

THE GEOGRAPHY OF HAPPINESS: NOW AND THEN

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Photo 1: The happiest and least happy places in the world were marked with pink and yellow sticky notes on a world map.
Photo: Tamsin Murchie.

Two years ago, inspired by an issue of *Primary Geographer*, Tamsin introduced the concept of 'The Geography of Happiness' to The British School Muscat. The year 5 team felt the concepts covered, and the tasks undertaken, were hugely beneficial at the beginning of the school year when getting to know new pupils, and while the pupils were making new friends from all corners of the planet. As a result, the Geography of Happiness is now firmly embedded in the year 5 curriculum and continues to be a thoroughly enjoyable and worthwhile topic.

In the intervening two years, The British School Muscat has been addressing the issues of sustainability and the importance or raising awareness of people and environments in other parts of the world, especially areas that have suffered natural disasters. We wanted pupils to reflect on global future happiness as well as happiness that could be generated through development of the local environment, especially the development of the school site. The team have spent four days working through a range of activities involving a variety of skills and have engaged in some enlightening discussion. The feedback from pupils and their parents has been extremely encouraging and, as a teacher, I now have a very good understanding of each individual in my class, how they see the world and what is important to them in the future.

Our work started us thinking about where the happiest places in the world

are found. As in previous years, pupils highlighted places familiar to them as well as Oman, where they have family and friends. Pupils articulated the need for positive relationships to ensure happiness in a place, especially the importance of families and friends. However, they went further to say that happy places show a concern for the environment and the needs of society. The pattern of pink sticky notes on our world map showed a general consensus on where the happiest places in the world are found. Having obtained a clear idea of what it means to be happy when discussing place, the pupils were then faced with the question: 'Where is the least happy place in the world?'. As before, they were given seconds to write down their response and were not allowed to converse with anyone until they had placed their yellow sticky note on the world map (Photo 1).

Figure 1: How can the world have a happier future?

Plastic bags should not be used because they take hundreds of years to biodegrade while other material doesn't take so long to biodegrade. We need to give poor people more education, water, food, houses and clothes. In Pakistan we need to rebuild houses as many people don't have homes anymore. We think the poor should have a brilliant life like ours.

Waheeb, Muhammad, Jonathan, Ramez

Open your mind and help the environment. We can work together for a better future. Get rid of cars that run on petrol and diesel; use solar power cars, it will save you money as well as helping the environment. We feel that an eco city should be built in Oman like the one being built in Abu Dhabi. We should raise money to provide food, water and shelter for people in poor countries especially those in countries that have suffered a natural disaster like Haiti and Pakistan. Lastly, we would like to see people thinking about the animals of the world and preserve their habitats; they should not cut down the trees.

Henry, Fraser, James K., Bhargavi, Eilidh

We think the world should be more eco-friendly and we should try and make everyone recycle their items so we can help our planet. Our next aim is to work towards a world in which everyone has at least one friend.

Grace and Jovanna

In every river in the world there is a fast and deep point, which means we could use water energy to generate power. Plus we could use wind or solar energy, especially in Oman because we have 365 days of sunshine! We would like to see a ban on plastic bag use; Oman needs to keep saying, 'No to plastic bags!'. We feel governments in rich countries should give more to the poor. Lastly, we would like to see more care towards endangered species.

Brodie and Daniel

Beware, animals are becoming extinct. If we are to have a happy future there should be a world-wide ban on killing animals for their fur, and for ornaments. We would also like to see a stop to killing animals for fun. We need to work together to rescue animals on the verge of extinction. We would like to see more use of solar energy, especially in countries like Oman which has so much sunlight. We would also like to see more sustainable forestry because we need the trees to prevent flooding, to give us oxygen to breathe and so that animals have homes. We want a green planet in the future and we all have to help.

Ellen and Asya

This time there was less agreement in terms of place, although the reasons given for choosing places were similar. The pupils chose places in which there was a threat to happiness due to war, poverty, greed, oppressive government and extreme climates. The issues of lack of education, insufficient food and poor or dirty water supply were also raised. Pupils' opinions were based mainly on information from the news, the internet and discussion with family and peers. However, in some cases it was based on first-hand experience; this led to some candid discussion and a new basis for understanding each other. Without prompting the pupils brought up the important role we all have in supporting people in other parts of the world, especially those which have suffered natural disasters. The pupils had responded to the natural disaster in Haiti earlier in the year when they produced a CD of songs that was sold to raise money. They showed an appreciation that they had a role as world citizens to help others and that their actions could lead to a happier world. As our discussions developed so did ideas to help others in countries perceived as being less happy. These will now feed into our fund-raising activities in year 5 this year.

In groups, pupils discussed what was required to ensure future global happiness (Figure 1). They recorded their ideas and fed them back to the class. The two themes which dominated their presentations were the importance of conserving the environment and building strong and happy relationships between people and nations. Their views on the environment weren't surprising as we have had a considerable move to make our school more sustainable and now have a Green Charter, which everyone in our school community helps to fulfil. However, the pupils had strong global opinions and showed a good understanding of how

they can impact on a global future. Even the quieter members of the class felt empowered to express their opinions. One child, from Pakistan, spoke with passion about the need not just to donate money to deal with the immediate and short-term problems in his home country, but also the need to find out why these disasters happen and to think about what could be done so that his country could enjoy a happier future.

From the global perspective we turned our attention to our own locality. Oman has taken great strides recently to adopt a more eco-friendly approach to development. Research into solar energy is moving forward and there are hopes of an alternative energy power station in the near future. Leaders in the field of green architecture are holding talks with the government with the hope that the city of Muscat will develop in a more sympathetic manner. Lessons have been learned of the importance of long-term and careful planning from our close neighbour Dubai. The development of an eco-city in Abu Dhabi is having a positive impact on the decision makers of this country. The British School Muscat has reached its own interesting crossroads in terms of future development. As the school has grown, various options have been suggested; but, whatever decision is made, there will be a need for careful planning and the pupils of year 5 have very definite ideas about what they feel is important when it comes to the future development of their school.

Following our annual walk around the school, using a map to orientate ourselves on the site, the pupils discussed those places which they consider to be happiest. The data they collected clearly showed that the pupils are happiest in the places with which they were familiar and felt most comfortable. Discussion then turned to how we could make our school



Photo 2: The world map was finally annotated with orange sticky notes to show where the pupils would like to live and work when they are adults. Photo: Tamsin Murchie.

Name	Nationality	Country of Birth	Happiest Place	Least Happiest Place	Where we would like to live in the future
Henry	British	England	Scotland	Antarctica	Spain
Thomas	British	England	England	South Africa	Russia
Grace	British	Canada	Scotland	Peru	Scotland
Jovana	Serbian	Qatar	Scotland	Antarctica	Scotland
Ramez	Egyptian	Egypt	Egypt	America	Egypt
Alizeh	Pakistani	Pakistan	Scotland	America	Scotland
Eilidh	British	Scotland	Spain	America	Spain
Charles	British	England	Oman	England	Sri Lanka
Fraser	British	Australia	Oman	England	Scotland
Daniel	Dutch/German	Norway	Norway	Iraq	Holland
Brodie	British	Scotland	Hong Kong	Saudi Arabia	Spain
Muhammad	South African	South Africa	Oman	Antarctica	England
Dina	Egyptian	Egypt	Egypt	Antarctica	France
Bhargavi	Indian	India	India	Kashmir	Malaysia
James	British	Scotland	Scotland	Brazil	France
Asya	Cypriot/British	Cyprus	Scotland	New Zealand	France
Waheeb	Pakistani	Oman	England	Oman	Canada
Jonathan	Australian	Oman	Oman	Finland	Thailand
Ellen	British	England	Oman	Saudi Arabia	Oman

Figure 2: Place and happiness according to class 5TT

a happier place. We looked at photographs of the school in the 1970s and noted how much it had changed over time. Aerial photographs of then and now illustrated the development of the surrounding area and the constraints on the existing site for further development. The pupils all agreed that any new building needed to be sustainable and help us to keep our Green Charter, and enhance it by going further in our efforts to become a sustainable school.

Pupils researched websites that addressed the importance of conserving energy and using alternative sources. Some went further and looked at green architecture. Some pupils were very interested in traditional architecture, especially pre-electricity features used to keep buildings cool, such as wind towers; they were keen to incorporate these ideas into their own designs. Working in small groups the pupils set about developing ideas for the future development of the school.

Throughout the planning, pupils engaged in meaningful discussion in which they questioned each others' ideas and made suggestions based on their own experiences and knowledge. One member of the class clearly explained a solar energy project she had seen working in Cyprus and another reflected on the use of the traditional *falaj* system to irrigate the school grounds. Some pupils went on to develop their designs into models using

everything from art straws to Lego. Once their ideas had taken form, the pupils took their plans for buildings, gardens and play areas to members of the senior management team to try and persuade them to think about the sustainable development of the school site. The pupils returned to class feeling the work had been worthwhile, as well as assured that they had a voice that was respected. This is their school and they had been given the opportunity to talk about its future.

To finish our work, we returned to our world map covered in pink and yellow sticky notes. I gave the pupils a final orange sticky note each. Once again they were given a few seconds to respond to a question without any discussion with their friends. Their final question was: 'When you are an adult where in the world will you live and work?' (Photo 2). By this time the pupils had become confident in their ability to look for patterns and to make statements based on the evidence. Immediately they were looking for links between happiness and their future homes (Figure 2). They asked if nationality or place of birth affected the choices and so we set up a database. Although a few pupils did intend to return to the countries of their nationality, mostly those from Scotland, the biggest correlation lay between the child's chosen happiest place in the world and their chosen home in the future. What proved to be interesting was the

number of pupils who had chosen not to return to the place of their birth. The life of an expatriate is transitory and creates a culture of world citizenship. However, despite the constant uprooting, these pupils have proved they have a strong sense of place and a strong understanding of their role in the world in which they live. They have a vision of a world in which strong relationships are built and they want to ensure that everyone has the right to education, food and clean water in sustainable environments.

Having spent the last week getting to know these pupils, the year 5 team would say that wherever these pupils end up in the future, they will be working to turn their dreams and ideals into a reality. I have no doubt they will make it a happy one!



If you would like to try these activities with your pupils, you can download a table outlining the activities and the learning objectives from www.geography.org.uk/pg

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