



# Metaphorical Dialogue: an Innovative Strategy for Capturing Children's Experience of Subjective Well-being

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## Abstract

Researchers conducting child-centered studies are expected to develop strategies that allow them to not only gain access to and accurately understand children's experiences, but also position children's participation and empowerment in the forefront. One possible way to promote this research approach is through the use of metaphorical methods. However, little is known about the use of such methods. This article aims to introduce an innovative metaphorical narrative-based data collection methodology developed and validated in a study documenting immigrant children's understandings and experiences of their well-being. The study was conducted in collaboration with two community centres in Montréal, Québec, Canada, offering services to a majoritively immigrant population. Twenty-two children between the ages of six and twelve attending these organizations' programs participated in four multi-activity workshops. The various activities were developed around a metaphorical character: an alien named Miinx visiting planet Earth on a mission to better understand Earthling children's conceptions and experiences of well-being. Each workshop was connected to a letter the alien sent the children. The activities fostered self-expression through discussions, image sorting, drawing, crafting, writing, and acting. The metaphorical framework was appreciated by children and seem to allowed them to share personal opinions and life events in an indirect way. Using a pretend character to interact with children can help them feel comfortable, as they are positioned as the experts, tasked with teaching someone unfamiliar with their reality about the way they experience and understand it. By demonstrating the use of a metaphorical character in research, this study contributes to the development of participative methods in child-centred research.

**Keywords** Child well-being · Metaphor technique · Child-centred research · Children with immigrant backgrounds · Child experience

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## 1 Introduction

What determines positive development is closely related to child well-being, making these two concepts indissociable. Regarding children from a migrant background, multiple factors can negatively impact their well-being and thus their development, such as stressors in connection to their or their parents' migration journey and arrival in their new society (Samara et al., 2020). However, exploring well-being can be difficult considering that the notion is multifaceted and multi-dimensional, and is rarely perceived or defined in the same way by researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers. Well-being has for a long time been measured mainly through quantitative approaches, and studies have not typically provided children the space to convey their own perspectives of their well-being. However, over the past couple of decades, various research methods that enable children to fully participate in research have been developed, and these have allowed researchers to explore in greater depth what contributes to and harms children's well-being through children's points of view.

This paper presents an innovative methodological approach for examining and gaining a better grasp of the understanding and experience of well-being of immigrant-background children in Québec, Canada. We first present the complexity of children's well-being and explore its connections with children's agency. This notion, and its relation to well-being, is particularly salient in the context of children with immigrant or other vulnerable backgrounds. We also highlight the importance of studying children's well-being with the participation of the children themselves, despite the challenges in accessing their voices. We discuss various research methods that can facilitate children's participation in scientific studies. These methods position children at the centre of research and adopt child-friendly tools that help children feel more comfortable in sharing their experiences and opinions. Such methods frequently use visual aids, for example. Lesser-known are metaphorical methods (Clark, 2004; Rousseau et al., 2003). These use metaphors to reach children. In what follows, we provide examples of these methods and explore their benefits, and then present in detail the particular methods we have developed, which are centred around a metaphorical character, and examples of the results these methods enabled us to obtain.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Child Well-Being

Well-being is a complex notion that encompasses such a multitude of dimensions that a single, authoritative definition of the concept can hardly be said to exist. It is both subjective and objective, as well as cultural (Casas & Frønes, 2020; Weisner, 2014). When discussing children's well-being in particular, many authors reference the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and how it is used to structure

child policies (Casas & Frønes, 2020; Fattore et al., 2012; Mason & Hood, 2011; Stoecklin, 2019). A child's subjective well-being can be understood as their own first-personal evaluation of and satisfaction with their life. Their objective well-being, on the other hand, can be seen "not only as a function of the opportunity structures and economic resources of various groups of children, but as rooted in the interplay between their opportunity structures, their *freedom* to *access* opportunities and their ability to *utilize* those opportunities." (Casas & Frønes, 2020, p. 189). Although the levels of subjective well-being reported by children differ from country to country, in general boys tend to report higher subjective wellbeing than girls (Kaye-Tzadok et al., 2017; Lee & Yoo, 2015). Major factors that contribute, regardless of country, to children's subjective well-being are time with family, home, school and neighborhood safety, time spent with peers, and sense of having agency (Fattore et al., 2012; Lee & Yoo, 2015).

Children are a vulnerable category of research participants, and child-centred research must give due regard to this fact. Nevertheless, approaches to research that overemphasize children's vulnerability have been challenged (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020). When accompanied by overprotectiveness, such approaches can hinder children's participation in research (Kirova & Emme, 2007). Viewing children as "too" vulnerable and powerless can entail viewing, and thus treating, them as unable to share their own views or know what is good for them. This can be a missed opportunity to better understand children's well-being as what adults consider significant for children is not necessarily what children themselves find important for their well-being (Fattore et al., 2007). Children's well-being has for a long time been determined by adults (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014), when in fact, when children are given the space to share their perspectives on their own well-being, a window is opened into their lives and new information can be obtained. It is by asking children about their well-being that researchers have discovered the importance they give to their agency. In Fattore et al. (2009)'s study on children's well-being, reports of the children participating in the study indicated that "having agency, or the capacity to have some control and to be able to exert influence" (p. 63) was essential to their subjective well-being. The researchers also found that agency and the sense of security that children felt were closely connected. Having a sense of agency can positively impact children's well-being. Being informed about what is going on around them can help children make better sense of their reality, which can ease their worries and positively affect their mental health and overall well-being.

The ongoing research project *Children's Understanding of Well-Being* (CUWB) presents methodologies for exploring and better understanding children's well-being that also position children at the centre of research. The CUWB began in 2015 and promotes innovative strategies that circumvent the limitations of the typical scientific approaches to child well-being research. At present, there are researchers from 24 countries contributing to the CUWB study; these researchers conduct fieldwork using CUWB methodologies in their own country. The CUWB study is currently in the data collection phase. CUWB research projects consider children's understandings and experiences of their well-being through qualitative methods and analyze children's subjective well-being within their daily lives. The CUWB explores what is important to children through different domains of life, such as family life, school,

and peer relationships as well as sociopolitical and economic areas. The CUWB is also nation-centred, in that the study's aim to understand children's well-being in relation to their national contexts. The projects examine how children from different countries and regions experience and perceive their well-being, putting similarities and differences into perspective. By putting forward a nation-centred approach, the CUWB study grants researchers a significant degree of flexibility, enabling them to conduct research that is reflective of and responsive to their country's particular context. Central research principles and methodologies that guide the different projects and demarcate them as CUWB projects included that studies use qualitative methods and are conducted with, and not merely *on*, children, and typically—though not exclusively (see, e.g., Akkan et al., 2019)—with children between eight and fourteen years of age. Fieldwork is also documented through ethnography.

## 2.2 Well-Being of Immigrant-Background Children

Like many other provinces and nations, Québec is home to a large immigrant and refugee population. Immigrants and refugees with a variety of backgrounds have resettled in the Canadian province. Immigration in the province (“people who are, or have been, landed immigrants or permanent residents” (Statistique Canada, 2023, Footnote 81) is mainly familial, with the second-largest immigrant age group, children 0 to 14 years of age, representing 25.91% of the total immigrant population. In Canada, 9.4% of children are immigrants and close to 40% were either born outside Canada or have at least one parent who was born outside Canada (UNICEF Canada, 2020). These children and their families can arrive to their new country traumatized, having seen and lived various hardships in their home country, including extreme poverty, political conflict, violence, war, crime, family separation, and trafficking. Many also face hardship in their new country, such as integration and socioeconomic difficulties, job precarity, poverty, food insecurity, racism, discrimination, and stigmatization (Gervais et al., 2021; Pitt et al., 2015; Rousseau, 2020). Immigrant and refugee families can have trouble meeting their basic needs, which can have a negative and detrimental impact on the family members' emotional, mental, and physical health (Pitt et al., 2015). Today, the experience of immigrants and refugees can be especially impacted by restrictive immigration policies and other citizens increasingly exclusive viewpoints of immigration (Becerra et al., 2015; Perreira & Pedroza, 2019).

Through their migration journey, children have to deal with various losses, which may include family members, friends, and an environment that they were familiar with (Gervais et al., 2021; Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2018). Once in their new country, immigrant and refugee children can have trouble adapting and experience difficulties at home, in their community, and at school, such as with making friends or performing well. Some, in contrast, may adapt well and better than other members of their family, such as their parents, which can cause parent–child conflicts (Salami et al., 2020; Vatz Laaroussi & Messé A Bessong, 2008). Children of immigrants also face difficulties, such as high levels of pressure to succeed academically, discrimination and mental health problems (Ceri et al., 2017; OECD, 2018; Valdez et al., 2022). Guerra et al. (2019) found that second-generation children, like

first-generation children, have a higher risk of social exclusion and issues associated with sociocultural adjustment and lower levels of school achievement compared to non-immigrant-background children. Second-generation children can also find themselves dealing with tensions between their parents' "home" culture and that of the society in which they were themselves born. These children often integrate the host culture more rapidly and in-depth than their parents, which can lead to intergenerational and value conflicts (Salami et al., 2020, Laaroussi & Bessong, 2008). The stresses that immigrant and refugee children or children with immigrant parents and their families experience can have a negative impact on children's emotional well-being (Perreira & Ornelas, 2011; Pumariaga et al., 2005). Many researchers have identified the importance of family and friends for immigrant and refugee children living these hardships (Gervais et al., 2021; McBrien & Day, 2012). Support from their inner circle and broader community environment can have a significant effect on their well-being and help them overcome certain challenges.

There is a relatively smaller body of literature on the comparative experiences of immigrant/refugee and non-immigrant/refugee children. Research on and with children in immigration and refugee contexts tends to focus on the migration journey and the integration process. While these are distinctive and important features of the lives and experiences of immigrant and refugee children and children born to immigrant parents, they are not the only features. First and foremost, these children are children, and their well-being is a function of much more than their migration journey. Considering that well-being is a diverse and complex notion, research that gives immigrant and refugee children and children of immigrant parents space to share what they think about their own well-being is better able to represent this diversity and complexity.

### 2.3 Importance of Children's Voices in Research

Children are active and reflexive agents who have the capacity to fully participate in knowledge construction (Côté et al., 2018; Fattore et al., 2009). When considering that well-being "refers to both subjective and experiences as well as to living conditions" (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014, p. 1) and that children know the most about what they experience in their daily life (Ben-Arieh, 2005), the importance and place of children's own perspectives in research seem self-evident. Also, considering that child well-being policies are influenced by studies on child well-being, it is essential that children participate in research to share their own opinion of their well-being so that policies truly respond to their needs (Ben-Arieh, 2005). The right of children to participate in research is in fact recognized and promoted by the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12) (UNCRC, 1989). However, there is a long tradition of adults speaking for children in research on children's well-being (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014), which conflicts with the need to respect and consider children's agency. Researchers have come to realize that to better understand children's well-being, children need to be involved in research and share their own viewpoints on the many dimensions of their lives (Fattore et al., 2007, 2021; Thomson, 2010). However, children can sometimes find it difficult to convey their

thoughts and feelings, especially in a language that is not their first and when they find themselves in a cultural environment that is new or unfamiliar, which is often the case for those with immigrant backgrounds (Brown et al., 2020). These children may also find it difficult to share past trauma (Kirova & Emme, 2007). These communication obstacles can make it harder to determine what contributes to children's well-being. Finding ways to negotiate these obstacles is therefore very important, as children's viewpoints can provide significant insight into what is important in their lives, and can help open unknown pathways to improve their quality of life.

## 2.4 Methodological Approaches in Child-Centred Research

Children's participation in research is even more relevant when considering the impact that such research can have on children's lives (Ben-Arieh, 2005). Research can influence children's rights and conditions by driving change in policies and programs that aim to improve children's well-being (Brown et al., 2020). Having children fully participate in research can positively influence their sense of agency, not only within the studies but also in their everyday lives. This in itself can have a positive impact on their well-being (Fattore et al., 2009; Mason & Hood, 2011). It is thus important to find ways to help children express themselves so that they can fully participate in research and reap these rewards. Children often express themselves differently than adults, and in a variety of creative ways; when conducting studies with them, it can therefore be advantageous to use flexible approaches that enable them to use this creativity, allowing researchers to better grasp their point of view (Brown et al., 2020; Driessnack, 2006; Thomson, 2010). Creative techniques – including visual methods such as drawing, photography, video, mapping, games, board games and toys – are familiar to children, can be fun and relaxing, and, when used, can be an effective tool for engaging them in research and gaining access to their worldview (Jackson Foster et al., 2018; McBrien & Day, 2012; Neag, 2019). Creative methods tend to allow children to be more expressive and share a broader spectrum of their lives than, for example, simple verbal or written methods allow on their own (Literat, 2013). Participating in research that not only considers their communication and thought experiences, but values them, can put children at ease and encourage them to share their perspectives. As children use these creative methods in their everyday lives at home, daycare, and school, using them in a research setting can help them feel more in their element. For example, many CUWB projects have used such methods, including projective storytelling (Akkan et al., 2019), city walks and photograph interviews (Fegter, 2017), and the Life Story Board (Huynh & Stewart-Tufescu, 2019). These types of methods enable children to feel comfortable in the research environment and share their stories in ways that encourage their creative minds. These methods, which we use in our study, consider children's cognitive development, thus enabling them to participate fully as social actors. In this way, researchers are better able to gather children's views of their subjective well-being.

These creative methods can be especially pertinent and practical when conducting research with children with immigrant backgrounds (Due et al., 2014; McBrien & Day, 2012). When considering language barriers in conducting research with

immigrant children, using more creative and visual methods can grant better access to the children's voices and experiences, as they are better able to express themselves and share insights into their lives (Kirova & Emme, 2007). In their scoping review of participatory visual research methods with immigrant and refugee children, Brown et al. (2020) found that the use of multiple and various research tools when conducting research with newcomer children allows them to be more deeply involved, which in turn enriches the research data gained. Immigrant and refugee children can have difficult pasts and may have had challenging migration experiences, and sharing what they have gone through or are currently experiencing can be hard or traumatic. Using creative approaches is recommended as allowing children to exercise their agency, to choose which information they share and enable them to share their stories in ways that are comfortable for them (Due et al., 2014; Gervais et al., 2020). Participating in research that uses participatory and creative methods can also help these children find a sense of control that they may have lost during their migration experience. Having these children participate in research about their immigration and refugee experience and letting them tell their own story thus respects their autonomy and agency (Clark, 2004; Kirova & Emme, 2007; McBrien & Day, 2012). It can also help these children create positive and trusting connections with adults and with the research process (Gervais et al., 2020). Furthermore, having immigrant and refugee children fully participate in research also enables a better understanding of their immigration or refugee experience, which can contribute to the development of new programs, policies, and services for these populations, as well as the amelioration of existing ones (Brown et al., 2020).

## 2.5 Metaphorical Approaches

One way to use creativity in research is by using metaphorical strategies. Literat (2013, p. 88) notes how “images also hold the inherent potential to generate metaphorical representations of identities and concepts, and thus stimulate abstract and creative thought.” The power of images is undeniable, as the adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” conveys. Using metaphors can help children better express their thoughts and feelings and help adults understand what they have to say. Metaphorical ideas can be more intellectually accessible to children, opening them to new and different possibilities of understanding. Metaphors are convenient in research as they can permit children to understand and transmit abstract concepts (Clark, 2004; McBrien & Day, 2012). The use of metaphors and images can be especially pertinent when doing research with immigrant and refugee children, as they can help these children express themselves despite language and culture barriers, as these methods can cross cultures and languages, thus facilitating communication and understanding (Brown et al., 2020; Literat, 2013; McBrien & Day, 2012). In this way, metaphors can help bring these children and researchers to meet on common ground.

Though metaphors have been used for a long time in different learning contexts, little is known about the use of metaphors in research, even though they are often used to help children make sense of the world (Rousseau et al., 2003). A few authors have done research using metaphors and note the effectiveness of such an approach in doing



research with children (Clark, 2004; Crowley & Vulliamy, 2006; Laws & Mann, 2004; Rousseau et al., 2003). Clark (2004, p. 172) mentions that “interviewing minors calls for employing communicative strategies that draw from children’s own native practices, respecting children’s ways of extracting and expressing meaning.” Clark (2004) used the Metaphor Sort Technique (MTS) to explore children’s experience of diabetes and asthma and found that the method helped guide their interaction with the children. The author notes that the MST is a child-centred research method that is useful with children with a limited vocabulary or language delay, as they do not have to rely on language to communicate, and highlights that through the MTS, the children were able to control and choose if and when they wanted to share something, using their own terms and expressions.

In a study conducted in England on physical punishment as perceived by children, a metaphorical character, an alien, was introduced to the children through a storybook. The authors asked the research questions through the character, which by lessening the adult–child power dynamic, allowed the children to feel more comfortable (Willow & Hyder, 1998, in Laws & Mann, 2004). The use of this character turned research sessions into something special and different from the children’s everyday lives, and became an event to which the children looked forward. This same alien character was used in other studies that explored children’s experiences of different issues, like poverty (Crowley & Vulliamy, 2006; Laws & Mann, 2004). In another study that used a metaphor approach, Rousseau et al. (2003) evaluated a Canadian school program in which newly arrived immigrant and refugee children participated. The authors found that the children used different metaphorical elements from various sources to share their experiences. Using metaphors enabled children to better represent their reality.

These examples highlight how metaphors can be an effective tool for helping children convey their stories in their own way. The use of symbolic referents also helps children to share difficult aspects of their lives as metaphors can depersonalize the information (Clark, 2004; Laws & Mann, 2004; C. Rousseau et al., 2003). Using metaphors in research means that researchers communicate in a way that is familiar to children and with which they are comfortable. Communicating with children in ways that they know and understand helps to empower them. In this study, we took into consideration both the fact that well-being can be an abstract notion for children, and the fact that that does not mean they do not have a wealth of information to share about it. With this in mind, we sought a methodological strategy which would allow immigrant and refugee children and children born to immigrant parents to be fully engaged in the research process, and allow us to truly access and better understand their thoughts on their well-being.

### 3 Objectives

This article seeks to contribute to advances in creative and child-centred research methods. More specifically, this paper will present an innovative metaphorical narrative-based data collection method used to document immigrant-background children’s understanding and experience of their well-being.



## 4 Method

### 4.1 Development of the methodology

Our overarching aim was to build a methodology that would place children at the centre of the research process and foster their engagement. To this end, the data collection procedure was developed in five steps. First, we investigated what other researchers used as tools to assist children in their expression of abstract concepts (Clark, 2004; Molina et al., 2009). Second, we conducted a literature review on participative, rights-based, developmentally appropriate, and culturally sensitive research methods validated with immigrant children for the data collection (Lundy et al., 2011). We also looked into multi-methods, including a variety of creative activities, in order to provide meaningful opportunities for participating with child-friendly and engaging avenues of communication (Brown et al., 2020; Due et al., 2014). Based on the team's experiences with children, we settled on the idea to employ a metaphorical character like the alien discussed above to initiate dialogue with the children.

Third, we co-constructed the data collection activities with the partner organizations as well as with the participating children. To line up our objectives with the mission of the community centres, we consulted their teams at different key moments throughout the project, from the building of the methodology to the dissemination of results. We thus included specific questions they had about children's well-being to help them better meet participants' needs. For example, one of the community centres was wondering if there were objects that could foster the well-being of children going through difficult situations. This collaboration also allowed us to create activities that were better suited for these children's interests and development. Fourth, we surveyed the literature to find examples where metaphors and alien narratives had been used with children, to better understand these methods' effects on children's receptivity and responses. Study results showed the relevance of using a character such as an alien to discuss children's well-being (Crowley & Vulliamy, 2006; Laws & Mann, 2004).

Finally, to stay aligned with a child-centred approach, we sought children's feedback at the end of each activity. To accomplish this, we sought their insights on what they learned during the workshop, the significance they attributed to this acquired knowledge, their preferences regarding questions and activities, the way the activities made them feel, and their suggestions for improving the workshop. From one week to the next, we thus modified the planned workshops according to children's preferences and recommendations. More specifically, the children's participation during the different activities was observed and documented in field notes by the researchers. Children were also asked to share their appreciation of activities and give suggestions for future meetings. This information was integrated into the next workshop curriculum, influencing the content or the nature of the creative activity. For example, one group found the mapping activity too long and expressed their desire to move and play more. The next research question was then explored using more theatrical improvisations and less drawing than originally planned.

## 4.2 Procedure and Participants

The methodology developed was tested with six groups of children in very culturally diverse neighbourhoods in the Greater Montréal area. Each group was met with four times in order to realize the four workshops described in the results section below. The first data collection was conducted during summer 2021 with four groups of children enrolled in a day camp at a community centre. The partner organization's mission was to foster children's development into active citizens. The second data collection occurred in the spring of 2022 with two groups of children who attended after-school activities in their community children's centre. This organization aims to contribute to children's development, facilitate the social integration of immigrant-background children, and to promote school success and perseverance.

The study protocol was approved by the Research Ethical Committee of the University of Université du Québec en Outaouais. Parental consent was obtained for every child participant, and a form validated by our team in our previous work (Côté et al., 2018) was used to obtain children's assent. In compliance with the ethical recommendations of child-centred research about continuous assent (Gervais et al., 2023), the latter was renewed with participants before each subsequent meeting. Concretely, assent was renewed by asking the children at the beginning of each activity if they remembered what had been discussed during the first workshop on consent to research. The children took turns expressing what they remembered (the importance of confidentiality, the right not to answer certain questions, the freedom to participate or not, etc.). Team members completed the information if necessary and concluded the discussion by asking the children verbally if they still agreed to take part in the study. It should be noted that the data collection occurred during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Montreal. With this in mind, precautions were taken to ensure that all research activities complied with the public health regulations in place during that period.

Data collection was carried out through four sequential focus groups including the different data collection activities developed. We opted for sequential focus groups to allow the development of stable rapport built on trust, which facilitates high-quality discussion and reduces adult-child power dynamics (Jacklin et al., 2016; Krueger & Casey, 2014). In total, 24 focus groups were held with 6 different teams. Every group reached 6 to 10 children and lasted 75 min. The focus groups were all recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participative field notes were gathered by the researchers conducting the data collection.

Study participants consisted of a convenience sample of 36 children, made up of 17 boys and 19 girls between 7 and 12 years of age (mean = 9.33). Within the sample, 72% were born in Canada, and 86% had at least one parent born abroad. Their parents came from a wide diversity of countries, with Haiti, Algeria, and Madagascar being the most represented. Only 14% spoke mainly French at home (the official language of the province of Québec) and 84% adhered to some religion.

The findings of this article have been drawn from field notes and reflective meetings held by members of the research team throughout the course of the study. Field notes allowed us to document the temporal evolution of the project and the concerns of the team members, thereby promoting the integration of the different

sources of information used and a critical stance toward the role of each person, activities, and the events in the research process (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Concretely, field notes were made during each of the activities with the children. These described how the participants answered and engaged in all research questions and activities, as well as the aspects of the activities they enjoyed, and the influences of other people and their broader life circumstances on their participation in them. In between each session, there were team meetings to debrief on our observations and examine our field notes. The research team discussed individuals' observations and reflections on their interactions with research participants and the context under study. The values, beliefs, and attitudes of the research team that were influencing the research process were exposed and discussed, ensuring that everyone's voice could be heard and integrated into the project (Rankl et al., 2021). Activities planned for the next workshop were discussed and adjusted in order to adapt to children's reactions and evaluation of the past activities, and to optimize their participation (Gervais et al., 2024). Moreover, during the fourth and last sessions, we presented to the participants a summary of their answers up until then, with the aim of obtaining their feedback on our understanding of their responses. By doing so, we verified that we had accurately grasped everything they said and meant to express. This step was helpful and allowed notes to be taken detailing the successful and less successful aspects of data collection.

## 5 Results

This section describes in detail the methodology developed. The main theme of the four workshops is explained, along with a brief description of each creative activity, a summary of the alien's request, and an extract from the letters sent to the children. The letters were freely translated from French by the research team. To illustrate the usefulness of the creative activities as data collection tools, a brief overview of some of the collected data is given via the Dixit images selected by the children, their drawings of the ingredients of well-being, and verbatim extracts which we have translated, that express their points of view on well-being.

### 5.1 First Workshop: Defining Well-Being

The main objectives of the first workshop were to build trust with the children and get to know them, to discuss their role as co-researchers and the importance of doing research with children, and to identify key concepts at the heart of children's experiences of well-being from their perspective.

The children discovered that an alien named Miinx, a self-proclaimed intergalactic well-being expert, wrote them a first letter. Miinx asked the children to explain what well-being is and to choose images that illustrate it. To explore the key components of well-being, we used the image sorting activity called the "Metaphor Sort Technique" (Clark, 2004), by using pictures from a game called *Dixit* as they are

figurative enough for young children but are still open to several interpretations. *Dixit* is a French family-friendly picture-card game created in 2008 by Jean-Louis Roubira, illustrated by Marie Cardouat, and published by Libellud. The game is made up of 84 illustrations that players are invited to interpret. Beyond its primary function as a board game, its cards have also been used in research (Vitancol & Baria, 2018) and interventions (Crettenand, 2018; Giacomini, 2020; Ikiz & Béziat, 2020; Mousnier et al., 2016) due to their evocative power. Table 1 presents Miinx's request, the instructions, verbatim extracts, and images selected by children, as well as examples of their conceptualization of well-being (Photos 1–8).

## 5.2 Second Workshop: Identifying Factors Contributing to Children's Well-Being

The objective of the second workshop was to collectively identify the conditions favourable to well-being. Miinx sent the children a second letter with a big all-dressed pizza. He asked them to draw or write ingredients that contribute to their well-being for each slice of the pizza representing different life domains. We concluded the workshop using the “miracle question.” We asked the children to imagine that they found a magic wand, giving them the power to amplify anything they want in their life that contributes to their well-being to further increase their well-being and happiness. Table 2 presents Miinx's request, the instructions, verbatim extracts, photos of the pizza with wellness ingredients (Photos 9–10).

## 5.3 Third Workshop: Identifying Factors Threatening Children's Well-Being

The objective of this workshop was to collectively identify the conditions that negatively affect well-being. In the third letter, Miinx wanted to know what threatens children's well-being, to help him better understand this concept. He thus sent them a second pizza, but this time, without cheese or sauce. For each slice, the children had to draw or write ingredients that made them sad, upset, or angry. As it was important to also discuss children's agency, we asked them to identify coping strategies that could be used to face some of the factors identified as threatening their well-being through animated theatrical improvisations. We concluded the workshop by asking them once again the miracle question, but this time by identifying what they would make disappear to improve their well-being and happiness. Table 3 presents Miinx's request, the instructions of the pizza mapping, improvisation, and the miracle question, verbatim extracts, and photos of the pizzas with ill-being ingredients (Photos 11–12).

## 5.4 Fourth Workshop: Formulating Recommendations to Adults for Contributing to Children's Well-Being

The objective of this last workshop was to identify recommendations for adults involved in children's lives for promoting children's well-being. In his last letter, Miinx thanked the children for their participation and explains how their work

**Table 1** Creative activity to define well-being

**Metaphor Sort Technique**

- **Extract from Miinx’s letter:** *I would like very much if you could help me to understand how you experience well-being on your planet, because it is not easy to understand it just by observing you. I have sent you some pictures and you can tell me which ones represent well-being for you and which ones do not.*
- **Instructions:** Miinx sent 16 different images. Each child received their own stack of cards. Individually, children classified the cards into two piles, one representing well-being, and the other ill-being. Participants were then invited to discuss their classification and to compare their choices with those of their peers. The last step consisted of a collective choice of images that represented well-being for the majority and which would be sent to Miinx.

**What the children had to say:**

**Photo 2** (representing well-being): “Yes. On this card the thing that is well-being is that there is always help coming for you. For example, it looks like the kids are all stuck on this. There is nothing around them, but a polar bear with a big heart comes to save them. It makes me feel better that there’s always help, but you have to find it” (Group 3).

**Photo 4** (representing both well-being and ill-being): “His father is playing with his son and laughing, and I think that’s good, that we should take the time to laugh with the people we love” (Group 4). “But there is something that bothers me a little bit. It’s just that because they go in the water and their bed may fall in the water and they may die, and the father may throw the baby in the water” (Group 1).

**Photo 6** (representing ill-being): “We see that there are children here in the bus who want to go out, but if I was there, I would not be well because I would be all stuck, and we could have injuries or things like that” (Group 5).

**Cards selected by the group representing well-being:**



**Photo 1**



**Photo 2**



**Photo 3**



**Photo 4**

**Cards selected by the group representing ill-being:**



**Photo 5**



**Photo 6**



**Photo 7**



**Photo 8**

helped the adults on his own planet to implement measures to support the well-being of their children. He suggested that the participants also share their work with the adults surrounding them to ensure their well-being. Children were then invited to identify adults around them who could contribute to their well-being, and to express their recommendations to them through the creation of posters. The images on the posters do not represent the participants but were cut from magazines. Table 4 presents Miinx’s request, the poster activity instructions, verbatim extracts, and poster examples (Photos 13–14).

**Table 2** Creative activities to identify factors contributing to well-being**Pizza mapping**

- **Extract from Miinx's letter:** *Out of all the different foods on all the planets, pizza is my favourite! It's so good! I like how we can cut the pizza up into different slices. In fact, I created a pizza for you. But not just any pizza! It would help me a lot if you would stick drawings or words of people, things, situations, or places that represent your well-being and put them in the different slices of the pizza.*
- **Instructions:** The children had to write or draw ingredients representing anything related to wellness. The children also drew ingredients that were positive consequences related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The pizza was split into five slices, each representing a life domain: home, school, neighbourhood, community, and everything else (i.e., all elements not included in the other categories).

**What the children had to say:**

"The real reason why we need to have friends in the community is that in a community, people should not be alone. That's the goal of the community, that everybody has someone to talk with and things to play and say things with" (Group 3).

**Photo 9****Photo 10****Miracle question**

- **Instructions:** We asked the children: If you had a magic wand that allowed you to change anything in your life that would improve your well-being and make you happy, what would it be?

**What the children had to say:****Is it more money you would like to have?**

"Yeah, yeah. To give to Miinx. To save him and his family, all that."

"Me, I'll take the money and give it to the poor."

"That's right!"

**Ok. You'd like some money to give to the poor.**

"Wait a minute, wait a minute! I haven't finished yet. When I say money, it means I become rich, a billionaire, I don't know what, and then I sometimes give to the poor and then I give to Miinx."






## 6 Discussion

This article aims to present an innovative data collection method used to document immigrant-background children's understandings and experiences of their well-being. This section will discuss contributions of the developed methodology to child-centred research, as well as its strengths and limitations in exploring the experience of immigrant-background children.

### 6.1 Methodological Contributions to Child-Centred Research

The developed methodology is in line with the well-recognized necessity of conducting "child-friendly" research (Barker & Weller, 2003; Hart, 1992) and considering children's preferred methods of communication to allow them to speak for themselves and fully participate in knowledge construction (Christensen & James, 2017).

**Table 3** Creative activities to identify factors threatening children’s well-being

|                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <p><b>Pizza mapping</b></p>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Extract from Miinx’s letter:</b> <i>I am impressed with your artistic talents! I have decided to share your works with the Grand Committee of Galaxies and also with our interplanetary museum. But wait! Your mission is not over! This time, I ask you to paste pictures or words of situations, places, or things that do not make you happy.</i></li> <li>• <b>Instructions:</b> The children had to write or draw ingredients representing anything related to ill-being. The children also drew ingredients that were negative consequences related to the COVID-19 pandemic.</li> <li>• Like the first mapping activity, the pizza was split into five slices, each representing a life domain: home, school, neighbourhood, community, and everything else (i.e., all elements not included in the other categories).</li> </ul> <p><b>What the children had to say:</b></p> <p>“I’ve made bad people.”</p> <p><b>How does that affect your well-being?</b><br/>         “When they are mean, I don’t feel good.”</p> <p><b>What is an example of a mean person? How does it feel?</b><br/>         “When they say something mean.”</p> <p><b>What is saying something mean?</b><br/>         “Say an insult” (Group 6).</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;">   </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <p><b>Photo 11</b></p> <p><b>Photo 12</b></p> </div> |
| <p><b>Improvisation</b></p>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Instructions:</b> Children were asked to act out a situation illustrated on the pizza and to come up with strategies for feeling better.</li> </ul> <p><b>What the children had to say:</b></p> <p><b>What did you learn through the improvisation?</b> “I learned that when we’re angry, when we have a problem, we can reconcile, so we become happy” (Group 5).</p>  |
| <p><b>Miracle question</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Instructions:</b> We asked the children: If you had a magic wand that allowed you to make anything in your life that reduces your well-being and makes you unhappy disappear, what would it be?</li> </ul> <p><b>What the children had to say:</b></p> <p><b>What would you change with your magic wand?</b><br/>         “I want my brother to come back because he is dead” (Group 5).</p>    |

By relying on a multi-method approach (Barker & Weller, 2003; Due et al., 2014), we aimed to reach and involve children with diverse profiles in terms of interests, skills, and personalities, as well as to attenuate the power relationship between the research team and the children by anchoring our interactions in a context of play rather than a formal research context. Each of the activities therefore had a dual purpose: to arouse the children’s enjoyment and make them feel comfortable and confident with the members of the research team, and to generate data faithful to their reality. Although exploratory, the methodology developed in this study has been fruitful in this respect and several of its strengths seem important to highlight.

First of all, the fact that the metaphorical character of the alien proved to be such a valuable tool in our research approach adds to the still scant literature that exists on methods of this kind. What literature does exist, however, has shown such methods to be useful when conducting studies with children (Crowley & Vulliamy, 2006; Willow & Hyder, 1998 in Laws & Mann, 2004). The use of this character allowed us to clarify and contextualize the questions we wanted the children to answer by



**Table 4** Creative activity to obtain children's recommendations to adults**Poster/Collage**

- **Extract from Miinx's letter:** *I presented your pizzas to the Grand Committee of Galaxies and they loved your work. Perhaps you could also share your work with the people around you who can help ensure your well-being. Who are these people? What should you tell them?*
- **Instructions:** Children were asked to create posters in teams to express messages they would like to share with adults about their well-being. They were then invited to explain their recommendations to the group.

**What children had to say:****What message would you like to send to adults?**

"Listen to your children. Like... When you say something, you shouldn't always say no. You shouldn't... You should believe them" (Group 6).

"Adults need to understand that those who have siblings, we need more attention. Sometimes we really need more attention because the parents don't take care of us and they always give more attention to the little ones. Some adults have to be nicer to us. That's what will make us feel good" (Group 3).

**Photo 14****Photo 15**

placing them in the context of an intergalactic quest, which we found to be a more effective way of stimulating children's interest than formal research questions. This is similar to what Willow and Hyder (1998) found to be an advantage of the metaphorical character they used, namely, that the character transformed research sessions into out-of-the-ordinary experiences, events to which the children looked forward. Our alien character was the common thread running through the workshops and greatly contributed to the children being and feeling involved. They were invested in helping Miinx by passing on their knowledge of the well-being of Earth's children. This mission put the children in an expert position and not only took into account their viewpoint but placed their perspective in the foreground (Gervais et al., 2020; McAuley, 2019). Miinx's quest allowed us to obtain elaborate answers from the children, because helping the alien who did not share their common references required them to develop their ideas in greater depth and clarity to better explain their feelings and points of view, and to suggest tangible solutions. The children developed a bond with the character, some having drawn a picture or written a letter to Miinx between the workshops. The dialogue with Miinx, as well as the tasks asked of the children, allowed for the recognition of their agency. As Fattore et al. (2009) and Mason and Hood (2011) reported, this full participation in research positively influences children's happiness and well-being.

Moreover, the children enjoyed the creative activities during the data collection. Their involvement and appreciation of these activities is another strength of the methodology we developed. The combination of creative activities and their adaptation to the children's interests and concerns encouraged their participation and self-expression (Crivello & Poulin-Dubois, 2019). More specifically, the metaphor

sorting activity (Clark, 2004) was particularly well suited to initiate a relationship with the children and explore their general representations of well-being. Indeed, sorting images proved to be a less intimidating prospect for children than answering a question in front of a group, especially on a topic as abstract as well-being (Fattore et al., 2019). The figurative images chosen, which allowed for several interpretations, required the children to reflect on their conceptions, representations, and concerns about well-being. The pizza mapping activities provided a concrete way to address the conditions that support and hinder their well-being all while sparking the children's creativity. These activities enabled the research team to create a caring group environment where everyone became more comfortable in expressing themselves. The improvisational theatre exercises were very much appreciated by the children, who participated enthusiastically, and nurtured their enjoyment of being together as participants in the study. However, this activity was less effective in collecting data. Only a few coping strategies could be identified. The magic wand question allowed for a broader exploration of well-being and a decentring of children's own experiences, mobilizing the children's imagination and expression of their ideas. Similarly to Stewart-Tufescu et al. (2019), we found that the variety of creative activities offered to the children fostered their interest in and engagement with the study.

## 6.2 Relevance to Immigrant Children

While our methodology could be used with children of all backgrounds, we believe that some of its characteristics make it particularly interesting and effective for engaging with children from immigrant backgrounds. We were impressed by how the children connected with Miinx, and we had the impression that this connection was facilitated by some of the experiences the children shared with the character. In his letters, Miinx wrote about his newfound exploration of planet Earth, learning a new language, and making many cultural discoveries, such as pizza. His adjustment to life on Earth may have been relevant to many within our study's participant population. Being the link between two systems such as parents and the host society can help children from a migrant background to bond and facilitate the integration of the family (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018). Miinx took on this role by introducing his planet's inhabitants to the different components of Earth children's well-being. The children who participated in our study were able to identify with him, which motivated them to be involved in his quest. The young participants shared many family stories about immigration. For example, one child wanted to use his magic wand to save Miinx and his family by bringing them to Québec. Although our data do not allow us to confirm the advantages of an extraterrestrial character over another metaphorical one, we note that Miinx and his quest were successful in arousing the children's interest, curiosity and involvement in the research process.

In addition to this identification with the character of Miinx, the creative activities were particularly appropriate and enabled the children who may have experienced difficulties or traumas in relation to their migration experience to express their vulnerabilities in a way that was comfortable to them. Indeed, without directly

questioning the issues that they may have encountered incidentally to their migration journey or their integration, the creative activities allowed them to choose what they wished to share and what they preferred not to discuss. Throughout data collection, and following recommendations for ethical research practices with refugee and immigrant-background children (Block et al., 2013; Caldairou-Besette et al., 2017; Due et al., 2014), the research team was particularly attentive to children's reactions of discomfort or discomfort and perceived none. Instead, children were seen instead to express curiosity and empathy for Miinx, and some quite excited at the prospect of seeing us again from one week to the next. Given that French was not the first language for most of our participants, the creative visual activities played a central role and greatly facilitated youth participation.

### 6.3 Challenges and Recommendations

Although the use of a metaphorical character proved to be a strength of this study, other methodological aspects raised some challenges. Well-being remains an abstract concept, and researchers need to be creative and reflexive in considering children's cognitive development and linguistic abilities when designing research, and actively support the participants' contributions to the construction of knowledge on this theme.

The first issue that we faced was the depth of the data collected, which posed some challenges. Indeed, the use of metaphors and images, while supporting the children's engagement in the proposed activities, also incited them to mobilize metaphors in their responses, which made the data analysis more complex. For example, one child described well-being as when polar bear with a big heart comes to save you, and another used the magic wand to wish to meet Miinx. The creative activities used certainly aroused their interest, as they were perceived as a form of play. In this sense, using metaphors provided the children a visual conduit for their expressions (Clark, 2004). The children were able to give free rein to their imagination and spontaneity. While the use of metaphors permitted children to express themselves in a more emotional and nuanced way (Clark, 2004), the fact that metaphors can have "infinite variations" (Rousseau et al., 2003) can lead to certain interpretative challenges. For the research team, the children's interpretation of the images sometimes led to uncertainty about the nature of the response obtained. There could be multiple meanings in the answer, and it sometimes became difficult to determine whether we understood the real or intended message the children were trying to convey, or were instead imposing our own interpretation on their responses. It would therefore be suggested that the animators remain vigilant in the face of allusive answers and dig deeper into the questions to lead the child to explain their responses and to be more involved in the interpretation of the meaning of some images they have chosen or drawn (Due et al., 2014). It is important for interviewers to reflect to children what they have understood, to enable them to validate, qualify or correct their messages (Clark, 2004).

Secondly, simultaneously filling the role of facilitator and interviewer during the workshops was at times challenging. We had to both seek detailed answers and

energize the meetings to sustain the children's attention across a wide range. For example, some children enjoyed talking about the food they liked and which they felt contributed to their well-being, and would talk about it at length. The activity leader then had the difficult task of allocating enough time to questioning some of the food-related responses and probing for deeper insights, while at the same time setting a reasonable pace for the workshop to allow all research questions to be addressed. For future research teams, it could be appropriate to assign the role of facilitator to a single person, who would be responsible for the content and structure of the workshops, the pace, and the playfulness of the meeting. The other researcher could then engage in participant observation, i.e., adopt a slightly more withdrawn posture, allowing him to concentrate on the children's reactions to the activities, the interactions between participants, the intonation of responses and silences, note-taking and intervening on more complex questions as needed. This would be especially helpful in instances where participants answer vaguely, too metaphorically, or incompletely, to obtain more concrete answers. This could also lead to greater understanding of the answers given by children with certain difficulties due to language barriers.

Another challenge was posed by the personal and sensitive issues shared by some of the children. Indeed, very broad questions, such as "What harms your well-being?" generated very concrete answers from some children (when I'm cold) and very intimate ones for others (when my brother died). When it happened, it was essential to provide a caring and active listening approach and to address those difficult topics with them, without insisting or asking for details, to avoid stigmatizing participants or provoking group discomfort. This approach allowed for a safe environment where children are free to express themselves, without judgment. Previous studies with children from an immigrant background have shown that these conditions foster well-being development and a feeling of belonging to the group (Papa-zian-Zohrabian et al., 2018). The presence of animators in the community centers helped, as they knew the children well and were able to follow up with the child as needed in the days following the activity. Considering the spontaneity of the children's responses, and the often-complex migratory journeys fraught with significant difficulties (Ziersch et al., 2019), we recommend involving familiar and reassuring figures during some activities. We also recommend that all parties involved take time to build a safe relationship with children and establish a caring group dynamic before undertaking research activities (Brown et al., 2020; Due et al., 2014; Ziersch et al., 2019).

Moreover, the purpose of the poster activity in Workshop 4 was difficult to understand for many of the children, and particularly for those younger than nine. Asking them to draw up a list of recommendations to adults using images cut out from magazines was complex for many children. Instead, the activity drifted towards posters expressing what they like. As adults are usually conceived as responsible for children's safety and needs, and children are rarely asked to take a position on what adults do, children must be better prepared and supported to formulate the kinds of recommendations they were asked to make. As suggested by Lundy and Mcevoy (2011) and Article 12 of the CRC, children must be first informed in an appropriate way, and in some contexts receive adult guidance to determine and express their genuine view if they are to properly participate in the decisions that affect them. To

really gather their recommendations, more time and potentially an additional participatory activity should be planned. This would help them think more deeply and clearly about their role as experts in their own well-being, to freely share their experiences “in context,” and to engage them as agents of change within the system in which they evolve (Montreuil et al., 2018).

## 7 Conclusion

This article aimed to present innovative research methods used to explore immigrant-background children’s conceptions and experience of well-being. Through an alien character named Miinx, we used a multi-participative method that brought children to fully share their experience and their perception of their well-being. The children participated in four sequential group sessions, each centred around a letter sent by the metaphorical character. The children had an overall mission to help the character in better understanding Earth children’s well-being. This mission enabled them to see themselves as experts, something which can be empowering and demonstrative of agency. The children achieved their mission through various activities and were invited to involve themselves by playing, drawing, improvising, creating posters, and talking about their thoughts and experience. Play, art, and metaphors are important mechanisms that foster children’s well-being and including them in research is effective in bringing children to more fully participate. While this method has its limits and challenges, as it depends on the age of the children, their ability to express their experiences and their desire to reveal themselves, we found that these research methods can be particularly appropriate for children from immigrant backgrounds. Many of these children may have experienced various hardships, and recounting them through activities they enjoy and with which they are comfortable can make it easier and less painful to recount difficult experiences. Researchers who conduct studies with children need to recognize the methodological importance of play, art, and metaphors in research, and how these devices can not only facilitate child participation, but also promote children’s sense of agency, and thereby positively affect their well-being and development. The discussed recommendations are useful for researchers wishing to develop creative metaphorical research approaches with children, or to adapt the developed methodology to address other research questions.

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**Data Availability** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, CG, upon reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** The study protocol was approved by the Research Ethical Committee of the University of Québec en Outaouais.

**Informed Consent** Parental consent was obtained for every child participant, and a form validated by our team in our previous work was used to obtain children's assent. In compliance with the ethical recommendations of child-centred research about continuous assent, the latter was renewed with participants before each subsequent meeting.

**Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals** The study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards as laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments and was approved by the community centers participating to the project

**Competing Interests** The authors have no conflict of interests to disclose.

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