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Assessing school happiness: development and validation of a measurement scale for parents/guardians

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Introduction: Parents are one of the stakeholders in evaluating schools, and families' perspectives about schools are increasingly acknowledged as essential to educational decision-making. However, little is known about how parents' perspectives on school happiness can be assessed. This article proposes a model for evaluating school happiness as perceived by parents/guardians.

Methods: Data were obtained through questionnaires administered to 641 parents. The model was tested using structural equation modeling techniques.

Results: The results identified four main components: relationships and teachers' characteristics (People), teaching practice (Process), learning/leisure balance (Process), and green school (Place).

Discussion: The article discusses the development and validation of an instrument that can be used with parents/caretakers as one of the means of assessing a school's overall happiness level and identifying key aspects to improve a school's level of happiness. Implications for future research on the evaluation of happy schools are also discussed.

KEYWORDS

happiness, scale, parents, guardians, happy schools

1 Introduction

The relevance of studying happiness in schools is highlighted by the current mental health and wellbeing crisis, with children and youth unhappier and more anxious than ever. With the pandemic, anxiety and depression increased worldwide, and every 11 min, a young person dies by suicide (UNICEF, 2021), which is the fourth leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds (WHO, 2023). Furthermore, one in three learners is bullied in school every month, and cyberbullying is globally widespread (UNESCO, 2024). The 2018 TALIS report showed that teachers who experience “a lot” of stress at work are more than twice as likely to want to leave teaching within the next five years (OCDE, 2020).

UNESCO (2024) placed the wellbeing of children and students at center stage and advocated for reimagining the educational framework. Schools should be places where students feel safe, valued, and happy so they can thrive socially and emotionally, not just academically. Bullying has a clear negative impact on several indicators of wellbeing. Being bullied on a more frequent basis has also been found to result in anxiety toward mathematics and a decrease in math scores by 18 points. Students need to feel safe at school, and when this

does not happen, it affects them emotionally and academically (OCDE, 2023). These problems enter the classroom as stress factors. In addition, prioritizing the wellbeing of teachers is essential, as happy teachers have a significantly positive impact on students (OCDE, 2020), and for younger teachers, there is even the possibility of leaving the profession due to stress (Luthar and Mendes, 2020; Maynard et al., 2019).

1.1 The happy schools framework

The happy school concept is about people working together and respecting differences in a school that favors active teaching strategies, has green spaces, and is based on human and social values such as inclusion, trust, and empowerment (Gramaxo et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2024). The happy school concept supports the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 (Good health and wellbeing) and 4 (Quality education). With regard to SDG 3, the happy school concept is related to an individual's awareness of how to understand their emotions, appreciate the diversity that surrounds them, and adopt patience and empathy. This awareness encourages the individual to think reflectively about others, allowing them to develop concepts such as kindness, flexibility, and adaptability, which leads them to be tolerant and open to the diversity that surrounds them. The concept of a happy school is also related to an individual's self-regulation, their skills in relationships and community involvement, and personal and social responsibility; ultimately, this concept enables individuals to resolve conflicts (UNESCO, 2021). With regard to SDG 4, the happy school concept is related to inclusive values, student and teacher relationships, teachers' characteristics, teaching and learning strategies, indoor conditions, and outdoor green spaces in schools (Gramaxo et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

Studies on happy schools have defined a framework consisting of three pillars—people, process, and place (Gramaxo et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2016)—based on a fourth pillar (principles), which together aggregate 12 criteria (UNESCO, 2024).

The Happy Schools Framework was developed primarily based on studies carried out in Asia. Nevertheless, cultural aspects may be determinants of what is valued in different contexts (Stearns, 2019), highlighting the importance of studying school happiness across different cultural contexts (Gramaxo et al., 2024).

1.1.1 People

The people pillar encompasses supportive and collaborative relationships, physical and emotional wellbeing, and teachers' positive attitudes and attributes (UNESCO, 2024). Student happiness and wellbeing are fundamental to academic success and holistic development. Aspects related to relationships with friends are central to students' positive experiences (Gramaxo et al., 2023b), with students valuing the time spent playing, chatting, and studying together. Positive relationships can promote students' feelings of relatedness and facilitate adaptation to a new school environment (Kiuru et al., 2020; Ryan and Deci, 2017). Even the teacher's strategy for determining who sits next to each other in a classroom may impact friendship formation and learning (Keller and Takács, 2019), and children's classroom engagement is an essential mediator between their feelings of relatedness to peers and teachers and their academic achievement (Wang et al., 2019).

Inside the classroom, the socioeconomic composition of the school class seems to matter more than the ethnic or cognitive composition regarding academic development. However, the peer effect is still present since it influences students, making the students' origins relevant (Dollmann and Rudolphi, 2020).

Students need to feel safe at school; when this does not happen, it affects them emotionally and impacts their performance. PISA 2022 data showed that students who experience bullying at least a few times a month see their math scores drop by 18 points (OCDE, 2020).

When it comes to parental participation in school life, there is evidence showing that teachers value parents' involvement but also feel vulnerable to the increasing influence of parents, who scrutinize their work and encroach on their professional domain. To counter this, teachers can implement open communication and transparency to boost parents' confidence and trust in their teaching skills or use diplomacy to avoid conflicts. Typically, this relationship is marked by situations linked to some problem, by the school's action in guiding parents on how to educate their children, and by the decrease in parental involvement in school activities as the child progresses through the grades (Gramaxo, 2018; Oliveira and Marinho-Araújo, 2010). On the contrary, when parents perceive teachers' work as efficient, they engage in collaborative relationships, and conflicts may decrease (Addi-Racah and Grinshtain, 2022).

Recent studies have highlighted teachers' crucial role in this process, not only as facilitators of learning but also as key influencers of students' emotional wellbeing and satisfaction at school (Chayanuvat et al., 2019; Dai, 2024). The relationship between happy, satisfied teachers and student wellbeing is complex, but the results of studies so far indicate a strong positive correlation. Teachers who demonstrate high levels of job satisfaction and emotional wellbeing are more likely to create positive learning environments where students feel safe, valued, and motivated to learn (Bernal et al., 2023; Nalipay et al., 2024; Zheng, 2022).

There are several significant ways in which teachers influence student happiness (Chayanuvat et al., 2019). Firstly, establishing positive relationships between teachers and students is one of the most relevant factors. Successful teachers cultivate robust relationships of trust with their students, demonstrating concern for their physical and mental wellbeing and cultivating a sense of belonging and camaraderie. Furthermore, the establishment of a supportive environment is of paramount importance for the wellbeing of students. By fostering a secure and welcoming learning environment, educators can mitigate potential sources of conflict and stress, promoting a sense of wellbeing and engagement among students during the learning process.

Another crucial element is the facilitation of cooperative learning, wherein educators promote collaboration among students with diverse abilities, emphasizing collective achievement over individual competition. This cultivates teamwork abilities and fosters a supportive and inclusive atmosphere (Chayanuvat et al., 2019). Furthermore, teachers are instrumental in the management of stress within the classroom. Incorporating stress-reducing activities and teaching coping skills enables educators to foster a more relaxed and positive learning environment for their students.

These actions enable teachers to markedly enhance the happiness and wellbeing of their students, thereby creating a more effective and enjoyable learning experience.

A positive teacher–student relationship provides several key benefits for students' academic and emotional development. Firstly,

such a relationship encourages greater student participation in classroom discussions and activities, promoting more active engagement in the learning process and, consequently, enriching the educational experience (Dai, 2024). Furthermore, positive interactions with teachers can enhance students' academic skills, helping them set and achieve future educational goals. Another crucial point emphasized by this author is the regulation of mental emotions. The presence of supportive relationships between teachers and students has been demonstrated to reduce students' anxiety and emotional distress. This is achieved by creating a safe environment where students feel comfortable expressing their feelings and concerns. This results in enhanced learning outcomes, positively influencing academic performance across various subjects, including mathematics and physical education.

Cultivating relationships encourages students to express their ideas and engage in creative thinking processes, which, in turn, contributes to enhanced learning (Dai, 2024). Therefore, the author emphasized that the fostering of positive teacher–student relationships is of crucial importance, not only for the attainment of academic success but also for the emotional wellbeing of students.

Considering the findings presented in another research study (Zheng, 2022), the key conclusions regarding the influence of teacher interpersonal conduct on student wellbeing can be distilled as follows. The provision of emotional support by teachers has been identified as a key factor in meeting students' emotional and social needs. This encompasses the provision of availability for students, engagement with their families, and demonstration of care and concern, all of which collectively cultivate a supportive learning environment. The quality of the teacher–student relationship is of paramount importance for the promotion of students' wellbeing. Such relationships constitute a fundamental element of students' educational experiences and can enhance their motivation and engagement in the educational process. Finally, the study posits that teacher interpersonal behavior mediates the relationship between teaching practices and student wellbeing. Positive interactions between teachers and students have been demonstrated to enhance student outcomes, including elevated wellbeing and academic achievement.

1.1.2 Process

Regarding processes, the happy school concept is about balancing the curricula with free time, learning through joyful and engaging strategies, and being assessed more holistically and flexibly (UNESCO, 2024). Although it is difficult to define best practices, as they depend on the objective, evidence shows that practicality is associated with student performance (Rato, 2023). Some researchers consider that Portuguese teachers can adapt and adjust their teaching strategies to their students' difficulties, conducting their classes in a more instructional way (Liebowitz et al., 2018). On the contrary, others point out that what they should be doing is exploring alternative teaching practices and supportive strategies inside classrooms to respond to academic and social struggles (Abrantes, 2023).

Although teachers consider it a more significant investment of time to prepare and carry out outdoor classes and/or activities, students do not show negative results; on the contrary, given the physical and psychological benefits, outdoor lessons should take place more often (Fägerstam, 2012).

Evidence reveals that 3rd and 4th grade students participating in extracurricular activities rank lower in retention (Abrantes, 2023).

Field trips complement classroom teaching by creating an interactive environment where cognitive and affective learning occurs and where there are many opportunities for students to explore and discover things, even if the gains are no greater than those expected in the classroom (Sánchez-Fuster et al., 2023).

A previous qualitative study in Portugal related to parents' perceptions of school happiness showed differences in appraisal by different stakeholders and highlighted the fact that parents' perceptions of processes rely heavily on teacher competencies and extracurricular activities (Gramaxo et al., 2023b).

1.1.3 Place

With regard to place, a happy school is safe, accessible, and has digital and sustainable physical infrastructures that consider people's disabilities, where walls showcase the school's ideas and work. Happy school spaces are community hubs. The foundation of all this is built on personal and social principles, such as trust, inclusion, and empowerment (UNESCO, 2024; Gramaxo et al., 2024).

Taylor and Kuo (2009) found benefits of time spent in green spaces. Another study argued that increased access to green space improves wellbeing (Alexander et al., 2021).

1.2 Assessing school happiness

The analysis of a school's reality includes not only the consideration of factors related to students' academic results but also dimensions related to the opinions of parents, teachers, and staff, teaching practices, the organization of the institution, the attitudes and values of students, and the school climate.

Given the relevance of happiness for students' development and the need to attract and retain teachers in schools, there is a need for schools to promote and nurture guidelines such as the ones outlined by UNESCO's framework (UNESCO, 2024 and the work of Gramaxo et al., 2024; Gramaxo et al., 2023a,b).

Families' perspectives on schools are increasingly recognized as relevant and necessary in policy-making. Families' right to be heard regarding their children's education has increasingly been understood and defended as essential to ensure that children's best interests are fulfilled (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022).

Parents and other guardians choose the school their children attend. For them, a happy school is where students have friends and good relationships with other students and teachers. In a happy school, teachers have positive attitudes and good teaching skills; students attending a happy school can learn through engagement, creativity, and the application of relevant and engaging content (Gramaxo et al., 2023b). Parents believe that what makes a school unhappy is a high workload, an unsafe environment where bullying exists, teachers with negative attitudes, a hostile learning environment, and bad relationships between students and students/teachers.

To assess and gather information that enables schools to act based on evidence, it is important to collect the opinions of parents and guardians, as they are one of the school's key stakeholders. Parents are called upon to evaluate the school's performance through interviews or questionnaires. When requested by government bodies, they provide feedback on the school's pedagogical, didactic, administrative, and managerial performance, as well as its efficiency

and effectiveness. This is seen more as control and regulation of the education system than as a beneficial contribution to teaching and learning strategies (Nogueira et al., 2019). However, when questioned internally, parents contribute to school self-improvement, with the primary goal of improving teaching and learning (Fernandes, 2019; Hofman et al., 2009), ultimately increasing school performance (Hofman et al., 2009). The present study aims to contribute to the research on happy schools by developing a tool that allows parents to voice their perspectives on school happiness—namely, the “Happy School Questionnaire – Parent/Guardian version”—enabling them to identify the aspects of a school that shape school happiness. By conducting the research in a Southern and Western European country, we expect to refine the understanding of the culturally relevant (Stearns, 2019) assessment of school happiness, which may be useful not only in Portugal—where the data were gathered—but also in informing other local and national efforts toward happy schools.

2 Methods

2.1 Item generation

The initial pool of questionnaire items was generated through an extensive literature review and qualitative and quantitative data from previous research (Gramaxo et al., 2023b). These items were derived through content analysis after administering an open-ended questionnaire to 1,399 parents. This process also involved identifying and extracting relevant items from existing scales and studies related to school happiness and wellbeing. The goal was to ensure comprehensive coverage of the constructs of interest, the four pillars of school happiness, identified by the UNESCO (2024). The initial list included 60 items.

2.2 Pilot testing and expert review

A pilot test was conducted with a sample of 20 respondents to assess the wording and comprehension of the initial items. This step was crucial to identify any ambiguities or misunderstandings in the questionnaire. Feedback from the pilot test was used to refine the items, ensuring clarity and relevance.

Following the pilot test, the refined items were reviewed by a panel of five experts in educational psychology and scale development. The experts evaluated the items for content validity, relevance, and representativeness of the constructs. Based on their feedback, further modifications were made to the items, resulting in an initial selection of items for the scale. A 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree).

2.3 Participants

The participants in this study were parents/guardians of students enrolled in Portuguese schools, including basic and secondary (ages 6 - 18). The sampling was non-probabilistic. The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) sample consisted of 348 parents, while the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) sample included 293 parents. All participants

were 39 or older, ensuring a mature perspective on school happiness. The demographic characteristics of the samples are detailed in Table 1.

2.4 Confidentiality and anonymity

No personal or professional data were collected from the participants to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. All responses were recorded anonymously, and the participants were assured that their data would be used solely for research purposes. The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring that all information provided by the participants remained confidential and was not linked to any identifying information. It was approved by the Laboratory of Distance Education and eLearning of the Open University (Portugal) Ethics Committee and by the Portuguese Directorate-General for Education. This approach helped create a safe environment for the participants to share their honest opinions and experiences regarding school happiness.

2.5 Study 1. Exploratory factor analysis

An initial filtering process was conducted using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with a sample of 348 participants. The purpose of the EFA was to identify the underlying factor structure of the scale and to reduce the number of items by eliminating those that did not load significantly on any factor. The EFA was performed using principal axis factoring with oblique rotation, as it allows for the factors to be correlated.

2.6 Study 2. Confirmatory factor analysis

To further refine the scale, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted with a separate sample of 293 respondents.

TABLE 1 Sample descriptives.

Demographic variable	Sample 1 (n = 348)	Sample 2 (n = 293)
Sex		
Male	28%	31%
Female	72%	69%
Age group		
39–49	53%	67%
50–59	42%	29%
60+	5%	4%
Education level		
Secondary	26%	28%
Bachelor's degree	62%	64%
Master's degree	12%	10%
Employment status		
Employed	84%	88%
Unemployed	11%	14%
Retired	5%	3%

TABLE 2 Cleaned item list after EFA.

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
A2 The children are happy at school.	0.547			
A3 Overall, the teachers treat the students well.	0.786			
A4 Children's differences are respected at school.	0.585			
A6 There are good relations between teachers and students.	0.777			
A7 There are good relations between parents and teachers.	0.667			
A9 The teachers at the school are generally happy.	0.614			
A10 The teachers at the school are generally friendly.	0.779			
A11 Teachers generally support students.	0.772			
A13 Most of the assistants are friendly.	0.628			
A14 Most of the assistants perform their duties well.	0.573			
A17 There is rarely any discrimination or injustice at school.	0.504			
A18 The school has good teachers.	0.747			
A34 Teachers praise students' success and/or progress.	0.664			
A44 There is a good atmosphere at school.	0.627			
A45 The classroom environment is suitable for learning.	0.529			
A24 Classroom practices are interesting.		0.590		
A23 The school promotes working together.		0.576		
A27 The school is open to technological innovation.		0.612		
A28 The school promotes project work.		0.702		
A29 The school holds some outdoor classes.		0.709		
A30 The school promotes dynamic learning.		0.792		
A31 The school promotes the development of students' abilities.		0.684		
A32 The school promotes opportunities to develop creativity.		0.764		
A33 Students' successes are recognized by the school.		0.531		
A37 The school organizes enough study visits.		0.558		
A39 Students often work in collaboration with their teachers.		0.578		
A40 Learning for life is valued at school.		0.669		
A58 The school's management is effective.		0.602		
A59 The school is open and promotes/solicits the participation of parents.		0.612		
A60 School is fun.		0.605		
A49 The school has adequate green spaces.			0.737	
A50 The school has green spaces for outdoor activities.			0.708	
A51 The school grounds are well looked after.			0.777	
A52 The school's spaces are sufficient.			0.773	
A53 The school is well equipped (study materials, computers, etc.).			0.687	
A54 The school is clean.			0.677	
A21 The organization of the timetable takes sufficient free time into account.				0.71
A22 The teaching load is adequate.				0.737
A25 Teachers send an adequate amount of homework.				0.513
A43 The number of tests/exams is adequate.				0.577

The descriptives for both samples are presented in [Table 1](#). The CFA aimed to validate the factor structure identified in the EFA and assess the model fit. Several fit indices were used to evaluate the model, including the chi-squared statistic, the comparative

fit index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Items that did not meet the criteria for a good model fit were revised or removed.

3 Results

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were conducted to validate the scale. The components used in these analyses were the 60 items previously identified through content analysis in Study 1. Skewness and kurtosis were assessed using SPSS version 21 to ensure that the data met the assumptions of normality.

In the EFA, all components were allowed to load on all factors, providing an initial understanding of the underlying factor structure. The analysis revealed several significant factors, each representing a distinct dimension of school happiness as perceived by the parents.

The CFA loadings were specified according to the hypothesized relationships between factors and their respective components. This step was crucial to confirm the factor structure identified in the EFA. The CFA model allowed for loadings between factors and their components, ensuring that the relationships hypothesized were accurately represented. In addition, in both the EFA and CFA, all factors were permitted to have non-zero covariances, reflecting the potential interrelationships between the different dimensions of school happiness.

The results of these analyses provided robust evidence for the validity and reliability of the “Happy School Questionnaire – Parent/Guardian version,” confirming its suitability for assessing parents’ and guardians’ perceptions of school happiness across multiple dimensions.

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach’s α , which yielded a value of 0.886. The 95% confidence interval, calculated through bootstrapping, ranged from 0.961 to 0.982, indicating excellent reliability. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with varimax rotation was conducted to determine how the components clustered together. We examined the eigenvalues of the factors, which suggested the potential for up to five factors. However, the reduction in eigenvalues after four factors was minimal. Therefore, we initially conducted an EFA using four factors. One factor had very low loadings, explaining only 5% of the variance. Consequently, we refined the model to include four factors with higher loadings, which accounted for 67% of the variance. For clarity, loadings below 0.4 were excluded from the visualization (Table 2).

The final scale was tested using CFA and consisted of items that demonstrated strong psychometric properties, including high factor loadings, internal consistency, and construct validity. The resulting instrument is designed to capture parents’ perceptions of school happiness across multiple dimensions.

A first-order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the model fit using maximum likelihood estimation with a sample of 293 participants. The model fit indices were as follows: $\chi^2(307, N = 293) = 914.95, p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.083, 95% CI [0.077, 0.089]; SRMR = 0.057; CFI = 0.914; AIC = 1,030.95. The correlation coefficients between the factors, as shown in Table 3, indicated moderate to strong correlations.

Several measures demonstrated the factors’ reliability (Table 4). The Cronbach’s alpha values ranged from 0.893 to 0.953, indicating high internal consistency for all factors. The composite reliability (rho_c) values were similarly high, ranging from 0.907 to 0.953, further supporting the reliability of the constructs. In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.632 to 0.873, indicating that the factors explained a substantial portion of the variance in the items. These results collectively confirmed the strong reliability and validity of the measurement model.

TABLE 3 Factor correlations.

	1	2	3	4
1	1.000	0.783	0.393	0.507
2	0.783	1.000	0.539	0.586
3	0.393	0.539	1.000	0.352
4	0.507	0.586	0.352	1.000

TABLE 4 Reliability indicators.

	Cronbach’s alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
1	0.948	0.948	0.672
2	0.953	0.953	0.632
3	0.893	0.907	0.759
4	0.931	0.933	0.873

The results of this study confirmed the significance of all identified factors in assessing school happiness from the parents’ perspectives. The exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses validated the structure and reliability of the “Happy School Questionnaire – Parent/Guardian version,” demonstrating that the factors of relationships and teachers’ characteristics, teaching practices, learning/leisure balance, and green school environments are crucial components of school happiness.

Given the factors’ high internal consistency and reliability, as evidenced by Cronbach’s alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted, we can confidently present a final list of items that accurately measure these dimensions. This validated instrument, developed with Western European parents/guardians, provides a robust tool for schools to gather valuable insights from parents, enabling them to identify strengths and areas for improvement in promoting a happy and supportive school environment. Table 5 presents the instrument.

4 Discussion

4.1 Relationships and teachers’ characteristics (people)

The people dimension is the first pillar identified in the Happy Schools Framework (UNESCO, 2016). Our results reinforce the importance of this pillar from the perspective of Portuguese parents; having good teachers, friendly assistants, and good parent–teacher relationships also emerged as fundamental factors for happy schools in the present study. Therefore, our results align with the previous theory, further confirming the proposed instrument’s usefulness.

Within the relationships and teachers’ characteristics factor, the items concerning teachers—addressing both their professional skills and the interpersonal relationships they promote and establish—are the most numerous. They highlight the importance of teachers in fostering a happy school environment—an aspect demonstrated by numerous previous studies on the happiness of students (e.g., Chayanuvat et al., 2019; Dai, 2024; Wang et al., 2019) and now also confirmed from the perspectives of parents, as shown in the present study (Addi-Raccah and Grinshtain, 2022).

TABLE 5 Happy school questionnaire—parent/guardian version.

Factors	Items
Relationships and teachers' characteristics (people)	A2 The children are happy at school.
	A3 Overall, the teachers treat the students well.
	A4 Children's differences are respected at school.
	A6 There are good relations between teachers and students.
	A7 There are good relations between parents and teachers.
	A9 The teachers at the school are generally happy.
	A10 The teachers at the school are generally friendly.
	A11 Teachers generally support students.
	A13 Most of the assistants are friendly.
	A14 Most of the assistants perform their duties well.
	A17 There is rarely any discrimination or injustice at school.
	A18 The school has good teachers.
	A34 Teachers praise students' success and/or progress.
	A44 There's a good atmosphere at school.
	A45 The classroom environment is suitable for learning.
Teaching practice (process)	A24 Classroom practices are interesting.
	A23 The school promotes working together.
	A27 The school is open to technological innovation.
	A28 The school promotes project work.
	A29 The school holds some outdoor classes.
	A30 The school promotes dynamic learning.
	A31 The school promotes the development of students' abilities.
	A32 The school promotes opportunities to develop creativity.
	A33 Students' successes are recognized by the school.
	A37 The school organizes enough study visits.
	A39 Students often work in collaboration with their teachers.
	A40 Learning for life is valued at school.
	A58 The school's management is effective.
	A59 The school is open and promotes/solicits the participation of parents.
	A60 School is fun.
Green school (place)	A49 The school has adequate green spaces.
	A50 The school has green spaces for outdoor activities.
	A51 The school grounds are well looked after.
	A52 The school's spaces are sufficient.
	A53 The school is well equipped (study materials, computers, etc.).
	A54 The school is clean.
Learning/leisure balance (process)	A21 The organization of the timetable takes sufficient free time into account.
	A22 The teaching load is adequate.
	A25 Teachers send an adequate amount of homework.
	A43 The number of tests/exams is adequate.

The importance of parents' participation in schools is emphasized both in the Happy Schools Framework (UNESCO, 2016) and other studies (Addi-Raccah and Grinshtain, 2022), and it is also reflected in parents' perspectives on happy schools, as captured by the instrument presented in this study. However, peer relationships—highlighted in

other studies (e.g., Kiuru et al., 2020) and in the UNESCO (2016) framework—are less evidently represented among the items included in the validated scale. This may stem from the fact that parents/caretakers experience schools and their happiness levels from a different perspective, one that focuses more on other aspects of the school.

Nevertheless, an item related to the classroom environment and another related to the lack of discrimination and injustice—both of which imply peer relationships—are included in this factor.

Finally, other workers at school, namely school assistants, are also represented in the questionnaire. These individuals are often overlooked, which may highlight the need for further research on their roles in promoting happy schools.

4.2 Teaching practice (process)

Teaching practices are represented as a factor in the proposed scale. This factor aligns with one of the pillars of the Happy Schools Framework—process—although not entirely. For our sample, the items related to time management were grouped into another factor, as we observed and will further analyze. Nevertheless, the teaching practice factor accounts for many of the aspects included in the process pillar—innovative pedagogies and assessment strategies, curiosity, inquiry, and creative-based experiences; locally relevant, globally conscious learning content; and celebrating achievement—each of which were clearly reflected in the items that loaded onto this factor (UNESCO, 2016).

All these activities and practices were included in this factor in a way that aligns with the theoretical framework behind our work.

Items related to teaching practices at school demonstrate their relevance, as highlighted in previous literature (Liebowitz et al., 2018; Rato, 2023; Abrantes, 2023). Extracurricular activities, including field trips, are also valued in the instrument, confirming the relevance identified in previous studies (Gramaxo et al., 2023b; Sánchez-Fuster et al., 2023; Abrantes, 2023).

4.3 Learning/leisure balance (process)

Our results unveiled a novel factor—learning/leisure balance. Although aspects related to this factor are included in the Happy Schools Framework, specifically within the process pillar, criterion 4 (Balanced curricula), they appear to be perceived as a separate dimension by Portuguese parents/guardians. This difference may reflect different cultural practices and values, given that the original happy schools studies were conducted in Asia (UNESCO, 2024). Portugal is one of the countries in Europe where students spend the most time in compulsory education—over 8,000 h (OECD, 2019). This fact may explain why parents view learning/leisure balance as a separate dimension when evaluating how happy a school is. This finding not only highlights the need for a contextualized measurement of school happiness—one that takes into account cultural and systemic variables influencing the perception of this construct (Stearns, 2019)—but also contributes to a better understanding of the happy school concept. Although learning/leisure balance is valued differently, it remains aligned with dimensions identified in previous studies.

Students' workload can be defined as the time they report spending on academic work assigned in class, the time they spend working on assigned homework, and the time they spend preparing for their courses outside of the school day. Nevertheless, perceptions of workload are influenced by content, difficulty level, type of assessment, and teacher–student and student–student relationships. Workload and surface approaches to learning are interrelated in what appears to be a complex, reciprocal relationship. It is possible to inspire students to work long hours toward high-quality learning outcomes if attention is paid to

teaching approaches, assessment, and curriculum design in the broadest sense. Therefore, it is important to have open evaluation systems that gather feedback on a wide array of curriculum variables (Kember, 2004).

Overall, Portuguese teachers have a 25-h weekly mandatory schedule, usually divided into 5 h a day. Schools also allocate extra teaching hours for tutoring or preparing students for exams in subjects that require it (Abrantes, 2023). These 25-h schedules can easily turn into 28 h of classroom time. Teachers may also need help in balancing teaching and leisure time.

4.4 Green school (place)

Place—including both school spaces and digital spaces, as well as safety and accessibility—forms a part of the Happy Schools Framework (UNESCO, 2016). Once again, our scale aligns with this theoretical underpinning by highlighting a separate factor related to place. However, in our case, the school's physical facilities were factored in, with outdoor spaces and activities playing a significant role in this factor, which led us to propose this designation. This difference in conceptualizing the important aspects pertaining to place may also reflect cultural and geographical differences, further highlighting the need to contextualize the assessment of happy schools (Stearns, 2019).

Our results are also in line with those of Taylor and Kuo (2009), who discussed the benefits of time spent in green spaces. Another study argued that increased access to green space improves wellbeing (Alexander et al., 2021).

Aspects related to school conditions and equipment were also included in this factor of the questionnaire. Nevertheless, other aspects of the place pillar of the Happy Schools Framework (UNESCO, 2024), such as the safety of online spaces or the use of the school as a community hub, are not clearly reflected in the items of this factor. These may be aspects that parents and caregivers pay less attention to when assessing school happiness.

4.5 Limitations and suggestions for future studies

The primary limitation of the study is the fact that the samples, although large, were non-probabilistic, which cautions against the nationwide validation of the scale, as this may have unintentionally introduced bias. Further application of the scale with more diverse samples may contribute to a better understanding of how parents perceive happiness across the country. Furthermore, the study's strength of contributing to the contextual and culturally relevant understanding of school happiness in Portugal carries with it the possible lack of relevance in other countries. While Southern and Western European countries may cautiously adapt the scale to their realities, the results caution against simply translating and applying it in vastly different educational systems or cultural settings. Consequently, future research should focus on adapting the scale to different contexts and exploring possible comparative studies. Longitudinal studies, focusing on how changes introduced in schools may affect school happiness and how school happiness may evolve in the face of involuntary changes, are also recommended, as the developed instrument is intended to support school improvement initiatives. The research team is currently working on validating an instrument to measure school happiness from the perspective of students, and integrative studies comprising the

perspectives of multiple stakeholders will contribute to a more complex, nuanced, and contextually relevant understanding of school happiness, thereby better guiding practical and policy measures. Studies focusing on the relationships between school climate, wellbeing, happiness, and academic success in Portuguese schools will contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and its broader implications.

5 Conclusion

The present study led to the presentation of an instrument—the Happy School Questionnaire – Parent/Guardian version—developed and validated using two non-probabilistic samples of parents/guardians of children in Portuguese compulsory education. The results, as discussed, are closely aligned with the theoretical framework that guided the development of the instrument, namely the Happy Schools Framework (2024). At the same time, they acknowledge and reflect differences in perceptions, both among the stakeholders involved in the appraisal, as previously demonstrated (Gramaxo et al., 2023a,b) and in terms of possible cultural differences and the specific characteristics of the educational systems—such as the emergence of learning/leisure balance (Process) as a separate factor. The theoretical and scientific contributions of these contextual differences (Stearns, 2019) point to the need to validate and adapt measures of school happiness for different stakeholders and contexts. The present instrument may be cautiously useful to guide research in other Southern and Western European countries, but it will necessarily have to undergo cultural validation.

Consistent with positive psychology, which emphasizes cultivating strengths and wellbeing rather than merely addressing deficiencies, happy school-inspired studies emphasize the significance of fostering positive relationships in educational settings to optimize overall student wellbeing. In this context, the results are also relevant in practical terms. The resulting questionnaire can be used in Portuguese schools to assess parents' perceptions of school happiness, aiding schools and school administrations, as well as government-level decision-makers, in identifying specific and contextual aspects for improvement at both local and national levels.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Laboratory of Distance Education and eLearning of the Universidade Aberta, Portugal, and Directorate General of Education (Portugal). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and

institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

PG: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AD: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MA: Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. GD: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. FS: Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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