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A Comparative Study of Joyful Learning for Well-being between India and Finland

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Abstract

Education systems are becoming assessed in terms not just of academic quality but also in terms of their ability to make students happy and well. The present comparative case study looks at joyful learning as a model of happy living promotion with particular reference to India and Finland. Finland is always among the happiest nations in the world, and India has to fight with the problem of student stress and education inequality. The study uses secondary sources of information, including OECD reports, World Happiness Report, and policy-making documents, including the National Education Policy of India (2020), to examine the variations in pedagogy, assessment, and the well-being of the students. The results show that the student-centered, low stress model of Finland significantly improves life-satisfaction, but in India, the reforms are a manifestation of the progress, but need more vigorous execution. The paper concludes with policy suggestions to incorporate joyful learning into the large-scale systems along with the future directions for research.

Keywords: *Happiness, Well-being, Comparative Education, Academic Quality, Thematic Analysis*

Introduction

Education is one of the basic forces of social, economic and personal growth. Traditionally, education systems in all countries were focused on cognitive success, standardization tests and quantifiable academic performance. In recent decades, however, a paradigm shift of the focus on the role of student well-being, emotional growth, and life satisfaction has been observed and these dimensions have become equally important aspects of education. This change has led to the development of a new idea of joyful learning that focuses on engagement, curiosity, and positive emotional experiences as the core of the learning process (OECD, 2022). Joyful learning is founded on constructivist and humanistic theories of education that suppose that learners actively generate knowledge by way of meaningful experiences, as opposed to memorizing. It helps to create a classroom atmosphere, where

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students are comfortable, encouraged, and eager to learn. This approach is also supported by the research in the field of positive psychology; accordingly, positive emotions promote cognition, creativity, and abilities to solve problems (Helliwell et al., 2026). As a result, joyful learning is emerging as a pedagogical approach as well as the way to lead a happy life, which is a pre-requisite for well-being, satisfaction and emotional stability. The discussion of global education is more often associated with schooling systems and measures of national happiness and well-being. The nations that are well-equipped in terms of social support are educationally fair, have environments with low-stress, consistently feature higher in the happiness index also. Finland ranked highest in global in happiness indices, multiple times. This is due to its non-exclusive education system that focuses on the well-being of the students (Helliwell et al., 2026). Finnish education system values equality, with low rate of standardized testing with more teacher autonomy that supports academic achievement and positive emotions (OECD, 2022).

Conversely, India's educational environment is characterised by high degree of diversity, substantial numbers of students, and huge socio-economic divergence. Although, India has done a lot to augment access to education, still, its education system is traditionally exam-based systems with stiff competition. All these have led to the increased stress and anxiety levels of students and the concern over the mental health and general happiness has emerged (Sharma and Gupta, 2023). The Government of India has realized these issues and framed the National Education Policy (2020) to revolutionize the education system by facilitating the learning experience, thinking, and holistic development (Government of India, 2020). Nevertheless, these reforms have not succeeded in making joyful learning in India, because of its structural hindrances, which include high student population, inadequate resources, and imbalanced urban and rural education systems. On the contrary, the highly-resourced system in Finland has facilitated uniform implementation of student centered pedagogies. This makes India and Finland, an appropriate preference of a comparative case study because they can be considered the extremes of educational paradigms, one is transformational and the other one is well-established.

In this context, the present study seeks to understand the role of joyful learning in promoting happy living using the practices of the Indian and Finnish education system. Particularly, it aims to examine variations in pedagogy, assessment measures, and experiences of students, and to determine the impact of variations on the outcomes of well-being. In this way, the

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research will not just as a source of academic accomplishment, but as an essential factor of human happiness and quality of life.

Review of Literature

Concept of Joyful Learning

The idea of joyful learning is formulated as a form of pedagogy, where the emphasis is on engagement, curiosity, creativity, and affective well-being in addition to academic achievement (Seligman, 2011). It uses constructivist and humanistic approach to education and focuses on active learning, experiences, and positive feelings in the classroom (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978). Empirical studies show that when learners find happiness in learning, they are more motivated, can solve problems and retain knowledge (OECD, 2022). Positive psychology is closely related to joyful learning, according to which, happiness and engagement are essential for human development (Seligman, 2011). Incorporation of happiness into the educational process has been found to boost life satisfaction, anxiety, and social-emotional skills (Helliwell et al., 2026).

International Conceptions of Education and Happiness

The studies carried out by international researchers always prove the existence of a relationship between education systems and the country welfare. This relationship can be seen in Finland, which has currently topped the global happiness survey, owing to its inclusive education system, student-centered teaching and learning with focus on well-being (Helliwell et al., 2026). Reports by OECD (2022) indicate that countries with holistic learning, low levels of standardized testing, and large autonomy of teachers report greater levels of student engagement, intrinsic motivation, and satisfaction with life. These results prove a significant role of joyful learning as a factor of academic and emotional success.

Student Well-Being and Education in India

India is characterized by a complicated and diverse educational environment where issues like excessive student-teacher ratio, curriculum focused on exams and unequal distribution of resources among the regions have significant impact (Government of India, 2020). Research shows that the culture focused on examination results is one of the factors that increase stress, anxiety and burnout among students, especially at the secondary and higher education levels (Sharma and Gupta, 2023). The National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) is a great move to comprehensive education with focus on experience, vocational learning and

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life skills (Government of India, 2020). It is still premature to suggest that both activity-based and project-based learning can enhance the level of engagement and decrease the stress levels, but its implementation is still less than equal, particularly in rural communities (UNESCO, 2021).

Finland Education and Student Wellbeing

Finland has one of the most popular examples of education in the world, where happiness in learning and happiness is embedded into the school culture. Its major characteristics are reduced standardized testing, student-centered and inquiry-based instruction, small class sizes and teacher freedom. OECD (2022) emphasizes that Finnish students are less stressed academically, more engaged and more satisfied with their lives. The system focuses on the holistic development process, which promotes cognitive, emotional and social competences simultaneously. These activities promote academic achievement and general happiness, which is result of the beneficial impact of joyful learning in practice (Helliwell et al., 2026). Joyful learning is an important factor that contributes to student's health, engagement and development. The focus has turned back to teaching and learning which is learner-centred, experiential and inclusive pedagogies to promote motivation, creativity and psychological well-being of learners (Cronqvist, 2024; Fält-Weckman et al., 2024). Research on student well-being highlights the importance of classroom climate, the role for teacher support, assessment practices and culture in shaping student engagement and psychological health. However, most empirical evidences come from the developed countries, and with few studies focusing on the development education systems like India. In addition, there remain challenges in comparing student well-being across countries because of inconsistencies in how student well-being is conceptualized and measured (Wentzel, 2024; Strukova, 2024). Teacher autonomy, formative assessment, education's equality and supports for learning play an important role in achieving joyful learning and student well-being. Other studies also show that positive psychology increase students' happiness, resilience and engagement (Hongell-Ekholma et al., 2024; Fält-Weckman et al., 2024). Notably, in the Indian context, recent research is focused mainly on the implementation issues of the NEP 2020, which emphasises on experiential learning, competency-centric learning and holistic development. However, research which evaluates the effectiveness of these changes in fostering student's happiness and well-being is limited.

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Gaps in Existing Literature

With the development of focus on joyful learning and student well-being, there are significant gaps in the existing literature. The comparison of the findings from studies in more developed countries, mainly Western and Nordic countries, with those from a developing country like India is still limited. There is lack of comparative studies to analyse the joyful learning practices both in India and in Finland. Finland is known for its learner centered education system and more recently, India is shaping up for a transformative education system with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Very few studies have done a systematic comparison between the two countries in terms of pedagogy, policy and outcomes of learning on well-being. The existing research has focused on student wellbeing. There are limited studies to bring these dimensions together to investigate how each contributes to joyful learning at both the micro and macro levels. To fill these gaps, the present study compares India with Finland through analysing education policies, practices in classrooms and student's well-being indicators among others. The study makes a meaningful contribution to the literature through evidence-based conclusions and recommendations to support the joyful learning and quality of education in different socio-economic and cultural context with reference to India.

Integrated Framework of Joyful Learning

This paper combines the three theoretical approaches into a unified approach:

Constructivism: The theory regarding active, student-centered, experiential learning as a means of engagement (Smith, 2019).

Humanism: Explains the emotional support, comprehensive development, and self-actualization (Kremer, 2021).

Positive Psychology: Bridges the gap between education practices and well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction (Lyons, 2020).

The conceptual model shows that the relationship between educational practices (pedagogy, assessment, teacher autonomy and curriculum) and student well-being (engagement, emotional health, life satisfaction) is intermediated by joyful learning. Finland is an excellent example of the integrated framework, where constructivist pedagogy, humanistic teacher roles, and policies based on positive psychology led to high student happiness and involvement (Kallio et al, 2023). India is moving in this combined approach, and NEP2020

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reforms offer a platform to joyful learning, but a lack of systems and resources prevents large-scale implementation (UNESCO, 2020).

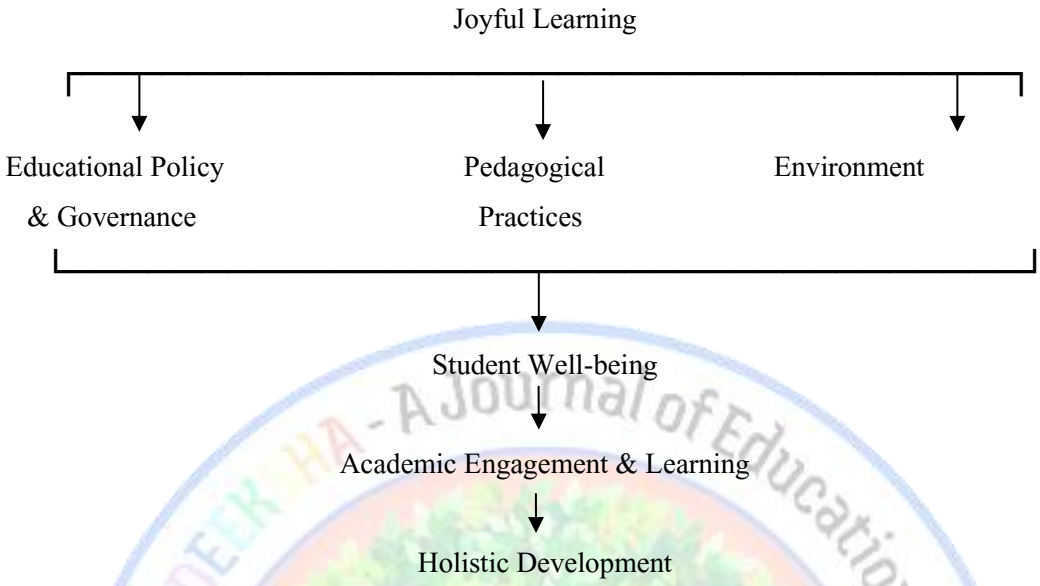


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Author's Compilation.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives are:

1. To explore concept of joyful learning in modern education.
2. To make a comparison between the educational policies, pedagogical practices and classrooms of India and Finland with regard to learner's well-being.
3. To examine how joyful learning is related to overall academic engagement, emotional development and well-being.
4. To identify the policy and pedagogical gaps in the Indian education scenario and suggest the measures from the lessons of Finland's educational system.

Significance of the Study

The present study adds to the existing literature on joyful learning with a comparative study between Indian and Finland Education system. It contributes to student well-being and learning outcomes and will help the understanding of how pedagogies that centre the learner, policies and practices in the classroom that affect student well-being and learning outcomes. The lessons from the Finnish education system suggest evidence-based ways to enable inclusive, engaging and student-centred learning environment. In addition, the study is also significant for the fulfilment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which

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involves educational practices that improve the well-being, holistic development and lifelong learning of students. The results offer a basis for future research and educational reforms that will enhance quality and effectiveness of the education system in India.

Methodology

The study design for this study is qualitative comparative case study, which is suitable for an in-depth exploration of education policies, pedagogical and institutional contexts in two contrasting education systems in order to learn about experiences and challenges. Yin's (2018) case study framework, designed to examine parties in contemporary settings in natural contexts, is the foundation for the research. The study is based on secondary data from authoritative and credible sources. This encompasses peer-reviewed articles published or indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, policy documents from the government (NEP 2020, and reports from the Finnish National Agency for Education), publications of international organizations (UNESCO, OECD, UNICEF, World Bank), the World Happiness Report, PISA reports, and official educational statistics. The analysis is done by a comparative analytical framework. Thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising familiarisation of data in the study, coding, identification of themes, review and refinement, theme definition and interpretation, was used to analyse the collected data.

Findings and Discussion

This section demonstrates the detailed discussion of the comparative case study of India and Finland by examining the way their respective education system that impacts on happy learning and the student well-being.

Learning Environment

Classroom atmosphere is one of the key elements to happy learning. In India, owing to the teacher-centered paradigm reigns, there is a limitation in creativity and interaction among students. The huge numbers of pupils in schools (30-40 per teacher on average in state schools) mitigate one-to-one teaching, making it difficult to instruct students personally (OECD, 2022). Although, the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promotes experiential learning, still, most facilities have not managed to leave behind the old pedagogical methods and test scores due to the traditional lecture-based delivery (Government of India, 2020).

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On the other hand, Finland emphasizes student centered pedagogy with collaboration and inquiry learning under favor. Students are also actively involved in discussions and solving problems, which increases intrinsic motivation and engagement (OECD, 2022). The small group sizes (about 12 pupils per teacher) allow the teachers to serve the learning needs of individuals, which leads to a favourable affective climate. A student-centered learning situation enhances cognitive growth, emotional health and involvement (Seligman, 2011). Finland model demonstrates that the playful learning is severely related to the structural and cultural organisation of classroom.

Evaluation and Academic Stress

Evaluation is an important aspect of student stress. In India, academic anxiety is often caused by frequent high-stakes tests, and in general, the condition is associated with sleep disturbances, mental exhaustion, and anxiety disorders (Sharma and Gupta, 2023). Although the NEP 2020 is focused on competency-oriented assessment, its application is still not even, especially in rural and under-resourced schools. Whereas, Finland has a low level of standardised testing and uses the formative assessments that provide feedback to support learning and not as a punishment. The assessment of students by teachers is conducted with the use of observation, project work, and portfolio assessment (OECD, 2022). There is a correlation between the reduced pressure in examinations and increased life satisfaction. Finland is the happiest in the world, and India ranks116, which means that the practices of assessment affect not only academic achievements but also the affective well-being. Further, dilution of high-stakes assessment allows students to engage in significant learning experiences instead of rote learning and the happy learning phenomenon is likely to be experienced, when the learning environment is seen as a positive experience instead of stressful learning.

Whole Person Learning and Student Well-being

Finland focuses on integrative education, which includes arts, sports, social-emotional education and life skills. This strategy fosters various aspects of student growth such as cognitive, emotional, and social skills. The use of periodic breaks, outdoor exercises and group assignments effectively ease the levels of stress and build interpersonal skills in learners. The performance of Finland shows that in order to integrate happiness into education, policy, pedagogical practices and cultural views on learning should be consistent.

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The reforms in India in NEP 2020 are encouraging and need a long-term effort to deliver similar results. Happy learning is not one-dimensional but involves the focus on pedagogy, assessment, the practices of teachers, as well as the comprehensive development. The lowering of academic stress, positive learning conditions and autonomy are closely linked with student wellbeing. These findings are corroborated by an analysis of international evidence. Likewise, data on academic stress, teacher–student relations, and school belonging provided by OECD data from PISA assessments show that as a rule, Finnish students are less stressed on academic issues, have better relationships with teachers, and feel more belonging in the education systems. Finnish teachers also highlight their high levels of autonomy for allowing them to experiment with novel and learner-centered pedagogies that improve the engagement and well-being of the students (OECD, 2023; Finnish National Agency of Education, 2024).

Overall, the results indicate that Finland's success is not from a single educational practice, but a fine strategic blend of educational policy, teachers' preparation, assessment systems, school governance and support provided to the students. While India with a policy conducive environment with NEP 2020, is shifting focus on teacher capacity building, equitable resource distribution, formative assessment and school-based well-being interventions. It is essential for India to explore and absorb atmosphere for joyful learning' in the socio-cultural and institutional contexts prevailing in the country.

Overview of Results

The results show that India and Finland have distinct differences on how happy learning fits into educational systems. Finland is an excellent example of a well-aligned system in which policy, pedagogy, and classroom practice all work together to facilitate student well-being. In comparison, India is characterized by a transitional model, in which progressive policy intentions and traditions are followed.

Table 1. Comparative Summary of Joyful Learning Practices and Student Well-being in Finland and India

Dimension	India	Finland	Why Finland Performs Better
Educational Philosophy	Teacher-centered and examination-oriented	Learner-centered and holistic	Focus on happiness, creativity, and life skills

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Curriculum	competency-based under NEP 2020 but largely content-heavy	Flexible, phenomenon-based, interdisciplinary	Greater flexibility encourages curiosity and experiential learning.
Assessment	Regular examinations	Formative assessment with nominal standardized testing	Low academic pressure reduces anxiety
Teacher Quality	Variable teacher quality and limited autonomy	Highly qualified, Strong professional autonomy	Enhanced Classroom engagement and innovation.
Classroom Environment	Large class sizes	Collaborative, inclusive, low student–teacher ratio	Individual attention promotes joyful and personalized learning.
Student Well-being	Increasing emphasis under NEP 2020 but uneven implementation	Embedded in school policies through counseling	Holistic support improves emotional and social development.
Educational Equity	Urban-rural and socio-economic disparities	Equal access to quality education across regions	Equity ensures consistent learning
Governance	More centralized	Decentralized autonomy	Greater autonomy enables context-specific innovation.
Public Investment	Lower public expenditure relative to need	High and sustained investment in education	Better infrastructure and learning resources.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on OECD (2023), Finnish National Agency for Education (2024), UNESCO (2024), World Happiness Report (2025), and Government of India, National Education Policy (2020).

The key reasons for Finland's success are:

1. *Community Development*: An education system with a focus on student happiness, curiosity, creativity and intrinsic motivation rather than on examination results.

2. *Highly Qualified Teachers*: demanding classification of the profession, high qualifications at masters and high level of autonomy of the teacher profession.

3. *Minimal Examination Pressure*: Frequent high-stakes testing is prevented by frequent formative testing, which helps to lower stress and allow for deeper learning.

4. *Equity and Inclusion*: Equal opportunities, Free School meals, health care, counselling and learning support provide students with all the necessary tools to enable them to achieve.

5. *Trust Based Governance*: Teachers and schools are innovative and flexible in the way they teach in order to meet local needs.

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Lessons for India

India can enhance joyful learning through:

- Increase experiential and competency-based learning.
- Less reliance on high stakes examination levels.
- Improve teachers' professionalism and professional independence.
- Enhance Investment in student mental health, counseling, sports and arts education.
- Improve equitable access to good quality education, especially in remote and underserved areas.
- Implementing NEP 2020 is effective by providing sufficient funds, training of teachers and institutional support.

The findings help in strengthen the point that well-being is not a by-product of education but a prerequisite for learning. Positive emotions increase cognitive flexibility, creativity and problem-solving abilities (Fredrickson, 2001). The success of the education system in Finland is not due to the high financial resources only, but due to the education system, which is built on a coherent education policy including pedagogy, teacher professionalism, assessment and pupils' well-being. The Indian experiment has been initiated with the introduction of NEP 2020. However, the results will not be seen unless the implementation is sustained, and the structures and workings of the program are adapted.

Conclusion

This study comparatively examined joyful learning practices and their influence on student well-being in the education systems of India and Finland. The findings indicate that Finland performs more effectively in promoting joyful learning through its learner-centred pedagogy, flexible curriculum, high teacher autonomy, formative assessment practices, equitable access to education, and comprehensive mental health support. These interconnected features create an educational environment that enhances students' academic engagement, emotional well-being, creativity, and holistic development. In contrast, although India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant shift toward competency-based, experiential, and learner-centred education but challenges such as examination-oriented practices, unequal educational opportunities, limited teacher autonomy, infrastructure disparities, and inconsistent implementation continue to constrain the realization of joyful learning. The study concludes that educational success depends not

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only on policy reforms but also on their effective implementation, institutional capacity, and sustained investment in teacher development and student well-being.

Policy Recommendations

The findings suggest policy implications for strengthening joyful learning in India. First, greater emphasis should be placed on implementing learner-centred and experiential pedagogies across all levels of education. Second, teacher education and continuous professional development should be strengthened to enhance instructional innovation and professional autonomy. Third, assessment reforms should prioritize formative and competency-based evaluation to reduce excessive examination stress. Fourth, schools should institutionalize mental health services, counselling programmes, and social-emotional learning to promote students' psychological well-being. Fifth, governments should address regional and socio-economic disparities by improving infrastructure, digital access, and educational resources, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Finally, effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are needed to ensure the successful implementation of NEP 2020 and to foster equitable, inclusive, and joyful learning environment.

Limitations of the Study

This study has also certain limitations. It relies exclusively on secondary data, including policy documents, international reports, and published literature. Further, the analysis is confined to two countries, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational systems. Moreover, differences in cultural, socio-economic, and institutional contexts may influence the interpretation of comparative findings.

Future Research Directions

Future studies may employ mixed-method or longitudinal research designs to examine the impact of joyful learning on students' academic performance, mental health, and socio-emotional development across different educational contexts. Comparative research involving additional developed and developing countries would enhance the generalizability of findings and facilitate broader policy learning. Future empirical studies could also investigate the effectiveness of specific NEP 2020 initiatives in fostering joyful learning. Furthermore, research exploring the role of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, teacher professional development, parental engagement, and inclusive education in

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promoting joyful learning would provide valuable insights for strengthening educational quality and student well-being in the twenty-first century.

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