



Letter to the Editor

Are Filipino Children Well?

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The well-being of children is something that many individuals aspire to. In occupational therapy, well-being is one of the ultimate goals of the therapeutic process, in addition to health and participation in life.¹ However, to evaluate well-being, we must first understand what it means and constitutes and, more importantly, take a child-centered and participatory approach to realize what the children consider important for their well-being.

Many definitions of well-being exist. Well-being is a broad topic of concern across multiple disciplines and contexts that can be interpreted in various ways. The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework 4th edition uses the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of well-being, "a general term encompassing the total universe of human life domains, including physical, mental, and social aspects that make up what can be called a 'good life.'"¹ Specifically, in the published literature on early childhood, definitions of well-being include multidimensionality, context-specificity, and being dynamic. It is related to meeting the demands in the current developmental stage, which results in positive feelings.²

The translation of well-being from English to Filipino is not as straightforward as with many English words. Different sources offer varying suggestions and are confusing. An initiative by the University of the Philippines, College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, hoped to address this problem and conducted a research program with the different ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippines. They translated well-being to *kaginhawahan* in Tagalog, or being "prosperous, peaceful, comfortable, and free from want or problems."³ Tagalog is the language used by the largest ethnic group in the Philippines, the Tagalogs, which are located in Luzon. It is the basis of Filipino, the Philippines' national language. Further, they found that in most ethnolinguistic groups included in their study, well-being is described as "ease or the feeling of lightness one experiences when everything one aspired for is in order or easily attainable."³

Another study explored the conceptualization of happiness of Filipino college students.⁴ Major themes related to their happiness include satisfaction of wants, absence of worries, expression of positive emotions, motivational drive, and fulfilment of relational needs. While some would argue that happiness is only one

component of well-being, many researchers consider happiness to be a good proxy for well-being, especially when doing research with children.

These studies, however, were only conducted with adults and a small group of adolescents. The absence of young Filipino children's voices is glaring. While these give us a glimpse into what Filipino adults and adolescents consider essential for their happiness and well-being, it is important to perform similar research with children and directly involve them to understand how they conceptualize their well-being, albeit this is not an easy task.

Until recently, children's voices, especially the younger ones, have not been well represented in the literature. In studies on well-being in early childhood, informants are mostly adults, using proxy ratings of the parents or the teachers. Several issues and challenges are associated with involving children's participation in research, including ethical and methodological ones. Because of this, doing research with children becomes tedious and more complicated. However, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC) in 1989 emphasizes that children's voices are heard, especially concerning their welfare. Recognizing the children as experts in discussions regarding their well-being is important. In addition, the subjective aspect of well-being necessitates evaluating it with the children as the direct and main source of information.

There are many ways in which children can participate actively in research while ensuring the validity of the findings. Children could participate in different levels at different stages of research, from conceptualization and planning to dissemination and utilization of the findings, depending on the child's capacity. Various methods to enable children's successful participation could be used, such as drawings, photo-elicited interviews, focus group discussions with fewer participants, and role plays. Play is a useful medium for children's involvement in research. It can be used to put the

child at ease, as a primer for the next task, or as the method for data collection.

Currently, there is very little information regarding the well-being of Filipino children. According to the WHO, 10-15% of children aged 5 to 10 in the country are affected by mental health problems in 2015. A study also looked into suicidal ideation, behaviors, and attitudes of adolescents and found that 40.9% of the sample had non-specific active suicidal thoughts.⁵ However, these studies only looked into one dimension of well-being. Filipino children are regularly exposed to multiple hazards, including poverty and hunger, earthquakes, typhoons, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Children are vulnerable and considering that 40% of the population in the Philippines is below 18 years of age, there is a significant percentage of Filipino children who need monitoring of their well-being.

Several matters must be considered before we answer the question, "Are Filipino children well?" How do Filipino children conceptualize their well-being? Is there a valid and reliable instrument to measure such? Were the Filipino children involved in developing the instrument to measure their well-being? Is the instrument designed to collect information directly from them? We might not have the answers now, but research efforts are being undertaken. Soon, the dream of understanding and measuring the happiness and well-being of our children will be a reality. Future research efforts should warrant that all Filipino children's conceptualization of well-being is represented and, consequently, policies and programs to safeguard their well-being are in place, informed by their voices.

Disclosure Statement

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Conflicts of Interest

The author of this paper is a member of the editorial board of PJAHS.

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