Understanding Children’s Well-Being and Transitions Through the Life Course: A Case from Ethiopia

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Introduction

In trying to understand children’s well-being and life transitions, researchers have become engaged in different methodological and theoretical approaches. In most cases, key transitions in a child’s life and his/her well-being have been treated as separate categories. For instance, a lot of studies have explored children’s ‘educational transition’ or ‘health’ as an aspect of well-being. Rarely do these fora coincide in academic studies.

Although standardized and adult-centred methods have been widely used by researchers, recent trends indicate that a major analytical shift has been made to incorporate children’s perspectives. Involvement of children in such studies includes participation in interviews, group activities and self-reporting.
This study aims to contribute to the existing theoretical and methodological debates surrounding our understanding of the lives of children in Ethiopia. Using the ‘life-course’ approach, it attempts to explore children’s well-being and key transitional periods as more integrated and interrelated aspects of their lives. I have taken ‘educational transitions’ and ‘health’ as representatives of children’s ‘key transitions’ and ‘well-being’, respectively. Moreover, as data have been generated through the participation of children and by using different methods, this chapter attempts to reflect on whether children could be ‘reliable’ sources of information in constructing their life courses. In this chapter, I argue that a life-course perspective helps to understand children’s well-being and transition in an integrated way, and that children themselves remain the best sources of data when it comes to their own lives.

This study draws on the longitudinal Young Lives study among children aged 12–13 in two communities in Ethiopia. The paper starts by reviewing theoretical and methodological debates on children’s well-being, transitions, life-course perspectives, and participation in research. It further sets out the relevant country background and research contexts. Subsequent sections analyse the research results and discuss major findings. Finally, brief concluding remarks are provided.

Theoretical and Methodological Background

Child Well-Being, Transition and the Life Course

Disparate methodological approaches, varied research contexts and a diversity of scholarly perceptions have left the definition of ‘well-being’ open to debate.

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1 Young Lives, run by Oxford University, is an innovative longitudinal research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty. Young Lives is tracking 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam over 15 years through a quantitative survey and participatory qualitative research, linked to policy analysis. Young Lives is core-funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. Sub-studies are funded by IDRC (in Ethiopia), UNICEF (in India), the Bernard van Leer Foundation (in India and Peru) and Irish Aid (in Vietnam). The views expressed here are those of the author. They are not necessarily those of the Young Lives project, the University of Oxford, DFID or other funders.