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Conceptualizing student wellbeing in secondary education: a qualitative systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of academic literature recognizes the importance of supporting students' wellbeing in school settings. Approaches to supporting students' wellbeing tend to focus on students' subjective wellbeing, largely focusing on individuals' mental health and advocating positive psychology. However, some studies have shown that socio-cultural factors, such as social equity, stigmas, and cultural norms also significantly impact students' wellbeing. To build a holistic understanding of student wellbeing, this research constructs a comprehensive conceptual framework by systematically reviewing existing literature on students' wellbeing within secondary education. It identifies factors such as health, autonomy, learning engagement, values, equity, and school culture as important attributes to students' wellbeing. This review advocates for further research to explore the interaction among these factors, examining how educational pedagogies and practices can effectively nurture those factors without constraints.

Introduction

In education, student wellbeing has been studied explicitly in academic literature. Research on student wellbeing has frequently covered topics on mental health (Haybron, 2016), which include autonomy, positive psychology, achievement, and school satisfaction. For instance, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] (2017) interpreted student wellbeing by understanding to what extent, students were satisfied with their school lives. However, Rappleye et al. (2020) state that this research approach ignores the socio-cultural perspective of wellbeing and factors such as educational values, cultural norms, employment outcomes, and financial stability. Specially, it is considered ineffective to assess wellbeing based solely on students' subjective evaluation of school satisfaction, while the broader society expects them to transcend their personal emotions and realize their values in social contexts (Rappleye et al., 2020; You, 2022). White (2017) and Wren-Lewis and Alexandrova (2021) agree that the meaning of student wellbeing goes beyond the absence of mental illness, situating mental health as a psychological attribute or precondition for pursuing wellbeing, rather than as a result.

In addition, it is especially appropriate to evaluate students' wellbeing by understanding different values at play. According to Rappleye et al. (2024), it is unjust to judge East Asian students' wellbeing through an ineffective translated questionnaire design based on Western theories of wellbeing. Western students may have an individualistic approach to a good life, while in some non-Western societies, maintaining positive social relationships seems more

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paramount because those interpersonal relationships provide psychological, social, and material foundation to wellbeing (Atkinson, 2013; Neubert, 2020; White, 2017). For example, Neubert (2020) specifically introduces the concepts of 'Ubuntu' (humanity to others) from South Africa and 'buen vivir' (living a good life) from Latin America. Both concepts highlight the importance of strengthening the connections of local communities in enhancing wellbeing (Neubert, 2020). Therefore, it is important to (re)conceptualize student wellbeing to accommodate both psychological and socio-cultural factors.

The current research gap identifies the necessity to 're-search' (Alexander, 2020, p. 11) student wellbeing to build a more comprehensive understanding of the factors, conditions, and attributes that influence students' wellbeing within secondary schools. This study reports on a systematic literature review, aiming to (re)conceptualize students' wellbeing based on what we have found. Our review focuses on secondary school students (from grades 7—12) because studies show that their sense of wellbeing has a life-long impact on their adult lives (OECD, 2017; Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014). We chose this focus rather than drawing on the wider applicable literature, because we strive to identify more specific implications for secondary school researchers and practitioners. The research question for this study is:

How has secondary students' wellbeing been understood by students, teachers, school leaders, and parents from 2012 to 2024? The research period was extended to 12 years to capture both foundational and recent development, providing a more comprehensive perspective on the topic.

Over the past decade, research in this area has grown significantly. We aimed to review the emerging literature and explore the conceptualization of student wellbeing. The methodology involved a systematic literature review of the most recent and influential studies, followed by a Reflexive thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns and unresolved issues. In so doing, this study explores how positive attributes, strengths, and practices may be expanded and leveraged to bring about more positive changes and development, so that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners can better support student wellbeing as a larger community, building strengths from strengths (Waterhouse & Virgona, 2008).

This study is important because while theoretical discussions on student wellbeing are flourishing, much of the existing theory on student wellbeing is based on mental health concerns, making it unclear whether positive emotions equal a good life. By focusing on the current discussion of student wellbeing in the literature, this study contributes to the theoretical discussions of student wellbeing. Second, this research addresses the significant gaps in the existing literature in the initiatives of wellbeing measures (Diener et al., 2018; Rappleye et al., 2024). Different cultures have different interpretations of wellbeing, so using a standardized measurement to evaluate students' wellbeing across cultures seems invalid (Rappleye et al., 2024). This study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of student wellbeing, identify nuances, and develop a clearer understanding of student wellbeing in secondary education.

Method

Because qualitative research is highly suited to understanding meaning and meaning-making in an array of contexts (Seers, 2015), this review considers studies with qualitative components (qualitative studies and mixed-method studies). A qualitative systematic review can assist researchers in theory building and uncovering new understandings, often elucidating the 'why' of a phenomenon (Seers, 2015). These reviews are less focused on the effectiveness of interventions, but they can shed light on how individuals experience specific socio-cultural phenomena and the factors or enablers that shape those experiences (Stentiford et al., 2021). This view is supported by McGaw et al. (2019), who argue that qualitative research offers deeper insights into how students experience school, how they interact with one another, and how they engage with various services and address different needs.

Systematic literature review

In this study, the method for conducting systematic reviews prescribed by the Joanna Briggs Institute was employed (Boland et al., 2017). The review process was developed following the 'Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analysis' (PRISMA) guidelines (Boland et al., 2017), which included consideration identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. To identify appropriate databases, search terms, and eligibility criteria, a scoping review was first conducted.

Search strategy

A PICo approach was employed in the database searches. The PICo approach is a framework used to conduct systematic literature reviews, particularly in qualitative research (Boland et al., 2017). It helps in framing research questions and identifying key elements to guide the review process. PICo stands for population (P), phenomena of interest (I), and the context (Co).

   In April 2022, six bibliographic databases (A+ Education, ERIC, ProQuest Education, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences [IBSS], Sociological Abstracts, and PsycINFO) were searched, using the following search terms in abstracts to capture peer-reviewed journal articles from the last decade: (student* or adolescent* or teenager* or child* or boy* or girl* or teacher* or educator* or leader* or principal* or 'school administrator*' or parent* or mother* or father*) AND (perspective* or perception* or view* or understanding* or attitude* or need* or experience*) AND (secondary or 'high school*' or 'middle school*' or 'grade 7' or 'grade 8' or 'grade 9' or 'grade 10' or 'grade 11' or 'grade 12') AND ('student* wellbeing' or 'student* well-being' or 'student* welfare' or 'student* wellness').

   Where the databases allowed, searches were limited to 'full-text' and 'peer-reviewed'. We did not limit our searches to English-only papers as we assumed texts in every language would be valuable in helping us understand the issues of students' wellbeing. The search was re-run in July 2024, but no further texts were located. In this case, our review sought to capture the literature over the 12 years prior to July 2024, as we considered such research reflects contemporary constructions of student wellbeing.

Screening and selection

The initial search identified 148 papers that were uploaded to Covidence. Research collaborations are strengthened by using Covidence, a web-based systematic review programme that enables researchers to select and assess papers independently through a 'blind' mode, adding scientific rigour to the collaboration process. After removal of duplicates, the remaining 123 entries were independently screened by the first and the second authors for relevance and inclusion. Out of the 123 entries that were co-screened, 35 entries were in conflict in terms of the decision whether to include or exclude (28.5%). The third author became involved at this stage to give a third opinion and resolve conflicts. Through collaboration, consensus was reached between all reviewers, with 63 articles moved into the full-text review stage for eligibility assessment. As mentioned, we had not excluded non-English papers (French, $n = 2$) in the searching process. However, non-English papers were excluded at this stage because we identified them as being irrelevant by using Google Translate to understand the titles and abstracts.

   As discussed above, for inclusion in this review, studies required a qualitative design or the incorporation of a qualitative component. The remaining 63 articles were screened by the first author for eligibility. The second author blind-screened the first 32 entries (50.8%) and the third author blind-screened the last 31 entries (49.2%). Of the 62 entries that were co-screened, an inter-rater discrepancy occurred on 9 entries (14.3%). The fourth author was involved at this stage to give a third opinion on conflicting decisions. Through collaboration, consensus was reached among all reviewers. The identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process are shown in Figure 1.
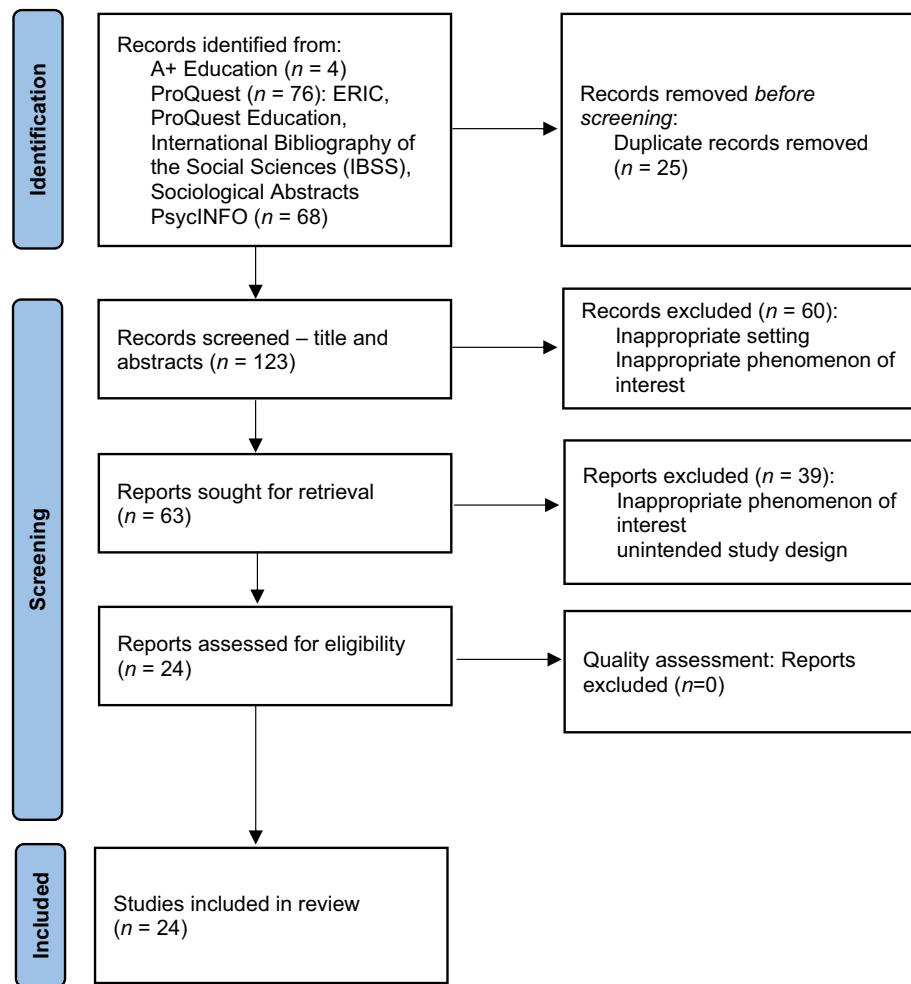
Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram. Adapted from 'The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews', by M. Page, J. McKenzie, P. Bossuyt, I. Boutron, T. Hoffmann, C. Mulrow, L. Shamseer, J. Tetzlaff, E, Akl, S. Brennan, R. Chou, J. Glanville, J. Grimshaw, A. Hróbjartsson, M. Lalu, T. Li, E. Loder, E. Mayo-Wilson, S. McDonald, . . . and D. Moher., (2021), *BMJ, 372*, p. 5 (https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71).

Data extraction and quality assessment

Established criteria were used to assess the quality of the study designs and the resulting evidence to inform this meta-synthesis. These established criteria are based on Dixon-Woods et al. (2004) and are used to evaluate various aspects of the studies included in the meta-synthesis. The specific criteria or appraisal prompts mentioned include:

Aims and objectives: Evaluating whether the questions are clear.

Research designs: Assessing the appropriateness and rigour of the study design for addressing the research question.

The research process: Reviewing how the research was conducted, including sampling and data collection.

Data: Evaluating the quality, relevance, and depth of the data collected in the studies.

Data interpretation: Checking if the results claimed are well supported by sufficient evidence.

These criteria help reduce bias in the screening process and ensure that judgements about the quality of included papers are systematic and transparent.

Methods of synthesis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022) was used to analyse and synthesize the extracted data. RTA is a qualitative research method that emphasizes the researchers' subjectivity and reflexivity in data interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Qualitative research requires researchers to be flexible and reflective to 'to learn about the problem or issue from the participants and engage in the best practices to obtain that information' (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 44). RTA aims to integrate researchers' insights and biases, enriching data interpretation and enhancing the overall rigour of qualitative research. It contributes to producing nuanced and impactful research findings that are more relatable for a wider audience by embracing researchers' subjectivity and reflexive engagement with the data.

The thematic development process has three phrases. First of all, after initial data familiarization, initial codes were generalized, with preconceived ideas based on researchers' 'existing knowledge and viewpoints' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 853). Second, themes were constructed, revised, and defined, creating provisional conceptual frameworks that were tested and refined through further data analysis. The revising and defining phases ensured that themes and theme names comprehensively and succinctly captured meanings, answering the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Finally, as a concluding step, the data analysis was finalized and produced to provide a deeper insight into the findings that are both academically valuable and publicly meaningful (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To ensure the quality of the data analysis process, the identified codes, categories and themes were carefully checked and reviewed in consultation with the research team.

Using RTA, researchers can identify key themes within the texts and work closely with them (Braun & Clarke, 2019). A data extraction table was designed for this project (Table 1). Each study was thoroughly read and analysed by the first author, who noted down the themes identified in the results/findings sections. Specifically, the data were extracted according to the findings, results, themes, and results and discussion sections labelled by the original study authors. Information regarding location, number of participants, type of analysis, and findings was also noted.

Findings

Six primary themes were identified from the literature: health, autonomy, learning engagement, values, equity, and school culture. Each element is further outlined and explained below. These themes collectively capture the key dimensions and emerging trends in the conceptualization of student wellbeing, providing a structured framework for analysis.

Health

Research shows that physical and mental health is important to students' wellbeing (Galloway et al., 2013; Kariippanon et al., 2018; Mann et al., 2021). This supports the conclusions of OECD (2017) and Stentiford et al. (2021) that physical and mental health is part of the construction of wellbeing. Symptoms of physical ill-health (exhaustion, weight changes, stomach/eating problems, and sleeping difficulties) and low level of mental health (Ahmed & Schwind, 2018; Mann et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2021) all indicate low student wellbeing (Galloway et al., 2013). According to Uchida and Rappleye (2024), physical and mental health can directly link to subjective and personal experiences, therefore improving physical and mental health aims to improve students' wellbeing from a micro perspective.

However, it seems that a narrow focus on maximizing the effects of physical and mental health is not effective enough to improve students' wellbeing. For instance, students' need for good health is in trade-off with other macro wellbeing needs, such as meeting the social expectations to be successful (Ling et al., 2022). Galloway et al. (2013) expressed concern that students were more likely to prioritize their need for social recognition over health because meeting the social expectations can provide immediate satisfaction. Yet, they (Galloway et al., 2013) also reported that meeting

Table 1. An exhaustive table of the included literature.

Authors, date, country	Participants (age of children, years)	Phenomena of Interest (a condition or intervention)	Method/study design	Key findings and themes
Ahmed and Schwind (2018) Canada	Grades 6–8 students $N = 42$	Mindfulness and creative reflective activities	Survey	Creative reflective activities and mindfulness helped foster their inter-intra personal skills, enhancing their learning experiences.
Cheng et al. (2021) China	Teachers ($N = 12$) and students ($N = 18$; $M = 15.8$)	Subjective well-being of academically at-risk students	Semi-structured individual interviews	Traditional concepts about studying, blind filial piety, peer relations, and self-efficacy were important factors for their SWB.
Countryman and Rose (2017) Canada	Secondary school music educators	Wellbeing and healthy development of school music programs.	Narrative inquiry	Music-making can be powerful for contributing to students' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness.
Dods (2015) Canada	Three young adults	The educational experience of three youths who bring trauma to school	Questionnaire and an in-depth, semi-structured interview	School connectedness increases engagement and decreases at-risk behaviours and emotional distress.
Galloway et al. (2013) America	4,317 students	Non-academic effects of homework in privileged, high-performing high schools	Survey	Current homework practices in privileged, high-performing schools sustain students' advantage in competitive climates yet hinder learning, engagement, and wellbeing.
Graham et al. (2016) Australia	606 primary and secondary students and 89 teachers and principals.	How relationships act to facilitate and limit the experience of wellbeing at school	Interview	Students and teachers placed emphasis on the importance of relationships, while reporting differences in their views about which relationships support wellbeing.
Greeson et al. (2015) America	Older youth in foster care ($N = 17$)	Child welfare-based natural mentoring	Focus group interview	Five themes: (1) permanent relationships with caring adults, (2) youth conceptions of natural mentoring, (3) unique challenges in providing natural mentoring for youth in foster care, (4) roles of a natural mentoring intervention in child welfare, and (5) challenges for implementing a child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention.
Jamtsho (2017) Bhutan	Public secondary school teachers ($N = 4$)	Experiences of Bhutanese teachers in wellbeing leadership roles	Interview	Teachers face numerous challenges in implementing a whole-school approach to student wellbeing that revolve around culture and context.
Kariippanon et al. (2018) Australia	12 school principals, 35 teachers and 85 students	Perceived relationship between flexible learning spaces and teaching, learning and wellbeing.	Interviews and focus groups	Student-centred learning; Student engagement; Teaching and learning challenges; Social and emotional wellbeing; Physical wellbeing.
Krane et al. (2017) Norway	17 students (5 boys and 12 girls).	Students' experience of teacher – student relationships	Focus groups and individual interviews	The findings demonstrated the value of positive TSRs and illustrated the ways in which they promote students' wellbeing at school.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Authors, date, country	Participants (age of children, years)	Phenomena of Interest (a condition or intervention)	Method/study design	Key findings and themes
Kutsyuruba et al. (2015)			Systematic literature review	Four themes: (a) school climate and its connection with school safety; (b) conditions that make students feel safe; (c) characteristics of particular groups of students who feel unsafe; and (d) impacts of a negative school environment on student achievement, secondary school completion, and wellbeing.
Mann et al. (2021) America	Students and school staff	The barriers, enablers, and possible solutions for enhancing student wellness	Focus groups and individual interviews	Academic stressors play a major role in student wellbeing; yet, teachers, staff, and administrators face pressure to achieve high test scores.
McKinney de Royston and Madkins (2019) America	Students and school staff	Black parents and students experience of FSCSs	Fieldnotes, Semi-structured interviews	The racialized nuance of FSCS reforms, including the critical role of culturally relevant strategies and the need for an aligned socio-political clarity and related set of goals across educational stakeholders in order to create and sustain the success of FSCSs.
Moilanen et al. (2018) Finland	Students ($N = 198$; aged 13 to 17)	Experiences of the new methods for sensor-based learning in multidisciplinary teaching	Questionnaire	Sensor-based learning can promote students' learning and wellbeing.
Odenbring (2018) Sweden	School professionals and local police	Professionals' efforts to meet the needs of vulnerable students.	Semi-structured interviews and observations	Professionals' collaborations were sometimes obstacles for student wellbeing.
Odenbring (2019) Sweden	School professionals	School professionals' perceptions of students' mental health and gender	Interview	Norms connected to the 'supergirl' and respectable girl framed the explanations for girls' health-related problems, whereas the explanations for boys' health-related problems tied to a theme of marginalized masculinities.
Powell et al. (2018) Australia	606 primary and secondary school students	Student views on the meaning of wellbeing	Focus group interview	Three themes: 'being', 'having' and 'doing'. Students identified relationships with self, teachers, friends, peers and significant others, as central to their wellbeing.
Soutter et al. (2014) New Zealand	Students and educators	Students' and teachers' perspectives and experiences on wellbeing.	Classroom observations, interviews, students' journal entries	Having, Being, Relating, Feeling, Thinking, Functioning, and Striving
Ssewamala et al. (2012) America	Youth and their parents/guardians	Feasibility and acceptability of an economic empowerment intervention	Focus groups and brief questionnaires	A strong interest in an economic empowerment intervention among adolescents and their caregivers in communities.
Wesley et al. (2020) America	Adolescents in care	Understand adult-youth relationships	Interview	Steadfast benevolence as an umbrella for multiple positive and instrumental relational qualities.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Authors, date, country	Participants (age of children, years)	Phenomena of Interest (a condition or intervention)	Method/study design	Key findings and themes
Willis et al. (2021) Australia	Teachers	How teachers manage student wellbeing concerns and academic pressures.	Semi-structured interview	Creating space, finding margin, mitigating and reducing pressures and stresses, while upholding academic rigour, are the salient capabilities described by teachers for simultaneously managing student wellbeing concerns and academic performance.
Willis et al. (2019) Australia	Teachers	Views and experiences regarding student wellbeing and academic performance in schools	Survey	Teachers experience tensions dealing with student mental health concerns and performance targets, which is complicated by a lack of confidence in the efficacy of wellbeing programs in schools.
Wong and Siu (2017) China	221 students	The association between school climate and students' wellbeing	Questionnaire	Six themes of school climate: positive student – teacher relationships, school order and environment, perceived academic competence, perceived privileges, learning interests, and academic support.
Zhang (2016) China	School leadership team	Leadership practices for improving students' wellbeing	Interview, observation, and document analysis	After the school had adopted wellbeing-oriented education, student learning and wellbeing were greatly improved.

the social expectations for academic success not only reinforces learning but also increases opportunities to gain social capital and employment. This highlights that broader socio-cultural factors play a significant role in the conceptualization of wellbeing, which is closely linked to overall health and life outcomes (Diener et al., 2018; Rappleye et al., 2024).

Autonomy

Autonomy enhances students' wellbeing by empowering them with a sense of control over their learning and personal growth (Countryman & Rose, 2017). When students are given the freedom to make choices about their interests, goals, and managing their time, they develop a greater sense of self-efficacy and wellbeing (Cheng et al., 2021; Countryman & Rose, 2017). Autonomy is especially important to secondary students because optimizing the power of choice and experiencing self-efficacy is important to their identity construction (Cheng et al., 2021; Countryman & Rose, 2017). The positive influence of having autonomy is well supported by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Deci and Ryan (2012) stated that across cultures, meeting the needs of autonomy and competence is essential for maintaining and enhancing wellbeing. Furthermore, autonomy helps students build critical life skills such as decision-making, problem-solving, and self-regulation, which are essential for their future success (Kariippanon et al., 2018). A lack of autonomy can result in feelings of distrust and decreased motivation, negatively impacting students' wellbeing (Cheng et al., 2021).

Much like students' need for health, autonomy is strongly linked to a micro sense of wellbeing, as both are closely tied to how individuals perceive and assess the quality of their lives (Uchida & Rappleye, 2024). Students face challenges to exercise their autonomy due to concerns about educational outcomes and socio-economic pressures (Cheng et al., 2021). For instance, there are fears that offering students choice may reduce productivity or lead to off-task behaviours (Evans & Boucher, 2015). Consequently, students experience increased surveillance of academic achievement

in schools (Willis et al., 2019). Students who meet the socio-cultural expectations are considered winners in schools, with greater access to psychological, symbolic, social, and material resources, receiving higher social recognition from family and communities, and positioning them for greater success and wealth in the future (Cheung & Lucas, 2015). Therefore, broader macro and socio-cultural factors should be reconsidered, as students may prioritize meeting social expectations over pursuing activities they genuinely enjoy.

Learning engagement

Learning engagement profoundly influences students' wellbeing by fostering a positive, engaging, and stimulating educational experience (Kariippanon et al., 2018; Soutter et al., 2014). When students are actively engaged in their learning, they are more likely to find the material interesting and relevant, which enhances their intrinsic motivation for attending school (Bücker et al., 2018). The importance of learning engagement to students' wellbeing was also supported by Ryan and Deci and Ryan's (2012) Self-Determination Theory on the basis that it can effectively improve students' sense of competence and relatedness. Furthermore, a high level of learning engagement can reduce feelings of boredom and frustration, decreasing the likelihood of exclusion and dropout (Krane et al., 2017). This is more important for secondary students because when they are engaged, they are more likely to seek help and find adults who can offer resources or support (Dods, 2015). Dods (2015) also noted engaged students are more likely to develop friendships and participate in extracurricular activities.

However, students' engagement in learning can be hindered by traditional assessment methods, which may not accurately capture the quality of their engagement and instead encourage more performance-focused approaches. One of the critical debates in this area is how aspects of wider political and social culture such as disciplinary power, academic culture, and an excessive focus on performativity have alienated students from learning (McDermott & Lave, 2006). Countryman and Rose (2017) expressed the concern that many contemporary competitive school environments do not facilitate access to 'essential experiences of connection to their common humanity' (p. 133). An increased focus on academic performance in schools has led to higher dropout rates, particularly among marginalized students with limited access to education (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). Therefore, it is crucial to facilitate genuine and authentic engagement for all students. Students should feel that what they learn is not solely judged by their academic performance (Clarke, 2023), and their efforts should be better recognized and supported by the broader socio-cultural environment to enhance their overall wellbeing.

Values

As the findings above show, student wellbeing is both an individual psychological or micro-mental state and a macro-socio-cultural construction. Broader society plays a crucial role in nurturing students' health, autonomy, and learning engagement. In this process, social values play an instrumental role, affecting students' interactions with the broader social environment (Uchida & Rappleye, 2024). When societal values prioritize respect, empathy, and inclusivity, students are likely to feel valued and accepted by their communities (Oishi et al., 1999), hence experiencing higher levels of wellbeing. Nowadays, teachers and parents increasingly value academic performance, which results in heightened stress, anxiety, and a diminished sense of self-worth in a highly competitive and discriminative society (Bücker et al., 2018; Willis et al., 2019).

Therefore, apart from the micro-macro concerns (Jiang et al., 2024; Sointu, 2005; Uchida & Rappleye, 2024), greater efforts need to be put into identifying and problematizing the social values that shape individual wellbeing (McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019). Cheng et al. (2021) raises the issue that academically at-risk students tend to have low self-esteem. Other research (Wang, 2022) has shown how students with low academic performance may be stigmatized as 'stupid and

lazy' (p. 585), therefore receiving more criticism from family and communities. To address student wellbeing holistically, ongoing efforts are needed to create an educational environment where all students are valued, and where students' needs for self-esteem and self-worth are met, particularly for students with less visible disabilities that do not readily 'fit' the school's expectations (Alshutwi et al., 2020; Subban et al., 2022).

Equity

It is important to have an education system that values students' holistic development instead of using a single standard to evaluate them (Clarke, 2023; McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019). Social equity influences students' wellbeing by ensuring that all students have equal access to opportunities and resources, despite their background and socio-economic status. McKinney de Royston and Madkins (2019) argue that schools should commit to equity, because it provides the support that students need to succeed. When educational systems are designed to promote social equity, they give students 'what they need to succeed without deficit notions or value judgements' (McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019, p. 254). This includes differentiated support in access, inclusion, opportunities, treatment, resources based on students' needs, and an inclusive environment where diversity is celebrated (Galloway et al., 2013; McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019). Findings show that providing equitable support, such as differentiated teaching methods, enhances students' self-efficacy (Galloway et al., 2013; Willis et al., 2019). In addition, equitable support can help reduce stress and anxiety related to academic performance and social exclusion (Cheng et al., 2021; McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019). By prioritizing social equity, educational institutions can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that enhances the wellbeing and academic success of all students.

The focus on educational equity further supports the argument that student wellbeing is both a micro and macro construction. Providing equitable support to students addresses students' need for feeling accomplished and successful. Seligman's (2018) account of the PERMA model proposes that Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment are the building blocks of a good life. Among the five elements, Seligman (2018) believes that a sense of accomplishment can improve an individual's overall rating of wellbeing. Therefore, practitioners and policymakers should recognize the positive impact of equity in fostering students' wellbeing as well as identifying ways to better support students' sense of accomplishment (Alam & Mohanty, 2023). Specifically, practitioners and policymakers need to achieve a balance between providing differential treatment to students with different capabilities and holding high expectations for every student (Alam & Mohanty, 2023).

School culture

School culture influences students' wellbeing by shaping the school environment in which they learn and grow. A positive school culture, characterized by mutual respect, inclusivity, and a strong sense of community, fosters an atmosphere where students feel safe, supported, and valued (Mann et al., 2021). Enhancing student wellbeing is widely considered a school-based effort (Mann et al., 2021; Odenbring, 2018; Willis et al., 2019). Mindfulness programmes (Ahmed & Schwind, 2018), music programmes (Countryman & Rose, 2017), school services for disadvantaged groups (McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019; Odenbring, 2018; Wesley et al., 2020), and physical activity programmes (Gray et al., 2018; Hagarty & Currie, 2012) provide examples from a wide range of supportive programmes for schools to consider.

This finding further highlights the influences of education tradition and cultures on students (Greeson et al., 2015; Rappleye et al., 2020). Consequently, student wellbeing is more likely to be a product of student's interaction with their schools and broader communities (Greeson et al., 2015). A supportive school culture nurtures students' mental and emotional health through the

provision of a safe, supportive, and engaging learning atmosphere (Greeson et al., 2015; Soutter et al., 2014). On the contrary, a negative school culture, marked by bullying, discrimination, or excessive competition, can lead to stress, anxiety, and a sense of alienation, significantly impairing students' wellbeing and academic performance (Mann et al., 2021). This finding identifies that student wellbeing is the construction of micro and macro perspectives. It highlights that individual wellbeing exists in social relations, where individuals negotiate their personal experiences and feelings with and within their immediate environments and relationships and their personal values and aspirations. Graham et al. (2016) point out that school pedagogies should focus on enhancing students' wellbeing by fostering relationships inside and outside the classroom.

Discussion

The HALVES model

As a result of this systematic review, we have constructed a conceptual model (the HALVES model) to hold these six themes together. The six themes comprise the two 'HALVES', providing a comprehensive view of the conceptualization of student wellbeing. One 'half' metaphorically represents a micro, individualistic or psychological perspective on student wellbeing: health (H); autonomy (A); and learning engagement (L). Meanwhile, the other 'half' represents a more macro socio-cultural or sociological perspective on student wellbeing: values (V), equity (E), and school culture (S). Each element is further outlined and explained below. The HALVES model provides a comprehensive frame of references that can be considered by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers when constructing curricular, learning activities, or education policies (see Figure 2).

As Figure 2 shows, student wellbeing should be considered from macro and macro perspectives. In the following section, we discuss strengths, limitations, and implications of such conceptualization.

Our systemic review of the literature shows that student wellbeing is both an individual matter and a societal responsibility. This combined micro and macro perspective provides a crucial synthesis necessary for understanding the future of wellbeing studies (Uchida & Rappleye, 2024). A micro-macro perspective of wellbeing is in accordance with Bronfenbrenner's (1977) conceptualization of socio-ecological child development, suggesting that a child's wellbeing is closely linked to individuals and their interactions with families, schools, and social communities at various levels. A micro perspective mainly deals with some wellbeing factors at the individual level, while a macro-perspective addresses issues at a societal and systemic level (Uchida & Rappleye, 2024). Together, micro and macro perspectives of wellbeing point to the importance of creating an equitable, inclusive, and supportive environment for students' needs for health, autonomy, and learning engagement, making up the 'HALVES' model.

Bridging a micro-macro dichotomy

There is a tension between the macro and micro perspectives of student wellbeing that schools need to manage. It is critical for a school to have a clear vision for keeping a balance between students' macro and micro wellbeing imperatives (Stentiford et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2019). Based on the literature, students, teachers, and parents also tend to view wellbeing somewhat differently. Their views are not necessarily oppositional or conflicting, but there is variation in their weightings, interpretations, and emphasis on different themes.

Specifically, students tend to conceptualize student wellbeing from an individual micro perspective. Key themes such as health, autonomy, and learning engagement become more prominent from the literature (Dods, 2015; Mann et al., 2021). This suggests that secondary students, as they move into adolescence, they may strive for autonomy and relatedness in school, as these help them build
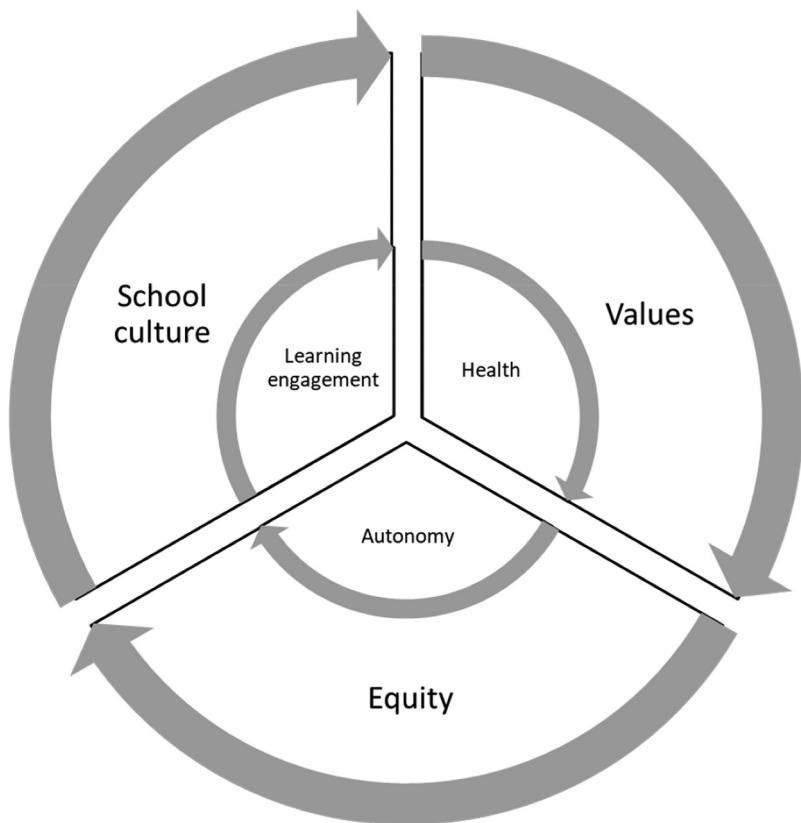
Figure 2. HALVES – A conceptual framework.

their identity and relationships with peers and teachers, fostering a greater sense of connection and support (Deci & Ryan, 2012). This can also lead to better academic performance as students are more likely to feel motivated and engaged if they feel connected to their peers and teachers (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

The findings reveal that teachers conceptualize student wellbeing from a more comprehensive and holistic viewpoint than students, recognizing that a student's wellbeing is also closely influenced by learning engagement and the school culture, apart from health and autonomy. According to Willis et al. (2019), teachers feel pressured in terms of juggling the two tasks of meeting the needs of students' macro and micro wellbeing in their hands. Learning engagement and achievements (Seligman, 2018) are considered significant contributors to students' macro wellbeing. On the other hand, the growing demands of academic achievement has caused a huge amount of pressure on students (Galloway, 2013). As a result of the pressure to succeed academically, students spend an excessive amount of time on schoolwork, which negatively impacts their mental health (Willis et al., 2019) and physical health (Galloway, 2013).

Parental perspectives on wellbeing focus more on broader social issues such as values and social equity (McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019; Ssewamala et al., 2012). Black parents, as described by McKinney de Royston and Madkins (2019), highlight the importance of teachers' awareness of race and class dynamics, a commitment to equity over mere equality, fostering a positive school climate, and actively addressing students' individual needs. In another study (Ssewamala et al., 2012), parents express enthusiasm for initiatives that

promote financial literacy and savings, recognizing how these resources can help students to navigate economic challenges and pursue higher education or career goals. Additionally, parents value the significance of mentorship components in offering guidance and support for secondary students (Sssewamala et al., 2012).

Thus, the HALVES model reflects or incorporates different perspectives, including different 'weighting' or value/s that stakeholders place upon wellbeing. It is multi-faceted and more comprehensive than traditional conceptualizations. Neither a micro nor a macro approach in itself, is entirely sufficient in addressing wellbeing issues. It is critical to acknowledge the *interdependence* of both 'halves' in enhancing our understanding of the interactions between 'micro' and 'macro' factors (Kitayama & Markus, 2000; Uchida & Rappleye, 2024). Specifically, it is worth asking how the 'macro' factors nurture environments where all students' health, autonomy, and engagement are valued and supported. Students who feel recognized affectively, cognitively, and socially tend to report higher levels of wellbeing, engagement, and a sense of belonging at school (Thomas et al., 2016). In contrast, socially stigmatized students report experiencing higher levels of stress, anxiety, humiliation, and shame (Fisher, 2010; McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019; Odenbring, 2018). In this sense, there is a need to develop clarity on how the micro-macro factors interact with each other and translate into personal emotional responses and overall wellbeing (Jiang et al., 2024; Fisher, 2010).

Cultivating an environment to nurture students' being and becoming

Student wellbeing is negatively affected by an excessively competitive school culture at both micro and macro levels. At a micro level, a competitive school culture has caused poor health problems for students because students sacrifice their exercise time and social activity time to study for exams (Galloway, 2013). Additionally, at a macro level, a competitive school culture leads to social exclusion, as it continuously disadvantages students who face learning difficulties (Cheng et al., 2021) or lack access to educational resources (McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019), making it harder for them to fit into society.

In the prior sections, we have argued that dichotomy of the micro-macro perspective of wellbeing is helpful but limited. In this section, we argue that it is more important to cultivate a supportive environment (macro) to support students' wellbeing. Hence, we think the interaction between different elements (themes) should be further investigated by looking into empirical data. We agree with what Wright and Pascoe (2014) propose, that student wellbeing is a dynamic process of 'being' and 'becoming', culturally defined and determined, a product and process where 'doing' is intertwined with 'feeling'. In this way, both being and becoming, product and process are inter-related in terms of flourishing (Wright & Pascoe, 2014). It is essential to adopt a developmental perspective, viewing students' wellbeing as a continuous process. This ongoing model of wellbeing reveals a more nuanced and deeper understanding, emphasizing the evolving macro-socio-cultural factors, such as values, social relationships, and societal expectations (Janicki & Dłużewska, 2022). This conceptualization helps students move beyond ontological individualism, reducing narcissism and loneliness (Rappleye et al., 2020), and fostering a society grounded in strong local communities that view the world as a complex, interdependent ecosystem of humans and nature (Neubert, 2020).

Limitations and future directions

There are two key limitations in this study. First, the review could have highlighted the findings and ontological concerns of non-English-speaking countries. Considering that the majority of texts originate in English-speaking countries, it is unclear whether wellbeing issues are more prevalent there or whether English-speaking countries have a more developed educational system, and more developed economic, political, and social structures that prioritize wellbeing (Stentiford et al., 2021). Second, the cross-cultural understanding of wellbeing might be marginalized in this review due to

the difficulty of cross-cultural translations of wellbeing. It will be interesting to investigate comparative views about wellbeing from different languages and cultures and consider how they are communicated in daily life (Rappleye, et al., 2024). Some alternative and Indigenous understandings of wellbeing may not be well presented in a form of language yet due to the loss of translation. This implies that each element in the HALVES model may not be equally important to some specific contexts and the six elements may not be as static as the image suggests. Therefore, the dynamic and interrelationships of the six themes can be further investigated in empirical research from different socio-cultural, linguistic, and geographic contexts.

While this conceptual exploration offers a foundation for understanding students' wellbeing in secondary education, it is by no means exhaustive and conclusive. Further analysis of the empirical data helps to redefine or re-modify the HALVES conceptual framework and provide more theoretical clarity of students' wellbeing. Overall, it serves as a bridge between theory and practice, driving theoretically and empirically sound implications for enhancing students' wellbeing.

The HALVES model can play a critical role in empirical data analysis inductively and deductively. First, inductively, it provides a structured lens to interpret and understand the data reflecting students' lived experiences. It can guide the coding and categorization of data, making the process more systematic and grounded in literature. Thus, this conceptual framework helps to generate research findings that align with the research objectives and address the gap in the literature. Additionally, while it can ensure consistency and coherence throughout the analysis, it is never meant to be conclusive. Researchers should remain receptive to the students' lived and emerging experiences, especially when they challenge this HALVES conceptual framework. Thus, it also provided a reference point to explore relevant concepts and their nuances, expanding the discussion to a wider audience.

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