

'Children with a Good Life *Have* to Have School Bags'

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Monitoring, protecting and promoting child well-being has become an increasingly important development goal, though understandings of both 'well-being' and 'childhood' are highly variable. In the context of this paper, the primary shortcoming of research into the understanding of well-being and ill-being is a lack of attention to children's perspectives and, where these are acknowledged, insufficient attention to diversity among and between children. This paper asks how such diverse perspectives and experiences can be represented without losing the main advantage of group work, namely, the potential for people to collectively reflect on their lives in a supportive environment and for shared understandings to be made explicit and contestable. The focus of this paper is the diversity of understandings of well- and ill-being from boys and girls aged 11-13 years in three Ethiopian communities.

Methodology

Quantitative data are drawn from the *Young Lives* child questionnaire, administered to children aged 11 to 12 years in Ethiopia during 2006. The qualitative data come from group activities in 2007 with a sub-sample of these children in three communities (urban, rural and remote rural) and individual interviews that build on these activities. Two questions are addressed: first, how understandings of a good life and what is needed to achieve this differ between communities and social groups. Second, how the relationship between well-being and education articulated in group activities is expressed in the biographies of individual children, illustrated by two case studies.

Findings

In relation to education, there were significant differences between urban and rural communities and within communities by socio-economic status. A higher proportion of children in urban areas than in rural areas anticipate that they will go to university. When children were asked what the best thing about school was, the most common response was 'learning useful skills'. When asked about the worst thing, an overwhelming response was 'nothing'. This reluctance to criticise was particularly noticeable among girls, which suggests their awareness of the fragility of their access to school. The most striking difference between groups relates to children's perceptions of their current position on the 'ladder of life' and where they think they may be in four years time. Almost all children believe that their lives will be better in the future. However, even children from

rich households are reporting scores that are lower than the conventional mid-point of the scale. In urban areas, 25 per cent of the children felt education would move them up the ladder. This perception was less common in rural areas, reflecting barriers to education beyond grade 4 of primary school and the lack of employment opportunities for children who overcome these.

An exercise for the older children explored what they consider a 'good' or 'bad' life for children of the same age and gender living in the community:

- In relation to education, the main concern in the rural sites was access, especially for girls, and to a lesser extent, educational materials. In the urban site, the focus was on quality of education.
- Children's behaviour was a common component of a 'good' life, for example, being obedient and not fighting, as was having a good appearance.
- Children also discussed work and how they managed it alongside their education.
- In the context of orphanhood, having a biological relationship with the caregiver was seen as important as this reinforces a child's right to get what she needs from her guardians.
- In the urban site, both boys and girls identified education as the most indicator of well- or ill-being. Other important factors were having sufficient food, being an orphan (a particular concern for boys) and shelter (for girls).
- Barriers to a good life which children identified included hardship after death of an adult member of the household, illness and debt.

Policy implications

The paper concludes by observing that children characterise ill-being as having no one rather than nothing, and see both family and 'school bags' as pathways to well-being. An awareness of both what children aspire to, in the context of local and international norms, and their daily activities, which may or may not relate to these aspirations is important in setting policy and planning interventions. The reason for this is that it highlights where children see themselves in the future and the potential barriers they perceive to a good life.

