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Social policy and the changing concept of child well-being. The role of international studies and children as active participants

Zeitschrift für Pädagogik 60 (2014) 4, S. 569-581



Empfohlene Zitierung/ Suggested Citation:

Ben-Arieh, Asher: Social policy and the changing concept of child well-being. The role of international studies and children as active participants - In: Zeitschrift für Pädagogik 60 (2014) 4, S. 569-581 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-146738

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ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR PÄDAGOGIK

Heft 4

Juli/August 2014

■ *Thementeil*

**Child Well-being. Potenzial und Grenzen
eines Konzepts**

■ *Allgemeiner Teil*

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im Wandel von Kontextkonstellationen

Über Julius Langbehn (1851–1907), die völkische
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Asher Ben-Arieh

Social Policy and the Changing Concept of Child Well-Being

The role of international studies and children as active participants

Abstract: Social policy refers to the overall actions and services a society takes to ensure the well-being of its citizens. As such, children are at the forefront of social policy, and investing in them is both crucial for their current well-being and an investment toward the future. However, the concept of child well-being is changing. Scholars have termed this shift as one of moving from child-saving to child development or from child welfare to child well-being. This changing context, which in many ways is still developing, is complicating the effort to develop appropriate indicators and outcome measures of children's quality of life and status and consequently it is complicating the evaluation of social policy and its contribution. This paper presents the changing context of children's well-being, the major shifts that have occurred in the field, and their implications for evaluating social policy. It then goes on to discuss the potential of international comparisons in evaluating social policies and in particular the new role for children's subjective reports on their well-being as a tool for evaluating social policy. In that regard, the paper presents the International Survey of Children's Well-Being and concludes with a call for new policies that will adhere to the new concept of children's well-being and serve to create a better life for children.

Keywords: Children Rights, Social Policy, Child Participation, Children's Well-Being, Children's Quality of Life

1. Introduction

“Social Policy” refers to the policy of governments and/or societies in regards to actions having a direct impact on the welfare of the citizens by providing them with services or income. The central core consists, therefore, of social insurance, public (or national) assistance, health and welfare services, housing policy, and so on (Marshall, 1965). Social policy is also a tool used by governments and social institutions to shape or influence their citizens' behaviors or in other words, a means toward achieving specific targets (Titmuss, 1974).

Social policy, although relevant to all citizens, is especially relevant for children because it shapes the environment in which they and their families live, work, and play and consequently impacts on their well-being (Jolly, 2012). On the one hand, this is so because the foundation of an individual's well-being is laid in childhood. Childhood is also the most opportune time to break the cycle of poverty or prevent it from beginning. Investments in children are increasingly seen as one of the best and most valuable long-term investments we can make (Rees, Chai & Antony, 2012). On the other hand, children are human beings from the day they are born and as such are entitled to a good life

during childhood, regardless of the issue of preparing them for a good adulthood (Andresen, Diehm, Sander & Ziegler, 2011). Therefore, they should be enjoying the benefits of social policies in childhood. Both of these perspectives lead to the same conclusion that children were and will always be at the forefront of social policy (Bradshaw, 2013).

Not only are individual and family well-being affected by social policy, many would argue that they are the prime outcomes by which social policy needs to be evaluated (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001). This is because social policy is always (at least declaratively) intended for improving individual and family well-being. Thus, it is natural to evaluate it by analyzing whether the well-being of children and families has been improved or not. The study of children's well-being plays a unique and potentially crucial role in this regard (Ben-Arieh & Goerge, 2006).

However, the concept of child well-being is changing. Scholars have termed this shift as one of moving from child-saving to child development (Khan, 2009) or from child welfare to child well-being (Kamerman, Phipps & Ben-Arieh, 2009). This changing context, which in many ways is still developing and has a long way to go (Ben-Arieh, 2008), is complicating the effort to develop appropriate indicators and outcome measures of children's quality of life and status, and consequently, of evaluating social policy and its contribution (Ben-Arieh, 2009).

One way to deal with this complicated task of evaluating social policy and its contribution to children's well-being is to utilize international comparisons. Such studies, challenging as they are by mere international comparison, are even more complicated due to the changing context of children's well-being. If the understanding of the concept is changing, then the goals of social policy must change as well. If the goals are changing, then one must acknowledge that the strategy for achieving the goals must change as well. Evaluating social policy in such a context becomes even more complicated, yet it also becomes a must, because policies need to be reexamined.

2. The changing concept of children's well-being

Our understanding of children's well-being can best be understood in terms of six major shifts: (1) moving from a sole focus on child survival to well-being; (2) moving from a primary focus on negative aspects of life to one that incorporates positive outcomes; (3) incorporating a children's rights perspective while looking beyond it as well; (4) moving from children's "well-becoming", that is, their subsequent achievement or well-being as adults to a focus also on children's current well-being; (5) focusing growing attention to the need to move from "traditional" domains of child well-being, primarily those determined by professions, to new domains that cut across professions; (6) increasing today's reliance on the child's perspective compared to our past understanding of children's well-being based on an adult's perspective (Ben-Arieh, 2002, 2006). These changes are detailed below.

2.1 From survival and basic needs to development and well-being

Children's physical survival and basic needs have long been a focus of social policy, particularly threats to children's survival. The use of such a concept has spurred policies and programs to save children's lives (Ben-Arieh, 2000; Bradshaw, Hoelscher & Richardson, 2007). Infant and child mortality, school enrollment and dropout, immunizations, and childhood disease are all examples of measures of basic needs that become goals of policies and tools to evaluate them. However, a fundamental shift occurred when the focus moved from survival to well-being. Scholars argued in the late 1990s for the need to move beyond basic needs and beyond the phenomenon of deviance to study what promotes child development (Aber, 1997; Pittman & Irby, 1997). Indeed, the field moved from efforts to determine minimums, as in saving a life, to a focus on quality of life. This move was supported by efforts to understand what constitutes "quality of life" and its implications for children (Casas, 2000; Huebner, 1997, 2004).

The challenges this shift created for social policy are evident and daring. If mere survival is not enough, then the goal of social policy can no longer be saving children. It needs to be about child development (Khan, 2009). In other words, if our new goal is child quality of life, we need a social policy that aims at children's daily lives and their subjective well-being (Ben-Arieh, Casas, Frønes & Korbin, 2013).

2.2 From negative to positive

The absence of problems or failures does not necessarily indicate proper growth and success or the success of a good policy (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Moore, Lippman & Brown, 2004). Preventing risk factors or negative behaviors is not the same as promoting protective factors or positive behaviors (Aber & Jones, 1997). Child well-being is moving from concentrating only on trends in dying, distress, disability and discomfort to issues of sparkle, satisfaction, and well-being (Resnick, 1995).

Thus, the challenge facing social policy since this shift is to develop services and programs that would target society's new goal of having a good life instead of preventing a bad one (Ben-Arieh, 2008). This is a major shift of focus not only in social policy goals but also in their application – they cannot focus on prevention alone. Social policy also needs to focus on promotion (Pittman & Irby, 1997; Lippman, 2004).

2.3 Incorporating children's rights and beyond

Although inspired and to some extent guided by the children's rights movement, the new concept of child well-being looks beyond securing rights. Perhaps the most crucial difference is the standard used to measure a child's status. Child well-being is normally focused on what is desired. However, the securing of rights addresses legally established minimums. The challenge here for social policy is twofold. First, an updated so-

cial policy cannot just set goals of securing rights but needs to go beyond and promote well-being. Second, an up-to-date social policy needs to be able to deal with goals that are not necessarily clear, concrete, and observable (as is the case of securing rights) but are abstract concepts of well-being that are less useful for policies than goals.

Furthermore, the new concept of child well-being, which is based on the notion of children's rights, is inspired by and conscious of the need to be, at a minimum, consistent with a concept of dignity for the child (Melton, 2005). It needs to be child-centered and draw attention to the actual situation of children. This calls for a social policy that will respect children, be anchored in their everyday lives and be centered on them and not on other units such as the family, school, or social services (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001).

2.4 *From well-becoming to well-being*

In contrast to the immediacy of *well-being*, *well-becoming* focuses on the future and the preparation of children to be productive and happy adults (Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2011). Qvortrup (1999) laid the foundation for considering children's well-being rather than only their well-becoming by arguing that the conventional preoccupation with the next generation is a preoccupation of adults. Although not a necessarily harmful view, anyone interested in children and childhood should also be interested in both the present and the future.

Accepting the arguments of Qvortrup (1999) and others to concentrate on the well-being of children does not deny the relevance of a child's development toward adulthood. However, focusing on preparing children to become citizens suggests that they are not citizens during childhood, a concept that is hard to reconcile with a belief in children's rights. Indeed, both perspectives are legitimate and necessary both for social science and social policy. However, the emergence of the child-centered perspective and its focus on children's well-being introduced new ideas and demands in the policy arena.

The challenges for social policy here cannot be overestimated. Most current social policies are geared toward transitions in life. A policy should be evaluated as successful if it prepares infants for childhood, children for adolescence, and adolescents for adulthood and the work force. A new concept of well-being calls for a social policy that will be evaluated in the well-being of children as children and not in the transition to adulthood. Here is one example: Economics teach us that children are better off as adults if they grow up in smaller families in which the resources are not split among many kids. However, children teach us that they prefer growing up in bigger families with more than one sibling. A well-becoming social policy will support smaller families. A well-being-focused social policy will do the opposite and support bigger families with more than one child.

Yet another example is the readiness for school social policy. In its original form, based on a well-becoming perspective, it is about preparing children for school. If the new concept of the well-being of children is the basis for such a policy, it would have to be about preparing the schools for the children.

2.5 *From traditional to new domains*

The previous changes are interrelated and are both the reason for and the outcome of one another (Ben-Arieh, 2006). Until recently, while studying the well-being of children, scholars concerned themselves with traditional domains – those defined either by profession or by a social service (e. g., education, health, foster care). Looking at children's well-being rather than only well-becoming naturally brings new domains of child well-being into focus including children's life skills, their civic involvement and participation, and children's culture (Ben-Arieh, 2000).

This in turn calls for a new social policy, one which will truly be interdisciplinary, multi-agency, and service cross-cutting. It can no longer be about education alone or about children's health. If it is about children's well-being, it will have to look at health and education as a whole.

2.6 *The emergence of the (child) subjective perspective*

The above-mentioned changes forced the field to ask at least some of the following questions to understand children's well-being: What are children doing? What do children need? What do children have? What do children think and feel? To whom or what are children connected and related? What do children contribute? Answering such questions demands a better picture of children as human beings in their present life, including the positive aspects of their life (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001).

To better answer these questions, the field began to focus on children's daily lives, which is something that children know the most about. Studies have found, for example, that parents do not really know how children spend their time (Funk, Hagan & Schimming, 1999; Ben-Arieh & Ofir, 2002) or what they are worried about (Gottlieb & Bronstein, 1996). Hence, to answer such questions, children had to be involved in such studies, at least as the primary source of information.

Prout (1997, p. 96) argued that large-scale social phenomena and small-scale inter-subjective action implicate each other, such that the complexity of the social world cannot be expressed through a simple asymmetry of objective social structure and subjective actors. Yet, much research on children's lives has, until recently, focused on objective descriptions, treating children as passive objects who are acted on by the adult world. As the child indicators movement accepted and built on the theoretical foundations outlined above, it became clear that a new role for children had emerged, a role that coupled the search for objective measures with a subjective view of childhood (Casas, González, Figuer & Coenders, 2004).

This has become immensely important for social policy, because studies have shown, particularly during adolescence, that parents do not always accurately convey their child's feelings (Shek, 1998; Sweeting, 2001). The field quickly realized that although there are areas in which indirect information may be superior – such as about the household economy as reported by parents, or grades from school records (in most in-

stances), children's own reports are particularly necessary for crucial measures such as mental well-being and social relations (Lohan & Murphy, 2001; Ohannessian, Lerner, Lerner & Voneye, 1995).

With regard to social policy, bear in mind the following example: In a study conducted in South Carolina (Ben-Arieh, McDonell & Attar-Schwartz, 2009), children, their parents, and school teachers were asked about safety in school (they were each asked to rate the overall level of safety in school on a 5-point scale as well as the safety in classrooms, on playgrounds, etc.). Teachers reported the school to be totally safe, parents reported it to be extremely dangerous, and the child's perspective was somewhere in between. Now, for those responsible for shaping educational policy (which is a part of social policy) and for operating the schools, the different perspectives mean a totally different urgency and policy. In another example (Ben-Arieh & Windman, 2007), a study was conducted among child victims of abuse (by nonparent adults) and their parents. Both groups were asked what is important for them in the criminal process (they were given a list of characteristics of the process and were asked to rate each one on a 5-point scale). The parents overwhelmingly replied that the most important thing is to finish with the process as quickly as possible. The kids said they do not care how long it will take as long as they will be treated respectfully and will be heard. From a policy point of view, each perspective leads to a different emphasis and maybe even a different policy.

Coming back to the respect issue, studies have shown that including the perspectives of children is important not only because they differ from those of adults but also because doing so respects children as people, better informs policymakers, provides a foundation for child advocacy, and enhances the legal and political socialization of children (Melton & Limber, 1992; Melton, 2005).

Finally, as some have claimed, the developments and changes in the concept of child well-being will eventually lead to the creation of a new role for children in studying their own well-being and in influencing new policies to promote it. A natural evolution of this would take place in a field that looks beyond survival to the full range of child well-being by including children and their own perspectives.

However, even in a field that adheres to the new concept of child well-being and respects children as human beings, we still need to tackle the issue of how we can best evaluate social policy and, regardless of its goals, what tools we possess to better understand the impact of social policy.

3. The potential of international comparisons for social policy

It is evident that some social policies have had a better impact on children's lives than others. It is further evident that some indicators and measurements of child well-being have led to new policies and programs for children whereas others have not (Ben-Arieh & Goerge, 2006). This is especially important to consider in a world in which the mere concept of child well-being is changing. The question here is whether and, if so, how

can international studies of child well-being serve us in the quest for better social policy and a better life for children. Hereafter, I shall try to address this question in the context of the new child well-being concept.

First, such studies can help us to chart and/or monitor progress. Within a country, it is hard to know what constitutes “good performance” or well-being in any absolute sense. What rate of child poverty or time spent on a specific activity would constitute an “acceptable” level; what even should be the target level? By comparing across countries, it is possible to benchmark internal performance. That is, we do not have to choose any particular absolute standard but can gauge performance by comparison with that apparent in other similar countries (Phipps, 2006).

A second potential use for international comparisons of child well-being is to identify both policy problems and potential solutions. If we find that a specific country record is significantly worse on some dimension (e. g., child obesity) than it is in most other similar countries, we have identified a problem. Hopefully, if the study is “effective,” drawing attention to the problem will help direct resources toward a new social policy (Richardson, 2013).

Third, studies of child well-being can help in suggesting fruitful directions for policy change in order to improve children’s well-being. For example, if we find that child well-being is better in countries that spend more on some specific programs (e. g., child benefits) or provide resources in different ways (e. g., on public medical care), this can suggest ways to modify policy within a country (Richardson, 2009; Bradshaw, 2013). Thus, it is crucial to study not only child well-being but also the resources and inputs in a given country and, thus, in an international comparison (Mekonen, 2010).

Fourth, looking across countries often expands the range of child outcomes and policy choices far beyond what would be observed within a single country, even over the course of time. This is especially true when one looks at a “new” or changing concept of well-being. In other words, the fact that child well-being has changed limits the in-country experience in regards to improving it within its new definition. An international comparison helps to overcome this limitation (Richardson, 2009).

Phipps (2006), for example, testified that according to her experience within Canada, it is extremely persuasive to both politicians and nonacademic policy audiences to compare Canadian children’s well-being with the well-being of children in other affluent countries, especially the United States. Such studies seem to catch media attention very readily and, presumably as a result, the attention of politicians.

Another prime example comes from the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS), which has advanced comparative analysis of child poverty tremendously. The LIS has gained widespread recognition and credibility, which has enhanced the capacity of researchers to make useful international comparisons of child financial well-being and it has had a major impact on social policies in a number of countries (Gornick & Jantti, 2009; Bradshaw, 2006; Khan & Kamerman, 2006).

Yet, beyond the effort to develop high-quality measures of child well-being by enhancing the comparability of existing surveys (i. e., the LIS model), scholars have argued for the need to generate new coordinated multi-country studies focusing on child

well-being in its new concept and understanding (Bradshaw et al., 2007). Hereafter, I shall describe one such innovative study.

4. The International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB)

Recent years have brought a surge in innovative works trying to capture the “new” concept of child well-being and how to measure it. One approach has been to conduct surveys with children, asking them about their well-being while using an array of scales (Huebner, 2004; Burton & Phipps, 2009; Andresen & Fegter, 2011). The second approach has been to work with the children to conceptualize child well-being and to bring together such measures (Fattore, Mason & Watson, 2009).

Very few have tried to do both. One example of an effort to study children's lives from their subjective perspective was based on measures they suggested in the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB). ISCWeB is a worldwide research survey on children's subjective well-being. The study aims to collect solid and representative data on children's lives and daily activities, their time use, and in particular, their own perceptions and evaluations of their well-being. The purpose is to improve child well-being by creating awareness among children, their parents, and their communities, but also to influence social policy and opinion leaders, decision makers, professionals, and the general public.¹

This project began in 2009 when a group of researchers, mainly from the International Society for Child Indicators (ISCI), held a meeting hosted by UNICEF to discuss the potential need for the survey. The group agreed that such a survey would fill an important gap in internationally accepted knowledge about children's lives. One of the products of the meeting was an early version of a survey questionnaire. This draft questionnaire was tested and piloted in the summer and autumn of 2010 in seven countries. A second draft version was piloted in the first half of 2011 in six countries.

Based on learning from these pilot tests, the questionnaires were revised and used in a range of countries for a large-scale pilot of the survey (Wave 1). The countries involved (which were recruited in a snowball convenience sample) at this stage were: Algeria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, England, Israel, Nepal, Romania, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Uganda, and the United States. Well over 35 000 children, aged 8 to 13, participated in this wave of the survey. Some initial findings from this pilot were presented at the ISCI conference in Seoul in May 2013.

The current phase of the project involves undertaking a new wave of the survey with representative samples of children aged 8 to 12 years in as many countries as possible. This phase of the project has been funded by the Jacobs Foundation for survey work to be carried out in a minimum of 13 countries (here countries were selected based on 4 principles: countries with different welfare regimes; countries from different continents; countries with different religions; and new and older democracies) during the pe-

1 For more details, please see <http://www.isciweb.org>

riod from September 2013 to April 2014. Each participating country surveyed a representative sample of at least 1 000 children in each of three school year groups – around the ages of 8, 10, and 12. So far (March 2014), a diverse range of 14 countries across four continents have committed to participating in the survey – Algeria, Colombia, England, Estonia, Ethiopia, Germany, Israel, Nepal, Norway, Portugal, Romania, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, and Turkey. A number of other countries are also currently considering taking part. ISCWeB will provide an opportunity to compare and contrast the lives of children in a wide range of countries. All data is to eventually be made available free of charge to researchers globally.

It is still too early to even start to assess the impact of ISCWeB and such studies on social policy. Yet, the potential of the new concept of child well-being to influence social policy is not limited to children's participation in studies or even to studies that will focus on the "new" well-being of children. Scholars have argued that in order to really grasp the relations between the "new" concept of child well-being and social policy, one needs to look at the active role of children in the making of policy (Ben-Arieh, 2005).

5. The new active role of children in social policy

Despite much progress in involving children in research, we are lagging a long way behind when it comes to understanding the potential and consequences of children's involvements in the dissemination phase of research findings and in policy-making. In fact, when looking at children's prospective roles in utilizing the data gathered in studies of their well-being, one must examine the core question of child participation and civic engagement.

Being active and involved safeguards a child's well-being (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001). Child participation is one of the major principles underlying the CRC; it is a basic component of children's rights and citizenship. Child participation does not only mean involving children in the research process but also making them partners in using the data and findings. Child participation is a guiding principle and, as such, it should be part of every aspect of children's lives and should be extended to all settings and to all types of rights.

Child participation is crucial in the public and political arena. Since children cannot vote, they are considered politically weak, and politicians tend to ignore their views. True child participation in this sphere can leverage the political power of children and enforce the politicians to hear them. This is especially important for democratic societies that want to include the opinions of all of their citizens in decision-making processes (Riepl & Wintersberger, 1999).

However, children's political rights are the least acceptable of all children's rights. The idea of child participation in the political decision-making process is a relatively new one that has already "earned" much resistance. Above all, this idea advocates the empowerment of children, which can and probably will be looked upon as a redistribution of power in society.

In order to realize the true citizenship of children, we must encourage child participation. To do so, we need to be creative and devise a variety of participation methods and tools appropriate for different children of different ages.

6. Summary and the need for new policies

Children were, still are, and probably will always be at the forefront of social policy. One of the main goals of any social policy is to promote the well-being of children and families. Scholars have long been arguing about how to measure the impact of policies and, especially, their impact on child well-being.

In this paper, I sought to present a new challenge. Not only do we need to improve our skills in evaluating policies and measuring their impact, but we need to take a close look at existing policies and their goals. Such an examination is needed, first and foremost, so that we can see whether the policy goals are in line with society norms at large and, in our case, with the new concept of child well-being.

I have tried to explain that our current understanding of child well-being has changed. It has done so in at least six major shifts. Thus, our understanding of children's well-being today differs dramatically from the one that was prevalent just a few decades ago. This calls for new goals for our social policies and indeed for new policies that will better serve these new goals.

Furthermore, the new concept of children's well-being calls for a new role for children. This would have to be a role of active players instead of subjects of policies. I have shown how children are gaining presence in research dealing with their own well-being. It is now time for them and us to find a new place for children as partners in the making of social policy. I would argue that not only will this change the current balance of power in which children seldom have had the upper hand, but that it will make way for better policies and better implementation and, eventually, contribute immensely to children's (and society) well-being and well-becoming.

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