

Enquiring Minds

Position paper: Well-being, school, and the 'crisis' of childhood

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This short article draws from research on the literature surrounding the current 'well-being' agenda in educational policy. It is based on work in progress on the Enquiring Minds project. As such, it should be read as a 'position paper' which articulates and situates Enquiring Minds in relation to the political language and academic analysis of education today.

A crisis of childhood?

Recently it has become difficult to ignore mounting concern that modern childhood is under threat. According to UK research on childhood 'well-being' published by the National Consumer Council (NCC) in 2007¹, children who spend more time in front of the television or a computer screen are more materialistic, have lower self-esteem, a lower opinion of their parents, and a lower opinion of themselves. Earlier in the same year a major report by UNESCO placed UK children at the bottom of well-being tables in the advanced world. At around the same time, Sue Palmer's books *Toxic Childhood* and *Detoxing Childhood*² have raised considerable concern and media interest across the country about the harm being done to children by modern culture. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has attempted to downplay the alleged 'crisis' with its report on *Children and Young People Today*³, yet it remains difficult to shake the impression that children's well-being is under siege in the UK. Newspaper and television news headlines announce it almost daily.

These are sensitive matters, which deserve close attention. In this article, I intend briefly to discuss the current contexts and concerns behind the 'well-being' agenda in UK education. This relates, also, to recent thinking and research on what it is like to grow up in a society that is averse to 'risk'. As Tim Gill argues in his book *No Fear*⁴, it is now more important than ever for risk and well-being to be balanced sensibly against each other, especially in order to avoid skewing the *Every Child Matters* agenda towards 'safety' at the detriment of all else. It is, in fact, in the context of *Every Child Matters* that childhood well-being has become of particular concern in recent years.

Every Child Matters is based on the five core principles that all children, whoever they are, have an entitlement to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic well-being. This links across education, youth and social services, the health service, and any other organisations involved in working with children. In the specific educational context, the focus is on ensuring that children are successful in school. A particularly important part of the agenda is addressing the disparity in educational achievement between children from families with more money and those who are less well off⁵.

These are indisputably important aims. However, the emphasis on well-being has the potential to shape our views about children in particular ways. It is certainly no surprise to many researchers in the fields of education, cultural studies, and sociology that childhood is 'constructed' in certain ways at certain times. Recent critics have identified how media imagery and news coverage of children either

constructs them as innocents in need of protection (from a grim and predatory adult world) or demonic monsters who need to be punished⁶. In the press, they point out, we are daily exposed to images of harmonious childhood innocence alongside "a terrifying generation of murderous, morally blank wolf-children, indulged one minute and brutalised the next"⁷.

Often, then, these views are related to a sense that an earlier, more idyllic, happier and golden age of childhood is being corrupted by a modern world. These are "fantasies of childhood" that David Buckingham has countered as fallacious and misleading - part of what he sees as a discourse of the "death of childhood"⁸. Marquard Smith, too, is unsurprised that "liberal, conservative, humanitarian Western culture" has become "obsessed with protecting in general, and protecting childhood in particular", and regards this as a problem related to competing "facts and fantasies of childhood" in popular culture and the media⁹. From a sociological perspective, Alan Prout argues that changes in the modern world have led to a fragmentation of "once stable notions of what childhood is and what it should be", and that as a consequence "new ways of speaking, writing, and imaging children are providing new ways of seeing them... different from the innocent and dependent creatures that appeared to populate the first half of the twentieth century"¹⁰.

These critics all point to the fact that established notions of childhood tend to restrict it to polar positions of innocence and abomination, both of which demand that the adult world take strong responsibility for defining and controlling the activities of children. Although it is obviously the case that a concern with children's actual physical, social and emotional well-being is something that all critics in this area share, the current alleged 'crisis' of childhood well-being is something that needs closer scrutiny. To what extent, for example, does well-being relate to social class, not least insofar as class lends distinctive perspectives for thinking about childhood and for defining what might be considered a good quality of life? What sort of childhood, then, is being constructed by the current attention on well-being?

The position I take here is that an over-emphasis on well-being is in danger of restricting children to a narrow set of future opportunities, a future without the experience of risk and decision-making and a future increasingly policed by adults. All of this comes at a time, paradoxically, when research on children and aspects of educational policy suggest that children should be permitted more choice and participation in making decisions about their own futures.

A well-being agenda?

Research on 'well-being' is currently thriving in a variety of disciplines, from psychology to economics, and from political science to evolutionary biology. Well-being is said to depend, for example, on environmental factors, the evolution of the brain, mental health, emotional reactivity and affective processing, as well as on physical activity, nutrition, social and cultural opportunities, relationships with reality, and levels of satisfaction with work¹¹. This is motivated by a recent turn away from dysfunction and disorder in psychology and psychiatry in particular, and a re-emphasis on what makes people feel happy, fulfilled, and good about themselves, although these are of course very difficult to measure.

Some aspects of well-being research are also related to the fact that while economic progress has grown, happiness levels have not followed suit and depression has risen¹². National prosperity, the theory goes, does not in fact lead to a happier, healthier nation, and as a consequence policy needs to respond to well-being measures rather than only to narrow economic analyses¹³.

The wide range of disciplinary perspectives on what counts as well-being demonstrates how difficult it is to arrive at a single agreed definition, and thus how easy it is to find the concept of well-being nebulous and confusing, or perhaps even contradictory. Put 'childhood' and 'well-being' together, then, and the question becomes: What sort of childhood, and what sort of well-being? Three recent reports on well-being demonstrate the complexity lying behind this question.

The National Consumer Council's (NCC) report on 'Watching, Wanting and Wellbeing' published in 2007¹⁴ paints a particularly grim picture of well-being in relation to children's exposure to the commercial world and material culture through media, as well as of the effects of socio-economic context and the impact of family relationships. In particular, it suggests that amongst children in less affluent areas of the country, watching television or using a computer often seems to take the place of family-oriented activities such as eating dinner together. As a consequence, the authors suggest, children from less affluent areas and families tend to be exposed to more consumer values and are more likely to develop materialistic attitudes and self-beliefs.

In short, the NCC research finds that commercial media and poverty are damaging influences especially on children's self-esteem and relationships with their parents. What needs to be dealt with, the authors argue, is a corrosive triangle of media, poverty and family life, from the centre of which children are at risk of developing a very narrow sense of their own well-being as a condition of material prosperity¹⁵.

In 2007, UNICEF published a report comparing childhood well-being across advanced countries¹⁶. The UK fared poorly on five of the six dimensions of well-being assessed by the research, including on education. The key indicators here were achievement in reading, maths, and science at age 15, the proportion remaining in education from 15-19 years, and the percentage of 15-19 year-olds not in any form of education, employment or training.

What the UNESCO findings neglect to report, however, is any sense of *why* educational well-being may be low in the UK, particularly if its key indicators are along the lines of basic literacy, numeracy and science skills. Not everybody would agree that basic skills can be used as any kind of accurate measure of well-being, nor that simply being in employment or education counts as well-being either.

According to an earlier report on well-being by the New Economics Foundation (nef), for example, children's overall sense of well-being at school is seriously compromised, particularly at secondary school, by a focus on exam results and performance according to targets. The nef "well-being manifesto for a flourishing society" emphasises the importance of a renewed and reinvigorated notion of what educational well-being means. The authors propose it requires a broadening of the curriculum, more opportunities for children to 'have their say', more creativity and more explicit promotion of "individual and societal well-being both now, and in the future"¹⁷. A focus on testing, they maintain, has harmed both learners and teachers. Simply training the focus on future employability skills, moreover, neglects children's actual needs in the present: it diverts the importance of a meaningful education into the adult world.

The nef proposals are persuasive. The emphasis on children and teachers having more choice about the everyday business of schooling is a refreshing alternative to key indicators and basic skills. What the report begins to get at is that

fostering educational well-being depends on acknowledging children's personal and social circumstances - yet this becomes problematic when children's backgrounds are defined by social class and economic position. The NCC argument, as we have seen, strongly suggests that commercial media is corroding familial relationships, children's self-esteem, and is contributing to the growing materialism of childhood itself, particularly in homes where spending power is limited. A manifesto for well-being in this context, then, would have to tackle commercial media as well as the organisation of school (in fact, the nef too recommends a blanket ban on advertising to children). By association, the NCC reports a crisis in the institution of the family, especially in poorer households. It is, then, clear that the nef proposals are challenged by the alleged problems of social class and by the ostensible deficits of less well-off households and communities.

The question of how well-being can be promoted in the context of media and changing notions of childhood is far from straightforward, because it implies that children, especially those from deprived backgrounds, are assimilating the socially degenerative aspects of media while their more affluent peers are more likely to be accessing media that promotes well-being. That is, poor children are forming ideas related to their social and economic backgrounds that valorise the materialistic lifestyle advertised to them, believing these to be the key to a happier and more fulfilled future. Better-off children, on the other hand, seem to watch less TV and use computers less; consequently they have less of a materialistic view of where happiness can be found.

Yet much well-being research is based on the notion that economic prosperity has failed to bring about general increases in fulfilment and happiness. Additionally, for some children from middle class homes, the pressures of schooling itself and from peer cultures can also create impedances to the feeling of well-being.

Whilst the well-being agenda is important, it must be reconciled with a range of existing social, cultural and economic problems. It is perhaps too easy to assume that poorer households and communities have an unhealthy fixation on materialistic culture (as well as, of course, poorer health, poorer diet and nutrition, and so on) when in fact these relations may need closer interrogation. Not least of the concerns in this area is the emphasis in the *Every Child Matters* agenda on children's 'economic well-being'. This is because of the possibility that it might be interpreted as the need to equip children with workplace skills above all else.

One of the chief responsibilities of schools in this context would be to encourage students to be more cautious about the media, and to examine it in terms of how it appeals to different audiences, including how it fabricates a view of childhood happiness and fulfilment as dependent upon material prosperity or economic prosperity in the labour market. It may also be the case that schools are detrimental to some children's well-being, including those under pressure from exam expectations as well as those who feel disaffected by education altogether.

Well-being and education?

This area, in fact, is where questions about educational well-being are most pertinent. And, of course, it is where the emphasis should be put on aspects of the well-being agenda that are usually neglected by the more obvious dimension of happiness. As Hetan Shah argues, happiness and pleasure are *parts* of well-being, but so too are challenge, meaning, and purposefulness. The feeling one gets from accomplishing a difficult task, or doing something new and invigorating, perhaps even frightening - these are contributing factors in well-being¹⁸. A key

part of this is the importance to children of feeling able to take risks and to approach new challenges in the activity of learning. Yet this may be stymied by a pervasive risk aversion in UK education.

A serious consequence of parental concerns about the safety and well-being of children, a paranoia amplified by the media and reflected by policy, is that schools have had to become more and more concerned with health and safety standards, something Tim Gill argues against. He suggests that the stranglehold of H&S and associated risk aversion policies, in particular the effects these have on outdoor learning experiences, has impoverished children's access to extra-curricular activity. To different extents, it has also restricted particular activities in subjects such as art, science, and sports¹⁹.

Arguably, too, risk aversion of a slightly different kind is having an effect on children's broader experience of school. For example, Michael Fielding has suggested that some schools in deprived urban areas tend to downplay intellectual challenge in favour of offering a safe, secure and caring atmosphere for children, while other, more high-performing schools overemphasise direct teacher instruction ('teaching to the test') in order to ensure maximum possible exam success²⁰. In both cases, risk is being minimised for both teachers and for children while well-being is reinforced. In the first case, this equates to emotional well-being at the expense of intellectual challenge, and in the second it produces intellectual well-being (exam success) at the expense of the social.

A narrow and instrumental focus on economic well-being, arguably, could well shift these emphases into a newly divisive focus on workplace skills that would need to ensure children are being equipped with the appropriate skills for the kinds of work they are expected to gain after they leave education.

The well-being agenda in UK education is to be welcomed. Yet it is also problematic and raises many questions about the ways in which schools can or should deal with the realities of children's diverse socio-economic contexts, their access to media, the pressures they are under to perform to targets, and about the extent to which their emotional well-being, safety and security needs to be counterbalanced by the need for challenge and risk. Just as health and safety regulation has had the effect of banishing risk from the playground, different brands of risk aversion have had an effect on the classroom.

Before we put well-being at the top of the priorities list for school renewal, then, we need to establish its very different dimensions. The danger, otherwise, is that the well-being agenda will get co-opted by the conservative emphasis on childhood protection, used to reinforce existing notions that some children are in need of protection while others need punitive regulating, or mobilised as a prop to deficit views of less affluent families, communities, and their patterns of consumption.

Furthermore, concerns with well-being are at risk of being no more than a forlorn hope unless the unregulated market and the competitiveness of schooling are dealt with. In a climate where children's exam successes come above everything else and where schools are in competition for league table positions, well-being may be seen as a well-meaning but ultimately empty buzzword. Schools must also be seen as offering more than an access point to the labour market, the economy, and the opportunities and challenges of adulthood. Well-being means addressing childhood as it exists now, with all its own opportunities and challenges.

One way of thinking about this more optimistically and in the specific context of curriculum and pedagogy would be to base aspects of teaching and learning on problems to do with well-being and modern childhood. By this I do not necessarily mean devising schemes of work on the subject of childhood well-being, but getting teachers and children to work alongside each other to define what might be meant by childhood well-being in the specific context of particular schools and the communities they serve, and then devising activities around that core of mutual appreciation and comprehension. It does not mean schools putting on hold the values associated with the day-to-day educational enterprise in order to appeal to children's tastes; nor does it mean turning to an emphasis on workplace skills to ensure children's future economic prosperity. It means gauging the climate of children's well-being - their levels of happiness, pleasure, challenge and risk - and using that as the basis for effective classroom planning and meaningful, relevant, and challenging activities.

Notes and references

- ¹ Nairn, A, Ormond, J and Bottomley, P (2007) *Watching, Wanting, Well-Being: Exploring the links* (National Consumer Council).
- ² Palmer, S (2006) *Toxic Childhood: How The Modern World Is Damaging Our Children and What We Can Do About It* (London: Orion); Palmer, S (2007) *Detoxing Childhood: What parents need to know to raise happy, successful children* (London: Orion). See also www.suepalmer.co.uk/toxic.php.
- ³ DCSF (2007) *Children and Young People Today* (DCSF).
- ⁴ Gill, T (2007) *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation).
- ⁵ More details about the *Every Child Matters* agenda can be found at www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/children.
- ⁶ Recent examples include Hollands, P (2006) *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery* (London: IB Taurus) and Madge, N (2006) *Children These Days* (Bristol: Polity Press).
- ⁷ Peter Hitchens in *The Mail*, quoted in Hollands (2006).
- ⁸ Buckingham, D (2000) *After the Death of Childhood: Growing up in the age of electronic media* (Cambridge: Polity Press): 35.
- ⁹ Smith, M (2004) Fantasies of childhood: visual culture and the law, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 3(1): 5-16 (7, 9).
- ¹⁰ Prout, A (2005) *The Future of Childhood* (Abingdon: RoutledgeFalmer): 8-9.
- ¹¹ Collected papers on these topics can be found in Huppert, F, Baylis, N and Keverne, B (eds) (2005) *The Science of Well-being*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ¹² See Layard, R (2003) *Happiness: Has Social Science a Clue?* Lionel Robbins Memorial Lectures, London School of Economics (March 2003): cep.lse.ac.uk/layard and Reeves, R (2003) *The Politics of Happiness: A nef discussion paper* (New Economics Fund).
- ¹³ Shah, H (2005) The politics of well-being, *Soundings*, 30: 33-44 (35).
- ¹⁴ Nairn *et al* (2007).
- ¹⁵ Academic research on the relations between children and media presents a much more nuanced and complex view of children as active meaning-makers when it comes to watching the television or using a computer. The key argument is that as children access media they form ideas and values in relation to it, not in some process of passive absorption, but by assimilating aspects of media with their existing thinking and within the socio-economic frameworks of their personal lives. See, for example, Buckingham, D (2003) *Media Education: Literacy, learning and contemporary culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press); Osgerby, B (2004) *Youth Media* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge); Lankshear, C and Knobel, M (2006) *New Literacies and Classroom Learning*, Second Edition (Maidenhead: Open University Press).

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- ¹⁶ UNICEF (2007) *Child Poverty in Perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries* (UNICEF).
- ¹⁷ Shah, H and Marks, N (2004) *A Well-being Manifesto for a Flourishing Society* (New Economics Fund): 12.
- ¹⁸ Shah (2005): 38-39.
- ¹⁹ Gill (2007): 64-68.
- ²⁰ Fielding, M (2004) Transformative approaches to student voice: theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities, *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2): 295-311.