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An analysis of primary school student's holistic well-being using PhotoVoice

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to capture children's interpretation of holistic well-being within Irish primary schools and add to the development of a comprehensive systems-informed positive education model.

Design/methodology/approach – This study utilized visual participatory research methods, including PhotoVoice and one-on-one interviews, to assess children's (n = 16) well-being, guided by Von Unger's comprehensive seven-step framework. Data analysis was anchored within grounded theory, beginning with data collection, initial coding, focused coding and culminating in identifying themes and subthemes. Data were interpreted using the mosaic approach by integrating visual and verbal data.

Findings – This analysis uncovered three primary themes that affect student well-being: relationships, space and physical environment and learning and curriculum, each with detailed subthemes. For instance, student–teacher relationships, peer relationships, safety, learning spaces, the creative curriculum including arts and music and the experiential richness of outdoor learning are crucial to students' educational growth and well-being. These aspects are seen as interconnected, shaping a holistic educational experience beyond academic learning to encompass students' comprehensive well-being. The students' narratives demonstrated that learning is not merely an academic exercise but a vital component of their well-being.

Originality/value – This study significantly departs from traditional educational research by advocating for a dynamic, action-oriented understanding of "well-being." It challenges the static, possessive interpretations of well-being and introduces the concept of well-being as a fluid and ever-evolving process. This reconceptualization positions well-being as a complex construct, influenced by an intricate web of relationships, spanning human and non-human interactions, organizational and environmental structures, personal desires, behavioral practices and broader societal and cultural frameworks.

Keywords Well-being, School, Students, Student voice, Participatory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Well-being in schools encompasses cultivating positive relationships among students, teachers, and the wider school community while fostering a supportive environment that

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promotes social, emotional, and academic development (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). It involves creating a culture where everyone feels secure, connected, and valued and where there are ample opportunities for learning, personal growth, and handling challenges constructively (CASEL, 2015; Department of Education and Skills, 2019; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015). It includes students' perceptions (positive and negative) towards school, people in school, and the school environment (Hascher, 2003). Furthermore, Farrell *et al.* (2024) identified three well-being conceptualizations: being happy, staying safe and healthy, and something you "do."

Students' well-being has been associated with positive mental health (Hill *et al*., 2020), social relationships (Graham *et al*., 2016; Holfve-Sabel, 2014; Suldo *et al*., 2019; Navarro *et al*., 2015), learning (Holfve-Sabel, 2014), and academic achievement (Bücker *et al*., 2018). In addition, du Toit *et al*. (2022) identified authenticity, self-esteem, self-support for autonomy, emotional repair, and the ability to regulate distress and despondency as outcomes of positive student well-being. Over the past twenty years, positive education (PosEd) has evolved, incorporating positive psychology as conceptualized by Seligman's PERMA model (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) with educational methods to foster student well-being (Slemp, 2016; White and Kern, 2018). Kern and Taylor (2021) expanded this through Systems Informed Positive Education (SIPE), weaving in systems science to enhance individual and educational system health. Similarly, Waters and Loton (2019) developed The SEARCH meta-framework within PosEd, providing an overarching structure for its application and study.

Earlier research on students' well-being predominantly focused on adolescents/older teens (Ramadan, 2021; Schmidt and Hansson, 2018; Howell, 2009; du Toit *et al*., 2022). However, in the past decade, there has been a growing interest in the well-being of primary school students (Holfve-Sabel, 2014; Graham *et al*., 2016; Liu *et al*., 2014; Graetz *et al*., 2012; Chiva-Bartoll *et al*., 2020; Lee *et al*., 2010). While various methodologies have been developed to assess older students' well-being, such as the student well-being questionnaire, anxiety questionnaire, and the seven-domain (Having, Being, Relating, Feeling, Thinking, Functioning, and Striving) student well-being model (Soutter *et al*., 2013; Hascher, 2007), the well-being assessment of primary school students have relied heavily on alternative tools such as subjective well-being in school scale (Liu *et al*., 2014), and the student's social well-being at school questionnaire (Chiva-Bartoll *et al*., 2020).

Engaging students in understanding their well-being can be effectively achieved through participatory methods such as photo-elicitation interviews, talk and draw discussions, sorting activities, and PhotoVoice. These methods extend beyond younger age groups and offer an authentic way to involve all students in discussions about their lives, catering to their developmental need for autonomy and self-expression (Honkanen *et al*., 2017; Kellock, 2020). Traditional methods like questionnaires, while commonly used, often fall short in eliciting candid responses from students. The structured format of questionnaires may lead to a lack of truthful reporting due to social desirability bias or the reluctance to engage in self-disclosure (Abma and Schrijver, 2019; Coyne *et al*., 2021). Participatory approaches, by contrast, create a dynamic space for students to articulate their experiences more freely and creatively, providing a richer, more honest insight into their well-being (Leavy and Hourigan, 2017; Montreuil *et al*., 2021).

This study utilized visual participatory research methods to capture interpretations of holistic well-being within Irish primary schools. Specifically, the current research aimed to explore (1) the authentic views of students on how they experience well-being in school and (2) how their voices impact the development of a systems-informed PosEd model.

Methodology

Theoretical foundations of pupil well-being

This study is grounded in the principles of Positive Education, a pedagogical approach rooted in Positive Psychology that seeks to integrate academic learning with the promotion of well-

being. At the heart of Positive Education is the belief that schools should not only equip students with intellectual skills but also provide opportunities to develop their emotional, social, and psychological skills necessary for a flourishing life (Seligman, 2011; Norrish, 2015).

The philosophical discourse surrounding Well-being, dating back to Aristotle's exploration of hedonism (Kahneman *et al.*, 1999) and eudaimonia (Waterman, 1993), underscores the dualism inherent in well-being discussions: the pursuit of pleasure versus a flourishing life. Indeed, Jenkins *et al.* (2022, p. 2) also found that "experiencing and integrating both types of well-being contribute to what psychologists have termed 'flourishing.'" This fundamental debate informs the educational approach to well-being, influencing the overall purpose of well-being initiatives within schools. Moreover, the identification of several philosophical approaches to Well-being in education highlights the varied lenses through which Well-being can be conceptualized and integrated into educational settings (Diener, 1984; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2002, 2011; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Keyes, 2002; Diener *et al.*, 2010; Roffey, 2012; Huppert and So, 2013; Street, 2018; Waters and Loton, 2019; Peill, 2022).

In the wider field of well-being in education, there are several frameworks that consider well-being from multiple perspectives (Konu and Rimpelä, 2002; Scottish Government, 2004; Seligman *et al.*, 2009; Brunwasser *et al.*, 2009; Norrish, 2015; Stokes *et al.*, 2019; Brackett *et al.*, 2012; Street, 2018; CASEL, 2017; Waters and Loton, 2019; Peill, 2022). Among them, Seligman's PERMA framework (2011, 2018), which includes positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, is well established. This model has been adopted by two leading schools, St Peter's College, Adelaide (White and Murray, 2015) and Geelong Grammar School (Norrish *et al.*, 2013), with the latter adding a sixth element to the framework: positive health. Kern *et al.* (2015) conducted a study in St Peter's College with over 500 male students to examine the efficacy of the PERMA framework. The authors found that each component of the PERMA framework is linked to different well-being outcomes. Positive emotion and relationships, for instance, were associated with life satisfaction, hope, and gratitude. However, positive emotion alone was connected to physical vitality, and relationships alone were linked to spirituality. This study led the researchers to conclude that evaluating subjective well-being through multiple lenses allows schools to understand and foster well-being in a more systematic and effective way.

This study, utilising the PhotoVoice methodology, seeks to explore how students' experiences within an educational setting align with the principles of Positive Education, particularly how they perceive and contribute to their own well-being. By using positive education as a guiding theoretical lens, this study aims to identify the multiple dimensions of well-being that emerge from students' lived experiences. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of research advocating for a more holistic approach to student well-being in schools, one that fully integrates academic achievement with personal growth and well-being.

Study setting and participants. Sixteen students aged 8–10 years old (six males and ten females) were recruited from second and third classes in an urban, co-educational developing primary school using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. The purposive sampling criteria were carefully considered to ensure a diverse representation of students in terms of gender, social background, and learning abilities. This approach allowed the study to capture a broad and representative range of perspectives on well-being, while remaining feasible given the researcher's proximity to the school.

The research methods and language were specifically tailored to be age-appropriate, taking into account the students' cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and social skills. The study was conducted within a familiar school environment to help maintain participant comfort and ease. A 4-week time frame was selected to allow students sufficient time to engage with the research process and gradually deepen their understanding of well-being.

In line with the participatory nature of the PhotoVoice methodology, participants played an active role in the coding and meaning-making process through their involvement in the gallery walk. By sharing their images and narratives, they contributed to the co-construction of

themes, effectively positioning them as co-researchers. A team-based approach to coding was also employed, with the involvement of the teacher and Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in each class. These individuals provided invaluable support throughout the research process, given their established trust-based relationships with the students, and their daily classroom interactions with the students.

Study design. The study setting, a primary school environment, was supplemented with diverse visual resources and methods such as talk and draw, photo-elicitation, and dialogic interactions, ensuring a rich and varied data collection process for four weeks to allow the capture of genuine and unaltered children's expressions.

The methodological design adheres to the Lundy model of child participation (Lundy, 2013), underscoring the importance of children's perspectives as articulated by the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The methodological framework is geared towards accessing and reflecting children's well-being experiences in primary schools through ethical participation (Harmon, 2020). Recognising the complexity of children's viewpoints, PhotoVoice empowers children as cultural researchers, revealing themes adults may overlook (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Komulainen, 2016; Luttrell, 2010; Burke, 2005). The research tackles child-adult power dynamics, guiding children's contributions in data analysis and interpretation (Luttrell, 2010; Wang and Hannes, 2020). We applied the seven-step PhotoVoice framework according to Von Unger (2012) to facilitate participant-centric, empowering research, yielding insightful data, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. The implementation of PhotoVoice using Von Unger's comprehensive seven-step framework

von Unger's 7-step framework	Research sessions
• *Establishing a Thematic Focus:* Identifying key themes and issues pertinent to the participants' experiences within their educational settings	Session 1 • Informing and consenting using picture books Session 2 • Stock Photos to acquaint the children with the research topic
• *Engagement in Talk and Draw Sessions:* Encouraging children to accompany their photography with reflective journaling, further elucidating their perspectives	Session 3 • Talk and draw sessions
• *Fundamentals of Photography:* Educating participants, in this case, children, about basic photography skills to adequately capture their environment	Session 4 • Basic photography instruction and photo-taking Session 5 • Gallery Walk • Ranking Activity
• *Conducting Group Dialogs:* Facilitating discussions centered around the photographs taken, fostering a deeper understanding of the children's views and experiences	Session 6 • Child-led interviews
• *Thematic Analysis of Photos and Discussions:* Analyzing the collected photographs and dialogs to identify prevalent themes and insights	Data Analysis • Initial Coding • Focused Coding • Mosaic Approach
• *Formulating Actionable Recommendations:* Develop practical and insightful recommendations based on the analysis to address identified issues or enhance the studied environment	Results and Findings
• *Reflective Evaluation of the Process:* Assessing the effectiveness of the methodology and the research process to promote learning and development	Future Directions

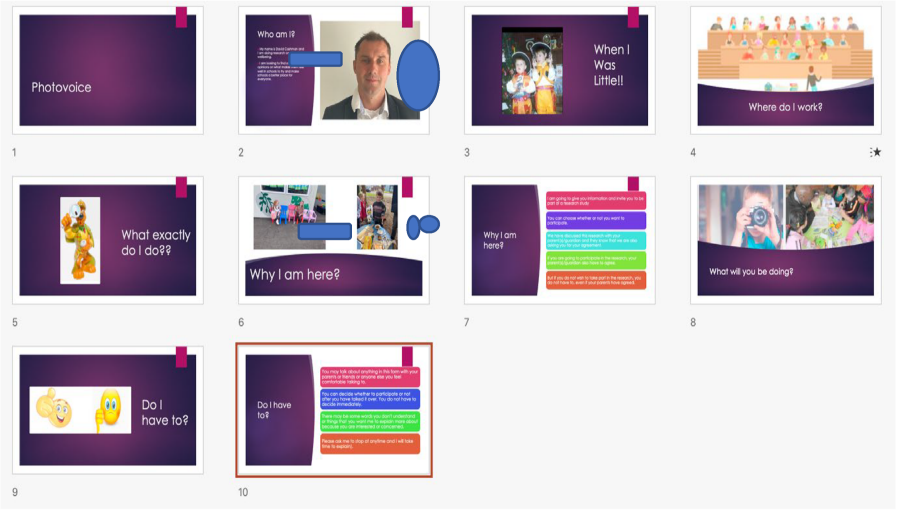
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Our research methods closely mirrored the research previously conducted by Martin and Buckley (2018), which sought to include the voices of young children in an ongoing evaluation of a community-based prevention and early intervention program. The data collection process spanned four weeks and unfolded exclusively within the primary school setting.

Session 1: introducing the researcher. During this inaugural session, we sought informed consent from the participating children. Children could only provide their consent if they fully understood their role in the study and the purpose of the study. To inform the children about the study, the researcher created a picture book detailing the research project, introducing the researcher and explaining the study's purpose in a visually engaging and child-friendly manner (Figure 1). The European Commission Guide to Creating Child-Friendly Versions of Written Documents (European Union, 2012) was used to develop the picture book. This approach follows the "narrative non-fiction" method, which has been recognized as an ethical way to provide information, where the researcher establishes the research context and purpose, outlines the rules of participation, and presents information in the form of a factual narrative, supported by real photographs of people, places, and events (Mayne *et al.*, 2015).

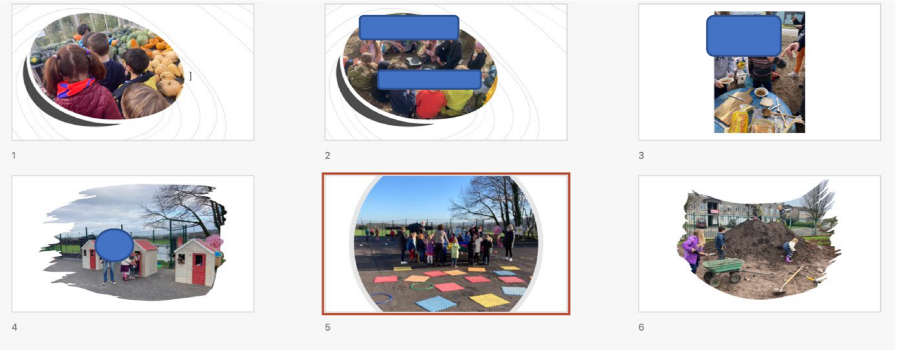
Session 2: introduction to well-being. This session commenced with introducing the concept of well-being in school to the children using photo elicitation, followed by a review of the previous session's narrative. This involved presenting stock photos illustrating caregiver interactions and photographs of the primary school taken by the school's staff (Figure 2). This session's primary objective was to further acquaint the children with our research team and cultivate a sense of comfort with our presence within the primary school environment.

Session 3: talk and draw. A talk and draw session was conducted with the children, implementing the well-established talk and draw method (Hanley *et al.*, 2004). The advantages of such activities include child-friendliness, bypassing the limitations of language, and engagement in an activity (drawing) with which children are familiar (Angell *et al.*, 2014; Horstman *et al.*, 2008). This aimed to elicit the children's nuanced perspectives on their everyday experiences while acclimating them to our presence in the primary school. Notably, posters were used as effective prompts for the children, and markers were provided, consistent with their prior use in the primary school classroom, to evoke enthusiasm. The session



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Figure 1. Picture book describing research study



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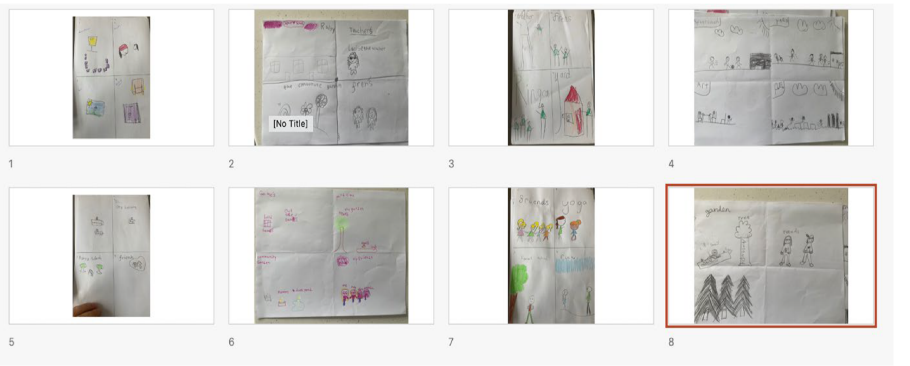
Figure 2. Stack photographs

comprised three groups, each consisting of 4–5 children, accompanied by their teacher. Each group was allocated a 20-min time slot for participation. After completing their coloring and drawing activities, the children were encouraged to affix their drawings onto their preferred photos displayed on the wall, originating from the prior photo-elicitation session (Figure 3).

Session 4: learning how to use cameras. The children were entrusted with digital cameras and received basic instructions on their operation. Their task entailed capturing photographs over two days of anything that made them feel well within the confines of their primary school. The primary school staff provided support in addressing any technical challenges that arose during the execution of this activity.

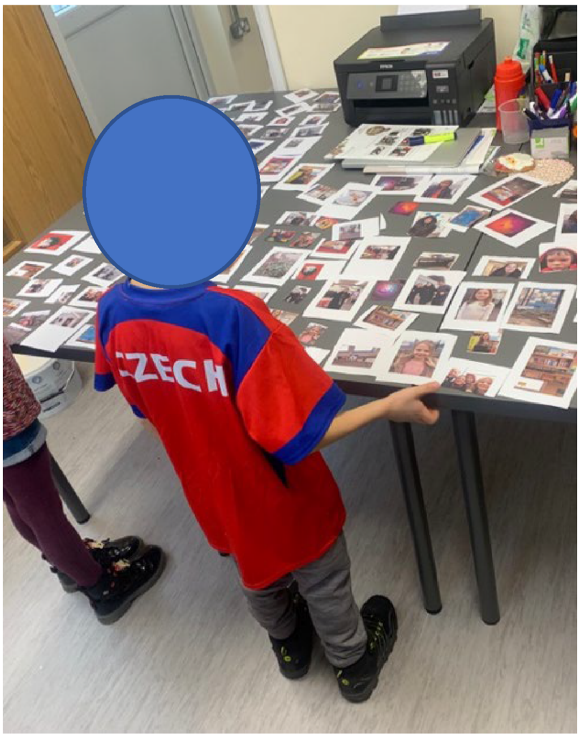
Session 5: gallery walk. This session involved a "gallery walk" with printed copies of the photographs captured by the children (Figure 4), serving as the primary source of empirical data for our research study (De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 2007).

The children were then invited to rank their five most preferred photographs. This approach enabled children to select and prioritize their preferred images and facilitated the inclusion of non-verbal children in the discourse. As a thinking skill tool (Rockett and Percival, 2002), the ranking could be organized vertically, horizontally, or in a mix of both (Figure 5).



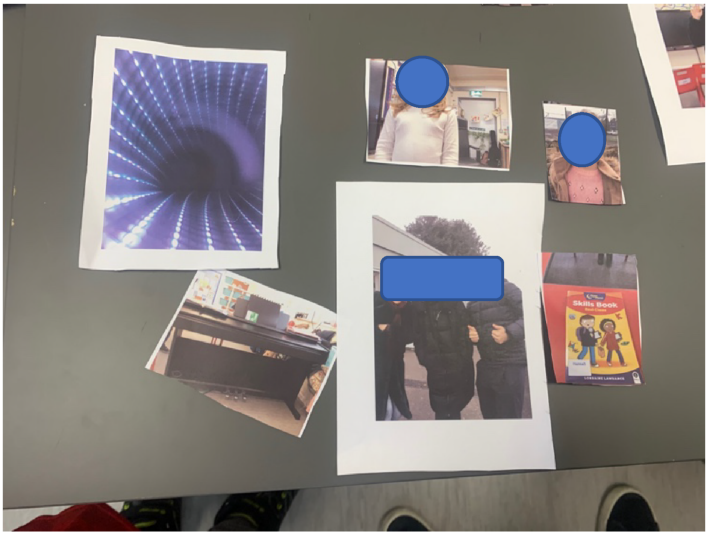
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Figure 3. Talk and draw drawings



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Figure 4. Gallery walk



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Figure 5. Ranking activity

Session 6: one-on-one interviews. Interviews were conducted with the participants individually in the school's resource room to comprehensively understand the children's daily experiences within the school and home environments. Subsequently, group discussions were conducted, as guided by child-friendly questions adapted from Wang and Burris (1994). Our questions were reframed as "Why did you take that photo?," "What is happening in the photo?" "What are you doing in the photo?" and "Did you like having the camera?" This facilitated the articulation of participants' interpretations of the visuals and encouraged peer-based discussion. These interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Session durations ranged from 7 to 15 min, tailored to each child's level of engagement. Variability was noted in both the communicativeness and the focus on individual photographs contributed by the students.

Data analysis. Data analysis was anchored in grounded theory, beginning in tandem with data collection, as recommended by Thornberg and Charmaz (2014), Corbin and Strauss (1990), and Corbin and Strauss (2008). This method guaranteed a direct and deep engagement with the data from the start, which was essential for grasping the subtle details in classroom environments. In the initial coding phase of the study, the analysis began with the artifacts from the talk and draw sessions, followed by an examination of the photographs. This process entailed assigning descriptive labels to data segments to encapsulate and classify the information, as suggested by Charmaz (2006). Additionally, frequency tables were created to track how often certain objects or people appeared in the drawings and photographs (Table 2).

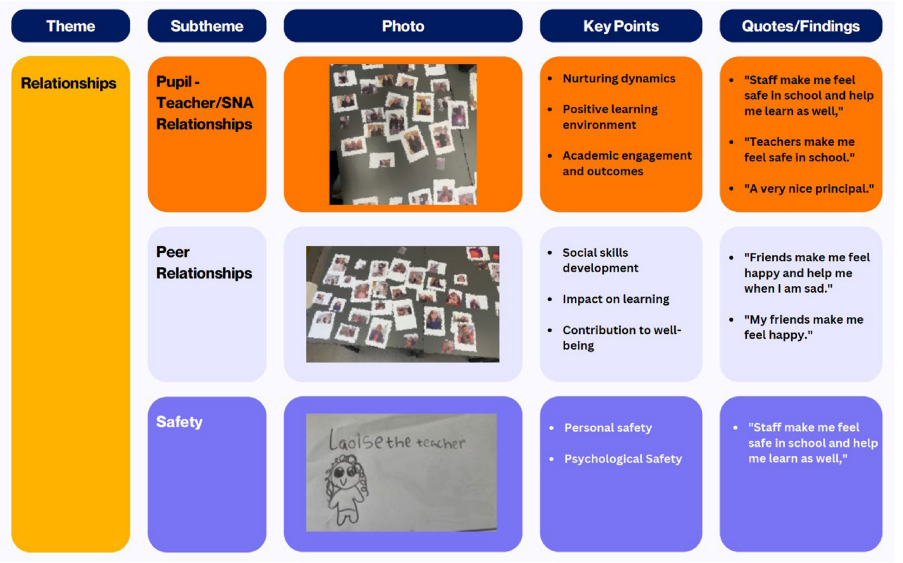
A subsequent comparative analysis, as described by Glaser and Strauss (2017), was conducted, resulting in nine common codes. Focused coding was employed to elevate significant codes into thematic categories, as described by Charmaz (2015). This iterative process involved interrogating the interview data across all nine classes and refining categories through methodological triangulation (Heale and Forbes, 2013) across different data forms, such as transcripts and visual data. This phase was pivotal for conceptualizing the data from varied analytical perspectives.

By analyzing data from talk and draw sessions, photographs, gallery walks, ranking activities, and child interviews, we employed the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2005) as the final data analysis stage. This integrated approach combines the visual with the verbal (Clark and Moss, 2011). The idea behind the Mosaic approach is that researchers collect data through various means. These are what Clark and Moss (2011) consider "individual tiles." The researcher then combines these pieces to form one big picture, like many little tiles forming one big mosaic. Our mosaic tiles are included in Figure 6.

Table 2. Frequency of objects/people drawn during the talk and draw sessions and the objects/people photographed during photograph sessions

Variables	Number of occurrences during sessions	
	Talk and draw	Photograph
Friends	21	29
School staff	12	28
School physical environment, including the sensory room, nurture room, yard, and garden	16	28
Literacy and numeracy activities, including books, library, and work samples	13	13
Outdoor learning areas	11	8
Physical education	10	–
Artwork samples or utensils	7	8
After school program	7	–
Music (piano, drums, ukuleles)	0	4

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Figure 6. Sample of mosaic tiles for the theme of relationships

Research ethics. This study was approved by University College Cork's Social Research Ethics Committee (Log, 2021–090) in September 2021, aligning with the 2011 Department of Children and Youth Affairs ethical research guidelines involving children. Utmost care was taken to protect the children and their families' privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality.

Explicit consent was mandatory for all images taken, and any photographs captured without consent were immediately deleted. Identifying images have been excluded from this publication unless specific permission was granted. We rigorously followed the copyright and ownership guidance issued by the university's Office for Corporate and Legal Affairs for photographs taken by children.

Results

Three primary conceptual themes were identified, each with three subthemes highlighting the distinct facets of a child's communicative methods and school experiences contributing to their well-being.

Theme 1: relationships

Student-teacher relationships. The role of student-teacher/SNA relationships in shaping the educational experience within the primary school setting was a prominent sub-theme that emerged in our study. A detailed analysis of the various forms of data, including the photographs taken by students and their drawings, provided a multifaceted perspective on these relationships.

Our analysis of the visual data revealed a substantial number of photographs taken by pupils that featured school staff, indicating the prominence of school staff in the students' school experiences (Table 2). Every child also created a drawing of their teachers during the talk and draw sessions, which further emphasized the importance of these relationships. These

interactions contribute significantly to a positive and conducive learning environment, strongly indicative of the teachers' roles as mentors and guides.

Integrating children's artwork and photographs in our analysis allowed for a comprehensive and participatory exploration of the children's experiences and perceptions. This collectively illustrated a pervasive theme of the essential role that school staff play in fostering a secure and supportive learning environment. The convergence of visual and verbal data through the Mosaic approach revealed a clear narrative: the teacher's role in the primary school context is profoundly influential, extending beyond educational instruction to encompassing emotional support and providing a secure learning atmosphere.

Peer relationships. In assessing the role of peer relationships within the primary school setting, our study explored the dynamics of child-to-child interactions, yielding significant findings that underscore their importance in pupils' educational and social development. Children engaged extensively in socialization and collaborative activities with their peers. This consistent interaction was instrumental in fostering a sense of community belonging and was essential for developing critical social skills. The influence of peer relationships extended beyond socialization, significantly impacting the children's learning experiences. Collaborative and peer-assisted learning activities were common, reinforcing the notion that peers play a crucial role in sharing knowledge and developing new skills.

The data from the *talk and draw sessions* and photograph analyses revealed a unanimous sentiment among the children: friendships at school contributed positively to their well-being. This was a pervasive theme across all visual and verbal expressions collected during the study. The children explicitly conveyed the emotional significance of these peer relationships. Student P remarked, *"Friends make me feel happy and help me when I am sad,"* highlighting the supportive nature of peer relationships. Student J plainly stated, *"My friends make me feel happiness,"* capturing the joy peers bring to her school experience.

The unanimity of children's reflections on peer relationships, evident in their drawings and photographs, clearly indicates the collective value placed on friendships for their overall well-being in school. This consensus underscores the critical role that peer connections play in creating a nurturing and emotionally supportive school environment.

Safety. The significance of safety within the school setting emerged as a prominent theme from our research, particularly through student interviews. Agbenyega (2011) defines safety within children's learning environments as spaces where they feel secure and are free to explore without excessive adult interference. This concept of safety extends beyond physical security to include psychological comfort, fostering autonomy, trust, and engagement in learning activities. The study emphasizes that such environments are crucial for cognitive and emotional development, supporting the notion that effective educational practices must prioritize creating and managing these safe spaces to enhance children's learning experiences (Agbenyega, 2011). In our study, the prominence of student's relationships with teachers and SNAs was first noted in their drawings and photographs, illustrating a collective appreciation for the role of the school staff. These expressions by the pupils underscored the value they placed on staff in enhancing their well-being at school.

It was, however, the child-led interviews that brought this theme to the forefront. In these discussions, students articulated a sense of security fostered by school staff. For instance, Student B stated, *"Staff make me feel safe in school and help me learn as well,"* encapsulating the dual role of school staff as both protectors and educators. Student D further complemented this sentiment with his remark, *"Teachers make me feel safe in school,"* pointing to the critical need for a protective environment that shields students from physical and emotional harm. These first-hand accounts by students highlight the essential role that school staff play in creating a nurturing and emotionally supportive learning environment. As expressed by the students, safety is not merely a background condition but a fundamental aspect of their daily educational experience.

Theme 2: space and physical environment

Sensory space and nurture room. Our research corroborates the findings of recent studies by Wang *et al.* (2020) and Kaya and Erdem (2021), supporting the critical role of the school environment in promoting student well-being. In our study, 23.7% of photographs captured featured school spaces, emphasizing their significance in the student's everyday experience. The school where our research took place was equipped with nurture [1] and sensory [2] rooms, each serving a distinct purpose. However, on closer examination, many photos included classroom displays, art displays, samples of children's work on the walls, and many classroom items. This suggests that the school environment is a backdrop and an active participant in the educational process. These elements contribute to a sense of community and personal identity among students and are essential components of well-being. Classroom displays and student work on the walls reflect a learning culture that values student contributions, enhancing their sense of achievement and belonging. This visual and physical engagement with the school environment reinforces the pedagogical relationship and mirrors the "situatedness" of learning (Fenwick, 2014) and "place-belongingness" (Antonsich, 2010). Furthermore, it highlights vital yet generally overlooked relationships between the learning environment, student learning, and well-being. This reveals the potential of participatory, values-based design approaches to create learning spaces that respond to contemporary learners' needs (Hughes *et al.*, 2019).

Interviews with the students themselves provide a clear narrative of these findings. Student F articulated a positive relationship with the school's sensory spaces, stating, "*Sensory room help me calm down*," illustrating the importance of such rooms for students needing to manage sensory input and find emotional balance. In addition, Student J expressed affection for another key area designed for emotional support, saying, *"I love going to the nurture room. I love the freedom there and that you can bring some snugglies (soft toys) so you have a calm space to do your work."* This personal testimony highlights the nurture room as a place of comfort and autonomy, vital for students who benefit from a calm environment to support their learning and emotional needs.

The convergence of visual data from our photographic evidence and the authentic voices of students like Student F and Student J strengthens the argument for deliberately creating special spaces within schools while highlighting the necessity for schools to consider all areas as potential well-being spaces. It becomes evident that while nurture and sensory rooms serve their specialized purposes, the ethos of well-being should permeate every corner of the school environment. Hallways, libraries, classrooms, and even outdoor areas should be designed with the same intentionality to support emotional and educational needs. This holistic approach acknowledges that every space where a student interacts has the potential to impact their well-being, thereby contributing significantly to holistic student development.

Outdoor learning. Outdoor learning was a significant component of our school research site, especially for the younger students in the junior and senior infant classes who participate in a structured outdoor learning program. Our study is consistent with a growing body of evidence suggesting that spending more time outdoors in nature benefits young people's well-being (McCormick, 2017). Outdoor environments offer numerous benefits for children's learning, health, and development. These include supporting emotional regulation and enhancing overall well-being (Louv, 2005). A longitudinal study of over 40,000 pupils found that outdoor lessons significantly enhanced students' enjoyment and well-being, with 95% reporting more enjoyment and 90% feeling healthier and happier (Waite *et al.*, 2013). Our research showed that students associate outdoor learning with enhanced well-being and calmness. This positive effect of outdoor learning activities was a dominant theme throughout the study's talk and draw activities, photographs, and interviews. The children emphasized the soothing and regulatory impact of the outdoor environment on their emotions and how happy outdoor learning made them feel.

Student C's observation, "*The garden and the plants make me feel happy,*" showcases the joy of direct contact with nature. This individual reflection is part of a broader enthusiasm for

experiential learning outside the classroom. Student L's enthusiastic comment, *"The outdoors is my favorite thing in school because I love forest school,"* echoes this sentiment. Adding to these perspectives, Student H noted, *"Outdoor learning makes me feel free; the birds singing make me feel calm,"* capturing the essence of the peace and autonomy students feel when learning amidst nature's sounds and sights. These insights collectively affirm the profound impact that outdoor learning has on students' happiness and self-regulation during their educational journey.

Theme 3: learning and curriculum

Academic curriculum. This research uncovers a nuanced student perspective in challenging the conventional adult conceptualizations of well-being in educational settings, which Farrell *et al.* (2024) describe as predominantly associated with feelings of happiness and well-being as something you "do." According to the children's experiences, well-being is deeply embedded in the learning process. This paradigm shift suggests that students perceive their well-being not as a separate by-product of education but as a core experience that unfolds through their academic endeavors.

This reframing is evident in how the students engage with the curriculum. There is an enthusiasm for activities that require mental agility and practical engagement. This can be seen in photos of mental math exercises and hands-on scientific experiments. These activities, which necessitate a tactile and investigative approach to learning, resonate strongly with the students. The eagerness and commitment displayed by the children in these learning scenarios suggest that well-being is closely tied to the satisfaction and sense of accomplishment derived from mastering new concepts and skills. Visual evidence from the students, comprising circle time sessions and outdoor educational activities, illustrates the curriculum's practical application. These student-generated images display an array of learning techniques, from conventional literacy and numeracy aids to innovative visual frameworks for writing, which they navigate in stages.

Personal quotes from the students further underscore this sentiment. The repeated phrase from student A, *"Learning makes me feel good,"* conveys a sense of enjoyment in their educational journey. Furthermore, student F's statement, *"learning helps me and helps me learn things,"* signifies the perceived personal growth associated with their learning. These expressions, directly from the students, reflect their academic engagement and a broader satisfaction with their educational environment.

The arts and music. Our study also underscores the arts and music as integral elements of the curriculum, as evidenced by their frequent mention in the talk-and-draw sessions and the photography analysis (Table 2). These disciplines were instrumental in fostering the children's creative expression, providing avenues for personal articulation, and encouraging exploration within artistic realms. The engagement with arts and music was related to increased emotional investment and excitement, thus enhancing the students' comprehensive educational experience. Student A's reflection on a picture of the piano, utilized daily by their teacher, encapsulates this sentiment, expressing a fondness for the instrument's sound and the overall experience of listening to music. Student A states, *"This is a picture of the piano, and sometimes (teacher's name) plays the piano when we have choir, and I like the sound of music."* Similarly, Student K's perception of art as a *"calming activity"* exemplifies the dual role of art and music as conduits for self-expression and exploration and as regulatory practices that provide solace and stability for the students. These insights affirm the multifaceted contribution of the arts to the student's well-being and educational enrichment, which is consistent with Nohilly *et al.* (2023), who argue that arts education, which includes disciplines like music and visual arts, has gained recognition for its potential to bolster student well-being,

Physical education. The essential role of physical education in educational programs was evident through our investigation, especially in the *talk and draw sessions* and interviews. A systematic review by Andermo *et al.* (2020) indicates that school-related interventions that

promote physical activity can reduce anxiety, increase resilience, increase well-being, and improve the positive mental health of children and young people. Furthermore, there is a worldwide call to action for enhancing children's physical activity (Kraus *et al.*, 2015; Woods *et al.*, 2010; World Health Organization, 2016). Although physical education and physical activity are distinct concepts with different influences, the role of physical education in schools is critical for fostering a commitment to lifelong physical activity. Specifically, school-based physical education is recognized as a fundamental and structured component of academic life, where children's physical training and growth occur (Fahey *et al.*, 2005).

Our research identified physical education classes as critical environments for fostering social development and positive emotions. Student L's direct quote, *"I like to be outside so I can run and do athletics,"* exemplifies the children's affinity for the physicality and freedom offered by such activities. This sentiment is supported by the recurring appearance of games, yard play, and physical education sessions (Table 2) in the talk and draw activities, emphasizing their regular integration into the school's routine. In the talk and draw sessions, children included annotated pictures of Rinka [3], yoga, athletics, and yard games, emphasizing the importance of looking at data from multiple perspectives.

Discussion

Insights from learning and developmental sciences to guide educational practices emphasize nurturing environments that support cognitive, social, and emotional development (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2019; Osher *et al.*, 2018; Cantor *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, these studies advocate for personalized and active learning strategies, highlighting the importance of adaptive teaching methods and the pivotal role of teacher-student relationships in fostering an inclusive and supportive educational atmosphere. Our study's comprehensive exploration of primary education echoes Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2019) by presenting a multi-dimensional perspective approach to investigating student well-being, and the research is underpinned by the profound interplay between student-teacher and peer relationships, space and environmental considerations, alongside curricular structures. These components coalesce to form the backbone of children's educational experience, each influencing and enhancing the other synergistically. Echoing the assertions of (Burke and Giraldez-Hayes, 2022), we found that these relational dynamics are foundational for well-being, constituting a vital aspect of PosEd, focusing on and reinforcing individuals' physical and mental health within educational settings. This was vividly demonstrated in the photographs and drawings depicting the positive engagement between pupils and educational facilitators—including teachers, special needs assistants, and principals (Taylor, 2009).

The photographs depict the school's environment, illustrating interactions indicative of a culture of support and empathy among individuals, suggesting a pronounced degree of relatedness within the school community. This is crucial for psychological functioning (Ryan and Deci, 2006). Moreover, this sense of relatedness is bidirectional, as Klassen *et al.* (2012) suggest that teachers' well-being is tied to their relationships with students. Thus, the nurturing interactions evident in our findings enhance the student's educational experience and contribute to the educators' job satisfaction and emotional health. Supporting these relational dynamics, Powell *et al.* (2020) argued for the importance of such connections in fostering the well-being of both students and educators. Our findings align with this view, suggesting that educational frameworks should strongly emphasize relational care and interpersonal connectivity.

This study also sheds light on the critical role of the school environment in supporting student well-being (Pillay *et al.*, 2005). As highlighted by the children's narratives and visual data, sensory spaces and nurture rooms provided essential emotional and sensory regulation opportunities. This aligns with sensory integration theory (Ayres, 2016), which advocates for environments that cater to the sensory needs of children. The concept of "safe space" transcends mere physicality, reflecting a more profound need for spaces that offer emotional

security and comfort, resonating with the principles of environmental psychology and how the physical environment impacts child development (Nair and Minhas, 2022).

Our findings underscore the significance of a well-rounded curriculum beyond traditional academic subjects. Including the arts, music, and physical education in the curriculum fosters creative expression and emotional investment in students. Such curricular elements contribute to cognitive development and offer therapeutic benefits, supporting the notion that education should cater to multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2015) and provide diverse pathways for student engagement. Physical education stands out as a crucial component for enhancing physical health and social skills, reinforcing the importance of peer relationships and supportive environments. This is important in the context of research by Carlin *et al.* (2024), which states that in the 2022 Ireland North and South Report Card on Physical Activity, fewer than 20% of children and adolescents with disabilities are meeting the current PA recommendations, with less than half of children and adolescents achieving the guideline of <2 h of screen time per day.

The interconnection of these themes is further exemplified in the structured outdoor learning program, which fosters a bond with nature and supports hands-on, experiential learning. The enthusiasm for outdoor activities expressed by the pupils underscores the value placed on interacting with the natural environment, aligning with outdoor education philosophies (Waite *et al.*, 2013; Morgan and Waite, 2017). Therefore, the current study significantly departs from traditional educational research by advocating for a dynamic, action-oriented understanding of "well-being." It challenges the static, possessive interpretations previously held and introduces a conception of well-being as a fluid and ever-evolving process. This reconceptualization positions well-being as a complex construct influenced by an intricate web of relationships spanning human and non-human interactions, organizational and environmental structures, personal desires, behavioral practices, and broader societal and cultural frameworks.

Notably, the students' narratives expressly demonstrated that learning is not merely an academic exercise but a vital component of their well-being. The children articulated that their learning experiences contribute significantly to their sense of well-being and that well-being extends beyond the confines of the classroom and encompasses their entire school experience, including their relationships with peers and teachers and their interactions with the school environment. This critical insight emphasizes integrating the students' voices while developing educational practices and policies. The children's reflections on how learning activities make them "feel good" and the joy they express in learning provide compelling evidence that educational well-being is multifaceted and deeply rooted in their learning experiences. This contrasts with adult conceptualizations of well-being by Farrell *et al.* (2024), who emphasized how neoliberal interpretations of well-being as an object, a tradable commodity based on notions of individuality, have infiltrated the education system, affecting even the youngest learners.

Limitations of this study

This study focuses on just one school, which limits the generalizability and applicability of the findings to other schools with different resources, cultural backgrounds, and educational practices. The context-specific nature of the results necessitates careful consideration when attempting to extend these findings to different settings, which may require adaptations to fit other school environments.

Additionally, the research engaged only a small group of students ($n = 16$), which may not adequately capture the full range of student experiences and perceptions of the school's student population, which is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of student well-being. The convenience and purposive sampling methods may introduce potential biases as they rely on the availability and willingness of participants, which might not yield a balanced representation of the broader student body. Such sampling can skew the data, reflecting

more about those who chose to participate rather than the entire student population. Furthermore, the research methods employed, including visual participatory techniques, might have been influenced by the presence of the researchers. This interaction could affect how participants respond, potentially leading them to highlight certain aspects of their experience over others due to the researcher's influence.

Thus, future research should recruit a larger population from multiple schools with varied demographic characteristics to enhance the reliability of the findings and allow for a better assessment of the variability in student experiences. Employing randomized sampling methods would help mitigate selection bias and provide a more accurate reflection of student experiences across different educational settings.

Conclusions

Aligned with the evolving visual participatory research that positions children as active participants and co-researchers in their own lives (Bruner, 2004; James, 2008), this research contributes to a deeper understanding of generational orders and children's unique perspectives on social realities (Honkanen *et al.*, 2017; Kellock, 2020; Abma and Schrijver, 2019; Coyne *et al.*, 2021; Leavy and Hourigan, 2017). In synthesizing these findings, it becomes apparent that the educational experience is an interconnected system where relationships, the environment, and the curriculum play interdependent roles. Each aspect is vital to the well-being and development of the pupils and the professional fulfillment of the educators.

In addition, the findings from this study contribute to an enriched understanding of well-being in educational settings, emphasizing the necessity for a systems-informed model of PosEd that is responsive to the voices of its primary stakeholders—the children. Educators and policymakers can develop more holistic educational practices by incorporating the children's insights into how learning shapes their well-being. These practices will not only teach but will also nurture the well-being of children, ensuring that the educational environment is one where well-being is dynamically pursued and realized through a synergy of teaching, learning, and participatory engagement.

Notes

1. "A nurture room sets out to provide a safe, welcoming and caring environment for learning and will replicate the home environment with a comfortable seating area, a kitchen facility for preparing food and a working area to address formal curriculum demands." (Sloan *et al.*, 2020)
2. Sensory rooms, are tailored spaces that caters to students' sensory needs, helping them self-regulate through individualized sensory experiences to enhance readiness for learning and social interaction. It engages primary senses such as sight, hearing, touch, and smell, along with vestibular and proprioceptive senses. This space may also be known as a sensory room, calm space, chill-out room, multi-sensory room, or sensory garden (National Council for Special Education, 2021).
3. An integrated physical education programme, which incorporates athletics, gymnastics, dance, drama and fundamental movement skills.

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