



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



MYWEB: MEASURING YOUTH WELL BEING

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDINGS OF WELL-BEING: THE VALUE OF CONSULTING YOUNG EXPERTS

This second policy brief of the Framework 7 Programme MYWEB project involving partners in 11 countries, highlights national relevant findings and policy implications to date for the United Kingdom.

Ongoing project

Commenced March 2014

DATE June 2016

SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

MYWeB actively engaged with children and young people throughout the life-span of the project. As experts, many of them were familiar with the concept of well-being, despite its complexity. They provided insights into numerous topics linked to well-being and drew our attention to the importance of education and social media for their generation. Other findings, based on a survey and cognitive interviews, corroborate the importance of engaging children and young people in order to develop a research instrument that is coherent and adapted to their abilities. This policy brief argues for a stronger use of children and young people's voice by policy makers through demonstrating the benefits of their contribution (i.e. ensuring evidence-based decision making that is up to date with new generations, empowering children and young people through giving them a voice and supporting their civic engagement)

INTRODUCTION

MYWeB is a project funded by the European Union, which looks at the feasibility of beginning a European Longitudinal Study for Children and Young People (ELSCYP) to collect data on their well-being. Fourteen universities and research organisations in eleven European countries are working together to identify the information that is already available, the policy priorities for children and young people's well-being and the concrete challenges of realising such a large study.

We are particularly interested in:

- both objective and subjective measures of well-being
- measures of health, welfare and poverty
- family experiences, including parental family dissolution and reformation and the effects on children
- educational and housing experiences and trajectories

- the transition from school to work
- young people's relationship formation (and dissolution)
- mapping the ongoing experiences and dynamics of the development of friendship circles
- organisational participation, civic and leisure activities
- capturing the experiences of the most vulnerable groups in society

The project involves different components providing a thorough and rounded view of the information that is required to inform policies across Europe in order to promote the well-being of children and young people. The project includes:

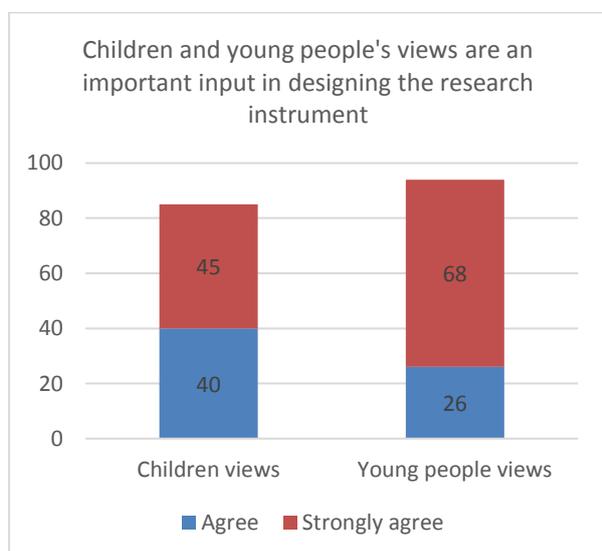
- Asking young people about their own interpretations of different aspects of well-being. Young people also contribute to the development of research instruments and decisions about appropriate ways of data collection.
- A wide array of experts in government, NGOs, academia, practice, in determining a suitable strategy to collect and use data on well-being.
- Identification of currently available data sources.
- Evaluating a suitable survey methodology.
- A cost-benefit analysis of an ELSCYP.

The Purpose of the Policy Brief

Children and young people have the right to participate in decisions that concern themselves (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). Increasingly, research engages with children and young people, acknowledging their key role as experts in their own lives. Increasingly, they are consulted and informed. Yet, there is a need to bring their participation to a higher level and make sure that their concerns are heard beyond academia, in particular by policy makers. Through the research findings from the MYWeB project, this policy brief argues for the involvement of children and young people in research and outlines its importance for policy making. It lists the benefits policy makers gain from integrating such research findings into their current and future work.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

A survey involving a panel of 334 European experts in children and youth studies, well-being, policy, and survey methodology was conducted between October 2014 and February 2015. Respondents largely agreed that children's (85% of respondents) and young people's (94% of respondents) views are an important input in designing the research instrument. A higher percentage of respondents strongly agreed with the statement when considering young people (68% strongly agree) than when considering children (45% strongly agree). Qualitative comments indicated that children and young people's views are important as they provide a unique insight into their well-being. They are the experts of their own lives and the sole window to subjective measures of well-being, such as happiness and life satisfaction.



We cannot assume that we know what is best for children or what their views are. For some groups, eg: disabled children, there may be a tendency not to consult them or to assume that their parents can speak for them but we know from research that disabled children's views are not always the same as their parents'.

Academic expert, UK

Researchers often involve children and young people in the design of instruments, such as survey questions. MYWeB has developed and tested a set of new questions with children aged 7 and 8 in six European countries, including the UK. Questions were adapted over several waves of interviews to ensure their age appropriateness. This work is an essential part of a questionnaire's development as it offers an insight that will improve its design. Yet, it remains researcher-led and does not capture unexpected elements because of its rigid structure. This brief argues for a greater level of engagement, where children and young people's voice is captured in a flexible way in order to offer an insight into their opinions. Key findings from interviews illustrate how such findings are relevant to policy makers.

The interviews undertaken with children (12 years old) and young people (15 to 18 years old) in the UK for the purpose of this project outlined that well-being is a concept most young people have encountered in school, social services, or Sunday school (religion). However, the concept appears to be quite abstract for children aged 10 to 12. For example, some associated the term 'well-being' with the notion of 'being good', which is a judgement of personal morality rather than an indicator of health.

Overall, the global understanding of well-being from the young people's perspective covered numerous topics, such as physical and emotional health, basic needs, such as having a house, education, freedom, happiness, feeling safe, future opportunities, and psychological aspects, such as self-esteem.

"I was quite stressed, especially since the government has changed quite a lot of laws and the university fee has increased quite a lot of times. That is worrying me, because we're not a rich family, and I think there are a lot of families like me out there and £9000 is not something which everyone can afford. And especially for about two, three years and then you have to obviously go... when you work you have to keep paying a particular fraction of your salary for to repay that bank loan which you borrow and it's tough, Miss."

Adnan, 16 years old

Interviews indicated that education is at the heart of young people's concerns. As illustrated by Adnan's quote, university fees and bank loans can be a cause of worries. Such concerns impact on complex notions of well-being, such as amount of choice and autonomy. They are, therefore, highly relevant to research and policies aiming to improve children and young people's life.

There was also a general sentiment amongst the young people interviewed that their voices are not heard in the British society. The interviewees mentioned two reasons to this lack of participation. Some of them indicated that young people simply do not voice their opinions, due to some political apathy and lack of civic engagement. Others, however, noted that young people do express their opinions, through videos posted on social media platforms for instance, but that the government ignores the messages spread by the youth.

"Have you not seen them videos that people post on Facebook? They have like 100 million views and nobody's taking no notice of it. Like, if I go to the government now and tell them, how many times has like the residents from [Manchester] gone to the government and said that we need this, the government's not done anything."

Rob, 18 years old

An important finding for policy makers is that **young people are keen to engage in research that leads to policy impact and want to hear about how their participation contributed to change.**

Key findings were presented to a Children and Young People Advisory Group (i.e. 6 young people aged 12 to 18), as well as a Professionals Advisory Group (i.e. 4 academics with relevant expertise). During the workshops, participants were asked to develop policy recommendations. Both groups independently decided to make recommendations concerning education. The topic was deemed a priority because of its central role in young people's well-being, as one of the main cause of stress (i.e. exams), but also as the mean to increase life opportunities and satisfaction through access to employment. Young people devised the following policy recommendations:

- The curriculum should include more content relevant to life knowledge and skills (e.g. how to set up a bank account) in order to keep the learning practical and applied.
- Focus should be taken away from exams to focus on individual life goals. The scoring system could be replaced by an assessment of targets / goals established by the student at the beginning of the year.
- Policy makers should trial this initiative in different schools (urban and rural). They could also consider what is done in other countries to improve the current British system.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Whilst there has always been some level of consultation with children and young people, the majority of the work undertaken is adult-led and directive. A more flexible approach, which is already applied in some organisations (e.g. Children’s Society, Funky Dragons in Wales), empowers children and young people and unveils important information, such as that presented in this brief. Furthermore, we argue for a greater connection between children and policy makers to ensure that their opinions are heard. Academics and NGOs have the ability and the means to be a conduit ensuring access to children and young people’s voice in the purest form possible.

There are many benefits when involving children in policy recommendations. The findings from the MYWeB project are easily transferable to the broader policy context:

- Observing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Accessing new information about children and young people’s perceptions and experiences
- Empowering children and young people through giving them a voice
- Promoting the civic engagement of children and young people
- Ensuring that decisions are evidence-based and adapted / in line with younger generations

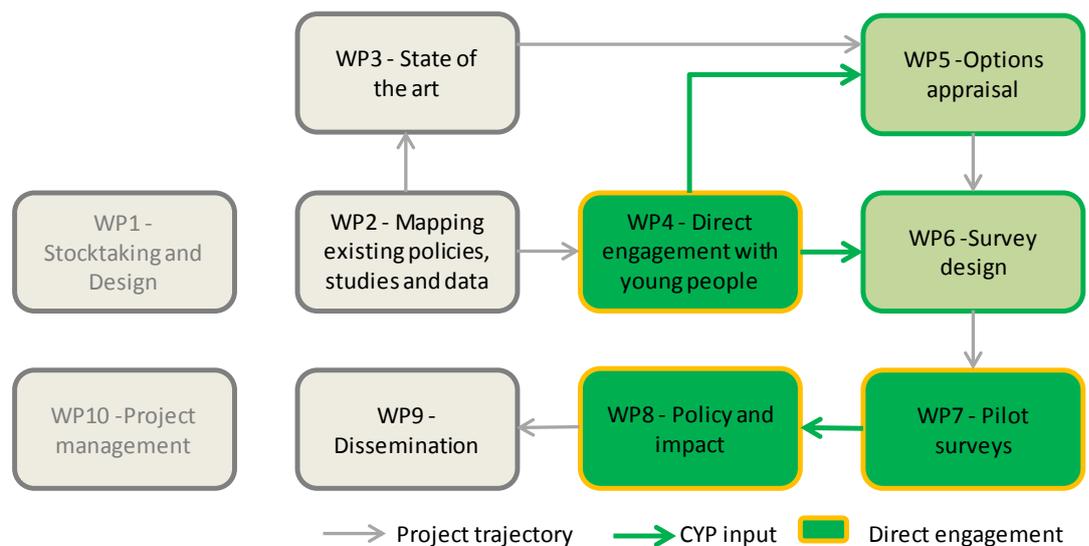
Children and young people have a direct stake in governmental legislative programmes. Whilst some are manifestly linked to young people (for example, those linked to education and children and youth services), others remain relevant regardless of their topic. For instance, young people will be directly impacted by legislation relating to the Digital Economy, both in terms of protection for citizens in the digital world and future employment opportunities created through digital infrastructures. When relevant to them, children and young people have the right to be consulted about the new legislation programme (UN CRC).

Findings from this project emphasise the need to further engage young people in research activities in order to ensure that their voice is heard by their government. For example, it became evident throughout this research that education is a prime concern for young people in the UK and that social media is perceived as an important communication tool for younger generations, one that the government should pay attention to. Beyond consultation, young people also want their government to be accountable and demonstrate how they used research involving children and young people to make decisions about current and future policies. In light of these findings, the project makes the following recommendations:

- Give young people a voice: Many Bills in the legislative programme are of direct or indirect concern for young people. It is important to ensure that children and young people’s opinions are voiced and included in legislative debates that affect them. Consultations can be organised across the country and in different communities to capture the diversity of their views and opinions. In addition, there should also be feedback to young people on decisions taken following the consultation.
- Observe (Listen to / acknowledge) what is being said on social media. Use research to keep up to date with communication tools used by young people.
- Create stronger links between policy and research to ensure that decisions are clearly evidence-based. Policy makers, especially local and national governments, should make an effort to show how children and young people are included in the decision-making processes. This can be done through clarifying sources, especially when coming from organisations actively engaging young people and would give more weight to research and young people’s voice.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Children and young people were actively engaged throughout this project as demonstrated in the figure below. Findings presented here draw on work undertaken for Work Package 5 (WP5) where a Delphi survey was undertaken between October 2014 and February 2015. Three questionnaires were issued to 334 panellists identified as experts in the fields of survey methodology, children and youth, well-being, and policy. Response rates were very good, ranging from 75% in the first questionnaire, to 58.9% in the second, and 61.7% in the third. Qualitative work (interviews and focus groups) was conducted with 450 children and young people across Europe (i.e. Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain and the United Kingdom). This brief specifically draws on the 24 interviews undertaken in the UK (WP4). Children were also involved in the design of new research questions through cognitive interviews (WP7 – Pilot surveys). Children and Young People Advisory Groups were established and consulted (WP8).



PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME Measuring Youth Well-Being (MYWeB)

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CONSORTIUM

- Manchester Metropolitan University, UK
- University of Bremen, Germany
- Pompeu Fabra University, Spain
- Ivo Pilar Institute, Croatia
- University of Debrecen, Hungary
- Daugavpils University, Latvia
- Panteion University, Greece
- Tallinn University, Estonia
- University of SS Cyril and Methodius, Slovakia
- University of Lisbon, Portugal
- Caucasus Research Resource Centres, Georgia
- University of Essex, UK
- University of Cambridge, UK
- Catalan Youth Agency, Spain

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WEBSITE www.fp7-myweb.eu

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FURTHER READING MYWeB project website: <http://fp7-myweb.eu>