Children's Well-Being: Indicators and Research 22

Patricia McNamara
Carme Montserrat
Sarah Wise *Editors*

Education in Out-of-Home Care

International Perspectives on Policy, Practice and Research

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Volume 22

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For Emeritus Professor Anthony (Tony) Maluccio (1932–2019) who has always 'dreamed large'; and for the children growing up in out-of-home care whose wellbeing has been his lifelong passion. It is our hope that this volume contributes to higher aspirations, better learning experiences and improved educational outcomes for children and young people in care internationally

Foreword

What can I add to the quotation from the Nobel Laureate, Malala Yousefai, which the editors rightly place at the head of this volume? Longitudinal studies and the testimony of generations of care-experienced authors show that education is the key to social mobility and escape from biographical disadvantage. The vast majority of children and young people in and leaving out-of-home care (OHC) come from stigmatized groups and families with multiple problems; social mobility is not just desirable for them but essential if they are to flourish and avoid repeating the life course of their parents. Why then has it been so difficult to convince those responsible for their care that every possible effort should be made to give them the best educational opportunities and bridge the persistent gap between their level of attainment and that of those who grow up in their birth families?

The nine countries represented in this book differ widely in their welfare, education and social care regimes and yet for children in foster or group residential care, the same issues arise again and again. All countries seem to go through a similar sequence: those in this volume are at different points along the road. The first step is to recognise the low educational attainment of children in OHC as a remediable social problem. Next, it needs to be quantified. Until there is statistical evidence of the failure of the care system to educate the children for whom it has assumed parental responsibility, there will be no momentum for change. After that it is necessary to identify the systemic barriers to educational success for children in care and mobilize politicians and legislators to overcome them. But statistics can only take us so far. To understand why it is very hard for young people who grow up away from home to steer a successful pathway through school and college, we need to hear from those who have done so against the odds. That is why it is so valuable that the editors have brought together evidence from leading researchers with the autobiographical accounts in Chapters 18 and 19.

England was one of the first countries to compare national data on the educational attainment of children in care with that of the general population, but for many years the published statistics were prefaced by anodyne statements such as 'children in care *tend* to do less well than others'. The evidence in this book, especially in Part I, is inescapable. Almost all children and young people in care do *much*

less well than others. Unsurprisingly, those who come into care earlier and stay longer achieve better results than those who remain in abusive and neglectful homes, but relative to all children, most of them fall progressively behind (Chapter 4) and very few manage to access college or university, even those who have the ability and motivation to do so.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, referred to by several contributors, shows that effective intervention needs to happen at all his different levels. Policy and legal initiatives are essential alongside a holistic approach to the care and education of individual children. For example, attendance at high-quality early childhood care and education settings is known to benefit the most disadvantaged children, but it takes government action to overcome the financial and practical obstacles to their attendance (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Young people whose educational progress has been delayed by placement and school changes usually need a protective home environment for longer than others, yet many care systems still throw them out to cope on their own at 18. A change in the law to enable them to stay in their care setting up to 21 or beyond may do more to improve their educational opportunities than any remedial program pitched at the individual level (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007). Wilson, Harvey, Goodwin-Burns and Humphries in Chapter 15 show how children in OHC are excluded from higher performing schools by an elitist education system which sets schools to compete with each other on the basis of examination and test results. In England, a change in the law obliged schools to provide places for children in care even if they were technically full, greatly strengthening the hand of their advocate, the Virtual School Head (Jackson, 2015, and see Chapter 10). Adding a tick box to the university application form to enable universities to offer targeted financial tutoring and emotional support to students with a care background made them visible for the first time and inspired new widening access initiatives from top universities (Jackson, Ajayi & Quigley, 2005; University of Oxford, 2019).

To access tertiary education from a care placement, still more to go on to earn a PhD, is an exceptional achievement. As the chapters by Jurczyszyn and Michell (Chapter 17) and Matheson (Chapter 18) show, it can be done, though not without overcoming massive obstacles. Low expectations of teachers and social workers are among the many barriers faced by children in OHC: how often are they encouraged in their primary school years to think of university as their long-term goal, something taken for granted in middle class homes?

In addition, despite the efforts of contributors to this book, some of them over many, many years, there are significant gaps in our knowledge. For instance, although several chapters point to the instability of out-of-home placements as a major impediment to children's educational progress (Jackson and Thomas, 2001), there is still almost no quality research on the subject. Advances in neurophysiology tell us that many of the problems experienced by children in OHC go back to the earliest months of life. In most countries, young children are looked after in family foster care, but what do we know about the people who care for them? The crucial

educational role of foster carers has not yet attracted anything like the research attention it deserves (Jackson and Hollingworth, 2017).

This is an enormously important book, the very first from an international perspective to put education right at the centre for children and young people in OHC, and to cover the whole age range from early childhood to tertiary education. It does not hesitate to expose the systemic weaknesses in most of our care systems which at present blight the chances of so many young people. But almost all the authors offer a message of hope, with examples of many positively evaluated initiatives. As Pecora and his colleagues conclude (Chapter 2), 'Devoting resources to improving education outcomes for these children is an investment in their improved life outcomes that in turn strengthens our communities, economy and society', or in the words of the Scottish Government, 'We can and must do better'.

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Patricia McNamara, PhD, is qualified and experienced in secondary teaching, social work and family therapy. Patricia was a teaching and research academic in the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at La Trobe University's Melbourne Campus for many years. She is currently a Senior Fellow (Hon) in Social Work at the University of Melbourne. Her research interests are education within and post out-of-home care and therapeutic residential care. Patricia co-led a La Trobe University national scoping study of transitions from out-of-home care to university. She also managed a collaborative funding application which gave rise to the *Raising Expectations* program. This program is increasing participation in and support for successful outcomes from university for care leavers. Patricia has been a foundation Board Member of the International Association for Outcome-Based Evaluation and Research in Family and Children's Services (ia*OBER*fcs). She is also active in the National Therapeutic Residential Care Alliance – Australia (NTRCA) and the International Therapeutic Residential Care Work Group (ITRCWG). She is a member of the editorial board for *Residential Treatment for Children and Youth.*

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Sarah Wise, PhD, is a developmental researcher with many years of research, policy and service innovation experience covering a wide range of issues relating to children, parents and families. Her special interest areas are early childhood development, out-of-home care, local area responses and the development of social policy and practice with evidence. Sarah currently holds an appointment within the University of Melbourne's Department of Social Work. She was formerly the inaugural Good Childhood Fellow at Berry Street Childhood Institute. Sarah has worked to integrate academic research into social systems and programs designed to support vulnerable children. She has attracted research funding from a range of government and non-government schemes and has an extensive record of publications relevant to parenting, early childhood services, social work and child development. Sarah's research has influenced policy and practice decision- making within the child and family service system; her work has been directly linked to program innovation and new resources to improve the educational outcomes of children and young people in foster care and residential care.

Chapter 1
Introduction

Patricia McNamara, Carme Montserrat, and Sarah Wise

There are many problems, but I think there is a solution to all these problems; it's just one, and it's education.
Malala Yousafzai

This book aims to assist those working with children and young people in out-of-home care (OHC), or on their behalf. Its purpose is to lift educational aspirations, expectations and outcomes of this cohort of students by improving the knowledge base within this helping domain. The volume offers empirical insights and best practice examples of teaching and learning with children and young people in care. The content applies to formal learning settings, the home (foster care, kinship care, residential care and other OHC settings) as well as within the community. Across Europe, young people with a care background have been found to be around five times less likely to attend tertiary education than those who have not been in care (Jackson & Cameron, 2014). Similarly, very few care-leavers make the transition to university in Australia and New Zealand (Matheson, 2016; McNamara, Harvey, & Andrewartha, 2019). Whilst relatively more students with a care background in the US enter tertiary programs, many do not manage to graduate (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). It is widely acknowledged that poor education outcomes, from early childhood onwards, can undermine lifelong opportunities, health and wellbeing (McNamara et al., 2019; Wise, 2016a, 2016b). Such outcomes also often impact negatively on the social sphere, constraining long-term personal development, including community inclusion and active citizenship (Garner, Forkey, & Szilagyi, 2015). Growing international concern has led to the development of approaches that

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address inequities faced by young people in care, including inequality of opportunities in education (Courtney & Hook, 2017; Jackson, Ajayi, & Quigley, 2005; Mendes & Snow, 2016; Montserrat & Casas, 2017; Montserrat & Casas, 2014).

This volume profiles some of the most important current initiatives that aim to narrow education achievement gaps between children in care (or young people with a care background) and their peers. It offers a range of responses to challenges encountered in achieving good education outcomes, from childhood to adulthood and from the micro to the macrosystems level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Initiatives presented herein include formal education interventions as well as informal psycho-socio-emotional learning approaches, much of which families are delegated to manage on behalf of society. In that context Plato's definition of education retains contemporary resonance:

> *Education is the constraining and directing of youth towards that right reason, which the law affirms, and which the experience of the best of our elders has agreed to be truly right.*
>
> Plato (1872 translation). "Laws. Appendix: Lesser Hippias. First Alcibiades. Menexenus. Index of persons and places", p.189

Internationally, contemporary formal and informal education are most often expected to produce young people who are *'successful learners, confident and creative individuals, active and informed citizens'* (Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians, 2008).

We embrace a broad-based definition of OHC:

> Out-of-home care is the care of children….who are unable to live with their primary caregivers. It involves the placement of a child with alternate caregivers on a short- or long-term basis (Department of Human Services, Victoria, Australia, 2007). Out-of-home care can be arranged either informally or formally. Informal care refers to arrangements made without intervention by statutory authorities or courts, and formal care (generally) follows a child protection intervention (either by voluntary agreement or a care and protection court order), most commonly due to cases of abuse, neglect or family violence (Campo & Commerford, 2016).

OHC takes a variety of forms; kinship care, foster care, residential care and family group homes are some of the most common types. Internationally, children and young people in care present a remarkably similar education profile. They often have lower than average educational performance when entering child protection services as the result of adversities experienced prior to entering care. These include poverty, maltreatment and family dysfunction; but many children also experience risks to education failure after entering care. Instability in education and care placements especially, can undermine learning outcomes during care and create barriers to education post-care (AIHW, 2015).

Over the past two decades, evidence has converged from multiple disciplines including neuroscience, education, behavioural science, public health, the social sciences, and medicine on the effects of early trauma on the developing brain (Dowd, 2017). Stress that is frequent and/or prolonged in early childhood creates "toxic stress" that can negatively impact development of socio-behavioural skills and cognitive-linguistic capacities in the early years and across the lifespan (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2019).

Across the world, rates of admission to OHC are high during infancy and early childhood, because children are at their most vulnerable. Attachment disruption, neglect and abuse are common sources of toxic stress that affect the biological and developmental functioning of children in care (Perry, 2009; Schore, 2005; Van der Kolk, 2013). It has long been accepted that secure attachment relationships early in life are central to long-term psychosocial wellbeing (Bowlby, 1965; Bowlby, 1982; Erikson, 1950; Freud & Burlingham, 1944). With advances in neuroscience, it is now understood that lack of, or disruption to, healthy attachment relationships can impair development of the orbitoprefrontal cortex, resulting in problems with self-regulation and auto-regulation in learning situations. This often undermines capacity for sustained concentration and focus along with positive engagement with teachers and peers (Downey, 2012, 2007).

Factors during pregnancy also have considerable impact on the developing brain. It is common for children in care to experience adverse impacts on cognition and learning, as well as socioemotional regulation because their mother was anxious, stressed or depressed and/or used alcohol and drugs during pregnancy (Bruce, Fisher, Pears, & Levine, 2009; Davis, Gagnier, Moore, & Todorow, 2013; McLean & McDougall, 2014; Perry, 2001). The importance of intervention early in life to address adverse impacts of attachment disruption and other toxic stressors as well as exposures in utero has been consistently stressed by clinicians and researchers (Perry, 2009; Van der Kolk, 2013).

Children are at their most vulnerable in infancy and early childhood, but also their most adaptable. The early years are when the brain has greatest plasticity and capacity for change (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2019). Early interventions that aim to redress adversely impacted areas of brain development during the very early years and at the pre-school stage can prove highly protective and have the potential to impact learning outcomes in the short and longer term. Speech therapy which addresses delayed and/or impaired linguistic development is but one example (Frederico et al., 2014; Snow & Powell, 2012; Snow, Timms, Lum, & Powell, 2019). However, without effective intervention, by the time a child in care starts primary school, toxic stress experienced early in life will have weakened the 'architecture of the developing brain', compromising executive function and self-regulation skills in the classroom (Downey, 2012, 2007).

In the early primary school years, under-developed executive function creates substantial challenges for a child in care to develop foundational formal learning skills in reading, writing and mathematics as well as informal socio-emotional skills. There is growing evidence, however, that one-on-one interventions at this point, such as tutoring and mentoring with literacy and numeracy can be helpful (Flynn, Marquis, Parquet, Peeke, & Aubrey, 2012; Forsman & Vinnerlung, 2012), especially when delivered in therapeutic environments, where the child experiences congruence at home and at school; a 'learning placement and a caring school' (Cameron, Jackson, & Connelly, 2015).

Children in care often do not receive the remedial help they need and enter high school with levels of formal and informal learning well behind their mainstream

peers (AIHW, 2015; Cameron, Jackson, & Connelly, 2015; McNamara, 2016; Courtney & Hook, 2017). Deficits in literacy can be especially limiting during secondary education, as standard learning objectives usually require that large amounts of text are processed and analysed. Mathematics too, often assumes a steeper learning curve at this point, requiring more sophisticated executive functioning. When the gap between capacity and set learning tasks becomes too great, many students from care backgrounds who are experiencing learning difficulties, such as dyslexia and dyscalculia, disengage from classroom activities (Downey, 2012, 2007; McNamara, 2016). Without intensive intervention, this gap frequently widens by adulthood. Behaviour problems associated with under-developed self-regulation capacity can also become more profound in adolescence, further alienating the young person from effective learning and disrupting classroom dynamics (Downey, 2012, 2007). The impacts of disengagement can be compounded when young people experiencing similar unaddressed learning struggles are placed in together, in class and in care. Too often, this leads to young people being excluded from school for periods of time or even permanently (Association of Children's Welfare Agencies, NSW, ACWA, 2017). When social and academic alienation become overwhelming, many young people in care discontinue formal schooling prior to completion of their secondary education. Should this coincide with leaving care without planful support there can be serious adverse consequences in terms of lifelong wellbeing. Once again, creative and inclusive strategies, employed at home and at school can create good education and bio-psycho-social outcomes at this stage of development. There is also evidence that paid and unpaid work experience can promote social inclusion and build life skills and competencies during the high school years (Gilligan, 2008).

In a context of learning gaps and other socio-emotional difficulties, it is unsurprising that young people from care backgrounds across the western world do not transition to tertiary education at the same rate as their peers. Graduation from tertiary education can be even less achievable it seems (Courtney & Hook, 2017; Jackson et al., 2005; Jurczyszyn, 2016; Matheson, 2016; McNamara et al., 2019; Montserrat & Casas, 2014; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). When young people from care do enter tertiary education, they are frequently limited by their neurodevelopmental profile and poor preparation in terms of academic skill development (often the result of a poor-quality secondary education). Financial, housing and mental health difficulties can also present serious obstacles (Matheson, 2016; McNamara et al., 2019). Young people entering tertiary education from care clearly benefit from creative equity and access interventions such as those employed by the Buttle Foundation in the United Kingdom (Jackson et al., 2005; Jackson & Cameron, 2012, 2014) and the Chafee Educational and Training Voucher Program (ETV) in the United States (Courtney, 2009; Okpych & Courtney, 2018). In Australia also, the *Raising Expectations* program is producing positive outcomes (Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2019).

Notwithstanding neurodevelopmental and other complex psycho-social challenges including poverty related issues and mental health problems, children and young people in care can and do display extraordinary resilience as learners (Harvard

Center on the Developing Child, 2019). There are clearly a range of bio-psycho-social elements contributing to this (Heft, 2013; McNamara, 2016). Concomitantly, it is increasingly acknowledged that to make a real difference in the lives of disenfranchised children and families, a more holistic or 'joined-up' response is needed, one that targets multiple interacting factors impacting education outcomes operating at different levels of the eco-developmental system (Cameron, Jackson, & Connelly, 2015; Heft, 2013; Garner et al., 2015, p. 495). An ecological-developmental lens reveals the complex transactions between family, education, OHC, and other key systems and the developing child. It is unsurprising that Bronfenbrenner's model has been applied effectively in this domain over some decades (Anderson, 1983; Arthur-Kelly, Lyons, Butterfield, & Gordon, 2003; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elias & Dilworth, 2003; Heft, 2013; McNamara, 2005, 2016).

It is clearly vital for educators to intervene therapeutically and for carers to actively promote learning (Cameron, Jackson, & Connelly, 2015). Nurturing, safe and supportive relationships with and around the child at home and at school can also contribute to good learning outcomes. Home based tutoring by literacy and numeracy trained foster carers and other mentors is a good example of this (Cameron, Jackson, & Connelly, 2015; Flynn et al., 2012). Close collaboration and communication between home, school, community-based welfare and other service sectors is also critical to success, such as well-functioning Care Teams (McNamara, 2016). Processes in OHC services and in other sectors that do not involve.

OHC of children and young people can have negative impacts. A placement change determined at a local child welfare case planning meeting, for example, may be swiftly followed by a change of school, potentially disrupting the child's secure learning base. At the broad macrosystems level, the values and beliefs expressed though welfare and education institutions are especially important. A contemporary example of this is the recent policy shift on the part of most Australian state governments to raising the statutory age for leaving foster care in Australia from 18 years to 21 years. This move to an increased level of socio-emotional, housing and financial support follows similar initiatives in the UK, the US, Canada and New Zealand; the approach has evidenced-based potential to facilitate better learning outcomes at high school and in tertiary education (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). That positive change has come about through focused long-term lobbying of governments at state and federal levels by the welfare and education sectors (e.g., the *Home Stretch Campaign*, http://thehomestretch.org.au/).

This volume manifests the importance of viewing educational outcomes as a product of a complex array of factors operating across various developmental levels and ecological subsystems. That perspective places the child at the centre and identifies key issues of policy, practice and research relating to education in OHC. It addresses issues that span child welfare and education systems to produce a strong corpus of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Readers will find this knowledge relevant across the developmental continuum. The book critically engages with and advances conceptual understanding of the teaching and learning relationship as a powerful therapeutic medium that can assist in healing trauma and addressing attachment disruption at home, at preschool, in school and in institutions of higher

learning (Downey, 2012, 2007; Jackson et al., 2005; Cameron, Jackson, & Connelly, 2015). We identify and explore contemporary opportunities and constraints operating in both caregiving and education sectors, and at the interface between them, during and post out-of-home care. There is existing evidence that challenges (including frequent change of school, insufficient funding to address learning difficulties and lack of identification of those in care/post-care as an equity cohort) too often create insurmountable barriers, resulting in education disengagement and poor education outcomes (Harvey, McNamara, & Andrewartha, 2016; Jackson & Cameron, 2012, 2014; McNamara, 2016; McNamara et al., 2019; Montserrat and Casas, 2014, 2017; Wise, 2016a, 2016b; David & Wise, 2016). Strategies have been developed and evaluated internationally which can address such challenges. Examples are presented from the nine countries represented in the book; these always emphasise the relevant developmental context for specific interventions.

The volume offers empirical insights and best practice examples of teaching and learning with children and young people in care; in formal learning settings, at home (in foster care, kinship care, residential care and other OHC settings) as well as in the community. It brings together international research from different disciplines (education, social work, psychology, social care and childhood and youth studies) across the developmental continuum. This is the first book to focus on education in care internationally, from early childhood to tertiary education, with an interdisciplinary lens. It starts to fill an international knowledge gap in relation to how good learning experiences can enrich and add enjoyment to the lives of children and young people in care as they grow and develop. Learning can also have therapeutic benefit in healing trauma and attachment disruption associated with abuse and neglect (Cameron, Jackson, & Connelly, 2015). There is strong evidence that positive experiences of learning in childhood and adolescence can facilitate successful education outcomes which, in turn, support childhood and lifelong well-being. Potentially the latter can manifest across the domains of work, further study, relationships, finance, community engagement and active citizenship, cultural enrichment and spirituality, health and mental health (Mendes & Snow, 2016).

Importantly too, the book generates new insights into the development and incorporation of diverse research, policy and practice methods in the context of education in OHC, demonstrating how innovative contemporary methods are applied by researchers internationally. This will potentially lead to much needed fresh initiatives, including cross national research, to address knowledge gaps in this under-investigated and under-resourced domain. The lived experience of children and young people and their rights as learners especially, have yet to be adequately explored. This book clearly identifies both opportunities and challenges encountered by young people in care and post care on their learning journeys. It gives voice to authors who have overcome enormous barriers to succeed educationally. That content enriches a limited existing archive of narratives from care leavers who have successfully completed further education (Jurczyszyn, 2016; Mendes, Michell & Wilson, 2014; Michell, 2012).

Education of children and young people in OHC is too often overshadowed by the urgent imperatives of removal from harm and placement in stable care, along

with the growing awareness of a need to address mental health concerns. Research, policy and practice presented in this book supports privileging of education consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). A child rights agenda demands that education of children and young people in care must become a higher priority in policy planning, program development and practice internationally.

Acknowledgements The Editors wish to acknowledge the expertise, generosity and commitment of our Chapter authors. Their contributions manifest best practice in research, policy and programmatic development internationally. We also express our gratitude to the children, young people and families around the world, and the professionals working with them, who have made this volume possible.

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Part I
Quantitative Evidence

It is widely recognized that lack of a convincing evidence base has constituted a major barrier to policy change and programmatic development targeting improved education experience and outcomes for children and young people in care. Large scale studies that clearly differentiate the educational aspirations, opportunities, experience and outcomes of this cohort from those of children growing up in mainstream society were long overdue. Over the past decade, national and cross-national initiatives especially, have begun to address this knowledge gap through important quantitative research. Evidence forthcoming has contributed to funding of new and established initiatives to support education of children and young people in care internationally.

Contributors to this part are based in Spain, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. They have all played important roles in building a stronger evidence base in this arena. Whilst there is clearly need for further research, the studies presented here provide a systemic frame of reference for the developmentally staged Parts of the book which follow.

Chapter 2
The Importance of School from an International Perspective: What Do Children in General and Children in Vulnerable Situations Say?

Carme Montserrat, Ferran Casas, and Joan Llosada-Gistau

2.1 Introduction

The role education plays in constructing, reproducing and legitimising social inequality has been widely studied for many years. At the same time, the potential of education to promote social mobility, development and equal opportunities and therefore, its role as a driving force for social change, has also been a subject of study. Contributing to this debate, authors such as Bonal (2016) have indicated the reason why many education policies fail to resolve the issue of inequality, arguing that these policies are not often linked to economic development and poverty reduction. On a global scale, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) showed that governments have set out to tackle poverty while ignoring inequality. They demonstrated that achieving greater academic success and offering increased opportunities for social mobility, among other indicators of social well-being, were more difficult to achieve in countries where differences between rich and poor were greater.

Tarabini and Bonal (2016) focused their studies on two key concepts: the right to education, understood not merely as access to compulsory education, and academic success for all students. On this basis, they pointed out not only the importance of education equality from a perspective of social justice (implementing policies to improve the situation of the more disadvantaged), but also its impact on the overall effectiveness of education systems.

These two concepts have not always been given priority in education policies. Carnoy (2016) explained global tendencies in education systems, especially the impact that international tests, such as PISA, is having on national education policies, and the increase in the number of countries wishing to participate in them. As a result, many countries are making an effort to identify "common" elements in

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education systems, highlighting issues like assessment, accountability, greater use of ICT, and the increased privatisation of schooling, especially in developing countries (Carnoy 2016, 39). Yet, the author also pointed out the key role that state governments can play in regulating or neutralising these global trends given that it is precisely in their power to provide greater access to education, improve the quality of education for everyone and generate knowledge more effectively and fairly.

Accordingly, the 2030 Agenda (OECD 2017) recognised that great progress had been made to increase access to basic education and improve infrastructures (see the World Bank World Development Report 2018). However, the Agenda also recognised that enhancing learning outcomes and equity (including the gender gap) should be strongly advocated for the future.

Yet, what do children think about all of this? Their perspective (which is clearly not the same as mere mathematics competence test results) is not usually the focus of this debate and yet it should be included to provide a more comprehensive approach to the phenomenon. What is child well-being in the different geographical and social contexts we are referring to? What role does school play in children's lives? Report Card 13, with data from 13 EU and OECD countries (UNICEF 2016), provides a reference point, reporting stagnation and even a decline in the relative position of children with lower levels of income and well-being during the economic recession (as in Spain, for example). The gap between those occupying the highest and lowest positions has increased, especially in the economic domain and in life satisfaction (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children – HBSC). The HBSC have concluded that the greater the inequality in a country, the poorer and less happy a cohort of its children will be, and add that children live better where everyone is treated more fairly. In this regard, the study conducted by Montserrat, Casas, and Moura (2015) showed that children who perceived their family as less, or far less, well-off than other families in their environment had much lower levels of subjective well-being than the average. In contrast, children who reported never being concerned about their family's finances displayed greater subjective well-being (SWB).

These examples show how important it is to systematically listen to children worldwide and focus on the issues that directly affect their lives. One international study that does just this is the Children's Worlds Project (www.isciweb.org), which collects representative samples of the views of 8–12 year-old children from very different countries. Results obtained so far, such as the Special Issue of *Children and Youth Services Review* edited by Ben-Arieh, Rees, and Dinisman (2017) or a Special Section of *Child Development*, edited by Casas (2018) are available for consultation.

Establishing a dialogue with children is also precisely what helps to enhance research instruments. For example, when we ask children about school, what are we actually asking them about? Previous studies on the link between subjective well-being and school have suggested that school encompasses two worlds for children. First, it may refer to the relational aspects that take place at school (mostly focusing on relationships with class mates), but it can also refer to more academic aspects reflected in their school experience, their marks, their relationship with teachers or the things they learn (see Casas & González 2017).

Apart from access to education mentioned above, the school situation of vulnerable children is still a long way from complying with criteria of equity and effectiveness. This is borne out by compilations of studies, such as the one on children in care (Jackson & Cameron 2014). Yet, few studies have been conducted on the SWB of children in care in relation to their school situation (Llosada-Gistau, Casas, & Montserrat 2017). The influence of school-related aspects on well-being, which we address next, has not been studied in depth.

2.2 Research Questions

In this chapter we have aimed to go beyond the socioeconomic data, results obtained in competency assessment tests, and what the experts say. Children in care and children in the general population were asked directly what importance they attached to going to school and the impact it had on their subjective well-being in different contexts. Our objective was threefold:

- To gauge the importance that going to school has for children from 18 different countries.
- To analyse the impact of different school-related aspects on children's SWB: if they liked going to school; level of satisfaction with their school experience, marks, and relationships with classmates; if they felt listened to and treated fairly by teachers, and their perceptions of safety and bullying.
- To analyse these aspects in both the in-care and general population of the same age (12 years old) and in the same country (Spain).

2.3 Method

The results have been drawn from two research projects conducted with different child populations. Both projects implemented quantitative data collection. They were aimed at evaluating SWB in children of the same age, and the same instrument was used. Thus, a comparative analysis could be made.

2.3.1 Sample

First, we analysed the second wave of data from the Children's Worlds Project with representative samples from 18 countries reflecting different cultural contexts and economic situations, with a pooled sample of 21,508 12-year-old children. The sample was drawn from the entire country in ten of the countries listed, while in the other eight (marked with an asterisk in Table 2.1) the survey only covered a specific region.

Table 2.1 Independent variables

Independent variables	Values
I like going to school	I do not agree/Agree a little/Agree somewhat/Agree a lot/Totally agree (1–5 scale)
I feel safe at school	
Friends are nice to me	
Teachers listen to me	
My teachers treat me fairly	
Satisfaction with school marks	0–10 scale rescaled to: 0–4 Not at all satisfied/5–8 Satisfied/9–10 Totally satisfied
Satisfaction with school experience	
Satisfaction with teachers	
Satisfaction with classmates	
Peers hit me	Never/Once/two or 3 times/More than 3 times
Left out by other children in my class	

Moreover, data corresponding to children in care of the same age were also analysed within the framework of Catalonia (Spain). In this study, 58% of the children in out-ofhome placement were in residential care, 36% in kinship care and 6% in non-kinship care (Llosada-Gistau et al. 2017). The response rate was 58% (N = 669) and characteristics regarding gender, age and country of origin were similar to the total children-in-care population.

2.3.2 Instruments

The self-administered questionnaire included different psychometric scales for measuring SWB, among which the Personal Well-being Index – School Children (PWI-SC) (Cummins & Lau 2005) was used in this chapter as an indicator for evaluating children's SWB not only in the 18 countries but also among the in-care population in Catalonia (Spain). The response scale for each item ranged from 0 to 10 points and only extreme values were labelled. The same questionnaire was administered to children in care with some adjustments (Llosada-Gistau et al. 2017).

The domains measured by the PWI-SC scale were: satisfaction with your health, how secure you feel, the opportunities you have in life, the things you have, your relationships in general, doing things away from your home, and your preparation for the future. The independent variables related to the school environment were as follows (Table 2.1).

2.3.3 Data Analysis

The variable *I like going to school* (1–5 scale) was used to study the importance of going to school for children. A table was constructed to compare the proportion of children from each country in either of the two extreme categories (*I do not agree*;

Totally agree). An analysis was also made based on the position occupied by each country in the World Bank Country Groups by Income ranking, measured using gross national income (GNI) per capita (https://data.worldbank.org/).

Subsequently, we analysed the impact of the different school-related variables on children's SWB by performing ANOVA to compare the mean scores for the PWI-SC. The tables show the mean scores for the two extreme values of each variable (*I do not agree* and *Totally agree* on the 1–5 scale, and to *Not at all satisfied* and *Totally satisfied* on the 11-point scale). The global value was the result of the aggregation of the different items and the rescaling of scores to a 0–100-point scale.

Finally, the importance of school and the impact of the independent school-related variables on the PWI-SC for the general population and for children in care were compared, using the same statistical analysis.

2.3.4 Procedure and Ethical Issues

In each country the sampling units were schools and the sampling design was stratified random sampling by clusters. The questionnaire was administered in the classroom. In contrast, the questionnaires administered to children in care were sent by post to each of the participants in a sealed envelope to be returned, containing a letter encouraging them to participate with an explanation of the study. The Project received support from the Catalan Government.

The questionnaire contained an explanatory introduction and included ethical considerations, such as the right to participate voluntarily, or the right not to answer questions if the respondent did not wish to. It was anonymous and data confidentiality was guaranteed.

2.4 Findings

Results based on the defined objectives are set out below.

2.4.1 The Importance of Going to School for Children from 18 Different Countries

In response to the statement *I like going to school*, the greatest proportion of children who responded *Totally agree* were from low-income economies, such as Ethiopia and Nepal (Table 2.2). Following this trend, the proportion of children from upper-middle income economies was lower, and among countries ranked as high-income economies, the majority of children did not agree with this statement.