste in the school yard”, “reduce plastic bags”, “waste sorting”, “keep the environment clean”, “do not litter”, “bring bowls and glasses from home to buy foods”, “eat there not take away”, “remind friends to put waste in right places”, “making paper bags to give to street vendors and canteens”...	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Feeling more empathetic with nature	“feel deeply sorry and uncomfortable when I use or see other using plastic bags”, “love nature”, “become more harmonious with nature”, “care about and for trees”	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Mental health</b>	More positive affects	“At ease”, “quiet/calm and peaceful”, “mindful”, “more gentle”, “very happy and content”, “forgive”, “tolerant”, “full of energy”, “feel balanced”	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Less negative affects	“release from daily stressors”, “relieves stress”	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Meaningfulness	“a more colorful life”, “can help others”...			✓	✓
	Positive functioning	“more confident”, “more independent”, “more interdependent”, “learn and work effectively”, “never tiring”, “sense of renewal”, “refresh the batteries”, “balancing studying and playing”, “my learning is more comfortable”...	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: PS1: Primary School 1; PS2: Primary School 2; SS1: Secondary School 1; SS2: Secondary School 2

In terms of care for others, the enhancement in deep listening skills and relationship skills (i.e. becoming more empathetic, feeling connected with friends and teachers, and better relationships and communication with others) are commonly reported. Some previous Vietnamese studies have recently confirmed the relationship between SEL and well-being in adolescent students (Nguyen et al., 2020; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2021, Dinh et al., 2021). As shown in Table 6, in line with these studies, self-management and social awareness practices seem to improve students’ well-being in both hedonic and eudemonic aspects: more positive affects, less negative affects, more positive functioning and meaningfulness. Many participants said breathing is a great activity for them to practice remaining calm during stressful situations, which helped them think clearly to find the right solutions to remove stressors. They also told that mindfulness exercises increased their concentration, engagement, and attention span. Thus, their stress level seemed to decrease during lessons. In another aspect, all participants said they were released when they could share their problems, thoughts, and feelings with their friends; they also felt stronger, confident and supported because they knew that someone was listening to them without judgement. They can build strong relationships with friends when both parties share thoughts and feelings and respond to one another’s needs, which helps increase their meaningfulness.

Regarding the care for nature component, all participants reported that they increased environmental protection awareness, had better behaviours to protect nature and felt more

empathetic with nature. Very recently, previous Vietnamese studies have shown the relationship between nature-relatedness and mental health among university students. Those with higher levels of nature-relatedness tend to experience more life satisfaction and less psychological distress (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022; Ton et al., 2022). In line with these studies, in this interview, some participants said they stood under a tree's shadow to calm down when angry. “Feel blue, touch green”, using the natural environment to regulate emotions may be an effective strategy. This sharing also helps confirm the interdependence of the three components of care. The practices in each component can promote those in other components.

**Question 3:** *What is the impact of happiness-based activities on teachers’ social and emotional competencies and mental health?*

The summary of social and emotional, and mental health outcomes of teachers from students’ perspective are presented in Table 7. As can be seen from Table 7, all participants recognized some positive changes in their teachers in terms of their social and emotional skills.

Table 7. Summary of social and emotional outcomes of teachers from students’ perspectives

Thematic category	Sub-theme	Characteristic phrases	PS 1	PS 2	SS 1	SS 2
Self-care	Emotion regulation/ management/ control	“calm”, “not getting angry, annoyed”, “gently behave when students do something wrong”, “do not scold”, “tolerant”...	✓	✓	✓	✓
Care for others	Better listening	“patient”, “listening to our feelings”, “listening to us”	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Feeling connected with students	“more hugs”, “gestures to express love to students”, “like our friends”, “seem that can say everything with her”, “care about and for students”, “put herself in our shoes”, “very empathetic, easy to share with her”, “talk comfortably with her”, “spread positive energy to us”...	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Better relationships with students	“fair to both good and bad students”, “understand students’ feelings”, “solving problems gently”, “teach us to understand ourselves”, “we respect her a lot but very close to her”, “very friendly”	✓	✓	✓	✓
Care for nature	Better awareness of protecting environment	“teach us the harm of plastic waste”, “teach us to take care of nature”	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Better behaviors to protect nature	“pick up waste in the school yard”, “keep the environment clean”, “do not litter”, “plant trees and take care of trees”,	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mental health	More positive affects	“happy”, “comfortable”, “calm”, “balanced”, “positive energy”, “optimistic”	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: PS1: Primary School 1; PS2: Primary School 2; SS1: Secondary School 1; SS2: Secondary School 2

Regarding self-care mode, the findings showed that teachers could adaptively regulate their emotions in the classroom. The participants revealed that even when students did something wrong, their teachers behaved gently and solved problems effectively. By using emotion regulation strategies, teachers might increase their positive emotions or decrease their negative emotions. The participants found their teachers comfortable, grounded, calm and energetic.

Regarding care for others mode, the findings showed that the teachers were good at listening and connecting with their students. As reported by the participants, teachers’ active listening made them feel cared for and understood. Moreover, when students feel that their teacher is interested in what they have to say and cares about their experiences and perspectives, it creates

an emotional connection that can positively impact their well-being and school experience. Besides, the findings showed that the relationship skills of the teachers increased. The participants said they considered their teachers “as a close friend with whom they can share problems and negative feelings and ask for advice”. At the same that, this close relationship did not decrease their respect toward their teachers. The caring student-teacher relationship plays an important role in students’ well-being and teachers’ well-being (McNeely et al., 2002; Osher et al., 2007). In line with previous studies, the findings showed that the teachers had more positive affects (e.g. balanced, happy, and full of energy).

More importantly, as Roffey (2012) also put it metaphorically, “*pupil well-being- teacher well-being: Two sides of the same coin*”. The participants said that the full energy of teachers spread to them, improved their love life and made them more optimistic. Indeed, students learn to develop self-discipline and support and encourage one another through teachers modelling desired caring behaviors. Students learn from the way teachers regulate their emotions in a constructive way, successfully solve problems in potentially stressful situations and effectively seek supports from colleagues and their students. The social and emotional competencies of teachers significantly impact SEL and their students' well-being (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Findings from a study by Wanless and Domitrovich (2015) on a school's readiness to implement new interventions affirmed that teachers with strong social-emotional skills tend to conduct new social-emotional intervention programs more faithfully. This finding also helps confirm the effective framework of the Happy School Project that begin with activities to build school leaders’ and teachers’ care capacities as a precursor to student programming.

Table 8 summaries teachers' social, emotional, and mental health outcomes from their perspective.

Table 8. Summary of social and emotional outcomes of teachers from their own perspectives

Thematic category	Sub-theme	Characteristic phrases	Respondents							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Self-care	Self-awareness	“naming emotions”, “recognizing the mechanism of why we have those emotions”, “recognizing emotions”, “wanting some alone time to think”, “identifying activities, knowing how to do”, “more motivated”	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
		“becoming mature, calmer, thinking before doing“, “more deeply”, “living better, having more skills to be more peaceful				✓			✓	✓
	Self-management	“managing emotions”, “regulating emotions”, “being calmer, understanding the causes more thoroughly”, “knowing that emotions come and go”, “recognizing & accepting emotions”; “knowing what to prioritize, what to let go of”	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Identifying core values for own	“Mindfulness, peace, happiness, love, empathy, tolerance”					✓			
	Connecting to self	“connecting with myself better”, “loving myself more”, “forgiving myself more”; “understanding & empathizing myself”, loving my body”, “reducing self-blame”, “respecting myself”					✓	✓	✓	✓
	Nurturing gratitude	“cherishing what I have”, “appreciating every moment when I am with my loved one”, “being grateful to have a healthy body, eyes to see, ears to hear, mouth to smile, talk , communicate...”, “Thank you HS Project for giving me many ideas and ways of doing things right”				✓	✓	✓	✓	



<b>Care for others</b>	Relationship skills; Non-violent communication	“Less judgment”, “reflecting things objectively”, “I have many ways to contact, relate, and treat people around me”, “more suitable, better, calmer”, “accepting that difference of people... looking at their good side to build relationships... not discriminating, avoiding people I don’t like”	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	Deep listening	“Listen more”, “listen, then understand, then have empathy”		✓		✓	✓	
	Empathy	“more empathetic”, “everyone has a point of view”, “it is not that people are angry with me, but people are angry elsewhere, sad elsewhere”				✓	✓	
	Relationship with family members	“sharing, confiding, talking with my child”, “behaving gently and politely”, “spend more time with your child”, “studying & resting together”, “letting my child be independent, talking to your children, not putting pressure on academic achievement”		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Relationship with colleagues	“relationships with staff, and colleagues are more friendly, sharing and helping each other”, “feeling of companionship and support”, “accepting the differences of all people”, “looking at their good side to build relationships...”		✓	✓		✓	✓
	Teacher-student relationship	“reducing distance”, “more friendly”, “finding good points to praise and motivate”, “less judgmental, respecting children, understanding their own circumstances, strengths and weaknesses”, “respecting children, supporting them to solve problems & propose ideas”		✓			✓	✓
	School climate	“friendly, open, sharing atmosphere”		✓				
	Spreading HS Project	“sharing with teachers in the school”, “spreading (motivation, non-violent communication...) to school leaders, administrators & other teachers”		✓			✓	
	Applying happiness skills in teaching and educational activities	“applying in teaching lessons, in experiential activities”, “integrating in 2 periods of experiential activities”, “instructing students to implement small projects (non-violent communication, environmental protection, empathy, anger management...)”; “applying happiness skills to organize activities with students...”, “helping to carry out teaching activities (according to the 2018 National Education Program) more effectively”		✓	✓			✓
<b>Care for nature</b>	Environmental awareness pro-environmental behaviour	“try to (reduce plastic bags)”, “reminding students to protect the environment and protect trees, not to waste paper”, “less shopping”, “more confident when wearing friend's stuff for (reuse)”			✓	✓		
	Connect with nature	“knowing how to spend time arranging flowers, looking at flowers, loving the natural beauty around”						✓

<b>Mental health</b>	More positive affects	“feeling at peace, happy”; “feeling safe, feeling light, comfortable, calm and not jostling”, “proud of the path I was fortunate to have chosen”, “feeling joyful and happy”, “feeling more peaceful”, “proud of myself, happy...” “peaceful and optimistic”	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Positive thinking	“positive thinking”, “optimistic”			✓		✓		
	Inner strength	“feeling inner strength”, “stronger, steadfast”			✓				
	Life satisfaction, purpose	“satisfied with life“, “seeing life meaningful”, “Happiness School Project as a very meaningful gift”	✓			✓		✓	
	Pressure reduce	“reduce work pressure”, “helping me release daily pressure”		✓					✓
	Job loving	“being happy with the job”, “having the motivation to do a good job”, “always looking at the job with a very light and fun measure”; “I love my job back, excited”	✓		✓				✓

In terms of self-care mode, almost all teachers interviewed reported that HS improved their self-awareness and self-management. In addition, half of the teachers felt better connected to themselves and practiced cultivating gratitude more often. Improvements in these capacities mean a lot to teachers, improve their mental health, and help them connect better with others.

In terms of care for others mode, teachers reported that HS improved their relationship skills, including non-violent communication and deep listening. Those skills help teachers improve relationships with family members, colleagues, and students.

One very meaningful result is that teachers have reported many positive impacts of HS on their mental health. From practicing happiness-based activities, teachers have more positive emotions and love their profession more. As mentioned above, teachers' mental health is an important factor, helping them to complete their tasks better, become more engaged with their careers, and positively impact their students' learning and mental health.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

##### 4.1. Summary

Grounded in the program’s theory of action, the evaluation is designed to address three basic questions:

- (1) What happiness-based activities are being implemented in the schools?
- (2) What impact(s) does the Happy School Project have on students’ social and emotional competencies and mental health?
- (3) What impact(s) does the Happy School have on teachers’ social and emotional competencies and mental health?

To address these three questions, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were administered. The findings from both approaches suggested that scaling –up is very promising. Findings compiled from the 05 experimental studies conducted by students and teachers of the schools participating in the Happy School Project confirm the effectiveness of the Project. Students who practised happiness-based activities (in all three modes of care: self-care, care for others and care for nature) significantly tended to have better social and emotional skills and experience the higher levels of life satisfaction and lower levels of psychological distress.

Findings from qualitative data showed that the schools implemented a variety of happiness-based three modes of care, in which self-care activities are mainly focused. The participants

also found themselves improve social and emotional skills, especially self-management and in both hedonic and eudemonic well-being, via simple but regular practices. They also recognized the significant positive changes in their teachers' social and emotional skills and well-being. Especially, they were much better in self-management skills and full of energy. Students benefited greatly from these changes, which helped create a better student-teacher relationship and a supportive and caring environment.

Available data are unrelated to long-term change indicators such as achievement, attendance, suspension and expulsion rates. However, some systematic and meta-analyses confirm the relationship between mental health and academic performance and achievement (e.g. Bas, 2021). It is expected that with a long-term project with the integration of a care-based curriculum, the effects on academic achievement can be identified.

## **4.2. Limitations of Evaluation Data**

### *4.2.1. Limitations of evaluation data*

- It was ideal but impossible to conduct an evaluation study on the effectiveness of the entire Happy School Project in all participating schools because the implementation of happiness-based activities is inconsistently and asynchronously organized in all these schools. This is due to the differences between these schools in needs, facilities and human resources, student characteristics, school levels... Therefore, we have chosen to evaluate the effectiveness of specific happiness-based activities in each mode (based on 05 intervention studies).

- The implementation of the quantitative assessment (pretest – posttest) before and after implementing the Happy School Project was also cancelled. As planned, this assessment would be carried out at the end of the second school year of implementing the program (2019-2020); However, the Covid epidemic halted the implementation of happiness-based activities during this school year (This is also the reason why the Project has to extend the ending time).

- The qualitative study (focus group interviews) works as a retrospective qualitative one, with a relatively small number of participants, which may lead to a decrease in the reliability and the diversity of data. Due to Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021, most happiness-based activities were implemented in the 2018-2019 school year; fewer activities were carried out in the remaining time. Over a relatively long period, teachers, and especially students, may forget some activities that have been implemented, ignoring some of the effects that they may feel and obtain after implementing activities.

### *4.2.2. Suggestions for Future Development*

- Integrating competencies to build up Happy School into the curriculum content of the teacher training program.

- Including competencies to build up Happy School and clarify the criteria for these competencies in The Professional Standards for Teachers.

- Organizing systematic, longer-term implementation and conducting more scientific assessments of the effectiveness of the Project.

- Continuing to deploy, reflect on, and share experiences to further improve the manual and enrich the practical exercises to improve the competencies to build Happy Schools.

- Expand the building up of happy schools at all levels (from kindergarten, high school and higher education) and to other regions.

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**DỰ ÁN TRƯỜNG HỌC HẠNH PHÚC Ở TỈNH THỪA  
THIÊN HUẾ: ĐÁNH GIÁ TÁC  
ĐỘNG**

*TU-ANH THI TRAN, PHUOC CAT TUONG NGUYEN,  
HONG-VAN THI DINH  
Trường Đại học Sư phạm,  
Đại học Huế  
QUỲNH-ANH  
NGỌC NGUYỄN  
Đại học RMIT Việt Nam*

**Tóm tắt:** Dự án Trường học Hạnh phúc tại tỉnh Thừa Thiên Huế được thành lập và triển khai như một biện pháp nhằm giải quyết các vấn đề về cảm xúc-xã hội và sức khỏe tâm thần trong xã hội ngày nay nói chung và trong các trường học nói riêng. Bài báo trình bày kết quả đánh giá tác động của việc triển khai Dự án đối với học sinh và giáo viên các trường tham gia, từ đó, đề xuất các gợi ý cho việc nhân rộng Dự án ra các trường khác. Các phương pháp định lượng và định tính đã được sử dụng với học sinh và giáo viên các trường tham gia. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy việc thực hiện các hoạt động dựa trên hạnh phúc có tác động tích cực đến năng lực cảm xúc xã hội và sức khỏe tinh thần của học sinh và giáo viên.

**Từ khóa:** Dự án Trường học Hạnh phúc, đánh giá tác động, tỉnh Thừa Thiên Huế, năng lực cảm xúc-xã hội, sức khỏe tâm thần.