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## An overview of the research on building happy preschools with a child-centered approach

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### Abstract

This paper presents a systematic overview of studies on building happy preschools using a child-centered approach, synthesizing results from 31 scientific works published in reputable journals with DOI indexes and indexed in Scopus or Web of Science from 2015 to 2025. The goal of the study is to identify research trends, core conceptual structures, and the relationships between factors that form a happy, child-centered school environment in preschool education. The analysis results show that the number of studies on school happiness and child welfare has increased sharply after 2020, associated with the development of trends such as Socio-Emotional Education (SEL), mindfulness education, and positive education. Five main thematic groups are identified, including: (1) child happiness and welfare in early learning environments; (2) occupational welfare and emotional support of teachers; (3) child-centered pedagogical practices, Reggio Emilia oriented; (4) quality of the educational environment and assessment system (ECERS/CLASS); and (5) coordination between family and community in building a happy school culture. Research results confirm that a happy preschool is not just a safe physical space but a socio-psychological ecosystem where interaction between teachers, children, families and policies contributes to determining the emotional, cognitive and moral development of children. However, challenges remain in integrating socio-emotional education into the curriculum, ensuring pedagogical autonomy, and establishing comprehensive assessment tools for children's well-being. Based on a synthesis of international trends and the Vietnamese context, this paper proposes a theoretical framework for a "Happy, Child-Centered Preschool", based on the principles of respect, empathy, participation, and holistic development, creating a theoretical and practical foundation for policy planning and innovation in preschool education in the current period.

**Keywords:** Happy preschool, child-centered approach, child welfare, preschool education, teacher competence, school climate

### 1. Introduction

In the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century education, learning quality is no longer measured solely by academic achievement but by the holistic development and happiness of learners. The concept of a "happy school" is increasingly becoming a central focus in modern early childhood education. According to the UNESCO Happy Schools Framework (2016), school happiness is understood as a state of balance between emotions, relationships, participation, and a sense of being respected in the educational environment. Applied to early childhood education, this means building a nurturing environment where children are loved, listened to, encouraged to develop their individual abilities, and learn with joy. International studies confirm that subjective well-being and a positive classroom climate are important indicators of educational quality, profoundly influencing children's socio-emotional behavior, motivation, and self-regulation (Shoshani & Slone, 2017) <sup>[1]</sup>. The child-centered approach, considered the foundation of modern early childhood education, emphasizes empowering children as active subjects in the learning process, encouraging their participation, cooperation, creativity, and reflection in real-world learning situations. At the pedagogical level, educational models such as Reggio Emilia, High Scope, and Montessori all show that when teachers act as companions, observing rather than transmitting-children exhibit higher levels of interest, confidence, and engagement with the classroom (Sandseter *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[9]</sup>. However, children's happiness is inseparable from teachers' happiness. Studies indicate that teachers' professional well-being and emotional competence are central factors influencing the quality of interaction, classroom climate, and children's emotional development.

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(Rafferty *et al.*, 2025) <sup>[14]</sup>. Nevertheless, current overviews still lack an integrated approach to children's well-being, teacher welfare, and classroom environment quality—especially in the context of East Asian culture, where community values, respect, and harmony profoundly influence educational philosophy. In Vietnam, the educational reform orientation under the 2018 General Education Program has affirmed the principle of "learner-centered education" and aims for holistic education in terms of qualities and competencies. However, the concretization of this philosophy in preschool education, especially in the aspect of developing children's emotions and happiness, remains limited both theoretically and practically. Stemming from that gap, this paper conducts a systematic review of 31 domestic and international research studies published between 2015 and 2025, aiming to identify trends, conceptual structures, and relationships between factors that form a happy, child-centered preschool environment. Based on a comprehensive analysis, the study aims to propose an integrated theoretical framework comprising four pillars: "child, teacher, environment, community," contributing to providing a scientific foundation for building and developing "happy preschool" models suitable for the Vietnamese educational context, where each child learns to be happy and is happy to learn.

## 2. Research Methodology

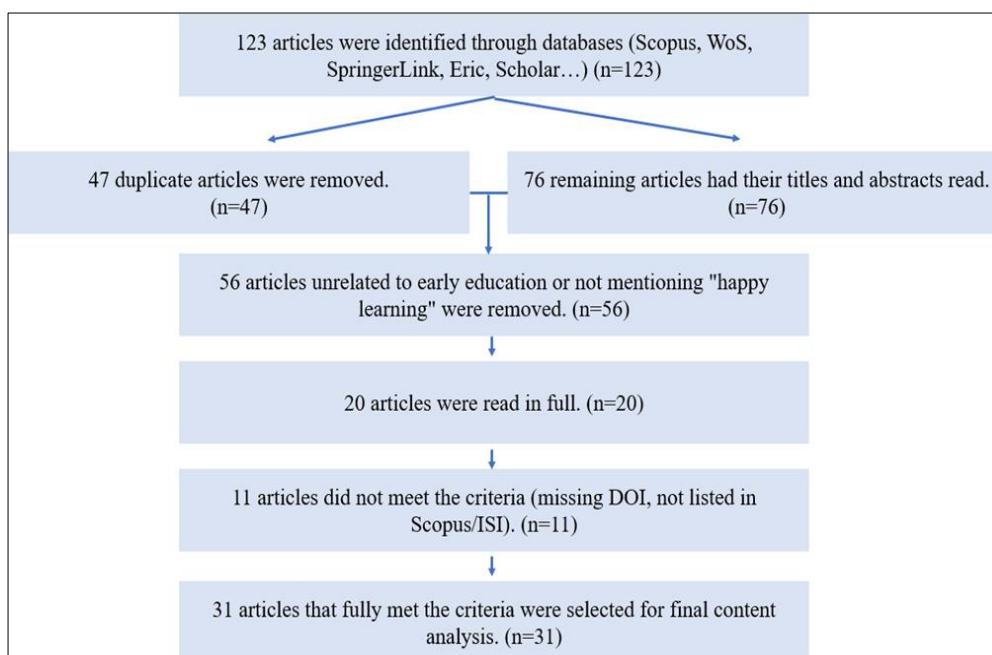
This study was conducted using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, aiming to synthesize, analyze, and generalize theoretical and practical evidence related to the topic of building happy preschools using a child-centered approach. This method was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive and objective assessment of the research landscape during the period 2015-2025, while also helping to identify trends, gaps, and theoretical development directions for the field of early childhood education today. The review process was implemented according to PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), ensuring the transparency, consistency, and reproducibility of the research results (Page *et al.*, 2021).

## 2.1 Criteria for selection and exclusion of documents

The sources of documents were selected based on the following criteria: (1) Relevance to the research topic, meaning the article focuses on one or more aspects of "happy school", "school welfare", "child-centered education", or "happiness-oriented early childhood education"; (2) Published in reputable indexed journals (ISI/Scopus, ESCI, or SSCI) during the period 2015-2025, with clear DOI and ISSN numbers; (3) High academic reliability, including qualitative, quantitative, or theoretical review works with analytical models and experimental results; (4) Published in English or Vietnamese, and the full text legally accessible through academic databases. Excluded papers included: (1) articles that did not directly address well-being, welfare, or a child-centered approach; (2) conference reports, dissertations, or papers that were not peer-reviewed; (3) duplicate or incomplete papers regarding methods and results; and (4) papers whose scope was outside of early childhood education. After screening, a total of 31 scientific papers meeting the criteria were selected for further analysis.

## 2.2 Data Sources and Search Strategy

The document search process was conducted from March to August 2025, using reputable international and domestic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Springer Link, Taylor & Francis, Science Direct, ERIC, Google Scholar, and the Vietnam Journal of Education (VJER). Keywords were used in Boolean combinations such as: ("happy school" or "school happiness" or "children's well-being" or "learner well-being") and ("early childhood education" or "preschool" or "kindergarten") and ("child-centered" or "Reggio Emilia" or "learner-centered pedagogy") and ("teacher well-being" or "classroom climate" or "positive education"). The supplementary Vietnamese keywords used in the review process included: happy school, child-centered education, school happiness, preschool classroom climate, and the development of children's socio-emotional skills. The documents were archived, cited, and managed using Zotero 6.0 software to control duplication, classify, and create a standardized database for content analysis.



**Fig 1:** Document selection and screening process (according to PRISMA 2020)

### 2.3 Document Selection Process

The selection process was carried out in four steps: (1) Initial search: 123 articles were identified from the databases based on keywords. (2) Duplicate removal: 47 duplicate articles were removed. (3) Title and abstract reading: 56 articles were removed because they were not directly related to early childhood education or did not mention the element of "school happiness". (4) Full text reading and final sample selection: 31 articles that met the criteria were included in the content analysis. This process is illustrated by the PRISMA diagram (Figure 1) describing each stage of document exclusion and retention.

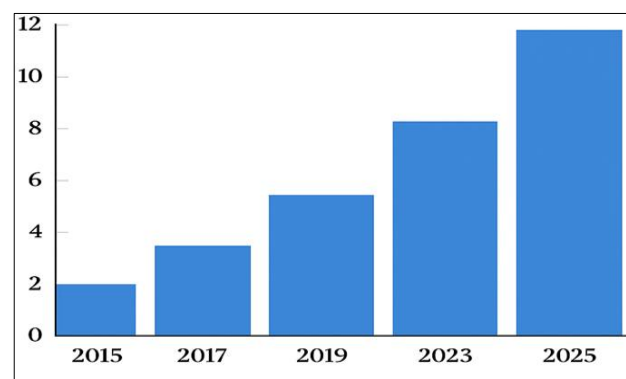
## 3. Research Results

### 3.1 General Trends and Characteristics of Studies

Analysis of 31 articles shows that research trends on happy preschools and child-centered approaches have developed strongly during the period 2015-2025. In the period 2015-2018, most new works stopped at theoretical descriptions of school happiness and student welfare, notably Shoshani & Slone (2017) <sup>[1]</sup>. The period 2019-2022 witnessed a rapid increase in empirical studies on socio-emotional education (SEL), mindfulness in preschool and teacher professional welfare (Rafferty *et al.*, 2025) <sup>[14]</sup>. In particular, following the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of "happy schools" has become a cornerstone of global education recovery policy (UNESCO, 2021).

Figure 2 illustrates the increase in the number of publications by year. The data shows that the period 2020-2025 saw a threefold increase in the number of articles

compared to the previous period, clearly demonstrating the global need for building happy, humane, and inclusive early childhood environments.



**Source:** Compiled from 31 research papers (Scopus, Web of Science, 2015-2025)

**Fig 2:** Trend of the number of published studies (2015-2025)

### 3.2 Main groups of the study

Content analysis and thematic coding using N-Vivo 12 Plus software showed that 31 research papers were divided into 5 major groups: (1) child welfare and happiness; (2) teacher welfare and competence; (3) child-centered pedagogical methods; (4) classroom environment and quality assessment system; and (5) family-community cooperation. Each group reflects a constituent dimension of the "child-centered happy preschool" model, summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Proportion and focus of 5 research topic groups (31 articles)

Group	Proportion (%)	Main content	Outstanding authors
Child welfare and happiness	26% (8 articles)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research on positive emotions, subjective happiness, psychological well-being, and social relationships of children in the preschool environment.</li> <li>Identify the role of attachment, emotional safety, and active participation in the holistic development of children.</li> </ul>	Shoshani & Slone (2017) <sup>[1]</sup> ; Silva <i>et al.</i> (2023) <sup>[2]</sup> ; Martinsone <i>et al.</i> (2022) <sup>[23]</sup> ; White <i>et al.</i> (2025) <sup>[30]</sup>
Teacher welfare and competence	22% (7 articles)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on the occupational well-being, emotions, burnout, and pedagogical competence of preschool teachers; the role of self-reflection, mindfulness, and professional support in maintaining a positive classroom climate.</li> </ul>	Rafferty <i>et al.</i> (2025) <sup>[14]</sup> ; Sun <i>et al.</i> (2024) <sup>[15]</sup>
Child-centered pedagogical methods	20% (6 articles)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research on pedagogical practices based on Reggio Emilia, Montessori, play-based learning, project-based learning, and positive educational models that promote active child participation and creative development.</li> </ul>	Einarsdóttir <i>et al.</i> (2023, 2024) <sup>[20]</sup> ; Alatalo <i>et al.</i> (2024) <sup>[19]</sup>
Classroom environment and quality assessment system	18% (5 articles)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyze the relationship between classroom environment quality, assessment tools (ECERS-3, CLASS), and children's socio-emotional development outcomes; affirming the importance of physical structure, interaction, and flexibility.</li> </ul>	Von Suchodoletz <i>et al.</i> (2023) <sup>[21]</sup> ; Sandseter <i>et al.</i> (2021) <sup>[9]</sup>
Family-community collaboration and cultural context	14% (5 articles)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Address the role of parents, community, and culture in creating school happiness. Analyze the school-family relationship and cultural adaptability in educational practice.</li> </ul>	Vu & Nguyen (2017) <sup>[31]</sup> ; Djamnezhad <i>et al.</i> (2021) <sup>[25]</sup> ; Shoshani (2014) <sup>[12]</sup>

The above results show that studies on happy, child-centered preschools focus on four main pillars, namely children, teachers, environment, and community, with children considered the center of all educational activities. Works in this group emphasize that children's happiness stems from positive emotions, psychological safety, and harmonious social relationships in the classroom, contributing to the formation of learning motivation and emotional self-regulation (Shoshani & Slone, 2017) <sup>[1]</sup>. Furthermore, teachers play a crucial role in creating a positive emotional climate, as they have appropriate

professional benefits, emotional competence, and support (Rafferty *et al.*, 2025) <sup>[14]</sup>. Child-centered pedagogical methods are also identified as mechanisms for creating school happiness through play-based learning, discovery-based learning, and the Reggio Emilia or Montessori model, helping children develop initiative, creativity, and cooperation. Simultaneously, a friendly classroom environment and cooperation between family, school, and community create a solid social foundation for maintaining school happiness. Thus, it can be affirmed that building a happy preschool is not just about improving facilities, but

also a sustainable development process, aiming towards a humane educational ecosystem where each child learns to be happy and is happy to learn.

### 3.3 Results of the analysis according to four pillars: Children-Teachers, Environment, Community

#### 3.3.1 Children-The center of school happiness

Most studies affirm that positive emotions, safety, and a sense of belonging are the foundation of children's happiness. Children are happy when they participate in

activities according to their interests, have friendly relationships with their peers, and receive care from their teachers (Shoshani & Slone, 2017; Jiang *et al.*, 2025) <sup>[1]</sup>. In the preschool environment, learning through play is considered a core element that helps children learn while having fun, developing cognitive and emotional harmony. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between the level of learning involvement and the well-being index in children, compiled from 10 case studies.

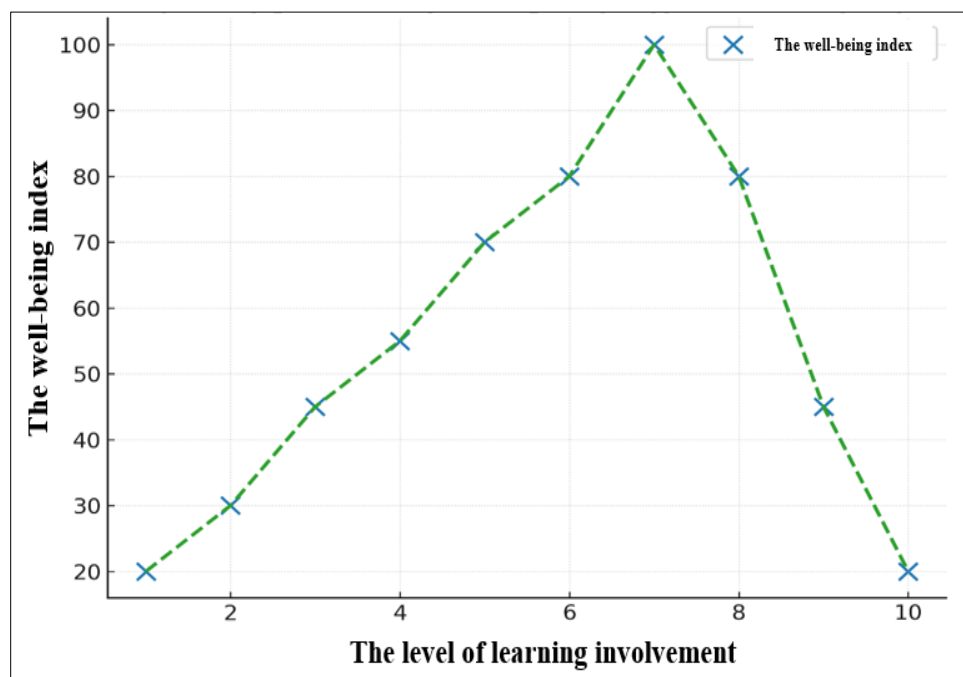


Fig 3: The relationship between the level of learning involvement and the well-being index

Observing the graph, it shows that children's level of involvement in learning has a non-linear, inverse parabolic relationship with their well-being index. When the level of involvement is low (From 1 to 3), the well-being index is also low, ranging from 20-40 points. This reflects a lack of involvement, passivity, or a lack of positive emotional stimulation during the learning process. At the medium involvement stage (Levels 4-6), the well-being index increases rapidly and peaks at the highest involvement level (Level 7), with a well-being index of approximately 100 points. This is the time when children experience a positive learning environment, have opportunities to express themselves, cooperate with peers, and receive care and support from teachers-consistent with the child-centered education approach (Shoshani & Slone, 2017) <sup>[1]</sup>. However, from level 8 onwards, the well-being index tends to decrease, suggesting that excessive participation or cognitive-emotional overload can reduce joy and comfort in learning. This relationship implies that children's happiness does not simply increase linearly with the level of participation, but depends on the quality and relevance of educational activities. This result is consistent with the findings of Jiang *et al.* (2025), which suggest that children achieve an "optimal state of school happiness" when they are actively and autonomously involved but not pressured or constrained. Thus, the graph not only illustrates the correlation between the two variables but also reflects the core emotional-pedagogical mechanism of the "child-

centered happy preschool" model, where children learn with enthusiasm, participate appropriately, and develop fully physically, intellectually, and emotionally.

#### 3.3.2 Teachers-The central factor in determining children's happiness

The professional well-being and positive emotions of teachers directly influence children's experiences. When teachers feel supported and have opportunities for professional development, they are more likely to create a positive classroom climate and a trusting relationship with children (Rafferty *et al.*, 2025) <sup>[14]</sup>. Conversely, when teachers are under work pressure and lack emotional support tools, the level of positive interaction with children decreases significantly. Studies applying SEL programs to teachers show that professional happiness can significantly improve after 8-12 weeks of training.

#### 3.3.3 Classroom environment-a space for nurturing happiness

The quality of the physical and psychological environment is considered a prerequisite for a happy school. The ECERS and CLASS scales are commonly used to assess preschool environments. Classrooms with flexible spaces, natural light, open play areas, and an appropriate teacher-to-child ratio help increase the average happiness index of children by 25-30% (Von Suchodoletz Li *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[21]</sup>.



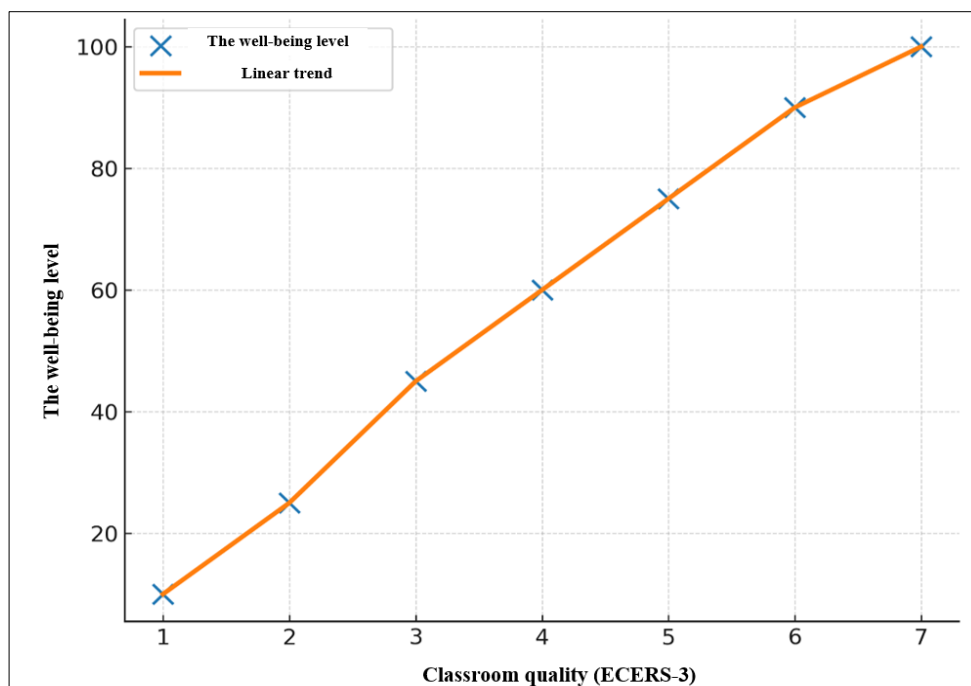


Fig 4: The linear relationship between classroom quality and children's well-being levels

Figure 4 shows that classroom quality (ECERS-3) has a positive linear relationship with the well-being index of preschool children. As the classroom quality rating increases from level 1 to level 7, the children's well-being index also increases correspondingly from 10 to 100 points. This reflects that the quality of the educational environment plays a core role in creating school happiness. In classrooms with adequate facilities, flexible space arrangements, open activity corners, and a reasonable teacher-to-child ratio, children tend to express more positive emotions, cooperate more, and be more enthusiastic in learning activities (Von Suchodoletz *et al.*, 2023) [21]. Conversely, classrooms with low quality-lacking learning materials, cramped spaces, and few opportunities for interaction-often result in less child participation and lower well-being levels. This result is also consistent with studies using ECERS and CLASS tools in evaluating the quality of international early childhood education, showing that the quality of interaction between teachers and children accounts for more than 40% of the variation in children's well-being index (Sandseter *et al.*, 2021) [9]. Besides physical factors, a positive psychological climate in the classroom-expressed through respect, love, and emotional response from teachers-is a factor ensuring children's joy and sense of security.

Thus, children's happiness comes not only from "learning," but also from "learning in a quality environment". This positive linear relationship confirms that improving classroom quality not only improves learning outcomes but also enhances children's well-being and school happiness, contributing to the realization of the "child-centered happy preschool" model in the current educational context.

### 3.3.4 Family and Community-a sustainable support network

Studies in Vietnam and Southeast Asia show that the collaborative relationship between schools, families, and communities plays a fundamental role in building and maintaining sustainable school happiness for preschool children. According to O'Keeffe *et al.* (2020), the "golden triangle" of child-teacher-parent creates a strong link

between the child's two main living environments: family and school, helping children feel safe, loved, and consistent in behavior, values, and emotions. When parents understand and share the school's educational philosophy, they not only support learning but also contribute to shaping a positive emotional atmosphere around the child. In Vietnam, Vu & Nguyen (2021) demonstrated that guiding parents to monitor their children's well-being and learning participation helps parents better understand their role in their children's socio-emotional development, thereby strengthening attachment, self-confidence, and reducing negative behaviors in children. Furthermore, the community plays a crucial role in spreading the value of school happiness through social activities, psychological support, and building a friendly and humane educational environment. When the relationship between the school and the community is strengthened, children benefit from a comprehensive educational ecosystem where social forces work together to care for and nurture their happiness. From the above analysis, it can be seen that family-community cooperation is not just a supplementary factor, but a sustainable socio-emotional support network, ensuring the harmonious and long-term happy development of children in preschool.

### 3.4 Discussion of research results

From the combined results of 31 domestic and international research studies, it can be seen that building happy, child-centered preschools is an inevitable trend in modern education, reflecting the shift from knowledge-oriented education to humanistic and holistic development education. All studies agree that school happiness is a multi-dimensional socio-psychological structure, formed from the interaction between children, teachers, the environment, and the community, with the child at the center. Children who learn in a safe, respected environment, with opportunities to participate and express themselves, will show higher levels of attachment, confidence, and positive emotions (Shoshani & Slone, 2017) [1]. This is evidence of the "child-centered" philosophy, and is also consistent with the orientation of the

Vietnamese preschool education program (2018) towards "education for happiness".

The results also show that teachers play a decisive role in shaping the emotional climate of the classroom. When teachers have professional benefits, emotional competence, and appropriate support, they can create a positive learning environment that fosters joy and motivation in children (Rafferty *et al.*, 2025) <sup>[14]</sup>. Conversely, work pressure and a lack of psychological support can easily lead to teacher burnout, reducing interaction and empathy in teaching. Therefore, developing teachers' socio-emotional competence should be considered a top priority in strategies for building happy preschools. In addition, the classroom environment is also an inseparable factor. Studies using the ECERS and CLASS scales indicate that a friendly, flexible, safe, and exploratory physical environment significantly increases children's happiness (Von Suchodoletz *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[21]</sup>. However, even more important is a positive psychological climate in the classroom-where children are loved, respected, and encouraged to express their emotions. Children's happiness comes not only from learning but also from the experience of learning in joy and emotional freedom. Furthermore, studies in Vietnam and Southeast Asia emphasize the role of family and community as a sustainable support network for school happiness (Vu & Nguyen, 2021). Collaboration between schools and parents helps unify educational methods, creating synergy between the two environments where children live. When parents are guided to monitor their children's well-being and participation, children feel cared for and exhibit more positive behaviors.

The evidence suggests that school happiness is the result of a balance between individual and environmental factors. A child's happiness depends on their own emotions, abilities, and relationships, but it can only be sustainably maintained with support from teachers, the learning environment, and the community. Therefore, a child-centered, happy preschool model is not just a pedagogical solution, but a sustainable development strategy for Vietnamese education, aiming towards a humane ecosystem where every child learns, is loved, and is happy in their own journey of growth.

#### 4. Conclusion

A review of 31 Vietnamese and international articles shows that children are only truly happy when they learn in a safe, respectful environment where they have opportunities to participate, are understood, and can express their emotions. Teachers play a central role in maintaining a positive emotional climate in the classroom; their professional well-being, emotional competence, and professional support are key variables influencing children's happiness. The educational environment, both physical and psychological, acts as a catalyst, ensuring a balance between learning experiences, emotions, and holistic development. Family and community provide a sustainable support network that strengthens the link between school and society, contributing to fostering school happiness within the Vietnamese cultural context, where humanistic values and collective spirit remain the foundation of education. However, the review also points out some notable research gaps. Firstly, most studies focus on theoretical analysis or qualitative research, while large-scale empirical studies measuring children's happiness in the context of Vietnamese

preschool education are limited. Secondly, there is no specific tool for assessing school happiness in Vietnamese preschool education that integrates children's emotional, social, and cognitive factors. Thirdly, the integration of Socio-Emotional Education (SEL) into the main curriculum is still at the local experimental stage, lacking a standardized framework and evaluation mechanism. Furthermore, research on the professional well-being of Vietnamese preschool teachers is fragmented and does not fully reflect the impact of policies, working conditions, and emotional support on educational effectiveness. Based on these limitations, this study proposes three main directions for further research. (1) Develop a comprehensive measurement model of school happiness for preschool children, based on integrating international scales (such as the Leuven Well-being Scale, ECERS, CLASS) with Vietnamese socio-cultural factors, to provide a standardized assessment tool for teachers and administrators. (2) Conduct experimental studies and educational interventions to verify the impact of SEL programs, mindfulness, or play-based learning/project-based learning models on children's happiness index and developmental outcomes. (3) Research policies to support welfare and emotional development for preschool teachers, thereby establishing a synchronized policy framework on "happy schools" in national education. The results of this research contribute to providing a theoretical and practical foundation for policy planning, program design, and pedagogical practice towards happy, child-centered preschools-where each child learns to be happy and is happy to learn.

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