# 'I get to learn more stuff': Children's Understanding of Wellbeing at School in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

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This purpose of this study was to explore how school-aged children understand dimensions of wellbeing in a Canadian context in participation of the Multi-national Qualitative Study – Children's Understanding of Wellbeing. Twenty-one school-aged children (boys = 8, girls = 13) participated in semi-instructed interviews facilitated by tactile, tasked oriented interview tool. Participants were recruited from seven before-and-after-school child-care programs throughout the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The wellbeing of children at school was influenced by the quality of the relationships they had with their teachers. Children recognized teachers as being essential agents in their learning process and teaching them essential skills for their future. Children who described feeling positive about school were children who felt that their teachers were supportive, provided creative ways to learn, and listened to their ideas and concerns. Conversely, children who described negative feelings about school discussed experiencing teachers who did not value their ideas and concerns, and were not supportive in their individual needs as a learner. The teaching style of teachers affect children's wellbeing at school. Teachers who promote wellbeing at school and positive feeling associated with learning are those who consider the voices and needs of their students, as well as make efforts to incorporate those considerations in their curriculum.

**Keywords**: wellbeing, student-teacher relationship, children's perceptions, middle school

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**Introduction**

Subjective wellbeing has been associated to a child's sense of belonging and their perceived ability to participate in social settings (Stoecklin, 2013). In the last decade, there has been a shift towards understanding wellbeing through engagement with children, and a shift away from relying on objective measures (Statham & Chase, 2010) and third-party, adult-centric assessments of children's well-being (Ben-Arieh, Casas, Frønes, & Korbin, 2014). Emphasis has been placed on capturing children's perspectives on what the concept of wellbeing means to them (Hicks, Newton, Haynes, & Evans, 2011), and the values, perceptions, domains, and experience of children in relation to the concept of wellbeing (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2017; White, 2008).

To fully understand children's wellbeing means to authentically acknowledge children as active beings in their life, and in research (Fattore et al., 2017). However, some significant challenges to achieve these ends have been noted in the field of child wellbeing research. According to Fattore, Fegter and Hunner-Kreisel (2018), two of these challenges include how to define 'wellbeing' theoretically, and how to integrate children's perspectives in research. Previously work done by Rose and McAuley (2010) in the United Kingdom (2010) noted that if researchers are to advance the field of child wellbeing more must be done to understand how children can help to shape our understanding of their lives, and how children can become even more actively involved in measuring, understanding, and monitoring their own wellbeing.

Previous research has also noted that the concept of wellbeing is multifaceted, (Fattore et al., 2017) and studies have shown that children's environment may have lasting effects on subjective wellbeing, and with notably differences between countries (Bradshaw, Keung, Rees, & Goswami, 2011; Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000). In Canada, it is required by law for children to attend school beginning at age 5 until the age 16. Children between the ages of 8 and 12 are considered to be elementary students in grades four to six. In these grades, children spend approximately 6-7 hours of their day, five days per week, for 10 months of the year in the school environment. Given children spend a considerable amount of their childhood in school, it is not surprising that school has a significant influence on their development and wellbeing (Kutsar & Kasearu, 2017). The educational experience has also been recognized as an important factor in more complex understandings of children's perceptions of wellbeing (Andresen, 2014), and as such is an important dimension to examine in the wider context of understanding children's perceptions of wellbeing. Moreover, because elementary school children spend the majority of their classroom time learning from a single teacher, it is also not surprising that the quality of the teacher-student relationship (characterized by warmth/closeness and conflict/rejection) has been shown to have a significant influence on children's perceptions of their wellbeing and appraisal for school and learning (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011).

Jellesma, Zee, & Koomen (2015) investigated this relationship between children's perceptions of the quality of the teacher-child relationships and children's internalizing problems and appraisals of interactions with their teacher. Using a sample of 500 school-aged children in grades three to five, the authors found that the children's perceptions of the quality of the teacher-student relationship— assessed as either conflictual or warm, and children's self-reported internalizing behavioural issues were mediated by children's appraisals

for teacher-student interactions. They also found that these results were stronger for relationships characterized by conflict and negative appraisal compared to positive teacher-child relationships and positive appraisal. Based on these findings, Jellesma et al. (2015) concluded that how children characterized their relationships with their teachers was an important influence on their perceptions of their health including internalizing problems such as depression, anxiety and physical health complaints. An updated meta-analysis involving 189 studies examined the emotional quality of teacher-student relationships (warm or hostile) and student achievement and engagement for elementary and secondary students. In this case, the results from this updated meta-analysis are even stronger than the initial meta-analysis from 2011, even after including longitudinal studies, confirming the strong associations between both positive and negative teacher–student relationships and students' engagement and achievement (Roorda, Jak, Zee, Oort, & Koomen, 2017). The authors conclude by reiterating the vital role of educating all teachers about the importance of develop nurturing and warm relationships with each of their students to promote wellbeing and facilitate academic engagement.

More recently, Prewett, Bergen & Haung (2019) investigated 336 grade fifth- and sixth- grade students' perceptions of the quality of their relationships with their teachers. In this study the authors examined both teacher and student factors and found that teachers' social-emotional support and the prosocial environment of their classroom were the two most important influences on how positively the students' perceived the quality of the relationships with their teachers. Together, these findings highlight the influence of the quality of the teacher-student relationship on school-age children's subjective wellbeing. Notably, the majority of the literature that has examined the quality of the teacher-student relationship and student engagement, wellbeing and achievement has utilized quantitative research methods relying on teacher assessments and adult-centric research methods. There is a dearth of research that has explored children's perceptions of the quality of the school environment including the student-teacher relationship and children's subjective wellbeing using child-friendly research method, and relying on children's as the primary informants and experts of their own school experiences. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to explore how school-aged children understand dimension of wellbeing in a Canadian context using child-friendly qualitative research methods.

*Background*

The history of this study originated from the International Survey of Children's Wellbeing (ISCWeb). The study sought to understand children's subjective wellbeing and how they experience daily activities within their families, neighbourhoods and at school using quantitative methods (Fattore et al., 2018). The findings of the ISCWeb "revealed children's assessment about sources of their subjective wellbeing in school vary from country to country" with a diversity of positive and negative experiences (Rees & Main, 2015). Specifically, for children living in Canada, the ISCWeb study revealed that low satisfaction with teachers and school. The quantitative phase of the ISCWeb study warranted the need for a deep understanding into the experiences of children at school. This resulted in the second phase of this research – the Multinational

Qualitative Study – Children's Understanding of Wellbeing (CUWB) (Fattore et al., 2018). By using qualitative methods to measure subjective wellbeing, this allows children to assess their own lives through dialogue.

**Methods**

The purpose of this study was to explore how children understand dimensions of wellbeing in a Canadian context including experiences at school. Children between the ages of 8-12 were recruited from seven before-and-after school child-care programs throughout Winnipeg, Canada. The Red River College Research Ethics Board approved of this study. Both parental consent and children assent were required prior to participation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting 30 to 60 minutes in duration. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were supported by the use of the Life Story Board™ to facilitate discussion. The Life Story Board™ (Image 1) is a game-like, pictorial, tactile interview activity using a game mat and sets of markers and magnetic cards designed for children (Chase, Medina, & Mignone, 2012; Stewart-Tufescu, Huynh, Chase, & Mignone, 2018). Specifically, the Life Story Board™ was categorized into coloured zones.
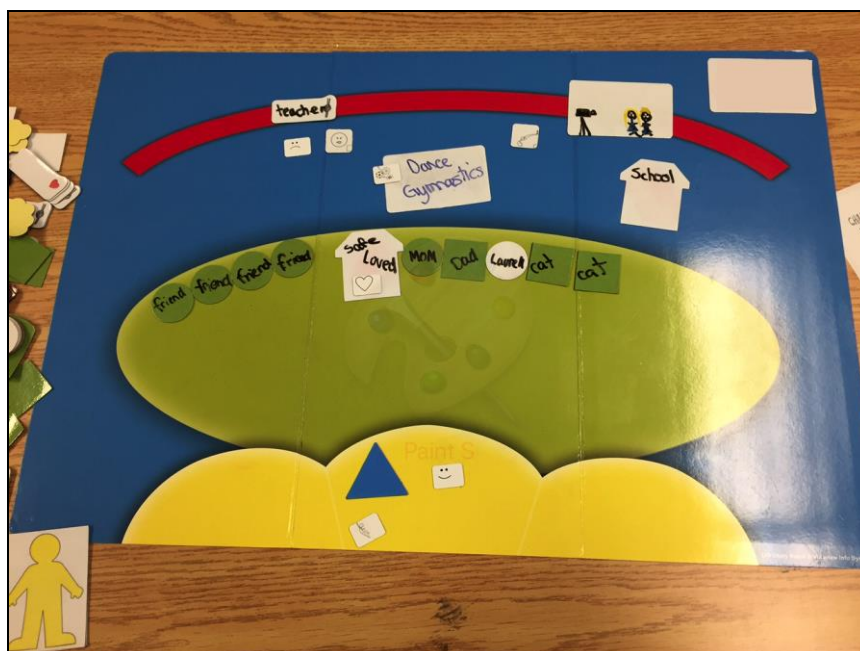


**Figure 1: Example of the Life Story Board™.**

The following description was provided to children:

> We will use this board – it is kind of like a game, it will help me understand your story. You can use these pieces to help you share your ideas; I have markers here to label them. The yellow means your personal space, the green represents your family/friends, the blue means the community and the red is a timeline. The timeline will help me understand when things happen.

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The interview guide was adapted from the Interview Protocol created by Hunner-Kreisel, Fegter and Fattore (2014) for the Multinational Qualitative Study – Children's Understanding of Wellbeing. Interviews were analysed through a thematic analysis approach guided by Braun & Clarke (2006). Participants received a photo of their completed storyboard to conclude the study.

Participants consisted of a convenience sample of 21 children (boys = 8, girls = 13) between the ages of 8-12. Age, and the ability to speak and understand English were the two criteria to participation. Children's demographic information was not needed for the qualitative analysis of findings, and therefore not collected. Each participant was assigned an alias for the purposes of anonymity and presenting the results. As the purpose of the Life Story Board™ was to support interviews, findings were not framed based on the Life Story Board™. During interviews, children were asked to discussion various dimensions of wellbeing, school being one of them.

**Findings**

Through a thematic analysis of the school dimension, two main themes were identified for the purposes of this particular manuscript. The first theme is children's perceptions of school, and the second theme is children's perceptions of the role of teachers. Both of these themes are described in detail below.

*Perceptions of School*

All children were asked to describe how they felt about their experiences at school and participants discussed various factors that made school enjoyable or not, and divided these factors into two distinct categories: the best parts of school and the worst parts of school.

*Best parts of school*

The majority of children described school as a place to learn and of safety. School was also identified as a place to participate in a variety of activities. This child explained her best parts of school with the following example.

> I love science. Well, we actually got to do – like in science we learned about materials and structures. We got to make our own structure. We also got to make – you know the spaghetti, right? When they're not cooked. We had groups and we had to make a structure out of spaghetti and --- No, spaghetti and tape – that's the only thing we could use. And our team won, so --- Well, our teacher told us that triangles – like I was – last year I was in [two three] class and so I had the same teacher. And so she told us that triangles are actually the strongest shape, so this is what we did: We took the spaghetti noodles and made triangles out of them, and so one, two, three triangles, and then we did the same thing, except that they were upside down, and we kept on doing that, and we won. No, it was just like a little competition. I was really happy. Because – well, we did a really good job on the structure, so it just made me feel happy (Susan).

Many children spoke about the different types of activities they get to participate while at school.

> I like to play there, play on the … I like to – I don't' know what it's called but it's like this pole that they've like, like a string and there's like a ball (tether ball?) Yeah, tether ball.  I like playing that (Nancy).

> I think it's about gym. I like that. And I like computer. I like music. I like … I like library. We sometimes like play games on tablets or we get pick – get to pick books to bring home. I - read. Then we could – we have to bring them back on the next library day. So I like it really much, school (Jacob).

*Worst parts of school*

There were children who described negative experiences at school, who specifically described situations relating to bullying and exclusion. Unfortunately, four children shared stories where they experienced these situations.

> Like today this was what happened; I was - for recess we were just playing "would you rather" me and my friend, and two girls came up and said - 'cos we did nothing, me and my friend - and then these two girls said, we don't want to be your friend anymore and then they walked away. So we just started - so we started to tell each other why would they do that, we're really good friends - why would they do that? 'Cos that was my best friend who said that and then my other friend said that so I felt kind of like - I felt kind of sad. Yeah, and yes, why did you say that and they said because sometimes you and Josephine feel like they're the boss and we never do that. So we didn't know what was wrong, so we decided to tell them how we felt about them and they still weren't our friend (Patricia).

> I have a high IQ for some reason, I don't know what it is, but I have a high IQ; but I just don't like to use it because I don't feel like I want to be a nerd. Because if you're a nerd people call you like the J-E-R-K word, jerk. And I don't want to be bullied, because who likes to be bullied, right? (Sarah).

Not surprisingly, children explained disliking subject areas that they felt they were not 'good' at as a part of school that was the 'worst'.

> Math. I don't like math at all. I don't - I don't know. I just don't like math (Aiden).

> Mostly I like everything except one.  I don't really like social studies. That there's so much stuff you have to talk about it all and remember it all (Maria)

Interestingly, another aspect other children did not like was feeling not challenged.

> I don't like sitting on the carpet too long, because sometimes we sit on the carpet. And I don't like when my teacher explains stuff that I already know, like really easy questions for math. I just want to start going because I get what she's saying. So that we can learn and that some people might not

know it like I do. And so that's why she still explains it, but usually it's like ten minutes sit down when she explains it so I get really bored sitting there (Amy).

Not working on different thing … like, not working on new things, just keep doing the same thing (Mason).

*Role of Teachers*

Teachers were discussed in children's experience of school. The wellbeing of children at school was influenced by the relationships they had with their teachers. Ten children described teachers as important agents in learning skills needed in preparation for the future. One child shared various situations in which how the things she learns at school will better equipped caring for herself when she is older.

Because, well, the teachers then they teach you things that you need to know. Like for math you need to know it cause it's going to help you with money. French is just a very good language to learn. Hygienics, right now I'm at hygienics. Life would be one thing to know. In Grade 5 you're going to learn about it. You're going to learn about like how you could deal with yourself when you're older, that's what I've been hearing about. But like also health is another one that they talk about. They tell you what kind of food, like we have this thing where they tell you like when we're learning about health they give you a food chart which and we have in here and it would tell you like the fruits and veggies you should eat, the meat you should eat, the greens you should eat and stuff like that. So they teach you about that stuff and what kind of food you should eat and what foods you should not eat all the time. They tell you the real healthy things which would be helpful, so. That's one thing (Linda).

For another child, she gave an example of why she felt learning to read was important.

Because they said that you will need it in life, like special stuff. Like for reading, you could ... one day, when you go the store or something, and if you can't read you don't know what you're buying (Laura).

There were three features children described that made teachers effective in their role: providing creative ways to learn, listening to their ideas and concerns, and being supportive.

*Creative Ways to Learn*

Participants favoured teachers who were able to be creative in delivering lesson plans. For example, Jackson described how his teacher makes learning game-like.

She makes math fun. So she just doesn't give us questions. She, like, puts in cards that -all the people to play with. So like, say these are someone else's cards, and then these are someone else's cards. And then you have to flip it over, and whoever has the highest - whoever said the answer first, so say

mine was a nine and yours was a five, you'd have to say the answer. Whoever got it quicker wins a card (Jackso).n

Another participant shared a different game that she played at school, which facilitated her learning.

We could play like where we would be playing a game like with a ball and passing like the ball and like one person would start off by like saying like they would have the ball and they would be like, it's like a math question and then they throw it to the person and then they have to answer it and then they can ask another math question and throw it and we play games like that sometimes (Mary).

*Listening*

The ability to listen to children's ideas and concerns was a factor that was discussed with regards to being a good teacher. One child shared a story where she had a bad experience with a teacher, and was able to confide in another teacher, who listened to her concerns and found a solution.

Well, there's a teacher that wasn't really my teacher. She was like my teacher in like two subjects 'cause our school we go to like different classes. Well, we don't really need to do that but that's what our teachers chose, it's just our teachers trading. So, in math and in natural science, I only know it in French, when I was in grade three, she threatened me of - because I was trying to push my hair so I could like read the board and all that 'cause my hair was so long. And like I was trying to get my bangs out of my way and kept going like this or putting it in a pony tail and hair would just fall out. She would be like stop playing with your hair or I'm going to pull it all out. So, I'm like - Really, really sad so I went out, I asked to go to the bathroom and I went to Madame [Keltie] and I told her and she's like oh my god and then she asked all my other friends and they said yes that it was true. Well, she pulled me out of that class and she pulled me into her class instead. That made me feel better (Lisa).

I think it's also that they're there. I think that's the most important one, to be there for you also because like, if you have a problem, again, you can always go to them. I think that's the best one (Laura).

Five children spoke about a negative experience with a teacher. A bad teacher was described as someone who yells and/or does not listen to students. One child explained how the negative interactions with a teacher resulted in her feeling that the teacher would not believe her other concerns.

There's a teacher who just kept saying sh-sh-sh - even when you're just doing the pencil sharpener - she goes sh. [Makes me feel …] Kind of mad. Because you couldn't even say - like sometimes when you were good and [you weren't doing anything, and said Madame, she would go sh- go back to your place. And it kind of feels bad because I couldn't tell, 'cos somebody was also - somebody could be

really mean. I feel like she would come to me and she would say oh, no-no, you can't, no, that wouldn't happen (Patricia).

Another child shared similar sentiments regarding bad teachers.

And then with a bad teacher they couldn't care less what you say. Well, I was doing my math and I got a question wrong on a math test and she got so mad at me and I told her why because I thought it was adding not multiplication and she just completely ignored me. [Made me feel …] Really mad. [Have you talked to someone about it?] No. Cause I just didn't really feel like talking about it (Lucas).

*Supportive*

Children discussed how having a teacher who was able to provide support was important. Two children described a level of patience as a source of support from teachers.

They have patience. And they listen to you, and they keep you safe in school. Like if you're not getting it they have to be patient until you do get it because that's what they're there for, to help you learn. So they have to be patient with you until you finally get it, because that's what they're there for (Amy).

They help you. Like, they can help you when like you're – sorry. When you're being like bullied or something they can like help you (Karen).

One child summarized what it being a good teacher means to him.

A good teacher doesn't get mad at you and you can talk to them about anything (Lucas).

**Discussion**

The study has highlighted the importance and influence of teacher interactions on children's subjective wellbeing. The quality of teacher-student relationships has been demonstrated to be associated with students' social functioning (Roorda, Koomen, Split, & Oort, 2011; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999), and level of engagement in learning activities (Roorda et al., 2011; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990). Empathy and warmth have been reported as effective characteristics of teachers (Cornelius-White, 2007). Unsurprisingly, studies have shown that whether a child adjusts well to school is influenced by negative experiences (Baker, 2006; DiLall, Marcus, & Wright-Phillips, 2004). In this study, multiple children disclosed stories with a 'bad' teacher and how this experience resulted in not wanting to talk to other teachers about it. Based on this study's findings, it would be of interest to future researchers to investigate the long-term effects of children who report low satisfaction of with teachers. Specifically, policy makers may consider including children's feedback in the evaluation of teachers to improve the quality of school experiences, since it has been documented that liking school declines with age (Kutsar & Kasearu, 2017; Bradshaw, Keung, Rees, & Goswami, 2011).

Eiserer (1954) has suggested, "happy, successful experiences with a good teacher have changed the negative attitudes of many a child" (p. 409). Four items have been identified has contributing significantly to children's satisfaction with school, a child's 1) teachers at school, 2) ability at school, 3) safety at school and 4) behaviour at school, whereas satisfaction with friends at school did not (Casas & Gonzalez, 2017). As well, other studies have documented two determinants for whether children enjoyed school, how teachers and others in school treat them and how safe they feel in school (Kutsar & Kasearu, 2017). From an extended attachment perspective, high levels of warmth and openness, and low levels of conflict in teacher-student relationships are foundational in helping children feel emotionally secure (Pianta, 2001; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). It has been documented that when emotional security is established, children are able to explore, learn and engage in school activities, which leads to better school performance (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Kooman, van Leeuwen, & van der Leij, 2004).

The children in this study who enjoyed school, were children who described their teacher-student relationship as positive, attributed this to a teacher who listens and considers their concerns, as well as provide alternative (eg. game-like) learning styles. The subtheme that children felt positively about school because their teachers listened to their ideas and concerns is similar to the findings of Nepal in the ISCWeb study (Kutsar & Kasearu, 2017). This finding supports current literature proposing that favourable teacher-student relationships encourage learning, and help children navigate school demands (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). It is noteworthy to mention that subjective wellbeing, in this case as it relates to school, remains context and socially specific (Fattore et al., 2018). Though similar findings have been documented in the literature, investigating variations in what children characterise as listening and support in other countries is warranted in continuing to understand children's subjective wellbeing.

Nevertheless, it is important for teachers and school professionals to also consider how experiences, positive or negative, will influence students' overall school satisfaction, as well as how this will translate to relationships outside of school (Casas & Gonzalez, 2017). The current literature regarding the age of students and how strongly teacher relationships influence students has varied (Roorda et al., 2011). This would suggest that though a student may have had negative teacher-student relationships in the past, attempts to establish positive relationships is still important in an effort to salvage overall school satisfaction. As the relationship between teacher and students continues to be a contributor to students' school experience, it is hoped that future research continues to investigate strategies to improve and optimize these relationships. It may be beneficial for future research to explore teachers' perspectives on teacher-student relationships, highlighting those who are able to establish positive relationships, and noting the challenges teacher may face to building one.

This study utilized the Life Story Board™ to support interviews with children. Children of this study felt that the use of this tool was helpful during the interview process as it provided them a visual representation of their lives. The tool allowed flexibility in how children wanted to represent their lives. For example, a child could visually emphasize the closeness of a friendship by the distance in which two people-pieces are placed on the board (Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2018). Though this study's interviews appear to be of

benefit with the use of the Life Story Board™, future research is warranted to compare interviews conducted with and without this tool. Interviews in this study were audiotaped and transcribed; the process and nonverbal interactions with the Life Story Board™ were not captured. Future research interested in using the Life Story Board™ may consider videotaping the board during interviews to avoid this limitation.

**Conclusion**

As children will continue to spend a substantial amount of their day at school, improving teacher-student relationships, and in turn overall school experience, remains fundamental. It is evident that the teaching style of teachers affects children's wellbeing at school. Teachers who promote wellbeing at school and positive feeling associated with learning are those who consider the voices and needs of their students, as well as make efforts to incorporate those considerations in their curriculum. It appears promising for teachers to continue this approach to improve student outcomes.

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