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Shifts in Child Well-Being Research

Susann Fegter, Christine Hunner-Kreisel

The international and interdisciplinary field of research on child well-being has obtained increasing importance in educational sciences in the area of childhood and youth studies (Fegter/Andresen 2017; Betz et al. 2018; Hunner-Kreisel/März 2018; Eccarius et al. 2017; Andresen 2014; Fegter 2014; Hunner-Kreisel 2012), in empirical educational research on students' well-being (Cefai/Spiteri 2020; OECD 2019) as well as social work and welfare research (Andresen et al. 2017; Alt/Lange 2014; Oelkers et al. 2010; Kamerman 2014; Kamerman et al. 2010). One strong narrative in the international context is that research on child well-being has significantly moved its focus within the last 30 years and has undertaken so called "fundamental shifts" (Ben-Arieh 2014, 2007): *From child survival to child well-being* (research interests has moved from physical survival and basics needs of children to indicators that focus on positive wellbeing); *from negative to positive well-being* (indicators of childhood flourishing have increasingly emerged); *from well-becoming to well-being* (how children understand lived experiences of well-being has become increasingly important, rather than focussing on future-oriented conceptualisations of well-being); *from traditional to new domains* (a shift towards a more holistic set of domains regarding children's lives has taken place); *from an adults to a child's perspective* (attempts to involve children in the research process and to investigate subjective well-being has become stronger following an understanding of children as social actors) (Ben-Arieh 2014, 2007). This narrative of conceptual movements and fundamental shifts have inspired fruitful and critical discussions in the field of child well-being research. In-depth analyses from a deconstructive perspective have pointed out that the situation within quantitative child well-being reports is much less uniform than this narrative suggest and that a closer look is required on the underlying frameworks and the entanglement of research and politics in child well-being research (see Betz 2013). In international qualitative research, the narrative has raised theoretical and empirical questions around challenges in child well-being research (Fattore et al. 2019): Firstly, in respect to the normativity and cultural contingency when indicators shift from 'survival' to 'beyond' and from 'negative to positive' (see Fegter 2020; Andresen/Betz 2014, Fegter/Machold/Richter 2010). Consequently, there is a call for an explicit clarification of the premises and normative decisions that underlie what is considered 'good' in research on child well-being and how this is linked to generational, classed, gendered, raced or other orders (Fattore et al. 2019; Esser 2014; Savahl 2015). A second challenge is highlighted in respect to the integration of children into research: How can we avoid reconstruct-

ing children's perspectives as authentic voices and instead reflect on social orders in which children are positioned (see *Hunner-Kreisel/Kuhn* 2010; *Müderrişoğlu* et al. 2013)? Thirdly, how can we understand children's well-being across multi-national contexts? If there are shifts to new domains (taking into account the everyday life of children worldwide), what is the relative significance of local and translocal contexts for well-being and is the nation-state for example a useful category for understanding well-being (cf. *Hunner-Kreisel* et al. 2020; *Fattore* et al. 2020)?

Based on the assumption that research on child well-being is constructing its object of analysis in the use of theory and methodology and that these processes are always situated in social and political orders, the aim of the special issue is to invite international experts who are currently undertaking qualitative or quantitative studies in the field of child well-being research to present their approaches and ideas in research in the context of *the narrative of the "fundamental shifts"*:

- How do they approach child well-being in terms of theory and methodology?
- How do they position their research and approaches *in the context of the narrative of shifts* within research on child-wellbeing? What's their perspective on this narrative?
- How do they reflect on *political, social or epistemic contexts* of their research on child well-being?

The paper of *Catrin Heite* and *Veronika Magyar-Haas* contributes to the discussion about a subjective turn in child well-being research. Starting from the concept of the child as an actor, which has played a central role in the developments in child well-being research, their argument is that the vulnerability of children is hardly taken into account and that only a combination of vulnerability and agency provides the opportunity to consider the interpretations of subjects in the context of their social, political and cultural embeddedness. They thus also stand for developments within the international field of child well-being research that have set new accents in recent years with the concept of vulnerability, and for developments that open up philosophical figures for reconstructive analysis on children's understandings of well-being, in their case Hannah Arendt's concept of natality.

Tobia Fattore's paper takes a closer look at analytical shifts in the field of child well-being research that have differentiated the field regarding its epistemological and methodological approaches in the last twenty years. By asking for the manner in which the approaches have developed in the field, whether by coincidence or whether as a distinctive response to existing intellectual traditions, the paper provides insight into how productive the dynamics within the research field have intertwined with theoretical contexts and intellectual traditions outside the field and how this has contributed to the theorization of child well-being and to a broader understanding of the phenomenon. *Fattore's* own conceptualization of child well-being combines cultural with material approaches and stands for rare developments to systematically examine child well-being in the context of class relations.

The paper of *Antoanneta Potsi*, *Zoi Nikiforidou* and *Lydia Ntokou* on refugee children in Greek brings methodological and ethical perspective of a child well-being research to the fore. The authors give insight into their field research describing their various ways of finding out how the best approach towards children's experiences could look like. One major issue is language as it causes not only disruptions and feeling of uneasiness on behalf of the children but also amplifies asymmetrical generational orders for children who are constantly confronted with adults who represent an authority (doctors, psychologists, social workers, worker from NGOs). With respect to the topic of shifts of well-being the paper shows the

relevance of survival and well-being for refugee children. Therewith the paper, implicitly, points out how the shifts of well-being should be analytically understood in their interdependencies.

The paper of *Dagmar Kutsar* highlights major shifts in research on poverty and its interwovenness with social policies within the country of Estonia in a historical perspective. At the same time the author reconstructs the position of children and their (in-)visibility as persons with own needs and desires that can only be taken fully into account when poverty as a topic as well as children as persons imbued with own rights are acknowledged. Therefore, *Kutsar* identifies and describes the various steps and shifts that have been taken in Estonian research on child poverty until children have been addressed accordingly to their subjective understandings of well-being. Interestingly, the paper of *Kutsar* gives seldom insights into a country and at the same time maps the parallels within research on child well-being beyond the national context of Estonia.

In summary the papers indicate how dynamic the field of child well-being research is currently developing and how shifts of paradigms in childhood research – together with the worldwide implementation of the CRC (*Bradshaw et al. 2007*) – also led to a change in methodical approaches in international child well-being research. The papers also demonstrate how critical inspiration through connections to theoretical and methodological discussions in the social and cultural sciences is received, but also through empirical field work with children in different social contexts and regions of the world.

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