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Presenting a Model of Social Well-Being in Schools for Elementary Students: A Thematic Analysis Approach

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study was to present a model of social well-being in schools for elementary students using a thematic analysis approach. Methodologically, the study falls within the category of descriptive-analytical research, and data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method (2006). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 academic experts and educational administrators in Alborz Province who were knowledgeable about social well-being in schools, each having published at least two related articles and possessing more than 10 years of professional experience. These interviews were conducted using purposive sampling and continued until theoretical saturation was reached at the 12th interview. The initial interview questions were developed based on a review of library resources, official documents, scientific articles, and related research. Prior to each interview, the researcher explained the aim and subject of the study in detail to participants. To ensure their comfort and focus, the interview schedule was set in agreement with the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and in adherence to ethical principles, while simultaneous note-taking was also performed. The collected data were transcribed verbatim, and the process of manifest and latent content analysis was initiated. This analysis was conducted with the aim of extracting key components for presenting the social well-being model in schools for elementary students, utilizing MAXQDA specialized software. From the interview analyses, a total of 113 initial codes were extracted. After further analysis of the interview texts, 30 basic themes and 10 organizing themes were identified. In the final stage, by reviewing the organizing themes, five overarching themes emerged: school environment and atmosphere, social relationships, individual and personal interactions, cultural and educational factors, and structural and managerial dimensions.

Keywords: social well-being, students, thematic analysis

Introduction

The concept of well-being in schools has gained significant scholarly and policy attention over the past decades, as it is increasingly recognized that academic success alone does not guarantee the healthy development of children and adolescents. Educational institutions are expected not only to provide knowledge but also to foster environments where students can experience social, emotional, and psychological growth. Social well-being, in particular, is a vital dimension of overall student

development because it reflects how individuals perceive their integration into, contribution to, and acceptance within their social environment (1). This dimension of well-being emphasizes belonging, supportive relationships, justice, and the opportunity for participation—factors that are especially crucial in school contexts where students spend a large part of their formative years.

Social well-being in schools can be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct involving social integration, acceptance, contribution, and actualization (2). These elements provide the foundation for understanding how students experience their school environment not only as learners but as social actors embedded in dynamic networks of peers, teachers, and institutional structures. Scholars have demonstrated that children and adolescents who feel socially supported at school demonstrate higher levels of motivation, resilience, and life satisfaction (3, 4). Conversely, negative social climates—characterized by exclusion, discrimination, or lack of support—can undermine both well-being and academic performance (5, 6).

The role of school climate is therefore essential in shaping students' social well-being. School climate encompasses the norms, relationships, and practices that structure the daily experiences of learners. When students perceive fairness, inclusion, and emotional safety, they are more likely to report high social well-being (6). Relatedly, psychological capital, including optimism and resilience, has also been shown to predict both psychological and social well-being, even in populations facing health challenges such as multiple sclerosis (7). This suggests that social well-being is not only determined by external structures but also by internal psychological resources that enable individuals to navigate stress and adversity.

The literature also emphasizes the developmental sensitivity of childhood and adolescence. During these stages, students undergo biological, cognitive, and emotional transitions that make them particularly vulnerable to stress but also highly responsive to supportive environments (8). For instance, a positive psycho-social classroom climate has been found to mediate the relationship between academic engagement and students' academic well-being, underscoring the importance of relational and emotional contexts in shaping outcomes (9). When schools prioritize inclusive and supportive environments, they can buffer the negative effects of stress and foster a sense of belonging that enhances both social and academic well-being.

Research has consistently demonstrated the close link between social well-being and educational outcomes. Students who experience a supportive and inclusive climate tend to achieve higher academically (4, 5). This connection is partly due to the fact that social relationships influence students' motivation and self-efficacy. When learners feel accepted and respected, they are more likely to develop confidence in their abilities and persist in the face of challenges (10). Moreover, training programs that enhance self-regulation and social participation have been effective in improving both psychological well-being and academic success (11). These findings highlight that interventions targeting social well-being are not peripheral but central to educational achievement.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided further evidence of the importance of social well-being. Studies of children and families during lockdowns revealed that stress, resilience, and parental self-efficacy directly influenced children's emotional and social well-being (12, 13). Increased screen time and reduced opportunities for face-to-face socialization were associated with declines in subjective well-being (14), while supportive parenting practices served as protective factors (13). These findings underscore that schools, as primary socialization contexts, play a critical role in buffering against crises by promoting social connectedness and resilience.

At the same time, new challenges have emerged regarding the role of digital media and technology. While digital platforms can enhance social interactions and access to information, their excessive or unbalanced use has been linked to declines in psychological well-being among children (15). Similarly, studies of Finnish youth reveal contradictory perceptions of technology: it is viewed both as a tool for innovation and as a source of stress or exclusion (16). Even in higher education contexts, digital communication platforms such as WeChat are strongly correlated with the quality of friendships but not

necessarily with perceived well-being (17). These complexities highlight the need for balanced approaches that integrate digital literacy into broader models of social well-being.

The school is often considered an ideal setting for promoting health and well-being because of its broad reach and potential for structured interventions (18). Programs that integrate social and emotional learning, trauma-informed education, and positive education approaches have shown promise in enhancing students' psychological and social well-being (19, 20). For example, interventions that combine self-regulation training with collaborative learning activities have been effective in fostering social participation and reducing behavioral problems (11, 21). Similarly, social justice-oriented pedagogies, such as healing-informed mathematics education, can strengthen students' sociopolitical consciousness and well-being by validating their identities and lived experiences (22).

International research further underscores the importance of cultural and contextual factors in shaping school-based well-being. For example, in Norway, intercultural empathy has been identified as a key component of inclusive citizenship education, which in turn supports students' social integration and sense of belonging (23). In Italy, studies of children's life satisfaction at age eight show that subjective well-being is closely tied to both family and school environments (24). Similarly, inclusive educational settings that bring together students with and without special educational needs can enhance learning outcomes and foster supportive peer relationships (25). These findings emphasize that social well-being cannot be separated from broader issues of inclusion, equity, and cultural diversity.

Social well-being is also deeply connected to broader social structures and inequalities. For example, research on Roma youth in the Western Balkans has shown how systemic exclusion perpetuates cycles of disadvantage and undermines well-being (26). Similarly, cosmopolitan perspectives among elite students reveal how notions of solidarity and responsibility toward family, nation, and the world are integrated into young people's meaning-making processes (27). These examples highlight the dual role of schools: they can either reproduce social inequalities or serve as transformative spaces where equity and inclusion are promoted.

The interplay between social support and student well-being is another crucial factor. Research on transgender youth, for instance, illustrates how good relationships significantly improve mental health and social well-being (28). In the context of primary and secondary school transitions, socio-emotional support has been found to ease adjustment and promote well-being, particularly for students with behavioral or emotional needs (29). Similarly, school cultures characterized by respect, empathy, and student participation are associated with better mental health outcomes (30). These findings converge on the idea that relational support—whether from peers, teachers, or families—serves as a critical foundation for students' social well-being.

Physical activity and health behaviors also intersect with social well-being. Evidence suggests that physical well-being, self-perceptions, and supportive relationships collectively contribute to academic achievement (31). During childhood and adolescence, participation in physical activity has been associated with higher levels of subjective well-being, while sedentary behaviors such as excessive screen time negatively affect mental health (14). These findings indicate that models of school-based social well-being should not neglect the embodied dimensions of students' lives, where health, activity, and relationships intertwine.

Despite growing evidence, many challenges remain in conceptualizing and implementing models of social well-being in schools. The multidimensional nature of well-being requires approaches that integrate psychological, social, cultural, and structural factors. For instance, family functioning, optimism, and resilience have been identified as predictors of psychological well-being, with social adequacy mediating these effects (32). Similarly, social competence and moral maturity are mediators linking school well-being with broader existential orientations (33). These findings highlight the complexity of social well-being, which is shaped by a network of personal, relational, and institutional factors.

The current study builds upon this growing body of evidence by focusing on elementary school students and adopting a thematic analysis approach to extract the key components of social well-being within the school context.

Methods and Materials

The primary objective of this study was to present a model of social well-being in schools for elementary students using a thematic analysis approach. From a methodological perspective, this research falls within the category of descriptive–analytical studies, and data analysis was carried out using Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis method (2006). Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 15 academic experts and educational administrators in Alborz Province who were knowledgeable in the field of social well-being in schools, each having published at least two related articles and possessing more than 10 years of professional experience. These interviews were selected purposefully and continued until theoretical saturation was reached at the 12th interview. The initial interview questions were developed through a review of library resources, documents, scientific articles, and related studies.

Before the start of each interview, the researcher explained the aim and subject of the study in detail to the participants. To maintain their comfort and focus, the interview time was scheduled in agreement with the participants themselves. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants’ informed consent and in accordance with ethical principles, while simultaneous note-taking was also performed. The collected data were then transcribed verbatim, and the process of manifest and latent content analysis was initiated. This analysis aimed to extract the key components for presenting a model of social well-being in schools for elementary students, using MAXQDA specialized software. This tool assisted in the precise categorization and organization of qualitative data to identify hidden patterns and conceptual connections among them.

Findings and Results

As shown in Table 1, of the 15 participants, 40% (6 individuals) were female and 60% (9 individuals) were male. In terms of education, 34% (5 individuals) held doctoral degrees, 33% (5 individuals) held master’s degrees, and 33% (5 individuals) held bachelor’s degrees. Regarding work experience, 13% (2 individuals) had 1–10 years, 60% (9 individuals) had 11–20 years, and 27% (4 individuals) had more than 21 years. In terms of age, 33% (5 individuals) were between 30–40 years, 47% (7 individuals) were between 41–50 years, and 20% (3 individuals) were above 51 years.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of interview participants

Participant	Position	Education Level	Work Experience	Age	Gender
1	University Faculty	PhD	10 years	36	Female
2	University Faculty	PhD	16 years	48	Male
3	Elementary Vice Principal	BA	15 years	38	Female
4	Elementary Vice Principal	BA	26 years	57	Male
5	University Faculty	PhD	15 years	48	Male
6	University Faculty	PhD	10 years	44	Female
7	Sixth-Grade Teacher	BA	14 years	45	Male
8	Vice Principal	BA	12 years	43	Male
9	Sixth-Grade Teacher	MA	18 years	46	Male
10	Teacher	MA	12 years	36	Female
11	Elementary Principal	MA	27 years	55	Male
12	Elementary Principal	MA	25 years	53	Female
13	University Faculty	PhD	13 years	37	Male
14	Fifth-Grade Teacher	BA	11 years	35	Male
15	Teacher	MA	22 years	48	Female

All stages of qualitative thematic analysis were conducted according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. In the first phase, familiarization with the data, the researcher transcribed all recorded interviews by hand and then re-listened to the interviews to ensure no sentence was omitted. The handwritten transcripts were then typed in Microsoft Word, and the entire dataset was re-read.

The second phase, generating initial codes, began when the typed transcripts were imported into MAXQDA software, and coding was conducted. A total of 113 initial codes were obtained. In the third phase, searching for selective codes, incomplete, irrelevant, and duplicate codes were eliminated, resulting in 30 selective codes. In interviews 13, 14, and 15, no new codes were identified, confirming data saturation.

In the next phase, the researcher grouped the selective codes into broader semantic categories, leading to the identification of 10 subthemes. The fifth phase began once a satisfactory thematic structure of the subthemes had been achieved. In this study, the definition and naming of the main themes and the preparation of the thematic analysis report were conducted based on the thematic network, dividing the themes into basic, organizing, and overarching levels.

As shown in Table 2 and Figure 1 (MAXQDA output), the extracted subthemes—also referred to as organizing themes—were classified into five overarching themes: (1) school environment and atmosphere, (2) social relationships, (3) individual factors and personal interactions, (4) cultural and educational dimensions, and (5) structural and managerial aspects.

Table 2. Basic, Organizing, and Overarching Themes Extracted from the Interviews

Basic Themes	Organizing Themes (Subthemes)	Overarching Themes
Creating a motivational and safe environment	Appropriate educational and psychological climate	School Environment and Atmosphere
Reducing stress and anxiety		
A supportive setting for positive interactions		
Adequate equipment and facilities		
Equal access to facilities for all students	Justice and Equal Opportunities	
Avoiding discrimination and inequity in opportunities and resources		
Friendly and empathetic relationships among students	Positive and Supportive Relationships	Social Relationships
Mutual respect and acceptance of differences		
Group support and collaboration		
Creating a sense of belonging and social security	Role of Teachers and Staff	
Supportive role of teachers		
Positive and motivational behavior of school staff		
Ability to establish effective communication	Students' Social Skills	Individual Factors and Personal Interactions
Problem-solving and conflict management skills		
Increased self-confidence		
Sense of acceptance within the group	Sense of Belonging and Personal Security	
Sense of calmness and reduced isolation		
Satisfaction with school relationships		
Strengthening empathy and respect	Social and Cultural Education	Cultural and Educational Dimensions
Education of ethical and cultural values		
Varied and engaging educational programs		
Activation of participation in decision-making	Student Participation	
Encouragement for cooperation and teamwork		
Participatory and collective programs		
Existence of coherent and supportive policies	School Policies and Procedures	Structural and Managerial Aspects
Planning for the promotion of social well-being		
Continuous monitoring and supervision		
Coordination among teachers, parents, and students	School Interaction Management	
Management of conflicts and behavioral problems		
Establishing support networks		



Figure 1. Model of Social Well-Being in Schools for Elementary Students Extracted from MAXQDA Software

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to provide a model of social well-being in schools for elementary students using a thematic analysis approach. The findings revealed five overarching themes—school environment and atmosphere, social relationships, individual and personal interactions, cultural and educational dimensions, and structural and managerial aspects—that collectively shape the social well-being of students. These results underscore the importance of adopting a holistic framework that integrates both individual-level factors and broader structural components in conceptualizing social well-being within educational contexts.

One of the key findings of this study was the emphasis on the school environment and atmosphere as a foundational dimension of social well-being. Students' experiences of motivation, safety, and equitable access to resources emerged as critical. This result is consistent with research showing that positive school climates strongly predict higher levels of social well-being, mediated by perceptions of fairness, respect, and inclusivity (6). Schools that establish a safe and motivational climate can reduce stress and anxiety, fostering a context in which students feel secure and valued. Similar results have been

found in studies where achievement goal orientations and the satisfaction of psychological needs were associated with higher levels of school well-being (10). These findings highlight that social well-being is not only a product of peer relationships but also a reflection of how institutional practices and environments communicate care, justice, and belonging.

Another significant theme identified in the data was the importance of social relationships, including peer friendships, empathy, and teacher support. This aligns with prior studies showing that supportive peer and teacher relationships serve as a cornerstone of children's mental health and well-being (28, 30). When students feel accepted, respected, and supported, they are more likely to develop resilience, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging. In the context of bullying, for instance, social skills training has been shown to improve the social well-being of students who otherwise feel marginalized (21). Furthermore, qualitative research on school culture demonstrates that environments fostering respect, mutual recognition, and support contribute significantly to students' mental health (30). These findings reinforce the centrality of social relationships in shaping not only academic outcomes but also long-term psychosocial development.

The results also emphasized individual factors and personal interactions, particularly social skills, problem-solving abilities, and self-confidence. This corresponds with studies showing that students' psychological resources, such as optimism and resilience, mediate the relationship between family functioning and psychological well-being (32). Similarly, psychological capital has been identified as a predictor of both psychological and social well-being in vulnerable populations, highlighting the importance of fostering internal resources in addition to supportive external environments (7). The development of social skills, such as conflict management and empathy, also plays a critical role in reducing isolation and promoting participation (21). Collectively, these findings support the notion that social well-being is co-constructed through both personal capacities and relational contexts.

A further finding concerns the cultural and educational dimensions of social well-being, including value-based education, diversity of educational programs, and student participation. These elements reflect the idea that schools are not only academic institutions but also cultural settings where students learn social values, norms, and citizenship (23). For instance, research has highlighted that self-regulation training enhances both psychological well-being and social participation, showing that targeted educational interventions can produce meaningful outcomes (11). Likewise, positive education approaches have been shown to elevate social and psychological well-being by teaching values such as empathy, respect, and responsibility (19). These findings suggest that the integration of cultural and ethical education within school curricula is fundamental for promoting students' social well-being and preparing them for active participation in society.

The structural and managerial dimensions also emerged as central in shaping social well-being. Supportive school policies, coherent management, and effective teacher–parent–student coordination were identified as key organizing factors. These findings resonate with international research showing that schools represent ideal environments for promoting health and well-being when systemic policies are aligned with student needs (18). Similarly, trauma-informed educational frameworks and social-emotional learning programs highlight the role of school leadership in fostering resilience and well-being among students (20). Importantly, the managerial role of schools in resolving conflicts and creating support networks illustrates that structural strategies can reinforce relational and individual strengths, thereby contributing to holistic models of social well-being.

The extracted themes also shed light on the interplay between digital media, social support, and well-being. The results emphasized the need for safe, inclusive spaces for interaction, which resonates with studies showing that excessive or unstructured digital media use negatively affects psychological well-being (15). At the same time, digital technologies can foster relationships, as evidenced by studies linking WeChat use to the quality of friendships among university students, though not necessarily to well-being (17). Similarly, Finnish youth perceive technology as both an opportunity and a source of stress

(16). These findings suggest that models of social well-being in schools should integrate critical perspectives on digital literacy, ensuring that technology is used as a tool for inclusion and not a source of exclusion.

Another dimension emerging from this study is the interaction between physical activity and social well-being. Although not directly measured here, the importance of supportive school environments implicitly includes opportunities for physical activity and health-promoting practices. This is supported by evidence linking physical activity with subjective well-being among children (14). Furthermore, physical well-being and self-perceptions have been shown to contribute to academic achievement when combined with supportive social relationships (31). During the COVID-19 pandemic, reductions in physical activity and increased screen time were linked to declines in well-being, further underscoring the integrative nature of physical and social dimensions (12, 13). Thus, a holistic school well-being model should account for physical, relational, and cultural dimensions as mutually reinforcing.

The findings of this study also resonate with cross-cultural and international evidence. For instance, inclusive practices in Italy demonstrated that children's well-being at age eight was influenced by both family and school contexts (24), while systematic reviews showed that inclusive classrooms benefited not only students with special educational needs but also their peers (25). Moreover, research on Roma youth in the Balkans highlights the dangers of structural exclusion, which perpetuates cycles of social disadvantage and weakens well-being (26). These examples highlight the broader socio-political context of social well-being, demonstrating that schools can either mitigate or exacerbate social inequalities.

The multidimensionality of social well-being also appeared in the role of solidarity and collective participation. This reflects findings showing that young people integrate notions of family, nation, and global responsibility into their meaning-making processes (27). In line with this, healing-informed social justice pedagogies demonstrate how schools can promote sociopolitical consciousness alongside well-being (22). These approaches reinforce the view that social well-being extends beyond individual relationships to include broader civic and cultural dimensions.

Taken together, the results of this study confirm that social well-being in schools is shaped by a complex interaction of structural, relational, and individual factors. The themes extracted from the interviews echo findings from both Iranian and international research, suggesting that school climate (6), family support (32), cultural education (23), and inclusive practices (25) all converge in influencing how students perceive their social world. This convergence underscores the necessity of integrative models that account for diversity, inclusion, and equity while fostering resilience and engagement.

Despite the valuable contributions of this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research employed a qualitative approach with a relatively small sample of 15 participants, which, while appropriate for thematic analysis, may limit the generalizability of findings to broader populations. Second, the study relied primarily on expert interviews and did not include direct voices of students, whose lived experiences may provide additional perspectives on social well-being. Third, cultural and contextual factors unique to Alborz Province may restrict the transferability of the model to other regions or educational systems. Finally, while MAXQDA software enabled systematic analysis, the coding process remains interpretive, and alternative coding strategies may yield different emphases or categorizations.

Future studies should expand the sample size and include diverse stakeholders, particularly students and parents, to capture a fuller picture of social well-being in schools. Longitudinal designs could track the development of social well-being across different stages of schooling, highlighting critical transition points such as entry into primary school or the shift to secondary education. Comparative cross-cultural studies would also be valuable, examining how social well-being manifests in different educational systems and cultural contexts. Additionally, mixed-methods approaches that combine thematic analysis with quantitative measures of well-being could strengthen the validity and applicability of findings. Finally, future research might

explore the intersection of digital technologies, social media, and social well-being, given the growing role of digital environments in students' lives.

In practical terms, the findings of this study highlight the need for schools to adopt holistic strategies that integrate environmental, relational, and cultural dimensions of social well-being. Educational leaders should prioritize creating safe and inclusive environments that reduce stress and promote equity. Teachers should be supported in developing relational skills that foster empathy, respect, and positive student–teacher interactions. Curriculum designers can embed social and cultural education into learning activities, encouraging values of cooperation, participation, and ethical responsibility. Finally, policymakers and administrators should implement systemic policies that align structural supports with student needs, ensuring coherence between classroom practices, school leadership, and broader educational goals.

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Authors' Contributions

Not applicable.

Declaration of Interest

The author of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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