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# Assessing Well-Being and Well-Becoming in Canadian Schools: Contributions of Children's Rights Perspectives

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## Abstract

This paper starts out with the claim that assessing Canadian students' well-being and their well-becoming in schools should be of importance to all those concerned for students' well-being. It then inquires into the question of what children's rights perspectives can contribute to the endeavour of developing tools for assessing students' well-being. For this purpose, the paper draws on two sources: the findings of a recently conducted Delphi study undertaken with Canadian experts on children's rights and on an inquiry into links between the literature on children's rights – particularly on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – and the literature on children's well-being.

## Keywords

Child rights; well-being; well-becoming; Canadian schools.

## Résumé

Cet article débute en affirmant que l'évaluation du bien-être des étudiants canadiens devrait être d'une importance accrue pour tous ceux qui en sont responsables. Par la suite, l'article traite de la question suivante : quelles perspectives du droit des enfants peuvent contribuer au développement d'outils pour évaluer le bien-être des étudiants ? Pour ce faire, l'auteur se base sur deux sources : les résultats d'une étude Delphi conduite avec des experts canadiens des droits des enfants ainsi que

ceux d'une enquête sur les liens entre la littérature au sujet des droits de l'enfant – en particulier la Convention relative aux droits de l'enfant de l'ONU – et la littérature courante sur le bien-être des enfants.

## Mots-clés

Droits de l'enfant; bien-être; écoles canadiennes.

It should be of great concern for a nation and the world overall, how well children are doing (well-being) and how well they are prepared to live well (well-becoming)<sup>1</sup>. Considering that children, at least in developed countries, spend about half of their waking hours in schools, students' well-being should be of great interest to those concerned for children. Furthermore, considering the developmental status of children, students' well-becoming in schools should also be of interest. Although the important role that schools can and do play for children's well-being has been acknowledged (Becete, Perrin, Schneider, & Blanchard, 2014; Munn, 2010), there is no systematic and comprehensive assessment of students' well-being and well-becoming in Canadian schools. The Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (O'Grady & Houme, 2014), the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2007), and the education report by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (Guhn, Gadermann, & Zumbo, 2010) include only very few indicators and are primarily focused on achievement in selected subject areas. Overcoming such narrow domains in order to get a richer picture of students' well-being and well-becoming in Canadian schools can be achieved by drawing on

more comprehensive notions of well-being provided in the scholarly literature (see below). However, this scholarship is not the only possible source.

Children's rights research in Canada (e.g., Covell & Howe, 2001) and internationally (e.g., Franklin, 1995; Invernizzi & William, 2011) – especially since the development and ratification of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) – has been concerned with children's "nurturance and self-determination rights" in the CRC (Ruck, Peterson-Badali, & Helwig, 2014), which many scholars have linked closely to children's well-being (see below).

The purpose of this paper is to inquire into the question of a role that a human rights perspective can play for assessing students' well-being and well-becoming in Canadian schools. To this end, the paper proceeds in three steps. The next section briefly discusses the relationship that relevant literature has identified between children's rights (CRC) and children's well-being<sup>2</sup>. Then the findings of a study are presented. The study solicited the views of Canadian children's rights experts on the role of child rights perspectives on the assessment of children's well-being. The final section discusses the findings of the study in light of the reviewed literature to identify what children's rights perspectives

<sup>1</sup> As is common practice in the children's rights literature, "child" denotes anyone under the age of 18.

<sup>2</sup> Unless it is a specific focus of a discussion, from here on I will use the term well-being to also include well-becoming for the sake of easier reading, because the children's well-being literature usually does not make this distinction.

can contribute to a concern for assessing children's well-being in Canadian schools.

### **Children's Rights and Children's Well-Being**

There are different disciplinary traditions which have all been contributing to the conceptualizing of human well-being (for a systematic discussion see Falkenberg, 2014): philosophy (e.g., Aristotle, trans. 1976; Griffin, 1986; Nussbaum, 2011; Sumner, 1996), psychology (e.g., Diener, 1984; Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999; Seligman, 2011), sociology (e.g., Veenhoven, 2008), and economics (Frey, 2008; Layard, 2005). As there are different conceptualizations of human well-being more generally, there are also different approaches to children's well-being, e.g., philosophically (White, 2011), psychologically (Gilman, Huebner, & Furlong, 2009), and more social-politically oriented approaches (Ben-Arieh & George, 2006). Children's well-being has been assessed at the international (e.g., Adams, 2013; OECD, 2009) and at different national levels (e.g., Bradshaw, 2011; Hanafin & Brooks, 2005) using approaches to well-being linked to the so-called child indicators research movement (Ben-Arieh, 2008). While some of these approaches are closely linked to the child rights movement, like the child indicators movement (Ben-Arieh, 2008, 2010a), others are less so. For instance, positive psychology does not seem to make any such link between well-being and a human rights perspective, as the lack of such a perspective in recent handbooks on positive psychology demonstrates (Gilman, Huebner, & Furlong, 2009; Lopez & Snyder, 2009).

For the purpose of this paper, it is not necessary to specify a particular approach to children's well-being, as the arguments put forward should apply regardless. As far as the children's rights perspective is concerned, I will draw exclusively on the literature around the CRC, because it articulates a concept of children's rights in "the most ratified human rights treaty in the history of human rights" (Doek,

2014, p. 193) and, thus, implies a certain level of commitment by, among others, the Canadian government, which will play a role in part of the argumentation presented here.

Based on the literature, four different perspectives on the conceptual relationship between children's rights and children's well-being can be distinguished. Each relationship implies a different role that a human rights perspective can play for assessing students' well-being in general and in schools in particular.

The first perspective considers children's well-being as being akin to "flourishing" and then focuses on the difference between well-being and rights as far as "state accountability" (Lundy, 2014, p. 2441) is concerned. In this case, children's rights are seen as foundational to children's well-being and that concept goes beyond what the concept of human rights captures. Bruyere and Garbarino's (2010) "ecological perspective on the human rights of children" might be an example of this first perspective, for which two reasons are provided. First, in terms of obligations they require, human rights have to be more "basic, because they require agreement and commitment by governments, while well-being – a concept that "has emerged largely from scholarly interest and activism in the area of optimum child development" (Lundy, 2014, p. 2442) – can represent expectations that are not restricted by political constraints as is the case for codified human rights. "Being loved" might be one example of a life quality included in the understanding of children's well-being, but such quality is generally considered to fall outside of the jurisdiction of the state and, thus, of codified human rights (Lundy, 2014, p. 2441). Second, human rights would also be considered to be more "basic" than well-being, because the life conditions identified by human rights based on the idea of human dignity apply to *all* human beings in the same way, while human well-being and flourishing involves an element of idiosyncrasy.

The second perspective does not see children's rights as conceptually foundational to a richer notion of children's

well-being, but rather sees the former as going beyond the latter. This perspective focuses on the "self-determination rights" that are codified in the CRC in addition to the "nurturance rights" that are also in the CRC (Ruck, Peterson-Badali, & Helwig, 2014). The self-determination rights include the right of children to being heard, to having a voice in matters that concern them. Lansdown (2001a) suggests that this particular right challenges a "welfare" approach to children's well-being, which acknowledges that children have needs for love, care and protection but does not acknowledge children as bearers of rights as, for instance, the CRC does (p.93).

The third perspective sees the notion of children's rights in the CRC as going beyond well-being in terms of content and scope. Here well-being is understood through *actually used measures of children's well-being*: "A direct comparison of the CRC and usual domains of well-being would suggest that its substantive rights are significantly broader in scope than those which are included [in] major international indices of well-being" (Lundy, 2014, p.2446).

The fourth perspective is widely held among scholars of children's well-being (e.g., Bradshaw, Hoelscher, & Richardson, 2007; Camfield, Streuli, & Woodhead, 2009), but also among some children's rights scholars (e.g., Doek, 2014): "a child's well-being can be defined as the realization of the child's rights and the fulfillment of the opportunity of the child to be all he or she can be in light of the child's abilities, potential, and skills" (Doek, 2014, p.205).

The next section reports on a recently completed study that had as part of its purpose to inquire into the views held by *Canadian* children's rights scholars and professionals on the relationship between children's rights and their well-being.

### **The Study**

#### ***Study Purpose and Design***

The purpose of the study was to solicit a consensus by a panel of Canadian children's rights experts on indicators for assessing

children’s well-being in general and in school in particular and on the role that a children’s rights perspective can or should play for such assessments. Consensus was sought from the panel on responses to the following five questions:

- **Question 1:** In your view, what are central indicators that should be used to assess the well-being of children in Canada?
- **Question 2:** In your view, what are central indicators for the well-being of students in the K-12 school system?
- **Question 3:** Consider the following statement: A *central* goal for K-12 schooling is to prepare students to be well and live well outside of school and after graduation. How important would such a goal for K-12 schooling be?
- **Question 4:** In your view, what role should the idea of human rights play for the concept of well-being?
- **Question 5:** In your view, what role should human rights play in assessing the well-being of students in schools in Canada?

The Delphi technique (Brown, 1968; Linstone & Turoff, 1975) was used for the study, as it has been developed as a “group facilitation technique that seeks to obtain consensus on the opinion of ‘experts’ through a series of structured questionnaires” (Hasson, Keeney, & McKenna, 2000, pp. 1009-1010). The first questionnaire solicits individual responses by panellists. For the second and possibly subsequent rounds, panellists are then asked to indicate their level of agreement with the responses provided in the previous round. “In its purest form, Delphis should continue until consensus is reached. However, in practice this rarely occurs due to time constraints and participant fatigue. Generally rounds are limited to between two and four” (Vidgen & Gallegos, 2011, pp. 5-6), although “more recent evidence appears to show that either two or three rounds are preferred” (Hasson et al., 2000, p. 1011). Recommendations for

defining group consensus vary from 51%, to 70% and 80% agreement among panellists on a particular response (Hasson et al., 2000, p. 1011).

### Participants

The target population for this study (Canadian children’s rights experts) consisted of Canadian academic scholars linked to human and children’s rights research and Canadian professionals working in the field of children’s rights. Through an online search, 29 individuals were identified and invited to participate in the study. Thirteen of them responded to the first round of questions, and 11 of the 13 responded to the second round of questions. The academic scholars who participated in the study came from a range of disciplines, including education, political science, and social sciences; the professional human rights experts were linked to professional institutions or organizations, like bar associations and government-linked agencies.

### Data Collection and Analysis

This particular Delphi study used two rounds of questionnaires. The first round solicited open-ended responses from each of the expert panellists to each of the five questions listed above. The responses were collated and in some cases clustered and a second questionnaire was created that invited the panellists – using a five-point Likert scale from “completely agree” to “completely disagree” – to express their level of agreement with each of the first-round responses to each of the five questions.

Quantitative descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) was used to analyze the second-round responses. The use of a five-point Likert scale for the second-round questionnaire required a variation of the usual type of consensus definition of a certain percentage of agreement by the panellists with a particular statement. For this study consensus among the expert panellists for an answer to one of the five questions was defined as a response statement to a question that has the two

following features: 1. the mean of the level of agreement with this statement is more than or equal to four (in the case of positively expressed statements) or less than or equal to two (in the case of negatively expressed statements); 2. The standard deviation (SD) of the answers to the question is less than or equal to 0.5, which means roughly that the average of the deviations of the responses from the mean is not more than half a point on the five-point scale. Furthermore, since mean and SD in a small sample like the one for this study are greatly impacted by outliers, the highest and lowest response for each of the statements were eliminated before determining panel consensus.

### Findings

**Question 1:** The first question asked for central indicators for assessing well-being of children in Canada. Table 1 lists the five indicators with panel consensus.

**Table 1**

*Central indicators for assessing the well-being of children in Canada*

Mean	SD	Indicator
4.89	0.314	feeling of belonging to a family/community
4.78	0.416	physical and mental health
4.44	0.497	feeling and being safe
4.33	0.471	positive relationship with parents or care-givers
4.22	0.416	access to quality education

In light of the focus on the relationship between human rights and well-being in this study, it is interesting to note that the following three first-round statements did not find consensus across the panel relative to the consensus standard: “implementation of the rights and freedoms spelled out in the UNCRC” (mean = 4.44, SD = 0.685); “opportunities to be heard” (mean = 4.11, SD = 0.737), and “poverty” (mean = 4; SD = 0.667).

**Question 2:** The second question asked panellists about their agreement to suggested central indicators for assessing well-being of students *in the K-12 school system*. Table 2 lists the seven indicators that the panel agreed upon.

**Table 2**

*Central indicators for assessing the well-being of students in the K-12 school system*

Mean	SD	Indicator
4.56	0.497	feeling and being safe at school
4.44	0.497	positive school climate/ positive relationship with students and teachers
4.44	0.497	physical and emotional health/absence of neglect and abuse
4.38	0.484	support by teachers
4.11	0.314	being physically active each day
4	0.471	drop-out/graduation rates
4	0.471	poverty/hunger

**Question 3:** The third question asked the panellists for their degree of agreement with statements that panellists provided in the first round of the Delphi study in response to the following claim: A *central goal for K-12 schooling is to prepare students to be well and live well outside of school and after graduation*. Using the consensus standards established for this study, *the panel did not agree with any of the statements provided by individual panellists in response to the claim*. The two statements for which the panel came the closest to a consensus were: “This is indeed an overarching/central purpose/goal of public schooling” (mean = 4.11, SD = 0.737), and disagreement with the statement “as a goal for K-12 education this goal is not important at all” (mean = 1.56 (between disagree and strongly disagree), SD = 0.685).

**Question 4.** The fourth question asked the panellists about their view of the role of the idea of human rights for the concept of well-being. Table 3 shows the relationship between human rights and well-being that found consensus among the panellists. This relationship could be described as follows: human rights are a way toward and are also needed for well-being.

**Table 3**

*The role of the idea of human rights for the concept of well-being*

Mean	SD	Indicator
4.67	0.471	Respecting and facilitating the rights in the Convention will lead to child well-being; human rights are a way to achieving well-being. Human rights are a factor that determines well-being.

**Question 5:** While question four asked for the conceptual relationship between human rights and well-being more generally, question five asked the panellists about the role of human rights in assessing well-being of students in schools in Canada. Table 4 shows the clusters of linked statements that reflect panel consensus.

**Table 4**

*The role of human rights in assessing the well-being of students in schools in Canada*

Mean	SD	Indicator
4.63	0.484	1. Human rights identified in the CRC should play a central role in assessing the well-being of students in schools in Canada. The UN CRC should be used as a litmus test to measure children’s well-being. Human rights are hugely significant and should inform our understanding of well-being and assessing it. Rights and well-being go hand-in-hand.
4.56	0.497	2. An analysis of human rights should be a component of the well-being assessment. The well-being of students requires respect for their human rights. Human rights are necessary for well-being.

**Children’s Rights and the Assessment of Students’ Well-Being in Canadian Schools**

I will argue that the children’s rights perspective (built around the CRC) can play the role of providing (a) a potentially

richer picture of what needs to be assessed (a more holistic concept of well-being); (b) criteria for methodological appropriateness when assessing students’ well-being; and (c) the power of codified rights to the concern for assessing students’ well-being as part of evaluating “success of school education”. These three arguments will be developed in the following sections.

**A More Holistic Concept of Well-Being of Students in Schools**

The literature review has unpacked four perspectives on the conceptual relationship between children’s rights and children’s well-being. In particular the second and third perspectives provide a potentially richer, more holistic picture of children’s well-being for the purpose of assessing children’s well-being in schools. The literature relevant here draws on a range of articles in the CRC, particularly articles 28 and 29, which explicitly link children’s rights to children’s education.

Article 29 (particularly section 1) goes beyond the fundamental rights to education and equal opportunity and articulates expectations for the *quality* of education: “education of the child shall be directed to [...] the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), n.d.). This section has

been referenced by scholars who make the case that core aspects of school education like the curriculum and teaching practices need to be judged with article 29 as a lens:

The key goal of education is the development of the child’s personality,

talents, and abilities (art. 29a). This implies, according to the CRC Committee, that the curriculum must be directly relevant to the child's social, cultural, environmental, and economic context and to her or his present and future needs, taking into full account the child's evolving capacities. . . .

The overall objective of education is to maximize the child's ability and opportunity to participate fully and responsibly in a free society. It should be emphasized that the type of education that focuses primarily on the accumulation of knowledge, which prompts competition and leads to an excessive burden of work on children, may seriously hamper the harmonious development of the child to the fullest potential of her or his abilities and talents. Education should be child-friendly, inspiring and motivating the individual child.

(Doek, 2014, pp. 210-211)

In the assessment of the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children (CCRC), article 29 of the CRC "receives too little attention in educational policy across Canada" (CCRC, n.d., p. 45), and the group, similar to Doek (2014), suggests that "pressure to prepare children for the workforce often shapes curricula, leaving less focus on development of the whole person (para. 29.1)" (CCRC, n.d., p.45).

While articles 28 and 29 of the CRC deal explicitly with children's educational rights, others are also relevant to children's school experiences. Article 12 of the CRC describes a child's "right to express [his or her own] views freely in all matters affecting the child, either directly or through a representative or an appropriate body" (OHCHR, n.d.). One implication of this perspective for assessing students' well-being in schools is that students' opportunities and abilities "to be heard" in their schools, which is a place that is primarily about what matters for them, needs to be assessed as one aspect or indicator of students' well-being

in schools. Article 3 of the CRC stipulates that "in all actions concerning children . . . the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" (OHCHR, n.d.). Howe and Cowell (2013) make the case that "education in the best interests of the child" – so the title of their book – addresses the *quality* of education with implications for core aspects of school education like the curriculum and teaching practices.

The children's rights discourse around these provisions makes clear that the *quality* of education in terms of educational purposes should play an important role in the assessment of student well-being. Thus, the CRC supports a more holistic approach to assessing student well-being in schools. Particularly the CRC's concern with *children's development* suggests that *well-becoming should be seen as an educational concern in schools*, where "well-becoming" refers to the development of students' internal capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 21) to being well as they live their lives as adults.

The children's rights experts on the study panel came to the consensus that human rights are a way toward and are also needed for conceptualizing well-being (see Table 4), a view shared by a number of children's rights scholars (e.g., Camfield, Streuli, & Woodhead, 2009; Mekonen & Tiruneh, 2014; Ruck, Peterson-Badali, & Helwig, 2014). As far as the assessment of student well-being in schools is concerned, the panellists also agreed that, in the words of one panellist, "the UN CRC should be used as a litmus test to measure children's well-being" (see Table 5). Thus, if the articles in the CRC are interpreted along the lines outlined above, the panellists suggest here that measuring students' well-being requires a more holistic approach. The panel's list of indicators for assessing student well-being in schools (Table 2) can be understood as an illustration of such holistic understanding of quality of school education.

What is noteworthy, however, is that as far as the purpose/goal of school education is concerned, there was no agreement

across the panel on well-being being a goal of school education (question 3). One explanation *might* be that, as Lundy (2014) points out, "child rights scholars have not engaged to the same extent with the concept of well-being [as the well-being movement has engaged with the concept of children's rights] – a fact that is undoubtedly linked to the lack of use of the term in the CRC itself" (p.2439). On the other hand, one can consider the assessment of students' well-being in school as being important without considering it as a goal or main objective of school education.

### **Equal Rights for and Giving Voice to Students: Methodology Matters**

The literature on children's rights (with focus on the CRC) suggests also two important methodological matters concerning the assessment of students' well-being in schools: measuring well-being should be done in such a way that (a) equal opportunities and/or outcomes can be evaluated and (b) students are given a voice in *how* their well-being is assessed.

Regarding the matter of equal opportunity/outcome, articles 28 and 2 of the CRC are of particular importance. Article 28 proclaims children's right to education on the basis of equal opportunities (OHCHR, n.d.). A focus on equality can support the assessment of well-being in schools in Canada by insisting that it checks for equal educational opportunities across different groups. Article 2 is the right to non-discrimination as far as the application of children's rights is concerned. As Lundy (2014) suggests, this article's "main relevance to well-being has been identified as requiring attention to the inequality of certain disadvantaged groups and thus requiring disaggregation of data" (p.2443). The last point is particularly important, considering that, for instance, the influential child indicators approaches to assessing children's well-being tend to focus on national data for international comparison purposes and, thus, report on aggregated data (e.g., Ben-Arieh & George, 2006; Bradshaw, 2011; Brown, 2008).

Non-discrimination is one of the “CRC’s four core cross-cutting principles” (Lundy, 2014, p. 2442), and this right to equality is a particular contribution to the question how to assess well-being in schools, considering that current practices of assessing children’s well-being more generally (e.g., The Annie E. Casey Foundation et al., 2008; Government of Canada, 2011), and in schools in particular (e.g., Guhn, Gadermann, & Zumbo, 2010), tend to report aggregated data that would hide inequality of outcome and experience across different social groups rather than unpack those.

Regarding the matter of student voices, the above-mentioned article 12 is of particular importance. As Lundy (2014) points out, this article does not only imply students’ right to having a voice in matters concerning them, but also that “any process purporting to measure outcomes from a children’s rights perspective should comply with it by engaging with children from start to end in a meaningful way” (p.2444). In other words, assessing their well-being will need to involve students’ views on the matter. This point has been pushed further by other scholars (e.g., Lansdown, 2001b; McAuley, Morgan, & Rose, 2010; Villarán & Muñoz, 2014), whose interpretation of article 12 suggests that students should be involved in the development of the assessment instrument itself. The interpretation of this article by the children’s rights literature has led the child indicator movement to incorporate children’s voices and their subjective experiences when measuring their well-being (Ben-Arieh, 2010b; Ben-Arieh, Casas, Frønes, & Korbin, 2014, pp. 16-20; McAuley & Rose, 2014).

The panellists agreed that the CRC should be used as a litmus test to measure children’s well-being (Table 4), and depending on the interpretation of the CRC in the context of school education, it could imply agreement with the methodological implications drawn by the authors referenced above. The panellists also agreed that “access to quality education” is

one of the central indicators for children’s well-being in Canada. On the other hand, when panellists were asked about central indicators for well-being of students *in the K-12 school system*, equal opportunity/ outcome or having a voice in educational matters that concern them (which are probably all core matters in a school) did not make it on the list agreed upon.

### **CRC as Codified Rights**

Currently, well-being – as conceptualized in any of the approaches referenced in this paper – does not seem to be a focus in the evaluations of school education by Canadian provincial governments, who have the legislative and executive authority over education. By linking the children’s rights with the well-being perspective, the power and demands of the CRC as a convention signed and ratified by the Canadian government can be brought to bear to the concern for student well-being in that nation’s schools and how “success” in school education is measured – although this power and demand of the CRC can leave a lot to be desired in Canada (Covell & Howe, 2001).

The children’s rights experts on the panel agreed that the UN CRC should be used as a litmus test to measure students’ well-being and that well-being requires respect for their human rights (Table 4). This role identified by the panellists for the CRC would bring indeed the power and demand of the CRC as a system of codified rights for children to bear to the concern for student well-being. On the other hand, the panellists could not agree on a common view on the question whether a central goal for K-12 schooling is to prepare students to be well and live well outside of school and after graduation. This disagreement qualifies the role that the panellists would see for children’s rights to contribute to the idea of using students’ well-being and their well-becoming *as a measure of the success of school education*, as suggested in the previous paragraph.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have outlined the way in

which the children’s rights literature, particularly around the CRC, can substantially contribute to the development of adequate assessment tools for student well-being in Canadian schools. The study reported on suggests that children’s rights experts strongly support this view. The focus of what is systematically assessed in assessing school education success needs to shift toward a greater attention to students’ well-being in Canadian schools, and the power of children’s rights can go a long way in making this happen.

### **Acknowledgement**

The author wants to acknowledge and thank the Centre for Human Rights Research at the University of Manitoba (<http://chrr.info/>) for its financial support of the study reported upon in this paper.

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# Revue d'éducation

La Revue d'éducation de l'Université d'Ottawa est une publication thématique semestrielle de la Faculté d'éducation.

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La Revue est une initiative du vice-doyen à la recherche.

ISSN# 1925-5497

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