Benefits and Limitations of Eliciting the Well-Being Views of Two-Four Year Olds Living in a Low-Income Area in England

Martina Street¹

Accepted: 1 September 2020 / Published online: 11 September 2020

© The Author(s) 2020

Abstract

This paper reports findings from a small-scale qualitative study exploring the views of two - four year olds about their well-being. While interest in children's views about their well-being has been increasing over the past couple of decades, the views of young children are under-researched, particularly those living in low-income areas. Deficit social constructions of young children and their capacities to 'express' (usually understood as 'verbalise') 'reasoned' (usually understood as 'cognitive') views have largely fuelled their exclusion. The study involved 18 young children living in one of England's most economically disadvantaged areas. Data were generated with children by using the Mosaic Approach, comprising multiple creative methods. The findings suggest that young children conceptualise their well-being in the here-and-now; they enjoy opportunities to be social and to participate in activities and decisions that affect them. However, while it may be beneficial to young children's sense of well-being to acknowledge their agency, and to treat their views with respect, it may be more beneficial to them to do so by also recognising their 'mutuality of being'. In this sense, eliciting the views of young children about their well-being is not only under-researched, but under-socialised and de-historicised. The paper concludes by proposing an integrative approach to well-being, which neither privileges nor abstracts children from their social and material contexts.

Keywords Young children · Subjective well-being · Low-income areas

1 Introduction

This paper contributes to the increasing interest in eliciting the views of young children about their well-being. It addresses, in particular, the recommendation to locate young

✉ Martina Street
martina.street@mmu.ac.uk

¹ Education and Social Research Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University, Room 1.06, Brooks Building, Bonsall Street, Manchester M15 6GX, UK

children's views within their socio-cultural and temporal-spatial contexts (Fattore et al. 2019), especially those children from marginalised communities (Fane et al. 2020:22) by reporting the well-being views of children aged two - four years, who live in economically disadvantaged areas - in this case, in England.

In spite of its prevalence in policy narratives (Bache 2019), the term 'child well-being' is highly problematic. It is ubiquitously considered to be under-theorised (Amerijckx and Humblet 2014) and its use is contested. The term has been described as a "benign umbrella" (Camfield et al. 2009:67), its ambiguity conveniently disguising inequalities (Camfield et al. 2009:97). Others, by contrast, have argued that the term's use enables analyses of power, thereby potentiating equitable outcomes (Nussbaum 2011:33).

Young children's well-being, in addition, appears to be increasingly conflated with their achievement of prescribed educational outcomes (see for example, the OECD's International Early Learning and Well-being Study n.d.). So too, in England's early childhood education policy, which is noted for its data-driven approach (Bradwell 2019), there is also a sense in which 'child well-being' is conflated with other terms, such as children's "best possible outcomes" (DfE 2017: 10). These outcomes appear to be predicated on young children's ability to reach linear and staged developmental milestones which, in turn, supposedly support them to be 'ready for school' thereby apparently potentiating their readiness for life and future well-being.

Young children's 'readiness for school' is measured by a range of indicators enabling comparative assessments of their educational attainment (DfE 2017). The justification for these assessments, at least in part, is that they provide the rationale for the introduction of compensatory schemes, which ostensibly ameliorate the attainment gap between economically disadvantaged children and their peers (Social Mobility Commission 2017:20). Such assessments echo attempts to measure young children's well-being more generally. A systematic review conducted by Fane et al. (2016) unearthed 87 assessments designed to measure at least one aspect of young children's wellbeing. Such a plethora of assessments and indicators underlines a concern that young children are the most observed, examined and evaluated population group (Te One et al. 2014:1054). Moreover, these assessments also raise a range of validity and reliability challenges, as well as conceptual issues (Ben-Arieh 2012), one of which is the challenge to support young children's rights to participate in decisions that affect them, while simultaneously ensuring stewardship of their well-being.

The subjective well-being views of children (over the age of eight years) are increasingly systematically collected (see for example, The Children's Society 2017). Indeed, findings from studies involving older children consistently suggest their participation is important to their sense of well-being (see for example, Fattore et al. 2012). However, those of young children are still under-researched (Fane et al. 2020; Lam and Comay 2020). Reasons suggested for their exclusion have included "adult fear, a risk that we will find out that which we would rather not know" (Bradwell 2019:424). However, more commonly, the paucity of opportunities for young children to participate in discussions about their well-being (among other issues) is considered to be influenced by (and in turn, contributes to) deficit social constructions of them as vulnerable-only, tabula rasa, future adults (Macleod 2015).

These deficit views of young children are endorsed, and undermined, by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989). This Convention,

while supporting children's participation, only gives "due weight" to the views of children "in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (Article 12). It has been suggested that this is, at least in part, because young children are not considered to be able to express (understood as, 'verbalise') reasoned (understood as, 'cognitive') views (Bou-Habib and Olsaretti 2015:27). This social construction of young children limits understandings about effective methods to elicit their perspectives (Lam and Comay 2020), and thus to justify proxy measures of their well-being (Fane et al. 2020:2). However, proponents of the "new sociology of childhood" claim that children are capable social actors with the right to participate in decisions that affect them (Palaologou 2014). These researchers have been using a range of methods to elicit the views of young children in a range of different ways for several decades (see, for example, the well-established Mosaic Approach developed by Clark and Moss 2001). So, while there are few studies that directly elicit the views of young children about their well-being per se, there are increasing numbers of studies that seek the views of young children about related issues (see for example, Joshi et al. 2015). Indeed, it has been suggested that listening to the views of young children may support their mental health (Bradwell 2019:423). Young children's status as "a social minority group" (Mayall and Oakley 2018:x) and the least visible group participating in social research (Crivello et al. 2009:52) although the most likely to be affected by poverty (Camfield et al. 2009:74) is becoming increasingly untenable (Fane et al. 2020:1).

That said, young children's perspectives on aspects of their lives are still relatively scant (Larsen and Stanek 2015: 196). When they are invited to participate in research, studies tend to gather their views about improving services that already exist, and especially their early education provision (see for example, Hreinsdottir and Davidsdottir 2012). This study addresses this gap by seeking the views of children aged two - four years living in a low-income area in England. Its approach is consistent with those emanating from the "new sociology of childhood", away from prevailing deficit views of young children to their being social actors with their own strategies for actively navigating their everyday life within the structures and institutions they inhabit.

2 Research Design

The study was a small-scale qualitative investigation conducted in a multi-cultural and low-income area in a northern English city.

2.1 Participants

Working with early years' educators, 18 children aged 2–4 years were recruited from two early childhood education (hereafter ECE) settings: a for-private-profit nursery and a school nursery. The parents of 20 children provided consent and 18 children subsequently assented to participate in the study, as shown in Table 1: nine girls and nine boys - twelve White British children, the other six from a range of Black and Minority Ethnic groups. Ten children were in receipt of Free School Meals (hereafter FSM) or had been eligible for early education funding as their families were formally recognised as living in 'relative poverty'. Pseudonyms are used for all the study's participants.

Table 1 Participants

ECE setting	Name	Age (years)	Ethnicity	Living in relative poverty ^a
Private nursery	Pam (Girl)	3	White British	No
	Emily (Girl)	3		No
	Jack ^b (Boy)	3		Yes
	Olly ^b (Boy)	3		Yes
	John (Boy)	4	Dual heritage	No
	Ned ^b (Boy)	3		Yes
	Amy ^b (Girl)	2		Yes
School nursery class	Evie (Girl)	4	White British	Yes
	Isla (Girl)	4		Yes
	Kenneth (Boy)	3		Yes
	Aurora (Girl)	3		Yes
	Cristal (Girl)	3	Dual heritage	Yes
	William (Boy)	4		No
	Jeremy (Boy)	4		No
	Alisha (Girl)	3		Yes
	Renny (Boy)	3		No
	Marissa (Girl)	3 at 1st interview and 4 at 2nd interview		No
	Kamran (Boy)	3	Black British	No

^a Poverty is a complex multi-dimensional concept but for the purpose of this study, its definition is based on Households Below Average Income (HBAI) data, which, in England, is used to assess children's eligibility for the two-year childcare offer and Free School Meals

^b These children were educated in a separate room according to their families' socio-economic status and eligibility for grant funding for their two-year olds

2.2 Methods

Data for this study were generated by use of the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss 2001). The intention was to be sensitive to young children's differential capacities for dialogue by employing participant observation and multi-methods to create a 'mosaic' of their views about their well-being. Children were invited to draw, photograph, video and/or audio-record what they (dis)liked within and beyond their ECE setting (as indicative of their well-being views) to scaffold 'interviews' with them.

The participating children, having gained some familiarity with the resources (including clipboards with an integral audio recorder, and digital cameras) and having received verbal information from the researcher and their Early Years Educators about the study, decided whether and which of the resources to take home over the weekend/half term holiday to generate the data. Close liaison with the children's parents, ensuring that they were happy with and had sight of the information their children brought back to their education setting, was crucial for ethical reasons (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Zig (Research Assistant)

Shortly following this, the researcher interviewed the children in their education settings to listen to their views, supported by their visual/audio data, about what they like and dislike. Some of the children chose to be interviewed with the researcher alone, and others chose to be interviewed with another participant alongside the researcher. These interviews were conducted with a sock puppet ‘research assistant’, which enabled engagement with the children as they often find it easier to share or confide information with puppets and dolls (Lancaster 2003).

The questions asked of the children, detailed in Table 2 below, were broadly shaped by concepts derived from The Capability Approach (Sen 1999) summarised in Table 3.

The audio-recorded interviews lasted between five and thirty-seven minutes (average 20 min) and were transcribed for analysis. Data were stored securely in digital format with password protected accessibility.

2.3 Ethics

Participants had the opportunity to withdraw their assent at various stages of the study. Spending time with them supported attunement to their ways of communicating, so that

Table 2 Semi-structured interview schedule for children

Doings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you like/not like doing? • What do you like to learn?
Beings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you feel in this picture/when you do these things?
Haveings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you like to have more than anything else? • What would you buy if you had loads of money?
Other questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything else that you like/dislike that is not in this picture?

Table 3 Adaptation of a theoretical framework of child well-being

Theoretical orientation	Conceptualises children as...	Social construction of children mainly as...	Key concepts privileged	Concept dimension emphasised
Capability Approach (Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum)	Unique	Vulnerable- only Tabula rasa Future adults	Beings & Doings (Functionings)	Individual unit of moral concern
			Becomings (Capabilities)	Self-defining
			Having	Distribution of resources according to self-defined goals that people value and have reason to value
Relational well-being (Sarah White)	Social and collective	Capable social actors	Belonging	Mutuality of beings and doings Interdependent with others, and temporal & spatial contexts

their different ways of expressing their wish to withdraw could be understood; this was important as the researcher conducted the interviews without the presence of the children's key carers or parents, to safeguard the participating children's anonymity and privacy. Parents of the participants were consulted to ensure they were happy with, and had sight of, the data their children generated and returned. Given the potential ethical compromises the children's data may have presented, it was explained to parents that the photographs and videos would not be retained by the researcher. This study was approved by the University of Manchester's research ethics committee.

2.4 Data Analysis

Analysis of the children's data was conducted over two phases: first, during fieldwork and second, after the end of the fieldwork period following further literature review resulting, in turn, from the fieldwork. Concepts from 'relational approaches' to well-being (as summarised in Table 3) were introduced in the second phase of analysis (please see Author [forthcoming](#) for more details of the development of the theoretical framework). Data analysis was therefore partly deductive and partly inductive in keeping with Constant Comparative Analysis (Fram 2013). Constant Comparative Analysis (an iterative analytic process that supports inductive and constant re-coding of data as the fieldwork is being conducted) can be used in tandem with Grounded Theory as a way of maintaining an 'emic' perspective ("experience-near concepts") with theoretical frameworks that maintain an 'etic' perspective ("experience-distant concepts") (Geertz 1983:58). This iterative process therefore involved a gradual synthesis of 'emic' and 'etic' concepts, supported rigour and close attention to the richness

of the data alongside dispensing with the premise that data is neutral or value free. In both phases of the analysis open codes were ascribed to words, phrases, sentences and images, and matched to the theoretical concepts they best fit.

Analysis and presentation of the children's data also drew from conversation analysis (as per Perakyla and Ruusuvuori 2011) i.e. focusing on both the form and content of the 'interviews'. This enabled reflection on the ways in which power and inequalities are reproduced and resisted in societies, especially in relation to young children.

3 Findings

In this section, the concepts derived from the theoretical framework of child well-being are used to present the findings about young children's views of their well-being. In so doing, a new concept is introduced that speaks particularly to the circumstances of children living and being educated in one low-income area in England.

3.1 'Beings'

The children demonstrated overwhelmingly that they are 'beings' immersed in the here-and-now. None of the children discussed what they wanted to be or do in the future. Marissa, for example, when asked about what she most liked doing, answered, "Playing with Zig" even though they had just been introduced; William spent most of the 'interview' making explosion noises while playing with his "fire aeroplane" which he had just constructed from Mobilo; and Jack wanted to take photos of his friends in nursery during the 'interview'. The children were not future-oriented and appeared unconcerned about their 'becomings'.

These examples also begin to illustrate their abundant curiosities, which they demonstrated in a range of ways. Emily, for example, when informed that Zig was tired and wanted to go to sleep said, "But he hasn't got closey eyes" to which Pam contributed by asking, "What does he close his eyes like?" This collaborative incisiveness on the girls' part demonstrated a criticality that took the researcher completely by surprise, as the implications of this feature of Zig's anatomy had neither been noticed nor considered.

3.2 'Doings' and 'Havings'

Alongside playing, relaxing, sleeping, befriending, relating, conversing, resisting, fighting, negotiating, laughing and giggling, bullying and being bullied, loving and being loved, the children were unanimous in their enthusiasm for eating. Most of the children either spoke about or photographed their food (usually both). They talked mainly about sugary foods – biscuits, chocolate, Oreos™, lollipops and cake, but also occasionally, sausages, beans, bananas, strawberries, fruit and yoghurt. Pam, echoing Bart Simpson, mentioned she liked to eat, "Flowers and shorts"!

Given that playing and eating were among the most commonly cited of the children's likes, it is perhaps unsurprising that toys and food were most mentioned by them when asked what they would buy if they had lots of money. The toys they

spoke about wanting and those they photographed included “kinoculars”, toy kitchen/home corner, a “Ghostbuster™ toy”, “a toy shot gun – a toy one”, Spiderman™, Transformers™, iPads™ and Toy Story™ toys.

Some of them also spoke of and photographed other resources they clearly enjoyed. Jeremy, for example, spoke of (photographed and videoed) his enjoyment of playing in the park, eating in a restaurant and visiting the airport; William and Evie spoke of (and photographed) their trips to the museum; Marissa enjoyed her holiday abroad. Other children photographed more local resources suggesting their importance: Renny photographed the local park, library and church; Kamran spoke of having to visit the doctor when he was sick over the half-term holiday and Cristal mentioned that her house had recently been “fixed”.

3.3 ‘Belonging’

What the examples above also begin to indicate is the importance of ‘belonging to’ or relationships to well-being, which the children described and demonstrated, as crucial to their (well) beings. These are now categorised to explore how they may influence children’s well-beings.

3.3.1 Relationships with their Families

Overall, the children spoke affectionately of their relationships with their families. This was also evident in their photos and videos. Olly, for example, took many photographs of his older sister who appeared to look lovingly into the camera at him. He also spoke of his concern for her as, he recounted with a worried expression on his face, she had bumped her head earlier that week and had cried. Some children imagined the existence of additional siblings (Evie and Isla, for example) and talked about them as if they were real. Jeremy too, mentioned at both interviews that he had a younger sister who lived with his grandma. His teacher described him as an only child.

The children enjoyed their families and extended families helping them with their learning. Alisha mentioned she and her grandmother had read together in the half-term holiday; William and Evie had visited a museum (William with his mother, father and older sister and Evie with her father and brothers) and Jeremy had been aeroplane spotting with his father and uncle. Marissa during her half-term holiday, which she spent abroad with her mother, older sister and brother, took a camera with her. The photographs and videos she took showed how she and her older sister had played and experimented with it, fully exploring its applications.

3.3.2 Relationships with each other in their Education Settings

The education settings gave most of the children the opportunity to make friends. Most of the participants mentioned, or at least demonstrated (if they were in the early stages of learning English), that they like to play with their friends. The games and activities they mentioned were highly sociable: hide and seek; card games; the role-play corner, for example. Other activities that could be undertaken singly were often enjoyed with each other: riding bikes; playing with the Mobilo and play dough. Most children appeared to be adept at making friends, not only by inviting others to their interviews

, but also by the way they communicated and developed affiliations with each other. For example, Evie and Isla showed how they developed their affiliation and friendship with each other by jointly undertaking and supporting each other to observe and explore Zig on the first occasion they met him:

Researcher: Zig would like to know...she would like to know what do you do at school?

[Girls ignore question and start to observe and point to Zig]

Evie: Red

Isla: Red

= Evie: And blue

Isla: And blue [they are pointing to Zig's rainbow coloured neck]

=Evie: And red

Isla: And grey

Evie: And green and yellow and orange and red and red and green and yellow and orange [Isla is simultaneously humming rhythmically to Evie's words]

Each of the conversations with participants, who invited friends, involved one or both of them helping each other in some way. During the conversation with Cristal and Marissa, for example, Marissa offered to return to the main room to fetch Cristal's medicine. The children appeared to enjoy supporting one another in these ways and this enabled them to participate in games, stay healthy, work out how to use the equipment, take pride in their achievements, demonstrate their caring and empathic natures, develop their language and communication skills and, most of all, have fun.

Yet their relationships with each other were not always mellifluous. Marissa, for example, disclosed there were bullies in her class and that she disliked it because, "They don't follow our values." When asked what her values were, she declared:

Marissa: Listen

Researcher: Listening?

Marissa: Yes, that's our values

Aurora: [rolling onto the floor] My values are, 'Fall over'

Researcher: Your values are falling over?

Aurora: Yeah

This extract suggests a number of things about children's potential to be well-beings (and to treat other beings well) at least in their education settings. First, that their ECE setting provides them, not only with opportunities to bully (and be bullied) but also to learn how to deal with conflict and bullying. This particular setting provided the children with a set of values they could potentially use to protect themselves. Marissa demonstrated that she was willing and able to whistle blow on others' transgressions and lobby powerful adults for her own protection as well as that of her friends. Aurora, on the other hand, may have been trying to participate in our conversation and used the word 'values' as a semantic lever to do so, but may also have been indicating, inadvertently or otherwise, that she was capable of deciding upon her own values which, as if to further emphasise her intervention, she physically demonstrated too.

Some of the children appeared to enjoy taking on the mantle of being representatives of the group when introduced to Zig. Marissa, for example, mentioned “we” like to play in answer to Zig’s enquiry, as if she were acting as spokesperson for all local children. This connected in various ways to some of the children’s sense of ‘belonging’, both to their geographical place and to each other. All the children (without exception) enthusiastically described their love of playing outside, beyond their homes and education settings.

Amy, who could not speak (English), did not play very much with others. Instead, she would often loiter unobtrusively observing others. She delighted in the audio clipboard when the data elicitation resources were introduced, and on one occasion, unbeknown to a small group of children who were playing outside, recorded their conversation. When she played it back and they heard this conversation, all started laughing, as it was a surprise to hear themselves. When the children stopped laughing, Amy again pressed ‘play’ and all the children heard their previous laughter as she had again unobtrusively recorded it. The children, hearing their laughter, thought this hilarious and laughed even more. This could be interpreted as an attempt on Amy’s part to create a connection between herself and the other children at nursery and to ‘belong’ to the group by making a creative intervention into their play. She performed this clever and spirited act without words.

3.3.3 Relationship with Zig

The children were also, for the most part, very keen to become friends with Zig, and demonstrated their concern for him in different ways. Ned, for example, after checking if Zig was a dragon or was “dangerous”, offered the puppet an imaginary cup of tea and pretended to feed him. Ned also told me that he would look after Zig, save him from “the bad guys” and showed Zig how to look after a (toy) baby. Olly too was equally affectionate with the puppet and gave him a kiss at the end of our conversation. Another boy who approached us, curious to find out what we were doing, put an exploratory hand in to Zig’s mouth and was admonished by Olly who told him Zig did not like it when people stick fingers in his mouth. This incident also intimated some of the tensions between their caring natures and their curiosity.

Zig also provided John with an opportunity to reflect on one of the ways he enjoyed learning, and to berate me for thwarting Zig’s ability to learn, in a way that indicated his incredulity at the injustice I clearly meted out to my research assistant!

John: I never knew he could stay in a bag [tuts in disgust]

Researcher: You don’t sound very impressed

John: I actually never knew [tuts again]. It’s weird

Researcher: Why is it weird? Where do you think he would live?

John: I thought he would live in your office

Researcher: He does! He lives in a bag in my office.

John: But why does he have to live in a bag? Why wouldn’t you put him on the side?

Researcher: Oh, maybe I should

John: And he can watch you

Researcher: Oh yeah that's true actually yeah...it's kind of obvious really isn't it?

John: My dad always lets me watch him tutor...He lets me watch him work

John's dad was a science teacher and he went on to describe his own joy and sense of achievement when I asked him if he was good at science too:

Researcher: ... Are you good at science as well John?

John: Yeah, I've done it because I got a pink [indistinguishable] put a bit of pom pom in it [indistinguishable] wash on it and then I stirred it with a paint brush and it turned pink

Researcher: Did it? How did you feel when you were doing that?

John: I feel so happy

Researcher: Really? How come?

John: Because it was really fun doing it. It was chemical...I used chemicals!

3.3.4 Relationships with the Researcher

The children, for the most part, seemed keen to make friends with me, and were generally helpful and cooperative. For example, Olly deferred his exploration of a discovery of spiders in the playground to show me his photographs and answer my questions. Jack wanted to take photos of his friends outside but complied with my request to show me the photos he had already taken. Other examples of this happened inadvertently when the data elicitation equipment either did not work when the children took them home, or I struggled to work the IT equipment advertised as suitable for three year olds. This suggested a number of well-being's ingredients. First, was their joy at being, and being acknowledged for their competences. Second, I sometimes had to admit that I could not work the equipment, so we were more equal in these exchanges. Third, it provided opportunities for some of them to demonstrate and practise their photography and IT skills by sharing them with me. Lastly, it also provided us with opportunities to become friends.

That said, the children sometimes drew on my status as an adult. Many of the children, for example, called upon me for protection of themselves, and their resources. During my conversation with Pam and Emily, for example, we were ambushed by John and Olly:

Researcher: I'm just talking to Pam and Emily, guys, so I'll see you later Olly.

Olly: I want it. It's mine [referring to the audio clipboard with which the girls are playing]

Researcher: Olly, that's Pam's. Please could you give it her back? [Olly has snatched the recorder from Pam] Pam wants that back please, Olly. You can play with something else, Olly.

John: Can I play with that?

Researcher: No John. I'm talking to Pam and Emily and when you bring your camera in, we can play with that.

John: What is it?

Researcher: It's a recorder. Right ok John, scram! I'm talking to Pam
 Pam: [wailing] He's not going to give it me! [Referring to Olly]
 Researcher: [to John] I'll talk to you tomorrow when you bring your camera in.
 John [ignoring Researcher] Why does he squeak? [Referring to Zig]
 Pam: [wailing] Give it back! Go and get it! Give it back to me!
 Researcher: [calling on the help of an early years educator in the room] I just want to talk to Pam and Emily.

During the course of generating data with the children, particularly in the school nursery unit, incidences like this happened regularly and I was often called upon to intervene and protect those who felt aggrieved. My role as an adult who brought exciting new resources into the ECE settings, initiated some complex responses from the children. Renny for example, did not appear to be especially interested in answering the questions I used my sock puppet research assistant to help me elicit, but largely to play with Zig and the camera equipment. When I analysed the interview (and even during the course of it) I recognise that he may have been using his ingenuity to work out ways of getting his desires met (i.e. to play with the sock puppet) by indulging me – the powerful adult who had brought many interesting but limited resources into the nursery unit.

Researcher: So would you mind asking...would you mind answering some questions that Zig has?
 Renny: I can do that. I can put my hand on [meaning 'in?'] that.
 Researcher: Can you?
 Renny: Yeah
 [Squeaking noises from Zig]
 Renny: I can do it now
 Researcher: I know but shall we have a chat with Zig first?
 Renny: Yeah
 Researcher: Hang on he wants to ask a question.

In this passage, Renny mentions a couple of times that he is able to operate the sock puppet and would like to have a go "now" but I was clearly determined to meet my research agenda and ignored these obvious cues. This interview took place towards the end of the day and I remember being exhausted. During our conversation, Renny diligently answered my questions but told me,

Renny: He said he wants to go to the shop *with me* [emphasis added]
 Researcher: He wants to go to the shop?
 Renny: Yeah, *with me*.
 Researcher: With you?
 Renny: Yeah
 Researcher: Why does he want to go to the shop?
 Renny: because he wants to...*with me*.
 Researcher: He wants to go with you...because are you two friends?

Renny: Yeah, he wants to go to the shop so he can buy something *for me*.
 Researcher: Aw, that's nice
 Renny strokes Zig
 Researcher: Are you stroking him?
 Renny: Yeah
 Researcher: That's very nice. He likes that. Oh he likes you Renny
 Renny: Yeah
 Researcher: Cos you're very friendly to him
 Renny: Cos he's gonna...he's gonna buy something. I'm gonna buy something for him...a chocolate.
 Researcher: That's very nice. You are going to buy something for each other?
 Renny: Yeah
 Squeaking noises from Zig
 Researcher: D'ya know Zig, what he said... he said...cos he's going back to Outer Space tonight but he's coming back after the half term holiday
 Renny: Yeah
 Researcher: And he said 'would you come back and to talk to him and tell him things that you like doing in the area
 Renny: Because he's going to call to me....can I have a turn? [Meaning to put his arm in Zig and control the puppet]
 Researcher: Go on then [taking puppet off arm and handing it to Renny]

Renny's actions could be interpreted as attempting to prise Zig (an interesting toy/ limited resource – not my fantasy research assistant) off my arm by deploying a number of sophisticated tactics. First, he repeatedly emphasised that Zig wanted to go to the shop *with him*. Second, he started to stroke Zig, not necessarily because he wanted to demonstrate how friendly he was (and I asked several leading questions to encourage this – drawing from another social construction of young children as being wholly innocent), but perhaps because at least he was now getting his hands on the resource he solicited. Third, Renny could be seen as attempting to reassure me by suggesting that Zig was safe in his hands, and that he could be trusted to go to the shop with him. And finally, when he realised that I was drawing the interview to a close because I had got what I wanted, he asked me directly if he could have Zig. I relented and the roles were reversed: he controlled Zig and I had to play along with the charade. Renny was the only child in the cohort who managed to wrest control of Zig (the resource) in this way. He may have had to employ little of his ingenuity to do so.

In our subsequent interview, Renny continued to outwit me, or so it might be interpreted. On this occasion, he had the camera to play with and was willing to show me the photos he/his father took during the half-term holiday. During the conversation he showed me a photograph of a local church (which I recognised as Church of England) but which he insisted was “Babamapooer” Church. It may well be that there is a church at which “Babamapooer” is practised, but having asked several people who were as bewildered as I about this religion, he may have been experimenting with language, using a personal-to-his-family term or having fun with me and inadvertently, or otherwise, resisting my agenda to privilege his own. The regularity with which he could be interpreted as resisting my attempts to find out about his half-term holiday may not have been about wanting to withdraw from the interview, because I asked him

several times whether he wanted to return to the main room in the nursery unit. Instead, he may have wanted to stop me, in ingenious and playful ways, from asking all the questions while he got on with playing and learning how to use the camera, knowing that when the interview ended so might his possession of the resource. Perhaps he also enjoyed the opportunity to resist. Many of the children who participated in this study employed a range of strategies to stop me from asking so many questions relating to my research agenda so they could focus on their own: playing.

In addition to the strategies employed by Renny, others ignored me, used delaying tactics, changed the subject, issued commands, distracted me, or laughed and giggled together. Evie and Isla collaborated to keep me out of the game they wanted to play together, and on a couple of occasions I was told directly to “stop talking” (Isla). And while I mentioned previously that Marissa demonstrated her caring and empathic nature by volunteering to fetch Cristal’s medicine, it could also be interpreted that she had decided to walk out of the interview, quite possibly out of boredom, and used Cristal’s medical needs as a polite excuse to do so. As the (sometimes) more skilful and certainly the more experienced communicator, in nearly all these instances, I managed to get the children to privilege my agenda, often by dogged and relentless persistence, which was exhausting. It is a tribute to the ingenuity of most of these children that they made it so difficult for me, and speaks to their agential capacities as capable operators. I often had to use all my ingenuity to get my research agenda back on track.

That said, the research methods I employed to generate data with the children about their well-being provided differential opportunities for them to participate. My interviews with Kamran and Kenneth, for example, did not generate any data I felt able to use because they did not yet have enough of a command of spoken language for me to understand and appreciate what they were trying to say. Kenneth talked about “poo” most of the time and was absent from school on the last day of term so had not taken home an elicitation tool. He was the only respondent who did not talk about having/liking to play with friends, although when prompted, he did talk about liking to play with William. The main method of generating data with these children, i.e. through dialogue, albeit scaffolded with visual data, had excluded these children from fully participating in the study. I did not manage to observe these boys in the nursery unit.

3.4 ‘Being Done To’

My observations of the children in their ECE settings indicated that their rights are often not acknowledged by many of their adults. First, during a phonics session, Cristal struggled to complete the task as instructed by her teacher, which was to write the letter ‘d’ on her whiteboard. She wanted just to scribble, but the expectation was to write single letters. She could not do this. She kept looking at me and came over to show me what she had done. I interpreted this as a need for reassurance as she could also see that most other children were more or less able to write the single letter they were encouraged to write. As I put my arm round her to give her a hug and to tell her how well she had done, I could feel her physically relax. She seemed happy that I was pleased with her work. I wondered later if an earlier appeal for me to come and talk to her may have been an attempt to solicit the help of an adult stranger who she might have imagined may have been able to get her out of a place she disliked being, and a routine from which she appeared to have little choice of deviating.

Second, Marissa excelled at this same phonics activity. She not only wrote the letters instructed by her teacher, but also drew a daisy in the corner of her whiteboard to enhance her work. She was highly praised by her teacher for so doing and photographed with her exemplary work, which was to go in her 'learning journey' as evidence of her achievement. This setting, consistent with many others, separated children into 'ability' groups in their subsequent year of 'pre-school'. These exercises helped to support decisions about how children were to be later categorised. It appeared that perhaps Marissa was encouraged never to miss a learning opportunity: from enthusiastically participating in the phonics sessions; being an active respondent in the research project; diligently observing the school's values and being excited about the educational toys she received for her birthday. These may well have spoken volumes about her well-being. She clearly loved learning and excelled at it; but I also wondered, as she arrived at school tired and grumpy on the Monday morning, after her half-term trip abroad (possibly as she got home late from the airport), about children's right to be average as also indicative of their well-being.

Third, Marissa was not the only tired child in the school nursery unit that day. Alisha, one of three children whose parents both worked and were in receipt of FSM, attended school nursery full-time but also Before and After School Club. When After School Club staff collected children at the end of the school day, Alisha was sleeping on the floor in a corner of the nursery unit. She was woken up and shepherded out of the building. The After School Club she attended was popular with families with children of all ages up to 11 years. Yet it had nowhere for children to take a nap or to have some privacy or quiet. This may well have been an isolated incident but speaks to children's right to rest and sleep as intrinsic to their well-being.

4 Discussion

In keeping with the Capability Approach, children demonstrated that they were unique 'beings' and indefatigable in their quests ('doings') to pursue and explore their self-defined valued goals. They did not appear to be concerned about their 'becomings' and were either blissfully unaware of and/or resistant to the "cunning development programmes" (Sen 1999:11) adults (including me) had upon them, however well intentioned. So too, their well-being within their education settings appeared to depend, at least in part, on their abilities to focus on the relational inter-subjective possibilities available in the here-and-now. Most of all, children wanted to play (especially outside) and have fun and pursued these activities as valued 'ends' as well as (and not just) the 'means' to satisfy their abundant curiosities. Fun and spontaneity (so highly-prized by the children in this study) appeared, to some degree, to be in tension with the routinised approach to early education privileged in policy mandates as being essential to support children's current and future well-being.

The visual images created by the children and interviews with them indicated the importance of their relationships. Most of the time the children expressed pleasure with their education settings (and other neighbourhood, city and, in Marissa's case, international resources) for the opportunities they provided to make, play with and admonish their friends and family, in other words to 'belong'. In addition, children demonstrated that their knowledge and the well-being that might be derived from their pursuit

or innovation were often co-created. It was sometimes difficult to see how their learning could be individually assigned; it appeared to be richer because of their social and collective collaborations. It was difficult to discern who 'owned' the children's learning and criticality in a way that is required of Early Years Foundation stage curriculum measurement protocols that privilege assessments of individual children. This suggests that their joint enquiry (and well-being) was happening in the interstices of their friendships. The children who responded to this study appeared to want to relate as intrinsic to their well-being, with some of them making up the existence of other siblings. This is consistent with 'relational approaches' to well-being and suggests that child well-being (as it is currently conceived within policy discourses and measurement tools described in the introduction to this paper) may not just be under-theorised but also under-socialised, in its ascribing well-being as the property of individuals (White 2015), and thus potentially limiting of young children's (well) beings and doings.

Many of the children also demonstrated that they were capable social operators and proficient at 'expressing' their subjective well-being views. The conversation between Marissa and Aurora is one example of this. Marissa expressed her dislike of the bullying that was occurring in her classroom, and was willing and capable of drawing on her own and the setting's 'values' to raise her concern with an adult on behalf of herself and her friends. Aurora, on the other hand, made a different but no less spirited intervention, indicating that she could arrive at her own values which were, above all, to play and have fun. Other children too, and Renny in particular, demonstrated that they were able to use their agency to conduct their lives in the ways they valued within the institutional and personal constraints and opportunities they encountered. These findings, relating to the benefits for young children's well-being of recognising their agentic proficiency, are consistent with those of researchers working with older children (Fane et al. 2020) and in the field of the 'new sociology of childhood' (Palaolou 2014).

That said, the examples cited above are of children who were capable of verbalising their views. Children were, however, differentially capable of doing so. Kenneth and Kamran, for example, did not yet have enough of a grasp of the English language for my interviews of them to be able to fully capture their views, even though their mother tongues were English. Kenneth, because of an illness during the fieldwork period, was unable to provide visual data, and I did not manage to observe him in his education setting. Even if their language had been 'developed' enough for them to verbalise their views, the researcher might still not have been sufficiently sensitive enough to hear what they were trying to communicate, as many researchers (and educators) may be accustomed to operating from prevailing deficit social constructions of young children. Researchers too, are of course differentially capable of understanding what young children have to 'say'. In addition, and crucially, while some children were differentially capable of 'expressing' their views, some of them also appeared to be having their capabilities differentiated and therefore be and become differentially capable agents owing to structural constraints (and in particular in this area, poverty). These constraints intersected with other enabling and/or disabling social structures (such as gender and race). Some children, for example, had more power and command over desired resources than others. The boys ambushing the girls for the prized resources was suggestive of social structures enabling the boys' and constraining the girls' procurement of resources, and hence possibly their 'beings', 'doings' and 'becomings'. Some

children were better able to articulate and negotiate what they wanted: Renny and Marissa, for example, who were confident, social children. This is suggestive of other structural influences (in this instance perhaps their non-FSM status) on their ‘functionings’, differentially impacting on children’s capabilities, and potentially their well-being. This is not to suggest that children on FSM were under-confident and unsocial but, consistent with studies suggesting poverty does influence children’s educational outcomes (Brown 2015), it appeared to be having an impact on what some of the children in this study were able to negotiate and achieve, at least within this small study.

The school nursery class provided children whose families were in different socio-economic positions, with the opportunities to become friends (Marissa and Cristal, for example) but it was also likely they would be in separate ‘ability’ groups in their following school year, with Marissa in a ‘higher ability’ set than Cristal. It has been suggested that learning might benefit from friendships, which support children to develop the positive educational identities underpinning achievement (see for example Brown 2015:28). This study only allows for the possibility to consider the effect that grouping practices might have on the two girls, if any, if and when they reflect on the reason they might be separated, and the kinds of messages that they (and their parents) may learn to assimilate about their own ability and worth. These messages may potentially become constitutive of the identities and activities (i.e. beings and doings) of these children and shape their acceptance of the nature of the ‘well-being’ they may, at least in part, have been being prepared to accept.

Other children too appeared to be potential candidates for this differentiation. Kenneth for example, (on FSM) was communicative but could not yet speak as fluently as others and may also have been a strong contender for a ‘lower ability’ group. Amy (already grouped according to her family’s socio-economic status) could not yet speak English and so would likely ‘fail’ to meet her two-year development check, in spite of her other abilities. Unless she was able to make very rapid progress, the ‘ages and stages’ model (privileged by the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum and assessment practices for under fives in England), and consequent labelling, might misrecognise Amy’s skills.

This study’s findings suggest that reconceptualising childhood away from deficit social constructions and recognising young children as capable agents may have a positive impact on and benefit their well-beings, and not just those in low-income areas.

If young children are capable social operators (albeit differentially so, as are all humans), and increasingly it is appropriate (within contexts considered to be more pedagogically progressive) to treat them as such (Olsson 2019) the question arises as to why they are not more often consulted. Their exclusion from decisions about what supports and hinders their well-being may only partly be influenced by prevailing deficit social constructions. Young children may also be excluded from studies as researching with them, using methods employed in this study, is time-consuming and costly and thus potentially a limitation in times of resource-constraint. It was a limitation of this study too. Spending more time with the children may have enabled data generation with Kenneth and Kamran, for example, who were for the most part excluded from the study, albeit inadvertently.

Further, some commentators point out that there is little interest in listening to young children’s views (Palaiologou 2014), that it is convenient for adults to instrumentalise

children at ever younger ages in the service of national economic growth (Goldstein and Moss 2014:260). These commentators contend that efforts to ensure children are ‘school ready’ prefigure their ‘work readiness’, that improving children’s educational outcomes is seen as providing the means to increase their labour market participation and subsequently the country’s economic competitiveness in the growing global knowledge economy (Gorur 2014:60). Consequently, it is argued, children’s development prefigures national development and that childhood is thus colonised by adults (Burman 2019:13). As such children not only acquire educational ‘goods’ as means to the end of their well-being, but instead become the goods that provide the means to others’ ends and upon which prosperity, for some, may depend. Thus, it may be argued that, the growth in ‘child indicators’ aligns with this colonisation of early childhood, that the promotion of ‘indicators’ as ‘objective’ measures, under the guise of supporting children’s well-being, may limit it and, inadvertently or otherwise, corroborate this instrumentalisation of young children.

However, and crucially, the findings from this study suggest that supporting young children to have the right to express their subjective well-being views and to have these views respected, while beneficial to their sense of well-being and consistent with their agentic capacities, needs to be understood within the context of their social and material circumstances. In other words, promoting and respecting young children’s rights alone may establish rights hierarchies that may militate against their well-being because women are often their primary carers and their interests said to be interdependent (Burman 2008). As such, children’s well-being is predicated on the totality of their (and their families’ and neighbourhoods’) experiences because children are nested in their social and material environments. Children were, as the findings from this study suggest, not just differentially capable of participating but may have had their capabilities differentiated because of their social and material contexts. It is proposed here therefore that children are a “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2013) rather than the bounded individuals privileged by the measurement requirements of ECE policy and the other ‘child indicators’.

5 Conclusion

This paper adds to current knowledge in two ways. First, it makes an empirical contribution to the field of child well-being by presenting the well-being views of children aged two – four years, who live in an economically disadvantaged area in England. In so doing, it is consistent with, but also extends the current literature by suggesting that recognising young children’s agency is beneficial to their sense of well-being. However, children’s differential agency may well be being differentiated by, among other things, their experience of economic disadvantage. That said, the small sample size, and study in only one low-income area, are limitations of this study. Some of the concerns about the differentiation of young children’s capabilities would require a more thorough exploration, perhaps in a longitudinal or ethnographic study.

Second, this study makes a conceptual contribution to the field of child well-being by suggesting that children are ‘mutualities of being’ whose well-being is interdependent on their social, material, temporal and spatial contexts. It is consistent with those who claim that listening to children’s voices alone will not necessarily afford new insights

into their experiences or well-being, unless adults attend to the relational aspects of our beings, doings and becomings in ways that surface our interdependence (Te One et al. 2014:1056). Individualising children may limit their well-being. Perhaps more beneficial is to recognise young children as simultaneously ‘mutualities of being’ and individual units of moral concern, rather than the units of analysis currently privileged.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank Rosie Flewitt for her valuable comments and helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this article, and also to the two anonymous reviewers for theirs.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Amerijckx, G., & Humblet, P. C. (2014). Child well-being: what does it mean? *Children & Society*, 28, 404–415.
- Street, M. (forthcoming). *Theorising child well-being: toward a framework for analysing Early Childhood Education policy in England*.
- Bache, I. (2019). How does evidence matter? Understanding ‘what works’ for wellbeing. *Social Indicators Research*, 142, 1153–1173.
- Ben-Arieh, A. (2012). How do we measure and monitor the “state of our children”? Revisiting the topic in honour of Sheila B. Kamerman. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 569–575.
- Bou-Habib, P., & Olsaretti, S. (2015). Autonomy and Children’s well-being. In A. Bagattini & C. Macleod (Eds.), *The nature of children’s well-being: Theory and practice, children’s well-being: Indicators and research* (Vol. 9, pp. 15–34). Springer.
- Bradwell, M. (2019). Voice, views and the UNCRC Articles 12 and 13. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 17(4), 423–433.
- Brown, C. (2015). *Educational binds of poverty: The lives of school children*. London: Routledge.
- Burman, E. (2008). Beyond ‘women vs. children’ or ‘women and children’: engendering childhood and reformulating motherhood. *International Journal of Children’s Rights*, 16, 177–194.
- Burman, E. (2019). Child as method: implications for decolonising educational research. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 28(1), 4–26.
- Camfield, L., Streuli, N., & Woodhead, M. (2009). What’s the use of ‘well-being’ in contexts of child poverty? Approaches to research, monitoring and children’s participation. *International Journal of Children’s Rights*, 17, 65–109.
- Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2001). *Listening to young children: The mosaic approach*. London: National Children’s Board for Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Crivello, G., Camfield, L., & Woodhead, M. (2009). How can children tell us about their wellbeing? Exploring the potential of participatory research approaches within young lives. *Social Indicators Research*, 90, 51–72.
- Department for Education. (2017). *Statutory framework for the early Years Foundation stage*. London: HMSO.
- Fane, J., MacDougall, C., Redmond, G., Jovanovic, J., & Ward, P. (2016). Young children’s health and wellbeing across the transition to school: a critical interpretive synthesis. *Children Australia*, 41(2), 126–140.
- Fane, J., MacDougall, C., Jovanovic, J., Redmond, G., & Gibbs, L. (2020). Preschool aged children’s accounts of their own wellbeing: are current wellbeing indicators applicable to young children? *Child Indicators Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-020-09735-7>.

- Fattore, T., Mason, J., & Watson, E. (2012). Locating the child centrally as subject in research: towards a child interpretation of well-being. *Child Indicators Research*, 5, 423–435.
- Fattore, T., Fegter, S., & Hunner-Kreisel, C. (2019). Children's understandings of wellbeing in global and local contexts: theoretical and methodological considerations for a multidimensional qualitative study. *Child Indicators Research*, 12, 385–407.
- Fram, S. M. (2013). The constant comparative analysis method outside of grounded theory. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(1), 1–25.
- Geertz, C. (1983). From the native's point of view: On the nature of anthropological knowledge. In C. Geertz (Ed.), *Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology* (pp. 55–70). New York: Basic Books pp.
- Goldstein, H., & Moss, G. (2014). Knowledge and numbers in education. *Comparative Education*, 50(3), 259–265.
- Gorur, R. (2014). Towards a sociology of measurement in education policy. *European Educational Research Journal*, 13(1), 58–72.
- Hreinsdottir, A. M., & Davidsdottir, S. (2012). Deliberative democratic evaluation in preschools. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 56(5), 519–537.
- Joshi, P., Wallace, E., & Williams, L. (2015). *Young childrens' and families' experiences of services aimed at reducing the impact of low-income: Participation work with children and families*. London: Office of the Children's Commissioner.
- Lam, L., & Comay, J. (2020). Using a story completion task to elicit young children's subjective well-being at school. *Child Indicators Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-020-09745-5>.
- Lancaster, Y. P. (2003). *Promoting listening to young children: The reader*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Larsen, R. M., & Stanek, H. A. (2015). Young children and their conduct of everyday life. *Nordic Psychology*, 67(3), 195–209.
- Macleod, C. (2015). Agency, authority and the vulnerability of children. In A. Bagattini & C. Macleod (Eds.), *The nature of children's well-being: Theory and practice, children's well-being: Indicators and research* (Vol. 9, pp. 53–64). Springer.
- Mayall, B., & Oakley, A. (2018). Foreword. In R. Rosen & K. Twamley (Eds.), *Feminism and the politics of childhood: Friends or foes?* (pp. ix–xi). London: UCL Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating capabilities: The human development approach*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- OECD (n.d.) International early learning and child well-being study <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.htm>. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- Olsson, A. (2019). Banning the “incompetent child” in pedagogical documentation and discourse. In V. Margrain & A. Lofdahl Hultman (Eds.), *Challenging democracy in early childhood education: Engagement in changing global contexts, international perspectives on early childhood education and development, ebook* (pp. 109–122). Springer.
- Palaiologou, I. (2014). ‘Do we hear what children want to say?’ Ethical praxis when choosing research tools with children under five. *Early Child Development and Care*, 184(5), 689–705.
- Perakyla, A., & Ruusuvuori, J. (2011). Analysing talk and text. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (Fourth ed., pp. 529–544). London: Sage.
- Sahlins, M. (2013). *What kinship is – And is not*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sen, A. K. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Social Mobility Commission. (2017). *State of the nation 2017: Social mobility in Great Britain*. London: HMSO.
- Te One, S., Blaikie, R., Egan-Bitrán, M., & Henley, Z. (2014). You can ask me if you really want to know what I think. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 46(9), 1052–1068.
- The Children's Society (2017) *The Good Childhood Report 2017*. Available at: https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/the-good-childhood-report-2017_full-report_0.pdf. Accessed 7 Sept 2017.
- UNICEF (1989) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Available at: http://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_united_nations_convention_on_the_rights_of_the_child.pdf. Accessed 12 Jan 2019.
- White, S. C. (2015). *Relational wellbeing: A theoretical and operational approach*. Centre for development Studies: University of Bath.