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 valance: 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