The Australian Child Wellbeing Project: Overview

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June 2013

Draft – comments welcome

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The **Australian Child Wellbeing Project** commenced in July 2012 and will continue until the end of 2015. It is being conducted by a team of researchers at Flinders University of South Australia, the University of New South Wales, and the Australian Council for Educational Research. It is funded by the Australian Research Council through a Linkage Grant, and supported by Partner Organisations including the Departments of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, and Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

A **Project Steering Group** provides strategic direction for the Project. The Steering Group is chaired by Professor George Patton, University of Melbourne, and includes as members the Chief Investigators (Gerry Redmond, Jen Skattebol and Peter Saunders), Partner Investigators (Sabine Andresen, Jonathan Bradshaw and Sue Thomson), representatives of the Partner Organisations, and independent advisers: Dr Ben Edwards (AIFS); Dr Lance Emerson (ARACY) and Ms Margaret Raven (Social Policy Research Centre, University of NSW).

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Published June 2013

The views expressed in this publication do not represent any official position on the part of Flinders University, the University of New South Wales, or the Australian Council for Educational Research, but the views of the individual authors.

1   Introduction

The Australian Child Wellbeing Project is a new child-centred study in which young people's perspectives are being used to design a major nationally representative and internationally comparable survey of wellbeing among children aged 8-14 years. The survey will be specifically designed to allow analysis of key domains of wellbeing (for example, family, school, friends), and comparison of students from a range of backgrounds, especially students from marginalised and culturally diverse backgrounds. The tools developed in the course of the project will be available at no cost for repeats of the survey at the national and sub-national levels, and indeed in individual schools. The study is funded by the Australian Research Council through a Linkage Grant, and supported by partners in a broad range of Australian Government agencies, including Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Wellbeing of young people in their middle years is important for their current quality of life, and for their future development. Wellbeing is broadly understood to be made up of a child's material and environmental circumstances, her relationships, and how she thinks about herself in the context of those circumstances and relationships. Focus on the middle years (age 8-14) is also significant. There is now a lot of research available on early childhood and later adolescence. However, the middle years have until recently been comparatively neglected. If policies to promote children's wellbeing are to be implemented, then policymakers need to know how children in general, and children from marginalised or diverse groups in particular, understand and evaluate their own wellbeing.

An important innovation of this study is that it sets out to investigate child wellbeing in the middle years from children's own perspectives. Particular attention is given to understanding the perspectives of children in six groups who are often seen as experiencing high levels of disadvantage or marginalisation: Indigenous children, culturally and linguistically diverse children, children with disabilities, children in regional and remote Australia, economically disadvantaged children, and children in out-of-home care.

The four-year study commenced in July 2012. In the first phase, which has recently been completed, in-depth groupwork and interviews on what young people see as important in their lives were conducted with almost one hundred 8-14 year olds in these six 'marginalised' groups, and in the 'mainstream' (we use this term as shorthand for young people outside of the 'marginalised' groups). The young people's perspectives are now being used to inform the design and implementation of a large nationally representative survey, to be conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research in the second half of 2014.

This will involve students in years 4, 6 and 8, drawn from a sample of over 460 primary and secondary schools in every State and Territory. Further in-depth interviews will provide deeper insight on survey responses, particularly among children in the six marginalised groups of interest.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the rationale for the study, the theories it draws on, and the methods it employs. As this is an ongoing study, it is possible that methods and timelines may change as the research develops. The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 discusses the concept of child wellbeing. Section 3 considers the policy significance of the study, while Section 4 describes in more detail the actual research methods to be used. Section 5 describes the phases and timelines for the study. Section 6 concludes.

2   Conceptualising child wellbeing

As discussed in the Introduction, wellbeing can be broadly understood as comprising a child's material and environmental circumstances, her relationships, and how she thinks about herself in the context of those circumstances and relationships. It is now generally accepted that environments matter for children's positive development – this is a key insight of Uri Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of child development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Research suggests that factors such as supportive relationships with family and friends tend to reinforce children's sense of positive wellbeing, and that experiences such as exclusion, bullying and conflict can have the opposite effect.

Commonwealth and state government initiatives to promote children's wellbeing have tended to focus on issues such as exclusion (for example as a result of racism) or bullying. For instance, the NSW Middle Years Strategy aims to develop whole-school and cross-community approaches to student welfare that build positive relationships, foster respect and responsibility, and provide targeted early intervention and support. The South Australian Learner Wellbeing Framework outlines important domains of educator practice which may impact on learner wellbeing, including the learning environment, partnerships between teachers, families and other agencies, and policy environments. The Framework acknowledges that learner wellbeing can be affected both positively and negatively in each or all of these domains.

Yet little is known of how children in Australia conceptualise and perceive their own wellbeing, how these conceptualisations and perceptions correlate with other aspects of their lives, and how their lived experience informs their world views. If policies (such as those being undertaken in several states) to promote opportunities for all children to develop to their full potential are to be successfully implemented, then policymakers need to understand this important motivator – how children in general and disadvantaged children in particular understand their own wellbeing. The purpose of this project is to contribute towards this understanding by conducting an integrated analysis of a nationally representative survey, informed by in-depth qualitative research, on children in their middle years (aged 8-14).

While there is little consensus on the definition of wellbeing, there is broad agreement on the main dimensions of child wellbeing. The *Melbourne Declaration*'s 'whole child' framework encompasses the goal that all young Australians "become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens." (MCEETYA, 2008: 9). A report for DEEWR states that a key element of the wellbeing needed to attain this goal is "satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences" (Erebus International, 2008: 7), or subjective wellbeing. Subjective evaluations of life satisfaction and happiness do not always correlate with more 'objective' assessments of people's circumstances (Camfield and McGregor, 2005). This does not mean that subjective measures are unreliable, just that they capture different phenomena to those reflected in objective assessments. The research in this project will draw on a concept of wellbeing that acknowledges not only its subjectivity, but that also reflects its social and cultural influences, and the world views associated with life in adverse circumstances (Nussbaum, 2012; White, 2008). Teasing out the differences between social and cultural influences on the one hand, and adaptation to lived experience on the other requires a detailed understanding of how different groups of children translate that lived experience into conceptualisations of wellbeing.

To this end, the study will examine the conceptualisation and attainment of wellbeing in aggregate and across diverse groups of Australian children in their middle years, with a particular focus on wellbeing among the six marginalised groups identified above. While these groups are known to experience considerable disadvantage in comparison with the 'mainstream', there may also be significant differences in world views that shape their conceptualisation of wellbeing, and their self-appraisal of their wellbeing. Where this occurs, it will affect their responses to standardised survey instruments that attempt to measure wellbeing (Ungar et al., 2007; Ungar and Liebenberg, 2011).

3   Why does Australia need this study?

Improving the wellbeing and developmental outcomes of Australia's children is a key policy priority for Australian governments. Strategic policy documents, including the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), and Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy(COAG, 2009) highlight the importance of adopting a perspective that recognises the whole child, "across cognitive, learning, physical, social, emotional and cultural dimensions" (COAG, 2009, p.4). The same documents emphasise an aspiration towards equality of opportunity – that a child's background (including culture, disability, family circumstances, socio-economic status and remoteness) should not influence his/her achievements, and stress the importance of 'closing the gap' between outcomes for Indigenous and other children.

ACWP and academic performance

The Australian Education Bill, 2012, which aims to provide the framework for commonwealth and state funding for primary and secondary education following the recent Gonski Review of funding for education in Australia and the National Plan for School Improvement, reiterates many of the aspirations outlined in the *Melbourne Declaration*, and outlines two overarching goals for Australian education:

- for Australian schooling to be highly equitable; and

- for Australia to be ranked, by 2025, as one of the top five performing countries based on the performance of Australian school students in reading, mathematics and science, and based on the quality and equity of Australian schooling.

The ACWP will provide information relevant to both these goals. There is now a wealth of evidence that what Heckman an colleagues (2006) term 'non-cognitive development' has a significant influence on cognitive development and academic performance. There is also considerable evidence that environments matter for children's intellectual development and engagement at school. In their large in-depth study of exclusion among economically disadvantaged young people in three Australian cities, Skattebol, Saunders, Redmond, et. al. (2012) show that engagement is influenced by numerous, often interacting, factors, including command over material resources, caring responsibilities, peer group attitudes to school, safety concerns, and condition of school facilities. Only young people themselves can inform on these contextual factors as they see them. Data gathered as part of this study will support examination of how these contextual factors interact in producing attitudes and dispositions that are likely to be related to school performance and scholastic success.

Importantly, and consistent with the aims of the Australian Education Bill, the study has a strong equity focus. The Preamble to the Bill states that

> *the quality of a student's education should not be limited by where the student lives, the income of his or her family, the school he or she attends, or his or her personal circumstances (personal circumstances may include a student's indigenous heritage, socioeconomic background, disability or individual learning needs).*

As noted above, the research team is working closely with children who are often seen as marginalised, and who do not appear to reap the same benefits from education as children in the 'mainstream', including Indigenous children, children living with disability, children living in rural and remote areas, and children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. A key aim of the study is to capture the attitudes, perspectives and challenges facing students in these groups, in comparison with those in the mainstream, in order to understand how education and other services can better attend to their needs, and support them to achieve their full potential.

ACWP and the 'whole child'

The focus of the ACWP on 'the whole child', and the young person as situated in particular environmental contexts, is consistent with approaches in Australian policy, as evidenced by the Australian Government's development of 19 headline indicators of children's wellbeing across multiple dimensions (AIHW, 2009). The whole child approach is also consistent with growing recognition of the rights of the child, and with trends towards more comprehensive international monitoring of children's development and wellbeing (Andresen and Fegter, 2011; Ben-Arieh, 2008; Bradshaw et al., 2006; OECD, 2009; UNICEF, 2007, 2010). For these reasons, the study aims to capture elements of young people's wellbeing that are

instrumentally important in providing information that could be used for improving academic performance and equity, and also intrinsically important. Consistent with the New Sociology of Childhood, it recognises the child in the present (as being) as well as growing towards adulthood (becoming) (Qvortrup, 1994). By taking a grounded approach and starting with children's own perspectives, it is respectful to children's right to be heard. The grounded approach also recognises that children are the foremost experts in their own lives; they have important knowledge on what matters to them, and on how they construct and respond to their environments.

Therefore, data from this study will also inform on how success in fields other than academic performance can be measured in Australian students. For example the National Plan for School Improvement highlights safety and bullying at school as priority issues for schools and policymakers. Research shows other issues such as the family environment, material wellbeing, participation in out-of-school activities, and participation in decision-making, as important predictors of engagement and success at school.

Building on and complementing existing work
Recent years have witnessed an extraordinary growth in interest among governments and researchers in Australia in obtaining children's own perspectives on their lives, and in obtaining a more comprehensive picture of children in their middle years. Initiatives include:

- The HowRU study – a large school based survey (sample size 10,000) of health behaviours among 12-17 year old students in Victoria, carried out in 2009 and due to be repeated in 2013.

- The Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing Survey, a large telephone survey (sample size 5,000) of Victorian parents of children aged 0-12 about their development and physical and mental health, carried out in 2005, 2007 and 2009.

- The NSW School Students Health Behaviours Survey, carried out in 2002, 2005 and 2008 among secondary school students in 118 schools across NSW (sample size 7,800 in 2008).

- The Middle Years Development Index, adapted from a similar Canadian study, and intended as a population-level measure of wellbeing among 9-12 year olds; it is currently being trialled in South Australia (sample size 4,000) and Western Australia (sample size 1,500).

- The Child and Adolescent Component of the National Survey of Mental Health and Well-being, a national survey which will take place between May and September 2013, and will gather information about the mental health status of about 5000 children aged 4-17 years.

- The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, a panel study of 5,000 children born in 1999 and 5,000 children born in 2003, and followed every two years since, with

detailed information collected from parents and increasingly from children themselves on their development. Wave 6 interviews are due to take place in 2014, when the cohorts are aged (mostly) 14 and 10, respectively.

The ACWP team is working closely with research teams conducting the other studies to ensure maximum complementarity, and where possible comparability, among the studies.

In addition to the above large scale initiatives to develop representative surveys (albeit mostly at the state level), the Children's Commissioners in NSW and Western Australia have engaged in extensive qualitative exercises to study children's perspectives on their wellbeing (see for example Fattore et al., 2007, 2009), as indeed have the Chief Investigators for this study, in a recently completed ARC project (Skattebol et al., 2012). The present project has drawn many useful insights from these studies. However, none of them was designed with the aim of deriving a questionnaire for a nationally representative survey from the findings.

Improving international comparability

While data collection and research on Australian young people's wellbeing have increased greatly in recent years, this research has for the most part lacked international comparability. This represents a significant information gap. For example, Australia has been excluded from recent high profile UNICEF reports on child wellbeing in OECD countries (UNICEF, 2007, 2010, 2013). One international survey, the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, has attempted to systematically monitor aspects of child wellbeing in most OECD countries. The HBSC has been extensively used in the UNICEF reports cited above. However, Australia has never participated in this survey. Another study, Children's Worlds (http://www.childrensworlds.org/), is currently being piloted in 13 countries. Comparability with these studies is one important factor to be considered in the survey design for the current project.

4   Method

The main data collection exercise of the project will comprise a new landmark nationally representative school-based survey of children who are in the school years 4, 6 and 8 (aged about 8½ to 13½ at the start of the school year). The survey will be conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research, using a stratified sample of primary and secondary schools (Government, Catholic and independent).We will aim to select samples that are large enough to provide sufficient numbers of children from the groups identified above.

Therefore, four hundred and sixty schools across all states and territories will be sampled (with replacements, so that if the first approached school declines to participate a similar school can be approached), and in each school all students in the target years 4, 6 and 8 will be invited to participate. Experience from other surveys such as TIMSS where samples cover students in both primary and secondary schools suggests that 460 (230 primary and 230 secondary) is a sufficient initial sample size to achieve a nationally representative picture of children in the age range 8-14 years, as well as sufficient numbers of most of the six

marginalised groups of children, to allow meaningful analysis of their wellbeing. Table 1 provides estimates of the number of schools and students in each state and territory that may be included in the initial sample. Depending on final response rates, sampling of students in 460 schools may also facilitate estimation of results at the level of the state/territory (with the exception of ACT and the Northern Territory).

Table 1: Estimated number of schools and students to be included in the initial sample, by state/territory

	N primary schools	Estimated N students Year 4	Estimated N students Year 6	N secondary schools	Estimated N students Year 8	Total schools	Total students
NSW	40	1413	1409	40	3695	80	6517
VIC	35	1198	1207	35	3403	70	5808
QLD	35	1382	1408	35	4093	70	6883
WA	30	954	987	30	1560	60	3501
SA	30	818	852	30	2463	60	4133
TAS	30	844	858	30	1968	60	3670
ACT	15	649	667	15	1625	30	2941
NT	15	317	292	15	383	30	992
AUS	230	7575	7680	230	19190	460	34445

Note: Estimated N students estimated from average numbers of Year 4, 6 and 8 students enrolled per school in each state/territory.

School-level response rates

Non-response and refusals among schools sampled will mean that the actual number of schools participating in the final sample is less than 460, even where a replacement sampling strategy is employed. Some surveys such as TIMSS and PISA are part of the National Assessment Program in which it is mandatory for selected schools to participate, but this will not be the case with the proposed study. In order to ensure representativeness of the sample, the active support of jurisdictional authorities (for state, Catholic and independent schools) is being sought. The survey strategy also includes active engagement with key personnel in schools, for example principals and counsellors. To this end, the survey is being promoted through the project website (www.australianchildwellbeing.com.au), advertisements at conferences for educators, leaders and school counsellors, and articles about the project in educational journals. Organisations such as Principals Australia, who support the MindMatters and WholeSchool Matters programs in Australian Schools, and other agencies and organisations involved in the areas of the middle years, youth and wellbeing are also being approached to provide endorsement of the project. These activities will continue up to the end of sampling phase for the main survey.

Among schools that are sampled for the survey, those with high proportions of students in the 'marginalised' groups will be identified, and contact made (via e-mail and telephone) with principals and other key staff to establish a relationship, and offer extra support where necessary, including teacher replacement costs, and in some cases, on-site support for

administering the survey. The project website will be updated to include a section for FAQs, contact with the researchers, etc.

After the survey is completed, ACER will provide school-level reports to participating schools, presenting results from the survey for their students and for students in Australia as a whole. In addition, principals from participating schools will be invited to participate in a stakeholder workshop to be held in Canberra towards the end of the project, to give their feedback on the survey process and results. It may also be possible to hold forums for participating schools after main data collection and reporting in some state capital cities, so that principals or other staff can discuss their experience of the survey process, results for their schools, programs they have found useful and steps they plan to take in the future.

Student-level response rates

In order to maximise the representativeness of the final sample, the research team will engage with schools (in particular schools with high levels of disadvantage) in order to maximise student response (in the context of the need for parent and student consent). Where schools and teachers are enthusiastic about the survey, this will facilitate the engagement of the students and their parents, and consent will be easier to obtain. Through dialogue with schools and where possible provision of cash compensation for Teacher Replacement Time and other on-site support, the research team will aim to maximise this engagement. Assuming that 70 per cent of students within 326 schools actually participate in the study, the final achieved sample would be in the order of 17,100. A 50 per cent response rate at the level of both school and student would yield a final sample of about 8,600 respondents across about 230 schools.

Qualitative research to enrich survey analysis

The survey will be informed and complemented by focus groups and in-depth interviews with students that will serve five main purposes:

(1) to ensure that the quantitative survey covers the dimensions of wellbeing seen as important by young people from the six disadvantaged groups and the 'mainstream' (see McLeod and Yates, 2006 sampling rationale and approach to the middle or the 'mainstream');

(2) to extend knowledge of how different groups of Australian young people conceptualise their wellbeing, and facilitate identification of culturally, socially or economically specific conceptualizations of well-being;

(3) to gain insight into connections between the different dimensions of wellbeing that young people identify;

(4) through in-depth individual interviews, to explore how young people from different backgrounds interpret and respond to the survey questions; and

(5) to explore how they adopt world views and perspectives on their own well-being that accommodate their lived experience. Fieldwork will be conducted in both metropolitan and regional locations to ensure broad locational coverage.

It may be possible to use this qualitative fieldwork to listen to young people, not only on how they understand this survey, but also how they understand other surveys, such as MDI and HowRU. This could comprise a significant contribution to knowledge in terms of how young people (and particularly marginalised young people) respond to different survey instruments.

5 Phases of research

The research to produce and analyse these data is subject to ethics approval from relevant education authorities, permission of schools, and consent as appropriate from parents and students. The research is being undertaken in six phases:

Phase 1 (July 2012 to April 2013): In this initial phase, which is now completed, the research team used a range of visual techniques (including drawings, and work with i-pad apps) to examine how young people from the six marginalised groups (n = 78) and two 'mainstream' groups (n=19) conceptualise 'the good life', understand its different dimensions and perceive the connections between them. The approach combined lead in activities that used visual prompts, for example having an artist on-hand to draw pictures of what the children thought was important for them, and children themselves using the i-pad app *picolage* to construct visual representations of components of 'the good life'. This method is particularly appropriate for children with language difficulties, and those unfamiliar with talking to strangers. In many cases (where children agreed to it) groupwork was followed with personal in-depth interviews, in order to understand better children's concepts and motivations.

The research at Phase 1 is fully described in a separate report that is due for release in early July. Some of the conclusions that have implications for the design of survey instruments are worth highlighting here. First, domains that are common to many surveys of child wellbeing (for example, family, friends, school, health, and community; see Land et al., 2007) could be seen as capturing most of the concerns expressed by the young people who participated in groupwork for this project. This is not surprising given that other research that has engaged with young people about their concerns has found similar results (Fattore et al., 2007; Rees et al., 2010). Second, however, it was also clear from the groupwork and interviews with young people that the actual definition of these domains varied considerably between individuals and groups – that is, not all young people had similar understandings of 'family', 'friends' or 'community', for example. Third, there is a clear hierarchy in terms of how young people view the importance of these different domains. These and other issues are currently being considered in Phase 2 of the research.

Phase 2 (May to September 2013): In this current phase, the research team is developing constructs based on children's perceptions of 'the good life', its correlates, and related

questions (such as on household membership and characteristics) to be included in pilot interactive computer-based self-completion questionnaires. The constructs are informed by analysis of focus group data collected in Phase 1 but are being developed, where possible, into questions and scales that have been successfully implemented in other children's surveys (including those listed in Section 3 above). It will also include a range of comparable questions from the international comparator survey. Questionnaires for Year 8 children will be more extensive than those for the younger children, since they will be able to deal with more complex issues.

Phase 3 (October 2013 to June 2014): Following 'finalisation' of the draft questionnaire, cognitive interviewing will be carried out on a small number of children in order to ascertain how they respond to different questions in survey settings. This will be followed by a pilot survey which will be carried out on children (n=300) in school Years 4, 6 and 8 in 20 schools. DEEWR will provide advice on identifying schools with high proportions of students from the marginalised groups. Analysis of pilot interviews by ACER and the research team at SPRC will focus on issues relating to communication with schools, questionnaire administration, survey and item non-response, length of time taken to complete the questionnaires, and validity and reliability testing of the responses, with a focus on development of a final questionnaire and associated research tools.

Phase 4 (July to November 2014): ACER will select a nationally representative sample of students in Years 4, 6 and 8 across 460 randomly selected primary and secondary schools, with all students in the selected years invited to participate. Both the research team and DEEWR are publicising the study across state and territory education departments, Catholic education authorities and independent schools in order to mobilise support among school principals. ACER is providing information brochures and letters of invitation to schools, students and parents, and will obtain ethics approval for the research, as well as written permission from parents/carers and students. The project website will act as the first point of contact for schools, parents, and students. Actual rollout of the survey will take place in Term 3, 2014. Through its network of offices in each of the state capitals, ACER will administer the questionnaire on school computers using online technology. All students will be provided with disposable headphones so they can hear, as well as see, the questions. The research team will also provide intensive support in schools where students have difficulty understanding or completing the questionnaire.

In-depth individual interviews will be carried out concurrently with up to 80 children (10 in each of the six target groups and 20 from the 'mainstream') who have participated in the quantitative survey. Schedules and support materials for these semi-structured interviews will be developed from analysis of the pilot questionnaires and Phase 1 focus group data. Building on the experience of the Making a Difference project (Skattebol et al., 2012), interviews will probe children's rationales for how they prioritise different dimensions of wellbeing, and will seek to elicit accounts of everyday negotiations over participation and inclusion to complement their survey responses. Interviews will also provide an opportunity

for the reinterpretation of children's survey responses, and will give an indication of where survey results may need further validation and analysis (Ungar and Liebenberg, 2011).

Phase 5 (January to September 2015): ACER will clean and document the survey data, merge in school level indicators, and produce a technical report on methods and findings. Analysis of both preliminary quantitative findings and qualitative data will be carried out by the research team, with support from the Partner Organisations. Analysis will focus on understanding the relationship between membership of one of the six marginalised groups, wellbeing and its correlates among Australian children, comparing this with the 'mainstream' in each school year (4, 6 and 8), and identifying the challenges that policy needs to address. Quantitative analysis will identify the overall dimensions of wellbeing and the connections between them. The quantitative and in-depth interview data will also be compared in order to ascertain the relationship between how children answer questions in the survey, and how they describe their wellbeing in the in-depth interviews. This information will be used to identify and develop alternative latent factors or dimensions of wellbeing, other than those produced by a purely statistical analysis of the quantitative data (see Ungar and Liebenberg, 2011). The relationship between the different wellbeing dimensions across all children, and among the five disadvantaged groups will be explored in depth using both the qualitative and the quantitative data. Comparisons with other data being collected in Australia (for example, the LSAC, HowRU and MDI), and with international data will focus on inequalities in wellbeing, and how these correlate across groups.

Phase 6 (October to December 2015): Work in this phase will focus on writing up and dissemination. In particular, a final project report summarising all stages of the research will be published in November 2015. At the same time, schools that participated in the survey will receive statistical reports on how they compare with the national average, and with 'like' schools. The survey data and all relevant documentation will also be deposited in a public archive accessible to other bona fide researchers. A key element in the dissemination process will be to convince stakeholders to advocate for a repeat study of wellbeing among children in the middle years in five years' time (that is, in 2019). While a single study will provide very valuable information for policy and research, its value will increase exponentially if the survey is repeated at regular intervals, giving a picture on trends in wellbeing and progress towards reducing inequalities in wellbeing.

6   Conclusion

The ACWP represents a new attempt in the Australian context to construct a picture of children's wellbeing in their middle years, based on children's own perspectives on what is important in their lives. The study moreover is making a particular effort to obtain the perspectives of children whose voices are often marginalised in the context of mainstream service provision, for example, children from low socio-economic backgrounds, Indigenous children, and children with disabilities.

The strong assumption underpinning this approach is that children's perspectives matter, for three reasons. First, as the Convention on the rights of the Child states, children have a right

to be consulted on matters affecting them; to some extent therefore, this study is part of a process of consultation with children. Second, as researchers in the New Sociology of Childhood argue, children are experts in their own lives – they are best placed to interpret their lives and environments in ways that make sense to them. Third, policies that fail to take account of how children perceive the services that are provided for them, or their lived experience, are less likely to be successful in supporting them to reach their full potential. Experience shows that this is especially the case with children who do not form part of the 'mainstream' or who are marginalised, such as the children on whom much of this study focuses.

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