



Background Note on Well-Being

Following on from the discussions during the dinner and meetings in Madrid and in preparation for our meeting in the autumn, we would like to present some of the sources from which we derived our vision and give you some background explanation about why we feel that well-being provides a framework for bringing together the many and varied efforts of foundations working with children and young people.

The education of children takes place both within the school environment and in every aspect of a young person's life. Current research illustrates that effective learning is related to students feeling emotionally and physically safe, supported by and connected to adults who care, listen to them and show respect for them. Student involvement with information and communication technologies (ICT) and media environments is shaping the ways young people think, build relationships with peers and adults, construct knowledge, and perceive current reality and hope for the future. Education is thus the responsibility of all, to be undertaken with greater deliberate action to support children's well-being.

We define well-being as the realisation of one's physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual potential. We believe that children who experience a greater sense of well-being are more likely to:

- Enjoy being playful, spontaneous and in the present;
- Learn and assimilate information in effective ways;
- Engage in healthy and fulfilling social behaviours;
- Invest in their own and others' well-being and in the sustainability of the planet, as they take up their social, professional and leadership roles in adulthood.

At the autumn meeting we would like to discuss with you in more depth what we mean by each of the aspects and to present the framework and indicators that we are developing which can be used to measure the achievement of well-being in different learning environments and contexts.

In moving towards this definition, we examined fundamental, international declarations and definitions by United Nations organisations concerning children, health and education. Firstly, the second principle of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) which states that: "The child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity". Secondly, the Constitution of the World Health Organisation (WHO) states that "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". Thirdly, the UNESCO report of 1996 on education for the 21st Century,

www.uef-eba.org

Operational Office: EIESP c/o Université de Paris Dauphine, F-75116 Paris, France

Tel: + 33 (0)1 4405 4001 Fax: + 33 (0)1 4405 4002 e-mail: info@uef-eba.org

“Learning: The Treasure Within”, which defines the four pillars of education as: “learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be”. UNICEF, the WHO, and UNESCO are increasingly framing their goals in terms of the overall well-being of children. From these texts, among other inspirations, we confirmed our assumptions about the importance of holistic development, taking account of all the aspects of a child’s life and experience.

Recent years have seen growing attention to the field of monitoring the well-being of nations, communities, schools and individuals, including children. The definitions of well-being vary depending on the field and the policy area but have a tendency to remain too narrowly focused (socio-economic issues or health issues or quality of life, etc.). The interest is nevertheless giving rise to high level and specialist conferences as well as many research projects. Among them, various “state of the child” reports have been published leading to higher levels of interest in statistical and qualitative descriptions of the well-being of children. A good example is the 2007 UNICEF report, “An overview of child well-being in rich countries”¹ which examines and classifies 21 mostly European countries according to six dimensions they have identified of well-being (material, health & safety, education, family and peer relationships, behaviours & risks, and subjective well-being). The report, which draws on existing studies, international comparisons and statistical data sources, aims to demonstrate that levels of child well-being are policy-susceptible, i.e. we can do something about the results! And indeed the findings demonstrate substantial scope for improvement, but the existing tools for monitoring and evaluating do not give us all the information we need to obtain a full and rounded picture and understanding of child well-being. Nevertheless, this is one of the few international reports to take account of the assessment young people make of their own well-being, though in a limited manner given the sources available. The chapter is based on data about their perception of their health, happiness at school and overall life satisfaction and leaves considerable scope for deepening and expanding the approach.

In part as a result of this interest and activity, the field of research on children and young people is undergoing major changes, including attempts to redefine the concept and the ways of measuring individual and collective well-being². For children, the major shifts include moving away from research and policy-making that is uniquely about the survival of children (reducing mortality rates, poverty and disease) towards focusing on their well-being, i.e. not only focusing on factors that harm a child's well-being but also on factors that pro-actively maintain and nurture/enhance it. These could include many aspects of children’s lives, such as how they interact with their peers and adults, their relations with the community, their range of experiences at school, including health promotion. It can also be the pleasure of sport, art, music, etc., as well as their uses and experiences of media and technologies. More examples would be their relationship to poverty and its consequences, their involvement in decision-making that affects their lives, etc. Some countries are replacing a policy focus on welfare (tackling poverty, poor housing, poor health, equal opportunities, and participation in

¹ **An overview of child well-being in rich countries**, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Report Card 7, 2007.

² See for example, Asher Ben-Arieh & Robert M. Goerge, **Indicators of Children’s Well-Being**, Springer 2006.

education, etc.) with the broader concept of well-being³. Two examples are Canada⁴ and Wales. A recent policy document in Wales stated that: “The concept of well-being provides a strong test of the extent to which policies are coming together to reduce inequalities and to promote sustainable development. A high level of well-being is a feature of strong and vibrant communities”⁵.

Three brief country examples illustrate these new approaches in the European context. The UK has given local authorities the powers and the duty to have a strategy for the promotion of economic, social or environmental well-being. As a result, in some areas, well-being coordinators work with schools to support the well-being of children and the adults that surround them with the subsidiary aim of demonstrating that well-being contributes directly to a school’s effectiveness. In the introduction to the national curriculum for schools in England, the government explicitly places the well-being of the individual as a central value and considers that “the personal development of pupils, spiritually, morally, socially and culturally, plays a significant part in their ability to learn and to achieve”. In Sweden the single curriculum for compulsory schooling, pre-school and leisure-time centres stresses that “education can never be the same for all”, that “activities should be characterised by care of the individual’s well-being and development” and that the curriculum should “aim to promote pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development” preparing them for the “opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life”. Another example is the Irish curriculum, also harmonised across primary and secondary school, which puts emphasis on key competences and a holistic approach to child development. The critical point here is that there is a growing expectation that education systems will take responsibility for the whole person and his/her well-being.

These shifts go hand in hand with the increasing emphasis placed on listening to what children and young people tell us about their inner or subjective experience of well-being. There are many, varied pilot schemes and mainstream experiences, both in schools and in the community, involving children and young people in evaluating their experience and making proposals about different aspects of their lives, and participating in decision-making. Examples include student involvement in teacher recruitment, establishing schools’ councils to give them a voice in what happens in the school and in the classroom, and consulting them on recreation and meeting areas in the community, etc. In all these ways they are being involved in shaping the environment in which they are learning and growing up. Research, including that carried out by UEF through the Voice of Children programme, shows that children and young people want to be listened to, to be respected and they want adults to take them seriously⁶. So, in order to take action to nurture the well-being of children and young

³ See for example G. Wood & J. Newton, “From Welfare to Well-Being”, paper for the Arusha Conference organised by the World Bank on **New Frontiers of Social Policy**, 12-15 Dec. 2005.

⁴ See this site for information about the Canadian Index of Well-Being <http://www.atkinsonfoundation.ca/ciw>

⁵ **Health, Social Care and Well-Being Strategies. Policy guidance.** NHS Wales, Welsh Assembly Government, February 2003.

⁶ Studies also show that children do not experience poverty in the same way that adults do and will express different impacts on their lives. See for example the Christian Children’s Fund study on “Children and Poverty”;

people, we need to know more about their experiences in the world today. UEF believes that it is essential that their voices are heard and taken into account in determining policy that will impact their present and future.

These shifts can have a significant effect on the work of foundations and NGOs which is why it is an excellent moment for us to focus our efforts for greater impact. Throughout the world funders are supporting many initiatives to address the conditions affecting children and young people, and to ensure that each one of them is provided with what they need in order to fulfil their full potential. Foundations are working on sustainable poverty alleviation, conflict prevention and resolution, the reinforcement and effective implementation of a legal framework to support children's rights, the promotion of health (as well as prevention and tackling disease), or specifically on HIV/Aids and the terrible consequences for children, on quality education, tackling child abuse and all forms of violence, etc. They are supporting inspiring solutions to improve the well-being of children and young people in many areas such as intercultural education, early years' development, sport, culture and the performing arts, health education, programmes that support out-of-school children, etc. Whatever the specific entry point of each foundation's work (rights, HIV/Aids, schooling, etc.), it is essential for us to be able to deal with the whole child, with all the aspects of their life as they interact and have an impact on their level of well-being.

Collectively these efforts are most impressive, and yet the opportunities to discuss perspectives and leverage various approaches have been insufficient. While each philanthropic organisation establishes its unique focus and expertise, there is now a real opportunity for us to synchronize efforts towards creating a paradigm shift that puts the well-being of children as a priority.

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