What the Children Thought: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Comparative Child Research

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Abstract

The chapter discusses certain methodological and ethical issues connected with cross-country, comparative surveys involving children, based on comments from the Norwegian participants in the study, Children's Worlds. An important point of departure is the issue of rights-based child research as defined by Beazley et al. (2009) and understood through a combination of four articles in the CRC. These highlight participation rights (art. 12.1), the right to freedom of expression (art. 13.1), the right to be protected by persons of high standards (art. 3.3), and the right to be protected against exploitation (art. 36). On the basis of comments from the Norwegian participants, it is argued that five issues are important to address: design; whether similar words and phrases cover the same phenomena; the significance of context; what constitute sensitive areas; and dealing with overtly negative responses. At a general level, comparative, cross-national studies generate knowledge which may be used in policy-making nationally and internationally. At the same time the question remains as to whether some of the questions take context sufficiently into account or are too sensitive for certain participants in certain countries, and should, thus, be discussed further in relation to article 36.

1 Introduction

It has become increasingly popular to investigate children’s own views of various aspects of their well-being through the use of surveys, both at the national level¹ and comparatively across countries.² This development reflects a genuine


interest in discovering what large numbers of children think and experience, motivated not the least by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).\(^3\) The Convention provided a new impetus for child research because States Parties were faced with the necessity to report regularly on progress towards achieving the human rights of children in their nations.\(^4\) In addition, child well-being is an important concern for policy-makers. How children fare through critical points of development will affect their quality of life, their productivity, welfare dependency and the transmission of their later life outcomes to their own children.\(^5\) Furthermore, the CRC can be seen as warranting a globalised perception of childhood,\(^6\) in itself making comparative studies of large numbers of children and young people important. The flipside of this is a concern that the globalised conception mirrors a Western conception of ‘the good childhood’.

All these developments contribute to making comparative, cross-national survey studies of children and young people attractive. However, the survey approach necessitates the use of similar questions and similar response alternatives across countries in order to enable the desired comparisons. This in itself raises several methodological and ethical issues, particularly as both the use of and importance attributed to cross-country surveys with children increase. The Organization for European Economic Development (OECD)’s repeated tests of school achievement\(^7\) is one well-known example where the question of substantive comparability has lately been raised.\(^8\) The research literature often discusses this as the problem of equivalence,\(^9\) or the question of the incommensurability of the concepts under investigation in cross-country

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6 Wells K Childhood in a Global Perspective (2015).
7 Like PISA (reading, maths, science, and problem solving), TIMMS (maths and science) and PIRLS (reading).