



## **School Climate, Emotions, and Relationships: Children's Experiences of Well-Being in the Midwestern U.S.**

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore children's perceptions of school relationships, and the ways in which those relationships supported or undermined children's emotional well-being (EWB). This sub-study of a multinational comparative investigation of children's well-being followed a semi-structured qualitative interview protocol. Rural and urban children (age 8 to 13, N = 23) from the Midwestern U.S. completed the interview and mapping exercise used to explore aspects of and influences on their subjective well-being (including school). Phenomenological analyses of interview transcripts focused on 1) the essence of children's EWB (including emotional valence and arousal) within the context of school relationships and 2) children's perception of the impact of school relationships on their EWB. A seasonal metaphor captured the essence of children's experiences of EWB, which naturally clustered into four themes based on emotional intensity and valence: spring, summer, fall, and winter. Children's emotional experiences with teachers and peers were similarly represented in the themes, with the exception of winter emotions, which diverged. Children expressed complex, multilayered emotions within the school setting that were connected to the quality of school relationships. Findings are discussed in the context of improving school relationships and climate to support children's EWB.

**Keywords:** Teacher-student relationships, school climate, subjective well-being, children's emotions, peer relationships

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### **Introduction**

Over the past decade, there has been an upsurge in research on children's well-being in diverse samples around the world (Dinisman, Fernandes, & Main, 2015). There has also been an increase in studies identifying the role of context in supporting children's well-being (Fattore, Fegter, & Hunner-Kreisel, 2018;

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Newland, Giger, Lawler, Roh, Brockevelt, & Schweinle, 2018). One context that interacts bidirectionally with children's well-being is the school environment, including the school climate and interpersonal relationships that can enhance children's well-being (Lawler, Newland, Giger, Roh, & Brockevelt, 2017; Newland et al., 2018). Although researchers have identified some key school context variables that can be adapted to support children's well-being, they have primarily focused on adult reports (Poulou, 2017) or children's responses to a constrained set of survey items (e.g., Wentzel, 1998). More research is needed to fully explore children's perceptions of their emotional well-being (EWB) in schools, including what emotions they experience and why. By asking children directly about the emotions they experience across diverse school settings, we may begin to identify contextual experiences both unique and universal in supporting their well-being (Fattore et al., 2018; Poulou, 2017; Reeves & Mare, 2017). This study contributes to that process as part of the larger project, 'Children's Understandings of Well-Being: Global and Local Contexts' (Fattore et al., 2018).

### *Children's Subjective Well-Being*

Early studies of children's well-being focused on objective indicators garnered through adult perspectives (e.g. infant mortality rates, access to education and healthcare, and socio-economic well-being). More recent studies have called for quantitative and qualitative measures of children's perspectives worldwide using a variety of measures of their subjective well-being (SWB; Brockevelt, Cerny, Newland, & Lawler, 2018; Dinisman et al., 2015; Fattore et al., 2018; Newland et al., 2018). According to the Children's Rights approach, aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to have their voices heard by expressing their thoughts, opinions, and ideas about their own well-being (Fattore et al., 2018; Simmons, Graham, & Thomas, 2015). Furthermore, children are experts on their own lives, and their perceptions of their experiences are predictive of their self-reported well-being across a variety of domains and across local, national, and international samples (Dinisman et al., 2015; Fattore et al., 2018; Newland et al., 2018). Recent studies have focused on children's EWB as a key component of their overall SWB (Brockevelt et al., 2018; Newland et al., 2018; Simmons et al., 2015).

### *Children's Emotions*

Children's EWB is tied to a host of other developmental outcomes, but is also dependent upon a child's current level of emotional development (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Van Duijvenvoorde, Huizenga, & Jansen, 2014). Although a great deal of research has explored children's emotional development, there is little consensus amongst emotional theorists in regard to the definition of emotion, much less the processes, meanings, or functions of emotions (Izard, 2007). Most theorists agree that by six months of age, infants are able to experience the full range of basic emotions, which prompt both a physiological reaction and an overt behavioral response, such as crying (Izard, 2007; Lewis, 2008). Initially, Ekman identified six basic emotions, including happiness, sadness, surprise, disgust, anger and fear (Ekman & Cordano, 2011; Ekman & Friesen, 1971). Plutchik (1980) proposed that there are eight basic emotions grouped into four pairs of

polar opposites, including joy-sadness, anger-fear, trust-distrust, surprise-anticipation. More recently, researchers have identified additional basic emotions such as contentment, pain, relief, and interest that are found cross-culturally in facial and vocal expressions (Cordaro, Keltner, Tshering, Wangchuk, & Flynn, 2016).

Complex emotions, such as guilt, pride, and shame, are not universal, but rather are culturally-specific expressions that are influenced by prior social experiences. These typically appear around 18 to 24 months and involve an appraisal of one's initial basic emotional response, as well as an awareness of self and others (Lewis, 2008). By middle childhood, children are able to experience and express a wide range of basic and complex emotions, including regret, relief, shame, and guilt, due to advances in their cognitive growth and self-awareness (Van Duijvenvoorde et al., 2014). These wide-ranging emotions are functional and adaptive, in that they help guide children's actions in their environment (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012).

Emotions have typically been categorized by their placement along two dimensions, pleasure and arousal (Barrett, 1998; Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009). Pleasure, or hedonic valence, refers to subjective feelings ranging from unpleasant to pleasant. Arousal refers to subjective states ranging from activated to deactivated (Barrett, 1998). Some theorists and researchers have attempted to map out states of core affect, taking into account both valence and arousal. In fact, both dimensions can be represented in a matrix ranging from negative to positive affective valence on the horizontal axis, and high activation to low activation on the vertical axis (see e.g. Barrett, 2004; Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009). In stable conditions, humans tend to experience negative valence emotions less often, and for shorter durations, than positive valence emotions. This is particularly true of high arousal negative emotions, which serve to call humans to action when environmental circumstances, such as a threat to one's safety, dictate an immediate response (Izard, 2007).

Emotion researchers debate whether emotions are discrete or experienced simultaneously. Some researchers consider emotions to be discrete, uniquely experienced states that do not overlap with one another, whereas others suggest that individual differences exist in the extent to which humans experience co-occurrence of purportedly discrete emotional experiences (Barrett, 1998; Cowen & Keltner, 2017). In fact, one fixed, overarching theory of emotions may not accurately describe all individual, subjective emotional experiences because even in cases where findings have indicated discrete emotion categories, the line between categories is somewhat blurred (Barrett, 1998; Cowen & Keltner, 2017).

Another consideration is whether people vary in their verbal reports of emotional experiences. Barrett (2004) found that there are individual semantic differences in the way people use emotional descriptors and focus on valence versus arousal dimensions. Even so, self-reports of emotions did not seem to be just an artifact of one's emotion language. Barrett (2004) concluded that emotional self-reports are a useful indicator of authentic individual core affective experiences. They can be used to "extract and interpret the psychological information that they contain" (p. 279). This finding aligns well with the research literature on children's SWB which suggests that it is necessary to explore children's perspectives, and substantiates the need to ask children to express, in their own words, what emotions they are experiencing and how that relates to their well-being.

### *School Climate, Relationships, and Children's Well-Being*

A positive school climate is an important factor in supporting children's EWB (Danby & Hamilton, 2016; Harvey, Evans, Hill, Hersicksen, & Bimler, 2016; Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Zumbo, 2011; Simmons et al., 2015), and can impact children's academic motivation, engagement, and outcomes, behavior, sense of belonging within the school system, and school satisfaction, all of which are related to children's overall SWB (Aldridge, McChesney, & Afari, 2017; Mok & Flynn, 2002; Lawler et al., 2017; Wentzel, 1998). Some key aspects of school environments that enhance children's SWB include safety, equity and diversity affirmation, connectedness, enjoyment, teacher rule clarity, and teacher support of children's needs (Aldridge et al., 2017; Kurt, 2017; Lawler et al., 2017).

Relationships within the school setting can support children's SWB or undermine it. Positive and supportive relationships with teachers, peers, and other school staff are important for children's EWB because they provide a bridge between children's emotional and academic lives (Poulou, 2017; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). When children feel supported and respected, they are better able to handle the stressors and challenges that arise within the school environment (Casas, Bălătescu, Bertran, González, & Hatos, 2013; Danby & Hamilton, 2016; Goswami, 2012; Kendal, Callery, & Keeley, 2011; Mok & Flynn, 2002; Suldo et al., 2009). Positive child-child and child-teacher interactions are characterized by helpfulness, honesty, fairness, and supportiveness, all of which enhance children's EWB and school connectedness (Cipriano, Barnes, Kolev, Rivers, & Brackett, 2018; Kurt, 2017; Oberle et al., 2011; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). When relationships are off-balance or characterized by power struggles, conflict, and bullying, children's SWB is threatened (Aldridge et al., 2017; Cowie, 2011; Poulou, 2017; Tiliouine, 2015).

Building upon current knowledge regarding connections between children's EWB and their school success, several interventions have been designed to improve EWB. Trainings aimed at improving teachers' and children's social and emotional intelligence and skills have improved child-teacher interactions, relationships, and children's EWB (Dolev & Leshem, 2016; Poulou, 2017; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). A relational pedagogy focused specifically on improving teachers' interpersonal skills with children has shown promise as an avenue for improving children's SWB (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). In fact, the infusion of social-emotional and relational learning in initial and continuing teacher education has been documented as effective in supporting child outcomes (Hatzichristou & Lianos, 2016; Waajid, Garner, & Owen, 2013).

Likewise, research studies on positive and negative aspects of peer relationships, especially child-child bullying and cyberbullying, have informed interventions and practices to support children's SWB. Training teachers and children to monitor social interactions that may be problematic and to intervene when needed has been one effective way to improve children's EWB (Cowie, 2011; Tiliouine, 2015). However, many of children's exclusion and bullying experiences go undetected or unreported, leaving children feeling threatened, alone, or unsafe at school (Cowie, 2011).

Across hierarchical (teacher-child) and parallel (child-child) relationships, trainings and interventions focused on improving interactions and relationships within the school system seem to be most effective in supporting children's SWB. However, some researchers have noted that most of the research on

children's well-being within school settings has been done with older children and adolescents or utilizing primarily teacher report of relationships and child outcomes, without asking children to self-report on their school experiences via open-ended questions (e.g. Danby & Hamilton, 2016; Harvey et al., 2016). Previous work has found that teacher and child perspectives can substantially differ, and in some cases, changes in teacher behaviors have not translated into improvements in children's EWB (Harvey et al., 2016; Poulou, 2017).

Currently, due to a lack of research on children's subjective EWB in schools, we sought children's insights on these topics through in-depth qualitative interviews. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to expand on previous work by Newland, DeCino, Mourlam and Strouse and explore within a new sample of U.S. children their perceptions of school climate in regard to school-based interpersonal relationships, and the ways in which they perceived that those relationships supported or undermined their EWB.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Participants included 23 children (47.8% male, 52.2% female) and their parents from three Midwestern U.S. states. Children ranged from 8 to 13 years of age; mean age was 11.15 years. Children were enrolled in 2nd (4.3%), 3rd (17.4%), 4th (17.4%), 5th (26.1%), 6th (13%), 7th (13%), or 8th grade (8.7%). All children were born in the U.S. and spoke English as their native language. Children's race was 82.6% White/Anglo American, 4.3% Asian American, 4.3% Native American, and 8.6% other or mixed race. Parents' age ranged from 31 to 56 years; mean age was 40.22 years. Parents' education ranged from high school (2.3%), to some/4 years of college (45%), to graduate or professional school (52%). Parents worked 20 to 60 hours per week (mean = 39.09 hours). Family income ranged from less than \$40,000 (4.3%) to more than \$65,000 (78.3%). Children primarily lived with both biological parents who were married (87%), as well as siblings (91.3%). Although 73.9% of families lived within city limits, most (78.3%) lived in towns or small cities with less than 100,000 population.

### *Procedures*

Following Institutional Review Board approval, research assistants identified potential participants by contacting schools and community centers, and by utilizing social network connections to engage in convenience and snowball sampling. Families (children between age 8 and 13 and their parents) were invited to participate in the study. Parental informed consent and child assent were obtained. Anonymity (use of ID numbers only), confidentiality, and the right to refuse or stop participation were covered. There were no potential conflicts of interest.

Parents completed short family demographic surveys. Trained research assistants established rapport, conducted one-on-one semi-structured child interviews, and completed a mapping exercise with children. Children were offered a break halfway through the 60-90 minute interview. Data were recorded

using field notes and audio recorders. Interviews were transcribed following a standard protocol and were archived for analysis.

### *Measures*

Parent demographic surveys included questions on parent and child age, race, country of origin, home language, and gender. Survey items also included child grade level and disability status, as well as family structure, SES, geographic location, and population size. To establish rapport, interviewers asked children to briefly describe themselves, and then completed a semi-structured individual child interview (see Fattore, Fegter, & Hunner-Kreisel, 2014; Fattore et al., 2018) that was modified slightly for language and to include local questions (Newland, DeCino, Mourlam, & Strouse, 2018). First, the child was then asked to draw a map of the places, people, and things important to them, and encouraged to explain their map. Next, the interviewer asked the child what made them feel well or good, including particular people, things, times, occasions, places, and anything else that made them feel well or good. The child was asked if they could change anything in their life, what would they want to change, and then offered a short break. Children were then asked about how they felt in specific contexts of their life, with general questions followed by more specific prompts for each context. The analyses for this paper focused on the school context, including prompts about school in general, teachers, and the best and worst parts about school. Children were also asked whether they felt listened to, felt free to do things that they wanted to do (agency), and felt safe.

### *Data Analysis Procedures*

Three researchers with expertise in child well-being, education, and development analyzed the interview transcripts following Creswell and Poth's (2018) guidelines for phenomenological analyses. The second author, who has qualitative research methods and analysis experience, served as an external auditor and provided feedback to the remaining research team at two critical junctures in the analysis process. The other three researchers read the transcripts several times to identify emerging thoughts, ideas, and concepts, using NVivo 12 Mac where the annotations feature was used to document reflections and notes on preliminary analysis during coding. During the first read through, school was identified as an important emerging context for child well-being, and emotional experiences as central to children's conception of their well-being. Therefore, first-cycle coding focused on the identification of specific child emotions and school contexts that children brought up during the interviews. After the first round of open coding was complete, the second author, acting as the auditor, reviewed the codes for consistency and accuracy, and provided feedback to help organize the data. Following the initial audit, the second round of first-cycle coding focused on two specific contexts that emerged as central to children's well-being in school, namely teacher relationships and peer relationships. Researchers identified and coded significance statements pertaining to children's emotions in the context of teacher and peer relationships. Codes were applied and revised as needed.

During second-cycle coding, the number of codes were reduced by combining and eliminating codes for parsimony. Emotion codes were identified and then categorized by valence and arousal. This process was

informed by the work of emotion theorists, including Plutchik (1980) and Barrett (1998). Plutchik identified eight primary emotions with polar opposites around a colored wheel of emotions. These primary emotions could be blended to form a colorful range of complex emotions, with highest intensity emotions in the center of the wheel, and lowest intensity emotions around the perimeter. Plutchik's wheel, as well as Cowen & Keltner's (2017) list of 27 emotion categories (with gradients or shades within emotion categories) were initially used to guide the labelling and categorizing of emotions described by children. When valence or arousal were unclear, Barrett's operational definitions (1998; 2004) were used to more clearly discern emotion labels, valence and arousal levels. Children's emotion labels and descriptions were also considered in the coding process, as a way of acknowledging their voice and perspective.

Finally, emotions were grouped into four seasons (Summer, Fall, Winter, and Spring) to concisely represent the findings and portray children's experiences of wellbeing. They were inductively clustered into seasonal themes depending on where they fell along two axes: from negative to positive valence on the horizontal axis, and from high to low arousal on the vertical axis. These themes included 1) Spring emotions (positive valence, low arousal); 2) Summer emotions (positive valence, high arousal); 3) Fall emotions (negative valence, low arousal); and 4) Winter emotions (negative valence, high arousal). Because emotions fell along a continuum, if an emotion fell near the center of an axis (e.g. rather neutral valence or medium intensity), placement of that emotion within the seasonal metaphor was determined through discussion amongst the researcher team.

To assess reliability of coding, each transcript was coded by at least two researchers. Coders checked reliability of labels, valence and arousal levels, and resolved coding differences by re-reading the quotes and discussing until consensus was reached. Codes were then verified by the auditor, and where necessary, differences in labeling were addressed and resolved by the auditor. The auditing process enhanced interrater reliability among the research team and supports the conclusions derived from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Results and Discussion**

Children expressed both positive and negative emotions in regard to school relationships, with varying levels of emotional arousal. To provide us a framework for analysis, we used a collective seasonal metaphor to capture the essence of children's experiences of well-being. Emotions naturally clustered into four themes based on degrees of emotional intensity and valence, which were organized into the four seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter to demonstrate various shades of emotions and to paint a comprehensive landscape of school climate.

### *Seasonal Themes*

All four seasons were represented in children's descriptions of their emotions related to their relationships with teachers and peers. Spring, summer and fall emotions that children expressed were similar with regard to teachers and peers, whereas the emergence of winter emotions in children's descriptions differed.

### *Spring Emotions*

Spring emotions (positive valence, low arousal emotions) were abundant in children's descriptions of their subjective well-being in the context of school relationships. Children expressed acceptance, safety and trust, and general satisfaction when discussing how they felt about both teachers and peers.

*Acceptance.* Acceptance was expressed in terms of children feeling listened to or cared about by their peers and teachers and feeling that their opinion mattered. For example, Child 723, an 11-year-old girl, said, "I think it felt like my opinion mattered when my teachers were listening to me when I had troubles on what we were doing in class." Likewise, Child 707, a 10-year-old boy, said "during class when I get called to go in front of the class and like do an answer, I feel like my classmates were listening to me."

*Safety/trust.* Children expressed that they felt safe and trusting when their environment felt safe, their relationships felt safe, and they felt a sense of protection and comfort from those around them in the school setting. Child 706, an 11-year-old girl, said about her teacher:

She is always really nice and when my guinea pig died... well I told her that my guinea pig got surgery the day before, and she was wondering how it went and she was like really comforting and like the day after when... I told her she died... she um, like, asked me if I was doing ok. Because, when I was in third grade her cat ran away, and so she knows how that feels and everything.

Child 709, a 10-year-old girl, described the importance of trusting her friends:

I (Interviewer): Is there anything else that you think affects your learning at school?

C (Child): Friends.

I: Ok, and why would that be?

C: Um, because, you know who you can trust or who you can't trust.

I: And how would that affect your learning?

C: Um, it teaches you to get the right group of friends and if you don't, it could make [get] you into serious trouble.

*Satisfaction.* Satisfaction with school and school relationships, another spring emotion, was expressed by children who said they "liked" school, that school was "okay," and that school experiences and relationships made them feel well or good. They also expressed satisfaction when the expectations felt appropriate and fair to children. The dialogue between Child 704, a 13-year-old boy, and the interviewer provided a clear example of satisfaction:

I: how does it make you feel when your teacher uses technology in the classroom?

C: It depends on what kind of technology, like if they are using something to help us learn, it's like, yeah, they are using it to help learn so it is ok."



### *Summer Emotions*

Children's summer emotions (positive valence, high arousal emotions) were characterized by strong positive feelings about school-based interpersonal relationships. Some children expressed a sense of joy and excitement when engaged with peers, teachers, and other school staff, including the school counsellor. Other children expressed amusement, such as having fun and laughing, particularly with regard to peer relationships. Summer emotions were not as prevalent in children's descriptions as spring emotions but were still characterized as a significant component of children's school relationship experiences.

*Joy/excitement.* Some children said that they "love" school and "love" playing with their friends and have more fun and enjoy it more when they are with friends at school. When Child 715, a 9-year-old girl, was asked about what made her feel really good, she responded:

Well when I'm at school and we have guidance with [school counsellor] she talks about stuff like keep trying your best or like be nice to people and stuff and when we get done with that, I feel really good and I can go home and be like mom, how was your day?

Child 706, an 11-year-old girl who did not express excitement or joy in relation to school in general, did express excitement about a particular program (a blended learning program) taught by her favourite teacher:

I: How do you feel about school?

C: I do not like it.

I: Not at all?

C: I just like a teacher there.

I: Ok, what teacher?

C: [Teacher] is my favourite teacher, she was my third-grade teacher.

I: Ok.

C: And this year, um, I went to a program called EPIC. And so, she is one of the EPIC teachers, so I get to see her a lot more this year.

I: Cool.

C: And I was really excited. And she is really nice.

*Amusement.* In the context of peer relationships, some children expressed a feeling of amusement, which included having fun, messing around, and enjoying funny experiences at school with peers. Child 705, a 9-year-old boy, described his favourite thing to do with his friends: "Me and some girls, I like playing with girls, kind of more than boys. And um, we like play funny stuff... That is my favorite thing to play." Child 722, an 11-year-old girl, explained her sense of amusement with being in the same class with friends:

C: It's a lot more, funner's not a word. It's a lot more fun when certain friends are in your class because you mess around.

I: Which class do you have that has the most friends in it?

C: Um, Social Studies.

I: Is that the class you get told to be quiet in?

C: Yeah, we've actually gotten moved because we talk too much.

### *Fall Emotions*

Fall emotions (negative valence, but low arousal emotions) expressed by children centered around annoyance, and also included apprehension, confusion, and disapproval. Children expressing these emotions were not satisfied with their school experiences and expressed displeasure with their relationships with teachers and peers. Fall emotions were quite prevalent in children's descriptions of their subjective well-being with regard to school relationships, despite not being directly asked about as part of the interview protocol. Fall emotions appeared in children's descriptions less frequently than spring emotions, but more frequently than summer and winter emotions. More than other seasons, children's expression of fall emotions appeared to frequently involve multiple related or overlapping emotions. These fall emotions emerged when they were irritated or frustrated with teachers and peers due to what they perceived to be unfair or inappropriate interactions, such as saying student grades out loud to the class or showing bias towards particular students. They also expressed fall emotions when they felt their opinion was not listened to, or when teachers created a negative classroom climate. Child 705, a 9-year-old boy, described a situation where he felt frustrated with his peers:

I: Are there situations where you want to be listened to more, but you don't feel like you are?

C: Sometimes, when . . . like I'm . . . trying to tell what will make everybody better at math and stuff, um, I try to tell them stuff and almost everybody just starts talking ###, and I am like come on guys, this is important.

I: Yea, so like when you are trying to help someone.

C: Mhmm.

I: That is a great idea.

C: Yea, this once happened, I felt extremely frustrated. The teacher told me, instead of doing dream box [a computer adaptive math program] that day, we could walk around and help other people that were having trouble. I went to help this other guy, um his name is classmate's name]].

I: Mhmm. C: Well, I went to help him with his math project, and like, like, "Ok you gotta do," and I said "do" and he just turned around and started talking to somebody.

I: Hmm.

C: And I'm like, come on I am trying to help you.

I: Mhmm. That is too bad, he missed out on your good advice.

C: Mhmm. And then I just left, because that is his problem.

Child 704, a 13-year-old boy, described an unfair situation with his teacher:

I: How does it make you feel when your teacher uses technology in the classroom?

C: It depends . . . if they are on their phones and stuff, it's just kind of like rude because they always tell us how we can't have our phone but then they sit at their desks while we are working and they're just on their phone, I just think it is kind of weird.

Child 716, an 11-year-old boy, described a situation where he was frustrated with his teacher's behavior:

C: Most of the teachers I've had are pretty good... Our English teacher, she's kind of stern.

I: Okay, Is that good or bad?

C: Well if she's in a good mood that's good; sometimes she just comes to school and she kinda yells at everybody for no reason.

I: Okay.

C: You just have to stay out of her way sometimes.

I: And so how does that make you feel when you when she comes in and yells at you . . .the class?

C: Frustrates me.

I: It makes you. . . might not want to

C: [I] just wish I could ignore her somehow.

### *Winter Emotions*

Children's experiences of winter emotions (negative valence, high arousal emotions) diverged with regard to peer and teacher relationships. This theme was the least thick and developed, with fewer children expressing strong negative emotions in relation to school relationships. Expressions related to peers included anxiety and fear, whereas those related to teachers centered around anger and contempt.

*Anxiety/fear.* With peers, one child expressed anxiety and fear related to shyness and loneliness. Child 712, a 10-year-old girl, described how her shyness left her socially isolated:

I: Interesting. So, thinking back to [former school], what do you think is the best part of [that] school?

C: ...I don't really remember the differences that much between the kids and the other parts of the school because I was really really shy in that school... and so I didn't make that much [sic] friends in that school because I would never talk.

When asked by the interviewer "Are there any places that you feel well or good at?" she responded:

C: Here, at school . . . I'm scared if I'm lonely, so if I have someone by me that helps me feel good."

*Anger/contempt.* Three children expressed contempt and anger with regard to their teacher, which appeared to be an emotional reaction to the teacher's negative behaviors and emotions. Child 706, an 11-year-old girl, said:

C: Yea, and my teacher, Mr. xxx (teacher's name) . . . is really strict sometimes like, if, um, some kids are naughty, um, he like yells, but, he never really has to yell at me, but still sometimes, like if he has to yell at some of my friends, it makes me kind of mad, sometimes, but he is really nice though otherwise.

Child 722, a 13-year-old girl, highlighted a negative experience with her teacher, where the child did poorly academically, and her teacher's response elicited a strong negative emotional reaction. She explained:

I: Do you like your teacher?

C: Um, yeah. Not as much as I did before this essay.

I: Because you had to go back and rewrite it?

C: Yes. And he said it was the worst essay that he had graded, so...

I: Oh.

C: That boosts my self-esteem [said sarcastically].

I: So, when you had to go back and kind of look at it again, did your teacher work with you on that then?

C: No.

I: No?

C: My mom did though.

Child 716, an 11-year-old boy, described a time when he felt contempt and anger about inappropriate punishment in the lunchroom:

A bunch of kids at my school were signing a petition to get rid of the wall like where the lunch lady that watches us... She punishes us... a lot or for nothing. Sometimes she sends us to a wall at the back of a lunch room and makes us stand up beside it and put our foreheads on it and I think it's weird. It's not a very good punishment... So, it just doesn't make sense, so we signed a petition, a lot of us signed a petition and voiced our opinion on it. Nothing's changed.

### **Discussion of Seasonal Themes**

In this study, the majority of children's emotional experiences related to school relationships centered around spring emotions, which were low arousal positive emotions such as acceptance, trust, and satisfaction. The second most often referenced emotional experiences were fall emotions. These were also low arousal emotions, but had negative emotional valence, and included emotions such as annoyance, apprehension, confusion, and disapproval. Children less often expressed summer emotions (high arousal positive emotions such as joy, excitement, and amusement). Winter emotions were the least expressed amongst the emotional seasons, but children did describe feelings of fear, anger, and contempt at school. These findings generally align with the research literature on emotions, which suggests that by middle childhood, children experience and can express a wide range of basic and complex emotions that are functional and adaptive in order to

guide their interactions as needed within their unique environments (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Van Duijvenvoorde et al., 2014). Findings are also in line with prior studies identifying positive valence emotions as more common and lasting for longer durations than negative valence emotions. High arousal negative emotions (in this study, labelled winter emotions) are the least common in most humans and often call for an immediate response to the environmental trigger (Izard, 2007).

One finding that is somewhat surprising was children's frequent expression of fall emotions, which are negative, low arousal emotions. This is particularly interesting given that the interview protocol, based on a child well-being perspective, asked about feeling well or good, rather than feeling badly or upset. This highlights the importance of listening to children's voices and opinions and allowing them to express their experiences in their own words (Fattore et al., 2018; Simmons et al., 2015). In this study, children clearly wanted to talk about their negative emotional experiences in schools, and described situations in which their feelings of annoyance, apprehension, confusion, and disapproval interfered with their school relationships and learning experiences, in some cases permanently changing their relationship and interactions within the school setting. These findings highlight the importance of understanding children's emotional states, and the importance of warming the school climate to a level comfortable enough for children to engage positively in their school environment (Danby & Hamilton, 2016; Harvey et al., 2016; Oberle et al., 2011; Simmons et al., 2015). Positive school climates that are safe, equitable, enjoyable, and relationship-focused promote children's academic and EWB (Aldridge, et al., 2017; Kurt, 2017; Mok & Flynn, 2002; Lawler et al., 2017).

#### *Cross-Season Patterns*

There were some similarities across seasons. For most seasons, children's emotional experiences with teachers and peers were similarly represented in their responses. They described a range of emotional experiences within both types of relationships, and both types of relationships seemed to be important for children's EWB in the school context. This is in alignment with current research that suggests that both peer and teacher relationships are important predictors of children's EWB and satisfaction with school experiences (Casas et al., 2013; Newland et al., 2018; Poulou, 2017; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). One exception to this pattern was within the winter theme, in which children described different emotional experiences with teachers (e.g. anger, contempt) than with peers (e.g. shyness, loneliness). As winter was also the least developed theme, this finding should be further investigated in other studies.

In some cases, children expressed complex, multilayered emotions related to one experience or event. For example, one child described being angry at a teacher, but still finding him to be fun and enjoyable. This was especially true when children expressed fall emotions, for example, expressing frustration and annoyance alongside apprehension, confusion, or disapproval. This suggests that, in some cases, children were experiencing co-occurring, rather than discrete emotions. Their individual, subjective emotional experiences were at times challenging to code, because even in cases where they described discrete emotions, the line between emotions was fuzzy and indicated that multiple emotional labels might apply (Barrett, 1998; Cowen & Keltner, 2017). This was one reason for taking both valence and arousal into

account and identifying core affective states and their location within the seasonal framework (Barrett, 2004). Even though children's labels of their emotions might differ, we could access the essence of their emotional experiences and align them with similar emotions within the same season for comparison and more in-depth examination.

Consistent with other studies, children's descriptions of their relationships across seasons included a focus on teacher and peer behaviors, and especially teacher behaviors, as contributing to the emotions they experienced (Dolev & Leshem, 2016; Hatzichristou & Lianos, 2016; Poulou, 2017; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017; Waajid et al., 2013). In large part, this seemed to be connected to the quality of teachers' relationships with their students. For example, the child who described losing her guinea pig expressed appreciation for the teacher providing comfort and emotional support and repeatedly checking in on the child's EWB. On the other hand, one child described liking her teacher less after the teacher gave her harsh, inappropriate, and comparative feedback that "it was the worst essay that he had graded." Another child described contempt at being shamed by the lunch lady and forced to stand with his forehead against the wall as punishment. These examples demonstrate the power the teachers and school staff have to impact the climate in the classroom (Dolev & Leshem, 2016; Harvey et al., 2016; Hatzichristou & Lianos, 2016; Poulou, 2017; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). The emotions and behavior in the classroom serve as the thermometer and the barometer to measure school climate and relationships.

### **Limitations, Implications, and Future Directions**

Like all research studies, this study has limitations. While we followed qualitative research guidelines for sampling techniques, sample size, and saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018), findings from this study may not be transferable across more diverse samples from other geographic locations in the U.S. and across the globe. Therefore, the cultural relativism of these findings should be examined in the larger, multinational comparative qualitative study of children's well-being (Fattore et al., 2018). In addition, due to the focus of the interview on children's well-being, interview questions were designed to focus on what made children feel well or good, potentially resulting in more positive emotional descriptions. Some negative emotions might not have been expressed because they were not specifically asked about, which is an area for future research. Lastly, there is the potential for response bias during any open-ended interview. Researchers attempted to reduce bias by establishing rapport, explaining that there were no right or wrong answers, and asking open-ended, non-leading questions. However, social desirability bias may have affected children's responses. Future research should address these issues, and also investigate connections between children's EWB, school climate, school relationships, and other educational outcomes such as engagement and achievement.

This study has implications for policy and practice. Children reported emotional experiences that were linked to the positivity of their school emotional climate and relationships. Although previous studies have identified school climate factors that are related to children's academic and EWB, children's subjective experiences reported in this study provide a richer and more complete description of children's perspectives

that offers suggestions for practice. Much like a meteorologist, teachers and other school staff could regularly check the moment-to-moment weather conditions and general seasonal climate within the classroom through observation and discussion with children. They might also make predictions about how climate might change (e.g. during a difficult lesson or exam). In addition, teachers may want to pay attention to the ways in which they provide feedback to students, and the emotional as well as relational impacts of their feedback and strategies. They could continuously monitor relationships with students and note pivotal turning points in teacher-student relations. If necessary, they could attempt to remedy any contention within those relationships. By using formative assessment strategies that focus on both positive and constructive feedback (e.g. the sandwich method), teachers might maintain a more comfortable (Spring-Summer) emotional climate in the classroom. Teachers should also consider talking to parents and referring students to the school counsellor if students are exhibiting an imbalance of Fall or Winter versus Spring or Summer emotions. By garnering student feedback and improving relationships between teachers and students, teachers may warm up classroom climate in a way that supports student engagement and learning.

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