



## Editorial

### **Special issue: Qualitative Research on Children's Well-being Across National and Cultural Contexts**

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#### **Introduction**

This Special Issue of the *International Journal of Emotional Education* brings together papers on the topic *Qualitative Research on Children's Well-being Across National and Cultural Contexts*. The inspiration for this Special Issue emerged from recent developments in child well-being research. Three developments in particular are relevant for this Special Issue. Firstly, we have seen an increasing number of studies on children's well-being that involve a multinational or transnational dimension, providing opportunities for comparison of different domains and dimensions of children's well-being across national contexts. Prominent among these is the *Children's Worlds Study* (or ISCWeb study), which collects subjective well-being data from tens of thousands of children from over 45 nations. This research provides rich comparative data at the national level on a range of well-being domains including children's living arrangements, material possessions, time-use, activities, life-satisfaction, school-satisfaction, sense of self, safety, family relationships, peer relationships and assessment of neighbourhood (Andresen & Ben-Arieh, 2016; Dinisman, Fernandes, & Main, 2015; Rees, 2017).

Secondly, an increasing number of qualitative studies of children's well-being have been undertaken. Often these studies aim to explore what the concept of well-being is, how it is experienced and what factors contribute to a sense of well-being, providing an alternative source of knowledge to research traditions whose

methodology involves the application of established metrics of well-being, usually using large scale surveys as the method. These studies tend to provide conceptual and theoretical insights which can then be taken up in studies that occur in different contexts. For example studies of children's perspectives on the role of the natural environment in Cape Town (Adams, Savahl, Florence, & Jackson, 2018); children's self-concept in Islamabad (Ahmed & Zaman, 2018); how young children articulate and manage adversity at school in Malta (Cefai & Spiteri Pizzuto, forthcoming), processes of digitalisation in Berlin (Fegter, forthcoming); how social inequalities manifest in children's daily practices in Germany (Hunner-Kreisel & März, 2018); or understand the constraints on their decision-making in Geneva (Stoecklin, 2018), while quite diverse in their focus, all contribute to an overall understanding of what well-being is, how it is manifested, experienced or performed in everyday life. By reading across these studies we can develop some assessment of whether similar aspects of well-being can be discerned across different social contexts and what elements of well-being vary across different contexts.

Thirdly, we have seen a growing body of well-being research that engages with children as subjects rather than objects of research (Mason & Watson, 2014). Research that enquires into the perspectives of children, on how they define well-being, how they experience well-being and what factors contribute to a sense of well-being has taken increasing prominence in the child well-being field. This research often involves an in-depth exploration of what children think and feel about various aspects of their life. These studies have found that children often prioritize areas of well-being similar to those used as domains in studies of well-being where the measures have been developed by adult researchers. However, these studies also extend upon and provide alternative knowledge about well-being from children's perspectives (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2016; McAuley, Morgan, & Rose, 2010).

The seven papers collected in this volume each contribute to these three developments in different ways. Each emphasises the importance of emotional well-being, that emotional well-being can be understood from a cross-cultural comparative perspective, that spatial elements are especially useful for providing a basis for comparison and that qualitative approaches have a valuable role in contributing to our understanding of emotional well-being. Six of the seven papers are based on fieldwork with children and one is based on research with teachers about how they engage with children. In the remainder of this introduction we outline some themes that emerge from the contributions to this volume, using the contribution to consider how well-being is conceptualised, themes that emerge regarding cross-cultural comparison and context and the use of spatial, comparative concepts to explore well-being. We conclude the paper by discussing the *Children's Understandings of Well-being* (CUWB) study, that attempts to engage with these topics explicitly and which provided the framework for the majority of contributions collected in this Special Issue.

#### *Definitions of well-being and the importance of emotions to well-being*

Within the child well-being field there is a vibrant debate about what constitutes children's well-being. Drawing from hedonic and eudemonic traditions of well-being, child well-being research has increasingly

argued for the importance of subjective well-being approaches, and has argued for frameworks beyond those based in developmental psychology (Ben-Arieh, 2000).

The papers brought together in this Special Issue also demonstrate that well-being is a varied and contested concept, reflecting dimensions of life that are valued in different social contexts. Edurne Scott-Loinaz, in her study of teacher perceptions and practices of social and emotional education (*Teachers' perceptions and practice of social and emotional education in Greece, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom*) demonstrates the importance of social and emotional education as a pedagogical practice, for developing relationships between teachers and students that are well-being promoting, for both students and teachers. By comparing teacher perceptions across Greece, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom, Scott-Loinaz demonstrates not only that there are cultural variations in the manner which emotional expression occurs across contexts, but there are differences in how emotional expression is valued as being important to well-being. In some contexts, emotional expressiveness and warmth is seen as being of critical importance to good pedagogical practice, whereas in others this expressiveness is considered as undermining good practice. Scott-Loinaz's research therefore provides some insights into variations in emotion rules in pedagogical practices, and the place and value of emotions in promoting well-being in schools.

That well-being is a product of social and cultural orders is theoretically elaborated in the contribution by Susann Fegter and Claudia Mock. In their paper (*Children's Emotional Geographies of Well-being: The Cultural Constitution of Belonging in the Context of Migration and Digitalization*), they present a cultural analytical approach to the spatial constitution of well-being, with a focus on discursive practices that children take part in. Based on a case study with children from Berlin, they show how the value of their home country (from where the children or their families migrated from) derives from a specific positing of the local self, as well as from evaluative differentiations between *here* and *there*. These evaluative differentiations occur along categories of unrestricted mobility and sensation, technological processes and belonging. The analysis demonstrates how children's conceptualisations of their home country are part of translocal spaces of belonging, which reproduce and shift broader discourses of migration and cultural identity. They also indicate how digitalisation becomes part of these contingent cultures of well-being. What well-being is, has to be empirically elaborated in an ongoing way.

Similarly, Gabrielle Drake and colleagues (*Is there a place for children as emotional beings in child protection policy and practice?*), in their discussion of the agency-safety nexus as a feature of children's well-being, demonstrate "that children's well-being is intersubjective, formed through, reliant upon, and existing in relationships- to one's self, with significant others and in encounters that constitute routine interactions in life." (p. 20). Both papers demonstrate the highly contingent nature of well-being, that it can only be understood as a constituted as part of context – something we discuss further below. Such an approach demonstrates the necessity for ongoing comparative analysis, because it is not sufficient only to understand how well-being is experienced and talked about, but to understand how the contexts in which these experiences and discussions are articulated are also constitutive of well-being.

The importance of relationships between teachers and students is emphasised in the studies by Dagmar Kutsar and colleagues in Estonia (*Schools for well-being? Critical discussions with schoolchildren*), Lisa Newland and colleagues in the Mid-West of the USA (*School Climate, Emotions, and Relationships: Children's Experiences of Well-Being in the Midwestern U.S*) and Elizabeth Huynh and Ashley Stewart-Tufescu in Winnipeg, Canada (*I get to learn more stuff': Children's Understanding of Wellbeing at School in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada*). These studies focus on children's understandings of well-being at school. Despite being undertaken in three quite different settings, all identified aspects of the school environment that are supportive of and aspects that undermine children's well-being at school. Amongst the characteristics that support well-being, the studies emphasised the importance of 'autonomy and agency' for student well-being. Teachers who provide choices to children, listen to student concerns, but importantly who also act on children's perspectives and incorporate them into teaching practice, are considered as supporting well-being in school. Another common factor was the importance of 'developing competence', of students feeling competent and being recognised for that competence. While this would seem to be the key role of schooling, many children in these studies noted that this was often not their experience, undermined by factors such as teachers acting unfairly or unethically or experiences of bullying. Features of environments supportive of learning identified by children are those in which they felt safe, that are calm, and where the physical environment is adequate and comfortable. Furthermore, there was some support in these studies for having a diversity of activities to support student learning and where children could see that they were developing competence for the future. Additionally, 'qualities of relationships with teachers and peers' are a further important factor. Teachers who were creative, empathetic, honest, fair and supportive were not only considered by children as making them feel well, but were also respected by students. Here we see an interesting parallel with the research by Scott-Loinaz on teachers' perceptions of the role emotional expressiveness plays in the classroom. It seems that further work comparing student and teacher perceptions on the role of emotional engagement may be warranted. Moreover, the children in these studies also pointed out the importance of friendships and being able to spend time with peers at school, further supporting how being able to undertake activities free from adults is important for children's well-being (Fattore et al., 2016).

These three studies also document how experiences at school too frequently undermine children's well-being. These experiences can be categorised as the negative corollary of dimensions that support well-being. In contrast to agency supporting features, students also identified aspects of school life that 'undermined their agency' – where children were provided no choice, felt they were not listened to, where school discipline regimes were overly authoritarian, where children did not feel safe or the school environment was physically run-down or unhygienic. The capacity to develop 'competence was undermined' where students felt there was too much pressure to achieve high grades, where assessment and homework loads were too great, where teaching style was considered inappropriate or poor, or where teachers do not have the requisite knowledge or competence to teach the subject. Perhaps most significantly, children pointed to aspects of 'relationships that undermined their well-being'. Bullying between children was an important topic pointed out in all three

studies. However, the authors in these papers go to some lengths to demonstrate that teacher-student relationships have a tremendous impact on children's well-being at school. Some teachers were feared by children, described as being angry or creating a negative classroom environment. Situations of teachers being unfair, inappropriate, indiscriminate and unethical are also documented in these papers, which appear to undermine the credibility of the teacher and question the value of schooling for some of the children.

Kimberley Lakes and colleagues (*I Am Me: Adolescent Perspectives of a School-Based Universal Intervention Program Designed to Promote Emotional Competence*), provide a detailed outline of the component elements of emotional competence as a valued basis for well-being, in their evaluation of the 'I am Me' school-based program. In the outline of the 'I am Me' program, we find an elaborate map of valued emotions, which we can read as one configuration of emotional well-being. Attributes of personal well-being – the power of forgiveness, authenticity, being motivated, communicative, kind and generous – provide a strong platform for agency to engage with the world – to be fearless and exploratory – and also to take responsibility for others and the world – to be kind, connected, a good friend and a problem solver, amongst other attributes. Their work demonstrates the importance of emotional management (self-awareness and self-regulation), as important to well-being, values which some authors have argued have become important social norms in 'developed' societies (Illouz, 2007; Seligman, 2011). Similarly, Drake and colleagues discuss the importance of moral agency in their discussion of emotions and well-being. In their paper they describe the centrality of moral frameworks in children's exercise of agency, and through their actions demonstrate that they are moral actors who can be depended on. Exercising this moral capacity, signalling it to others and having one's status as a moral actor recognised by others, they argue, is important to children's well-being.

In their outline of the importance of universal programs to promote emotional competence, Lakes and colleagues demonstrate how social inequalities also have pernicious effects in creating inequalities in the social and emotional resources available to children, and consequently in the benefits that accrue to individuals from being emotional competent. Their work can therefore be read in the tradition of Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities approach, which emphasizes the functional capabilities of individuals (Sen, 2001), with several of the factors discussed by Lakes and colleagues corresponding with some of the central capabilities identified by Nussbaum (2011).

The emphasis on the relational basis of well-being in these papers, not only confirms the importance of emotional connections as significant to well-being, it serves to remind us that well-being has intersubjective and cultural qualities, rather than something that is experienced by individuals as a subjective experience. In this sense the papers presented in this volume critique a container model of well-being, which is assumed in dominant utilitarian concepts of well-being. Utilitarian approaches focus on pleasure attainment and pain avoidance and epistemologically prioritize subjective experience as the measure of well-being. The notion that individuals are in the best position to assess their subjective preferences is an important intellectual influence on subjective well-being studies and is highly influential in economic approaches to well-being. Yet they underestimate the importance of relationality to well-being. Therefore, concepts of well-being should not be

viewed in isolation from the contexts in which children are situated. Being positioned as poor, rich, Muslim, female, male, foster child, etc. not only affects the emergence of the child's subjectivity, but is also instrumental in the conceptualisation of well-being. Consequently, concepts of well-being cannot only be defined objectively. Since exclusively subjective understandings are not adequate solutions for making social inequalities visible and may also reflect adaptive preferences, an analysis of well-being should not only rely on subjective concepts of well-being. Rather, an analysis of well-being must include both objective and subjective determinants. With this approach the epistemological goal is to reconstruct the social and moral orders children are positioned in that frame their ideas, including their concepts of well-being.

#### *Developing categories for comparative analysis of well-being*

At the beginning of this introduction we discussed the increasing number of studies that have a multinational or transnational dimension. This development has raised issues usually not discussed in child well-being research, in particular whether the category of the nation-state is an appropriate lens through which to analyze children's well-being (Fattore, Fegter, & Hunner-Kreisel, 2018). While the nation as an analytical category may be of relevance, this is usually not dealt with as an empirically open question. Instead a methodological nationalism is usually a taken-for-granted starting point for analysis. However, this taken-for-granted starting point has been questioned in critiques of methodological nationalism (Amelina, Faist, Glick Schiller, Nergiz, 2012, p. 2), asking whether and how the nation becomes relevant and, seen as an analytical category and as socio-cultural context, in what ways the nation-state is related to other categories and contexts.

Scott-Loinaz prioritises cross-cultural elements in her study of teachers' perceptions of social and emotional education. Critiquing research that treats teachers "as faceless variables", her comparative analysis moves from the level of nation-state to cross-cultural comparisons, and in so doing points out cultural differences and similarities in factors, such as the degree to which teachers feel comfortable expressing emotions in class, the role of expressing negative emotions, the degree to which teachers think social and emotional competence can be taught, which social and emotional skills should be taught and the relationship emotional expressiveness has with pedagogical practices valued by teachers. In so doing Scott-Loinaz suggests that there is likely to be a complex interaction between cultural factors (that might be discerned as relevant at the nation level), educational practices (that might be discerned as relevant at the nation, province and local school level) and individual teacher preferences.

In the contributions by Lakes, Kutsar and colleagues, Newland and colleagues and Huynh and Stewart-Tufescu, the school can be interpreted as providing a spatial category of analysis. In each of these papers, the school can be read as a microcosm, a site for a complex set of interactions between school staff and children and between children, that both support and undermine well-being. Spatial metaphors are commonly used to describe the school, as a 'safe space' or as a 'learning environment'. For example, where Newland and colleagues state:

Positive and supportive relationships with teachers, peers, and other school staff are important for children's EWB because they provide a bridge between children's emotional and academic lives... When children feel supported and respected, they are better able to handle the stressors and challenges that arise within the school environment (p. 7)

They are referring to the interactions that occur within the defined spatial parameters of the school, as critical to well-being. However, these experiences are part of larger contexts. Not only does the school as a microcosm exist within broader educational environments, characterised by, for example, educational policy and funding regimes set at the local, provincial, national and international level; translocal and global factors are also evident in the realities of daily school life. For example, the level of homework given to students might be dictated by a particular teacher, whole of school position on homework or government policy on educational outcomes, which in turn might be determined by government responses to their nation's aggregate results on international comparative tests, such as the PISA test. These factors, from the local to the global may be experienced by students in a very personal way, such as where, drawing from an example provided by Kutsar and colleagues in Estonia, students are unable to pursue their own interests out of school; or in an example provided by Huynh and Stewart-Tufescu in Winnipeg, knowledge of terrorist attacks in another part of the world and school shootings in a more proximate, yet different nation, combine with recent experiences of theft at the school, to create anxiety and fear amongst some of the students.

These interactions can be understood as forming emotional geographies, as outlined by Fegter and Mock in their paper. They are examples of "the spatiality and temporality of emotions" that "coalesce around and within certain places" (Bondi, Davidson, & Smith, 2007, p.1, cited in Fegter and Mock, p.4). Fegter and Mock provide a discursive theoretical framework to understand the complex interactions of different spatial levels, evident in the other papers in this Special Issue. Drawing from the work of Martina Löw, they demonstrate how the concepts of 'Spacing' ("the process of *situating and positioning* social goods and people in relation to each other") and 'Synthesis' ("the process of connecting goods and living beings to form space through processes of perception, ideation, or recall") provide one means to understand how multiple social and spatial scales interrelate. In their own research they demonstrate how the concept of 'homeland' functions as a repository for things that are valued and associated with well-being, which invokes memory, presence, material artefacts, physical environment and human interaction. This is also evident in the paper by Drake and colleagues who, in their discussion of the importance of place to well-being, argue that places have emotional significance because they connect the child with a larger group identification. They suggest that the emotional landscapes that children associate with local places, because they are an expression of larger group identity, are therefore also connected with multiple geo-spatial scales. This simultaneity of scale is important for experiences of well-being.

*The value of spatial, comparative concepts for researching children's well-being*

So far we have hinted at the value of comparative analysis for understanding children's well-being, and have undertaken a provisional comparative analysis of the contributions. We can also discern from the contributions to this Special Issue that well-being is constructed through a complex interplay of personal (individual preferences and attributes), interpersonal (for example relationships between teachers and children and between children) and organisational factors (for example state and school policy, pedagogical guidelines), the interaction between these factors manifested in children's experiences. Both Newland and colleagues and Huynh and Stewart-Tufescu, for example, point to the importance of policy that develops teacher competence in relational pedagogy; policy addressing qualities of the school environment both inside and outside the classroom, including bullying and cyber-bullying; formative teacher assessments; and teacher skill in linking students with other support services. Multi-level interactions and interrelatedness are also evident in the papers by Fegter and Mock and Drake and colleagues for different aspects of well-being. In Fegter and Mock's analysis of 'homeland' as important to well-being, their analysis of the evaluative differentiations evident in a child's discussion of the country that their family migrated from and their country of reception, are part of "broader discourses around migration, cultural identities, technologies and citizenship" (p. 16). Drake and colleagues emphasise children's physical vulnerability in their discussion of children's agency and safety and use this to demonstrate the necessity of relationships of interdependence, between individuals and between individuals and the state.

A comparison of these studies also highlights the importance of local policy contexts in framing the value of emotional well-being, especially in education. Scott-Loinaz demonstrates how different educational systems determine the way in which social and emotional education is taught in the classroom, both reflecting and reproducing cultural (here teacher) attitudes about whether emotional aptitude can be taught and the value of such teaching. However, her study also demonstrates sources of dissonance between sanctioned policy and teacher expectations, suggesting that cultural norms about the value of emotional education are a potential topic of conflict between, for example, teachers at the coal-face and educational policy-makers. We also see the importance of standardised comparative testing as having some influence on teacher practice and children's well-being. This is made explicit as an important context factor in the study by Kutsar and colleagues, but is a feature of many education systems around the world, indicating the importance of global comparisons of national achievement as a measure of educational performance. We have noted elsewhere how these comparative testing regimes have the effect of creating internal policy pressure, with some national governments adopting the educational practices of another nation, without due regard to differences in historical, economic and institutional dependencies and contexts (Fattore et al., 2018). While the impact of high-stakes testing on curriculum and pedagogy has been well documented (Rice, Dulfer, Polesel, & O'Hanlon, 2016), research on the effects of these tests on student well-being is also beginning to emerge (Howell 2016). Furthermore, the transmission of educational practices from one nation to another often involves the transmission of hegemonic educational practices from the global 'north' to the global 'south'.

Through such transmission normative ideas of childhood and child well-being are also transported (see Bühler-Niederberger, 2016). One consequence is the creation of normative ideals of legitimized universal childhoods, which are in fact eurocentric and which often dominate other and differing conceptualisations of childhood and child well-being (Liebel, 2018).

These studies demonstrate that cross-national comparisons have some value in moving beyond or in complementing methodological nationalism, by using a different comparative referent (other than the nation-state or analysing how the nation-state is related to other dimensions like generational orders underlying school and teaching performance) as the basis for analysis. Scott-Loinaz for example, uses categories related to emotional expressiveness and intelligence as the basis for comparison, and in so doing demonstrates how some dimensions of emotional well-being can be named in some places and not in others, and that some kinds of emotional engagement in some places do not appear to have a comparable referent in other places. For example, why ‘convivencia’ in Spain or ‘ενταχθούν’ (to join or integrate) in Greece does not have an exact counterpart in other places, or why group integration (Sweden) or resilience and grit (United Kingdom) are prioritised in these contexts and not others, raise important questions for further comparative research.

One study that attempts to examine how children conceptualise and experience well-being from a comparative and global perspective is the research project “Children’s understanding of Well-being”-Study (CUWB) (Fattore et al., 2018). This project involves a multi-national, qualitative study that reconstructs children’s understandings and experiences of well-being in different parts of the world and explores the relevance of cultural and social contexts for these meanings and experiences. The aim is to determine similarities and differences in children’s understandings of well-being in a locally oriented and multi-nationally comparative manner and to take into account the normative and value-oriented aspects of well-being. The study is designed around a core set of modules and principles that are replicated across the study sites. These include participation of children aged between 8-14 years of age; an ethnographic component documenting the fieldwork setting and completion of several fieldwork stages. Currently 29 research teams across 24 countries are involved in this study, focusing on topics like digital well-being, developing definitions of well-being; constructions of safety and vulnerability; media and technologies; negotiation processes; and inclusive methodologies with vulnerable children. All research teams aim to follow the principle of involving direct participation of children as research subjects, to facilitate children’s participations rights and to document the challenges, processes and mechanisms of conducting multinational qualitative research (see Fattore et. al 2018). The studies by Drake and colleagues, Fegter and Mock, Huynh and Stewart-Tufescu, Kutsar and colleagues and Newland and colleagues are part of this CUWB project.

## **Conclusion**

The papers in this volume serve to demonstrate the importance that emotional education plays in the well-being of children. However, as well as documenting the developmental value of emotional education, these papers show that emotional education can be considered a well-being practice. The ways in which some

emotional education programs can contribute to developing relationships characterised by trust, recognition, support and care between children and adults, appears to contribute to the well-being of adults and children, quite independent of any well-being outcomes that might be achieved by children, for example in improvements to educational outcomes or future psycho-social adjustment.

These experiential or process-oriented modes of well-being may appear fleeting and intangible, difficult to quantify and measure the ultimate effect size of in terms of psychological or educational outcomes. Yet the processes through which they occur, the social orders and power relations in which they are embedded and the value these experiences have for individuals are captured in the qualitative research presented in this Special Issue. While these studies cannot make claims about the enduring effects of being treated with respect, of being cared for or caring for someone, of feeling safe, of having a sense of home or a place of belonging, they tell us much about the processes which contribute to these experiences of well-being and about the meanings of these valued goods and activities as part of multiple and complex social phenomena.

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