Protection, Freedom, and Eid: Algerian Children's Voices on Their Well-Being

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Abstract

In the context of cultural shifts, economic challenges, and evolving family structures in Algeria, very little has been done to examine children's well-being in this world region. While acknowledging the nation's efforts in child protection, this study delves into children's discourse to report their experiences and perceptions of their well-being, aligning with the United Nations' call for their active involvement in research. Using a child-centred approach, the study was conducted with 20 children, aged between 8 and 12, from three private schools and one public school in eastern Algeria. Focus groups were conducted using the draw and write technique along with the protocol suggested by the Children's Understanding of Well-Being Study. This multinational study within which our research is embedded aims to document how children conceptualize their well-being in a comparative and global perspective. Algerian children expressed how cultural and religious traditions, emotional support from family, and their material possessions are important to their well-being. They also articulated a desire for freedom, a preference for non-violent teaching approaches, and a wish for a fairer world, reflecting their awareness of social equity and the impact of external factors on their well-being. The findings emphasize that children's well-being in Algeria cannot be fully understood without considering the significant influence of religion, cultural identity, and the challenges they face in environments that limit their agency and development opportunities.

Keywords Children well-being · Algeria · Child-centred research · Qualitative research · Draw and write technique

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1 Introduction

In a country with a complex historical backdrop and a less certain future, Algerian children's well-being is more than just a statistic. Since Algeria ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992, national child policies have increasingly prioritized children's well-being (Tiliouine & Boussena, 2016). This national commitment aligns with broader international efforts, where an expanding body of literature on child well-being has informed strategies to promote children's healthy development (Fattore et al., 2007). Nevertheless, North Africa, like other world regions, has been less represented in these discussions compared to Western contexts. Research on Algerian children's well-being remains scarce, particularly within the international scientific community. We already know that a significant proportion of Algerian children continue to experience maltreatment and inadequate educational practices (MSPRH, 2020), along with various forms of deprivation, such as inadequate household facilities, poor neighborhood conditions, and low satisfaction with friendships and peer relationships (Tiliouine, 2022). However, despite the high prevalence of bullying and aggressive behaviors, children's satisfaction with family life and school experiences remains relatively higher than that of children in other parts of the world (Tiliouine, 2022). This complex situation, however, needs further in-depth analyses using the generic notion of well-being.

Well-being is a highly intricate and multifaceted construct, lacking a universally agreed-upon definition among scholars and policymakers. Nonetheless, many agree on two dimensions of well-being: objective well-being and subjective well-being (Cummins, 2000). Objective well-being, drawing from Sen's (1985) capability approach, can be defined as the appraisal of a person's well-being that remains independent of their preferences and interests, encompassing factors such as the availability of opportunities, economic resources, and the freedom to access and use these opportunities (Casas & Frønes, 2020). However, while objective indicators provide valuable insights into living conditions, they do not fully capture how individuals, particularly children, experience and interpret their own well-being. As for subjective well-being, it relates to how people assess their own well-being, for which Diener et al. (1999) included people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction. "Subjective well-being" remains a generic construct which covers a wide variety of domains. Its conceptualization varies significantly across cultures, shaped deeply by the unique social, economic, and historical contexts of each society (González-Carrasco et al., 2019). Specifically, the study by Cheng et al. (2011) highlights that the source of subjective well-being in collectivistic cultures, such as Algeria, often stems from social harmony and interdependent relations, contrasting with individualistic cultures where personal achievement and independence play a central role. Given the cultural and developmental specificity of children's well-being, it is essential to directly explore their own perspectives to inform local and international policies.

While these policies promoting children well-being have originally been informed by studies on adults' indicators of well-being, researchers have realized the necessity and validity to involve children in the research process (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). By centering on children's subjective well-being, this study acknowledges their role as

active agents in defining what matters for their well-being, rather than being passive recipients of external conditions. Therefore, this paper presents personal experiences and perspectives of the well-being of Algerian children within their unique cultural context. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of their well-being, which will inform targeted interventions and policy recommendations.l.,

We are aware that cultural relativism is not on itself sufficient to explain the uniqueness of well-being in children. On the contrary, this latter is shaped by personal interactions as well as the broader social, economic, and cultural contexts. Given that well-being is shaped both by individual perceptions and external conditions, this study adopts Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) to examine how different environmental layers influence children's well-being. These interconnected systems are the microsystem (family, school, peers) which directly impacts the child's daily life; the mesosystem, which refers to interactions between microsystems, like parent-teacher relationships; the exosystem includes external influences that indirectly affect the child, such as a parent's workplace or local government policies; the macrosystem consists of cultural values, laws, and societal norms shaping a child's environment; and finally, the chronosystem, which accounts for changes over time, such as life transitions or historical events. In short, the dynamic interaction between the child and their surrounding systems emphasizes the need for supportive environments at all levels to foster well-being and, hence, healthy development. The results of the present study are framed within this complex theoretical framework.

2 Background

2.1 Doing Research with Children, Rather Than on Children

In the past 50 years, initiatives aiming to measure and document children's well-being are numerous (Fattore et al., 2007). Traditionally, researchers have asked adults surrounding children such as caregivers and teachers about children's well-being. Children were seen as not cognitively mature enough and lacking too many language capacities to participate in research (Côté et al., 2020). As research is increasingly guided by the UNCRC's postulates (Lundy et al., 2011), the latter recognizes and promotes children's participation in research as stipulated by Article 12: "children have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them" (UNCRC, 1989). Participatory methodologies such as Lundy's model (2007) provide a structured framework that guarantees that children's voices are meaningfully heard, considered, and acted upon. This model emphasizes four key elements: providing children with a space to express themselves, facilitating their voice, ensuring an audience listens, and guaranteeing influence over decisions affecting them. Such approaches have reinforced the importance of interrogating children themselves in order to better understand and promote their well-being (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001).

Child-centred research takes its roots on this idea that children should be considered as the experts of their life experiences and have a deep understanding of what is good for them (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015). This approach entails to do research with children rather than on children. In fact, authors have put forward how children

can efficiently participate in all inherent parts of a research study, including determining the research questions, designing the data collection, undergoing the analysis and disseminating results (Lundy et al., 2011). However, doing research with children involves multiple ethical and methodological considerations. For instance, the hierarchical relationship between children and adults may increase children's vulnerability to power imbalances inherent in the researcher-participant dynamic. Additionally, obtaining children's informed assent and consent presents significant challenges, as it requires that both children and their guardians fully comprehend and voluntarily agree to participate in a study, understanding its objectives, risks, and benefits (Côté et al., 2020).

In the Algerian context, where children's voices are often overlooked in family and societal decision-making, child-centred research becomes even more crucial. Findings from the Centre d'Information et de Documentation sur les Droits de l'Enfant et de la Femme (CIDDEF) (2022) highlighted the limited opportunities children have to express their views within the family. The study revealed that reduced communication and discussions widen the gap between male adolescents and their fathers, and to a lesser extent, between female adolescents and their mothers. Similarly, seeking adolescents' opinions before making decisions that concern them is relatively uncommon. The study noted that only 19% of parents report doing so with younger children (under 16 years of age), and 38% with older adolescents (15 years old and above). Mothers are more likely to involve children in decision-making frequently, whereas 65% of fathers never seek their children's opinions (CIDDEF, 2022). These findings underscore the need for research that amplifies children's voices and acknowledges their perspectives.

2.2 A Cross-Cultural Debate on Child- Well-Being

The large body of research measuring subjective child well-being is characterized by quantitative methodologies evaluating life satisfaction in many specific domains (Fattore al., 2021). The present study results from a flagship quantitative project aiming to fill the gap in international comparative research, the *International Survey of Children's Well-Being* (ISCWeB). The project was initiated in 2009 at a meeting hosted by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (RO/CEECIS). It has now reached its 5th wave of data collection, involving approximately 47 countries and tens of thousands of children, with 128,184 participating during the 3rd wave (Rees et al., 2020). Algeria took part at each time measures which allowed an unpreceded documentation of Algerian children's subjective well-being. The ISCWeb aimed to collect views and experiences directly from children between 8 and 12 years old, as this is a group age relatively neglected by existing research (Rees, 2017). Even if this initiative produced very relevant assessments of children's subjective well-being, including in Algeria, this approach has been criticized as using standardized well-being indicators developed and validated with adults (Fattore et al., 2021).

To address these limitations, critical realism offers an alternative epistemological framework (Alderson, 2017). This approach acknowledges both objective realities

and subjective experiences. Unlike positivist methodologies that emphasize objective facts and measurable outcomes, critical theorists defend that social phenomena should be understood from 'within', drawing upon the psychological, cultural and social resources of the researcher, so that a deeper form of knowledge could be obtained. By recognizing the interplay between social structures and individual agency, and by delving into the underlying mechanisms that shape children's lives, critical realism can provide policymakers with more nuanced and contextually relevant insights, leading to more effective and impactful policies (Alderson, 2017).

Qualitative studies complement this perspective by providing thick descriptions of how children experience and understand their well-being, thus filling the interpretative gap left by quantitative studies (Fattore et al., 2022). In order to obtain children's evaluation of their own lives, qualitative studies allow the use of different data-collection tools which foster children's expression and are suited for the developmental stage. Acknowledging the need for qualitative inquiry, a multinational study, the *Children's Understanding of Well-Being* (CUWB), in which this study is embedded, started in 2015 to examine how children conceptualize and experience their well-being.

2.3 The Algerian Context

Research on subjective well-being in the Northern African Arab and Muslim population is sparse. Therefore, contributions from the ISCWeb and CUWB projects are particularly valuable, as they enhance our understanding of children's well-being in this region. Algeria, with a steadily increasing population of nearly 45 million (World Bank, 2023), has a significant young demographic; children under 15 years old make up almost a third of its population (30.4% in 2019) (MSPRH, 2020). Algeria exemplifies the current situation of children in countries with slow social development, akin to other Arab and Islamic societies (Tiliouine & Boussena, 2016). In fact, an estimated 97,9% of the population is Sunni-Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2014). In Algeria, religion impregnates a great deal of the sociocultural, educational, and political structure. Notably, driven by strong Islamic values and following its independence from 132 years of French colonialism, the country adopted a socialist governance and provided free modern healthcare and education to all its population. Since the independence, the Algerian government initiated substantial reforms for social housing, focusing on eradicating slums and providing free housing to address critical shortages (Ettouahria, 2024). The public housing program in Algeria targets economically disadvantaged individuals, specifically those whose household income does not exceed 24,000 Algerian dinars (178 USD) per month (Ministère de l'habitat, de l'urbanisme et de la ville, n.d.). Since the beginning, Algeria's development slogan has emphasized 'regional balance', but significant disparities between rural and urban areas, as well as between the northern and southern (Sahara) regions of the country persist. They extend beyond infrastructure to include key social indicators. For instance, access to preschool education and school attendance rates remain lower in rural areas compared to urban regions and in the south (Sahara) compared to other parts of the country (MSPRH, 2020).

The 1976 Education Law gave access to compulsory and free schooling for all children between 6 and 16 years old which gave the opportunity to children to complete a full course of primary schooling and reduced illiteracy among 10-year-olds from 75% in 1966 to 22% in 2008 (World Bank, 2017). Strengthened in 2008, the Orientation Law on National Education mandates the provision of an education that aligns with the principles of children and human rights. It emphasizes the development of a democratic culture through teaching the principles of debate and majority opinion acceptance. The law unequivocally opposes discrimination and violence, advocating instead for the promotion of dialogue (*Loi d'orientation sur l'éducation nationale n° 08 − 04.* (2008), art. 5). The law also states that "Corporal punishment, moral abuse, and all forms of harassment are prohibited in educational institutions. Violators of the provisions of this article may face administrative sanctions, without prejudice to legal proceedings[1]" (*Loi d'orientation sur l'éducation nationale n° 08 − 04,* 2008, art. 21). In this effort, this law emphasizes the importance of children to be stakeholders of their own life, to promote a society which is open to modernity, to develop children's attachment and fidelity to Algeria, and assimilate effectively Islam as a religion with a value and spiritual system as an organized social model.

However, the quality of education can still be improved while the Algeria World Bank Group's 2020 Human Capital Index (HCI) remains relatively unchanged at 0.53 since 2010 (UNDP, 2022). This HCI is higher than the average for lower middle-income countries but remains below average for the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). In the 2015 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is an instrument for evaluating the proficiency of 15-year-olds in mathematics, reading, science, and problem-solving, Algeria was placed 71 st out of 72 countries (OECD, 2016). This ranking reflects a critical concern, as Algerian students' performance not only falls below the MENA regional average but also lags almost four years behind the OECD average in educational attainment. Despite these educational challenges, Algeria has made significant progress in some societal fields, mainly in the area of child protection and children's rights promotion.

Algeria has been working to align its national child legislation with international standards. Children protection has been reinforced by the adoption of the Child Protection Law in 2015 which aims to establish a global judicial framework associating social protection and judicial protection in children's favour (*Loi de la protection de l'enfant* n° 15 − 12, 2015). This law also enabled the implementation of reporting mechanisms such as the toll-free hotline (11–11) and an email service for reporting violations of children's rights (NOPPC, 2020). This dedicated listening unit is staffed with psychologists, sociologists, jurists, and physicians. This team is tasked with assessing reported cases, guiding the response, and providing continued support through to the resolution of each case. Despite these advancements, media reports and calls to the hotline indicate that child maltreatment remains a persistent issue (NOPPC, 2020). Many NGOs were also created to assist children in need, notably the Algerian network NADA for the defence of children's rights which aims to coordinate actions undertaken by the civil society and institutions (Ettouahria, 2022). Despite these recent efforts, children's rights were particularly at risk in Algeria when

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[1] Note. Free translation by the author.

the pandemic of COVID-19 stroke (Amnesty International, 2020). The NADA network reported that violence against women and children increased substantially during lockdowns. From February to March 2020, the NADA Network received 18,000 calls, more frequently from interior provinces (NOPPC, 2020).

In this evolving social landscape, marked by a conservative culture, Algerian family structures are shifting. As seen in other Arab countries, women are no longer devoting all their time to family, and social institutions are substituting for children's care, mainly kindergartens, schools, and other education and welfare institutions (Selwaness & Krafft, 2020). A new way of life, based on the nuclear family rather than a traditional extended family where many relatives live close by is spreading (Tiliouine & Achoui, 2018). As a result, a new family dynamic is emerging, reflecting a balance between collectivist traditions and a growing interdependence that echoes trends observed in Asian societies (Cheng et al., 2011).

2.4 Child Well-Being in Algeria

Research on the well-being of children in Algeria has been limited, with significant contributions emerging primarily from the Children's Worlds project since 2014 (Tiliouine, 2022). Similar to findings in other developing countries, wealthier individuals tend to report higher levels of happiness (Tiliouine et al., 2006). The 2020 ISCWeB survey places Algerian children's satisfaction with their material possessions 27th out of 35 countries, a ranking that contrasts with the country's lower GDP per capita (Rees et al., 2020). This discrepancy may be attributed to the socialist-egalitarian policies of free education and healthcare, and the support of extended family networks, which serve as significant protective factors against poverty. However, the deprivation intensity, which measures the average deprivation score among those living in multidimensional poverty, stands at 39.2%, reflecting deep inequalities (UNDP, 2023). Notably, disparities also exist between regions and gender; boys, for example, are more likely to own a music player, a mobile phone, and have their own bedroom, as well as slightly better internet access than girls. These differences could reflect varying parental attitudes and practices towards boys and girls (Tiliouine, 2022).

The ISCWeB surveys also revealed that children in Algeria have a relatively positive view of their school and family life compared to other countries (Rees, 2017). While a harmonious family life contributes positively to children's healthy development, it is understood as a strong determinant of children's subjective well-being (Flaquer, 2014). Algerian children ranked 7th out of 16 countries in satisfaction with all the people in your family (Rees et al., 2016). The follow-up study showed that from ages 12 to 14, satisfaction with family aspects remained somewhat stable for boys, but satisfaction with family, along with satisfaction with time use and material possessions, significantly decreased for females (Tiliouine et al., 2019). This highlights a gender-based difference as children transition from early to mid-adolescence, which could be explained by differential parental practices for boys and girls. In the latest ISCWeB survey, Algerian children aged 8 to 10 years reported some of the highest levels of satisfaction with school life, ranking third among 35 countries (Rees et al., 2020). Typically, children from Africa and other less developed regions tend to report higher satisfaction with school life, which often surpass expectations. Algerian

children's high levels of satisfaction with school life could be linked to the fact that their daily activities predominantly involve homework, family care, and housework rather than organized extracurricular activities and sports (Tiliouine, 2020). Without many alternatives, school is likely their main social and recreational outlet.

Furthermore, there is a notable disparity in perceptions regarding the need for legal protection against violence toward children. While 14% of parents and 21% of children deemed such protection unimportant, this highlights a significant gap in awareness and prioritization of children's rights and protection (Tiliouine & Boussena, 2016). Despite these challenges, 47.5% of Algerian children who answered the last ISCWeb survey believed that adults generally respect their rights, indicating some recognition of efforts to uphold these rights (Rees et al., 2020).

3 Objectives

This study aims to understand children's experiences and perspective of well-being in Algeria. More specifically, the purpose of this article is to describe how children in Algeria experience well-being in their daily life, including people, things, places, and events.

4 Methods

4.1 Study Design

This research is part of the international collaborative network *Children's Understanding of Well-Being* (CUWB), which uses qualitative methods to investigate how children perceive and experience well-being. Up until now, 24 countries have participated and used CUWB's protocol in their local context. In line with the child-centred approach, the CUWB network provides guiding principles and methodologies, including a variety of participative tools for children to elaborate on the research questions. Our methodology relied on this protocol which was translated into Arabic and discussed by the research team. The protocol applied faithfully included the draw and write technique which allows children to creatively express their thoughts and feelings in writing or drawing, offering deeper insights into their subjective well-being (Angell et al., 2015). Additionally, we incorporated the "magic wand" question to shift focus away from their personal experiences, fostering imagination and the expression of their ideas. The research questions explored various aspects of children's well-being, including self-perception and identity, significant events, school experiences, relationships with parents and caregivers, feelings of freedom, the importance of material possessions, and perceptions of community and environment.

4.2 Participants

Participants were recruited in 2016 from three private schools and one public school located in Constantine, a prominent city in northeastern Algeria. Four focus groups

were formed from the private schools and one from the public school, with each consisting of five children ($n=20$) including 11 boys and 9 girls (55% of boys). Children were aged between 8 and 12 years old (mean=10.00). The third author approached school administrations to seek permission to conduct focus groups during school hours. Children were selected based on a voluntary basis. The private schools were selected to represent diverse socio-economic backgrounds, while the public school provided a contrasting setting.

4.3 Procedure

Children received detailed, illustrated explanations of the study's procedures, along with information on potential risks, benefits of participating, and their rights as research participants. In Algeria, where ethical standards require only the consent of the school principal rather than parental consent, assent was nonetheless reaffirmed with the children prior to each session, in alignment with ethical standards for child-centred research (Côté et al., 2018). The focus groups were conducted in a familiar environment within the school, each interview lasting approximately 45 min. In the interviews, children first described themselves and were asked to either draw or write what mattered most in their lives, touching on places, people, and activities. They were also asked what changes they would make to enhance their well-being if they had a magic wand. The discussion then broadened to their school experiences, personal necessities, views on their family financial needs, alongside their perceptions of autonomy, being heard by adults, and what makes them feel safe and secure. This comprehensive conversation aimed to capture a detailed picture of their well-being from multiple aspects of their daily lives. Each session was video-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Children's drawings and written materials were also collected as part of the data. Reflective notes were taken by researchers to capture the context and nuances of discussions.

4.4 Data Analysis

Data from the focus groups were transcribed and analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis to identify common patterns and unique perspectives on well-being as expressed by the children (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The data analysis was conducted using NVivo software (QSR International, 2024), following a six-step process to ensure rigor and validity (Braun & Clarke, 2019). First, the research team familiarized themselves with the data by listening to recordings and re-reading the transcripts. Initial codes were generated inductively from the transcripts and refined through an iterative process involving multiple team members to ensure reliability and depth of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These codes were organized into themes and sub-themes, which were collectively reviewed and refined in team meetings. A codebook was developed, and the material was coded in NVivo by the first author, who also documented reflections throughout the process. To enhance validity, the team engaged in regular discussions to ensure a low level of inference, staying close to participants' views and experiences, while biases were identified and minimized through this collaborative process. The emergent themes were then related

back to the broader theoretical frameworks of child well-being and the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to interpret how these findings might inform the understanding of children's subjective well-being in Algeria.

A comparative analysis was also conducted to compare the perspectives of participants from private and public schools (Mello, 2021). This analysis aimed to identify differences and similarities in their experiences and perceptions of well-being, considering the varying socio-economic and educational contexts of the two types of schools. However, most themes were similarly discussed across both groups, except for children's relationship to material possessions, which is further explored in the results section.

5 Results

Our results highlight diverse experiences of well-being reported by Algerian children, underscoring the significant influence of both immediate and broader environmental factors. Through narratives and drawings, children articulated their perceptions of well-being, safety, and happiness, providing insightful reflections on their interactions within family, school, community, and broader societal contexts. The next section answers this articles' objective regarding the description of Algerian children's experiences of well-being in their daily life. The results are organized according to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), highlighting different environmental layers that shape children's well-being.

At the microsystem level, which includes direct influences such as family, school, and peer relationships, children emphasized the role of family in emotional well-being and the impacts of participative and non-violent teaching approaches. At the mesosystem level, which concerns interactions between microsystem elements, discussions focused on how children's home and school lives intersect through their need for autonomy and freedom. At the macrosystem level, which refers to the broader context including economic systems, cultural values, and societal norms, material possessions, along with cultural and religious traditions shaped children's identities and their understanding of well-being. While children generally expressed contentment with their belongings, notable differences emerged between those in private and public schools. Finally, concerns about fairness, frustration with restrictive environments, and reflections on the role of education suggest a developing awareness of the broader world and their place within it.

Note: In the quotations presented throughout the article, *I* refers to the interviewer, while *P1*, *P2*, etc., indicated different participants to preserve confidentiality.

5.1 The Microsystem

5.1.1 Family as a Source of Emotional Well-Being

Most of the children's drawings included their family members. Children specifically mentioned the protective and comforting roles of family members like parents,

grandparents, and siblings. These relationships could make them feel safe and loved, even though some contributed to a lesser extent.

> I: *What is the thing that makes you feel safe and don't scare you at all?* P1: *My mother and my father*. P2: *My sister protects me. My father a little bit*.

(Private school, 3rd grade)

Moreover, participants reported enjoying the birth of newborns, while the sense of belonging within a growing family unit contributed considerably to their emotional well-being. In fact, they judged that a happy family life revolved around emotional and material needs.

> I: *For a happy life, in your point of view, what does a family need to live well? Things, cars, houses?* P1: *They need to help each other and love each other.* P2: *A house and family warmth.* P3: *Love.*

(Private school, 5th grade)

Here, participants emphasized the importance of love, family warmth, and mutual support as essential elements for well-being. These values suggest that these children prioritize emotional connections and the atmosphere of care within the family over material possessions for a happy and fulfilling life.

5.1.2 Appreciation of Participative and Non-Violent Teaching Approaches

Children experiences with teachers also seemed to greatly impact their well-being. Children shared their appreciation for teachers who encourage participation and offer appreciative support by recognizing progress and effort. Therefore, positive teacher-student interactions contributed to their school enjoyment and well-being. However, negative experiences arose from punitive measures, including physical discipline, and lack of parental intervention.

> "I: *What are the qualities of a good teacher?* P1: *The teacher who interacts with me.*
>
> P2: *A teacher who compliments me and asks me to write on the board.* P3: *It's the one who doesn't use violence. When you don't do your homework, he asks you to stand up, he beats you, and he insults you. If I ask for permission he shouts, and after he convenes your parents, and he says that you are naughty. The parents say: "beat them". The teachers when they are angry, they discharge their anger on us.*"

(Public school, 6th grade)

Children testimony suggests the importance of positive reinforcement and recognition to contribute to their well-being. A participatory learning environment where teachers engage students, listen to them, and allow them to actively contribute to the class makes them feel valued and heard. Many children also emphasized on violence, both physical and verbal, which underscores the negative impact such experiences have on children well-being. Reporting that teachers "discharge their anger" onto students highlights that children feel subjected to unjust punitive measures. Furthermore, the narrative includes reference to parents where some parents condone physical punishment. Children are placed in a position where teachers and parents may align against their protection from violence, further contributing to their distress. This dynamic reflects the mesosystem, where school and family interactions shape children's well-being, sometimes reinforcing harmful practices.

Interestingly, children had precise opinions on educational practices. They voiced their dissatisfaction with the mismatch between school teachings and the preparation for life in general. For instance, a young girl expressed how violent disciplinary measures overshadow other aspects of education.

I: *How do you feel about school?* P: *I feel like the children's education does not match the educational institution. School only teaches them. They do not educate them. Education becomes only beating children. It means that violence becomes everything.*

(Public school, 6th grade)

The child articulates a distinction between teaching, which is viewed as a transfer of academic knowledge, and educating, which encompasses broader developmental goals such as social, emotional, and moral growth. The critique that schools focus solely on the academic aspect while neglecting the broader purpose of education suggests a perceived failure to prepare children for life outside of school. The statement "Violence becomes everything," reflects how violence, especially in the form of corporal punishment, has become a dominant aspect of children's school experience. The normalization of violence within the school environment not only diminishes the value of education but also compromises children's well-being. This broader critique points to the macrosystem, where cultural norms and societal expectations around discipline and education shape children's experiences and well-being on a systemic level.

5.2 The Mesosystem

5.2.1 The Desire for Freedom and Autonomy

Many expressed how boredom and lack of freedom that extends from home to school hindered their well-being. Their narratives convey a sense of frustration within restrictive environment with strict rules that limit their free time and activities. Here, a participant who was forbidden to play after finishing his homework attempted to gain control over his free time by playing secretly.

I: *When do you feel that they must give you freedom?* P: *When I finish my homework. Yet, yesterday I finished my Arabic and math homework, and I had to hide to play.*

(Private, 3rd grade)

Children's experiences of well-being at school varied widely. While some found moments of autonomy and enjoyment through activities like school trips, swimming, or parties, most participants felt restricted in both the primary environments they regularly attend—school and home. Many voiced their frustration about the lack of stimulation and freedom, noting that these limitations were present not only in school but also in their home lives.

I: *At school, do you feel free or not?* P: *No! They do not let us. It's so boring that it kills me. Yet, at home, during the week, we cannot move. So, imagine at school, we are more locked.*

(Private school, 3rd grade)

These passages illustrate the mesosystem, where the interactions between home and school influence their sense of autonomy and well-being. The similarity of restrictions between school and home shows how these two microsystems interact to reinforce an overall sense of lack of freedom.

5.3 The Macrosystem

5.3.1 The Importance of Cultural and Religious Traditions

Children frequently drew and expressed their appreciation for religious and cultural events. These celebrations hold significant importance to them, often due to the joy of receiving gifts, spending time with family, the festive atmosphere, and a profound sense of connection to God, all of which contribute to their well-being. These events are deeply intertwined with their sense of identity, as they were often mentioned when children described themselves.

I: *Please describe yourself.* P: *Me, it's Yasmine. I like religious days like Mawlid, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha. […] Eid al-Fitr because they give me money.*

(Private school, 3rd grade)

Mawlid, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha are celebrations commemorating distinct aspects of Islamic history and practice: Mawlid celebrates the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Eid al-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha commemorates Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son in obedience to God. Here the child expresses her appreciation for the tradition of giving money to children on Eid al-Fitr. Kids also shared their affection for other aspects of their cultural identity. For some,

the familial legacy of Algerian martyrs who fought in the independence war against France (1954–1962) contributes to their well-being by inspiring national pride and resilience. This historical awareness is integrated with their personal identity and experiences of well-being, as illustrated by children like this participant:

> "I: *Draw what is important in your life, and what makes you happy.*
>
> P1: *Can I draw weapons? Is it normal?* I: *Yes. You draw what you want.* P1: *I will draw weapons. [...]* P2: *He wants to say that his grandfather is one of the great Algerian Martyrs.*
>
> *This is why he likes weapons.*"
>
> (Private school, 6th grade)

Here, the participant's friend helps clarify that the drawing of weapons is connected to a participant's pride in his grandfather's role as an Algerian martyr. This contextualization helps to understand the personal significance of the symbol chosen, aligning it with a sense of national pride rather than any inappropriate or violent intent.

5.3.2 Contentment with Material Possessions

When asked about their satisfaction with their personal belongings, all children answered they were satisfied with what they have, some acknowledging gratitude toward God. However, the only notable difference that emerged from the comparative analysis between children from private and public schools was in their relationship to material possessions. Drawings by private school children included more personal objects and electronics than their public school peers, which may highlight differences in how they perceive and value material possessions.

> I: *Some people don't have a PSP, they have a small house, but they are happy.* P1: *Me, I don't have a PSP, I don't have a phone. I only have a Play, and I'm happy. [...]* I: *Are you happy?* P1: *Yes. Happy alhamdulillah!*
>
> (Private school, 5th grade)

The phrase alhamdulillah means "praise to God" in Arabic. Despite not having luxury items like a PlayStation Portable (PSP) or a phone, here the child expresses gratitude towards God for what they do have. Furthermore, electronic devices and games are recurrent themes across groups. Children seem to associate ownership of electronic items with happiness and pleasure. As depicted below, some also seem to believe that material possessions are tied to independence and strength by desiring items that adults typically possess.

I: *Draw what is important in your life, and what makes you happy.* P1: *PC laptop.* P2: *All adults' things. I would like to own adults' things.* P3: *I want to own all things of strong people.*

(Private school, 3rd grade).

Wanting adult objects tells us about their developing sense of agency. Children seem to be aware of a social hierarchy where they could gain power if they own specific material, namely a house, luxurious cars, weapons or social media. This desire reflects their developmental stage and the dynamics of the chronosystem, as well-being is shaped by both their age and the evolving power relations they experience over time.

5.3.3 Aspirations for a Fairer World

When asked about what would improve their well-being, social equity and peace emerged as important themes in children's discourse. For instance, this child believed that a country leader from a humble background would care better for children.

P1: *I will change the Republic president and put a poor one.* I: *Why?* P1: *A poor president is better to improve the lives of poor people.* P2: *If I had a magic wand, I would give money to the poor.*

(Private, 3rd grade)

The suggestion of a "poor president" to improve the lives of poor people reflects an empathetic perspective and awareness of economic inequality, indicating that children believe those with humble backgrounds will better understand and address the needs of the underprivileged. This child's understanding of resource redistribution as a solution to social inequality highlights how these children see economic disparity as a key issue affecting well-being, not just for themselves but for society as a whole.

I: *Each one of you tries to think what are the things you want to change.* P: *I will change the world, so it becomes warless.* I: What else? P: *Everybody loves each other.*

(Private, 3rd grade)

The child's wish for a world without war and for everyone to "love each other" illustrates a hopeful worldview where peace and social harmony are paramount for their well-being. The fact that these young children envision a world free of conflict points to their recognition of the negative impacts of violence and division on their well-being.

6 Discussion

Reflecting on the initial commitments made under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, this study provides an enriched understanding of Algerian children's well-being by placing their voices at the forefront. Using a qualitative research approach, this research explored children's experiences and perspectives of their own well-being. Findings reveal that well-being is deeply embedded within cultural and religious fabrics and influenced by proximal and more societal factors. Additionally, the study shed light on the challenges children face in environments that restrict their agency and opportunities for leisure, as well as the impact of violence on their well-being. These findings highlight the importance of a culturally sensitive approach to address children's well-being in Algeria, as standardized measures may overlook the complexities and nuances unique to this context.

In exploring children's well-being in Algeria, the findings highlight that well-being is not just personal but also deeply connected to broader societal and cultural factors. Children's aspirations for social equity and a fairer world indicate a deep connection to global issues such as wars and poverty. This perspective aligns with findings from González-Carrasco et al. (2019), where children's well-being was closely tied to their evaluation of their surrounding world and global threats rather than their personal life satisfaction alone. Participants' sense of well-being depended not only on the protection they received but also on their active involvement, such as improving the lives of others and making a positive impact on the world.

A central theme in this study is this dual need for protection and agency, a concept underscored by the three P's approach– participation, protection, and provision (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020). This framework goes beyond conventional focus on safeguarding children from violence and ensuring their proper growth and development. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and respecting children as individuals with opinions, agency, and a right to voice their perspectives on matters that impact them (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020). Incorporating this participatory aspect into policies and practices by involving them in decision-making processes is crucial, as it strengthens their sense of competence, autonomy, and overall happiness. This suggests that fostering a sense of agency and social responsibility in children could be a vital component of their well-being, encouraging them to actively engage in their communities and beyond.

A key issue that emerged in the study was children's sense of hostile environment in proximal settings such as school and home. Reports of heightened insecurity, violent disciplinary measures, and lack of participation in school affairs reveal significant barriers to a positive school experience. This is concerning given that recent data indicates that 11.3% of Algerian students have experienced physical violence within their school between September 2021 and January 2022, with 8% of girls and 17% of boys reporting such incidents (CIDDEF, 2022). Alarmingly, 40% of these girls and 60% of these boys were victims of repeated violence. These acts were primarily committed by teachers, followed by school supervisors (CIDDEF, 2022). These challenges are compounded by the fact that teacher preparation programs often allocate little space to acquiring appropriate skills to deal with deviant behaviors and discipline problems using non-violent and constructive techniques. In Algeria, many

teachers have been and continue to be assigned to schools without any professional training, and data on the number of certified, trained teachers are lacking (Lakhdar, 2015). Moreover, aspects of the UNCRC related to enhancing children's security and participation in school settings are either ignored or less known by teachers. Therefore, it is urgent to open a large debate among teachers and between teachers and learners to discuss all possible ways to avoid using violent measures. Schooling conditions, mainly reducing class sizes which often go up to 35–45 students should be a priority of education leaders in the country in order to help teachers work with a suitable number of children. Although mentioned earlier, it is important to reiterate that children in Algeria report higher satisfaction with school compared to their peers in developed countries (Rees, 2017).

Children also expressed concerns that their parents were not intervening to prevent teachers from using physical punishment. While the CIDDEF (2022) study found that a majority of parents disagreed with the notion that a good education must involve physical punishment (around 60% of fathers and 40% of mothers), a UNICEF report revealed that 84.1% of children had experienced some form of physical or psychological punishment from their parents in the month preceding the research (MSPRH, 2020). Of those who were physically punished, 16.8% experienced severe physical punishment, such as being hit on the face or head or being struck with a hard object (MSPRH, 2020).

Furthermore, many children expressed how boredom and lack of freedom hindered their feelings of ease. Their narratives convey a sense of frustration within the restrictive environments such as home and school. They report that too many strict rules that limit their free time and activities are imposed to them. In poorer nations like Algeria, the opportunities for children to experience the joys of childhood, such as safe play and leisure activities, are often limited. This is partly because these nations prioritize educational outcomes as a key to future success, focusing heavily on mastering science and technological advances in schools. However, the lack of playgrounds, leisure spaces, and safe environments for children to interact outside school confines results in schools being perceived not just as places of learning but as rare opportunities for social interaction and fun.

According to a recent survey of Algerian parents, less than one third of children had access to extracurricular recreational activities in the previous 12 months, with girls participating significantly less than boys (33% vs. 10%) (CIDDEF, 2022). This discrepancy highlights the limited and unequal access to leisure and recreational opportunities, contributing to children's feelings of constraint and frustration. These responsibilities limit their ability to engage in unstructured play.

Religion was also remarkable in children's declarations. They consistently described religious celebrations, particularly Eid, as moments of immense joy and happiness, largely due to the special attention they receive from adults during these times. Gifts and money are highly valued by these young persons, but what stands out is their deep sense of gratitude towards God for the blessings in their lives. Their gratitude is emphasized in their satisfaction with what they have, often expressed through the phrase 'alhamdulillah.' In fact, Algeria ranked 14th out of 33 countries in ISCWeb survey regarding the total number of items children lack (Rees et al., 2020).

This gratitude seems to play a critical role in sustaining high levels of well-being, even in the presence of deficiencies in their material conditions.

Children's expressions echo the Islamic emphasis on contentment and acceptance of God's will. As Joshanloo (2013) highlights, happiness in Islam is closely tied to contentment, which comes from aligning oneself with God's plan. The Islamic worldview holds that trials and hardships are tests of faith, and enduring them with patience and gratitude fosters spiritual growth, ultimately leading to happiness. Understanding well-being in non-Western contexts like Algeria requires acknowledging the profound influence of religion and spirituality. Religious beliefs are not only deeply woven into daily life but likely shape children's entire conception of well-being.

Moreover, this cultural and religious propensity to be grateful and content might pose a significant challenge to accurately measure their real satisfaction with life, both quantitatively and qualitatively, particularly in areas like material resources. As Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2017) suggests, culturally specific expressions of well-being can obscure underlying distress or dissatisfaction when standardized measures are applied without considering cultural nuances. In the Algerian society, where gratitude and acceptance are highly valued, children's self-reports might reflect a socially or religiously motivated response rather than an objective assessment of their circumstances.

In a similar stream of ideas, children's discourse showed that Algerian culture and Islam are deeply embedded in children's sense of identity. Some drew strength and pride from their family's historical connection to the Algerian independence war. This historical awareness, passed down through family stories, ties into their personal identity. The significance of cultural and religious traditions in shaping their experiences of well-being underscores the importance of fostering a strong cultural identity for these children.

6.1 Strengths and Limitations

This study is pioneering in the Algerian context, as it actively involves children in the research process, a critical step in empowering them and valuing their voices in a society where children's views might traditionally be underrepresented. Incorporating age-appropriate and culturally sensitive data collection techniques like the draw and write method is crucial in research involving children, as it allows for a richer and more comprehensive expression of their experiences (Angell et al., 2015). By tailoring the approach to their developmental stage and in a more playful way, children can feel more comfortable and encouraged to share their perspectives, leading to more meaningful and nuanced data than traditional verbal or written methods alone.

Nevertheless, the study's findings are limited by the sample, which was drawn from only one region in Algeria and included more private schools than public ones. These factors should be considered when interpreting the results, as they pertain specifically to this context. Another limitation is the lack of differential analysis between boys and girls. Although previous quantitative studies have highlighted different experiences based on gender, the speaker in some cases was not always identifiable, and the small sample size may have constrained the ability to fully explore these differences. Future studies could aim to include a more diverse sample by select-

ing participants from multiple regions and ensuring a balanced representation of school types and participants' gender. Moreover, although the translation of verbatim responses from Arabic to English could have resulted in some nuances being lost, this risk was mitigated by the involvement of bilingual researchers in the analysis. Furthermore, since the questions were asked in a school setting, children's responses may have been more focused on this context, potentially overlooking aspects of their lives outside of school, even though children were prompt to think about various spheres of their lives. Finally, the cultural norm of expressing gratitude might have influenced the children's responses, making it challenging to obtain a reliable portrait of any disturbing aspects of their lives. To address this, the interviewer made sure to create a safe and trusting environment where children felt comfortable discussing difficult topics, allowing for more candid and honest responses.

6.2 Implications for Future Research and Practices

The findings from this study highlight several critical areas for further investigation and action in the Algerian context regarding the rights and well-being of children. The diverse experiences of well-being reported by children highlight the profound influence of cultural, religious, educational, familial, and material conditions on their development and overall happiness - factors that are central to the lived experiences of children across Muslim-majority and Arab societies, as well as in developing countries more broadly, given their shared cultural, religious, and socio-economic contexts (Tiliouine, 2022). These insights suggest that the lessons from this research can inform efforts in similar settings where children face comparable challenges and culture.

Given the concerning incidents of aggression by school personnel previously reported, it is imperative that future research delves deeper into the factors that foster positive teacher-student interactions. Understanding these dynamics is essential for creating a safe and supportive learning environment in Algerian schools, which is fundamental to children's overall development and well-being.

This study also reveals a gap in the children's agency at home and at school. This suggests a need for initiatives that promote children's participation in family and school life, but also in policy making, reinforcing their feeling of agency and competency. Moreover, this study underscores the importance of developing a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by children in Algeria, particularly in the realms of education, leisure, family dynamics, and security. By addressing these issues through informed research and targeted interventions, stakeholders can better support the rights and well-being of children.

7 Conclusion

This study is one of the first qualitative research articles dedicated to exploring Algerian children's experiences of well-being. It aims to push North African Muslim countries into the international conversation about children's well-being, offering valuable insights of a relatively underrepresented world area in this field. A salient character-

istic of the well-being construct is that it takes the colour and the shape of the studied context. In this case, the well-being of Algerian children reflects the unique cultural and social aspects of their environment. Religion plays a crucial role in fostering resilience, with children's expressions of gratitude and contentment reflecting deep-rooted Islamic values. Their positive outlook, despite material deficiencies, underscores the importance of understanding well-being through a culturally specific lens. However, challenges persist, particularly regarding the need for agency and leisure. Many children report frustration due to restrictive environments. Additionally, issues of violence and inadequate participation in school are significant concerns, revealing the need to rethink teachers' approaches. The study also emphasizes the broader societal factors such as aspirations for social equity and for a balance between protection and agency. These findings suggest that any future research or interventions aimed at improving children's well-being in Algeria must consider the distinctive cultural and environmental factors that influence their experiences.

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Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Naime Daoust-Zidane, upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Informed Consent In line with Algeria's research ethical procedure, assent was renewed with participants before each subsequent meeting.

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflict of interests to disclose.

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