Do We Listen to What Makes Children Happy? A Systematic Literature Review of Voices of Children Aged 3–7 Years in Educational Research

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Research shows that children's views and experiences are usually overlooked in discussions related to their own happiness and wellbeing. In fact, the largest international study to date on children's wellbeing only included children aged 8-12. A review of reviews further reveals that no previous studies have focused on exploring factors that make children aged 3-7 happy. This research addresses this gap in the literature by conducting the first systematic review of international studies exploring young children's perspectives on happiness. The EPPI-Centre framework guided this systematic review of international research published covering almost a decade of research (2015-2024). This comprehensive approach aimed to provide an overview of the current research landscape to inform future research and policy decisions. Out of 2594 papers arguing to listen to children, only five focused on exploring children's happiness and wellbeing from an interpretivist perspective. Results showed that there are studies listening to children's voices, however, very limited studies genuinely explore what makes children happy. Factors contributing to children's happiness and wellbeing include spending time with loved ones, receiving praise, achieving goals and engaging in sociodramatic play. Negative factors include feeling ignored, having limited interaction with peers/friends and being forced to do activities children do not enjoy. Methodological limitations identified include unclear sample selection, regional bias, subjective data interpretation, and pre-determined prompts influencing children's responses. The findings can inform future research directions and policy decisions aimed at promoting children's happiness and well-being in schools. As such, this paper provides a unique insight and makes an original and significant contribution to the field.

Keywords: Systematic literature review, children's happiness, children's wellbeing, happy children, children's voices

The intricate relationship between happiness and subjective wellbeing (SWB) constitutes a central focus within the positive psychology field., however, they are different constructs. Happiness is often conceptualised as a transient emotional state characterised by positive affect, contentment and pleasure (Lyubomirsky, 2014; Oishi et al., 2013; Tanzer, 2021). Researchers usually assess happiness through self-report measures, capturing individuals' immediate experiences of joy, satisfaction or positive emotions (Linton et al., 2016). SWB on the other hand, considers not only the experience of positive emotions, but it also focuses on cognitive evaluations of individuals' lives considering individual's life satisfaction, and the experience of negative emotions (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2021; Lyubomirsky, 2010). Subjective wellbeing, encompassing cognitive and affective components, is a multidimensional construct intricately linked to the individual's overall life satisfaction and fulfilment (Diener et al., 2018). However, psychological research consistently shows that happiness serves as a pivotal component influencing one's SWB (Busseri & Quoidbach, 2022; Choi et al., 2023; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener,

2005). Recent psychological research suggests that positive affect and life satisfaction significantly contribute to subjective wellbeing, portraying happiness as a fundamental precursor to an individual's overall sense of fulfilment (Diener et al., 2018). This interplay is dynamic, with SWB reciprocally influencing happiness over time (Huppert & So, 2013). Moreover, there is a growing body of empirical evidence revealing that the experience of positive emotions such as happiness or enjoyment, serve as a protective factor against mental health problems. Studies show that not only adults but also young children who experience more happiness, report lower rates of stress (Waters et al., 2022), anxiety (Layous et al., 2014) and depression (Ford et al., 2014). Hence, understanding and exploring this intricate relationship holds practical implications for interventions aimed at enhancing young children's overall life satisfaction and happiness, and a healthy mental health. However, to our knowledge, there is no study systematically appraising the international literature exploring factors that influence children's happiness, limiting our knowledge to inform psycho-educational interventions and school policies.

Further to this, the largest international study on children's SWB conducted by Children's Worlds, included only children aged 8-12, leaving out younger children (Gross-Manos et al., 2021). Whilst more than 223,500 children's views were gathered in such study, the views of younger children remain unheard. Understanding

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children's views at this age is crucial considering research suggesting that within the first 6 years of life thinking and behavioural patterns are well-established (Clark & Lee, 2021; Rose et al., 2015). In fact, there is robust evidence to suggest that these early patterns have direct influence on children and young people's mental health as shown by longitudinal studies (Clark & Lee, 2021; Claveirole & Gaughan, 2011), as has parents' practices shaping children's views about life (Ambert, 2014). In this review, we follow the notion of some experts (e.g., Lyubomirsky & Dickerhoof, 2005) whereby happiness is considered an essential component of SWB. We do not see these as separate entities, but rather as entities which complement each other. Hence, we deemed essential to review research on both entities.

Ed Diener's Theory of Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) provides a useful framework in the study of individuals' perceptions of their own lives and has been instrumental in understanding SWB in young children (Casas, 2019; Ditzel et al., 2022; Gross-Manos & Bradshaw, 2021). Diener conceptualises SWB a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive and affective components (Diener et al., 1999). Specifically, it includes cognitive evaluations of life satisfaction, assessments of the frequency and intensity of positive and negative affect, and subjective assessments of the overall quality of life (Diener, 2000; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). A wealth of psychological research has further shown that SWB is influenced by genetic predispositions (Rietveld et al., 2013), personality traits (Anglim et al., 2020), life circumstances, and intentional activities (Diener, 2000; Helliwell & Wang, 2014). Recent research has made significant progress in identifying the relative importance of these factors and understanding their complex interactions. For instance, studies examining the heritability of SWB highlight the genetic underpinnings of subjective wellbeing (De Neve et al., 2013).

Other research on the role of intentional activities such as gratitude practices and mindfulness, have provided valuable insights into enhancing SWB (Disabato et al., 2016; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011). Diener's original work emphasised the universality of SWB, suggesting that the pursuit of happiness was a human characteristic across cultures (Diener et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2016). However, recent research challenges this perspective by acknowledging the impact of cultural variations on the expression and attainment of subjective wellbeing (Oishi & Diener, 2014). Cross-cultural studies highlight the role of cultural norms, values, and social comparisons in shaping individuals' SWB experiences (Safdar et al., 2019). However, there seems to be a tendency in studying happiness and SWB from a positivist perspective (David, 2014), with a tendency to use Like-type scales which do not allow to understand the lived experiences of children from an interpretivist perspective. As a result, understanding cultural variations from children's perspectives, emerges as crucial to better understand how happiness and wellbeing are shaped by societal values, practices and norms across countries. This suggests a clear need to continue exploring happiness and SWB in different cultures; with multiple populations including young children, and with an interpretivist focus.

At a young age, it is fundamental to consider the physical spaces where children spend most of their time (i.e., not only home but school) to better understand how their experiences are shaped (Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Specifically, extensive research has focused on the topic of children's happiness at school, recognising its crucial role in their overall development (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012). Focusing on schools is relevant considering recent research showing that schools serve as influential environments where children spend much formative time and which influences the development of academic and personal skills (Malik & Shujja, 2013). Additionally, understanding children's happiness and wellbeing is vital to develop policies and practices to promote a holistic development at schools - not merely academic (Clarke & Platt, 2023). Considering recent research around subjective wellbeing in young children, it has been shown that recognising success beyond academic achievement fosters eudemonic wellbeing (Losada-Puente et al., 2022). Likewise, empirical evidence suggests that joyful school activities can enhance children's hedonic wellbeing (Disabato et al., 2016; McLellan & Steward, 2015).

Interestingly, studies employing quantitative questionnaires have predominantly focused on the interplay between happiness and academic achievement, establishing a bidirectional relationship between the two constructs (Quinn & Duckworth, 2007; Stiglbauer et al., 2013). This keen interest has extended beyond academic inquiry, infiltrating policy-driven research initiatives. For example, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, OECD, 2015, 2018), used student life satisfaction scores as a proxy for school well-being. Notably, PISA data revealed a concerning decline in life satisfaction, averaging a drop of 0.3-1 point between 2015 and 2018. However, the study used self-reported questionnaires prone to bias and subjectivity. The cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow to understand how biological maturation and changes in life, impact life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was correlated to school wellbeing, however the study could not determine causality. Nevertheless, similar downward trends emerged from the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HSBC) survey conducted by the World Health Organization (i.e., during 2017/2018), where adolescents reported decreased school satisfaction compared to 2014. However, some methodological limitations may question the reliability and validity of the findings. The study included self-reported data prone to social desirability and recall bias. It only included children aged 11-15 excluding younger children; and participation was voluntary, questioning the representativeness of the findings. Interestingly, the survey highlighted that younger children reported greater enjoyment of school and less pressure compared to adolescents. This observed decline in positive sentiment aligns with data presented in UNICEF's Report Card Series (2007, 2013, 2020). Taken together, these studies reveal useful evidence showing a concerning downward trend around life satisfaction in adolescents where the greater enjoyment reported by younger children (i.e., 11 y.o.), has only been partially explored. However, the exclusion of younger children (e.g., below 8 y.o.) in international studies, is clear and worrying. Importantly, Report Cards 11 (2013) and 7 (2007) specifically urge for the inclusion of children's direct voices in happiness evaluations, acknowledging significant discrepancies between questionnaire data and children's own narratives.

Research on Children's Happiness & SBW

Subjective Well-Being (SWB) specifically in children has been a topic of growing interest in psychological research. In the current

comprehensive review, happiness is defined as a fairly constant, positive emotional characteristic, focusing on subjective well-being and overall satisfaction with life (Baioco et al., 2019; Gomez, 2019; Holder & Klassen, 2010; Kamp et al., 2008). Recent studies have provided valuable insights into children's happiness and SWB, revealing trends and factors that influence these aspects of their lives. The Good Childhood Report (2021) presents the latest trends in children's SWB which uses the Good Childhood Index (GCI) to assess children's happiness with different aspects of life and overall life satisfaction. Findings suggest that children aged 10 to 17 were generally happy with their home, family, and health, however a larger proportion of children expressed dissatisfaction with school. This finding is consistent with pre-pandemic years, suggesting that school-related factors significantly impact children's SWB (Steinmayr et al., 2018). However, such study focuses on children aged 10 which does not help to uncover the factors that make children happy at a younger age -leaving out children below 10. This study (like many others) uses single items to measure happiness and life satisfaction which has been the focus of severe criticisms (Raudenská et al., 2023). Moreover, causality between social factors and happiness could not be ascertained. Self-reported data could have been affected by mood or social desirability. The sampling process is not clearly described, and it recruited UK participants only -findings might not translate directly to other cultures. Whilst future research should focus on younger children, the present study represents a unique opportunity to explore the extent to which academic literature has -or not- considered younger children such as those aged 3-7.

The Good Child Report includes three measures of personal wellbeing from the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2022). These measures ask children about their happiness, overall life satisfaction, and whether they feel the things they do in life are worthwhile. Findings revealed a generally positive SWB among children. However, results from other studies conducted within the last ten years, reveal contradictory findings highlighting a decline in children's happiness with life as a whole, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork (Understanding Society, 2022). This trend suggests that children's SWB has been negatively impacted over the past decade, suggesting the need for interventions to enhance children's happiness and wellbeing. A recent study supports these findings further by revealing that mean scores on children's SWB vary across countries and cultures but overall, are low (Savahl et al., 2021). Notably, empirical research consistently identifies strong, supportive relationships as a cornerstone of children's SWB. For example, secure attachment to caregivers provides children with a safe haven for emotional exploration (Mikami & Shields, 2019) and lay the emotional foundations for navigating challenges (Grossmann & Grossmann, 2020). Studies like Willoughby et al. (2011) demonstrate the association between positive peer relationships and SWB, highlighting the vital role of friendship in social-emotional development. Whilst these studies have provided us with relevant evidence around the importance of belonging within families, living in friendly communities and fostering environment in schools to nurture children's emotional well-being, there are important limitations to highlight. These studies have predominantly been explored from a positivist perspective, with very little exploration of factors from an interpretivist perspective. Hence, we know how

satisfied older children are with their life (based on 0-5 points scoring systems), but little is known around "what factors" influenced such scores. This is, we still do not know the perceptions of younger children around these factors. The need to address this gap becomes even more crucial if we consider that children facing adversity, such as those from impoverished backgrounds or exposed to violence, are often underrepresented in SWB research (Masten et al., 2017). Understanding resilience and identifying factors that promote SWB amidst disadvantage is vital for developing targeted interventions and improving the lives of vulnerable and non-vulnerable children.

The complexity of children's inner world presents challenges in exploring SWB. Self-report measures may be unreliable in younger children, calling for the need to use more innovative methods like participatory methodologies, observational assessments and adult-child interviews (Aysun et al., 2022; Gunnar & LaFreniere, 2000; UNICEF, 2020). Additionally, longitudinal studies may help uncover how children's perceptions of SWB might change over time and context. However, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no systematic reviews of the international literature focused on listening to children aged 3-7 to explore what influences children's happiness. Available reviews with older children be discussed in more detail below, however the present study aims to fill this gap by offering unique insights as to what studies investigate when they claim to listen to children's voices. We are also interested in exploring whether they place any emphasis on what makes children feel happy. More importantly, this review is unique as we were interested to cover one of the most challenging times for human beings, that of a global pandemic and its effects during 2019-2021. This phenomenon threatened the physical and mental wellbeing of children and adults alike, calling for the need to explore the experiences of young children in published research. Additionally, developing developmentally appropriate and context-sensitive measurement tools remains an ongoing challenge. To the best of our knowledge, the present study represents the first systematic review of the international literature of the extent to which researchers pay attention to factors that influence children's happiness whenever children's voices are heard. We aimed to do this by synthetising and critically apprising the most recent research around listening to children's voices and by focusing on researchers' efforts to explore what influences children's happiness. But why do we need to listen to children? The relevance of listening to children's voices is framed at a global scale, by the UNCRC's children's rights. This framework encourages global efforts to have children's voices heard in matters which are important to them, and which affect their lives. However, there have been challenges in ensuring this worldwide right that children have.

Art 12 of the UNCRC: Children's Right to be Heard

The groundbreaking U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) set the stage for a radical new view of children. No longer passive subjects, (young) children were declared "competent individuals" with their own unique experiences, knowledge, and perspectives. Article 12, in particular, emphasises their right to have a say in matters affecting them, including research (Sommer et al., 2013). This convention became a powerful tool for advancing (young) children's rights in areas like health, family, and education.

Beyond setting a global standard, it also inspired adults to involve children in decision-making processes (Tisdall & Punch, 2012) and shape research and practices that impact them (MacNaughton & Smith, 2008). Despite its transformative impact, we acknowledge that the UNCRC may have some limitations. Some scholars suggest that the UNCRC has inconsistencies in the language used within its articles making them difficult to enact (Beazley et al., 2009). Additionally, UNCRC may have a blind spot for cultural differences (Roche, 2004) which should be addressed. Moreover, countries can opt out of specific articles that clash with their cultural norms or policies (Killkelly & Lundy, 2006). Despite its limitations, the UNCRC approach seems to embrace diversity by offering an essential rights-based framework that acknowledges the vast array of childhood experiences across the globe. This, in turn, calls for additional exploration of how international studies enact Art 12 by amplifying the voice of children around things, persons, situations or events that makes them feel happy and that could contribute to their SWB.

Review of Reviews

We searched for existing reviews that focused on children's perspectives, views, and involvement in research. We did this by using key terms like "happiness", "subjective wellbeing", "child," "voice," "perspectives," "views," and "literature review" in our search. This led us to nine major reviews conducted by Curtin (2001), Pollard and Lee (2003), Davies and Wright (2008), Zhang (2015), Bradbury-Jones, Isham and Taylor (2018), Grace et al. (2019), Moss and Urban (2020), Izzo, Baioco and Pistella (2022), and Papadopoulos et al. (2022). These reviews together covered research published between 1968 and 2022, although one review did not specify its timeframe.

Scoping

The reviews we found were constrained in their scope through several limitations. Firstly, in terms of geography, one review concentrated solely on Australian literature (Grace et al., 2019), while another encompassed both Australian and New Zealand literature (Zhang, 2015). Moss and Urban's (2020) included England, Estonia and US only. Secondly, the characteristics and demographics under consideration varied, with one review focusing on children in care, those with disabilities, or mental health issues (Bradbury-Jones, Isham, & Taylor, 2018). Another focused on the perspectives of looked after children regarding mental health services (Davies & Wright, 2008), and yet another examined specific service sectors (Grace et al., 2019). Curtin's study (2001), offered limited information about methodology or criteria and was published in an occupational therapy journal indicating a particular focus of the study. Thirdly, the type of methodology employed in the included papers varied, with some reviews, such as Bradbury-Jones et al. (2018) and Grace et al. (2019), emphasizing participatory research. Bradbury et al. also limited the literature to qualitative research, whilst Izzo et al. (2022) excluded all qualitative studies. The methodology used by Pollard and Lee (2003) focuses only on examining literature-based definitions and exploring what instruments are used in the literature to investigate wellbeing. No focus on listening to children's voices around happiness was included. On the other hand, Papadopoulos et al. (2022) focused on the impact of an intervention program, -classroom-physical activity

on primary school children's SWB. However, this review did not include non-English studies limiting the generalisability of the findings, and used only quantitative strategies to "measure" children's SWB. Children's voices were not explored.

Whilst Moss and Urban's (2020) was not a review of the literature per se, they analysed the data available from the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS) by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020) which was a pioneering initiative to explore children's wellbeing internationally. However, there seems to be an overreliance on self-report measures from parents or primary caregivers, and staff. One notable concern is the potential homogenization of early childhood education through standardised assessments, limiting the understanding of diverse cultural and contextual factors influencing wellbeing. The emphasis on direct and indirect assessments, while capturing certain aspects, may overlook the holistic and subjective nature of early childhood wellbeing. Given these narrow scopes in the existing literature reviews and recognising gaps in the covered literature, it became imperative to conduct a literature review with a broader focus. Considering the timelines of the existing reviews and addressing their limitations, the decision was made to concentrate on international literature spanning almost a decade with research published between 2015 and 2024, irrespective of the authors' methodologies, with a specific emphasis on educational research.

Interestingly in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015) showed drastic but rather positive change by including the promotion of wellbeing for all at all ages. Worryingly, this emphasis was not present in the Millenium Development Goals (UN, 2000). Hence, we deemed relevant to capture potential changes in the landscape of research focusing on global efforts to support wellbeing across ages. Additionally, we were also interested in covering the period where a global pandemic disrupted the lives of adults, children and young children alike with important implications for their physical and mental health (van de Velde, et al., 2021). Thus, we deemed essential to analyse and synthesise qualitative research covering the COVID19 lockdowns. Likewise, an important number of research studies on the influence of social media on young children and children's wellbeing has increased drastically over the last 10 years. This calls for the need to further explore recent research considering social media and wellbeing as suggested by Przybylski and Weinstein (2017). Lastly, recent developments around Artificial Intelligence (AI) over the last 2 years, have triggered a global interest in analysing how AI is influencing the wellbeing of its users (Rajest et al., 2023). We deemed relevant to capture global initial efforts to study this rather new phenomenon.

Methodology Used in Previous Reviews

The quality and transparency of the methodology was challenging since they varied among these studies. In some studies, databases and inclusion criteria were not explicitly listed in every review. Worryingly, the age of children was not included in all reviews, however the age of participants ranged from 0-5 years (Zhang, 2015) whilst other reviews limited themselves to mentioning "children and young people" challenging the transparency of the methodology and the replication of the study (Bradbury-Jones, Isham, and Taylor 2018; Grace et al. 2019; Izzo et

al., 2022; Pollard and Lee, 2003). Likewise, the methodology used in these reviews was mixed with four reviews reporting a systematic literature review (Bradbury-Jones, Isham, & Taylor 2018; Izzi et al., 2022; Pollard & Lee, 2003; Zhang 2015). Whilst the review by Davies and Wright (2008) reported the inclusion criteria and search methods, they did not mention the nature of their review. Curtin's (2001) on the other hand, conducted a narrative review which investigated the strategies to listen to children rather than listening to children's voices per se. Lastly, Grace et al. (2019) conducted a scoping review. IELS's (OECD, 2020) methodology included a sample of 3,000 children in at least 200 settings, but with a low number of children per setting. The study did not consider cultural differences when it comes to defining "well-being" which may pose challenges as to what it was measured. The study relies on self-report measures from parents or primary caregivers, and staff. These measures can be subjective and may not accurately reflect the child's actual experiences. As a result of this, it became essential for our study to conduct a robust and systematic literature review. Our transparent methodology includes a clear definition of key terms, age range of children, specified databases, inclusion criteria, and implementation of cross-team quality checks. Furthermore, previous reviews have not focused on rigorously scrutinising studies to identify the extent to which researchers amplify the voices and gather the perceptions of children around what makes them happy. To the best of our knowledge, the present study is unique as it represents the first systematic review of the literature focusing synthesising international research on what makes children happy whenever children's voices are heard.

The benefits of analysing what makes children feel happy and how this can influence their wellbeing are diverse. Firstly, using an interpretivist approach allows to understand young children's subjective experiences that cannot be explored with Likert-type scales. Using interpretivist lenses enhances our comprehension of children's subjective factors. This is done by going beyond conventional academic metrics and shedding light on the emotional and social dimensions of a child's well-being. The interpretivist lenses also help us recognise cultural, social, and familial contexts as influences on a child's happiness -data which can inform the design of culturally sensitive interventions. Secondly, it provides teachers with first-hand insights that could inform the creation of classrooms, fostering belonging and joyful learning. Teachers informed by children's narratives can acquire and develop new pedagogical practices to better meet the holistic needs of young learners and contribute to children's overall wellbeing. Thirdly, parents can understand children's sources of joy which could lead them to develop/acquire practices to promote meaningful connections and offer a home environment that promotes children's happiness and thus wellbeing. Lastly, policymakers can use these insights to advocate for policies that prioritise young children' wellbeing over academic pressure in schools. This could bring important benefits by reducing academic-related factors that seem to be associated children's stress and anxiety in schools (see Cassady, 2022). This could also influence broader societal attitudes toward early childhood education, the relevance of happiness in these formative years and the need to actively involve children in decision-making processes. Considering the limitations of previous reviews of the literature and previous research, as well as considering the

benefits of listening to children's first-hand experiences, we argue that this review is highly needed. We aimed at conducting a systematic literature review focused on identifying, appraising and synthetizing international research which has focused on listening to children's voices. Specifically, we aimed at investigating the extent to which researchers pay attention to factors that make children happy whenever authors claim children's voices are heard. We focused our review on young children that we defined as children between the ages of 3 and 7. Our main research question was: What type of evidence is there in the literature claiming to listen to children's voices and exploring what influences children's happiness in educational research?

Method

We followed a rigorous approach to systematically review and synthesise research evidence, following the guidelines set by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre). This particular method was chosen for its strength and reliability in reviewing educational research (EPPI Centre, 2019). Given the substantial volume of relevant peer-reviewed research published within the last nine years, conducting a scoping review or broadening the inclusion criteria to encompass other types of literature was deemed unnecessary for this study. By adhering to the established EPPI-Centre framework, we aimed to generate robust evidence capable of informing and guiding "evidence-informed policy in the field of education" (Oakley et al., 2005, p. 5).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

We structured our inclusion/exclusion criteria rigorously by considering different aspects. (i) Building on existing knowledge: We conducted a thorough review of existing literature reviews to capture the latest advancements and identify gaps in the field. We also analysed the reference lists of these reviews to uncover seminal studies; (ii) Analysing terminology: We delved into the literature, examining how studies worded their approach to listening to young children's voices. This helped differentiate studies that truly engaged with children's perspectives from those that merely claimed to do so ;(iii) Database search refinement: Through meticulous database searches and testing various phrases and terms, we gained a deeper understanding of how the key concepts are defined and utilized in international research. This enabled us to pinpoint the most relevant studies for addressing our research question; (iiii). Strict quality assessment: Additionally, we applied specific criteria (Table 1) to ensure the included studies were relevant, recent, transparent, and reliable/valid. These criteria, aligned with Gough's (2007) recommendations, allowed us to assess the "weight of evidence" by evaluating the methodological quality, relevance, and topic alignment of each study. Essentially, this multi-faceted approach ensured we gathered the most pertinent studies to answer our research question effectively.

Searching Procedure

Leveraging Existing Reviews and Tailoring Terminology. This study relied on a review of existing reviews to inform the selection of key search terms. While some terms from previous reviews were retained (e.g., "child"), others were excluded to align with the specific age range of the present research (e.g., teenagers and young people were included in studies by Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018;

Grace et al., 2019; Izzo et al., 2022 and Pollard & Lee, 2003). To address the research questions focused on young children, the terms "voice", "happy", "happiness" and "wellbeing" were prominently included. Additionally, international educational contexts were considered to broaden the search scope. Terms like "nursery," "kindergarten," "preschool," etc., were employed to represent formal settings where young children learn and interact. When screening initially-identified studies, we also considered parallel phrases that researchers could have used to access related aspects of children's happiness and wellbeing such as "things that you enjoy the most at school", "favourite activities at home or school" "things you enjoy the most at home" or "favourite activities at home" "favourite persons to be with".

Comprehensive Database Search and Boolean Operator Optimization. We used four leading scientific databases for the search: PsycINFO, ERIC, SciELO, and Web of Science. These platforms provide access to a vast collection of journals relevant to educational research. Boolean operators ("AND," "OR," "NOT") were strategically applied to ensure the inclusion of papers containing the desired terms. A combination of terms was used in the search query, including "child," "views," "voice," "experiences," "perspective," "happiness" "happy" "wellbeing" "well-being" "nursery," "kindergarten," "elementary," "preschool," and "primary school." This comprehensive search strategy yielded 2594 initial results, as illustrated in the PRISMA Flow Diagram (Figure 1).

Screening Process. Rigorous and Collaborative Screening for Inclusion: Each identified study underwent meticulous screening against the pre-defined criteria outlined in Table 1. This standardized approach ensured consistent evaluation and facilitated the selection of studies relevant to the present review. To enhance the robustness of the screening process, a collaborative approach was employed. Each publication year was assigned to at least two researchers, guaranteeing a dual-screen for every study. Furthermore, researchers engaged in cross-checking at various stages, verifying criteria application, article analysis, and inclusion decisions beyond the initial two-person assessment. Studies included from 2022-2024 were screened, appraised and analysed by the leading author of the present study and such analysis was reviewed by two other seasoned researchers, experts in children's wellbeing external to the authorship team. This multi-layered approach minimised bias and promoted inter-rater reliability, contributing to the overall rigor of the selection process.

Reasoning for Exclusions and Continued Rigor: A total of 2589 studies were excluded from the review for various reasons, as detailed in Figure 1 (PRISMA Flow Diagram). The primary reasons for exclusion included:

- Children falling outside the specified age range.
- Studies focused on measuring the impact of wellbeing-related interventions.
- Focus on measuring quantitatively the impact of COVID19 on wellbeing.
- Conceptual or review articles lacking empirical data.
- Studies measuring wellbeing with standardised instruments/scales (in typically and atypically developed children). No focus on personal lived experiences.
- Studies primarily focusing on assessing children's learning assessments.

This rigorous screening process, coupled with collaborative evaluation and multi-tiered cross-checking, ensured the review's foundation upon high-quality, relevant studies aligned with the research objectives.

Mapping Process. We created a grid to analyse different aspects of the studies included that helped addressed our main research question. The grid focused on the following aspects: place where the study was conducted; data-collection strategies used to gather children's views on what makes them happy; the clarity of the methodology and Weight of evidence following the principles outlined by Davies et al. (2013). This ensured to obtain a rigorous picture of each study to address our research question.

Quality Assessment. Each study underwent a meticulous quality assessment by trained researchers, focusing on the study context; the methodology used; the extent to which scholars focused on gathering children's voice/views on what makes them happy and the theoretical framework used to analysed children's voice/views. Assessing the weight of evidence (WoE) in this review followed the rigorous criteria detailed by Davies et al. (2013), prioritizing studies with robust methodologies and substantial findings aligned with the research questions. The WoE was assessed by using a 4pts., scale as suggested by Jindal-Snape et al., (2018), going from 1 (limited WoE) to 4 (trustworthy results derived from an explicit methodology). Recognising that discrepancies in judgment can arise, a multi-layered validation process was implemented. When doubts about any quality-related aspect emerged during individual assessments, two additional members of the team independently analysed the study in question. Through discussion and critical evaluation, they reached a mutual consensus regarding the quality rating. If necessary, a third researcher acted as a tie-breaker, ensuring consistent application of the quality criteria and safeguarding against potential biases. This collaborative and iterative approach reinforced the robustness and reliability of the study quality assessment process.

Table 1. Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

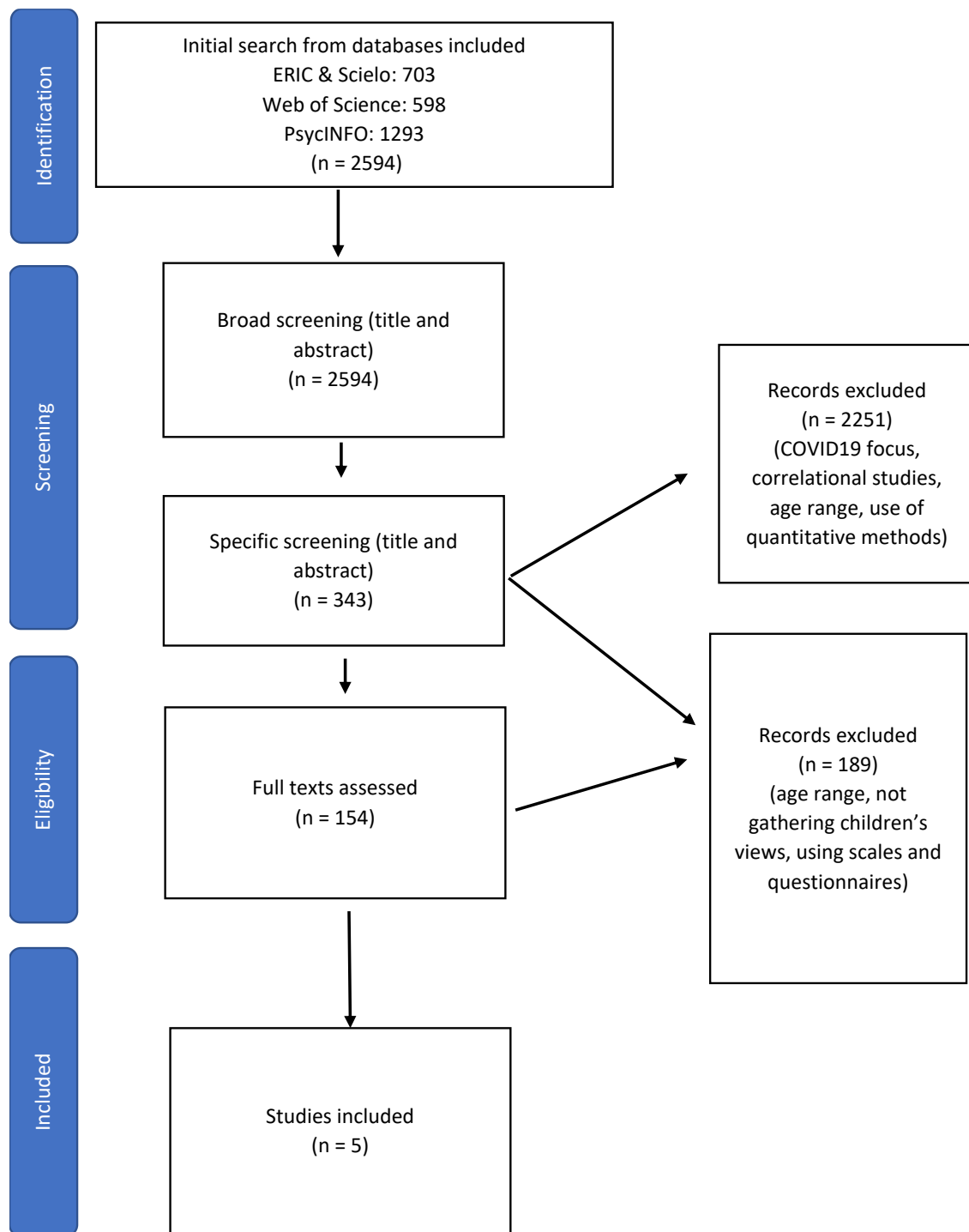| Criterion	Criteria in order to be included
Scope of Topic	Inclusion of studies should focus on listening to children's voices, happiness, wellbeing, preschool etc.
Publication years	Inclusion of studies published between 2015-2024
Participants' Age Range	Inclusion of studies with samples of young children between 3-7 y.o.
International Scope	Inclusion of studies published in English language from any country around the world
Type of research	Inclusion of studies published in peer-reviewed journals, including qualitative, mixed-methods or quantitative methodologies.
Transparency	Authors should offer a clear step-by-step methodology.
Validity and Reliability	Findings must be valid and reliable based on the methodology used

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┌──────────────┐   ┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│              │   │ Initial search from databases        │
│ Identification│   │ included                             │
│              │   │ ERIC & Scielo: 703                   │
│              │   │ Web of Science: 598                  │
│              │   │ PsycINFO: 1293                       │
│              │   │ (n = 2594)                           │
└──────────────┘   └─────────────────────────────────────┘
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Identification

Initial search from databases included
ERIC & Scielo: 703
Web of Science: 598
PsycINFO: 1293
(n = 2594)

Screening

Broad screening (title and abstract)
(n = 2594)

Specific screening (title and abstract)
(n = 343)

Records excluded
(n = 2251)
(COVID19 focus, correlational studies, age range, use of quantitative methods)

Eligibility

Full texts assessed
(n = 154)

Records excluded
(n = 189)
(age range, not gathering children's views, using scales and questionnaires)

Included

Studies included
(n = 5)

Figure 1. PRISMA diagram

Synthesis of Results. This review adopted a Narrative Empirical Synthesis (NES) approach, as defined by Popay et al. (2006). NES prioritizes textual analysis and narrative representations to systematically review and synthesize findings from multiple studies. The initial stage involved constructing structured narrative summary tables for each individual study. Subsequently, these narrative summaries were utilised to draw higher-order conclusions about the overall weight of evidence for different types of impact or association observed across the included studies. This iterative process, involving critical evaluation and consensus building, further strengthened the validity and reliability of our review.

Conclusions. Authors engaged in a dynamic and iterative process for formulating the concluding remarks in addition to offering recommendations of this review. Through ongoing engagement with the analysis of individual studies, the team engaged in critical discussions characterized by constructive feedback and critical evaluation, ensuring that all interpretations and insights were thoroughly scrutinized and refined. Ultimately, this iterative process led to the formulation of a well-grounded set of recommendations, paying particular attention to the transferability and generalizability

of the findings across diverse contexts. The authors critically discussed the study limitations and implications for policy and practice.

Results

Given the limited number of studies that met our inclusion criteria of listening to what makes children feel happy, we present an in-depth critical analysis of each of the five papers meeting our inclusion criteria, focusing on the methodologies used and main outcomes when listening to children. We deemed this as relevant given that broader generalisations based on five papers would be limited -considering the limited evidence published around this topic with young children so far. We analysed these in line with our main research question namely, what type of evidence is there in the literature claiming to listen to children's voices and exploring what influences children's happiness in educational research? Overall, in terms of the geographical distribution of the studies included, we observed five specific countries such as Turkey, UK, Brazil, Australia and Indonesia. We acknowledge that this may reflect either a genuine scarcity of research on this topic in other regions or, alternatively, be a consequence of our language criteria, considering only English-language publications. Regardless of the underlying cause, we recognise that this limited geographical scope constitutes a limitation in our review, hindering our ability to confidently claim broader generalisability and suggesting the urgent need for future research efforts to actively seek representation from diverse international contexts.

Reviewed Studies

Overall, results showed that there are indeed some studies claiming to listen to children's voices, however there is extremely limited research in our review interested in exploring what makes children happy and/or exploring their wellbeing. This first finding helps address our research question, by uncovering the extent to which researchers listen to factors that make children happy in educational research. Within the few studies that focused on children's happiness and wellbeing, we found Aysun et al. (2022) who investigated the perceptions of primary school children in Turkey as to what makes them happy and unhappy. Authors used observations and interviews to gather the perspectives of 28 children aged 6-10. Results showed that children value different aspects that makes them feel happy such as spending time with friends and relatives, being praised by peers and adults and achieving goals (e.g., playful goals or academic goals). On the other hand, factors that make children unhappy include the perception that peers/adults do not care about them, seeing that significant friends/relatives get ill, having a nickname by peers, being forced to do things, not receiving positive reactions from parents/teachers and not being able to do something they really want. One of the strengths of the study is that the views of children, are grounded and clearly relate to aspects within the school setting. These findings highlight that teachers, friends, academic goals and playful goals, are important factors that influence children's happiness and their wellbeing by experiencing positive and negative emotions. However, the study lacks clarity regarding specific criteria for selecting the sample which possess challenges regarding potential bias and representativeness. The study's generalizability may be limited due to the specific regional focus (e.g., Tokat, Nevşehir, Istanbul), warranting caution in extending findings to a broader context. Whilst the data analysis -

employing content analysis to form themes and codes related to children's happiness, aligns with qualitative research standards, the lack of details on inter-rater reliability and the potential subjectivity of interpreting happiness may affect the study's rigor.

Demkowicz et al. (2023) filled the gap regarding the limited literature on children and young children's perspectives on wellbeing during educational transitions. Virtual interviews and the use of storybooks were novel methods used to gather the views of 49 children aged 6-17. Although the authors' main aim was to understand children's perspectives around school transition, this topic was used as a vehicle to explore children's wellbeing. Results showed that children valued some factors that make them feel "good" and "safe" such as receiving emotional support from peers and significant adults such as teachers/parents, being supported with feelings of loss and by recognising and supporting individual interests/needs rather than over-emphasising support on academic matters only. Once again, evidence from this study, clearly outlines the emotional-related aspects of schools whereby, feeling safe and receiving support from peers, seem to influence children's sense of wellbeing. Interestingly, this finding highlights that children can indeed acknowledge and "see", the over-emphasis on academic matters at school. Children do value emotional support and recognition around their personal interests and needs within the school environment. Whilst the methodology seems to be robust considering the challenges posed by the pandemic, the potential influence of researchers' wider research foci, including developmental psychopathology and healthcare should be considered and thus, findings should be interpreted with caution. Additionally, authors used pre-determined "stories" to prompt children's answers when the storybook strategy was used to elicit children's voices. This may have influenced the direction of children's responses and could have not allowed children to consider different or alternative aspects.

Moore et al. (2021) investigated the perspectives of six children (4-5 years old) about outdoor play spaces and how these contributed to children's experiences of wellbeing. Authors used participatory tools such as Storytelling and the Mosaic approach including visual expressions, verbal accounts, artefact collection and drawings. Results showed that children valued sociodramatic play as this gives opportunities to interact with peers, communicate ideas, use imagination, find a relaxing time and feel happy. However, no further questions to children asking how or why the activities they reported made them feel happy were asked. Findings seem to suggest that the school environment plays a major role in offering children opportunities to communicate and exchange their ideas as well as interact with their peers whilst engaged in pedagogical activities. This finding is relevant as it offers evidence that academic matters and practices that promote children's happiness and wellbeing should not be mutually exclusive. They can indeed be very-well integrated ensuring a holistic approach to working with young children. Whilst the Mosaic approach uses a variety of strategies to gather children's views, voices and perspectives, it is well documented that the data interpretation can be subjective and influenced by the authors' own interpretations and biases. Furthermore, generalizability remains a challenge, as findings from specific contexts may not translate to diverse settings. This is potentiated by the use of a very limited sample of participants in this

study.

Malta and Vieira (2021) focused on reviewing secondary data of 45 children's narratives (2-6 years old) with an emphasis on analysing children's wellbeing during the COVID19 pandemic lockdowns. We acknowledge that whilst this study did not gather primary data, we think that reporting this study is relevant as it shows evidence of the existence of studies that children's voices are heard around their wellbeing. Authors of the present study did not have access to the Brazilian studies reported by Malta and Vieira since such studies have restricted access in Brazil. The data analysed by Malta and Vieira comes from the Observatório da infância e da educação infantil [Observatory of Early Childhood and Education] and the Núcleo de estudos e pesquisas educacionais Paulo Freire [Centre of Educational Research] from the UNEB (Universidade do Estado da Bahia). Results showed that children were concerned about the COVID19 virus, the hygiene measures enforced by adults, and the longing for school and friends. Children shared emotions felt during lockdowns which impacted their wellbeing including, sadness, fear, anger and frustration as a result of missing their friends at school and not being able to go out and play. Research on wellbeing has well-documented the positive influence of social interaction in children's wellbeing when at school. As such, Malta and Vieria's findings offer additional evidence of the importance of this by uncovering those children were missing interacting with school friends. Whilst this study shows relevant findings as to how a pandemic affected children's wellbeing, the study is limited in that it only included data from Brazil. The sample is limited to 45 children and there is limited information of the way in which the narratives were analysed and coded by the original authors -posing challenges in terms of trustworthiness and replicability.

Pranoto and Hong (2018) used storytelling and direct interviewing to collect data from children who were asked "Who are your preferred play companions that make you happiest (sangat senang) in your daily life?". Content analysis was used to explore the preferences of 777 Indonesian children aged 4-6 years old regarding play companions who contribute to their happiness. Results showed that most of both boys and girls nominated their friends as their most preferred play companions. However, and interestingly, when feeling unhappy with their friends, boys tended to turn inward to themselves, while girls tended to prioritise family as their play companions -highlighting interesting gender differences. These findings support earlier evidence that that peer interaction and social connection are valuable aspects for children in this age group. Interestingly, the highest level of happiness was reported by girls who participated in play activities with both teachers and friends at school. This finding has important implications for school settings since it suggests that structured classroom settings involving cooperative play and adult guidance, can indeed foster happiness for young girls. Whilst this study used storytelling and interviews with children to access children's voices and views, limitations such as the convenience sampling technique and focusing only on Indonesian children, limit the generalizability of the results.

Discussion

The present study aimed at examining research claiming to hear children's voices and exploring what shapes children's happiness in educational research. Findings from this systematic review of the literature helped us address our main research question in a very straightforward way. Our findings show that indeed, there are efforts to listen to what makes children happy in educational research. However, the studies focusing on exploring this important avenue of children's wellbeing are worryingly limited. Moreover, studies around children's happiness and wellbeing seem to be overshadowed by a wealth of studies with an over-emphasis on exploring academic-related matters or using methodologies to "measure" children's wellbeing form a positivist perspective. Unfortunately, such tendency only limitedly, allow us to understand the underpinning factors that shape children's happiness and wellbeing. This is to say, from a methodological standpoint, focusing on "measuring", does not really allow to explore the inner worlds of children from an interpretivist perspective. Our findings highlight the worrying scarcity of studies exploring children's personal experiences without which, policy changes and effective psycho-educational interventions, cannot be developed. We argue that this has important implications since in an adult-led world, there is a pressing need to ensure and guarantee a safe place for children at school -considering their perspectives and experiences to inform educational policies- with important long-lasting implications for their mental health.

The studies reviewed were conducted in a limited number of countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, Brazil, Australia and the UK. Hence, our knowledge and understanding of what influences children's happiness in school settings remains limited. Nevertheless, by uncovering this, the present study opens an important window for future research that should focus on this topic in other countries. We argue that it is important to explore not only the extent to which studies have focused on this topic, but also the way in which researchers use and adapt methodologies to listen to children's voices in educational research. Cross-cultural research in this regard is needed to better understand cultural differences in the conceptualisation of happiness or wellbeing and the factors influencing these in formal schooling and home.

Analysing the studies identified, contributes to current international debates around the most effective strategies researchers can use to listen to children's voices in matters that are important to them. Specifically, the studies reviewed used a range of methodological strategies including group interviews, individual interviews, observations, storytelling, the "Mosaic Approach", visual expressions, verbal accounts, artefact collection and drawings. The use of these strategies has allowed studies to offer similar types of evidence when listening to children's views -that of first-hand socio-emotional lived experiences through children's own narrative. Additionally, these methods have allowed to gather children's views reflected in drawings, views through artistic artefacts and perceptions expressed via storytelling. Taken together, results show that whilst limitedly, researchers are listening to children's voices. These studies are offering initial evidence that these strategies used and the type of evidence researchers can obtain with these, seem to be effective to explore perspectives and experiences around wellbeing with young children. Evidence from these studies suggest that we can empower children, show children that we value their experiences, give children the agency to speak up and access children's inner worlds. Whilst these strategies offered a

number of advantages in exploring children's inner worlds, they also come with limitations which are explored below with more critical lenses.

Despite their limitations, the studies reviewed offer valuable insights into children's voices on factors influencing their happiness and wellbeing, which can be critically analysed through the lens of Ed Diener's tripartite theory (Diener et al., 2005). This theory posits that subjective well-being (SWB) is comprised of three distinct yet interrelated components namely positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction. Once more, the studies included revealed that while there is some recognition of the importance of listening to children's voices in educational research, however, there is a significant gap in understanding what specifically contributes to their happiness –from an interpretivist perspective. Specifically, the study by Aysun et al. (2022) stands out as an exception investigating Turkish primary school children's perceptions of happiness and unhappiness. Findings suggest that spending time with friends and relatives is important for children as this makes them feel happy. This is consistent with research elsewhere showing that children have significant adults with whom they enjoy spending time with (McAuley et al., 2012) and which make children feel safe (Clark, 2017). Being praised by adults was another interesting finding which is consistent with previous research showing that praising is an essential factor closely associated to the development of self-esteem (Li, 2021), self-concept (Hattie, 2014) and self-identity (Wait-Jones & Rodriguez, 2022). Children report to feel happy whenever they experience a sense of achievement regarding playful or academic goals with research supporting further these findings showing that the achievement of goals plays a major role in reinforcing the self-identity of children (Rahmani, 2011). This makes them feel confident about their knowledge and skills.

The sense of achievement and happiness when spending time with friends and relatives, clearly relate to one of Diener's components namely positive affect showcasing how positive experiences in child's life can lead to experiencing positive emotions (Stifter, et al., 2020). Likewise, positive experiences like spending time with friends and achieving goals suggest contentment with certain aspects of children's lives -which relates to the third component of Diener's namely life satisfaction. On the other hand, Aysun et al. results show that children can experience negative emotions whenever they perceive those adults or peers are not interested in their lives. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that not receiving unconditional positive regard seems to negatively impact the self-esteem and self-concept of children (Gurney, 2018). Likewise, being forced to do things children do not want or not being able to do things they like to do, were factors that Aysun et al. found in children. These findings are consistent with previous studies related to authoritarian parenting whereby there is evidence showing that children receiving an authoritarian parenting style consistently show lower self-esteem (Jadon & Tripathi, 2017), lower self-concept and can even develop poor mental health (Rahman et al., 2017) and traits of introversion (Sangani & Jangi, 2019). Factors like feeling ignored by adults, illness of loved ones, and forced activities seem to be sources of unhappiness for children. These directly relate to Diener's second component, showcasing how negative experiences and unmet needs can contribute to diminished feelings of well-being. However,

Aysun and colleagues study's limitations such as unclear sample selection criteria, potential regional bias, and subjective data interpretation raise concerns about representativeness and rigor. Aysun et al. study showed revealed that children's inner worlds can be indeed, explored with the use of observations and interviews. These findings contribute to our understanding of the type of evidence we can gather with these methodological strategies. Children can indeed value their peers and feel happy when achieving playful goals. Moreover, this type of evidence helps us explore what make children unhappy such as being forced to do things or perceiving those adults do not care about them -issues not explored in previous studies with young children. Gathering this type of evidence would not have been possible with the sole use of standardised measures such as Liker-type scales. The contributions of Aysun et al. study is indeed significant to the field of psychology.

Findings from Demkowicz et al. (2023) showed that children feel good and safe when they receive emotional support from peers and parents/teachers, which is consistent with previous research highlighting that the emotional bond created between children and adults is fundamental to promote a child's mental health and wellbeing (Urbina-Garcia, 2020; Winston & Chicot, 2016). Additional research shows that positive emotional connections seem to be associated with children's high levels of wellbeing (Shalaby & Agyapong, 2020) high levels of self-esteem (Baiocco et al., 2019) and the experience of positive emotions (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2013). Children also seem to feel good and sage whenever adults take into account their individual needs and interests over academic matters. These findings offer additional evidence supporting previous research showing that children feel more supported whenever adults recognise a child's individual personal interests (Castro et al., 2015). Research also shows that whenever adults place a stronger emphasis on academic matters only, children may develop feelings of stress and insecurity (Rodriguez-Ayllon et al., 2019) and may feel pressured and anxious (Golombok, 2015) which may lead to the experience of negative emotions (Cline & Fay, 2020).

The findings by Demkowicz and colleagues relate to Diener's theory whereby children experiencing emotional support, seem to lead children to experience frequent positive affect. Similarly, Demkowicz et al.'s (2023) findings on emotional support illustrate how addressing negative emotions (second component) can contribute to feelings of safety and confidence, thus influencing overall life satisfaction. However, the potential influence of the researchers' wider interests (e.g., psychopathology) raises questions about the study's primary intent and its implications for understanding children's happiness. Findings should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that using storybooks and interviews can yield an interesting type of evidence to understand children's inner worlds. The type of evidence provided by this study allowed to understand that children value receiving emotional support from significant adults/peers. Likewise, understanding that children feel good whenever their individual interests/needs are recognised, is an important type of evidence that contributes to our understanding of children's wellbeing. This has important implications at a practical level, since school policies should consider the inclusion of daily times and spaces to allow for children's needs and interests to be heard. Teacher training policies should look at ways to help teachers develop skills to effectively

listen to children's views.

On the other hand, the findings by Moore et al. (2021) offer evidence that sociodramatic play is a great opportunity to help children experience positive emotions given that children can interact with peers, feel heard and feel relaxed and happy. These findings are consistent with previous studies consistently showing that children's positive interactions with peers, lead to experiencing positive emotions (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). The opposite however, is also true. When children are engaged in interactions where they are called by nicknames or are bullied, feelings of stress and anxiety have been observed in children (Armitage, 2021). Children feeling relaxed and happy during socio-dramatic play seems to be supported by studies showing that providing a safe physical environment for young children, is associated to experiencing feelings of acceptance (Bartlett et al., 2020), belonging and security (Allen et al., 2018) which are factors closely associated to wellbeing. Overall, Moore et al. study used a range of tools which helped to gather relevant types of evidence about children's personal lived experiences. Sociodramatic play allowed to understand how children value opportunities to interact with peers, communicate and exchange ideas with peers. We argue that this type of evidence would have not been possible with the use of quantitative surveys or closed-ended questions. As a result, this type of findings contributes to the field by offering evidence that could guide future research with children, and help adapt methodologies to listen to children. Considering this evidence, school policies should look at ways to ensure that pedagogical activities are focused not only on a given academic goal. This evidence contributes to the field by suggesting the need for school policymakers and other stakeholders, to create spaces and times within pedagogical activities, that allow for spaces for children to freely share their interests and ideas -as opposed to promoting academic competition.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings by Moore and colleagues are closely related to the first component of Diener's tripartite theory of positive affect since these findings offer important evidence of what activities can help children feel valued, supported and happy. More specifically, these findings suggest that creating a safe space where children can express freely, not only seem to foster positive emotions (first component), but also provides opportunities for social interaction and expressing individuality, potentially bolstering life satisfaction (third component). Moore et al.'s exploration of outdoor play spaces contributes to the literature but falls short in providing a deeper understanding of why specific activities contribute specifically, to children's happiness. Future research should focus on finding additional ways in which children feel supported, valued and happy.

Malta and Vieira's (2021) findings showcase the feelings and emotions that children experienced during the COVID19 lockdowns shedding light on how the confinement may have impacted children's wellbeing. Specifically, lockdowns triggered in children, feelings of frustration for not being able to see their school friends. This is consistent with empirical evidence suggesting that school is a place where interactions foster children's sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018) and where they feel valued by their friends (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Considering this evidence, it is understandable why children may have experienced this. These

findings could be related to Diener's third component of life satisfaction since COVID19 lockdowns, indeed limited children's opportunities to interact with friends and enjoy the primary environment where children can socialise. More specifically, children experienced emotions such as sadness, fear and anger during lockdowns which is consistent with several studies conducted during and after COVID19 showing that lockdowns proved to be challenging for school pupils triggering a range of feelings and emotions such as anxiety (Garcia de Avila et al., 2020), stress (Cusinato et al., 2020), sadness and fear (Radanovic et al., 2021). Malta and Vieira's study offered a relevant type of evidence which contributes to the field by allowing to better understand how negative emotions can be triggered with stressful situations. Exploring these further and with cross-cultural lenses, will help us understand how children's wellbeing can be impacted in school settings but more importantly, how they can be supported. Accessing children's emotions -either positive or negative- should be part of future research as the experience of these is essential for a healthy wellbeing (Kapteyn et al., 2015).

Malta and Vieira's (2021) findings show further evidence of the second component of Diener's tripartite theory namely negative affect showcasing those challenging situations such as an unexpected pandemic has the potential to trigger negative emotions in humans and which could have a negative impact on the overall wellbeing of children. Moreover, the lack of socialisation (in schools) was a consequence of the lockdowns, hence, we argue that the limited opportunities that children had to interact with their friends, played an essential role in the experience of such feelings and emotions –rather than the confinement per se. Whilst these findings are relevant, the study lacked a comprehensive exploration of the intricacies of children's happiness. The study often identifies factors that make children happy or unhappy, but do not delve into the underlying mechanisms or the nuanced reasons behind their emotional states. This evidence contributes to our knowledge and understanding of negative emotions experienced by young children at schools considering global threats. School policies and parental guidelines should consider strategies to support children's socialisation for potential future pandemics.

The findings by Pranoto and Hong (2018) revealed that children prefer being and playing with friends to feel good and happy. This finding is consistent with some studies showing that not only young but older children, enjoy spending time with their friends doing their preferred activities such as playing (Hartup, 2022). However, these findings are inconsistent with evidence suggesting that children prefer to be alone and not socialise. This body of evidence suggests that individual differences (e.g., personality or intelligence) should be considered -for example, introverted children do not enjoy spending time with children (Nguyen et al., 2022). Children's sense of acceptance and belonging when playing with friends was an essential factor in Pranoto and Hong's findings which is consistent with previous research showing that feeling accepted and valued are important factors for a healthy socio-emotional development in children (Stifter, et al., 2020) which can have implications to children's wellbeing. The type of evidence offered by Pranoto and Hong contributes to the international literature by uncovering that children indeed, value social interaction and can tell adults whenever they develop a sense of belonging or not. Playing with their peers

and decide that interacting with peers makes them happy, helps us to better understand that children can indeed assess what situations, events or persons make them happy. Again, we argue that with the use of standarised instruments, this type of evidence would not have been possible. The inner worlds of children should be explored with a high level of warmth, care and empathy as suggested by Hasio (2016).

Relating Pranoto and Hong's findings to Diener's theory, the children's preference for play companions can be seen as a factor influencing their positive affect, which in turn contributes to their overall SWB. The gender differences observed in the study may suggest that boys and girls have different strategies for maintaining positive affect and minimizing negative affect when their preferred play companions (friends) are not available. This gender-based difference may also reflect sociocultural influences and normative expectations which aligns with Diener's recognition of the impact of societal norms on individuals' well-being (Diener, 2021; Jebb et al., 2020). Overall, analysing these findings through the lens of Diener's theory provides a unique framework for understanding how positive and negative experiences, social interactions, and individual perceptions interact to contribute to children's overall SWB. Further research explicitly employing and testing this framework is crucial for optimizing educational and social environments that nurture children's happiness and well-being in a holistic and evidence-based manner.

An Integrative Look

Despite the limited studies included in this review and aware that generalisable conclusions cannot be drawn, we analysed the evidence obtained from the five papers with a view to identifying specific patterns or trends. Our analysis revealed specific types of evidence pertaining to different aspects of children's happiness and wellbeing at school. Firstly, factors that make children happy at school include interacting with school peers, being recognised and praised by peers and adults, and achieving academic/playful goals. Secondly, factors that do not seem to contribute to their happiness include, perceiving adults do not care about them, being forced into tasks, not receiving positive feedback from adults, and not being allowed to do something fun. Socio-emotional support was evident in our analysis whereby children value receiving emotional support from peers and significant adults at school. Likewise, children feeling supported in events of loss and recognising their interests and needs beyond academic achievements seem essential to them. Although with limited evidence, a study focussing on COVID-related lockdowns, contributes to our understanding of the negative impact that lockdowns had on children. During lockdowns, children experienced sadness, fear anger and frustration in addition to longing for school friends. Whilst the experience of negative emotions is considered within Diener's theory -and seen as a normal process from a developmental psychology perspective-, research supports the notion that negative emotions do not contribute to children's wellbeing (Kutsar et al., 2019). Overall, an integrative look of the findings of these papers, provides valuable insights into children's emotional experiences and perceptions of happiness and unhappiness in young children. We argue that whilst limited, the evidence clearly highlights the positive influence of social connections, emotional support and play in children's overall

wellbeing -offering further support to research on wellbeing in older children and adults (Mertika et al., 2020). Additionally, this study further exposes additional evidence to support the notion that events like the COVID pandemic, can have an important detrimental effect in children's wellbeing -supporting a wealth of evidence produced during and after COVID (see Dudovitz et al., 2022; Spiteri, 2021; Urbina-Garcia, 2020).

Methodological Considerations and Interpretative Challenges -A Closer Look

The reviewed studies employed diverse methods, highlighting the potential for rich and multifaceted data gathering. Aysun et al.'s (2022) use of observations and interviews, Demkowicz et al.'s (2023) virtual interviews and storybooks, Moore et al.'s (2021) participatory tools like storytelling and the Mosaic approach and Pranoto and Hong's (2020) storytelling and interviews, show really good efforts to make use of a range of strategies. However, limitations arise in each case. Aysun et al.'s lack of inter-rater reliability checks and potential subjectivity in interpreting happiness raise concerns about data trustworthiness. Demkowicz et al.'s pre-determined storybooks may lead to researcher-driven rather than child-driven insights -not actually listening to what children would like to express freely. Moore et al.'s limited sample size and potential author bias in the Mosaic approach raise generalizability concerns. A more transparent and explicit procedure regarding the analysis of the data, will help strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. Additionally, Malta and Vieira's (2021) analysis of existing data from Brazilian children during the pandemic, whilst valuable, the fact that the original data could not be accessed, raises concerns about the pre-existing coding.

Pranoto and Hong's (2020) methodology may pose some challenges when it comes to potential leading questions. This is to say, while emphasizing an open-ended approach, the storytelling prompted children by using pictures which may have subtly influenced children's responses towards specific scenarios. Additionally, there seems to be a limited analysis of the qualitative data. This is, authors transformed narratives into quantitative data to compute a chi-square test, however this could have potentially overlooked the richness and nuances of children's explanations. Overall, the methodological choices in these studies present both strengths and limitations. Qualitative methods, such as observations, interviews, and narrative analysis, offer rich insights into children's perspectives. However, the potential subjectivity in interpreting happiness, the lack of transparency in analysis procedures, and the absence of inter-rater reliability checks in some studies raise concerns about the internal validity and the trustworthiness of the findings. Generally speaking, future research should value and make use of open questions where children can feel free to answer about what makes them happy, sad or worried -without induced biases such as pre-determined impositions, examples or patterns.

We also recognise that the analysis of excluded studies is out of the scope of the present study, however, we observed aspects that we thought are worth highlighting and that could help the scientific community in the advancement of our knowledge and understanding of appropriate methodologies to listen to children' voices. In many studies excluded, we observed the over-use of Likert-type scales to measure children's happiness and wellbeing. A significant number

of studies focused on measuring the effects of wellbeing-related interventions such as workshops with parents, teachers or children, or tailored school activities. However, most of such studies focused on children aged 9 or older. We argue that this trend of using scales can still be used, as long as open questions are also in place to explore what events, persons, situations or objects make children feel happy. On the other hand, studies measuring the impact of interventions, whilst valuable, they could also be exploring children's views from an phenomenological perspective. We argue that methodologies should complement each other. These studies cannot be used either or if we are truly committed to listening to children's voices about things that affect their lives. Given the time period of publications considered for this review, we observed a number of studies focusing on exploring the experiences -from a general perspective- of children during COVID19 lockdowns, however and whilst valuable, these studies did not explore what factors make children happy or even unhappy. Scholars focused on quantitatively measuring aspects related to stress or anxiety for example. Many other studies seem to focus on measuring happiness and wellbeing with standardised instruments after a direct adult-intervention (e.g., psycho-educational workshop, interventions programmes), which fails to capture children's views on everyday life events. We observed a number of studies with a tendency to claim that they were listening to children's voices whenever they were assessing academic-related matters/subjects with quantitative data-collection strategies. We argue that this is not listening per se. The scientific community should consider the difference between listening -or even better-, retrieving factual knowledge that children can recall -as a normal psychological process part of their executive functions-, and the expression of free thoughts about matters that are important and relevant to children. Future methodologies should consider open methodologies and strategies to allow a free-flow of thinking and ideas from children.

Practical Implications

Considering our review, there are many practical implications to highlight. The evidence synthesised and appraised in this study, could help inform educational policies to include activities to foster positive social connections and promote supportive relationships in schools -as opposed to promoting heavily academic competition/achievement. Creating a supportive school environment that recognises children's individual needs and interest seems to be essential. Our findings advocate for incorporating play-based learning strategies within school curriculum, acknowledging its potential to not only enhance cognitive development but also nurture children's wellbeing. By knowing what children value, educators and policymakers can develop tailored psycho-educational interventions and educational practices to optimise children's wellbeing and academic outcomes alike. Moreover, recognising sources of unhappiness including perceived neglect and imposing restrictions on children, could inform psycho-educational strategies to mitigate negative experiences and enhance children's resilience within in-school activities.

More specifically, the evidence analysed here could also be used to inform teacher-training curricula, highlighting the need for teachers to acquire/develop skills to foster children's wellbeing -and not merely academic achievement. Lastly, this evidence could aid the development of parental guidelines that could help them acquire effective practices to promote their child's wellbeing at home. By focusing educational practices on listening to and understanding children's voices, we can facilitate a holistic approach to promoting their happiness and wellbeing within educational settings. By making policy modifications and helping adults develop effective practices, we could contribute to tackle the increasing rates of mental health problems in school settings.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

In conclusion, while recent studies have made advances in recognizing the importance of listening to children's voices, there is a critical gap in exploring and understanding what influences children's happiness in educational settings and at home. The selected studies provide valuable insights into factors influencing children's happiness and wellbeing; however, they offer a limited comprehensive exploration of the emotional experiences of children and the reasons behind what influences children's happiness. Future research should prioritise a more in-depth investigation into the mechanisms of children's happiness, employing rigorous methodologies and ensuring diverse representation to enhance the generalizability of findings. This is to say, future research needs to actively prioritise the exploration of factors that influence children's happiness and wellbeing as a central topic of inquiry. This should be done by employing robust and diverse methodologies, ensuring inter-rater reliability, minimizing researcher bias, and prioritizing child-driven interpretations. Addressing these gaps will contribute significantly to the existing literature on children's voices and children's happiness and wellbeing in educational research which could inform policies and practices that promote a holistic wellbeing of children.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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