



Peer-reviewed paper

## **Narratives on children's rights and well-being**

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This narrative-based article asks how we, as early childhood educators and advocates for children's rights and participation, can rethink early childhood experiences and resituate discourses on children's well-being to better encompass their agency and to acknowledge their rights to participation. The aim is to explore how *social progress* goes beyond policies of protection and provision of children, families, and early childhood programs to include a nuanced interpretation of child well-being. Drawing from personal experiences and several research projects, primarily in the US, we ask what it might mean to evaluate programs and plan professional development activities for early years teachers and caregivers based on our understanding of children's well-being. We conclude with ways to re-envision policy, programming, and practice and to put our reconceptualizations into action, especially as influenced by New Zealand early years policy.

Well-being – “The state of being happy, healthy, successful” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2015)

In the United States, as in much of the world, when thinking about child well-being, attention is most immediately drawn to actions taken by adults to provide nurturing and safe environments for the physical and mental health and development of children. However, the concepts of nurturing and well-being have been co-opted most recently by neoliberal policy and program initiatives including Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) and the universalizing of preschool or prekindergarten. More to this point, these initiatives continue to narrow definitions of well-being to align with constructs of school readiness and to codify practices perceived to increase “quality.” As Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2013) assert, “prescriptive technology” by way of standards-based benchmarks and quality indicators is perpetuated in reform with the intention of children reaching predetermined outcomes. Testing for children begins as early as preschool and children's performance on school tests is used to measure well-being, with the belief that passing rates will further their education and their adult careers (Stipek, 2006). Adults continue to enact policies regulating teachers, centers and schools, to achieve these ends in the name of child well-being. In following these policies and practices, well-being is done to or provided for the child. Given the increasing emphasis on children's



rights based policy and practice across national and local contexts, where are the children in this notion of well-being? Where are children's participation rights in frequent constructions of child well-being? As early childhood educators and advocates for children's rights and participation, we ask, how can we rethink early childhood experiences or resituate discourses on children's well-being to better encompass their agency and acknowledge their rights to participation?

This article takes the form of collective narratives among colleagues who share a strong commitment to making a place for children's participation and well-being. Our aim is to examine these experiences as early childhood educators and researchers to reveal situations wherein our work with and about children implicitly or explicitly addresses *well-being* through the lens of children's rights and participation. Each of us draws from research projects as well as professional experiences.

First, we explore in more detail the notion of well-being as it is commonly defined and discussed in the field of early childhood education in the United States including conversations of safety, child development, developmentally appropriate practices and learning achievement and then how these discussions connect to early childhood teacher preparation. Next, we share each author's narrative, illustrating and illuminating these perspectives on well-being through our research and experiences with teachers and teacher-preparation students. Finally, we will draw upon these experiences to share our views on how well-being might be reconceptualized to align more closely with children's views, rights, and life experiences as we discuss further implications for integrating child participation more fully into child well-being.

### ***Environmental factors influencing well-being***

In large part, schools and child care programs in the US aim to promote children's well-being by acknowledging a "whole child" approach to child development, reaching beyond physical and cognitive development to include social, emotional, language, and creative developmental domains (Weissman & Hendrick, 2014). "Child-centered" environments are privileged, yet the construction of a child-centered space is adult-directed and constricted by external forces such as licensing health and safety regulations. In the US each state has agencies responsible for designating child care licensing requirements based on predetermined or established rules and regulations, which are often set at minimal levels of quality, focused on safety and child protection criteria (Arizona Department of Health Services, n.d.; New York State Office of Children and Family Services, n.d.).

Childcare and education programs can also be accredited by early childhood organizations to raise the level of quality of a setting (for example, National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2015). In these cases, quality builds upon the minimum licensing standards to include advanced adult education and higher credentials needed for staff, modifications to the physical environmental requirements, as well as specific guidelines on how adults are to interact with young children and specific curriculum and assessment requirements. Definitions of well-being through these entities are actualized in the sense that children are vulnerable and need protection and there is a perception of younger people as being incapable. Additionally, these



accreditation programs and their expectations are costly to implement and are often beyond the economic and educational means of centers.

### ***Well-being through the lens of developmentally appropriate practices***

In many areas of the United States the focus on developmentally appropriate practice(s) (Bredenkamp, 1987; Copple & Bredenkamp, 2009) and views of the “whole child” is changing in the name of *scientifically-based* pedagogy and standardized forms of learning, in response to the implementation of Common Core Standards, along with federal policy mandates. Well-being now becomes framed within the discourse of closing achievement gaps and children are placed on a “racetrack” (Rogoff, 2003) and described as being competitors in schools and within the global economy. Well-being is compartmentalized into domains of learning and children are commonly evaluated along norms-based or criterion referenced, commercially available assessment tools.

Preschools, most especially pre-kindergarten programs, have received increased attention as preparation for “formal” school at the elementary level, and primary grades have become virtually indistinguishable from upper grades. Remediation programs are implemented at the youngest primary grades (and are moving younger) so that children do not “fall further and further behind” as child well-being becomes synonymous with later school success primarily defined by specific scores on standardized high-stakes exams (Byat, Mindes, & Covitt, 2010; Greenwood, Carta, Atwater, Goldstein, Kaminski, & McConnell, 2013).

### ***Designing early childhood teacher education programs within the current context of education reform***

Building upon this emphasis of child well-being as adequate preparation for their later learning and self-supporting capacities, there is a narrowing of the scope of teacher education programs to meet the demands of current education policy mandates or reform. With the heightened attention on academically-focused learning, early childhood teacher preparation programs diminish the focus (and value) of learning through play, and there is a notable declining of courses that focus on social studies, building of family and community partnerships, and educational leadership, policy and advocacy. Even in teacher preparation programs with strong emphasis on play and family engagements, teacher preparation students often have their own challenges in observing or implementing these perspectives in their field experiences and coursework.

### ***Our stories***

The aim of the following narratives is to examine our collective experiences as early childhood educators and researchers, illuminating situations wherein our work with and about children implicitly or explicitly addresses *well-being* through the lens of children’s rights and participation. We build upon ongoing



conversations about ways in which we interpret children's life worlds, opinions, and experience and give these due weight.

### **Lacey's story**

I transitioned to being an assistant professor in early childhood at a time wherein the "shovedown of accountability" (Hatch, 2002, 2010) was holding strong and the discourse on the need to invest in early childhood was growing. This rhetoric had major influence on policy initiatives, such as the expansion of Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) in New York City. The nature of children's well-being was being siphoned into conversations on *capital* gains in the human and social sense – grounded in a conception of school readiness, as defined by the standards used to measure growth and learning. Within these discourses emerges a tension about how to use what is known about human development, social dynamics, and culturally responsive pedagogy as neoliberal policy and corporate based reform continue to infiltrate systems of education. My narrative provides examples of how attention is shifting away from children's well-being in a holistic sense and is being reframed by "prescriptive technologies" (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013) that are more prevalent in UPK classrooms.

In March of 2014, the mayor of New York secured funding from the state to expand full day prekindergartens (preK), with plans that a universal program would be launched in September 2014, therefore creating a need for a stronger early childhood workforce. The UPK Teacher Training Program was initiated through a joint collaboration of various early childhood entities in the city in response to an expansion of UPK programs. Each teacher candidate in the Teacher Training program was provided financial support that enabled them to complete a program leading to their Master's degree and initial teaching certification in early childhood education.

At my institution, there were 27 women participating the program, all of whom identified as female and represented diverse cultural backgrounds. Several teachers reported to have minimal experience working in early childhood settings, particularly in a prekindergarten program for children aged four to five years old. However, while taking classes, the women worked full-time in UPK classrooms, having constant and direct interactions with children and seeing more precisely their own influence(s) over younger people's well-being. As the women completed their program of study, a colleague and I were curious to see how teachers' thinking about children and working in early childhood education changed as they progressed in their coursework, especially considering it was an accelerated "teacher training program" (Portnoy & Peters, 2015). Thus, we asked teacher candidates to respond to a series of open-ended prompts to help us gain deeper insight on their experiences being and becoming early childhood professionals. In one such prompt, teachers were asked to respond to the question: "*How has your thinking about how children develop changed since you've entered the classroom this fall?*" Overwhelmingly, teachers talked about revelations they had about the active nature of human development, especially working with four-year-old children, and the intricate nature of younger people's growth and learning. The following comment sheds light on one such realization:

I have always thought children were amazing beings who offer light and wisdom in ways we sometimes miss as adults. However, with all the coursework since I entered the program, I have come to



appreciate them even more. I have especially had many insightful moments on how children learn. I am learning from them and how to best guide their learning styles in ways I had never looked at before as closely.

In their coursework, teachers were introduced to an array of theory, literature, and research on children and early childhood care and education to give deeper meaning to the qualities of children/childhoods and the social and cultural nature of development, and this in turn was used to promote professional or specialized language. The acquisition of such knowledge, language, and skills helps to build higher levels of efficacy needed to promote responsive teaching. However, despite being introduced to divergent perspectives, many teacher candidates working in the UPK programs were confronted with the hegemonies of regulatory and standards-oriented practices in the field when they entered their classrooms. The Department of Education in New York City specifies that programs must adopt one of three “authentic” assessment tools, including Teaching Strategies Gold, the Work Sampling System®, or the High Scope Observation Record/Child Observation Record Advantage®. In response to the emphasis on assessment, the women in the program started asking for more practical or technical information on how to work with these tools. In line with discourses circulating on assessments used in early childhood (largely voiced on internet forums such as blogs), students would comment on the nature of accountability in UPK classrooms. More specifically, they alluded to a trend by which early years classrooms were becoming data mines and they saw the cycle of assessment, while intended to be used to inform instruction or to foster children’s well-being, becoming an arduous task. Their observations parallel debates happening within the broader early childhood community around measuring such constructs as quality and school readiness (see, for example, Ochshorn, 2015). More to this point, a UPK teacher shared the following reflection:

I used to think that teaching in early childhood was all about the children but now it feels like an illusion. There are so many policies to follow that at the end of the day it feels like we're not really looking at the children. Despite this I still try to keep my focus centered on my students and how to help them.

Another teacher noted that the director of her program enforced approaches to education that were in contrast to the promising practices discussed in courses. Upon hearing this commentary, a concern that is raised is that when education reform places such an emphasis on children’s acquisition of academic skills and standards-based or criterion-based assessment, children are reduced to rating scales, numbers and statistics, and tangible products that serve as *evidence of their learning*. The extent to which younger people are social agents, active participants, or co-constructors of their educational experiences in schools is lessening as pressure builds to bring adequate return on public investments in early childhood, notably UPK programming. Well-being as manifested in the opportunities to interrogate dominant discourse, grand narratives, and taken-for-granted assumptions about children, human development, and appropriate practices in early childhood care and education becomes moot. Yet what is encouraging is to see the power of children in reframing people’s beliefs about them and their capabilities. As duty-bearers within a children’s rights framework, adults have the responsibility to elevate the voices of children to dismantle the



hegemonic and regulatory practices and advocate for the personhood of younger people. They are more than just a score.

### **Beth's story**

What does it mean to take a children's rights-based approach to supporting the well-being of infants and toddlers? I first engaged in this question early in my career with then Ph.D. student Kimberlee Whaley, who was studying infant emotions and peer interactions in group care. Her research (Whaley, 1990) documented empathy in babies – comforting each other, interacting in ways that contradicted prevailing views of egocentrism and stage theory that often diminished possibilities of agency in young children. Later, in the early years of the Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) movement, Robin Leavitt's (1994) book *Power and Emotion in Infant Toddler Day Care* used a more Foucaultian analysis to enter the world of infant care and explore the emotions of both children and caregivers within power dynamics.

My interest in children under three informed a year-long collaborative study with Kenyan colleagues (Swadener, Kabiru & Njenga, 2000), focused on understanding global economic policy impacts on changing childrearing and care for children under three in 11 unique sociocultural regions in Kenya. In the latter study, our focus, when framed in a child rights perspective, tended to be on children's protection and provision rights, though participation rights were only occasionally addressed. My interest in children's rights and well-being in Kenya was also influenced by collaboration with Mercy Musomi and the Girl Child Network, as well as in the Jirani Project, supporting orphaned and other vulnerable children over the past decade.

My deepened interest in children's rights, voice and research with children was influenced by the work of colleagues Lourdes Soto (Soto & Swadener, 2005) and Valerie Polakow (Polakow, 1994, 2007; Swadener & Polakow, 2011). These collaborations, in turn, led to studying how colleagues focused on the direct participation and collaboration of young children (e.g., Lundy & McEvoy, 2009; Lundy, McEvoy & Byrne, 2011; Lundy & Swadener, 2015; Macnaughton & Smith, 2008; Smith, Alexander, & Mac Naughton, 2008, Smith & Smale, 2007) entered the life worlds of children and gave their views due weight. This tied directly to seeking children's input when making decisions about community services, early childhood programs and environments, and care. Such approaches also reflected a deep commitment to better understanding children's well-being and respecting their views.

### *First Relationships Project*

In this article, I draw from the most recent research project I've been part of – First Relationships, which has focused on promoting relationships-based caregiving approaches (e.g., Lally, 2013) in infant and toddler group care settings in a low licensing standards state context. Led by community-based early childhood consultants collaborating with higher education partners, this pilot project brought a combination of workshops, classroom coaching, director and teacher Communities of Practice sessions and grants for classroom and playground equipment to centers serving infants and toddlers. The relationships-based foundation of the project emphasizes continuity of caregiving, small groups, and children's ability to interact with each other, consistent caregivers



and the environment. In many cases, this meant directors and teachers grappling with pervasive practices that tend to emphasize efficiency in staffing, budgetary constraints, or assumptions of infant and toddler-being that ran counter to the project's goals.

As participants became more informed about these child-focused practices and the implicit rights-based assumptions of the project, most worked hard to change practices including primary caregiving, adults transitioning with small groups of babies as they joined another classroom, and communicating closely with families. Other changes included changing use of furniture and equipment in classrooms, so that children were not contained, legs dangling, from curving tables or kept in high chairs or cribs for long periods of time. In the following section, I will draw from our external evaluation final report (Schaack, 2015), free writes of participants and exit interviews with directors to make connections between children's well-being and the rights of our youngest children.

When directors were asked about what changed in their practice after participating in the First Relationships Project, answers included "knowledge of attachment and temperament of children," "learning about and staffing for continuity of care," and "asking how long staff are with a child – and making sure what we do is best for the child, versus for ease of scheduling." Others reflected, "At first I asked, 'How are we going to do primary caregiving?' Now, I see a better fit – knowing reasons behind it helped." Many reflected that, in so many words, the well-being of children now played a larger role in a range of center policies, procedures and approaches to curriculum.

Others talked about ways in which they changed the classrooms' environments – including giving children more freedom to explore, trying to "contain" infants less and encouraging their peer relationships, as well as removing unneeded or inappropriate furniture. As a director reflected,

Once we got teacher desks out of the classroom it made a difference for the children – teachers thought they needed desks but they were really just a place to put their things and now teachers love having the extra space and so do the children.

A teacher reflected, "We didn't notice children with dangling feet versus when their feet can touch the floor and other changes we needed to make. Our environment has changed a lot!" Another director of a center with quite limited resources discussed the positive change of "re-routing the way we took older children outside – we stopped taking twos and threes through the one year old room to go outside and they now go out through the office – much better for all."

Several directors and teachers discussed the emphasis on strengthening relationships. As another director stated, "there are no shortcuts in building relationships – reciprocity is key. If you believe everyone has strengths you will see them. I would ask myself, 'What haven't I given them to help them understand?'" Others reflected that "a trusting relationship is needed to make changes in practice," and "I would have to say for the children and families, it's been about the teacher relationship." Another stated, "We learned about the importance of relationships – with children, with staff, with families – and with each other!"



When reflecting on the greatest challenges in implementing the First Relationships goals, responses included: “Staffing for small groups with the same teacher;” “decreasing the number of transitions in the infant room;” “learning not to back away from conflict, but learn from it;” and “learning to trust that by focusing on relationships and what is best for children, things will work out.”

In terms of what the project taught teachers and directors on a personal level, Communities of Practice sessions with teachers and directors were mentioned: “meeting with other directors and not competing with them but learning from them was helpful to my own growth.” Others mentioned teachers staying with babies as they went into the one year old classroom, or “looping – once we did it, worked very well with parents and of course children.” I would argue that these changes in infant and toddler caregiving are initial steps to a rights-based approach anchored in children’s well-being.

### **Sonya’s story**

At the 2008 Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education conference, I presented an autoethnography that illustrated the tensions between children’s participation, academic learning and ultimately a child’s well-being (Gaches, 2008). I shared the story of Nyasha, an African-American young girl who many had given up on. In the words of her teacher, “She couldn’t do anything” most especially the phonemic awareness skills that were the topic of current discussion. Yet, this is the same little girl I had seen that morning manipulating words and rhymes as easily as she had manipulated skipping double-dutch with the jump rope. When I suggested that we help her make the link between her jump rope rhymes and the reading skills we were teaching, my colleagues looked at me aghast. “Why, that was not an approved evidenced-based program!” “How could we ever do something like that? After all, all interventions had to come from an approved list!” Pushed aside was this beautiful opportunity to build upon Nyasha’s own understandings, skills and culture to build a bridge to this world of school and instead she was going to be sitting in intervention session after intervention session pounding out sounds and syllables that were written in a teacher’s guide. Who Nyasha was and what she brought to school were gone.

In other research, I asked primary grades teachers how they thought children’s rights were represented in their classrooms (Gaches, 2009). Just a few of their responses really hit upon their primary focus on protection and provisions. One theme from the teachers was safety and rigor of learning inside the school:

children have a right to be safe and protected within the confines of our school property and our supervision. So that’s first and foremost. Um, from there, you would break that down even further. We could get into the whole bullying spectrum, rights that they have with regards to other students, rights that they must respect regarding other students. And then the basic right to be educated, to our utmost as an institution. No one is overlooked. No one just slides by. (Frank, kindergarten teacher)

However, other teachers noted that children needed to be protected from influences away from school:



different kids watch different T.V. shows and they'll come to school and talk about that and it's not always appropriate. And so children who haven't been exposed to that are just by association . . . exposed to things. (Jessica, first grade teacher)

Jessica specifically cites these outside influences on children from other families and the media as challenges to children's "right to innocence."

One particular teacher in this study was truly passionate about children's voice and participation:

Well, my motivation for being a teacher is *totally* steeped in children's rights! . . . my mission, my passion for teaching has all grown out of that! Every kid is going to feel like they have rights! Every kid is going to feel like they have a voice! Every kid will see *my* classroom as their personal space, their haven, their turf, and I think I've been pretty well able to do that for some thirty-some years. And that has a ripple-effect, you know. You give voice to one person then you don't know where that voice will lead . . . perhaps part of my teaching hasn't been as strong in some areas, but I know every kid, sort of at a soul level, at the basic root of that kid who spends time in my classroom, in our classroom, feels like they are somebody! That, if there's nothing else I did in 30 years, I'm proud of that! (Jeff, multiage primary grades teacher)

Jeff even goes so far as to prioritize his relationship with children and commitment to children's participation over some of his teaching of content skills.

Finally, in a current project, teacher preparation students are sharing their stories of their own growth and identity formation as they are transitioning from becoming teachers as university students to being teachers in their field experiences and student teaching. Unlike many others, the teacher preparation program at this university has a strong focus on relationships with families and utilizing families' funds of knowledge (González, Moll & Amanti, 2013) as resources for children's learning (Clift, Iddings, Jurich, Reyes & Short, 2011). This emphasis provides the students with a unique perspective on children's participation. Bringing these university-based learnings into their early childhood classrooms they are finding their work as teachers enriched by children's participation.

One little boy in class always plays with guns. Whether he is manipulating a toy or his hands, he manages to bring guns into the classroom. One day, he was playing with some other children and making shooting noises. One of the teachers looked at him and loudly said "what are you doing?!" The boy looked nervous and said "I am shooting bad guys." The teacher shook her head and sternly said "no guns." He looked at her, waited until she turned away, and went back to playing with his toy gun. Instances like this happen often in the classroom: the boy plays with guns and the teachers tell him not to. I have heard the teachers often talk about how he plays with guns too often and is too aggressive with the other



children in class. I, too, started to worry about this child's actions, but then I found out that his father was a cop.

I could not help but reflect back to discussions we have had about play. If another child was pretending to do surgeries because their parent was a surgeon or pretending that there were fires in class because their parent was a firefighter, would that be unacceptable? I feel like part of my purpose as a teacher is helping children explore their lives in the classroom. By saying "no \_\_\_\_!" I feel like I am closing a door to that exploration and understanding. (Stephanie)

As for becoming a teacher, I learned so much about how to work with children. You can plan things and have hopes that things will go this way or that way but you can't determine that. You have to let the children lead mostly. Otherwise, they won't be interested and you will end up sealing off their curiosity and ideas. While I had plans for a lesson to go this way or that way, I learned that embracing where the children want to go as more important is key. I came in and was trying so hard to stick to MY lesson but the lessons really are the students' and not my own. (Layla)

Building from Layla's narrative, adults can create bubble-wrapped, surgically-sterile environments and plan amazing standards-aligned developmentally appropriate learning opportunities, but children's voices and rights to participation have to also be prioritized or all will be for naught.

### ***Reconceptualizing well-being and young children***

We hope our stories serve to convey ways in which children, teachers, and teacher preparation programs in the US are struggling with what child well-being means and how to interconnect children's physical and mental health, safety, learning and care environments, and children's voices and participation. How then do we move forward in reconceptualizing well-being to move beyond neoliberal policies focusing on health, safety and academic attainment of objectives to include a strong commitment and inclusion of children's voices and participation? First, we need to recognize that a child is not "whole" if her voice is not heard and given due weight. Unlike New Zealand licensing regulations which support children's home culture and the respecting of other cultures (Criteria C6) and that children are "involved in decisions about their learning experiences" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009, Criteria C7), there are no similar such requirements, guidance, or support in any such documents in our home US states. As licensing requirements are generally the minimum standard for care and education of young children, it is critical that the due weight of young people's perspectives and participation be included when explicating what is deemed a healthy, safe environment. As these are minimal licensing standards, the due weight given to children's voice and participation must also be present in further policy requirements of "quality" early childhood care and education.

Building from that basic requirement, while accountability policies are shifting the focus from the "whole child" to more scientifically-based pedagogies, our narratives are filled with examples of teachers disrupting these hegemonic and



regulatory practices and prioritizing the voices of children, such as by focusing on children rather than policy, changing classroom physical environments for less contained infant and toddler play, questioning the quashing of gun play and advocating for building bridges between home and school. This teacher advocacy must be supported and nurtured amongst current teachers and those in teacher education programs.

Our experiences with those in our teacher education programs illustrate the interconnectedness between well-being and relationships – relationships among teachers, children, families, and colleagues. In these relationships teachers learn from the “light and wisdom” of children themselves how to best guide those children. It was also through developing these relationships that teachers found children’s strengths and could better address changes that needed to be made in their own practices towards the development and well-being of these children.

In this reconceptualization of child well-being, teacher education programs must expand their scope beyond how to fulfill policy requirements for physically healthy and safe environments designed for attainment of externally developed standards. These programs must also include a focus on integrating children’s voices and participation into children’s school lives. These programs must provide opportunities for teachers to develop relationships with children and families and to experience how these relationships can further incorporate children’s participation in educational decision making. Finally, teacher education programs need to support teachers’ advocacy efforts as they face challenges incorporating a children’s rights-based framework for well-being in the current climate of education reform movements.

Well-being is much more than happiness, health and success (Well-being, 2015) evaluated by licensing regulations, environmental rating scales and test scores. Any notions of child well-being must prioritize the child – most especially the child’s voice and participation.

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