

Children's Rights and the Capability Approach

Children's Well-Being: Indicators and Research Series

Volume 8

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Children's Rights and the Capability Approach

Challenges and Prospects

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Foreword

This exceptional collection of papers is about the growing discourse on children's rights and the capability approach. My colleagues who contributed these fine chapters have done a splendid work in discussing various aspects in children's life by looking at them in a children's right or capability framework. In this short foreword I would like to add my personal thoughts on both frameworks and their contribution to our understanding of the "new" concept of children's well-being. Children's well-being is a desirable status in life referring to being happy and satisfied with one's own life. Well-being is also related to the fulfilment of desires, to the balance of pleasure and pain, and to children's living conditions and quality of life. Thus, well-being is related to individual preferences and opportunity structures. From a children's rights perspective that would mean that rights are implicitly creating opportunities for well-being, hence the freedom of choice becomes a crucial component of well-being. From a capability approach it is apparent that the same level of commodities and resources do not produce the same level of well-being for all individuals.

The sociology of childhood underscores two dimension or axes in the understanding of childhood and children that have their origin in the Greek philosophy that conceived the concepts of *being* (object or state) and *becoming* (change or development). These concepts refer to life as it is experienced in the present, and life as development towards adulthood.

Children's rights refer both to their rights in the present childhood and to their right to develop and "become" (realize their potentials) successful adults. We may view *being* as a state at a given point in time, and *becoming* as the unfolding of the life course along trajectories shaped by social structures and the agency of the actor. The sociology of childhood as well as modern advocacy of children's right have underlined children's right as citizens of the present, not only as beings underway to an adult positions. Yet, the two are interfolded in each other as for example, child labor may represent the theft of the child's present as well as of his or her future.

The relationship between being and becoming is in itself a part of children's well-being. The child who devotes endless hours every week for school work may lose out on leisure activities of play in childhood, but may gain in the future, and the

child that invests little in the school work may enjoy the moment but weaken his or her future well-being. The status and position of children have to be understood within the framework of the present, as description, and within a framework of life course and development, as predictions. The *total well-being* will therefore consist of both the well-being of the present, and the predicted well-being of the future.

Thus, well-being is a process; the understanding of the well-being of children requires a model that encapsulates the dynamics of present, and the dynamic relationship between the present and the possible future. The capability approach dominates the understanding of human development, commodities and resources both when it is related to the differentiated sets or combinations of utilities available to different children and as they relate to what the children are able to achieve with their resources. The child must be able to trade his or her resources for other valuable resources in given contexts. The level of well-becoming a child can achieve depends on the structure of the environment and his or her strategies and goals. Within such a framework, freedom to act and choose becomes a central issue; as well as the set or combination of the resources, and the relationship between the resources and the environment.

Capabilities refer to interaction and relationships, not only individual resources. The concept of capabilities is especially relevant to children's well-being because their movement through the life course produces new contexts assigning new values to resources and commodities, and because socialization is understood not only as the evolving of capacities (as IQ or economic or cultural capital) but as the evolving of capabilities. The concept of capability is bridging development at a societal level and socialization and self-realization on the individual level. Children's well-being in a capabilities approach will therefore be based on subjective as well as objective components, and be anchored in a matrix of being and becoming, in the experiences of the moment as well as in the capacities for development. It seems we can define well-being, as a state, as a process and as a development.

That the capabilities framework and the children's rights approach influenced our understanding of children's well-being illustrates their significance. Thus, the new concept of children's well-being includes two axes. The first is about children life course, both as the cognitive and social dimension of development and as the relationship between the present and the future. The second is about experiences, freedom and rights. Freedom is not only related to the economic and political participation as such, but to children's development, competence and life course.

Well-being is a relationship, not just a status and it is not only a reflection of level of income or consumption. Values and references are likely to vary with cultural framework and historical period. The context defining values and well-being changes not only because of historical changes, but because the factors producing well-being at one age level do not necessarily do it at another level. An ideal environment for the four-years old may not be ideal for the young teenagers, and contexts may provide different conditions related to social groups and gender. At the core of all analysis of children's life and development is that there is a developmental relationship between today and tomorrow; the conditions of the present influence further development. This implies that factors of children's

well-being have to be understood within a different framework than related to other age groups.

Both the capability approach and the children's rights framework provide such a tool to better understand children's well-being. Combining these two approaches and the discourse between them is a promising step forward in our understanding of children's well-being. This collection of papers takes us one step forward in this crucial route. It contributes to the growing discourse and to our better understanding of the relations between these two dominant contemporary approaches. But most important – it takes us a few steps closer for a better understanding of children's well-being.

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