

A Local Problem That We Should Solve

Have you ever asked yourself whether or not you are happy? Not an easy word to define or question to answer, and yet there are reports which measure happiness in children. Reports which sadly show how poorly Japan performs. This essay hopes to raise awareness about this local problem and offer an alternative approach to measuring youth happiness in this culture.

One UNICEF report - detailing happiness in developed countries - ranks three categories: mental well-being, physical health and social skills. Although Japan's overall ranking of 20th might not seem so low, when you take a look at each category it shows the unique characteristics of Japan's education system and how children are negatively affected by it. If I can define *local* as a *national problem*, then it should be noted that the report indicates that even though our children are physically healthy, they are neither mentally well nor developing the social skills needed to be successful in life.

This "Innocenti Report Card 16", published in September 2020 by UNICEF, an organization which promotes children's rights, shows the happiness ranking of children in 38 developed countries. They measure happiness by collecting data in those areas which experts believe lead to a good childhood. *Mental Well-Being* measures positivity and quality of life experiences. *Physical Health* results show progress in medical care. And *Skills* analyses how much basic education children receive and how their social skills are developed. Japan ranked first for physical health, 27th for skills, but only 37th for mental well-being. This shows that while Japan provides enough medical care and proper sanitation, it has an education system that has an adverse effect on mental health and underplays social skills.

As a young person living in Japan, these outcomes are not wholly unexpected. While I am physically healthy, I do feel stressed by my jam-packed life. I am overwhelmed by the length of my daily to-do list, beginning with school, ending with cram school, and with so much homework and exams sandwiched in between. I am aware that the economic wealth of the country means that I have always had access to good quality education, however, compared to other nations, Japan is a profoundly academic background-oriented society. This makes it very difficult for young people to enjoy their childhood to the fullest as getting into a good school, a good university, and then getting a well paid job are the only real measures of having a happy life. All our energy is used to that end, the stress can weigh heavily and mental health doesn't factor in. This, I believe, has resulted in middle and high school students becoming apathetic towards their studies.

One way that we could improve our mental well-being ranking is by redefining what happiness really means for children. At present children are told that happiness only equates with the old stereotypes: good school, good university, good job. Yet studies show that close relationships and meaningful or rewarding work are more important contentment indicators. If our education system could start promoting these things, then I believe children and adults would have a tremendous burden lifted off their shoulders.

This report has highlighted the need to tackle this socio-cultural issue. Poor mental health, of course, exists in other countries, but it is particularly serious in Japan right now. I believe, we can still educate to the highest standards whilst also reconsidering what is important in life. Mental health or wealth? Changing our definition of happiness is at least a starting point towards nurturing a generation better equipped to lead an all round healthier life.