

Article

What Makes a School a Happy School? Parents' Perspectives

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Abstract: Well-being, equity, and inclusion are central aspects of happy schools. In this context, we aim to provide information to identify the characteristics of happy schools and Portuguese children's level of happiness at school. In total, one thousand three hundred and ninety-nine parents of children from five to twenty years old participated in this study by answering a mostly open-ended questionnaire. They indicated their perceptions of how happy their children were at school, the moments they associated with individual happiness and unhappiness, and the characteristics of schools that they found conducive to promoting happiness. The findings show that parents value the relationships their children establish at school, teachers' personal and professional skills, learning strategies, and the fact that students can be creative while learning valuable content. From the perspective of parents, unhappy schools are characterized by teachers with negative attitudes and attributes, bullying, an excessive workload, and consequent stress. Differences in terms of gender and age were not significant in this study. We found that levels of happiness at school decrease as students' ages increase.

Keywords: happiness; happy schools; parents' perspectives; basic education; secondary education



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1. Introduction

At the forefront of educational agendas are concepts such as well-being, equity, and inclusion. These are the guidelines set forth by the fourth Sustainable Development Goal: Quality Education, launched by the United Nations [1]. A school allows students to acquire and develop academic skills but its role exceeds that. Schools help students to be more resilient, cope with adversity, strive for more in the future, and develop their relationships while connecting with the world around them [2].

Thus, a school is not only a center for learning but also a center for socialization [3]. There, children learn about and experience life in society; such knowledge and experiences will impact children's attitudes and behavior throughout their lives [4]. Therefore, the school, the government, and other governance levels have a mandate to ensure that the conditions and environment where learning takes place are as positive and happy as possible.

Educational opportunities are critical determinants of happiness [2]. This subject has gained relevance in the last decade [5]. The OECD has studied happiness by analyzing subjective well-being [6], a term associated with happiness. The literature also relates happiness with pleasure [7], flow [8], flourishing [9], and life satisfaction [10], though, primarily, happiness is related to subjective well-being [11–13]. Despite this association, there is no agreement that the two terms are synonymous as well-being could be interpreted as “a conglomerate of many aspects of life and one's physical and mental being, while happiness [is] more mental and more fleeting” [14]. In summary, upon reading the existing definitions of happiness, we have concluded that its definition must consider three distinct

aspects that, together, contribute to an individual's happiness: first, one must have goals fulfilled and needs satisfied; second, one must engage in meaningful activities; and third, one must consider the personality of the individual. Being happy means being able to reduce tensions (personal or group) and eliminate pain. Being happy is also a result of genetics and personality, which allows the individual to react positively at cognitive and emotional levels. Happiness is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world, and it depends on internal and external factors; it is not the absence of negative aspects. Instead, the attempt to overcome those negative aspects contributes to the happiness of the being.

The study of happiness began with a focus on adults. In that context, happiness is an important concept because it is the maximum value an individual intends to reach in life: A happy person lives well and acts well [15]. Happiness is composed of positive events and the absence of negative aspects [11,16–18]. To be happy and have a good life means to do what is right and virtuous. Being happy enables one's growth and prompts one to pursue important goals and develop and apply skills, capacities, and talents, regardless of how one feels at a specific moment [9]. On both personal and social levels, happiness is simultaneously the cause and effect of positive earnings; it has merit in itself and is an indicator of opportunities to live a good life [12]. Happiness does not imply a total absence of discontent; rather, it is how we face and handle adversities that makes us happier [10].

To avoid being unhappy, one must identify the causes of unhappiness [19]. Therefore, to study happiness is to admit that behavioral improvement can be made and reflected in personal development [20]. All these arguments can be found in literature concerning adults' happiness, which can represent the outcomes of living a happy life. A longitudinal study investigated the outcomes of children's happiness and concluded that the variables of family background and childhood related to life satisfaction, as measured at various adult ages [21]. Therefore, living a good life during childhood creates lifelong benefits.

Since children spend much of their daily time at school, efforts to provide the best possible school environment are crucial. Also, parents want their children to be happy. As Stearns [22] noted, parents in different countries claim that happiness is the most crucial goal when it comes to raising children and assessing the results of childrearing. However, others (Asian parents, for example) put success and achievement first.

What makes children happy has been investigated and the findings align with what common sense might expect. Contributors to children's happiness include family [23–25], good or bad friends [24,26,27], health [28], and school [23,24,27,29,30].

Children spend most of their time at school. Therefore, what makes children happy at school and what makes a happy school are relevant variables to inform policy and practice. The individual gains of education are transposed into better and higher-paying jobs, work and skills valuation, personal independence and social relations, as well as reduced risk of unemployment and increased odds of well-being. Education acquired at school also generates better decisions on a health level, encourages civic participation, and reduces the probability of developing risky or delinquent behaviors [31]. If young people cannot achieve their desired happiness, they might pursue the false happiness that comes from the use of drugs and psychotropic substances.

Schooling is essential because it prepares students for life both in the labor market and at a personal level; those who spend more time at school tend to be happier than those who spend less time there [32]. A synergy exists between happiness and learning [33]: Happy students achieve more [34–37]. Researchers have looked at happiness as an outcome; indeed, happiness should be an aim of education and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness [38]. Our purpose is to study happiness not as an outcome but as a path, a daily experience at school. To do so, we investigated the happy school concept as it is understood by one of the key stakeholders of schools: parents. We have a holistic understanding of school that encompasses not only children—who are the reason for its existence—but also parents, teachers, and non-teaching professionals. Understanding and fostering a happy school requires engaging with the perspectives of all these participants. In the present paper, we focus on the perspectives of parents.

2. Happy Schools

School has an impact on students' happiness and their happiness at school has been the subject of recent studies [39–43].

These studies suggest that all students appreciate school environments where bullying is infrequent, making friends is relatively easy, and establishing genuine and respectful relationships with teachers is the norm [44]. A happy school is one where management, teachers, and students are open to innovation, where students value the learning that is necessary for life and acquire self-related skills, and where students highly value teachers because they are knowledgeable, attentive, helpful, sufficiently demanding, and able to explain their subjects well [45].

In fact, a happy school is where students, teachers, administrators, and staff feel happy [46]. A happy school offers a learning environment that prompts students to feel happy and excited about going to school and acquiring knowledge from their teachers [47].

As Mahfooz and Normén-Smith [4] said:

“Happy schools can be sites or spaces to support social cohesion, creating communities across differences. Happy schools, too, can foster a lifelong love of learning through joyful engagement, rather than pressuring academic performance over all else to the detriment of personal well-being, which will in turn undermine learners' engagement in learning. In short, happy schools can provide the safety, support, and positive social interactivity engagement that is needed for students to learn.” (p. 5)

The aim of building a happy school is to give students the best learning environment possible, continuously create new values, motivate teachers to teach, and devise new teaching techniques that interest students in lessons [47].

The variables associated with a happy school are: praise for student success and progress, active teaching methods, group thinking and work, teachers' happiness and interaction with students, course content, training facilities, and school organizational climate [43]. By promoting a positive climate, schools can foster equity in educational opportunities, diminish socioeconomic inequalities, and enable social mobility [48]. Understanding what makes children happy at school and which variables should be considered in creating a happy school could be a relevant contribution toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal Four: Quality Education, as defined by the United Nations Resolution, 2022. This goal seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong opportunities for all. However, there are gaps as far as socioeconomic background is concerned. Thus, improving the performance of all students is necessary for countries to become high performers and to achieve Sustainable Development Goal Four and its targets [30].

A happy school's goal is to improve learning experiences. Seeking to achieve this objective, UNESCO [49] conducted a study called the Happy School Project (HSP). The authors reviewed the literature on happiness and well-being and also gathered answers from an online survey of those who frequented private and public schools and had responsibilities or worked in those schools, i.e., students, teachers, support staff, parents, the general public, and school principals. The findings enabled the researchers to design a framework through which three factors contribute to a happy school: People (referring to social relationships), Process (referring to teaching and learning methods), and Place (referring to contextual factors).

According to the project, these factors stem from twenty-two variables (Table 1).

The HSP also clarifies what makes students unhappy at school: (1) an unsafe environment in which they are prone to bullying, (2) a heavy student workload and stress motivated by exams and grades, (3) a hostile environment and school atmosphere, (4) negative teacher attitudes and attributes, and (5) bad relationships.

Table 1. Factors and variables for studying happy schools [49].

Factors	Variables
People	1. Friendship and relationships in the school community
	2. Positive teacher attitudes and attributes
	3. Respect for diversity and differences
	4. Positive and collaborative values and practices
	5. Teacher working conditions and well-being
	6. Teacher skills and competencies
Process	7. Reasonable and fair workload
	8. Teamwork and collaborative spirit
	9. Fun and engaging teaching and learning approaches
	10. Learner freedom, creativity and engagement
	11. Sense of achievement and accomplishment
	12. Extracurricular activities and school events
	13. Learning as a team between students and teachers
	14. Useful, relevant, and engaging learning content
Place	15. Mental well-being and stress management
	16. Warm and friendly learning environment
	17. Secure environment free from bullying
	18. Open and green learning and playing spaces
	19. School vision and leadership
	20. Positive discipline
	21. Good health, sanitation, and nutrition
	22. Democratic school management

Source: Happy School! A framework for learner well-being in the Asia-Pacific, UNESCO Bangkok Office (2016).

The combination of happy and unhappy school variables informs policymakers on what measures to implement and what variables to avoid in order to reduce unhappiness and adverse feelings.

The findings from the HSP are consistent with those of other studies. One claims that the factors contributing to a happy school are (1) individual, (2) social/emotional (people), (3) instructional (process), and (4) physical (place) [43]. Another says that the factors contributing to the school environment are (1) the quality of interactions with teachers and peers (people), (2) instructional practices in the classroom and students' perceived and actual academic performance, as well as opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities (process), (3) students' perceptions of safety (place), and (4) parental involvement in schooling [50]. Another study, conducted by the Philippines' Department of Education in 2021 (integrated into the national project, Happy Schools Movement), focused on three interrelated factors: (1) relationship, (2) teaching-learning experiences, and (3) physical environment and atmosphere, similar to the HSP.

We see a consensus when we analyze the main assumptions of the HSP and the results of the other studies. To guide a school through the HSP "is a way of thinking [about] what makes a school a happy place" [4] (p. 9). According to the authors, this project provides tools that help teachers and school leaders understand how to support, monitor, and assess student, classroom, and school-level happiness. These tools were developed to give teachers and school leaders in the Asia-Pacific region on-the-ground tools to implement the framework by prioritizing happiness in their daily teaching and learning experiences.

3. Happiness at School

With regard to parents, Sezer and Can [42] found that their opinion of school happiness relies on nine fundamental themes, with the first relating to school physical equipment. Aspects such as the hygiene of the school, sufficient equipment, a healthy eating environment, adequate infrastructure, non-crowded classes, accessibility, and technological equipment are features that a school should have to promote students' happiness. The second theme is the learning environment. For parents, it is essential that the school assesses pupils fairly

and that student-centeredness, cooperative learning, respect for differences, learning by experience, learning without test anxiety, respect for human rights, and encouragement for learning are present. The third theme is the school environment, which should be appealing, safe, and supportive, and the school should promote values with adequate guidance. The fourth theme relates to teachers' qualifications. They must show enthusiasm for their job and a close interest in pupils, treat students with dignity, be well-equipped for their jobs, be pedagogically sufficient, and be teachers who teach learning. The fifth theme is communication and collaboration. There must be collaboration between the school and parents, freedom of expression, and open and trust-based communication. The sixth theme pertains to learning activities. For parents, it is vital that students' learning is enjoyable and makes them happy, without the need to memorize, and is compatible with talent and development. Activities that enhance students' imagination and assignments that support learning and encourage research and aesthetic feelings are valued. The seventh theme pertains to social activities. There must be a sufficient number of such activities, including sports, arts, environment, nature, reading, and field trips. The eighth theme concerns school management. The leadership of qualified administrators is important, as are the following: teachers feeling appreciated, a sense of fairness, data-driven management, good rapport with staff, and management that makes education a priority, that encourages improvement, and that is not oppressive. The ninth and final theme is education policy. Parents value talent education, a non-elimination-based system, a democratic and laic education, a long-term education policy, equality of chance, and the absence of extra courses and studying. Schools should prioritize 'quality' and help students become good people, in fewer lesson hours.

Regarding children's perspective, López-Pérez and Fernández-Castilla [41] found that, from a child's point of view, what contributes to their happiness at school is having free time, helping and being helped in their difficulties, being with their friends, and being praised.

In this regard, López-Pérez, Zuffianó and Benito-Ambrona [40] compared English and Spanish students' views on happiness at school. They found that English children defined happiness at school as experiencing autonomy and non-violence and having a positive relationship with teachers. On the other hand, Spanish children mentioned harmony and having leisure time more than English children did. Finally, compared to boys, girls more frequently mentioned having emotional support, having a positive relationship with teachers, and experiencing competence.

For children to feel happy at school, they must spend time with their friends, have fun, have self-esteem, and feel safe. Contrarily, tiredness, confusion, nervousness [51], and bullying [27,46,52] contribute to their unhappiness. Table 2 summarizes these arguments.

Table 2. Happiness at school.

Parents' Perspective	Children's Perspective
school physical equipment	having free time
learning environment	helping and being helped in their difficulties
school environment	being with their friends
teachers' qualifications	being praised
communication and collaboration	having self-esteem
learning activities	having autonomy
social activities	having a positive relationship with teachers
school management	feeling safe
education policy	not being bullied
	not feeling tired, confused, or nervous

4. Parents' Choice of School

Parents strongly prefer schools that promote high academic achievement and that are close to home [53]. They are also concerned about the school's reputation. Generally, when

they choose a school, they do so based on its general development, academic achievement, and functional conditions [54]. Interestingly, they want their children to be happy in their academic journeys (Americans in particular) [22].

A study explored factors influencing parents' school choices. The authors found that parents chose schools based on teacher quality (personal and professional characteristics), academic quality and performance (grades and pathways after school), opportunities for a diverse student population (respect for differences in pupils), student support and pastoral care (support and mentoring), discipline (high behavior standards), the principal's vision (and the ability to communicate it clearly), a comprehensive curriculum and subject choice (wide range of courses and subjects on offer), the presence of significant facilities and resources (equipment and spaces), and a range of extracurricular activities (enriching students) [55].

Others argue that, for parents, school choice stems from their satisfaction with the school culture [56]. Going back to early times, the premises of school culture are an academic emphasis, continued school improvement, an orderly school environment, collaborative work, adaptation to students' needs and specificities, and participation in school processes [57]. For parents, school choice also involves their satisfaction with how communication occurs between the school and the family, how teaching occurs within the classroom, and classroom organization [56].

Where does parents' school choice meet the Happy Schools framework (People, Process and Place)?

Some studies have pointed to academic characteristics, student care characteristics, school ethos characteristics, academic and physical resource characteristics, and logistical characteristics as factors affecting parents' school choices [55]. Others have referred to teachers' qualifications and reputation, the medium of instruction, school facilities, the curriculum, and teaching style [54]. Furthermore, others have indicated that school culture, communication, classroom instruction, and classroom organization [56] are factors.

These factors are included in the Happy Schools framework. Therefore, parents seem to want to choose a happy school. Thus, school choice is based on children's happiness and the school characteristics relating to people, processes, and places, i.e., the factors behind a happy school (Table 3).

Table 3. Where parents' school choice meets the Happy Schools framework.

Authors	Parents' School Choice	Happy Schools Framework
Beamish & Morey (2013) [55]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - academic characteristics - student care characteristics - school ethos characteristics - academic and physical resource characteristics - logistical characteristics 	
Chan & Yeung (2019) [54]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - teacher's qualification and reputation - medium of instruction - school facilities - curriculum - teaching style 	People Process Place
Meier & Lemmer (2019) [56]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - school culture - communication - classroom instruction - classroom organization 	

In the Portuguese system, the choice of school is reserved primarily for parents who can afford private schools, as the priority for attending a particular public school is anchored

to the student's address and the parents' place of work. There is no clear choice, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds whose parents do not have the information or financial capacity to choose.

5. Objectives and Research Questions

No studies have yet been published regarding happy schools in Portugal. The UNESCO report that fueled our interest in this matter and that is behind the structure of our data analysis was based on a study in Asia. We have noted relevant cultural differences in how happiness is perceived across countries [22,41]. Therefore, studying the Portuguese context and uncovering the aspects that are seen as crucial to a happy school in that context is a valuable contribution to the field. The Happy Schools concept and framework that we consider is the one developed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2016. This framework, developed in Bangkok, is accepted as a reference in this area of study. However, it might have some limitations when applied to different cultures. Also, it focuses on children's perspective of a happy school and does not consider the vision of other school stakeholders, such as teachers, administrative staff, and parents. This article is part of a major research project aiming to address the aforementioned limitations. Through this project, we intend to adjust the Bangkok model to the Portuguese culture and identify the items and factors that are important for a school to be happy from the parents' perspective.

The main objective of this research is to develop an understanding of parents' perceptions of what constitutes a happy school. At the same time, we seek to identify happy and unhappy school moments and events that parents lived with their children. The purpose is to gather information capable of answering the following questions:

1. What are parents' and caregivers' perceptions of their children's level of happiness at school?
2. How do their children's age and gender interplay with parents' perceptions?
3. What are the most relevant dimensions of happy experiences of parents and their children at the children's school?
4. What are the most relevant dimensions of unhappy experiences of parents and children together at the children's school?
5. From the parents' perspective, what are the characteristics of a happy school?

The purpose of this study is not to measure or analyze children's happiness or well-being. If we wanted to do so, we would have used the "School Children's Happiness Inventory" [13], which determines the factors affecting the happiness of school children. Instead, we aim to characterize a happy school because it can impact children's happiness and well-being.

6. Materials and Methods

We have conducted a descriptive and correlational exploratory study, given the absence of previous studies about happy schools in Portugal. We chose a quantitative approach and applied a mostly open-ended questionnaire to parents of school children. This resulted in qualitative data that were subjected to content analysis, categorized, and quantified. The resulting quantitative data were then subjected to quantitative analysis.

In the study reported in this paper, a sample of 1809 parents of children aged between 5 and 20 years old, attending eight Portuguese public school clusters (35 schools in total), gave consent to participate in the study. Among these, 1399 (76%) completed the questionnaire, while 419 participants were excluded from the research because their forms were incomplete.

The following socio-demographic measures were collected: child's age, level of education, and sex.

Parents were asked to rate how they perceived their children's happiness at school on a Likert scale from 1 (very unhappy) to 5 (very happy).

They also answered three open-ended questions: (a) mention three happy moments/events you and your child experienced at your child's school; (b) mention three unhappy moments/events you and your child experienced at your child's school; and (c) in your opinion, what are the characteristics of a happy school? The questionnaire was filled out online. To ensure that only the intended respondents could access the questionnaire, the school director emailed the link to the parents. Parents were informed of the study's objectives and that data would be used only for research purposes. Their collaboration was voluntary, and participants could drop out of the study at any time. The questionnaire's introduction stated that participation was not mandatory and that there would be no consequences for those who chose not to answer. The answers were visible only to the researchers and not to the teachers, thereby avoiding any kind of coercion. The questionnaires were anonymous. Ethical concerns were, therefore, present at all stages of the research process [58]. The questionnaire is presented in Appendix A.

The resulting data were predominantly qualitative. An *a priori* category scheme was constructed based on the 22 variables of the HSP framework [49,59,60]—those presented in Table 1. This scheme was applied to the two open questions related to happiness. The open question related to unhappy moments was coded based on emergent categories, related to the same framework but with the items reversed. Only four categories were created: (i) School environment prone to bullying; (ii) Excessive workload and stress due to assessment and evaluation; (iii) Teachers with negative attitudes and attributes; and (iv) Bad relationships with teachers and/or peers. 1399 responses were categorized and coded using MaxQda 11.2.5 (software for qualitative data analysis in academic research) [61]. The qualitative responses were coded according to the 22 previously defined categories. A nominal scale was used to transform those qualitative data into quantitative data. When a parent's answer revealed that the parent valued one of the categories, the category was marked with a 1 (presence/valuing of that category). When this was not evident in the parent's answer, the category was marked with a 0. The resulting quantitative data and the quantitative data stemming from the closed questions were subsequently analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0.0.0. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics, including hypothesis testing, were used. This analysis was used to validate (or not) the 22 variables of the HSP framework [49] as they apply to Portuguese parents.

Participants

The ages of the participants' children ranged between 5 and 20 ($\bar{x} = 11.86$, $SD = 3.25$). To permit comparisons between age groups, age clusters were formed according to the stages of Portuguese education: Preschool (3–5), 1st Cycle of Basic Education (CBE; 6–10), 2nd Cycle of Basic Education (11–12), 3rd Cycle of Basic Education (13–15), and Secondary Education (16 and above). The resulting groups are characterized in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Age, sex, and school cluster distribution of the participants' children.

		Sex			
		Female		Male	
		Count	%	Count	%
Age	3 to 5	28	2.0%	29	2.1%
	6 to 10	194	13.9%	185	13.2%
	11 to 12	163	11.7%	163	11.7%
	13 to 15	248	17.7%	201	14.4%
	16 to 20	97	6.9%	91	6.5%

Table 4. *Cont.*

		Sex			
		Female		Male	
		Count	%	Count	%
School Cluster	AE 1	140	10.0%	131	9.4%
	AE 2	8	0.6%	11	0.8%
	AE 3	95	6.8%	99	7.1%
	AE 4	51	3.6%	39	2.8%
	AE 5	18	1.3%	17	1.2%
	AE 6	90	6.4%	90	6.4%
	AE 7	120	8.6%	107	7.6%
	AE 8	208	14.9%	175	12.5%

7. Results and Discussion

The results section is organized according to the previously defined research questions.

7.1. What Are Parents' Perceptions of Their Children's Level of Happiness at School?

Parents assessed their children's happiness at school on a 5-point Likert scale. The result was positive but with a high dispersion ($\bar{x} = 3.98$, $SD = 0.843$), indicating very diverse levels of satisfaction, though most children are considered to be happy at school.

7.2. Do Parents' Perceptions Vary According to Their Children's Age or Gender?

To answer this question, we performed a one-way ANOVA comparing the age groups with regard to the levels of happiness estimated by the parents. We found significant differences ($F = 10.77$, $p < 0.01$, effect size considering partial eta squared 0.03). Post-hoc Sheffé tests revealed significant differences between younger children (3 to 5 and 6 to 10) and older children (11 and above) as depicted in Table 5 and visually represented in Figure 1.

Table 5. Sheffé test for comparison between age groups (only the significant results are portrayed).

		Mean Difference (I–J)	Std. Error	Sig.
3 to 5	11 to 12	0.479	0.119	0.003
	13 to 15	0.528	0.117	0
	16 to 20	0.607	0.126	0
6 to 10	11 to 12	0.198	0.063	0.042
	13 to 15	0.247	0.058	0.001
	16 to 20	0.326	0.074	0.001

This difference is further confirmed by an analysis of the variable age without clusters and its correlation with the estimated happiness level, which also proved significant ($r = -0.17$, $p < 0.01$) and negative, confirming that happiness at school, as the parents perceive it, tends to decrease with age. This perception of children's reduction in happiness as their age increases from the parents' perspectives is weaker than what the children perceive [62].

Next, we analyzed possible differences according to the children's sex. We performed an independent samples T-test, which did not reveal significant differences between groups ($t = 0.89$, $p > 0.05$).

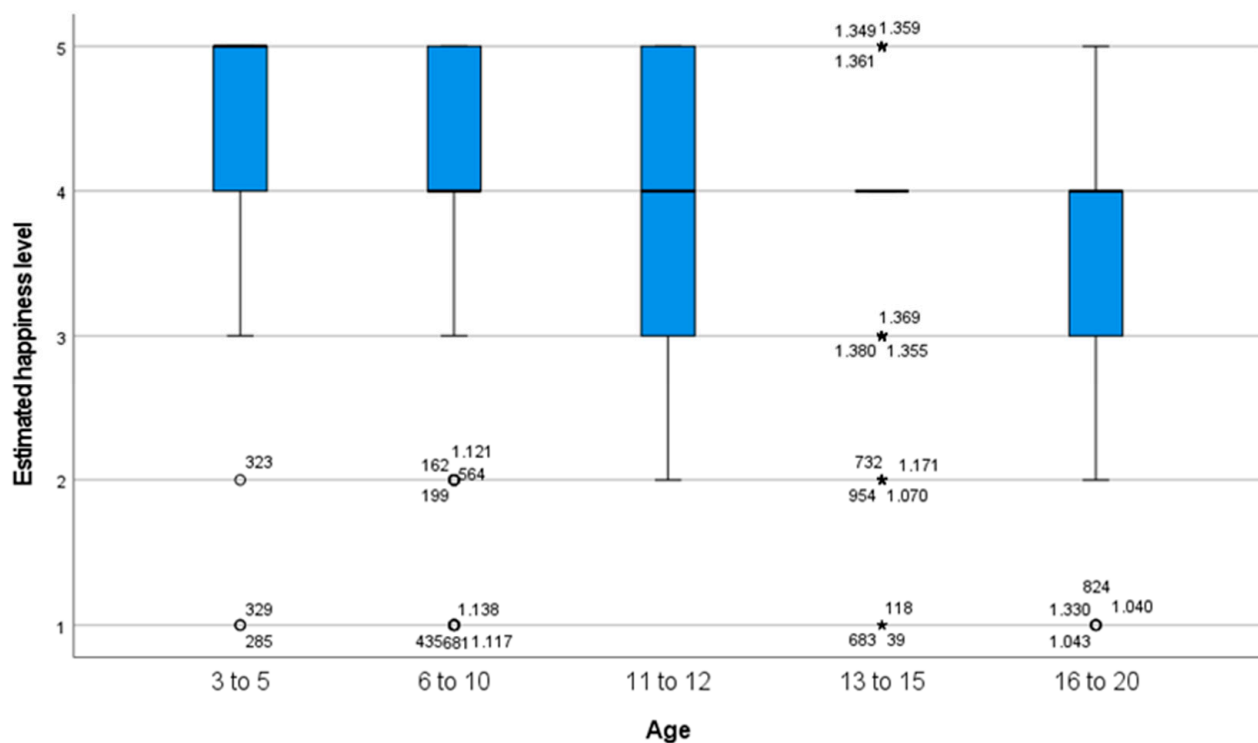


Figure 1. Stem and leaf graph of the distribution of the variable estimated happiness level, according to age groups. “*” Extreme outliers, “o” Outliers.

7.3. What Are the Most Relevant Dimensions of Happy Experiences Lived Together by Parents and Children at School?

Most parents (89%) referred to at least one happy moment at school with their children.

With regard to that moment, most references were related to “Process” (64%); only about 30% referred to “People,” and very few involved the dimension “Place” (Figure 2).

With regard to the details of parents’ accounts of happy experiences they had with their children at their school (Table 6), Extracurricular Activities and School Events (Process) take the lead, being mentioned by 712 parents, and are followed by Friendships and Relationships (People, mentioned by 326 parents), Sense of Achievement and Accomplishment (Process, 198 references), Positive Teacher Attitudes and Attributes (People, mentioned by 158 parents), and Fun and Engaging Teaching and Learning (Process, 138 mentions). Aspects related to learning experiences and relationships with friends and teachers are therefore at the forefront of their positive experiences. Although there are formal structures through which families can participate in schools, the probability of their participation is low [63] except on festive days that schools commemorate, like Christmas parties and end-of-the-year barbecues, as reported here by parents. There are also several parents, especially among younger children referring to closed schools, where parents are not welcome. This might help explain the salience of extracurricular activities in parents’ accounts.

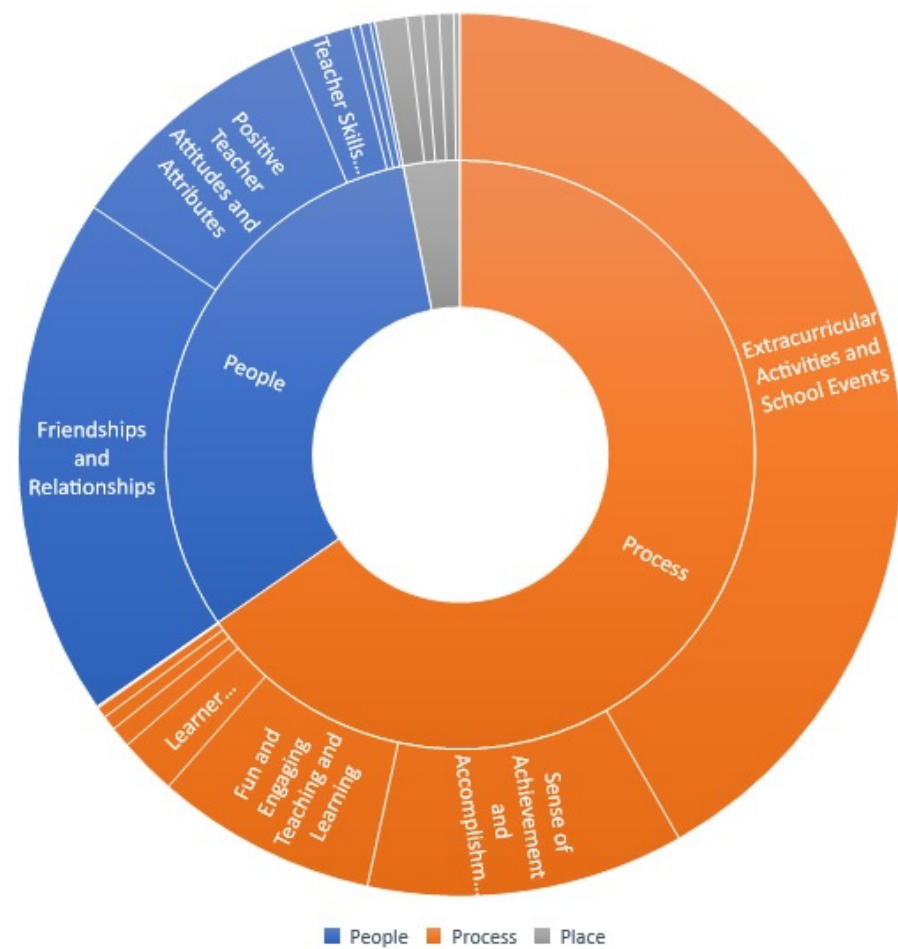


Figure 2. Visual representation of the frequency of categories and subcategories mentioned in parents' accounts of happy moments lived at school with their children.

Table 6. Frequency of mentions of each of the categories by parents as representative of happy experiences lived at school.

Categories	Subcategories	N	%
People	Friendships and relationships	326	23.2%
	Positive teacher attitudes and attributes	158	11.3%
	Respect for diversity and differences	3	0.5%
	Positive and collaborative values and practices	6	0.4%
	Teacher conditions and well-being	0	0.0%
	Teacher skills and competencies	39	22.8%
	Reasonable and fair workload	6	0.4%
	Total	538	58.6%
Process	Teamwork and collaborative spirit	7	0.5%
	Fun and engaging teaching and learning	138	9.8%
	Learner freedom, creativity, and engagement	36	2.6%
	Sense of achievement and accomplishment	198	14.1%
	Extracurricular activities and school events	712	50.7%
	Learning as a team between students and teachers	1	0.1%
	Useful, relevant, and engaging learning content	13	0.9%
	Mental well-being and stress-management	9	0.6%
	Total	1114	79.3%

Table 6. *Cont.*

Categories	Subcategories	N	%
Place	Warm and friendly learning environment	10	0.7%
	Secure environment free of bullying	10	0.7%
	Open and green learning and playing spaces	20	1.4%
	School vision and leadership	9	0.6%
	Positive discipline	0	0.0%
	Good health, sanitation, and nutrition	4	0.3%
	Democratic school management	0	0.0%
	Total	53	3.7%

On the other end of the spectrum, we highlight areas neglected by parents, as evidenced by their not being present in any of the parents' accounts: Teacher Conditions and Well-being; Positive Discipline; and Democratic School Management. These aspects seem to be relatively invisible to parents, as they pertain more directly to teachers.

Within the People dimension, parents highlight friendship in the school community as well as teachers with positive attitudes and warm welcomes. Based on a correlational analysis, parents of younger children are slightly more likely to report Fun and engaging teaching and learning approaches ($r = -0.16, p < 0.01$), Extracurricular activities and school events ($r = -0.15, p < 0.01$), and Open and green learning and playing spaces ($r = -0.08, p < 0.01$). In contrast, parents of older children are slightly more likely to refer to Sense of achievement and accomplishment ($r = 0.19, p < 0.01$). Parents of children whom they assess as being happier are slightly more likely to refer to Extracurricular activities and school events ($r = 0.07, p < 0.01$).

7.4. What Are the Most Relevant Dimensions of Unhappy Experiences Lived by Parents and Their Children at the Children's School?

When we asked parents to recall the unhappy moments at school that their children shared, about 60% did not recall any. When analyzing the specific categories those experiences fall into, People is the most prominent dimension, including Bad relationships with teachers or peers, and Teachers' negative attitudes. Place appears second, with references to an Unsafe school environment prone to bullying. Finally, there were mentions of Process, related to Excessive workload and stress (Table 7).

Table 7. Frequency of mentions of each of the categories by parents as representative of unhappy experiences lived at school.

	Categories	Frequency	%
People	Bad relationships with teachers and/or peers	170	12.1%
	Teachers with negative attitudes and attributes	166	11.8%
Process	Excessive workload and stress due to assessment and evaluation	77	5.5%
Place	School environment prone to bullying	122	8.7%

Parents of older children are more likely to report unhappy moments related to Excessive workload and stress due to assessment and evaluation ($r = 0.08, p < 0.01$) and Bad relationships with teachers and/or peers ($r = 0.06, p < 0.05$), while parents of children whom they consider to be happier at school are less likely to report unhappy moments related to each of the four considered categories (Bad relationships— $r = -0.09, p < 0.01$; Teachers with negative attitudes— $r = -0.21, p < 0.01$; Excessive workload— $r = -0.08, p < 0.01$, and School environment prone to bullying— $r = -0.17, p < 0.01$).

7.5. From the Parents' Perspective, What Are the Characteristics of a Happy School?

When asked about the general characteristics of a happy school, parents placed People in the lead, with 76% indicating this. Processes were referenced by 34% and Places by 37%. As can be seen in Figure 3, the number of references in each category and subcategory is more balanced than for happy experiences, and all the subcategories are represented in at least one parent's answer. Only 6% of parents did not refer to at least one characteristic.

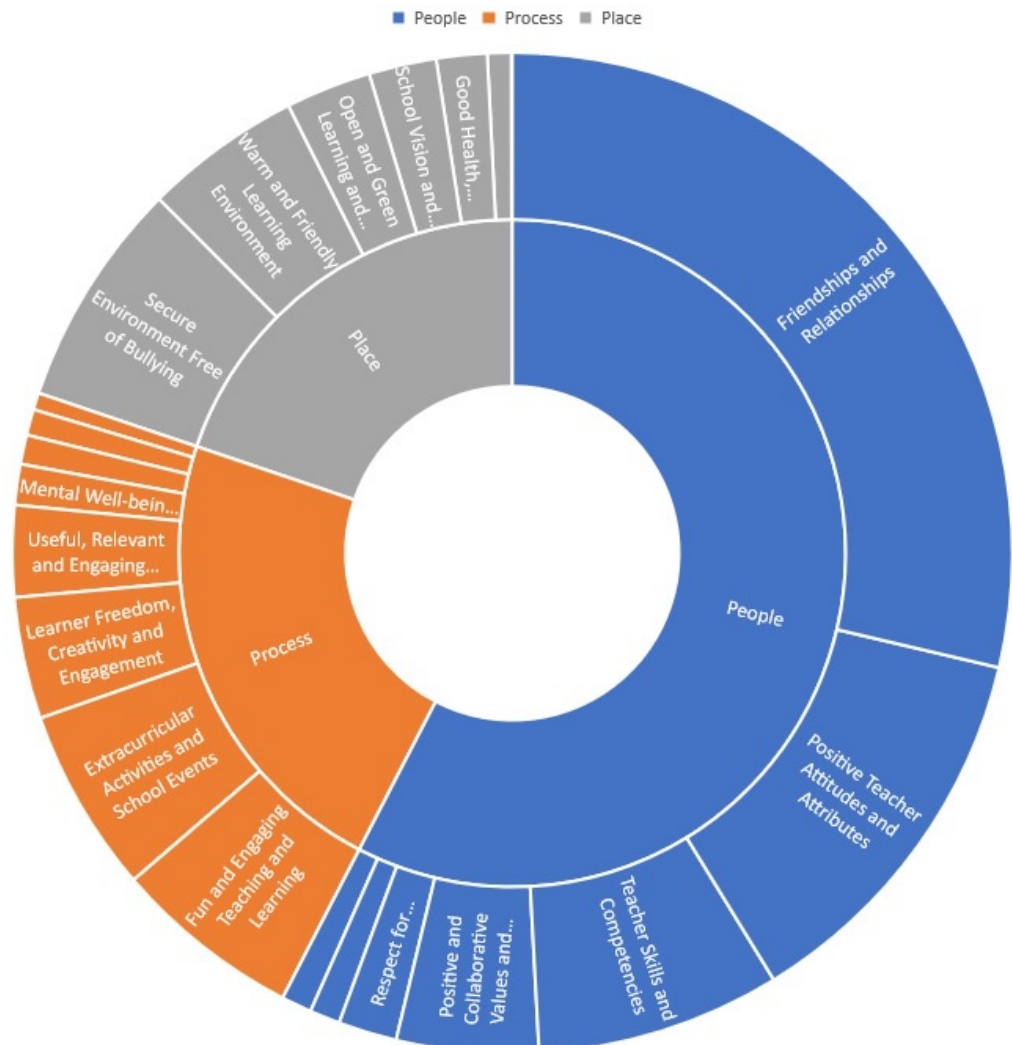


Figure 3. Visual representation of the frequency of categories and subcategories mentioned in parents' accounts of characteristics of a happy school.

Considering the most represented subcategories, they relate to Friendships and relationships (People, 787 mentions), Positive teacher attitudes and attributes (People, 345 mentions), Teacher skills and competencies (People, 217 mentions), Secure environment free of bullying (Place, 201 mentions), Fun and engaging teaching and learning (Process, 167 mentions), and Extracurricular activities and school events (Process, 164 mentions). Thus, all categories are included, albeit with an emphasis on People (Table 8).

Table 8. Frequency of mentions of each of the categories by parents as characteristics of a happy school.

Categories	Subcategories	Frequency	%
People	Friendships and relationships	787	56.1%
	Positive teacher attitudes and attributes	345	24.6%
	Respect for diversity and differences	52	3.7%
	Positive and collaborative values and practices	126	9.0%
	Teacher conditions and well-being	27	1.9%
	Teacher skills and competencies	217	15.5%
	Reasonable and fair workload	27	1.9%
	Total	1581	112.7% ¹
Process	Teamwork and collaborative spirit	15	1.1%
	Fun and engaging teaching and learning	167	11.9%
	Learner freedom, creativity, and engagement	108	7.7%
	Sense of achievement and accomplishment	26	1.9%
	Extracurricular activities and school events	164	11.7%
	Learning as a team between students and teachers	23	1.6%
	Useful, relevant, and engaging learning content	81	5.8%
	Mental well-being and stress-management	36	2.6%
Place	Total	620	44.2%
	Warm and friendly learning environment	140	10.0%
	Secure environment free of bullying	201	14.3%
	Open and green learning and playing spaces	76	5.4%
	School vision and leadership	60	4.3%
	Positive discipline	21	1.5%
	Good health, sanitation, and nutrition	45	3.2%
	Democratic school management	1	0.1%
	Total	544	38.8%

¹ Respondents were asked to report more than one aspect related to happiness. Therefore, it was possible to achieve a percentage higher than 100%. This implies that parents identified more than one aspect related to people in their answers.

Considering the characteristics of a happy school and based on a correlational analysis, parents of younger children are slightly more likely to value Friendships and relationships in the School Community ($r = -0.08$, $p < 0.01$), Positive teacher attitudes and attributes ($r = -0.11$, $p < 0.01$), and Learner freedom, creativity, and engagement ($r = -0.06$, $p < 0.05$), while parents of older children are slightly more likely to value Sense of achievement and accomplishment ($r = -0.06$, $p < 0.05$), Useful, relevant, and engaging learning content ($r = -0.09$, $p < 0.05$), and School vision and leadership ($r = -0.06$, $p < 0.05$). These weak correlations signal a general agreement across all age groups on the characteristics of a happy school, with parents of older children focusing slightly more on academic aspects and parents of younger children focusing slightly more on interpersonal aspects.

8. Discussion

One of the purposes of this study was to identify students' levels of happiness at school from their parents' perspectives. Parents of younger children felt that their children were happier than did parents of older children, which is in line with the findings of O'Rourke and Cooper [64]. Our results show that levels of happiness decrease as students' ages increase. This result parallels the findings of others [23,24,50,51,65]. Nevertheless, the decline in levels of happiness at school is less marked from the perspective of parents than when the pupils themselves are asked [62].

Analysis of the collected data did not reveal any gender differences in levels of happiness at school, contrary to what others have pointed out [29]. We continued the analysis and found that the most relevant dimensions of happiness, characterized by moments lived by parents and children at school in Portugal, are those related to events that the school organizes, such as Christmas or end-of-year parties, which shows the limited extent to which schools are open to other types of parental participation [66,67]. This appears to be

an issue requiring schools' attention. We are led to think that parental participation remains voluntary, case-by-case, and sporadic [68].

In short, when it comes to characterizing a happy school, parents state that it is important to have Friendships and relationships within the school community and Teachers with positive attitudes and attributes. Parents also state that it is important that teachers have the right skills and competencies. A happy school employs good teaching and learning strategies and offers extracurricular activities. The importance of teachers is not a novel discovery. However, these results emphasize the need to prioritize teacher education, including education directed toward preparing them to deal with diversity in the classroom [69] and collaborative supervision practices geared toward ensuring educational quality [70].

We are now in possession of data, provided by parents, that allow us to characterize a happy school. When we compare our results with the Happy Schools framework and the results of Gramaxo and colleagues [61] concerning Portuguese students, we find parallels between them, as shown in the Figure 4 below.

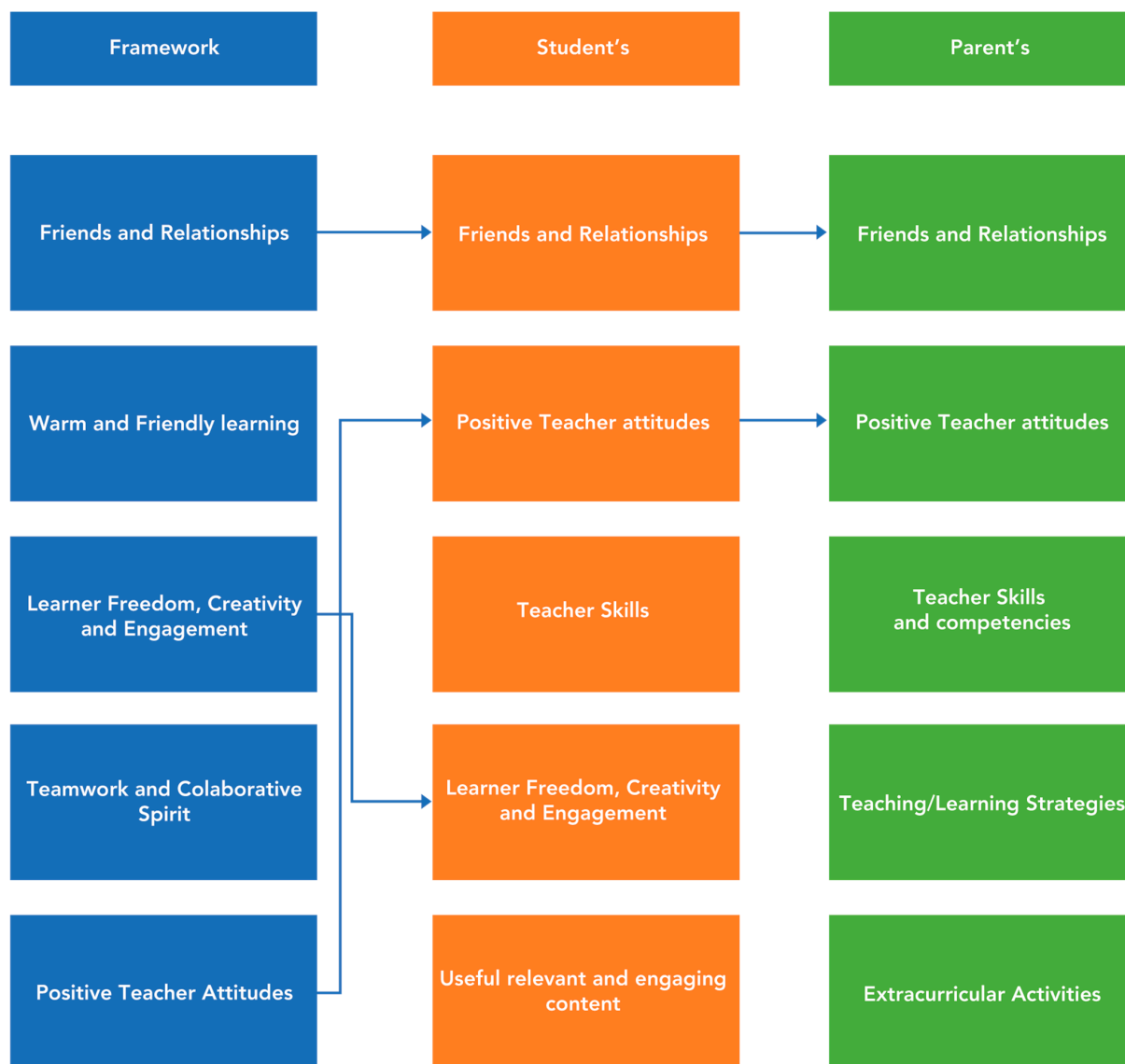


Figure 4. Top five variables that characterize a happy school. Framework: Source: Happy Schools! A Framework for Learner Well-being in the Asia-Pacific [49]. Student's: Source: Gramaxo et al. [62].

For students and parents, it is generally agreed that the variable Friendship and relationships within the school is the most important characteristic of a happy school [39,40,42,47].

The Bangkok study [47] identified a Warm and friendly learning environment as the second most important characteristic of a happy school. However, for Portuguese students and parents, the second-most prioritized variable is that of Positive teacher attitudes and attributes. Additionally, in the Bangkok study, the third position was occupied by the variable Learner freedom, creativity, and engagement, while students and parents mention the Teachers' skills and competencies. In fourth place, we find Teamwork and collaborative spirit, though students value Learner freedom, creativity, and engagement, while parents value Fun and engaging teaching and learning. Finally, the Bangkok study mentioned Positive teacher attitudes and attributes, while students mentioned Useful, relevant, and engaging learning content and parents mentioned the existence of Extracurricular activities and school events.

Most parents did not report any unhappy moments at their children's school. Nevertheless, they could identify unhappy moments related to their children's peers [46,52] and teachers [71,72], which aligns with the results of previous studies.

An unhappy school is one in which students have an excessive workload and experience stress [73] (Figure 5).

When we analyze the data, we find evidence of agreement between the characteristics of an unhappy school as identified by the Bangkok study and as indicated by the answers of Portuguese students. An unhappy school has an unsafe environment prone to bullying, a high student workload, stress caused by exams and grades, a negative learning environment and school atmosphere, negative teacher attitudes and attributes, and bad relationships. What changes is the order that the first two variables occupy in the top five. Portuguese students report having 'too many classes' [62]. Addressing bullying and promoting healthy relationships among students are essential avenues for an intervention designed to promote happier school environments [52].

Differences appear when we examine the parents' data. For them, the most damaging variable is Negative attitudes and attributes of teachers, followed by Bad relationships with teachers and/or peers, having an Unsafe environment prone to bullying, High student workload, and Stress motivated by exams and grades.

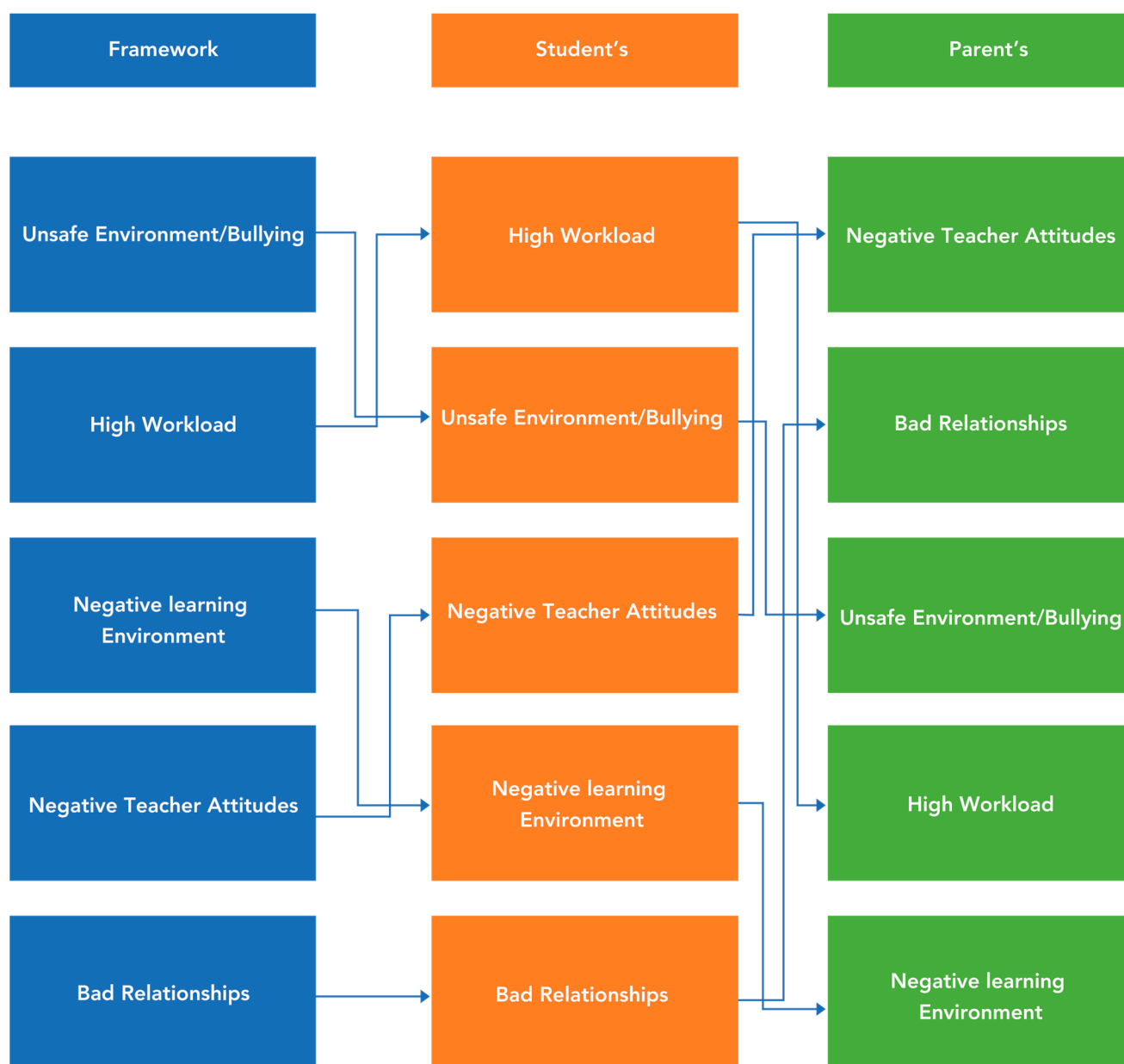


Figure 5. Top five variables that characterize an unhappy school. Framework: Source: Happy Schools! A Framework for Learner Well-being in the Asia-Pacific [49]. Student's: Source: Gramaxo et al. [62].

9. Conclusions

We begin the discussion section by acknowledging the limitations of our study. One such limitation concerns the fact that the current study considered only parents' perspectives. A happy school should consider the perspectives of all major stakeholders—not just parents but also students, teachers, and non-teaching professionals. Therefore, we intend to extend this study to include other perspectives.

Also, the fact that the sample was non-probabilistic means that the results cannot be generalized to the Portuguese population. However, the fact that we gathered data from a large number of participants who included parents from all three age groups in non-higher education, via a qualitative questionnaire that allowed participants to express their feelings in their own words, is in itself innovative and valuable. Furthermore, the fact that the distribution of happiness includes several outliers, can lead to difficulties in data interpretation. We chose not to eliminate such outliers, as this study is interested in

encompassing the diversity of experiences and began with a qualitative stage. However, we acknowledge further research is necessary.

We intended to verify whether the framework [49], when constructed in a very different cultural environment, would remain relevant in the Portuguese context. Other studies [22] referred to cultural differences in how these constructs are experienced, which makes this analysis particularly relevant. We have found that, generally, the framework remains relevant for Portuguese parents, although the People and Process dimensions are more salient than the Place dimension. Having confirmed the relevance of these dimensions through a more exploratory study, we now intend to create a closed-question questionnaire exploring these three dimensions (People, Process, and Place) and the twenty-two variables associated with them (Table 1), which can be applied to parents as one of the means of assessing the general level of happiness in a school and identifying key aspects to improve, in order to elevate a school's level of happiness. Also, the fact that we found differences in what parents of children of different age groups value is relevant to targeting the most salient aspects for each age group in interventions. Therefore, we believe that the current study has relevant practical implications.

Parents presented us with data showing that their children are fairly happy at school, with no relevant differences among genders. Levels of students' happiness at school decline with age, but the decline is not as marked when parents account for the students' levels of happiness. This highlights a difference between students' and parents' perceptions of happiness at school. The collected data did not show differences between schools, which revealed a certain standardization of parents' ideas about their children's happiness at school.

We can conclude that Portuguese parents consider People and Process to be more relevant than Place. Interestingly, students have the same opinion on this matter, as they answered similarly to parents [62]. As we mentioned previously, when drawing a complete picture of a happy school, one should consider the perspectives of multiple stakeholder groups. Evaluating the similarities and differences between the perspectives of those groups is a promising avenue for research and is critical to informing policy and practice.

To parents, an unhappy school is one where bullying happens, students have an excessive workload, teachers have negative attitudes and attributes, and bad relationships exist. This is in line with previous findings and the Happy Schools framework.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the LE@D, Open University (CE-Doc. 23-03), and the General Directorate of Education (Portugal), under the number 0694400004.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data are not publicly available due to the confidential information involved, as per the confidentiality agreement established with the participants.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Questionnaire applied to the parents:

1. What is your child's level of education? (Possible answers: Preschool/1st Cycle of Basic Education/2nd Cycle of Basic Education/3rd Cycle of Basic Education/Secondary Education).
2. How old is your child? (Open answer).
3. What is the sex of your child? (Possible answers: Male/Female/Other or prefer not to answer).
4. How happy do you feel your child is at their school? (Possible answers: 5-point Likert scale from 1 (very unhappy) to 5 (very happy)).
5. Please mention three happy moments/events you and your child experienced at your child's school (Open-ended question).
6. Please mention three unhappy moments/events you and your child experienced at your child's school (Open-ended question).
7. In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a happy school? (Open-ended question).

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