

2. Well-being policies and practices in education: an overview

This chapter provides an overview of the Emirate of Dubai's well-being journey thus far, as well as the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA)'s current approach to well-being in schools. In addition, this chapter presents the OECD's analytical lenses, and discusses how it has been applied to Dubai's private school sector.

Introduction

In recent years, the Emirate of Dubai has been placing a stronger emphasis on people's well-being with the aim of making Dubai “an inclusive and cohesive society ... that is the preferred place to live, work and visit and a pivotal hub in the global economy” (Government of Dubai - The Executive Council, 2021^[1]). As part of this approach, KHDA and Dubai's private schools have introduced a number of initiatives to help raise awareness, measure and support students' and staff's well-being. This report analyses the well-being policies and practices implemented in Dubai's private school sector, looking at the strengths and challenges of the approach taken in Dubai, and discussing potential steps that could support higher levels of well-being in the Emirate's private school sector. As background for the discussion that follows, this chapter provides an overview of the Emirate's journey thus far, presenting KHDA's current approach to well-being in schools. In addition, the next sections discuss the OECD's analytical lenses, and how it has been applied to Dubai's socio-economic context.

Well-being: the OECD's perspective

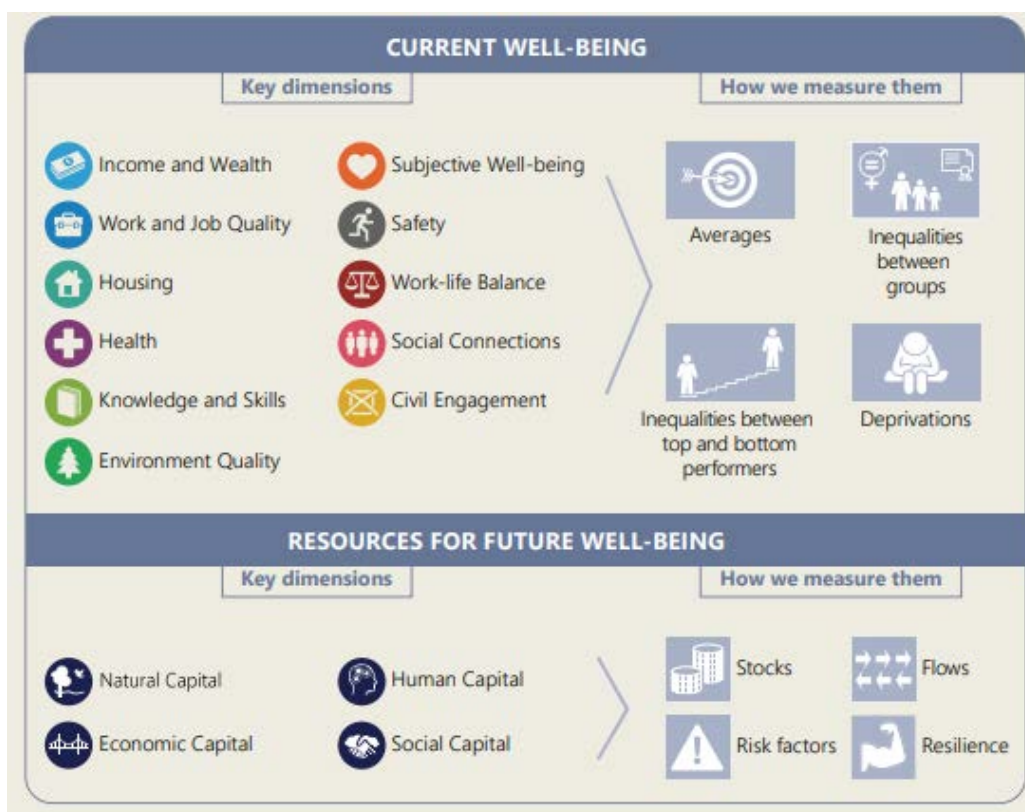
The notion of well-being has gained increasing traction over the last 20 years as an agenda for research, measurement and policy. The OECD has played a prominent role on all of these fronts. It has contributed to the development of better metrics, quality data and comparable indicators. There is now a solid and well-established case for looking “beyond GDP”, using well-being metrics in the policy process and assessing economic growth in terms of its impact on people's well-being and on societies' standard of living.

But what is well-being? It can be defined as the quality of people's lives and their standard of living. It is often quantified both via objective measures, such as household income, educational resources and health status, and via subjective indicators such as experienced affect (or emotions), perceptions of quality of life and life satisfaction (OECD, 2019^[2]). According to the OECD Well-Being Framework (see Figure 2.1 below), well-being is defined in terms of:

1. **Material Living Conditions and Quality of Life**, captured through 11 different dimensions that shape people's lives. These dimensions are: income and wealth, work and job quality, housing, health, work-life balance, knowledge and skills, social connections, civic engagement, environment quality, safety and subjective well-being;
2. Four types of **assets** (natural, economic, human and social) that drive well-being over time (Llena-Nozal, Martin and Murtin, 2019^[3]).

The most notable features of the OECD Well-Being Framework are that: 1) its dimensions and indicators are people-focused rather than economy-focused; 2) it captures outcomes (i.e. life conditions and experiences) as opposed to inputs (i.e. health status rather than health care spending) or outputs (i.e. number of patients treated); 3) it pays attention not only to averages but also to the distribution of outcomes; and 4) it takes account of both the objective and subjective aspects (i.e. people's evaluations) of well-being. (Llena-Nozal, Martin and Murtin, 2019^[3]).

Figure 2.1. The OECD Well-Being Framework



Source: (OECD, 2020^[4]), *How's Life? 2020: Measuring Well-being*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9870c393-en>.

And why does well-being matter for policy? A focus on well-being provides policymakers with a broader picture of the state of their country/jurisdiction and the way in which its economy is performing for its population. The potential of this broader approach for improving policy decisions and outcomes is significant. Through a broader focus on multi-dimensional well-being, policymakers can better identify the areas of good performance, detect challenges and areas of strain at an early stage and understand the way in which different components of well-being interact within their specific national contexts. This can allow them to set priorities more effectively, better assess the cost and benefits of different policy options and select levers for high-impact action (Llena-Nozal, Martin and Murin, 2019^[3]). The following chapters draw on the OECD Well-Being Framework as well as other analytical frameworks to discuss how well-being emerges and is conceptualised in education and education policy.

Dubai's private school sector well-being journey

Inspired by the vision of the UAE's and Dubai's leadership and the responses from staff engagement surveys, KHDA embarked on a "well-being journey" to increase levels of happiness and well-being among all stakeholder groups in Dubai's private school sector. The journey first began within the organisation itself, with the adoption of a strengths-based system approach, a reprioritisation of KHDA's strategy as well as fundamental changes to the organisational culture based on the New Economics Foundation's work on "5 ways to wellbeing" (Aked et al., 2008^[5]). Once shifts in the organisation's internal processes and culture had effectively bedded down, KHDA began to look outwards, disseminating positive practices across the private sector and inviting other stakeholders, including school leaders, teachers, parents and students, to join their journey.

As part of this journey, KHDA leveraged existing initiatives in Dubai, such as the Lighthouse project, What Works and What Works X events (see Box 3.6 in Chapter 3). In addition, the organisation drew on emerging practices worldwide, notably a strengths-based approach to education (see Box 2.1) (KHDA, 2020^[6]). As part of these efforts, KHDA collaborated with a number of institutions and experts, including the International Positive Education Network, and The Wellbeing Lab (KHDA, 2020^[6]). KHDA also developed new programmes to measure well-being levels, such as the Dubai Student Well-being Census (see Box 3.5 in Chapter 3 and the Dubai Adults@School Wellbeing Survey (see Chapter 4).

All the while, KHDA's approach to well-being policies and practices has not only recognised, but also embraced the diversity of the sector. With the understanding that a “one size fits all” approach to well-being cannot and should not be imposed in Dubai's private sector, KHDA has avoided a directive style or a narrow definition of well-being, opting instead for an “organic” adoption of well-being in Dubai's private education sector (KHDA, 2020^[6]). Under this model, schools and other education stakeholders have the autonomy to take action based on their own priorities, resources and interests. In this context, KHDA has focused on building stakeholders' well-being literacy, and disseminating what has worked – or is believed to have worked – encouraging others to follow suit.

As will be discussed in the next chapters, the results of this approach have been remarkable in many respects. KHDA's efforts have helped raise awareness of the importance of well-being across the sector. More importantly, it has encouraged school leaders, teachers, parents and students to better understand the concept of well-being, not only in the form of daily habits but also as a long-term commitment for themselves and the system as a whole.

However, evidence from the OECD fact-finding mission indicates that, in spite of their best efforts and intentions, stakeholders often lack the necessary guidance, information, skills or resources to implement meaningful and impactful well-being policies and practices. This suggests that KHDA's “organic” approach may be nearing its limit in many respects and that more will be needed to translate stakeholders' growing understanding and commitment into more effective change in Dubai's classrooms and schools that supports improvements. This review argues that to succeed in the next steps of its journey, KHDA will need to consider new strategies, and a re-examination of the organisation's priorities, activities and stakeholder engagement methods.

Box 2.1. What is positive education?

Positive education has been defined as: “the application of the science of wellbeing and principles of positive psychology within education which enhances student, staff and wider community wellbeing – both in boosting wellbeing and reducing ill-being” (Positive Education Schools Association (PESA), 2020^[7]) The positive education approach acknowledges “the importance of, and teach(es) the skills required to enhance wellbeing and character development as an essential component of academic achievement and personal flourishing over an individual's lifetime” (Norrish et al., 2013^[8]).

Despite its growing popularity, the positive education approach is not fully established – or indeed unanimously accepted by education experts (see Box 5.2 in Chapter 5) – as a pedagogical model. Early adopters of the positive education approach have drawn on different frameworks, including:

- The PERMA(H/+) framework which consists of: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment and Physical Health. (Positive Psychology Center, Penn Arts & Science, 2021^[9])
- Five-ways of well-being that identifies five key actions to improve well-being: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning, and give (Aked et al., 2008^[5]).

- The PROSPER framework that highlights Positivity, Relationships, Outcomes, Strengths, Purpose, Engagement and Resilience (Noble and McGrath, 2015^[10]).

Similarly, various positive education models have promoted different interventions and strategies, although some features appear common across the board, including:

- Appreciative inquiry or strengths-based approach: positive education is built on an approach to change that focuses on what is working well, and stakeholders' strengths. KHDA is an advocate of this approach.
- Character development: at the core of positive education is the understanding that values and character traits can be taught and developed, and that the "formation of character" should be at the heart of schooling.
- Mindfulness: those who practice mindfulness exercises can become more attentive of their thoughts and surroundings. Mindfulness interventions include exercises on breathing, body scans, movement, and sensorimotor awareness (Napoli, Krech and Holley, 2005^[11]). Meta-analyses show that regular mindfulness practice can improve cognitive performance as well as physical and psychological health and overall well-being (Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz and Walach, 2014^[12]) (OECD, 2018^[13]) (Weare, 2013^[14]) (Burke et al., 2009^[15]).
- Staff well-being: there is growing recognition of the importance of staff well-being. Many positive education manuals and frameworks highlight the importance of providing teachers and school staff with the knowledge, skills and tools they need to look after their own well-being and that of their colleagues.
- Student agency: positive education calls for students to take an active role in their own learning and well-being. This can involve opportunities for authentic student decision-making, as well as the teaching of social and emotional skills (Positive Education Schools Association (PESA), 2020^[7])

It is important to note that many of these elements were not born from or are exclusive to the positive education approach.

Positive education in Dubai

KHDA has adopted a strengths-based approach to education and well-being (discussed above). Positive education, on the other hand, has not been formally taken up by the organisation. Nevertheless, since 2016-17, KHDA has partnered with a number of institutions and experts that promote a strengths-based approach, including the International Positive Education Network, the Geelong Grammar School, and The Wellbeing Lab. Together with these partners, KHDA has helped organise conferences, meetings, workshops for principals, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to develop their knowledge and skills. As a result, many schools and school networks have since committed to the tenets of positive education, embedding it into their curricula, appointing Heads of Positive Education and/or Well-being champions, re-thinking student discipline policies, renovating the school's physical environment (e.g. mindfulness and well-being rooms), training their staff and introducing new practices and initiatives (e.g. positive affirmation and gratitude exercises) (KHDA, 2020^[6]). Despite the fact that no specific positive education approach or products have been officially endorsed by KHDA, stakeholder interviews revealed the widespread influence of this specific approach among KHDA's leadership and staff.

An overview of the OECD's analytical lenses

High levels of happiness and well-being have wide benefits for individuals, and more broadly for the performance of education systems, the economy and society. Conversely, low levels of welfare can

negatively impact teaching and learning and jeopardise individuals' and countries' present and future. As a result, increasing attention is being given by policymakers and educators to how the education system can support students', teachers' and other non-teaching staff's well-being.

As measures to monitor and strengthen well-being in education have emerged across the OECD and beyond, it has become possible to take a comparative perspective on the matter, benchmarking countries' experiences with well-being policies, identifying key policy challenges and how they relate to countries and economies' wider socio-economic context, as well as promising practices. At the national or local level, looking beyond one's borders can help inform more effective policy design, implementation and monitoring, all of which can, in turn, ultimately, help strengthen well-being in education. However, undertaking any type of comparative review meaningfully requires caution, and in the specific case of well-being policies and practices, careful consideration of:

- **The actors/players/stakeholders involved:** More so than other education policies, the broad nature of the well-being issue implies a large number of stakeholders, including, for example, teachers, school leaders, and relevant government authorities (e.g. health and education agencies). Stakeholders can be both active agents, meaning players involved in the design and implementation of policies, and/or passive players, in that they are the target or beneficiary of certain policies.
- **The environment/context in which they operate and co-exist:** The manner in which stakeholders interact; including who leads efforts or monitors the impact of policies, how and whether collaborative work is undertaken, vary across countries and sub-national entities depending on the regulations, processes and culture that exist in the environment in which they operate (see Figure 2 in the Key Insights).
- **The levers/channels on which well-being policies and practices draw:** different levers and channels can (and should) be leveraged to support well-being policies and practices in education. As a reference, Figure 2.2 illustrates how they can be categorised under the following dimensions of an effective education policy approach:
 - **Smart policy design and implementation:** this implies a policy that is well justified, based on evidence, and supported by relevant and appropriately-aligned incentives and regulations.
 - **A conducive context:** effective policy design and implementation processes recognise the influence of the existing policy environment, the educational governance and institutional settings and external context.
 - **Effective and inclusive stakeholder engagement:** whether and how key stakeholders are recognised and included in the policy design and implementation processes, is crucial to its success. It is equally important to build their capacity and knowledge to ensure the effectiveness of the policy.

As shown in Figure 2.2, the different policy levers are interconnected and interdependent. A successful policy approach to well-being in education requires a combination of these different channels, often at different points of the policy cycle. For example, strategies and visions can offer common orientation and goals, and define stakeholders' roles and responsibilities. This is particularly relevant at the starting point of any reform process. It is important that these types of interventions be accompanied by relevant services and resources (e.g. psychological counselling and guidelines) that enable stakeholders to successfully implement this vision.

The OECD's analytical lenses applied to Dubai's private school sector

With the aim of providing relevant and appropriate policy considerations to the Emirate of Dubai, the analysis undertaken in this review accounts for the specificities of Dubai's context. The particularities of the Emirate's social and economic environment (e.g. diversity of the school system and population) as well

as the private school sector environment (e.g. wide disparities between schools) – discussed in detail in Chapter 1 – were carefully considered when developing the diagnosis and policy recommendations.

Other deliberations were taken when applying the OECD's analytical lenses to Dubai's private school sector. For example, although the OECD's analysis accounts for the multiple stakeholders in Dubai's private school sector, from students and families to the school leaders and governing boards, and the multiple government agencies (see Figure 1 in the Key Insights), the analysis has focused predominantly on three stakeholders: students (Chapter 5), teachers (Chapter 4) and school leaders as key school actors (Chapter 3). This selection is due to the fact that existing surveys and data collection tools (e.g. TALIS, PISA, the Dubai Student Wellbeing Census (DSWC) and the Dubai Adults@School Wellbeing Survey) in Dubai have focused on these actors. While the welfare of other stakeholders (e.g. well-being counsellors, nurses, parents, governing board members) is also critically important and will be discussed to some extent, the information available on their subjective and objective well-being remains more limited thereby precluding a more in-depth analysis.

Importantly, as discussed above, this review has not only considered the different players as the *target* of well-being policies and practices, but also as *agents of change*. As argued in the next chapters, the OECD's diagnosis has revealed that this view is not yet as widely shared in Dubai as in some OECD countries and economies (e.g. Wales [United Kingdom]), in particular with regards to the perception of teachers and students as empowered actors. Chapters 4 and 5 offer some policy considerations to support KHDA in this endeavour.

As part of the OECD's diagnosis, the OECD's analytical lenses were used to categorise the existing well-being policies and practices in Dubai's private school sector, including those implemented by government agencies and those implemented by schools according to the main policy lever/channel leveraged. Table 2.1 provides a broad overview of this categorisation, following the colour coding from Figure 2.2.

Table 2.1. Categorisation of Dubai's well-being policies and practices according to policy levers

Dimensions	Key policy levers	Definition	Level	Examples of existing policies and practices	
Smart policy design and implementation	Strategic vision and orientation	Visions and strategies that provide a common logic and understanding for well-being, propose a vision and goals for the sector, define roles and responsibilities	System or sector	- KHDA's informal dissemination of the positive education approach - KHDA strategy map	
			School or school network	- Reports suggest some schools (or school groups) have developed their own well-being strategy or frameworks	
	Regulatory mechanisms and standards	Regulations, laws, standards and other instruments that regulate the actions of stakeholders to support well-being	System or sector	- The UAE Child Protection Law - The UAE Labour Law - Executive Council Resolution No. 2 of 2017 regulating private schools in the Emirate of Dubai - DSIB School Inspection	
			School or school network	- School-level regulations (e.g. code of conduct)	
	Data collection and monitoring	Surveys, assessments and other tools that collect quantitative and qualitative data on well-being	System or sector	- KHDA's DSWC - PISA and TALIS - KHDA's Dubai Adults@School Wellbeing survey - KHDA's Ad-hoc student surveys (e.g. impact of COVID-19) - KHDA's Parent Survey	
			School or school network	- Student surveys developed by schools - Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) surveys - Staff consultations/surveys	
	Research and analysis	Drawing on the evidence to research specific areas of interest, inform programmes and policies, report	System or sector	- Ad-hoc research projects being conducted by KHDA or external contractors - KHDA's Infographics on survey results	
			School or school network	n/a	
	Inclusive and effective stakeholder engagement	Awareness raising and communication	Communication mechanisms and resources to disseminate knowledge, create awareness surrounding certain issues	System or sector	- UAE Bullying Prevention Week - Dubai Fitness Challenge 30x30 - KHDA's Teachers of Dubai - KHDA's Teach Together - KHDA's What Works, What Works X and Living Arabic - KHDA's Abundance
				School or school network	- School-level campaigns
		Training and capacity-building	Tools, courses and systems to develop skills among stakeholders	System or sector	- KHDA's Training for DSWC - KHDA's Positive Parenting Workshops
				School or school network	- Engaging with external experts to provide training or workshops on specific topics (e.g. mental health safeguarding) - Some schools organise seminars for students and/or staff
Stakeholder participation and collaboration		Regular and/or ad-hoc committees, groups and/or platforms to enable stakeholder engagement and collaboration	System or sector	- The UAE Well-being Council - The Ministry of Youth's Youth Circles and Councils - The KHDA Student Summit on Well-being - On-going projects co-led by KHDA and students - KHDA's What Works, What Works X and Living Arabic - Teachers Social - Lighthouse	
			School or school network	- Many schools have student councils and/or buddy programmes	
A conducive context	Support services and resources	Tools and resources to promote well-being, identify issues, meet individual needs and address barriers	System or sector	- KHDA's New Days New Ways Platform - International Positive Education Network (IPEN) resources on offer to schools as part of the DSWC school report	
			School or school network	- Some schools offer school counselling, and other forms of pastoral care	
	Instruction and pedagogy	Curriculum, assessment and pedagogical strategies to help students develop cognitive and non-cognitive competences that support their overall well-being	System or sector	- UAE Moral Education Curriculum and assessment	
			School or school network	- Reports suggest most school curricula incorporate dimensions of student well-being and health literacy to some extent	

Note: the table is colour-coded to match Figure 2.2.

This exercise has revealed some of the sector’s main strengths, as well as key policy gaps. As illustrated in Figure 2.2, KHDA has relied predominantly on three policy levers and channels to support well-being in Dubai’s private school sector, namely awareness raising and communication; stakeholder participation and collaboration, and data collection and monitoring.

Figure 2.2. Main policy levers and channels used in Dubai’s private school sector to support well-being



Note: Darker shades indicate policy levers that have been emphasised by stakeholders in Dubai.

Nevertheless, as will be argued in the following chapters, KHDA could be making fuller use of these levers in many respects. For example, while KHDA’s measures have fostered collaboration between schools, more could be done to ensure stakeholders translate what they learned from these opportunities into their schools’ daily lives (see Chapter 3). More attention could also be given to stakeholders’ engagement in system- and sector-level policymaking and implementation (see Chapters 4 and 5). Moreover, KHDA’s surveys – and their reporting - could be re-examined to ensure that they provide relevant data to stakeholders (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5).

As will be discussed in the next chapters, the OECD’s analysis also reveals that certain policy channels are currently underutilised in the Emirate. The main reason for this is that, as a government agency that “does not regulate curriculum, pedagogy, assessment of teacher development” (Al Karam, n.d.^[16]), KHDA’s leadership considers many of the policy levers specified in Figure 2.2, such as instruction and pedagogy, to be off limits. Still, KHDA could take fuller advantage of other key levers at its disposal, including notably regulatory mechanisms and standards (see Chapters 3 and 4) and research and analysis (see Chapter 5) to provide stakeholders with the strategic orientation and evidence they require to strengthen well-being policies and practices in the sector. This means, for instance, directing stakeholders towards evidence-

based interventions and tools and re-thinking Dubai's accountability structure so as to encourage the adoption of effective well-being policies and practices.

Other stakeholders seem better positioned to use the remaining policy levers – e.g. instruction and pedagogy, support services and resources – to support higher levels of welfare across Dubai's private schools, including school governing boards and other government bodies (e.g. Dubai Health Authority, DHA). However, KHDA's orientation, incentives and advocacy will be key for this to take place effectively, supporting those that need it the most.

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