



Well-being of Children in Estonia Problems of International Comparability with Attention to Qualitative Methods

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General approaches to cross-national studies

- **Universalist** - '*landless theory*' (Rose 1991)
 - '*the very spirit of the comparison involves the quest for universals*' (Dogan & Pelassy 1990); '*societies would undergo the evolutionary process and ultimately converge*' (Wilensky & Lebaux 1958)
- **Culturalist** – focus on national uniqueness and particularism and cross-cultural contrasts and differences (Chicago School)
- **Societal** – social phenomena are not only diverse but always occur in mutually interdependent and interacting structures, possessing a spatiotemporal locations (Przeworski & Teune 1970)

‘ if contrasts between countries are dominant, they point towards cultural explanations, but if similarities predominate they indicate the force of general processes’ Viazzo (2012).

Preconditions of a comparative study

- Social phenomena can only be measured if they are perceived to exist (e.g. 'poverty' during the Soviet period in Estonia could not be measured)
 - The respondents' competence should be trusted (children's perspectives!)
- The society (and the power structures) is ready to accept truthful measurements and face the findings / evidence
 - The 'gatekeepers' are friendly and able to cope with their vulnerability as being adults/parents/service providers, etc, in relation to the study with children
- ...

Specific features of a comparative social study: Collection of contextual data

Start with terms and definitions

- E.g. age range of being a child; what is wellbeing, etc

Continue with thematic overviews – study the contexts

Country scans on:

- Academic research
- National statistics
- Media coverage
- Laws and political documents, reports

A child in research

(1) Child – an object

- Child is dependent, cannot be trusted, not competent to consult findings → only adult researchers can make conclusions from research

(2) Child – a subject

- Children have their own opinions that can be analysed
- Researcher adapts the research strategy to the child respondents

(3) Child – an active social actor

- Children are active social actors with autonomous conceptual status in research (unit of observation/analysis in research)

(4) Child – a co-researcher

(Pia Christensen & Alan Prout 2002)

(5) Child – an advisor in issues impacting his/her life

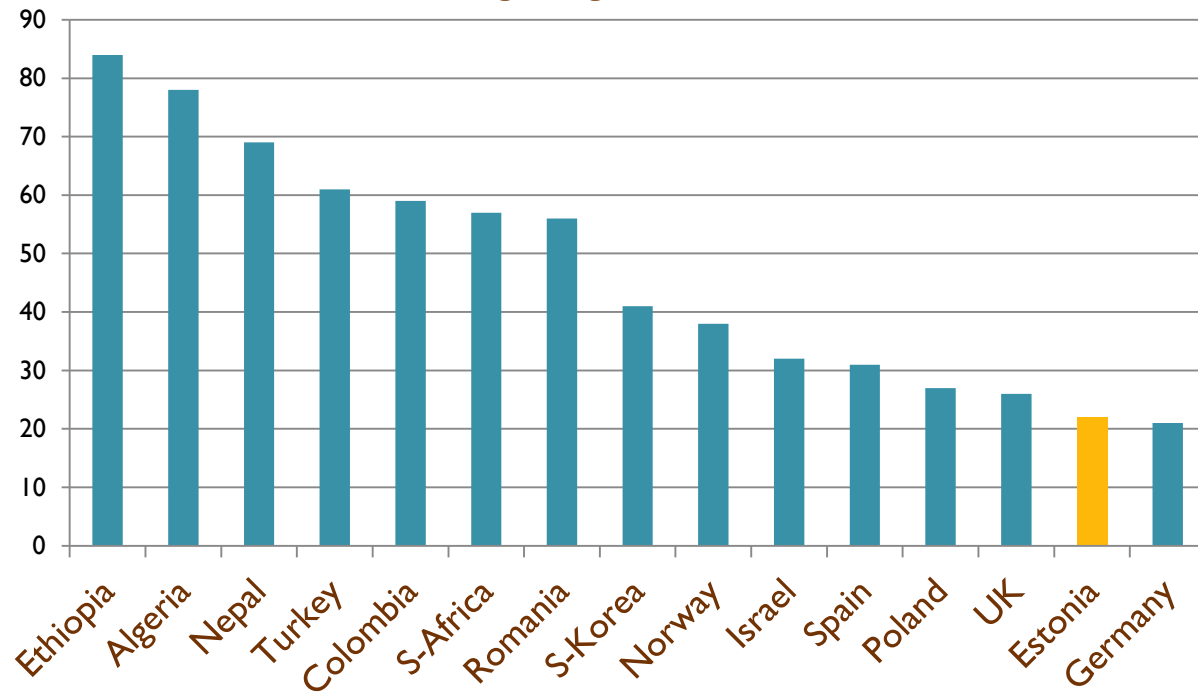
Why a qualitative study with children

- Preceding quantitative survey (exploratory, for setting hypotheses of a quantitative survey)
- Accompanying quantitative survey (asking explanations to responses of the survey items, e.g. what is family; attitudes related to job migration of parents; self-exclusion, etc)
- An independent study of children's worlds (e.g. Children's experiences of relative deprivation and exclusion from peers; being bullied, left behind by commuting by job parents, etc)
- Consulting policy issues (e.g., children's opinions concerning adoption rights be given to same-sex couples)
- Consulting quantitative evidence (explanatory, post-quantitative, e.g. after ISCWeB survey discussing the research evidence)

ISCWeB, 2014

(53,000 children; 8, 10, 12 yrs old; 15 countries)

I like going to school, %



Ethiopia: the context briefly

- Children are expected to contribute labour in the agricultural activities and in household chores.
- Parents in many cases prefer to send the boys rather than girls to school for fear of sexual abuse to their daughters and losing their major contributions in managing household chores
- Boys are more likely to be enrolled in primary school than girls
- Hence, school is a very important environment for children with lasting effects on their life and wellbeing. However, school settings are also places where students encounter experiences that could affect their well-being negatively

ISCWeB Country Report of Ethiopia, 2015

Germany: the context briefly

- Since education became compulsory for all German children at the age of 6 and also to migrant and refugee children, school is a time-consuming and important part of every child's life
- These days, childhood and the best type of up-bringing is a big issue in the public media and among parents. They are under big pressure to bring up their children to persist and be successful in the performance-oriented society.

ISCWeB Country Report of Germany, 2015

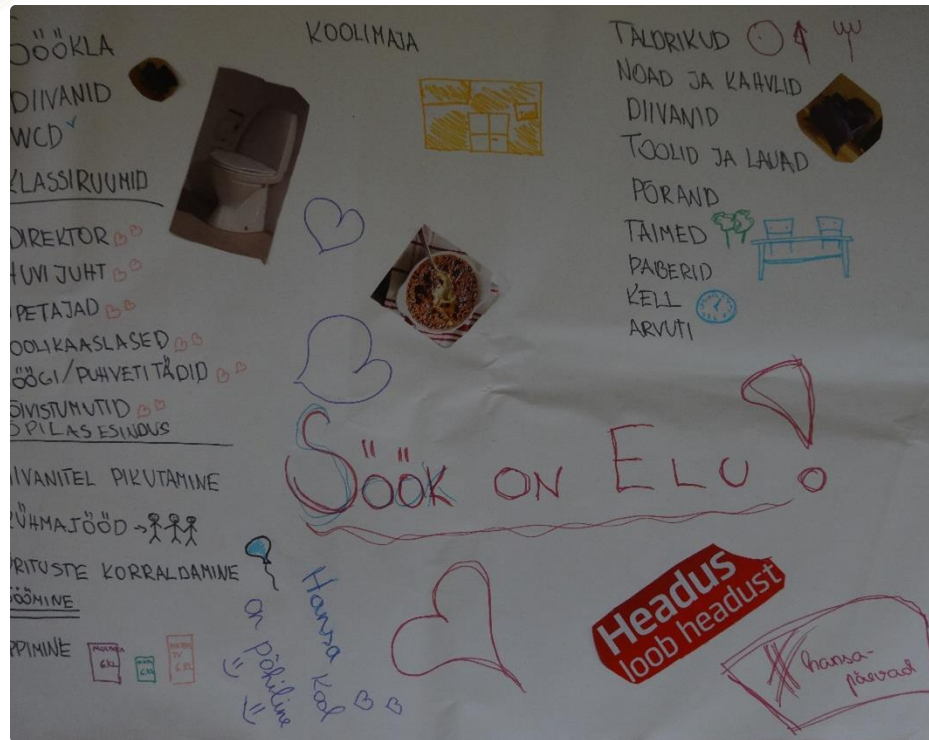
Estonia: the context briefly

- Estonian society is an individualistic, success-oriented society. Parents are concerned about their children's personal success from an early age. It is broadly accepted that education is a tool for building one's success
- Children have to compete for places in the best schools as an investment into personal success in the future
- Marks are important: Estonia is doing relatively well internationally according to the PISA test

ISCWeB Country Report of Estonia, 2015

Consulting with children: child wellbeing in school context (EE)

- What is wellbeing for a child... in the school environment?
 - Mapping important aspects of wellbeing
 - What makes children feel good at school
 - What makes children feel bad at school
 - What should be changed
 - What are the messages you would like to send about your school to other children worldwide
- Methods:
 - self-concept (throwing a ball)
 - Mapping exercise: drawing a map of wellbeing at school
 - Focus-group discussion, incl explanations to the maps
 - Magic wand
- 12 yrs children in a municipal school



What makes feeling good at school

FOOD IS LIFE!
Eating

GOOD CREATES
GOOD
Relationships



Details about eating

What makes feeling good at school



places
people
activities
things

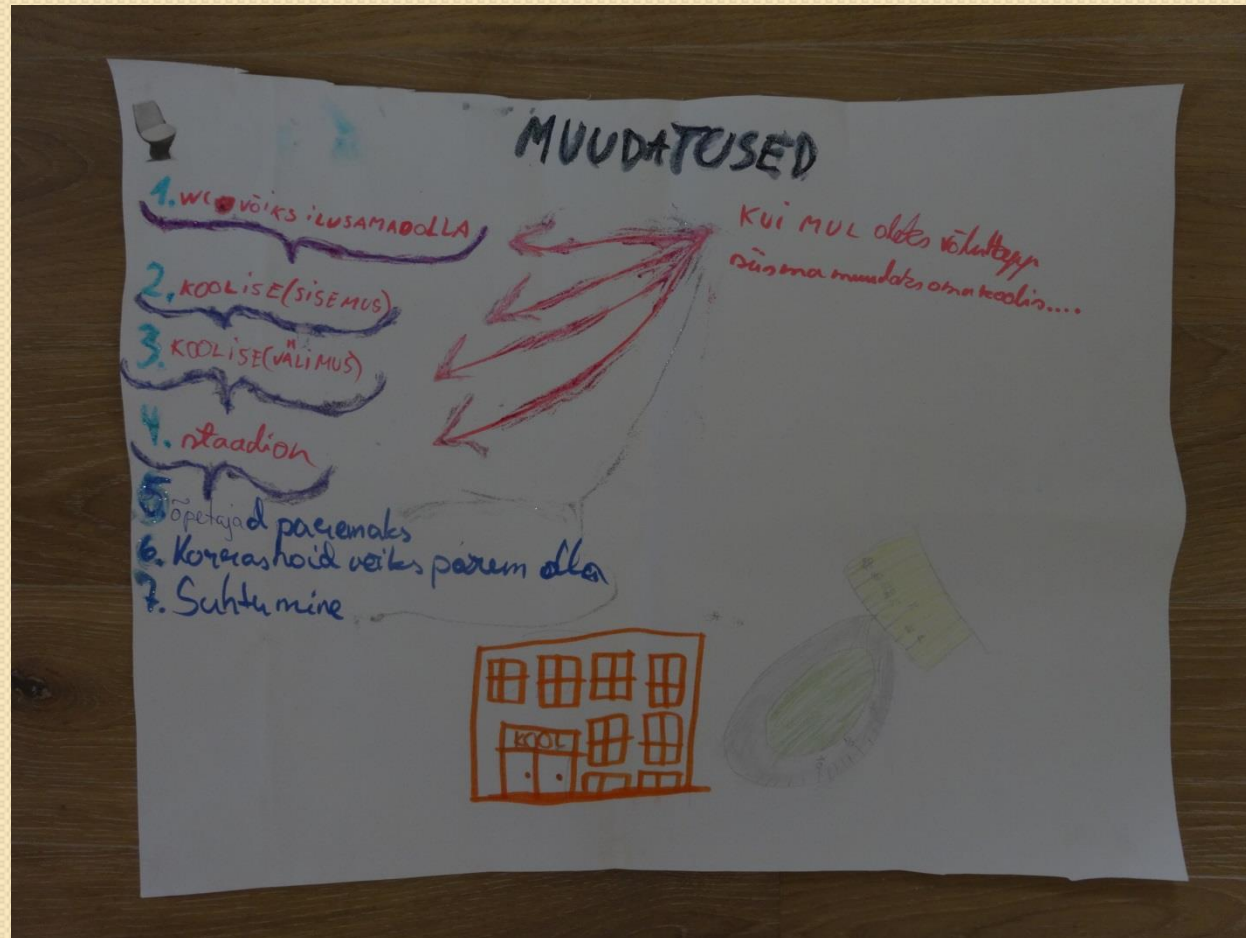
What makes feeling good at school

Critical points of wellbeing in school environment

- Physical environment
- Teachers' qualities: changing moods, violent, evil, unequal treatment of children
- Child value, agency and expertise (not asked about their opinions; low value as individuals)
- Success and requirements (receiving marks instead of valuing knowledge)
- General security and bullying
- „Forgotten“ social pedagogue and psychologist

A MAGIC WAND: CHILDREN GIVE ADVICE

- Changes in attitudes and behavioural patterns of teachers
- Less homework
- Smaller groups for hyperactive classmates
- Improvement of physical environment
- Ask children their opinion
- Teach survival and social skills





Instead of conclusion: Comparative research as communication

- Communication of researchers (academic perspectives)
- Communication of researchers and children (generational perspectives)
- Communication of cultures (comparative perspectives)
 - Researchers need to interpret information across historical, cultural and socio-political contexts, collecting specific information within a framework that is at once flexible enough to facilitate this, as well as robust enough to allow comparison. (Oxley 2001)
 - ‘normativity of cultures’ vs ‘children’s subjective perceptions, incl peer cultures’ vs ‘researchers’ interpretations and cognitions’ – A GREAT CHALLENGE!