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Family Support, Peer Support, and Children's Subjective Well-Being: The Mediating Role of School Belonging

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Highlights

What are the main findings?

- Family support and peer support were both positively associated with school belonging, and school belonging was positively associated with subjective well-being.
- Indirect associations through school belonging were statistically significant, supporting partial rather than full mediation, and peer support showed the stronger total association with subjective well-being.

What are the implications of the main findings?

- School belonging is an important school-domain indicator linking children's relational support with subjective well-being in diverse school settings.
- Children appear more likely to report positive well-being not only when support is available in family and peer contexts, but also when school is experienced as a place where they belong.

Abstract

Background/Objectives: Children's subjective well-being is multidimensional and shaped by proximal contexts such as family, peers, and schools, yet how these contexts work together remains less clear. This study examined whether family support and peer support were associated with children's subjective well-being directly and indirectly through school belonging. Methods: Using the United Kingdom (UK) component of the Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe (MiCREATE) survey, the analysis treated relational support, school belonging, and subjective well-being as linked child-reported indicators spanning relational, school, and evaluative well-being domains. The analytic sample comprised 463 children aged 8–16 years. A cross-sectional secondary structural equation modelling analysis compared a partial-mediation model, a full-mediation alternative, and reliability-corrected specifications for the brief support measures. Results: The preferred model was a refined reliability-corrected structural model. Family support and peer support were both positively associated with school belonging, and school belonging was positively associated with subjective well-being. Both support constructs also retained direct associations with subjective well-being, while their indirect associations through school belonging were statistically significant, supporting partial rather than full mediation. Peer support showed the stronger total association with subjective well-being. The final model explained 43.0% of the variance in

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school belonging and 78.8% of the variance in subjective well-being. Conclusion: The findings suggest that school belonging is an important school-domain indicator linking children's relational support with subjective well-being in diverse school settings.

Keywords: child indicators; subjective well-being; school belonging; family support; peer support; structural equation modelling

1. Introduction

Within child-indicators scholarship, children's well-being is generally treated as a multidimensional construct that should be understood across several domains rather than reduced to a single global score. The field has also increasingly emphasised the importance of indicator-based approaches to well-being measurement and of taking children's own perspectives seriously in the monitoring of their lives and outcomes [1,2]. Ecological and relationship-based research reinforces this position by showing that children's subjective well-being is shaped by proximal contexts such as family, peers, school, and neighbourhood, and that child-level relational and contextual indicators often account for more variation in well-being than broader macro-level conditions alone [3–5]. From this perspective, family support, peer support, school belonging, and subjective well-being are not isolated variables; they are linked indicators spanning relational and school domains.

School belonging is especially important within this configuration. It refers not simply to liking school, but to children's perceptions of being accepted, respected, included, and legitimate members of the school community [6]. A substantial body of evidence shows that stronger school belonging is associated with better adjustment, more positive mental health, and stronger well-being outcomes among children and adolescents [7–9]. Recent qualitative work in England likewise shows that children experience well-being at school through trust, care, inclusion, emotional safety, and recognition, indicating that school well-being cannot be understood adequately through formal participation or attainment indicators alone [10]. In child-indicators terms, school belonging is therefore a substantively meaningful school-domain indicator rather than a merely attitudinal correlate.

At the same time, children's school experiences are embedded in broader relational ecologies. Family and peer relationships are among the most consistent correlates of children's subjective well-being, and studies across national and school-based samples show that supportive family, peer, and school environments are positively associated with children's life satisfaction, adjustment, and psychosocial functioning [4,11–13]. Social support may also operate through school processes. For example, perceived support from parents, teachers, and friends has been linked to school adaptation and, in turn, to adolescents' subjective well-being [14]. This suggests that relational support may influence well-being both directly and indirectly through children's day-to-day experience of school.

The present study examines these associations using the United Kingdom (UK) component of the MiCREATE survey, an open dataset developed within a child-centred European project on migrant children, inclusion, and transforming communities [15]. The wider project context is analytically useful because research on migrant and culturally diverse school settings shows that school well-being and belonging are shaped by school climate, perceived discrimination, peer victimisation, and broader institutional inclusion [16–18]. However, the present article addresses a broader ecological question within the

UK subsample: how family support, peer support, and school belonging are jointly associated with children's subjective well-being in a socially diverse school-based sample.

This article therefore has three aims; first, it positions family support, peer support, school belonging, and subjective well-being as linked child well-being indicators spanning relational and school domains. Second, it develops an ecological-relational framework explaining why school belonging may mediate the association between relational support and subjective well-being. Third, it tests that framework through a secondary structural equation modelling analysis of the UK MiCREATE survey. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute both to the empirical literature on children's well-being and to the use of secondary survey data in child-indicators research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. School Belonging as a School-Domain Child Well-Being Indicator

School belonging is widely understood as a child's experienced sense of acceptance, inclusion, support, and membership within the school community rather than as a simple positive attitude toward school [6]. This distinction matters because belonging captures the social and emotional quality of school participation. In their meta-analysis, Allen et al. [7] concluded that school belonging is linked to a wide range of educational, psychological, and developmental outcomes. Similarly, Arslan et al. [8] showed that school belonging is a significant predictor of youth well-being and mental health, while Tian et al. [9] reported a longitudinal, bidirectional relationship between school belonging and subjective well-being in school among elementary students. Qualitative child well-being research in England also indicates that children describe school well-being in relational terms, especially through being cared for by adults, feeling emotionally safe, and managing the emotional climate of peer relations [10].

For child-indicators research, this makes school belonging especially valuable. School is one of the most developmentally consequential institutional settings in childhood, and indicator systems that rely only on attendance, enrolment, or attainment risk missing whether children experience school as socially meaningful, safe, and inclusive. Because belonging integrates affective, relational, and evaluative dimensions of school life, it provides a strong candidate school-domain indicator for understanding how children experience everyday schooling [7,10]. It is also theoretically important because it offers a plausible bridge between children's relational resources and broader subjective well-being [9].

2.2. Family Support and Peer Support as Relational Child Well-Being Indicators

A large body of research shows that social relationships are central to children's subjective well-being. Goswami [11] found that positive relationships with family and friends were associated with higher subjective well-being, whereas negative friendship experiences, bullying, and unfair treatment by adults were associated with lower well-being. In an international comparative study, Lee and Yoo [4] similarly showed that family, school, and community lives all significantly affected children's subjective well-being, with immediate surrounding environments proving more consistent predictors than national economic indicators. Adolescent studies also support this pattern. Piko and Hamvai [13] found parent-, school-, and peer-related variables to be associated with adolescents' life satisfaction, and Moore et al. [12] reported that family, peer, and school relationships were independently associated with subjective well-being and mental health outcomes in Wales.

From a child-indicators perspective, family support and peer support should therefore be treated not merely as background predictors, but as relational indicators of children's lived conditions. Support from parents or carers may provide emotional

security, communication, guidance, and coping resources, while peer support contributes companionship, reassurance, and a sense of social anchoring in everyday life. These are substantively meaningful dimensions of children's well-being in themselves, and they are also likely to shape how children experience other settings, particularly school [3,19]. This is important for the present study because family support and peer support may influence children's subjective well-being both directly and through school-based experiences.

There is also growing evidence for such mediated pathways. Tomás et al. [14], for example, found that perceived social support from different sources predicted adolescents' subjective well-being partly through school adaptation. Although school adaptation is not identical to school belonging, the study supports the broader theoretical expectation that school-based experiences mediate some of the relationship between social support and well-being. This makes it reasonable to examine school belonging as a possible mediator linking relational support with children's broader subjective well-being.

2.3. Subjective Well-Being and the Measurement of Children's Lives

Subjective well-being occupies a distinctive place in child-indicators scholarship because it foregrounds children's own evaluations of their lives. Ben-Arieh [2] famously argued that children should not appear only as objects of adult assessment but should be recognised as informants on their own well-being. Subsequent work in the field has continued this shift by treating children's self-reports as central to understanding both levels and predictors of well-being [20]. In UK evidence, Rees and Bradshaw [20] found that, although a wide range of parent-reported variables predicted low child subjective well-being, a smaller set of child-reported variables had greater explanatory power. This is highly relevant to the present study because all focal constructs are based on children's own reports of their experiences and evaluations.

At the same time, subjective well-being is not best understood as an isolated internal state detached from context. Ecological research across countries shows that family relationships, peer relationships, school context, and teacher relationships are important child-level predictors of well-being [3,5]. Newland et al. [5], using data from 14 countries, found that most of the variance in children's well-being was attributable to child-level rather than country-level factors. Likewise, Lee and Yoo [4] found that family, school, and community factors all significantly affected children's subjective well-being across nations. Taken together, this literature supports the use of subjective well-being as the outcome in the present study: it allows the consequences of family support, peer support, and school belonging to be modelled from the child's own perspective.

2.4. Diverse and Migrant School Contexts

The MiCREATE dataset also originates from a project explicitly concerned with migrant children and child-centred integration [15]. This broader context matters because research on migrant and immigrant-background children suggests that school well-being is shaped not only by generic developmental factors, but also by the quality of inclusion within school environments. Ham et al. [18], in a cross-national multilevel study, showed that immigrant-background adolescents' sense of belonging at school was related not only to individual attributes but also to the broader policy context of educational inclusion. Guerra et al. [17] found that immigrant children in Portugal reported lower well-being and peer acceptance than native peers, and that perceived discrimination was negatively related to school achievement among immigrant children.

Comparative MiCREATE-related work further shows that migrant adolescents' self-perceived school well-being is associated with feelings of safety, multicultural teaching practices, peer relationships, and peer victimisation across European countries, including the UK [16]. This suggests that in diverse school settings, support and belonging are not

merely generic developmental resources; they are also part of how children experience recognition, safety, and participation in everyday school life. The present study does not estimate separate models by migration status, and its claims should therefore remain appropriately general. Nevertheless, the project context strengthens the relevance of school belonging as an indicator of inclusion as well as well-being in socially diverse educational environments.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on ecological and relationship-based models of children's subjective well-being. In these approaches, well-being is not treated as an isolated internal disposition, but as the product of children's participation in relationally organised everyday environments. Lawler et al. [3] conceptualised children's subjective well-being as rooted in interconnected home, peer, school, and neighbourhood contexts, while Newland et al. [5] showed that child-level contextual factors account for much more variation in well-being than country-level indicators. This framework is also consistent with Lee and Yoo's [4] finding that family, school, and community conditions all contribute significantly to children's subjective well-being across national contexts.

Within this framework, family support and peer support can be understood as proximal relational resources. School belonging occupies a different but linked conceptual status. It is a school-domain indicator, but it can also be understood as an integrative psychological process because it reflects how children interpret their place within the school microsystem. Supportive family relationships may provide emotional security and communicative resources that help children engage positively with school, while supportive peer relationships may make everyday school life feel safer, more validating, and more socially meaningful [11,12]. School belonging, in turn, is expected to translate these relational resources into a broader evaluation of subjective well-being because it captures whether children experience school as a place in which they are accepted and included [7,9].

At the same time, direct paths from family support and peer support to subjective well-being remain theoretically plausible. Prior research shows that family and peer relationships have independent associations with well-being beyond school-based processes [4,11,13]. Moreover, Tomás et al. [14] found that social support predicted subjective well-being partly, not completely, through school-related mediating variables. For that reason, the present framework predicts partial rather than full mediation.

Based on the reviewed literature and the ecological-relational framework, the study tested the hypotheses below. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model.

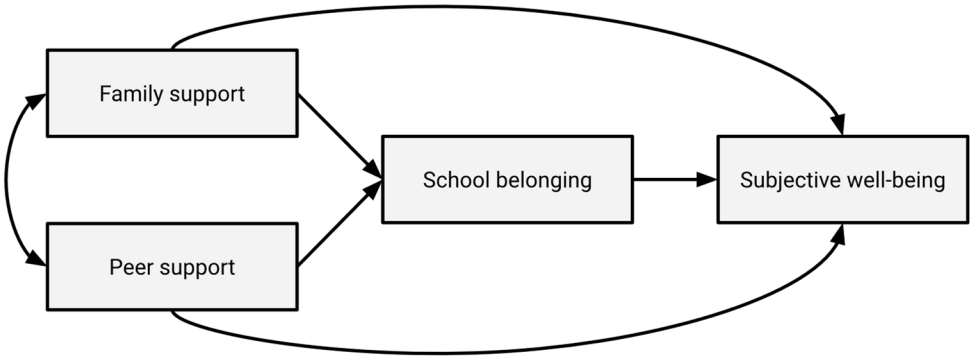


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

H1. *Family support is positively associated with school belonging.*

H2. *Peer support is positively associated with school belonging.*

H3. *School belonging is positively associated with children's subjective well-being.*

H4. *Family support is positively associated with children's subjective well-being.*

H5. *Peer support is positively associated with children's subjective well-being.*

H6. *School belonging partially mediates the association of family support and peer support with children's subjective well-being.*

3. Method

3.1. Data Source and Research Design

This study is a secondary analysis of the United Kingdom (UK) component of the MiCREATE survey [15]. MiCREATE was a Horizon 2020 project designed to investigate the inclusion and integration of diverse groups of migrant children through a child-centred framework. The UK deposit includes school-based survey data together with questionnaire documentation and study materials archived through the UK Data Service ReShare repository [15].

The present article adopts a cross-sectional secondary-data design. No new contact with participants occurred. Instead, anonymised survey data were re-analysed to test a theoretically specified structural equation model linking relational support, school belonging, and subjective well-being. In keeping with the ethical principles for educational research, the present study relied on anonymised secondary data and did not involve additional data collection from children [21].

3.2. Participants

The dataset contained 463 child respondents. Children ranged in age from 8 to 16 years (M = 11.47, *SD* = 1.71). The sample included 241 girls (52.1%), 219 boys (47.3%), and 3 cases with missing sex/gender information. In migration-duration terms, 53 children (11.4%) were classified as newly arrived, 98 (21.2%) as long-term migrant, 307 (66.3%) as local, and 5 cases (1.1%) had missing migration-status information. Table 1 summarises the sample characteristics. Because the present study used anonymised secondary data from an open repository, no new human-participant contact occurred. However, the original MiCREATE documentation indicates that child assent procedures and parental consent or parental notification procedures were used during the original data collection process.

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

Characteristic	*n*/Statistic	%
Age range (years)	8–16	
Mean age (*SD*)	11.47 (1.71)	
Girls	241	52.1
Boys	219	47.3
Missing sex/gender	3	0.6
Newly arrived	53	11.4
Long-term migrant	98	21.2
Local	307	66.3
Missing migration status	5	1.1

3.3. Measures

Consistent with child-indicators scholarship, the focal variables were treated as child-reported indicators spanning relational, school, and evaluative domains of well-being rather than as detached background covariates [1,2]. This emphasis on children's self-reports is

methodologically appropriate because child-indicators research increasingly recognises children as informants on their own lives, and prior UK evidence suggests that child-reported variables can be especially informative in explaining subjective well-being [2,20]. Table 2 summarises the focal constructs and their analytic specifications.

Table 2. Focal constructs and indicators.

Construct	Item Codes	Example Wording	Domain and Analytic Role
Subjective well-being	Q24a–Q24d	Life satisfaction, self-acceptance, and optimism about the future	Evaluative well-being indicator; latent outcome
Family support	Q29a–Q29b	Family help and parental/carer listening	Relational indicator; reliability-corrected single-indicator latent exogenous construct
Peer support	Q29c–Q29d	Friend availability and support in the event of a problem	Relational indicator; reliability-corrected single-indicator latent exogenous construct
School belonging	Q34a–Q34e	Liking school, safety, belonging in class, teacher-question comfort, classmates' views	School-domain indicator; latent mediator

Subjective well-being was measured with four items (Q24a–Q24d) concerning life satisfaction, perceived attainment of desired life conditions, self-acceptance, and optimism about the future. In child-indicators terms, this construct captures children's own evaluative appraisal of their lives and was therefore specified as the latent outcome in the model [2,20].

Family support was measured with two items (Q29a–Q29b) concerning family help and parental/carer listening. Peer support was measured with two items (Q29c–Q29d) concerning friend availability and support in the event of a problem. These two constructs were treated as brief relational indicators of children's everyday support environment. That treatment is consistent with ecological child well-being research showing that family and peer relationships are central dimensions of children's lived conditions and are closely associated with subjective well-being [3,4,11,12].

School belonging was measured with five items (Q34a–Q34e) covering liking school, safety at school, belonging in class, comfort when answering teacher questions, and comfort with classmates' views. This construct was treated as a school-domain indicator and specified as the model's mediator, consistent with the literature positioning belonging as a core dimension of children's school experience and well-being [6,7,9].

All focal items were scored on five-point response scales. For descriptive purposes, scale means were computed from the relevant items. In the structural models, subjective well-being and school belonging were specified as multi-item latent constructs. Family support and peer support, by contrast, were each measured with only two items. They were therefore represented in the preferred specification as reliability-corrected single-indicator latent constructs rather than as error-free observed composites. This approach is useful when brief but theoretically important measures are expected to contain non-trivial measurement error, because it preserves them within the structural model while avoiding the implausible assumption of perfect measurement [22]. Internal consistency estimates were acceptable for subjective well-being, family support, and school belonging, and lower but still interpretable for the brief peer-support measure.

3.4. Analytic Strategy

The structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis followed a staged procedure consistent with applied SEM guidance [23,24]. First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was estimated to evaluate the latent measurement structure for subjective well-being and school belonging. Second, a baseline partial-mediation structural model was fitted in

which family support and peer support predicted both school belonging and subjective well-being, while school belonging predicted subjective well-being. This specification corresponded to the ecological-relational framework developed in the literature review.

Third, the partial-mediation model was compared with a more restrictive full-mediation alternative in which the direct paths from family support and peer support to subjective well-being were constrained to zero. Fourth, a reliability-corrected version of the structural model was estimated, in which family support and peer support were represented as single-indicator latent constructs with fixed error variances derived from their observed variance and internal consistency estimates [22]. This final step was undertaken to improve measurement realism rather than because reliability correction was expected automatically to produce better global fit. The conceptual advantage of the specification is that it avoids treating brief relational indicators as perfectly measured.

All models were estimated in R (v4.5.0) using robust maximum likelihood. Missing data were handled using full-information maximum likelihood so that all available observed information could contribute to parameter estimation under standard SEM assumptions [24]. Model evaluation drew on the chi-square statistic, the comparative fit index, the Tucker–Lewis index, the root mean square error of approximation, and the standardized root mean square residual. In interpreting fit, emphasis was placed on the overall pattern across indices rather than on rigid mechanical cut-offs, while taking account of widely used benchmark guidance for CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR [24,25].

Because the study was theory-led rather than exploratory, post hoc re-specification was kept deliberately minimal. A single residual covariance between the two most semantically similar global well-being items was considered only as a constrained refinement if it improved fit and remained theoretically interpretable. Indirect effects were then examined within the preferred model to assess whether school belonging statistically mediated the association of family support and peer support with subjective well-being. Given the cross-sectional design, these indirect effects were interpreted as patterned associations consistent with mediation theory rather than as evidence of temporal causation.

4. Results

4.1. Sample Descriptives and Internal Consistency

Table 3 reports descriptive statistics and internal consistency estimates for the focal constructs. Valid *n* ranged from 442 to 446 across the constructs. Mean scores were relatively high for family support (M = 4.42, *SD* = 0.76) and peer support (M = 4.45, *SD* = 0.79), and somewhat lower for school belonging (M = 3.97, *SD* = 0.82) and subjective well-being (M = 4.07, *SD* = 0.83). Internal consistency was strongest for subjective well-being (α = 0.812) and school belonging (α = 0.788), acceptable for family support (α = 0.736), and lower for the brief two-item peer-support scale (α = 0.657).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and internal consistency of the focal constructs.

Construct	*n*	Mean	*SD*	Cronbach's Alpha
Family support	442	4.42	0.76	0.736
Peer support	445	4.45	0.79	0.657
School belonging	446	3.97	0.82	0.788
Subjective well-being	446	4.07	0.83	0.812

4.2. Measurement Model

The confirmatory factor analysis of subjective well-being and school belonging indicated acceptable fit: chi-square(26) = 70.72, comparative fit index = 0.953, Tucker–Lewis index = 0.935, root mean square error of approximation = 0.077, and standardized

root mean square residual = 0.038. The standardized factor loadings were all positive and substantively meaningful, supporting the retention of both constructs as latent variables for the subsequent structural models.

4.3. Structural Model Comparisons

Table 4 summarises the measurement and structural models. The full-mediation SEM fit the data less well than the partial-mediation SEM. A scaled chi-square difference test indicated that retaining the direct paths from family support and peer support to subjective well-being significantly improved model fit, delta chi-square(2) = 29.68, $p < 0.001$. This result supported continuation with the partial-mediation specification.

Table 4. Model fit indices for the measurement and structural models.

Model	Chi-Square	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	AIC	BIC
CFA	70.72	26	0.953	0.935	0.077	0.038	10,336.76	10,452.43
Full-mediation SEM	126.26	42	0.931	0.910	0.081	0.048	12,151.54	12,296.13
Partial-mediation SEM	95.74	40	0.954	0.937	0.068	0.039	12,114.09	12,266.95
Reliability-corrected base SEM	95.74	40	0.954	0.937	0.068	0.039	12,114.09	12,266.95
Refined reliability-corrected SEM	85.40	39	0.962	0.947	0.062	0.037	12,102.40	12,259.39

The reliability-corrected base SEM yielded the same global fit indices as the uncorrected partial-mediation SEM in this application. This numerical equivalence indicates that introducing reliability correction for the two brief exogenous support constructs did not materially alter overall model-data fit. The reliability-corrected specification was nevertheless preferred because it modelled measurement error in the family-support and peer-support constructs rather than treating them as perfectly measured composites.

A final theory-led refinement allowing covariance between the two most semantically similar global well-being items further improved the reliability-corrected model, delta chi-square(1) = 11.09, $p = 0.001$. The refined reliability-corrected SEM also produced the lowest AIC (12,102.40) and BIC (12,259.39) among the SEM specifications reported in Table 4. It was therefore retained as the preferred final model.

4.4. Refined Model

The preferred refined reliability-corrected model showed acceptable-to-good fit: chi-square(39) = 85.40, comparative fit index = 0.962, Tucker–Lewis index = 0.947, root mean square error of approximation = 0.062, and standardized root mean square residual = 0.037.

Within this model, both support constructs were positively associated with school belonging. Family support significantly predicted school belonging ($\beta = 0.373$, $p < 0.001$), and peer support also significantly predicted school belonging ($\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.001$). School belonging, in turn, was positively associated with subjective well-being ($\beta = 0.504$, $p < 0.001$).

The direct paths from the support constructs to subjective well-being also remained statistically significant. The direct effect of family support on subjective well-being was modest ($\beta = 0.181$, $p = 0.028$), whereas the direct effect of peer support was larger ($\beta = 0.349$, $p < 0.001$). Indirect effects via school belonging were statistically significant for both family support ($\beta = 0.188$, $p < 0.001$) and peer support ($\beta = 0.187$, $p < 0.001$). The coexistence of significant direct and indirect paths was therefore consistent with partial mediation.

Total standardized effects were 0.369 ($p < 0.001$) for family support and 0.536 ($p < 0.001$) for peer support. The final model explained 43.0% of the variance in school belonging and 78.8% of the variance in subjective well-being. Table 5 reports the

standardized direct, indirect, and total effects, and Figure 2 presents the preferred structural model.

Table 5. Standardized direct, indirect, and total effects in the preferred refined reliability-corrected SEM.

Path or Effect	Standardized Estimate	*p*
Family support → School belonging	0.373	<0.001
Peer support → School belonging	0.372	<0.001
School belonging → Subjective well-being	0.504	<0.001
Family support → Subjective well-being	0.181	0.028
Peer support → Subjective well-being	0.349	<0.001
Indirect family support → well-being via school belonging	0.188	<0.001
Indirect peer support → well-being via school belonging	0.187	<0.001
Total family support effect	0.369	<0.001
Total peer support effect	0.536	<0.001

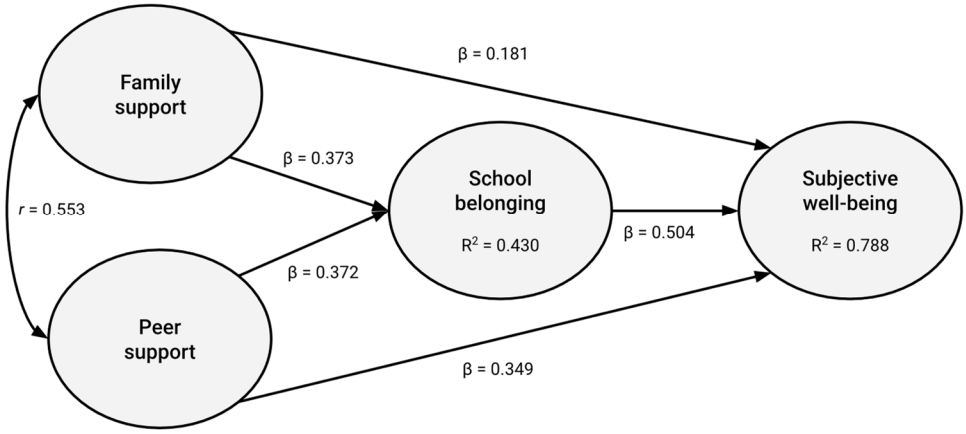


Figure 2. Preferred refined reliability-corrected structural equation model (standardized coefficients).

5. Discussion

5.1. Literature and Theoretical Interpretation

The findings are consistent with the view that children's subjective well-being is shaped not only by the availability of relational support, but also by how children experience their place within school. In the preferred model, both family support and peer support were positively associated with school belonging, and school belonging was positively associated with subjective well-being. Because the data are cross-sectional, these paths should be interpreted as patterned associations consistent with, rather than definitive proof of, the theoretical expectation that belonging functions as a school-domain process through which relational resources are linked to evaluative well-being. This interpretation is aligned with the literature describing school belonging as a central dimension of children's psychological functioning and school experience [6,7]. It is also consistent with evidence that school belonging is positively associated with youth well-being and that the relationship between school belonging and school-related subjective well-being may unfold over time [8,9].

The combination of direct and indirect effects also supports an ecological reading of children's well-being. Ecological and relationship-based models argue that children's evaluations of their lives emerge from interconnected home, peer, school, and community contexts rather than from any one domain in isolation [3,5]. From this perspective, family support may matter because being listened to and helped by parents or carers provides emotional security and coping resources that children bring into school, while peer

support may be especially salient because peers are embedded in the everyday social life of school itself [4,11]. The stronger total effect observed for peer support is therefore theoretically plausible in a school-based dataset and is broadly consistent with prior studies showing that peer, family, and school relationships each have meaningful associations with adolescents' subjective well-being and mental health [12,13].

The results also contribute to child-indicators scholarship. Rather than treating relational support, school experience, and subjective well-being as separate domains to be reported in parallel, the present study models them as linked child-reported indicators. This is important because child well-being monitoring increasingly emphasises both multidomain measurement and the importance of children's own accounts of their lives [1,2]. The findings suggest that family support and peer support are not only predictors of outcomes but also meaningful relational indicators of children's lived conditions, while school belonging operates as a substantively important school-domain indicator that helps connect those relational conditions to children's broader evaluative well-being [2,20].

5.2. Relevance for Diverse and Migration-Related School Contexts

Although the present study did not estimate separate models by migration-status category, the MiCREATE context remains relevant for interpretation. The dataset originates from a child-centred project on migrant children, inclusion, and transforming communities [15]. For that reason, the present findings are best interpreted not as evidence about migration background in itself, but as evidence that, in socially diverse school settings, immediate relational and school experiences may be especially important for understanding children's well-being. This is consistent with research showing that migrant and immigrant-background students' school well-being and sense of belonging are shaped by school climate, safety, social relationships, discrimination, and broader inclusion contexts [16–18].

This contextual reading strengthens the significance of school belonging. In diverse educational settings, belonging may function not only as a correlate of positive school experience but also as an indicator of whether children experience the institution as recognitive, safe, and socially navigable. Dežan and Sedmak [16], using MiCREATE-related data, showed that school well-being among migrant adolescents is associated with everyday school experiences such as safety and relationships with teachers and peers. Similarly, Ham et al. [18] and Guerra et al. [17] indicated that belonging and well-being among immigrant-background children are tied to wider inclusion conditions. The present study cannot determine whether the same pathways operate equivalently across migration groups, but it does suggest that support and belonging deserve analytical attention as indicators of inclusion as well as well-being in diverse school environments.

5.3. Policy Implications

The main contribution of the study lies in showing how relational, school-domain, and evaluative indicators can be modelled together within a coherent explanatory framework. Child well-being systems often report domains side by side, yet children encounter family relationships, peer cultures, and school experiences as interconnected features of everyday life. A child-indicators approach informed by the present findings would therefore give greater analytical weight to relational support and school belonging alongside more conventional educational or well-being measures [1,2].

The policy implications should be stated carefully given the study design, but some practical implications are reasonable. First, schools should not treat belonging as a soft secondary outcome. Research consistently shows that belonging is tied to student adjustment and well-being [7,8], and the present model suggests that belonging may be one of the key school-domain pathways through which relational support is associated

with well-being. Second, school well-being monitoring and local child well-being frameworks may be strengthened by including brief child-reported indicators of family support, peer support, and school belonging rather than relying only on attendance, behaviour, or attainment proxies. This recommendation is compatible with child-indicators scholarship that emphasises the value of children's own reports and multidomain indicator systems [1,2,20].

At the school level, the results particularly highlight the practical importance of peer relations. Because peer support had the strongest total association with subjective well-being in the final model, schools may wish to treat peer culture as a well-being issue rather than only a behaviour or discipline issue. Interventions that improve peer support, reduce exclusion and victimisation, and strengthen teacher–student and student–student connectedness are theoretically well aligned with the present findings and with prior research on school belonging and adolescent connectedness [7,12,19]. At the same time, the findings do not justify narrow programme prescriptions or national generalisations. The most defensible implication is that relational and belonging-based indicators deserve greater prominence in school well-being monitoring and improvement work.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is cross-sectional, so the structural paths should not be interpreted as evidence of temporal or causal processes. The model identifies a pattern of associations consistent with mediation theory, but longitudinal data would be needed to establish developmental ordering more convincingly. This is especially relevant because prior work on school belonging and well-being has shown the value of longitudinal designs for examining relationships over time [9].

Second, all focal measures were based on children's self-reports. That is an important strength for child-indicators research because it keeps children visible as informants on their own lives [2], but it also raises the possibility of common-method inflation and shared-response bias. Future studies would benefit from combining child self-reports with complementary information on school context, peer climate, or teacher relationships where available.

Third, family support and peer support were measured with only two items each, and peer support had the weakest reliability among the focal constructs. The reliability-corrected specification improved the treatment of measurement error, but it cannot fully compensate for the limitations of brief scales. In addition, the final model required a small theory-led covariance between two subjective well-being items, suggesting some item-level overlap within the outcome measure. Future work should therefore use fuller measurement batteries, report complete factor-loading tables, and test alternative measurement structures for both support and well-being constructs.

Fourth, the UK MiCREATE sample is a school-based project sample rather than a nationally representative sample of children in the UK. The present findings are therefore analytically informative, but they should not be interpreted as national prevalence estimates or as direct evidence of population-level effect sizes. Fifth, because the data were collected through schools, responses were likely nested within school contexts. The present analysis did not model school-level clustering, and future research should use multilevel SEM where sample structure permits, particularly because prior child well-being research shows that both child-level and context-level conditions can shape subjective well-being [4,5].

Finally, the study did not test subgroup differences or measurement invariance by migration status, age, or sex/gender. Given the MiCREATE context, this is an important limitation. Future research should examine whether the observed pathways differ across newly arrived, long-term migrant, and local students, and whether the meaning of school

belonging is measurement-equivalent across these groups. Such analyses would provide a stronger bridge between the present child-indicators framing and the literature on migration, inclusion, and diverse school environments [16–18].

6. Conclusions

This study examined how family support, peer support, school belonging, and subjective well-being are related within the UK MiCREATE survey. The preferred model suggests that family support and peer support are positively associated with children's subjective well-being both directly and indirectly through school belonging, and that peer support has the stronger total association in this school-based sample. Interpreted cautiously, the findings are consistent with ecological accounts of child well-being in which children's evaluations of their lives are shaped by interconnected relational and school experiences [3,5].

The wider contribution of the study is conceptual as well as empirical. It shows how child-reported relational indicators, a school-domain indicator of belonging, and subjective well-being can be integrated within a single explanatory model. In that sense, the article supports a child-indicators approach that takes children's own accounts seriously and that treats well-being as multidomain, relational, and contextually embedded [1,2]. For diverse school settings, the central implication is that children appear more likely to report positive well-being not only when support is available in family and peer contexts, but also when school is experienced as a place where they belong.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was not required for the present study, as it involved secondary analysis of fully anonymised, open-access data. According to the MiCREATE study documentation, the original data collection used child assent together with either opt-in parental consent or opt-out parental notification procedures, in line with institutional ethical approval guidelines.

Data Availability Statement: The dataset analysed in this study is publicly available from the UK Data Service: Arun, S., Szymczyk, A., & Batool, F. (2022). Migrant Children in a Transforming Europe Survey Data, 2020–2021 [Data collection]. UK Data Service. https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-855768 [15].

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