Partnering Across Generations: Viewpoints inspired by Learning for Well-being

By Linda O'Toole and Luis Manuel Pinto

Welcome to the 7th issue of the Learning for Well-being (L4WB) Magazine. This issue represents a slight departure from previous issues of the L4WB Magazine. We structured this issue around the theme, *Partnering Across Generations*, and invited authors to address one of the principles of L4WB, specifically in relation to ACT2gether, a new initiative stewarded by the L4WB Foundation. The featured texts represent viewpoints anchored in the personal experiences of each of the authors.

This editorial provides an orientation to *Partnering Across Generations*, describing four different views on this theme and how these can be integrated by the ACT2gether initiative. We propose the L4WB principles, represented by the viewpoints in this issue, as a meaningful and practical framework. In doing so, we acknowledge the role of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as foundational and make a case for balancing a rights-based approach with one that emphasizes well-being and human development, offering a process-oriented way to remember our humanity. Within the L4WB principles, we highlight the first three principles as critical for allowing the inner life of children and adults to manifest through intergenerational partnerships. Lastly, we touch on cultivating core capacities as a means through which we animate these partnerships. We conclude with an invitation to renegotiate the ways you personally relate with younger and older generations by participating in the ACT2gether movement.

We are dedicating this issue to Jean Gordon, co-editor of the magazine, who died in October 2018. Jean was passionate about societal change through inclusive partnerships and was instrumental in shaping and enlivening ACT2gether. She was a friend and

colleague to all the authors of this issue, who have each included a brief statement about Jean at the end of their viewpoints.

1. Why intergenerational partnerships?

Since its beginnings, the Learning for Well-being Foundation[1] has advocated for a shift in paradigm where children are seen and treated as agents of change, rather than objects of care.[2] It seemed evident to us that human systems designed to serve children could only be fair and sustainable by taking their perspective into consideration. Our practice of involving children in reflection and decision-making processes evolved our thinking and led us to three important realizations:

- **The quality of relationships can trump structural opportunities for children's participation.** Even when policies and infrastructures are in place, the quality of relationships between generations can 'make or break' children's experience of engagement and having an opportunity to participate as their authentic selves.[3]
- **Focusing on the participation of children requires reflecting on the role and practice of adults who interact with them.** On the continuum of consulting with children to totally child-led activities, there are always adults who support, engage with or confront children's actions. In our experience, adults need preparation to engage in these activities, as much as children do.
- **Children's perspectives can enrich virtually all areas of life.** Children can contribute to creating environments that are directly designed to support them (school, family, healthcare) but also those that impact them indirectly (business, environment). We have often been surprised by what interests and concerns children, and the level of insight they can offer.

These insights encouraged us to start looking at children's participation from the perspective of a partnership across generations. Addressing children's participation acknowledges that the norm is for children to be excluded from offering opinions and being involved in decision-making. In the same sense, addressing intergenerational partnership acknowledges that children and adults can be competent partners in addressing the challenges that face them, together. We want both children's participation and partnering across generations to become the norm.

2. Four views on partnering between children and adults

We are witnessing the emergence of interest and support for co-creative initiatives involving children and young people in policymaking and service provision. Drawing inspiration from

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[1] At the time Universal Education Foundation.

[2] Ilona Kickbusch and Jean Gordon (2012), Learning for Well-being: 'A Policy Priority for Children and Youth in Europe. A process for change, with the collaboration of Linda O 'Toole', drafted on behalf of the Learning for Well-being Consortium of Foundations in Europe, (published by Universal Education Foundation).

[3] Lundy, L., McEvoy, L., & Byrne, B. (2011). Working with young children as co-researchers: An approach informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Early education & development, 22(5), 714-736.

the four perspectives in the Learning for Well-being framework [see Viewpoint 1 for a fuller discussion of the four perspectives], we identify four ways that collaboration between generations has been promoted. These approaches have been developed by different groups of academics, practitioners, and policymakers who have advocated for the involvement of children in decision-making from their particular standpoint. They formed pockets of good practice worldwide, that do not always see themselves as sharing a common ground, and at times compete for attention or resources.

The head argument – a matter of rights

We think of this as a 'head' oriented argument because it defines structures and laws that support the entitlement for children. Several social constructions of children see them as 'people in the making' or 'property of adults', instead of as individuals in their own right, entitled to dignity and to participate in decisions that affect them. This vision of children is translated in many behavioural and structural conditions – like voting age. Almost a third of the world's population are children aged between 0 and 18. Despite having nearly 50% of people living in democratic countries, participation is assumed to happen 'automatically' at age 18 or 21. We firmly believe this situation leads to children's disengagement from their role as citizens and a loss of faith in democratic processes. It is therefore a matter of rights, because children are entitled to be heard and taken seriously. Probably the most important marker of the widespread recognition for children as victims of social injustice is the development of the UNCRC, a comprehensive body of work, with a holistic and systemic view of children's lives, and the factors affecting them. [See Viewpoint 5 for a discussion of shifting views on participation.]

The heart argument – a matter of well-being

The 'heart' is associated with how we feel about ourselves and the world around us. A recent study of over 60,000 children in 18 countries confirmed a high correlation between positive relationships and subjective well-being. A report from the International Society for Child Indicators (ISCI) gathering in 2019[4] calls for children's involvement in any research on their lives, stating:

> Studies of children's well-being have seldom included children's participation, particularly in comparison with similar research on adults' well-being (Huebner, 2004). Indeed, researchers are only starting to listen to children, discover their opinions and evaluations and recognize that the children's points of view may be different from those of adults. …[...] including children and their own perspectives in research on their well-being is an obligation.

We suggest that many problems of children's mental health result from feeling isolated and not being heard by adults. Partnership is therefore a matter of well-being, and a way for both children and adults to create good relationships with others that help them flourish and contribute positively. [See Viewpoint 4 for the critical role of authentic relationships in determining well-being.]

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[4] Kutsar, Dagmar & Raid, Kadri. (2019). Children's Subjective Well-Being in Local and International Perspectives. Retrieved from https://www.stat.ee/publication-2019_childrens-subjective-well-being-in-local-and-international-perspectives on 2019-10-25

The hand argument – a matter of sustainability

The 'hand' relates to what we offer as services, and what is available as resources. Education, economic, health and social welfare systems are failing those they aim to serve. Of all stakeholders, children (in spite of being almost a third of the world population) are the least taken into consideration in systems design and reform. Often this results in services that are inefficient, unsustainable, and unfair. Children and young people are raising awareness of these challenges and rallying others to stand with them. Some examples are Malala (Pakistan) for the right of women to education, the Parkland Secondary School students (USA) for the right to safety, and Greta Thunberg (Sweden) for the right to a sustainable future.

As suggested by the New Economics Foundation, co-production of services suggests doing things 'with children,' rather than doing them 'to' or 'for children'. This approach goes beyond consultation, providing children and young people with the opportunity to 'be the change'. To achieve this, it focuses on children as part of their own solution.[5]

Designing unsustainable systems leads to increased poverty, illness and conflict. Partnering across generations offers the hope of systemic and sustainable outcomes for children, for their peers, and for their families. [Viewpoint 6 describes some paths for improving systems through human connections and bottom-up interventions; Viewpoint 7 offers an example of a co-produced assessment system.]

The spirit argument – a matter of wholeness

The idea of 'spirit' evokes what connects us with something larger than ourselves. The ways we have constructed our ideas of childhood and adulthood may limit our ability to see ourselves and to be whole human beings. For example: seeing children as victims, makes us see adults as protectors – both are limiting. Another critical reminder is that children and adults are not monolithic groups. [Consider Viewpoint 3 on patterns of individual differences that continue from childhood to adulthood.] By narrowing how we conceive of generational differences, we have created fragmentation: ascribing certain qualities to childhood (spontaneity, playfulness, curiosity) and others to adulthood (responsibility, stability, commitment) – qualities which are often seen as opposite polarities.

The consequence of fragmentation is not allowing ourselves the full expression of our potential at any age. This might be reinforced by what is expected from peers, and what qualities are rewarded (or sanctioned) in our societies. This fragmentation can be the cause of losing connection with others and with our deeper sense of purpose. Suppressing what might be perceived as 'childish characteristics' leads to the loss of the creativity, entrepreneurship and resilience necessary to address individual and societal problems. Creating spaces for partnership between children and adults is a matter of wholeness, allowing both to experience more freedom to be their unique selves, and develop a fuller

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[5] New Economic Foundation, & Action for Children. (2006). A guide to co-producing children's services. In *Backing the Future* (Vol. 1). Retrieved from https://neweconomics.org/2009/09/guide-co-producing-childrens-services

range of human qualities accessible to any age. Children can be serious, and adults can be playful.
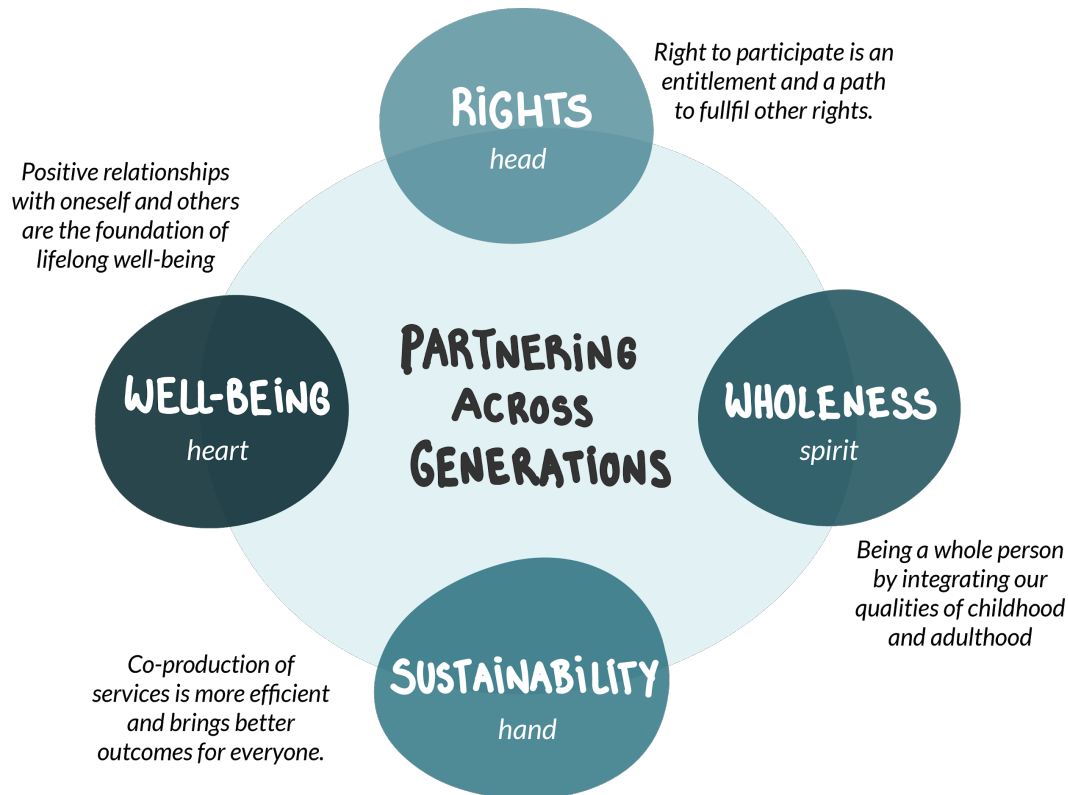

Figure 1. Diagram summarizing the 4 views on intergenerational partnerships.

3. Making a case for ACT2gether

With ACT2gether, the Learning for Well-being Foundation proposes to gather all perspectives for a holistic approach to partnering between adults and children. It intends to provide a means for children to engage with their head, heart, hands and spirit while being recognized as competent partners; it encourages adults to reconnect with their innate qualities and take full responsibility for modelling their humanity rather than dominating or exerting power over young people or moulding children into their image of adulthood. Its aim is to help children and adults in every environment work together in addressing the challenges that affect their lives. It is an intergenerational partnership approach to fulfilling children's right to participate in decision-making, and thus create societies that serve everyone, young and old.

We are bringing to light the latent wisdom and intelligence of children, legitimizing and exploring it. From a rights and well-being point of view, as well as from the point of view of driving innovation, there is a lot to be learned by and from children in a way that has broad ramifications for human beings. Elevating this knowledge is an unmined asset that we are not sufficiently utilizing as a species.

More than a project, ACT2gether is an idea and a movement that intends to spread the awareness of the importance and benefits of generations working together towards the

goals of fairness and sustainability that are outlined by the sustainable development goals set for 2030. In 2019, the Universal Declaration on the Rights of the Child celebrates its 30th anniversary. Within it, there is a promise of involving children and young people in the decisions that impact their lives. Fulfilling this promise is crucial to obtain social equity and sustainability in our societies, because only if we ACT2gether, can we reach future-proof solutions for the issues that affect us today.

The particular characteristics of ACT2gether initiatives can be grouped around the questions of WHO partners, HOW they partner, and WHY they partner.

1. **WHO? Children and adults in partnership.**
   Activities can be planned, implemented or evaluated in partnership between children and adults. Depending on the possibilities, children might be involved by being consulted, acting as collaborators or leading different components of the activity.
   Working in partnership between children and adults – with the necessary experience, inspiration, information and tools – is a catalyst for adults and organisations to move from acting FOR children to acting WITH children.
2. **HOW? A holistic approach (supported by the L4WB framework).**
   Activities consider and engage all four perspectives: mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual in order to offer transformative learning experience lived through collaboration between children and adults which links personal transformation with societal change.
3. **WHY? Create fairness and sustainability in their environments.**
   Collaboration happens around key questions important to realize the rights of children and adults, ultimately promoting their well-being. Outputs are local or individual actions done through intergenerational partnership, where children and adults contribute to a fair and sustainable world, while realizing their unique potential.

With this initiative, we are building on our collective experience of 6 years organizing Children as Actors Transforming Society (CATS), where we modelled the collaboration between children and adults around different themes. We wish to create the next iteration where we focus on supporting others in creating such spaces of partnership between generations and between peers.

The Learning for Well-being Foundation stewards this initiative through three main activities at international level: (1) by modelling and supporting transformative gatherings that enable those working '*for children*' to start working '*with children*'; (2) it offers training opportunities and tools that cultivate the necessary capacities for children and adults to act as competent partners; and (3) it develops alliances, offline and online, supported by digital platforms that enable the initiative to extend into the virtual world.

4. Remembering our humanity

The Learning for Well-being framework describes 7 principles which are represented through the viewpoints in this issue. The principles encapsulate what any living system, whether individual or collective, needs in order to thrive. The principles are process-oriented, focused on how conditions are put in place to help one consider action in a way that is life affirming. Together, they represent a whole system and support what we want to achieve in ACT2gether, as a ground for partnering between children and adults, and as a practice field for remembering our humanity.

1. Wholeness
Cultivate expressions of wholeness in people, communities and societies: creating environments for physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development through the practice of core capacities.

2. Purpose
Allow the unfolding of unique potential in individuals and communities: nurturing behaviours that provide purpose, meaning and direction in every activity.

3. Inner Diversity
Respect individual uniqueness and diversity: encouraging diverse perspectives and multiple expressions.

4. Relationships & Communication
Emphasize the quality of relationships: focusing on process and seeing the other as a competent partner.

5. Participation & Engagement
Support the engaged participation of those concerned, involving everyone in decisions that impact them.

6. Nested Systems
Recognize nested systems as influencing one another: providing opportunities for different sectors and disciplines to work together.

7. Feedback
Ensure conditions for feedback and self-organization: measuring what matters for the well-being and sustainability of any system.

We are proposing ACT2gether as a way to inspire and nurture partnering across generations. In the spirit of a living system approach we recognize that having all of the principles represented is one way to move towards sustaining holistic and systemic environments which support human functioning. The authors in this issue have highlighted examples of how each of the L4WB principles are implemented in ACT2gether – as part of the overall design, the methodology and the content. For events that are part of ACT2gether, Viewpoint 1 on Wholeness offers particularly comprehensive and concrete examples.

The UNCRC, celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2019, is the foundation on which ACT2gether rests. Since its establishment, it has advanced the ways in which children are protected, supported and treated as equals in dignity. In the first years there was a strong focus on gaining widespread adoption, emphasizing children's rights to provision and protection (less on participation.) In recent years, there has been increasing activity to support children's right to participate in decisions that affect them. [Discussed in Viewpoint 5.] As a result, there has been greater attention on process elements related to *how* these ideas were being implemented, the need for shifts in attitudes of adults and children involved, and the quality of their interactions. The L4WB approach aims to expand the understanding of children's rights and participation, extending it to the context of well-being, flourishing and human development.

The UNCRC is comprehensive, with a systemic view of children's lives and the factors affecting them. However, many discourses around children's rights take a rather legalistic expression, attracting mainly the legal and social welfare sectors. L4WB, and other advocates for children's well-being, look at child participation as an important determinant of healthy development, and as a basic human need. Both perspectives contribute to an ever-evolving understanding of children's rights, and both need to be engaged in a global community of advocates for children's rights if we are to create a culture shift in relation to the way children are seen and treated.

ACT2gether has the potential, through its emphasis on the relationship between children and adults, to integrate rights-based views, and to galvanize individuals and organizations that identify with a developmental perspective on child participation – a perspective which is often underrepresented. In promoting the use of the L4WB Framework we see the UNCRC as foundational, and the seven principles as a container for a *process approach* that encourages holistic systems and environments. A well-being approach remembers the subjective dimension of life, including the importance of experiencing meaning and purpose in one's life and of agency, belonging and being recognized as competent.

While all seven principles represent the conditions necessary for holistic environments, we are putting particular attention on the first three principles: wholeness, unique potential, and inner diversity. We regard these central principles as a unique contribution of L4WB,

one that is reflected in how Otto Scharmer, author of Theory U,[6] describes his view on leadership and facilitating corporate change:

> We know a great deal about what leaders do and how they do it. But we know very little about the inner place, the source from which they operate. Successful leadership depends on the quality of attention and intention that the leader brings to any situation.

Scharmer describes a 'blind spot' in individuals, organizations, and society as the lack of awareness about the interior condition from which our attention and actions originate. As a society, we have placed significant weight on exploring and creating the externalized structures and processes without considering how they connect to the inner life. With the Learning for Well-being approach, we want to balance this emphasis with how we experience our thoughts, feelings, and souls so that we illuminate our 'blind spots'. We believe that a focus on the central core principles aids this process.
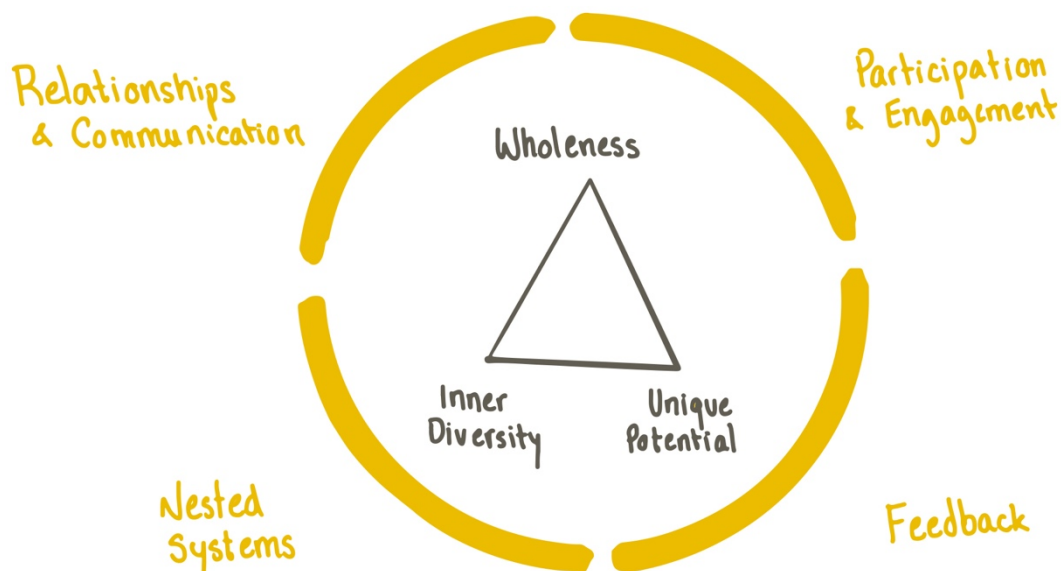

Figure 2. Another view of the L4WB principles.

5. Inner place from which we operate

The first three principles of the L4WB framework reflect the inner source to which Scharmer refers. It is our view that these principles are insufficiently acknowledged in daily life and often overlooked in processes involving children; yet recognizing their value is key for encouraging a flourishing life. By highlighting the importance of this inner place from which we operate, we give priority to processes that contribute to the well-being of individuals as well as whole communities and societies. In the L4WB approach there is an underlying assumption and deeply held belief (a matter of both evidence and faith) that systemic change requires the involvement of oneself – iconically stated as 'we must be the change

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[6] Scharmer, C. O. (2008). Uncovering the blind spot of leadership. *Leader to Leader*, *2008*(47), 52-59.Retrieved on 26 October 2019 from http://www.allegrosite.be/artikels/Uncovering_the_blind_spot_of_leadership.pdf

we want to see'. These core principles need to permeate every aspect of ACT2gether for it to promote the most effective and expansive practice of partnering across generations.

With these three core principles in dynamic interaction, it is often difficult (and perhaps unnecessary) to differentiate them in practice. What they share is constancy over a lifetime: ways of being that expand and contract and develop over time yet remain uniquely expressive of who we are and how we function. Patterns of inner diversity are closest to the surface of what we can see and hear (see figure 1 in Viewpoint 3 for a depiction of the relationship between personality, behaviour, temperament and patterns of processing.) We know them largely through inference in how they impact the ways in which we learn, communicate, seek to know, solve problems, and develop. They reflect our unique ways of knowing and engaging with others, and from the differences between our own patterns and those of the people around us (regardless of their age) springs a multitude of misinterpretations, lack of understanding, and potential conflict as well as the possibility of being accepted fully.

A practical application of respecting individual uniqueness and diversity in groups is to consider what we mean by 'participating'. Taking into account patterns of inner diversity opens the question of *how* children and adults are participating, rather than *whether* they are participating. Silent observation and listening can look like disengagement, when it might in fact be a way of contributing to a group or be a precursor to later action. Without considering inner diversity, we might privilege a particular form of participation, whether that is cultural or individual, in detriment of other forms.

In groups or relationships, encouraging the unfolding of unique potential in children and adults asks us to consider whether there is a clear purpose for the process in which they are asked to participate, and whether this purpose is meaningful to the individual members of the group. This attention to the immediate purpose of an activity requires that those involved have a deeper sense of what brings meaning and purpose to their lives, and how that connects with the context in which they are participating. There is often an interchangeable use of the terms 'full potential' and 'unique potential', but they are distinct. Full potential implies the maximal, or at least optimal, development and expression of our gifts and talents. Unique potential refers to the centralizing impulse of your life – that which offers a story to be told, a fiery passion, a constant thread, an inner compass, or essential essence. The unique potential is intended to represent the organizing principles of a particular individual: every person is born with the potential to be more fully and deeply her/himself. This is at the core of what it means to be human. Full potential wants a blossoming and full expression of what we can do; unique potential asks us to deepen, to live and to bring forth what only we can offer.

In Viewpoint 2 the author describes discovering her own unique potential. In doing that, she links her journey with realizing her life purpose, knowing what she is called to do and who she is invited to be in that process. Paying attention to individual purpose and its link to group purpose is an opportunity to notice what is unique about each child and adult, and how such uniqueness is expressed as implicit qualities that are available for the individual and in service to the group. This, in turn, reminds us that creating 'safety' needs

to extend beyond physical and emotional considerations to creating safe spaces for our life purpose to express, through acknowledgement of its active presence. If we consider our pattern of inner diversity as *HOW* we function, we might usefully call our core driving force (unique potential) the *WHY* of how we operate. Always, they work together.

The other factor related to our inner life, as we are exploring it in the core principles of L4WB, is represented by Wholeness. Considering wholeness in partnerships between children and adults invites us to nurture ways through which the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of the person (and the experience) are engaged. This is an invitation for everyone to bring their thoughts, feelings, actions and intentions into the present moment. However, we need to remember that the four perspectives are proxy positions to highlight what is, in fact, indivisibly dynamic and complete. The principle of wholeness is intended to reflect the ground on which life, and we through our unique selves, operate. This implies a cultivation of aliveness and presence that celebrates groups of people working together. For example, being motivated by working with children as competent partners will inspire adults to work with other adults as competent partners, contributing to a fairer and more sustainable world. It has been said that we must look to the younger generation to save the world. From the standpoint of wholeness, we must look to *all* generations working together as the ones to make a difference in the trajectory of humanity. A significant contribution to living the principle of wholeness is the practice of core capacities.

6. The role of core capacities

Learning for Well-being has proposed a set of core capacities that support the development of more complex competences. These offer simple and natural actions that are seemingly innate so developing them is a matter of refining, engaging, and fully expressing them. The set identified includes: reflecting, noticing, listening, inquiring, empathizing, subtle sensing, enriching sensory awareness, relaxing, and discerning patterns and systemic processes. [7]

These capacities can be experienced through three aspects (**mental, emotional** and **physical**) along a continuum from material to **spiritual**. Each of us has an individual relationship with the core capacities: for some, empathizing is experienced as literally feeling what another feels; for others, it registers as the ability to understand another person's motivations and life circumstances. The individualized experiences of the core capacities are useful in discovering and working with one's patterns of processing in educational settings as discussed in Viewpoint 3. The authors of Viewpoint 4 identify the core capacities as 'processes that can be practiced and enlivened to help develop mutual trust and care in partnerships.' The value of the core capacities in evaluation and feedback

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[7] O'Toole, L. (2016). 'Cultivating Capacities: A Description of the Learning for Well-Being Approach to Core Practices'. In *Improving the Quality of Childhood in Europe* (pp. 14-29). Brussels: Alliance for Childhood European Network Foundation.

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is highlighted in Viewpoint 7. All three examples demonstrate the utility of practicing core capacities to enrich partnerships.

Beyond this utility, the core capacities function as mediators, connecting our unique potential, and how it is expressed through our patterns of processing, to the ground on which we live. These are foundational abilities that enable us to be 'more finely and deeply human', enabling the expression of one's soul, through unique patterning of thinking, feeling, and doing. As such they represent a form of *sacred technology* that refines our ability to relate with ourselves, others and our environments.

In an authentic sense, core capacities can be seen as 'building blocks' for more complex life skills AND as qualities of the soul that allow those qualities to manifest in daily life and activate our capacity to engage and serve according to our own specific inner life. This is the heart of what ACT2gether wants to support.

7. An invitation

Our hope is that this issue of the magazine will inspire your interest in encouraging collaboration and partnering across generations. If you want to learn more or participate in ACT2gether, there are several ways you can be involved:

- **Share with us any initiative** in any environment or sector, that involves children as partners — not only as beneficiaries — in addressing needs in the community. We will be inviting representatives of these initiatives to share their story in our media, and in our events.
- **Attend one of our 2getherLAND events** and start connecting with an international community of child and adult supporters of intergenerational partnership.
- **Start your own activity and contribute to a growing movement.** If you feel it is aligned with the spirit of ACT2gether, get in touch with us. There is a whole team and a wider community here to help you with connections, knowledge and inspiration.
- **Let us know how we can do this better.** The Learning for Well-being Foundation has been stewarding this initiative trying to make the best of what it has to offer, and what the world needs. Your feedback can help us bridge these two sides better.

An Attempt at Wholeness: Using Four Perspectives in Creating Intergenerational Events

By Luís Manuel Pinto

1. An attempt at wholeness

I was offered the challenge of writing an article in which I should propose a way to fulfil the first principle of the L4WB framework, described in short as 'wholeness', and consider its importance when thinking about intergenerational partnerships, or in particular relationships between children and adults. The principle reads:

> Cultivate expressions of wholeness in people, communities and societies: creating environments for physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development through the practice of core capacities.

Personally, I place a lot of emphasis on the 'how': How can this principle be applied in a practical way? What could I write that would almost serve as a set of guidelines and examples for those wanting to bring a greater sense of wholeness to their intergenerational practice? I am interested in these questions because although the Learning for Well-being framework might be considered abstract in nature, it has for me very concrete implications in the way I design and facilitate learning experiences, especially those that need to consider complexity such as differences in age, culture and learning preferences.

I have decided to base this article on my experience of attempting to cultivate wholeness in international gatherings for large groups of children[1] and adults. The idea of wholeness is important to me because I believe it makes explicit some elements that people might feel were overlooked (or in contrary, well addressed) in organized collective experiences. Some might leave feeling there was no space for personal connection, or that not enough attention was paid to the physical environment. Some might say that everything was well thought through, but they missed the underlying intention. It had no 'soul'. In this article I will try to connect these dots.

The right to be a whole person

ACT2gether is an international initiative that aims to fulfil children's right to participate in the decisions that affect them, through intergenerational partnership in every environment. One might be surprised to know that being recognized as a whole person and developing all of one's aspects is a right enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 29 which defines the Aims of Education. The General Comment No.1 further expands the intention of the article by stating:

> article 29 (1) insists upon a holistic approach to education which ensures that the educational opportunities made available reflect an appropriate balance between promoting the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional aspects of education[2]

Once a principle is established and agreed upon by almost all countries in the world, the question then becomes 'how to apply it?' This article will explore 'how' and 'why' to cultivate wholeness, but before that, I would like to start with the 'what' by sharing some of my own reflections about what wholeness means and how we – as human beings – can grasp it. Building on that, I will show how the four perspectives embedded in the Learning for Well-being framework can be used as a guiding structure to nurture holistic experiences for children and adults together. I will illustrate with practical examples, how the same perspectives can be used in designing, implementing, and evaluating intergenerational events. These examples are as much from practice, as they are from my wishful imagination. To conclude, I will advance some arguments in support of adopting the four perspectives as an approach, but also elicit some of what I perceive can be limitations. I hope I have managed to spark your curiosity so far… now stay with me.

2. Understanding wholeness

The use of the term 'wholeness' was first attributed to a South African philosopher Jan Christiaan Smuts (1870-1950) who was pointing out something fundamental: that there is a universal pattern in nature to form organized 'wholes', always greater than the sum of their parts.[3] This holistic worldview has been expressed in different cultures and moments in time

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[1] The use of the term 'child' refers to people aged up to 18 years old.
[2] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), General comment No. 1 (2001), Article 29 (1), The aims of education, 17 April 2001, CRC/GC/2001/1, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/4538834d2.html [accessed 26 July 2019].
[3] Smuts, J. C. (1927). Holism and evolution. Macmillan. Retrieved from http://krishikosh.egranth.ac.in/bitstream/1/2048242/1/0198_2688A.pdf

and has been applied to fields as varied as biology, psychology, language, ecology, community and organizational development. In Western cultures it has greatly emerged in contrast to the so-called *mechanistic* worldview associated with philosophers like Newton (1642-1727) or Descartes (1596-1650).[4]

Digging into the etymology of the word 'whole' I realized its roots help us understand what cultivating wholeness might mean. Two streams of associations with wholeness stand out: one, the quality of something complete, integrated, global… and second, that something is healthy, that it preserves its own dynamic integrity.[5] So, striving to cultivate wholeness in people and environments invites us to first, understand and respect what keeps the integrity of any living system we relate to, and second, act in a way that engages, and potentially expands, all dimensions of its experience.

Four perspectives into wholeness

But in which way can we grasp and work with wholeness? It might be fair to say about us human beings that when we try to understand something, we break it into parts. Think of different ways we have tried to map out the whole of human experience through mental models: yin-yang, masculine-feminine, five elements[6], twelve zodiac signs…

A few ideas are constant in all these systems: (1) there are elements of the whole in every part; (2) the whole is greater than its parts; (3) the parts are never distributed equally in any system, whether person or environment.

This 'breaking-down-into-parts' strategy just seems to be a persistent part of our human nature. We know that grasping wholeness will always remain an attempt for there is always an element we did not consider, or simply cannot contain. But there is hope for this Cartesian-inspired way of taking hold of our shared human experience. If we consider different (and enough) perspectives, then we might come close to a sense of wholeness. As for what we cannot grasp, we can still allow and even appreciate the mystery.

The Learning for Well-being framework describes four perspectives, as means to guide us into continuously experiencing more wholeness in our lives. They are referred to metaphorically as physical, emotional, mental and spiritual perspectives, although the same notions and associated terms have been described differently in other contexts. The four perspectives were chosen because of their intuitive appeal, and because correspondences can be found in many other approaches, coming from traditional and scientific sources.

The table 1 below shows a series of equivalences that can be approximately found in other ways of organizing the same perspectives. I ask you to look at the different sets of words horizontally (per line) and to take the content of the table lightly. Simply consider that in different places in the world, human beings have attempted to capture wholeness by noticing similar four sets of characteristics. Isn't that intriguing? Try to create your own…

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4 Clark, E. T. (1991). Holistic Education: A Search for Wholeness. New Directions in Education. Selections from Holistic Education Review, 53-62. Brandon, US: Holistic Education Press.
5 Retrieved from https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/whole [accessed 26 July 2019].
6 Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/classical_element [accessed 26 July 2019].

Table 1: Equivalences between four perspectives

	PERSPECTIVES			
	MENTAL	EMOTIONAL	PHYSICAL	SPIRITUAL
Function	Thinking	Feeling	Doing	Being
Body	Head	Heart	Hands/Feet	Spirit
Movement	Stability	Flexibility	Mobility	Balance
Directions	North	West	South	East
Elements	Air	Water	Earth	Fire
Time	Future	Present	Past	Infinity
Plan	Goals	Relationships	Actions	Inspiration
Language	Words	Feelings	Sensations	Intentions
Your Own ...	....	....	....	....

Source: Adapted from "Four Perspectives" handout, Learning for Well-being Foundation. Courtesy of Linda O'Toole.

For the sake of consistency throughout the rest of the article, I would like to describe briefly the four perspectives, and anchor a few of their associated keywords or qualities. These keywords refer to ways in which the perspective can be experienced in people but also in moments (time) and organizations (space). They can be lived in their most concrete and tangible expression – like the walls of a house – or be felt as abstract and subtle, more like the blueprint that guided the construction, or the intention of the architect, that can be felt but not seen.

- The *physical perspective* relates to the function of **doing**. It can be experienced as **sensations**, **actions** but also as a connection to, and between, **environments**. Its most subtle and universal expression can be felt as a sense of **will** or power to create and change.

- The *emotional perspective* relates to the function of **feeling**. It can be experienced through **subjective expression** and **relationships** but also in the multiple and dynamic **connections** between people, animals, ideas. In its most subtle expression, it can be experienced as pervasive and universal **love**.

- The *mental perspective* relates to the function of **thinking**. It can be experienced through **concepts** and **values**, but also a sense of **structure** that keeps the boundaries of spaces, roles, or organisms. In its most universal and subtle expression it can be felt as the quality of **light** or clarity.

- The *spiritual perspective* relates to the simple state of **being**. It can be experienced through a feeling of **transcendence**, a deeper **meaning**, and be articulated through **symbols** and art. In its most subtle experience, the spiritual perspective can be felt as a sense of **oneness** with all that exists.

The keywords can be placed around a circle, inspired by representations of wholeness like medicine wheels or the four directions.
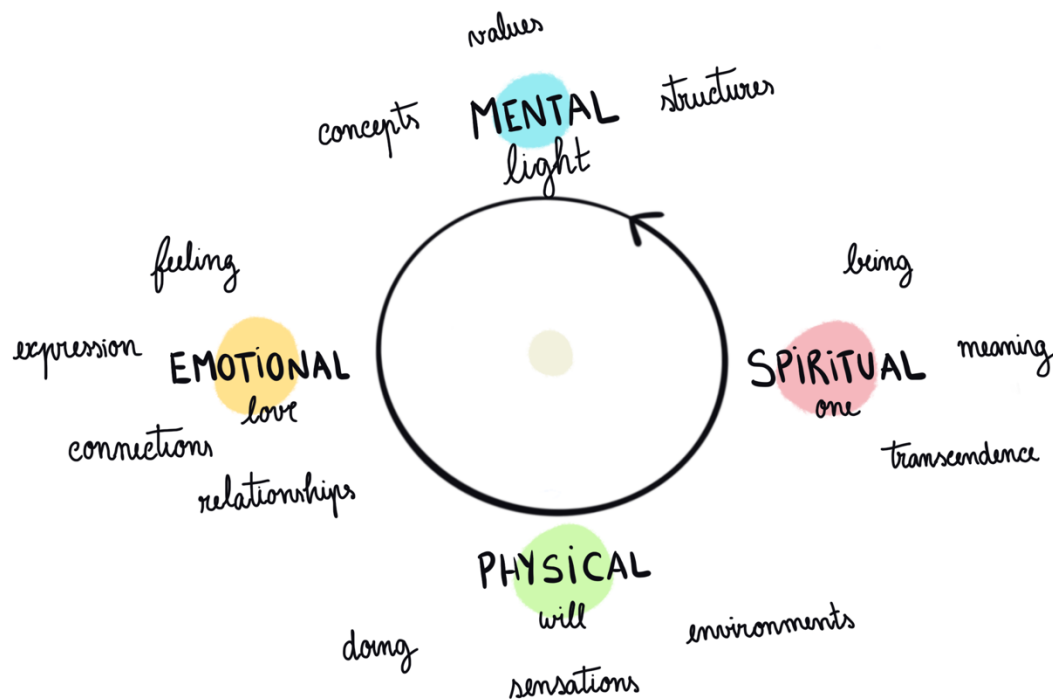

Figure 1 – Keywords associated with the perspectives around a wheel

Facilitating four perspectives

Cultivating wholeness in events requires us to become intentional in all the choices concerning the experience lived by people in the event, from space to time, from food to materials, from content to process. All this, while making sure all four perspectives are considered.

The four perspectives function like fractals and can be used to define quality criteria or desirable outcomes from an experience. See below how the four perspectives can shed a light on important aspects of any event: the structures put in place and given information, the quality of relationships and space for making connections, space to take and plan action, and the intention, or 'spirit' of the event:

Table 2: Using the four perspectives to define quality (read horizontally).

		PERSPECTIVES			
		MENTAL	EMOTIONAL	PHYSICAL	SPIRITUAL
EXPRESSED IN …	Structures and information	Information is clear and accessible for all	There are options to choose from, and possibility to change	There are opportunities and spaces to contribute	Clarity (light)
	Relationships and connections	There are clear roles, boundaries and responsibilities	There is space for personal expression and connections	There are opportunities to play, and be spontaneous	Connection (love)
	Actions and details	There are support structures for taking action	Participants have ways to find partners, discuss plans	There are opportunities to experiment and acquire skills.	Engagement (will)
	Intention and 'spirit'	Space for new ideas and insights to emerge	Participants feel a connection to a larger whole	Participants feel a sense of service and purpose.	Deeper Meaning (oneness)

Source: Luis Manuel Pinto

Through time, different bodies of practice in experience design and facilitation have privileged one or another perspective. Let's look at some examples of very well-known practices that support communication and action:

- Non-violent Communication privileges Thinking and Feeling. It brilliantly knits a four-step structure and precise wording, with the inner world of feelings and needs.
- Theory U privileges Doing and Being. It facilitates social change coming from a place of presence, allowing the future to emerge.
- Technology of Participation privileges Thinking and Doing. It offers systems to make visible all inputs from a group and process them in an inclusive way so that patterns can be seen, priorities established, and decisions made.
- Way of the Council privileges Being and Feeling. It gives space for each person in a circle to take their turn speaking from a place of full presence in a group

Using the four perspectives as a guide can help us not only understand and choose methods adequately, according to the qualities we want to emphasise, they also function as 'quality control' to make sure the event considers all aspects of human experience.

3. Using the four perspectives in events for children and adults

2getherLAND, is one of the activity strands of ACT2gether. It is a model of gatherings for children and adults to play and work together around a theme of importance in their lives.

The basic tenets of 2getherLAND can be applied to local and self-organized gatherings (e.g. a school day or community event) or international multi-day events, and mobilize many relationships and resources like in the 2getherLAND Global event which gathers about 250 children and adults from all over the world.

In this section, I will describe some of the ways in which we have used (or aspired to use) the four perspectives as a way to cultivate wholeness in 2getherLAND's development. Most of these practices have been used or created with the core team of child and adult volunteers that imagine, design, implement and evaluate the international event.

a. Creating a rhythm for the event

One of the ways we have been using the four perspectives in working with intergenerational groups and planning events is by pinning them on the metaphor of a compass, indicating the four directions. In this case, the East is associated with the Spiritual perspective, North is associated with the Mental perspective, West is associated with the Emotional perspective, and South is associated with the Physical perspective.

Going around the wheel, starting from the East – where the Sun rises – we design a programme for the event that approximately follows the four directions. Each moment has one perspective as guiding intention[7].
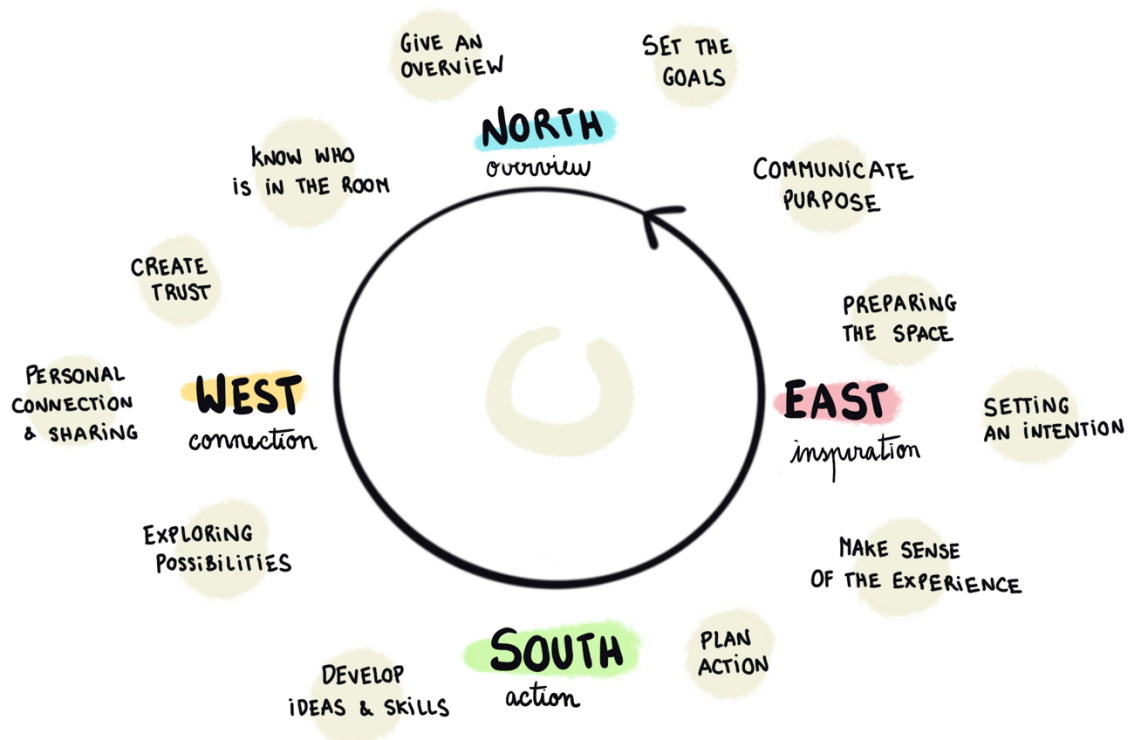

Figure 2 – Planning event through four perspectives

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[7] A four-fold model for community planning has been made popular worldwide by Dragon Dreaming International (http://www.dragondreaming.org)

- Setting the tone of the event from the beginning by making sure there is a shared spirit in the hosting team, that the space conveys the intention of the event, and that the very first activity is above all, inspiring [spiritual perspective].

- The next moment should put the necessary structures in place for participants to know how to navigate the event. This means making clear what will happen, who is there for what, what are the boundaries (child protection) and where heading [mental].

- After the foundational information is given, space is given to know who the part of the group is, what their aspirations are. We give space for creating personal connections through storytelling and networking so that there is basis of trust for the next moment [emotional perspective].

- Once there is a bedrock of self-confidence and trust in others, and ideas have started emerging from interaction, the direction of the programme starts moving to give space for participants to suggest and develop their own actions. [physical perspective].

- At the end of the programme, we come full circle by reviewing and integrating the event experience into a 'new self', stimulating a sense of purpose and meaning, and inspiring the group to apply and share their learning with the outside world [spiritual perspective].

I'd like to point out that using the four perspectives mechanically, either using them as checklists or being rigid or persistently linear about their application somehow contradicts the intention. Even when they serve as a guiding structure, they should be seen more as ingredients in a recipe. All of them are present, but you might emphasise a particular taste in any given moment. The illustration below shows how this might play out in the course of 2getherLAND.
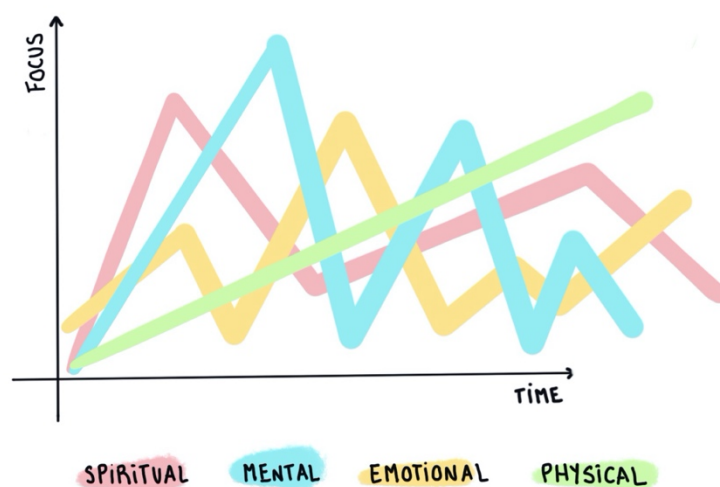

Figure 3 – Focus on different perspectives during an event

b. Exploring one's inner life. Finding your ground.

Creating a model of the wheel on the ground (Photo 1), we use the four perspectives with the core team composed of child and adult volunteers to talk about differences in perception and preferences in the group. We ask the group to find a place within the wheel, and in relation to the four directions, that represents some aspect of their inner life. We might ask 'what place on the wheel represents what you care for the most?' or we might ask 'what place on the wheel represents where is important for you to start any activity you don't know?'. The wheel and the four directions become a metaphor through which people can express, and gain recognition, for the perspectives they feel they represent in the collaboration.

Photo 1

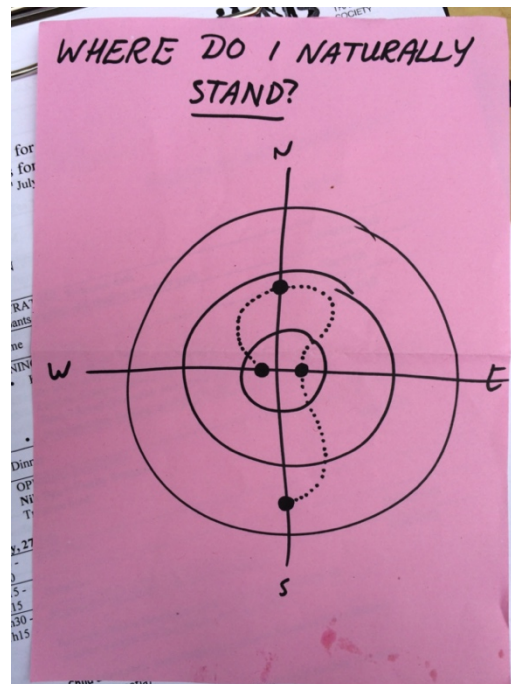Wheel with four perspectives drawn on the floor

Photo 2

Exercise reflecting on which perspectives feel more natural

In Photo 2, we can see how a young collaborator, at the time 18 years old, adapted the exercise to explain his internal process. He showed how he might address any new situation by starting with one perspective wanting to have concrete experience (physical/south), then seeking the deeper meaning (spiritual/east), then try to get an overview (mental/north), and finally making personal sense (emotional/west).

c. Giving clarity and choice in the programme

Another metaphor we have used to work with the four perspectives is *head*, *heart*, *hand* and *spirit*. We have used these to give information about the form of engagement that different elements of 2getherLAND's programme are privileging. 'Head'-related sessions were dedicated to clarifying concepts and sharing information. 'Heart' sessions would privilege sharing of personal experiences and dialogue. 'Hand' sessions would either imply

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learning by doing and working with concrete examples. 'Spirit' sessions would turn more toward the inside and use contemplative practices as an approach.

How many times have you chosen a workshop because of its content but then feel totally disengaged because of the means used to address it? Using the four perspectives can be helpful to support participants in choosing activities that are interesting to them both in terms of content, but also process. It also helps the team designing the programme to give room for more modalities through which content is addressed. One of the ways we have tried to cultivate wholeness in the way we work with serious topics like violence against children, and in particular stimulating the spiritual perspective, is making use of the arts. Theatre, poetry, music, movement have all been appreciated by children and adults as powerful ways to address difficult topics, and develop participants own awareness and resilience. I'd like to make the case for using the arts as a way to acknowledge and bring forward different ways of knowing, and these should be an intrinsic part of cultivating wholeness in any event or space dedicated to learning

d. Taking care of space

Using the four perspectives when preparing a space to host a group of children and adults helps us consider aspects of space organization and aesthetics that will make the experience of the space more adapted to your intention and create more vitality.

- Is the orientation in the room clear? Is it clean and structured? [mental perspective]
- Are the furniture and the materials appealing and safe to both children and adults in the room? Will people be able to connect easily with one another, as well as with the facilitators? [emotional perspective]
- Do you have the materials and space to engage the group in the activities you planned? Can it be easily changed? [physical perspective]
- Is there a sense of beauty and spaciousness, connection to the outside world? [spiritual perspective]

e. Evaluating the experience

We have also used the four perspectives to reflect back on the experience and make decisions about how we might change certain aspects to make it more holistic. There are a few ways in which we have done this:

Ask questions related to the four perspectives through a digital polling system. With the questions projected on a screen, participants answered with their electronic devices and could immediately discuss the results. Below is an example of how we have used the four perspectives in statements for the young people and adults to rate at the end of the meeting:

I gained enough clarity about aims, content and roles (Head)
I felt heard and I have opportunities to express myself (Heart)
I felt welcomed and I had chances to contribute (Hand)
I felt inspired and part of a larger family (Spirit)

4. Why cultivate wholeness?

Referring back to the different ways we divide the whole into parts, I am not sure whether it makes a difference whether we use the four perspectives, or one of the other ways, but I certainly advocate for finding your way to cultivate wholeness in any environment where you might gather children and adults. Here are three reasons 'why':

Allow participants to feel engaged and complete: Taking the four perspectives as a model to consider events I have attended in the past, it seems to me that most tend to privilege Thinking and Doing (e.g. sharing information and planning action), but don't intentionally address the Feeling and Being aspects (i.e. making personal connections and allowing space for stillness or connection to a larger purpose). They either take these perspectives for granted or simply do not allow space for them to be lived more fully. Environments that make space for all perspectives enable adults and children to develop their own physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects, as encouraged by the UNCRC when it proposes an Aim for Education (Article 29).

Figure 4 – Emphasis on vertical and horizontal axis in relation to the four perspectives
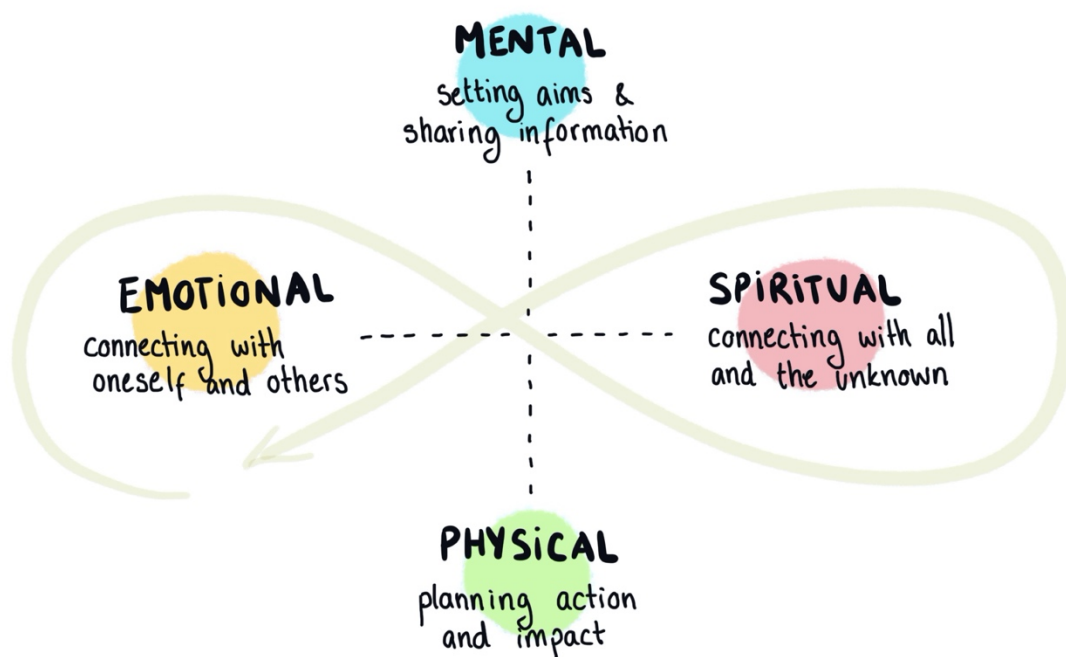
Give space to multiple ways of knowing: Allowing multiple expressions to find their home in the collective experience will honour children and adults' different ways of knowing. Bringing forward other means of engagement that don't privilege either verbal language and cognitive thinking will also make a more inclusive experience for the youngest participants, for people that do not speak the dominant language (i.e. English) and for those who have different cognitive and learning abilities. Cultivating wholeness is also a proxy for appreciating the wisdom of different sectors and disciplines. It's appreciating the

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'hard' and the 'soft' approaches, the value of science, art, tradition and spirituality brought together.

Greater purpose and meaning: All of the dimensions elicited by the four perspectives are pervasive in human experience. They are always present, whether you find yourself at home, at school or at the top of a mountain. As educators and activists, we must cultivate wholeness by first becoming aware of the presence and relevance of these different perspectives, and then learn how to work with them in a way that fulfils the purpose of our activities. Considering the four perspectives can help to make our experiences fairer, more sustainable and meaningful.

I'd like to make the point that striving for wholeness does not mean attempting to 'score high' on all perspectives, but rather creating an opportunity for each perspective to live fully, while respecting the dynamic balance that each person and moment carries. This does not mean that there is no space for evermore expanding our experience, but what I am advocating is for understanding what the starting point is, appreciating its beauty and contribution and then plan the journey from there. As someone once told me: 'We are all perfect, but we could all use a little improvement.'
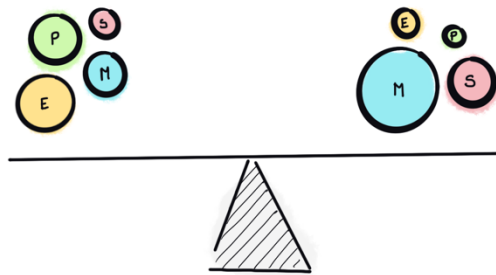

Figure 5 – Dynamic balance between different ratios of the four perspectives

5. Author

Luís loves to learn, and to help others learn. His longstanding focus has been on exploring and optimising individual differences in identity, learning and communication processes. He has developed several international educational programmes that support inclusion, personal development and participation of children, young people and adults. He holds a Masters degree in Educational Sciences, where he explored holistic education, self-directed learning and learning differences. Luís has a particular interest is using the body and the senses as an instrument for knowing and developing. In his role as Director for Programmes, Learning and Branding at the Learning for Well-being Foundation, Luís co-founded the ACT2gether initiative, which promotes partnership between generations for a fair and sustainable world. https://www.linkedin.com/in/luismanuelpinto

6. Dedication

I would like to end this article by dedicating it to Jean Gordon, who I worked with since the beginning of my journey with the Learning for Well-being approach. She passed away last year. Jean and I often found ourselves representing different perspectives in a conversation, but we were bound by our love for learning and our aspiration to make life feel more whole for children and adults alike. I miss a lot of things in Jean, but the thing I'll I always remember her for is her deep sense of integrity.

Thank you for staying with me until now.

The Greatest Connection: Unfolding Our Unique Potential Through Partnership Between All

By Maria Paz

Why do we question ourselves so much about what we can achieve? How is it so hard to believe in what we can create, as individual human beings but also as a whole, as humanity? I am 'only' 33 years old and I have had the chance to live certain experiences and meet other humans that have showed me that if we believe in oneself and in others then we are actually fulfilling life's purpose, which for me is to actually be here, live fully and believe in oneself and others. What has led me to this reflection? Discovering in my deepest self what some would call a concept but I will refer to as a feeling: that each and everyone of us has a **unique potential**; that if societal conditions let us fulfil this potential then humanity, 'we', will connect in a deeper way which will lead to a fairer world. In this article we will explore the profound connection that exists between each and everyone's **unique potential** and the **shift of paradigm and mindset that ACT2gether is promoting and wants to expand** all over the world. We will look at the purpose of ACT2gether, building partnership between generations for a fairer and sustainable world, as an essential piece in the puzzle to understand and fulfil our unique potential. We will explore this from the four perspectives proposed by the L4WB approach to understand how we need our head, heart, hand and spirit aligned in order to fulfil this purpose. We will discover how ACT2gether is implementing this approach in order to participate in a worldwide social movement and what the challenges of these are. I invite readers to explore and be aware that this could change our lives a little bit or a lot, and change the world in the most positive and courageous way, through believing in the greatest connection with everything and with all.

1. Introduction: How I personally connect to 'unique potential'

I started writing this article with a lot of questions. I had the privilege to write about something I believe in, but I thought at first: what a difficult task! One of my first questions was how do I talk about unique potential ('the vital energy and qualities that provide meaning, purpose and direction to an individual's life') without making it too personal? I felt blocked in trying to write; then, by talking about it one day in the office something clicked: why not make it personal? In fact, I believe that talking about purpose in life and each and everyone's unique potential is as personal as it can get. This viewpoint reflects my personal understanding, thoughts and feelings towards the fulfilment of our unique potential throughout life. Let me first tell you a bit about my story and then present how I believe it is linked to the values, purpose and work of ACT2gether.

I grew up in a small neighbourhood in La Paz, Bolivia, surrounded by mountains and the love of a very big family. I don't think I realized how lucky I was until I discovered, as an adult, that whenever someone talked about activities for developing our unique potential, I could somehow understand deep in myself what it meant. Little by little, I feel I am discovering, living and unfolding my unique potential, but how did I come to that? I haven't been able to fully answer that question yet. I know it is connected with feeling loved, being protected, feeling recognized and being offered different possibilities to grow on an intellectual and spiritual level.

A few years ago, I started working in the children's rights field, more specifically in the area of child participation. It felt like a call to me; everything within me felt aligned. I enjoyed it so much that I felt the need to understand how my engagement with this cause emerged. I attended different workshops, retreats, and meetings, finally finding my answer in a very simple and powerful meditation exercise of connecting to your inner child. During the exercise you remember how it was to be a child, and what feelings were the most significant. I remembered and realized that as a child, I felt considered, heard and loved. Those conditions completely changed my life and allowed me to find clear purpose as an adult. Having recognized those conditions, how do I – and how do WE – share this with others?

2. How I describe 'unique potential'

Learning for Well-being uses a working definition of well-being as 'realizing one's unique potential through physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual development in relation to self, others, and the environment'. This emphasizes that allowing the expression of our undivided and evolving self (unique potential) is at the heart of well-being.[1]

It is difficult to use words to explain something about which I feel so deeply. For me, unique potential has everything to do with spirituality, in the largest sense of this word. Finding the way to unfold one's unique potential is an ongoing spiritual experience. In reading remarks from a presentation by Guy Claxton, a British educator, I connected to his simple definition of a spiritual experience as a 'common experience.' Claxton refers to these experiences as more common (in frequency) than we think and also suggests that there are four qualities that spiritual experiences seem to have in common. He describes them as follows: 'an unusually strong sense of aliveness … frequently characterised by a heightened sense of energy and vitality – an unusual clarity or strength of perception.' The second quality is 'belonging: a sense of being at home, at ease in the world, that seems to be independent of actual places and situations.' The third quality he calls 'an affinity with mystery, involving a curious, almost paradoxical sense that all is well with the world, despite not knowing how things are going to turn out.' 'Fourth, there is a sense of enhanced peace of mind, a quietness of mind, heart, body and spirit.'[2]

There is a sense of wholeness as we consider these common elements of a spiritual experience, one that I can relate easily to my own early environment and experiences of feeling safe, loved, recognized for my own gifts, and inspired to grow. When you have a sense of meaning and purpose in your own life, you can feel anchored where you are, free to explore and be yourself, and live fully in presence through all of your life. It is the deepest connection that you can have with everything, knowing that you are part of a whole that is larger than yourself, and connected to the known, the unknown, and the unknowable. The beauty of this connection is that it allows us, in our differences, to share our common experiences of peace, mystery, belonging and aliveness, and through these to help ourselves and others to allow the expression of our unique potential.

What a privileged situation to be in where you can feel you are unfolding your unique potential, but what happens to children living in difficult situations, where many of their rights are not being respected? I believe that through these common experiences, spirituality is available in any setting. Finding a way to connect to your unique potential can be expressed in many different ways, such as resilience after a violent experience leading you to find the fire in you to fight injustice because you live it. It is a duty for all of us, who are conscious of this, to find ways to support others in their path and to fight with them for the respect of everyone's rights. That is where I find my 'fire'.

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[1] https://www.learningforwellbeing.org/our-approach/
[2] www.guyclaxton.net Mind Expanding: Scientific and Spiritual Foundations for the Schools We Need, University of Bristol lecture, October 21, 2002.

So, if we can talk about these experiences as being common how can we set up conditions so that everyone can discover their unique potential? How do we allow the expression of our unique potential for ourselves but also so that we can help others, and from each us, contribute to the development of humanity?

3. We are discovering together as we create ACT2gether

When ACT2gether started we were a large group of individuals, volunteering to be a part of this initiative that we hope will grow into a social movement. Many of us had worked together, closely or less closely, during some of the six years of CATS;[3] others were new to the group. From the beginning, we established that the concept/feeling of every person's unique potential would be at the centre of our values, purpose and actions. I think natural selection drew together people who could connect their own personal purpose to the shared group purpose. The L4WB approach supports the centrality of individual and collective purpose and meaning and proposes four perspectives – head, heart, hand and spirit – to align ourselves in wholeness to everything we live and do, and encourages the use of our core capacities. Through this context, we managed to create a safe space in which we could show vulnerability but also share our dreams without feeling judged and while being appreciated as whole humans. What connects us deeply is the belief that developing partnership between generations can actually create positive impact in the world. This shared belief, connected to us personally, gave us a collective purpose – a sense of aliveness which I experience personally but also feel within the group. I think that is what drives us today.

Within Act2gether, we are committed, as a principle, to nurturing behaviours that provide purpose, meaning and direction in every activity that we propose. In order to do this, we have set up some conditions: one condition is being attentive to whether there is a clear purpose for the process in which participants and especially children are asked to engage, and to check, in a variety of ways, whether this purpose is meaningful to individual members of the group. Another condition is to promote and create opportunities where children can develop the capacity to sense, feel, and experience what brings meaning and

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[3] CATS (Children As Actors for Transforming Society), in partnership with Initiatives of Change France and the Caux Foundation.

purpose to their lives, and how that connects with their context and life. Still another condition is to invite everyone to notice what is unique about each person, and how such uniqueness is expressed as qualities in the way a child or an adult engages with the experience. We need all of us to participate in identifying these qualities in order to create spaces and contexts in which these qualities can be used and expanded.

I can genuinely say that in the many years I have participated in conferences, events, and workshops in the children's rights field I never fully experienced a spiritual connection to what I was doing or related it to my own purpose and that of the group. That began to happen for me first in the CATS programme and continued even more strongly in Act2gether. I believe the main difference is that the experiences feel more whole. I believe the focus on connecting the spiritual, mental, physical and emotional perspectives is what is unique to what we are doing. Running a workshop or a dialogue group needs to take into account that the individuals and the group are living whole systems, and the experiences created need to relate to that wholeness of feeling, reflecting, acting and connecting to all the people. It becomes an actual living experience of wholeness in which you can find individual and collective purpose. Initially, it can sound difficult or complicated but, in my experience, just the fact of being aware of what is possible and trying your best to make every moment alive and relevant is a big part of it.

In ACT2gether we believe that nurturing safe and respectful relationships between generations, children and adults, can be developed and grow into a wider social movement with an impact on how we tackle societal challenges. Let's see how we implement this.

4. Planned activities to promote purpose/meaning in the centre of every endeavour

In Act2gether we aim to promote opportunities where everyone can express their uniqueness and recognize each other as competent partners.

To do this, we offer innovative and creative gatherings to allow a shift in mindset so that both adults and children can see each other more fully and learn to work together while feeling safe in being themselves, and still be connected to one another. This might sound simple or extremely complex. As a team, it took us many years and learning from several mistakes in order to create tools, imagine different ways of thinking, challenge paradigms and build skills that will allow us to contribute to the creation of spaces where everyone feels they can contribute and learn together.

An innovative approach to fulfil children's rights in a holistic way? What a challenge some may say! The strength of our approach for the fulfilment of children's rights comes from the acknowledgment that each one of us is unique. When we do this, rights become much more human and can be understood as conditions that we as humans need in order to feel safe, considered and respected. For a long time, we have approached respected children's rights primarily as implementing the Convention of the Rights of the Child effectively all over the world at national and local levels. As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the

Convention this year, we recognize that it represented a real revolution in thinking about children and their intrinsic rights. Yet the challenges are still enormous; advancing towards more effectiveness in the actual fulfilment of these rights for all feels very difficult. One of the bigger challenges comes from not seeing this Convention (and the laws and rules it has inspired) as a part of everyday life, so that they become a part of being human, not separate from ourselves.

I believe this is what Act2gether brings to the ongoing discussion about rights and how we implement them: an innovative approach that focuses on how we propose to live them, through a partnership between generations, respecting and connecting with one another.

5. How intergenerational learning opportunities allow fuller expression of individual/group unique potential

One of the main actions of ACT2gether is promoting learning journeys, of different lengths, in different settings. The core of these is the possibility to choose and connect to one's way of learning, expressing and processing information. We are constantly developing new alternatives and resources for different environments where children and adults collaborate not only in schools and families but also in municipal governments where it has been shown that these kinds of initiatives give better results to the public policies that are implemented. We believe that part of unfolding one's unique potential throughout life is constant and mutual learning. A main goal in this is to be able to promote the existence of a pool of children and adults, within a system capable of development and renewal, that is ready to help others in creating the conditions needed for children and adults to collaborate and contribute. In that sense we also aim to support experiences that already exist on intergenerational learning, such as adolescents in schools delivering workshops for younger children or children sharing training experiences with municipal authorities in order for them to better understand their reality when it comes to designing public policies.

Finding purpose in life, understanding it through the concept of wholeness, is deeply related to finding and developing the inner and outer expression of our unique potential. These learning opportunities aim to be experiences where we can all participate, express our uniqueness, embrace diversity and co-create.

6. Creating a worldwide community of mutual learning with unique potential at the centre: facing the challenges

I want to conclude by considering the question of how we can grow into a worldwide community and somehow maintain the magic of what we have clearly said is 'the indescribable.' This is the greatest challenge. There is extraordinary potential in finding more effective ways for partnership between generations, and one of our main goals with Act2gether is to promote innovative virtual spaces where we can connect and be part of a wider global movement. We believe that if there is a mind shift for people from different ages and sectors, who are connected globally and who feel and live these connections, first with themselves, and then with one another, we can have an enormous social impact.

We also know that this cannot happen without a substantial shift in how we view ourselves and one another.

I know in my deepest self that each and every one of us has a unique potential. The sooner we live that recognition fully, and advocate for societal conditions that let us fulfil this potential then humanity (that is, us) can connect in ever deeper ways. This will lead us to be able to construct a fairer world. I have not provided a clear definition of what it means to fulfil one's unique potential – finding purpose and meaning in life is an ongoing process that I believe never ends. My desire has been to express how I try to feel and live every day with the awareness of the sacredness of each and every life. I believe that we are all part of the whole, and that the connections that we can have with one another, and what we give from our deepest self to others, is and can be the energy that allows us to constantly and throughout life express our unique potential. Believing in everyone's unique potential is one of the most courageous acts, since it is focusing on the positive and believing in what we can achieve as individuals and as humanity. Let's be courageous – keep believing in ourselves and one another, and from different parts of the world participate in creating the inner and outer conditions so that we can all find purpose in life: me, you and all of us as humans.

7. Author

Maria Paz is a Bolivian woman who has been passionate about children's rights and child participation from a very young age. She studied in the French School in La Paz, Bolivia and

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8. Dedication

There are people that have influenced me in different ways or have opened doors in order for me to feel free, safe and better know myself in order to discover and experience my unique potential. One of these amazing humans is Jean Gordon and I will be forever grateful for her kind attention, presence and inspiration, because with her existence and example she has contributed to light more and more my 'fire'.

Inner Differences:
Exploring How We Seek to Know

By Linda O'Toole

1. Introduction

I was ten years old the last time I watched my father and brother move quickly from disagreeing, to excitedly arguing and shouting, to physically hitting and shoving one another. Even then, I knew that the major source of their frequent 'battling' was a difference in how they saw the world. More fundamental than divergent values, they differed from one another in how each of them needed to know and to engage with information, other people, and events in the environment in order to feel secure and effective in their actions. Unaware, and certainly unaccepting of these differences, they continued to clash and to believe they could not value one another.

My early awareness of the existence of differences in the ways people perceive, learn, and communicate has encouraged a journey of exploring the ways in which these manifest uniquely for individuals. In my life work as a researcher, teacher and facilitator, I have sought to nurture understanding and acceptance of individual differences and to help myself and others learn to capitalize on them – first as individuals and then in partnerships and in groups. I have worked in this way with thousands of adults, children and adolescents in schools, health care facilities, literacy programs, businesses, and community groups.

In this viewpoint, I want to share my observations and explore the perspective that intergenerational partnering can be nurtured through understanding one's inner diversity. My experience is that when adults, children and young people focus on how they can recognize and acknowledge their inner differences, they are able to work together with greater joy and effectiveness. I am centering my descriptions on how we each 'seek to know,' primarily using examples with children and extending them to adults.

2. Meaning of 'inner diversity'

In the past three decades there has been increasing interest in individualized and personalized approaches particularly in the education and health sectors – including theories of multiple intelligences, cognitive diversity, neurodiversity and research on the impact of social and emotional responses in brain functions and behaviour. While these areas all relate to inner differences, I want to consider a more holistic perspective that we are calling *inner diversity*. The term refers specifically to the fundamental patterns through which we perceive, process and integrate information. It is through these foundational processes that thoughts, feelings, actions, and beliefs are filtered, organized, and given meaning.

Although inner diversity is a critical element in how we nurture ourselves and our relationships, it is a factor that is frequently missing or underrepresented in activities which intend to be inclusive. When we speak of group diversity, we often mean factors such as age, ethnicity, country of origin, gender identification, religion, economic status, and so forth. All of these reflect individual differences and clearly impact the ways in which people value, express, and define themselves. Yet there is more to be considered. The iceberg illustration depicts various ways in which diversity is approached, with the 'water line' differentiating between what is apparent and what is often unseen. At the base of the iceberg is where we place the patterns of inner diversity.
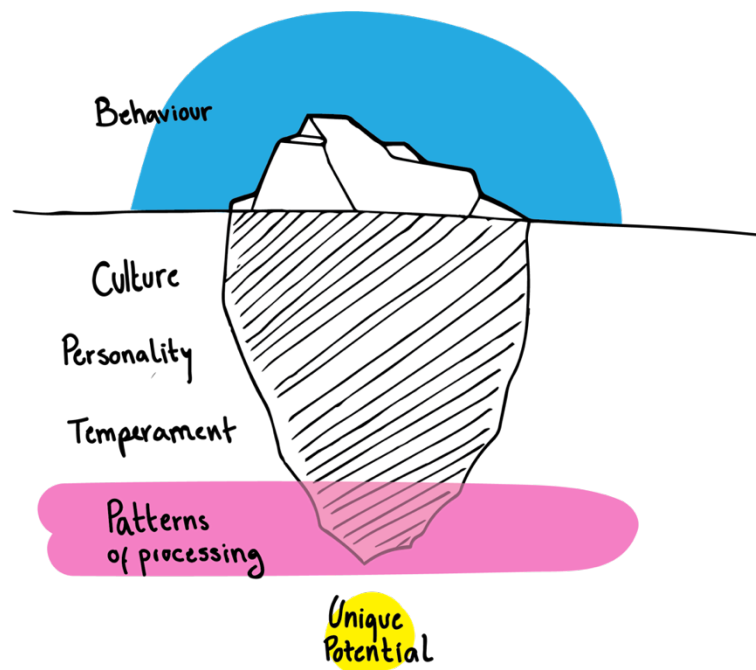
These patterns of how we process the world appear to be present at birth and continue through our lives, more fully expressed and nuanced but essentially consistent. As Loris Malaguzzi wrote,[1] children embody (at least) a hundred such individually unique patterns.

L. Malaguzzi (undated) Poem (accessed 11/2/13 at: http://pah2.golding.id.au/theChild/)[1].

He makes this point to emphasize that school and upbringing 'steal ninety-nine' of those ways.

> *[Children have] … a hundred languages*
> *a hundred hands*
> *a hundred thoughts*
> *a hundred ways of thinking*
> *of playing, of speaking.*
> *A hundred, always a hundred*
> *ways of listening*
> *of marveling*
> *of loving*
> *a hundred joys for singing*
> *and understanding*
> *a hundred worlds to discover*
> *a hundred worlds to invent*
> *a hundred worlds to dream.*

Taking account of inner diversity is particularly relevant for young children as they begin learning about themselves, how they fit into their environment, and what they need to offer and receive from their relationships. It might seem difficult to identify differences in functioning, yet parents with more than one child almost always notice differences in their children at an early age. Some differences may be related to temperament – outgoing or reserved (as two points) – but much of what we notice in the beginning is differences in inner functioning.

In the next section we'll consider some common patterns to give a better sense of what we mean by inner diversity.

3. Examples of how we 'seek to know'

Through the lens of inner diversity, I see people, young and old, seeking knowledge and understanding. They need information in a form in which they can use it – to express their thoughts and ideas, and to move into action. Both young people and adults want to give and receive information that is clear, relevant, and complete. Difficulties often arise between adults and children around inner diversity for two reasons: first, adults believing that their way of seeking or offering information is the most effective way, expecting children to function in the same ways as they do; second, adults seeing that there is a standardized norm for success and wanting the best for children in their care.

To explore these difficulties I want to briefly consider four common areas of inner diversity which can lead to conflict or misunderstanding: Starting (how we engage with a new task); Pacing (how we move in time); Noticing (how we pay attention) and Expressing (how we use words.) These points are not independent of one another.

a. How we engage

I've noticed that people, old and young, *get started, or engage, with a new task* in different ways. Here are a few examples:

'Can I do things by myself?'
Some children need to stand apart, to get a sense of perspective and to know why they are being asked to engage in an activity. They are answering the question 'why?' *for themselves.* They need time to think through the situation, linking it to their own values, without conversation or interaction with others.
In adults who function similarly, this process is often one of mapping, in which information and experiences are slotted into specific categories to build a basis for action. This may involve many questions, on a variety of subjects, as different scenarios are developed.

'Please, listen to me and my story!'
Some children need to talk in the first place. Conversation with others helps them feel comfortable with the group *and* the activity. Without talking aloud – even if it's not directly about the subject matter – it is virtually impossible for them to feel engaged and able to participate in learning or other activities.
In adults we often recognize this pattern as learning through engaging with others – knowing what they know as a result of their conversations and interactions. For people who need to talk, it may also be essential to establish a personal connection before other topics can be discussed.

'Do I have time to look around?'
Other children rely on involving all their senses in order to engage fully. To read, listen to an explanation or watch a demonstration means little to them unless they can also actively touch, manipulate, smell, even taste the experience. This need for 'hands on learning' is not a phase in the child's life: a child of ten who will read, see, smell, touch everything he possibly can related to a specific topic, and still does not feel he knows enough, will likely grow into an adult who declares: 'Let's learn more by going to places where this is actually happening!'

In groups settings especially, taking time to consider a response, to see the whole picture, or to observe carefully before moving into action can be considered as signs of disinterest or lack of engagement instead of reflecting a different way of functioning.

b. How we move in time

Pacing is such a basic element of a person's innate patterning that some mothers can connect their experience of movements *in utero* to their children's pacing as they grow. Pacing is related to speed, but the two are not identical. Pacing refers to the rhythm of one's way of focusing, expressing, and acting. Two broad categories, existing on a continuum, are steady (deliberate) and syncopated (unexpected beats). In our patterning, most of us reflect some ratio between these two ways, but the basic rhythm for each of us is consistent.

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You may recognize a persistent way in which your own natural rhythm and pacing has been perceived. For example, you may have heard repeatedly: 'you leap before thinking', 'you need to be more thorough', or 'you are not listening to all the information.' Or, you may have heard about 'procrastinating', 'taking too long', and 'considering too many options.'

In children we often notice pacing in how they transition between activities – does she need to bring the activity to completion (which can include putting away everything in a deliberate manner and 'finishing the story.')? Does she follow the flow of what is happening with others who are involved, using a more syncopated pacing that fluctuates with circumstances?

As adults these distinctions continue and we see pacing reflected in whether time is considered a measured commodity, variable and elastic depending on interest, or regarded as a challenging adventure – 'a race to be won.' Cultural norms play a role in one's relation to time, but probably less than individual differences. In our contemporary world in which most activities are precisely timed (e.g. tests, meetings, train schedules), pacing is one of the most controversial and conflictual elements in any group (school, family, community, work.)

c. How we pay attention

What part of the world (or your immediate situation) captures your attention in the first place – do you look inward at how you are feeling in response to what is around you? Are you noticing your physical body? Is your attention drawn to what has changed in the environment? To what needs doing? To how you are feeling about what needs doing? To planning how you will do it?

Concentrating on a single point is certainly one way of focusing attention, but some people naturally pay attention in a broader way – noticing the whole context, and the interconnections and relationships between all the parts. Others follow the interactive flow of people and their environment so that the 'attention' seems to be fluctuating or pulsing between one area or another.

How we pay attention and the information we need is often revealed through the questions we ask. For example, are we seeking factual clarity ('what did that word mean?' 'what's the source of that information?'); personal validation ('are we still moving ahead?' 'is everyone feeling okay about this process?'); the action that is needed ('what are we going to do with this information?' 'can you show me how this works?') It is natural that questions vary with context; still, there is often a predominant pattern (a type of default position) that is clearly or subtly present for each of us.

People are always paying attention to something, even though it may not be what you expect. Giving people choices in the types of information available, how and when to access it will reduce the chances that only one way of paying attention will be acknowledged.

d. How we express our thoughts and feelings

Relationships are impacted by biases about how thoughts and feelings are expressed. The following admonitions for 'managing impulsivity' – *Take time to consider options; Think before speaking or acting; Remain calm when stressed or challenged; Be thoughtful and considerate of others; Proceed carefully* – clearly preference some people over others; as one example, some naturally think before they speak (they pause to consider the words they will use); others need to speak aloud in order to know what they are thinking (through verbalizing they know what they want to share.) Depending on the adult's own ways of listening and observing, specific ways children express themselves may be regarded as positive or negative. Learning to self-regulate emotions in ways that recognize, respect, and develop natural tendencies is critical.

Respect for differences also applies to the ways in which young people are encouraged or rewarded for sharing their ideas. Frequently those who are given opportunities for presenting, in classrooms or meetings, are gifted in using language that corresponds to the dominant patterns of the adults selecting the presenters. Those who express themselves better in interactive exchanges or who share through images, storytelling, written text or metaphors sometimes don't have the same opportunities to share their thoughts. Adults need to be particularly aware of this tendency to privilege certain ways of speaking – for the sake of children and also for other adults who may have learned throughout their lifetime that their ways of expressing thoughts and feelings were not acceptable or valued.

4. Exploring inner differences

Reflecting on your own way of processing is critical to exploring inner diversity because your pattern of processing is the filter through which we view what others are doing – how they are functioning. There are questions you can ask yourself such as the first question in the last section: *what do you need in order to start?* Expanding on that: Do you need to get clear about the purpose of what you are doing? Talk to others about what they are thinking and feeling? Gather information on what has been done before? Understand the strategy for what has been happening? Walk around and see for yourself what has been done and what is possible?

While inner diversity steers us away from labelling ourselves with a specific processing pattern, having a simple framework to guide your exploration is often helpful. Comparing a particular pattern to that of someone else is a way of authenticating your own experiences. For example, after years of difficult experiences in the classroom, John confronted the possibility that he was like those who were constantly attending to 'the big picture'. Suddenly he was able to see himself and his schooling experiences in a way that made sense:

> With each part to which I was exposed, I wanted to keep connecting that part to something whole – something bigger. I needed to know more, and I needed to know the 'nuts and bolts' … where does this come from? I would look around and wonder how other students could just move from point to point without stopping and pondering and making connection to the bigger picture.

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John had a breakthrough in his understanding (and his acceptance of himself) when he contrasted himself to others, but also when he was able to identify others who shared a similar pattern (i.e. needing to see 'the big picture'). It was the link with others that confirmed that his approach was valid.

Noticing differences in others

When starting a new group project or activity, we often notice how others need different types and amounts of information at certain points in the process; for example, we may notice how others tend to gather the information they need – some taking time on their own to review the information, others talking with at least one person. In addition, we can note different pacing and timing in carrying out a piece of work and how we measure our progress in different ways – against the objectives of a plan, in relation to what the group has achieved, in terms of our own priorities, etc.) One typical way of noticing these differences is a built-in signal: we find ourselves annoyed and making judgements: 'weren't they listening?' 'why mention this NOW?' 'how can *that* possibly be important to consider?' 'here's another divergence, just when we were about to make a decision!'

If you don't find yourself irritated by particular questions or requests for clarifications or additional information, you may still be asking yourself with wonder: *Did we not hear the same words? Not see the same images? Not experience the same situation?* The quick answer: No, in most cases, you did not.

When this signal (of irritation or wonderment) happens, whether the person is a child, adolescent, adult, or senior, we need to remember to turn around our judgements: What is the information they are seeking? What are the questions left unanswered? What might they be seeing that we have not noticed, or taken into account?

5. Inner differences for partnering

Inner diversity makes a critical contribution to how we create and nurture partnerships of all kinds, intergenerationally and with peers. The patterns of inner diversity are not the source of difficulties between adults and children – they are a major source of difficulty in how people of **all** ages relate to one another. However, one of the most significant ways inner diversity impacts intergenerational partnerships is that adults have learned to privilege certain patterns of processing, often to their own detriment, and they pass along these biases in what they expect from children and other adults through how they design activities, and communications.

Working with inner diversity to unwind the impact of selective privilege requires three broad considerations:

   a. Understanding differences through cultivating capacities
   b. Accepting differences through creating positive environments
   c. Capitalizing on differences through inviting full participation

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All three considerations require a change in how we think about the underlying differences – it is a shift in mindset as much as any particular action.

a. Understanding differences through cultivating capacities

We need to be aware of *all* of the ways in which we operate in the world, internally and externally. Those ways include what we see, feel, sense, and imagine. Such capacities as noticing, listening, discerning relationships and patterns, imagining and reflecting are fundamental to understanding our patterns of processing. A shift in mindset requires us to approach this understanding in a neutral way—as objectively as possible: to *notice* and *listen* to what is happening rather than being focused only on what is not happening. *Discerning relationships and patterns* may involve discovering that a child standing slightly apart at the beginning of one activity may do this in many other situations. *Reflecting and imagining* help one play with the needs underlying a pattern: 'If I had to make up a story about what I'm seeing, what might be happening here?' This kind of internal pattern-seeking and metaphor-making is central to an awareness of inner diversity.

Here's an example of how one teacher and student cooperated in developing some of these capacities.

> Alex, as a first grader, chose not to participate in games with his classmates or even sit in a reading circle. He was labelled as a stubborn and uncooperative child. His teacher, however, began to notice that when he was not participating, he was standing close by and watching. So, the question might be: **_How_** does Alex participate in a new game?

> The teacher noticed that he observed until one cycle had been completed. He then joined in. She looked for this pattern in other activities and found it. This allowed the teacher to see what was going on (sufficiency) instead of labelling what was not going on (deficiency).

> For Alex, we might imagine that his need was that he felt most comfortable knowing what was going to happen or that watching one cycle gave him an advantage in the game or that he liked having a sense of the overview and knowing where he would fit.

> Having some clear options about the observed pattern allowed Alex's teacher to ask him questions that helped him understand his needs. Together, Alex and his teacher considered ways in which he could meet his need to have an overview and not be perceived as an outsider who stands apart.

b. Accepting differences through creating positive environments

Acknowledging that each person is born unique requires us to be aware of the implications of this fact. Adults can model an openness to differences, expressing genuine curiosity about the ways people learn, and demonstrate a willingness to suspend judgement. It's easy to form a habit of agreeing with one another on the surface and ignoring very real differences in how we perceive and express our needs. To counteract this tendency, we can

actively encourage both young people and adults to share their ways of learning. Dialogues are a good way to do that. By asking questions about the process ('how does this happen?') we are assuming sufficiency rather than deficiency. For example, if we ask how someone pays attention, we may discover that it can be described as a direct focus; alternatively, we may see it as being aware of peripheral details or of shifting between an overview and a single detail (a macro/micro perspective). We will never discover this information if we assume there is only one way of paying attention.

Using simple questions, here's an example of exploring from a new stepmother and 12-year-old Tim.

> I asked a few questions about school. It was useful for me, but it was useful for him as well: 'What do you like learning about (___)?'
> I followed up with asking 'How do you like to _____?'
> and, then: 'How do you do ____?'
> and still another: 'How does ____?'
>
> Together we discovered that he likes to learn from pictures and movies because they are quicker than words. Using the example of a video game, we learned that he likes the challenge of getting to the next level and solving the problem – challenges that are more meaningful than earning a higher grade.
>
> I asked with genuine curiosity because it was interesting to know more about how he learns. I shared a little about how I'm different from him in my learning.

c. Capitalizing on differences by encouraging ways to participate

Active engagement may be the most fundamental factor for successful outcomes in learning and working together. There is an important distinction between *engaged* participation as opposed to *pro forma* participation in which young people are simply present or consulted. *Engaged* participation requires that everyone involved (children and adults) has an interest and a stake in the outcome. Partnerships require active participation from everyone, stemming from curiosity, genuine interest, and the willingness to co-create the experience. The only way you can truly capitalize on inner differences is by approaching them as gifts, in service to the work that you are doing together. Initially, people may not know or recognize how differences contribute to the group or the work, but the explicit assumption must be that they are real and valuable. With this attitude, you create a space for creativity and innovations.

You can also build in certain practices such as:

- Providing opportunities for everyone to *choose* how to undertake an activity (particularly how to begin) and being open and explicit about the fact that all options have value.
- Allowing space and time in the process for *reflecting* before a task and when it is complete; and
- Encouraging *self-assessment*, according to the participant's own criteria, which allows everyone to speak about their individual approach.

These practices help people feel recognized for how they function, and act as concrete reminders of the ways inner differences can impact relationships and bring strength and creativity to the group.

6. Conclusion

The Learning for Well-being principle of inner diversity suggests that well-being flourishes in environments in which we 'respect individual uniqueness and diversity: encouraging diverse perspectives and multiple expressions.' At a minimum, this implies providing opportunities for everyone to be aware of inner differences, to develop ways for exploring their patterns of inner diversity, and to actively encourage other ways of functioning. We know that supporting diverse ways of processing contributes to the overall innovations and insights of both children and adults. The critical factor for this increased creativity in the group seems to be the extent to which participants are comfortable in expressing those diverse perceptions. Most importantly, we need to approach differences with the notion that there is something valuable and precious in how others seek to know.

7. Author

Linda O'Toole has been co-editor, with Jean Gordon, of the *Learning for Well-being Magazine* for the last four years. She has pursued her interest in inner diversity patterns for nearly four decades by honing her capacities to inquire and listen. As a life-long Californian she has survived encounters with earthquakes, wildfires, and landslides. With amazement and joy, she's still here.

8. Dedication

For Jean. Daily, you are missed.

The Human Connection is the Foundation for any Competent Partnership

By Arshad Mozumder, Andri Pandoura, Kassandra Beltran, Polyxeni Papageorgiou, Rebekah Scerri, Roxanne Landais

Source: https://welldoing.org/article/upgrade-better-human-connection

1. Introduction

From interpersonal interactions to digital communication, connections and partnerships are a noteworthy aspect of our day-to-day lives. The formation of such effective, meaningful

and competent relationships presupposes something critical: a human connection. The human connection arguably far supersedes the partnership one, and examples to support this abound; for instance, why do individuals learn more from teachers that they 'like' as opposed to teachers they do not? The development of such a connection is what enables a group of people to truly support one another, allowing each and every person involved to discover their unique potential, thus becoming the best version of themselves. It is only after this process is genuinely completed that we can feel comfortable to 'ACT2Gether' in a competent and effective manner.

As Karinthy theorised, anyone in the world can be connected to another through six or fewer social connections, the six degrees of separation (Smith, 2008). Friends of friends can connect you to any and every other person in existence. But what is a connection? Is it something physical, established between two parties allowing them to communicate? Is it something electrical or astronomical that helps people share information across realms of data and spiritual or digital signals? Or, rather, is the connection something chemical or biological, something that connects us as human beings, as partners in a relationship?

Competent meaningful partnerships can be developed and strengthened through one simple act: establishing a human connection. Doing so allows people to trust one another and develop a sense of comfort and understanding. Once you understand how someone functions best, you can move forward, knowing and accepting the strengths and shortcomings of that person.

2. What makes a competent partnership?

Competence can be defined in many ways. In some media, it is the ability to successfully and effectively complete a task, while in others it gives you the authority to deal with specific matters. For the purpose of this article, competence can simply be understood as the state of being where you are trusted to carry out a task, with the expectation that said task is carried out successfully and to the best of your ability. Thus, a competent partner is someone who you can wholeheartedly trust to complete a task that falls within their areas of expertise.

To have a 'good' and healthy partnership there needs to be an element of trust and comfort between all parties of the partnership. This is however often obstructed by humanity's reluctance to express weakness and vulnerability. The act of trusting someone and risking betrayal and heartbreak is often a deterrent. So, first we must understand ourselves and others. Through mutual understanding and development, we can lay the bricks to form a competent partnership through human connection.

2.1 Mutual development and understanding
Human beings all function in similar yet different ways, each with their own capacities and approaches to the same everyday tasks. This creative difference in expression is beautiful, but can sometimes create rifts, leading us to distance ourselves when instead we could explore why these differences and behavioural patterns exist. Once this is determined, the

best course of action can be identified as one which allows us to come together to draw out one another's strengths through this uniqueness.
We need to understand how and why we function in a certain way. Our partner(s) also need to do the same, as one-sided development does not result in healthy partnerships. There needs to be equity in partnerships, ensuring a balance is maintained so peace and functionality can continue effectively.

One effective means of understanding ourselves internally is through the use of the Head, Hand and Heart perspectives model, used across many sectors, including education and self-learning (Gazibara, 2013). With this model, we understand that everyone is influenced by a combination of perspectives in their everyday existence and actions. Other schools of thought enhance this model by supporting the existence of a fourth perspective which assimilates each of the others, giving meaning to why they exist: the soul, or the spirit. Those who primarily use the perspective of the head tend to seek rationality and structure in tasks and choices made, more so than feelings and emotions. Those primarily using the 'hand' instead prefer to take action and do things now; worrying later about the consequences of their actions. In contrast to those who primarily use the 'head' perspective, 'hand' people are more 'try-think-try' than 'think-try-think'. These people believe that direct experience is the most important in learning processes, and hence only through living experiences can they truly prosper and develop themselves. Then we have those who primarily use the perspective of the heart; individuals ruled by this perspective first think about the emotions and feelings of themselves and others before carrying out tasks. These individuals learn from experiences by witnessing how they felt by during the journey as well how they felt at the outcome of a situation.

Individuals usually associate with one of the perspectives more than the others, and this can lead to different issues arising. As someone more aligned with one of the perspectives, you may begin to have concerns about the others, as outlined in the table below.

Table 1: Understanding the reservations that champions of each perspective may have against one another. Read horizontally, left to right

PERSPECTIVE		HEAD	HAND	HEART
PERSPECTIVE	HEAD		Disdain of action with lack of forethought, obstruction of rationale	Fear of emotion due to lack of control in emotions, chaotic
	HAND	Impractical, over-thinkers, theorisers		Emotions are a weakness, feelings are a waste of time
	HEART	Cold, distant, emotionally inadequate, lack of people skills	Unaware of the consequences of their actions, pities, lack of understanding	

Source: Head, hands and heart, 2002.

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It is important to acknowledge which perspective you attribute to yourself and which perspective your partners attribute to themselves. Once you can watch and listen to others, acknowledging their preferred perspective, you can begin the process of mutually understanding what is needed by each party in order for the partnership to succeed.

2.2 Growth and discerning systemic processes

Now that we share this understanding, it is essential that all within the partnership understand that it is within human nature to have imperfections. No matter what level of understanding we share, we don't always work the way others would like us to. Some people like to work during the day, whereas others work much better at night. Some people may respond well to positive reinforcement whereas others prefer constructive criticism. These subtle differences, if not acknowledged and acted on, can lead to complications later on. You cannot assume that your partner will react in the same way as you to a certain situation.

So, we need to properly acknowledge our partners, understand their strengths and weaknesses, and discern their systemic processes. How do they work? What makes them tick? What do they like or dislike? Once you begin noticing these processes and understand the implications they have on your partner's emotional and physical well-being, you can begin to appreciate when and where to work with your partner best and what climates and conditions allow them and yourself to work optimally. This will lead to a stronger, more effective and meaningful partnership. Such healthy partnerships allow spaces initially occupied by fear of betrayal to be replaced by a sense of trust and ease. And this is due to the human connection developed between the individuals, and the understanding of each other's behaviours which truly allow all partners to excel.

In spite of all this, knowing what needs to be done to grow and develop mutually within a partnership is not enough. Individuals need to understand how and why this growth is possible, leading us to the following point.

3. Why do we learn more from teachers we 'like' as opposed to those we do not?

3.1 Emotions & humanity

Why is it that we learn more and assimilate knowledge from teachers we 'like' rather than those we do not? Why are humans able to go to greater lengths for those they care for rather than ones they do not? You see this phenomenon in schools, work and even in our interpersonal relationships themselves. To bring us back to our internal reflections, it is due to the fact that humans are innately beings of the heart, and so feelings and emotions hold great power over us.

This state of existence is innately rooted into our very core as human beings but is also something that one develops through upbringing and early childhood developmental growth; the balance between nature and nurture.

Behaviours can be learnt and assimilated into the core of our beings, not just in animals but even in human beings through positive and negative reinforcement and through living experiences. However, the existence of these behaviours can be attributed to basic ethical philosophies that are implicitly taught to all throughout life. Hedonism (Veenhoven, 2003) and utilitarianism (Tobler et al., 2008; Duignan and West, 2017) are both examples of such ethical philosophies that capture why humans behave in certain ways, allowing themselves to be governed by emotions as they are. Hedonism argues that the most important thing in life is the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Utilitarianism takes this further, believing that humanity will and should always choose to seek out the greatest good for the greatest number of people. These implicit beliefs and teachings can be attributed to why individuals act in certain fashions. You learn more from teachers you like due to the positive rewarding feeling obtained from pleasing the individual that you care about. If you did not care about the teacher, there is no extra hedonistic push from a pupil to thrive and succeed, hence one performs less well. This principle can also be applied in other settings: pleasing a friend, your family, a mentor and even through pleasing yourself through achieving personal goals and overcoming challenges.

Once we acknowledge why we as human beings behave due to these specific means, we can begin to appreciate the steps required to internally develop ourselves to better engage in mutually beneficial partnerships. This allows us to understand ourselves as human beings, after which we can begin to allow ourselves to be more vulnerable and trusting towards our partner(s).

3.2 Selfless vs. selfish – individual growth before partnership growth

Some struggle with this realization as it poses the question of whether human beings are selfish or selfless beings. Is altruism in our nature, or is egoism at the core of humanity? Some question the existence of selfless actions themselves, as according to hedonism, we are always seeking our own pleasure. Actions undertaken by humans are for personal gain, hence people are selfish. Others argue that selfless actions do indeed exist. For example, a mother will carry a baby for nine months, costing her own comfort and well-being, just so the baby can grow and live their own unique life. People may argue that there is reward in childbirth itself and having a child, however, this would not justify surrogacy. You can argue there is reward in supporting another family, however, does the rewarding feeling outweigh the pain of carrying a child for nine months only to give them away; does this action demonstrate the core principle of hedonism? This is a difficult question to reflect upon, as we can question whether each and every action was done in a selfish or selfless manner.

From a young age we are taught that selfishness is wrong and immoral, that we should live through being kind and supportive of others. This is contradictory to the teachings of hedonism and utilitarianism, as they almost always prioritize the pleasure of the individual first. Why then are we as human beings, taught that to be selfish is wrong? In airplanes individuals are instructed to put on their own oxygen mask first if an emergency occurs. In such a situation, you may want to help those around you with putting their masks on, if they seem to be old or frail or young. The utilitarian approach supports this as the more people you help the better, no? This however is what people are advised against, as the first action

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to take in such situations is to put your own mask on first. This self-sufficient response may seem quite selfish and it is, as you ensure your survival first.

Nevertheless, you can only help others if you manage your own survival first. Thus, we see that sometimes being selfish is not necessarily a bad thing, regardless of what we are taught. In reality, the ability to be selfish and selfless are both essential qualities needed by each of us, as it is only through appropriate use of both trains of thought that we can truly begin to grow and develop ourselves and engage with competent partnerships in the future. In order to be selfless and support one another in a partnership, we must be selfish first to understand our respective wants and needs within the partnership. Once these have been acknowledged, we can begin to connect as humans, understanding the choices each makes in our own respective fashions and why we behave the way we do. After we begin to 'see' one another and express vulnerability through mutual understanding and behavioural development, we can generate an affinity of sorts with our partner(s).

3.3 Challenges and resolutions

As mentioned, having affinity with an individual or belief can be powerful, as it provides you with the strength to go above and beyond the call of duty. However, misinterpretation of this affinity can lead to issues and complications arising, proving harmful both to the relationship and your personal well-being.

There are many different types of relationships: with friends, family, a mentor, a professor, a romantic partner and more. Each relationship differs in subtle ways, with many overlaps across the board, and different types of relationships can often be misconstrued for one another, brewing possible danger. For example, in romantic relationships, many individuals want their partners to be their best friends, leading to a blurring of the lines between these romantic and platonic relationships. The problem here is that if the partners view this relationship from different perspectives, then the expectations and assumptions from both sides will differ. Hence, it is vital that we always communicate effectively to ensure all parties are on the same page, reducing any imbalances that may potentially arise.

Relationships can also be developed in the 'wrong' manner, and thus have the potential to evolve into something more damaging as opposed to something mutually beneficial, allowing both parties to grow and develop. There are numerous types of these 'toxic' relationships. These can be expressed through the biological teachings of symbiotic relationships (Brenner, 2018). A symbiotic relationship dictates the interactions between different species allowing for the survival of one or more said species within the relationship.

One form of a symbiotic relationship is through mutualism. In this form of partnership, both parties benefit from the situation. This type of relationship is what should be sought after, a relationship in which there is mutual benefit for all parties and through which partners do what they can to support the other, as a 50:50 approach may not always be possible (Dore, 2019).

A more toxic symbiotic relationship exists in the form of parasitism. Here, one species, the parasite, gains from the relationship where the other species, the host, suffers. This form of toxic relationship is destined to break apart because mutual understanding and trust is required for a strong and healthy partnership – a human connection is required. In parasitic relationships, one party is always at a loss, and so cannot benefit from the partnership in any capacity. This means that the individual can never truly engage in the partnership nor form a strong connection with the other, as ultimately there is no care or support within the relationship.

The final type of symbiotic relationship can still cause problems and result in the dissolution of a partnership due to imbalances and lack of human connection. A commensalistic relationship is one in which one species benefits while the other is neither helped nor harmed. The simple fact of there being an imbalance in this relationship means that it can never reach a point where both parties feel fulfilled. This can never become a truly competent partnership in which there is mutual benefit and growth.

Finally, another danger associated with relationships can be the loss of personal identity and uniqueness. During the developmental stages of life, individuals can unknowingly be influenced into adopting another person or a mentor's quirks and characteristics. This may not necessarily be a bad thing, as many individuals aspire to be like someone they look up to, however, it can lead to the loss of personal identity due to external factors and pressures. There is a risk that inspiration in these circumstances gives way to imitation, and so an individual is unable to truly express themselves and become who they are meant to be, meaning people cannot unlock their unique potential. In this case, it is almost impossible to establish strong and true human connections with others, because to establish a human connection, you must first look inward and accept and develop your own unique person. Imitation will not allow this.

Ultimately, there are many challenges with relationships, but most can be easily overcome through regular communication as this enables a clear understanding within parties of what is and is not expected from the partnership. This clarity and trust allow individuals to be more comfortable and understanding of one another, enabling a human connection to be established between them. Further, through internal and external reflection, you can identify key practices undertaken by yourself and your partner; this leads to understanding how best to interpersonally and interdependently behave and act, allowing the development of a trusting human connection, strengthening your partnership even further.

4. How do we ACT2gether to develop and build on these human connections and relationships

In summary, there are several qualities that are required in developing strong human connections. We have to reach the point where we care and have a stake in the partnership itself. We need to care for and develop trust with our partners. After this, through active engagement and mutual understanding, we can begin to sow the seeds of meaningful and competent partnerships.

Now that we can appreciate what is required to build these connections, we can delve into the process required of us to begin to ACT2gether, not only with our partners in a one-to-one, group or community setting, but also in an internal individual setting.

4.1 Building a home, a town and a community

Think of a partnership between individuals as a house that is being built. When building this house, both parties need to be able to take and give bricks to build the home. One by one, a brick is donated from each side. In the end, the house that is built has been equally developed by both parties, hence both parties feel a sense of ownership and care towards the house. The house now becomes a home, something to cherish for both individuals. In cases where one party gives or takes more than the other, the house that is erected in the end is not mutually owned by both parties, as one party has had more influence than the other. This means that it does not give a sense of comfort and fulfilment when living there, as it does not feel like a home. This is the same in partnerships and relationships where one side has dominance, the other does not have a chance to feel truly safe and secure, hence trust cannot be developed or felt, ultimately dooming this partnership to fail. When building together, the home developed should be a safe space for all owners. In human relationships that work cohesively and meaningfully, all parties can feel happy and feel a sense of fulfilment. This happens when both parties give and take the same amount, when there is a mutually agreed balance between the parties.

However, this does not necessarily mean that equality trumps all when setting up partnerships, as naturally this process will never occur in a 50:50 manner. Some individuals will always have higher stakes than the other, more investment, more to lose. This does not mean, however, that a home for both individuals in the partnership cannot be built. For example, in a teacher-student partnership, the teacher will have more knowledge and expertise to share, and the student may have little to none; this does not mean that the partnership developed will prove unsuccessful. What can damage this partnership is how interactions take place, and what kind of human connection they possess. Ultimately through understanding and trust, you can identify a balance in the relationship that both parties are comfortable with, a balance that ensures equity and resonance, leading to success.

Building a town or community is, in reality, no harder than building a home. A partnership between two individuals, a small group or even a large mass of people within one collective movement, is relatively easy to develop and uphold effectively. Once we acknowledge that a balance and understanding is needed within partnerships, we can look at the processes and methods used to achieve this.

4.2 How to lay the bricks and foundations

Reaching this point of mutual understanding may seem like an arduous task but in reality, it is simple. We must be able to partake in copious amounts of what some refer to as 'core capacities'. (O'Toole, 2016) These are processes that can be practiced and enlivened to help develop mutual trust and care in partnerships: the fundamentals of a human connection. One such process of using the capacities is detailed below.

First, we need to simply relax; reach a point of tranquillity within ourselves so that we can allow our minds to open and prepare to interact with another separate being to ourselves – something foreign. Relaxation brings openness to the chaos of the foreign and unknown, so we do not fear it. Once relaxed, we gain the ability to do numerous things, as our internal energy is now less focused on self-survival and protection against the unknown, instead we can now use our energies to better build bridges between us and the individual(s) we wish to form a connection with.

Now we are able to notice things about the other individual, discerning the patterns and systemic processes they undertake. We recognize the interdependency of their entire being; how their tone of voice resonates with their emotions at that moment; how subtle muscular movements indicate whether they are comfortable or not, and more. We can thus subtly sense what the individual likes and dislikes, empathizing with them along the way and relating them to ourselves. How are we the same? How are we different? Step by step, recognizing the other individual as their own unique being who in reality is not too different from yourself, as we all share the same perspectives within us, the same core capacities and the same ability to unlock our unique potential.

Now that we are more comfortable with the other, as they are not so foreign anymore, we feel less threatened, our fear of vulnerability is diminished. The hedonistic impulses telling us to avoid pain are now more silent, as we dissociate this new individual from all of those feelings. Now we become more inquisitive and inquiring. We ask questions to track mutual experiences and ambitions, finding more commonalities each step of the way. We ensure that we are actively listening with our eyes, ears, heart and soul, all the while continually reflecting and reaffirming within ourselves that this individual does not pose any threat to us. In reality, a partnership with them would be enlightening, educational and even 'fun'.

You then reach a point in which you feel connected to the other, through a mutual understanding developed through the use of your core capacities. You begin to hold a stake in your partnership, as now you are invested. Now that you care, you want to go above and beyond to ensure that the work done through this partnership is successful and fulfilling and reaches the standards desired by you and your partner. A human connection has now been developed between you and your partner. You now have the tools and requirements to help build strong and healthy relationships, to build a 'home' together.

Without this human connection, it would be near impossible to reach this point of genuine mutual understanding, care and acceptance. Hence, it would be impossible to develop a healthy, meaningful and competent partnership.

5. Conclusion – becoming champions of our own unique potential

Now that we understand the steps needed to form strong connections, we must become our own champions; to allow ourselves to use our unique potential to fully engage in these connections with others. If we do not allow ourselves to properly engage in these connections, then we damage the human connection, and thus negatively affect the overarching partnership.

The core capacities can be used externally in developing our relations with others, but for the journey that starts with the self, we need to come back to the introspective perspectives: the **head, hand, heart and soul**. These perspectives allow us to reflect internally, to bear witness to who we are. We can identify what kind of person we are and how we tend to approach different tasks and situations. After recognizing this, we can truly begin to accept ourselves and who we are, and then identify the extent to which we can provide in a relationship. We can then mutually understand what to give or take in terms of bricks when building our homes together, and hence we can reach a balance, knowing that all parties mutually understand and are comfortable with this balance that we share.

It is said that life is like a school, and through life we learn what our souls already know. The soul, or our core for those who believe not in the soul, connects our emotions, our rationality and our drive to act together. Through understanding ourselves and our 'souls' in this regard, we can graduate from our schools, having unlocked our unique potential. Once we have reflected and assimilated the perspectives in this manner, we are ready to set forth into the world, using our unique potential to engage in meaningful and competent partnerships with individuals we have developed a deep human connection with.

Ultimately, it is essential that we form a human connection in order to truly find a way in which we can all wholeheartedly and comfortably ACT2gether.

6. Authors

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7. Dedication

Jean Gordon was an exceptional woman, to all who knew her, and to all who only heard stories. I and my co-authors all met Jean at various points in our own lives, but the impression she left on us all was magical. Some met Jean once a year, some every few months, but it did not matter, Jean was Jean. Jean was the type of woman who remembered every little detail of your life, from what foods you enjoy, to how your family was, to what your dreams and ambitions were. I will never forget how every time I met with Jean, she continued to ask about my journey to pursue a medical profession, and how she would always encourage and support me towards it. Jean saw something in me that I didn't know I had, and my only regret is not being able to show Jean that I made it. I started Med school, I achieved the dream that she believed I could achieve, something she sometimes believed more than I did.

Jean taught us a great many things, one of which was that the bonds you form between people themselves; the human connection that you share, holds such great power and influence in your life, that together you can do almost anything, regardless of differences in age, gender or background. Jean taught us the power of the human connection and how it is a necessity in any competent partnership between children and adults and more, and that is why we have decided to write an article delving into this notion of a human connection further. And to further showcase our gratitude to Jean and her faith in us and our dreams, we have done so in a way that truly showcase the kind of people we are: medics, scientists, philosophers and dreamers.

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Shifting How We Participate With One Another

By Darren Bird

PROTECTION   PROVISION   PARTICIPATION

At the age of 17, I sat on the board on the Children's Rights Development Unit, representing the Wales Youth Forum. Since then I have happily passed through all international definitions of youth. 'Participation' for me, has been both a professional and personal passion for nearly three decades. Therefore, given a choice, this was the obvious principle for me. In my life, I have seen what it is like for children who are not listened to, I have also had the privilege of seeing what happens when they are listened to, and the

benefits for all involved. In this viewpoint, my approach has been to recognize that in 'participation' everyone's needs, need to be taking into account, so that everyone benefits from the relationship. I am asking what do we all need to do, to work together, so that we can all thrive?

1. Introduction

If we are going to build a better future for everyone, then we need to include everyone in creating that future. This will involve children and adults developing new ways of working – ways that recognize each other's skills and experience and allow for relationships built on trust and respect.

In this viewpoint we are going to look first at what we mean by the term 'participation' and then to question when young people are capable of making their own decisions, and how we determine which decisions.

In the course of the article we will reflect on how the 'participation' of young people has been interpreted and implemented in the last 30 years. We propose some processes to help young people and older people prepare for engagement with one another and in shared decision-making.

We conclude with three examples of how the Learning for Well-being Foundation is striving to model participation within the paradigm of intergenerational partnerships.

2. Rights of the child

In November 1989, the United Nations adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Since then, **194 countries** have signed up to the UNCRC, making it the most ratified convention in the UN's history.

All countries that sign up to the UNCRC are bound by international law to ensure it is implemented. This is monitored by the **Committee on the Rights of the Child.**

The articles of the convention cover three main themes: Participation, Provision and Protection. The articles on participation are based on the idea of the child or young person as someone who actively contributes to society as a citizen in the here and now and not just as someone on the receiving end of good or bad treatment and services from others. While the UNCRC did not give birth to the idea of children being involved or as active citizens, it changed the language used to describe such actions by calling them 'participation'.

For many people the ideas of protection and provision were long established and understood. Participation, however, was a new idea. Many individuals and organizations began to question what it means to 'participate'. Our friends in the field of sport said, 'children participate in a game of football', while our friends in the child rights field said 'participation of children in football would see children represented on the board of FIFA'.

To some extents they were both right. However, the UNCRC gave a new definition to the word 'participation', giving depth to what we mean by being involved.

Thirty years after the CRC's almost universal ratification many children's organizations have implemented a range of ideas to afford the opportunity for children to participate in the organizations of which they are a part. A plethora of ideas such as school councils, youth fora, children's councils have been established, although in the U.K many of these have not survived the cull of public services under the government austerity policies. However, the idea of listening to children is still not 'common' or what some professionals would call 'mainstreamed', and as a result children and young people are often surprised when you ask their opinion about something that impacts them.

Concerns of young people
Many young people are not happy about aspects of the societies in which they live. They are taking on their responsibilities as active citizens and taking to the streets to protest. In Florida, young people have campaigned about gun control. In India young people have advocated for change in the education systems. In Europe, Greta Thunberg has ignited a passion in young people that has spread across the world to save their planet . Many young people across the UK and Europe have organized their own campaigns in their hometowns, creating controversy as they have chosen to protest on a school day.

These are just a few examples of young people who have become icons for their causes. We could mention scores more who are becoming well known such as:

AUTUMN PELTIER, 14
@Autumn.Peltier was appointed chief water commissioner for the #AshinabekNation and was just nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize 2019 awarded annually to a child who 'fights courageously for children's rights.' She is a #waterprotector and has been called a 'water warrior'.

ISRA HIRSI, 16
@Isra.Hirsi is the co-founder of the U.S. Youth Climate Strike and the daughter of Congresswoman @Ilhanmn. She says the climate crisis 'is the fight of my generation, and it needs to be addressed urgently.'

XIUHTEZCATL MARTINEZ, 18
Earth Guardians Youth Director Xiuhtezcatl Martinez is an indigenous climate activist, hip-hop artist, and powerful voice on the front lines of a global youth-led environmental movement.

These young people are representative of the thousands of unnamed young people who work daily to improve their communities and societies.

Many of the successes achieved by these young people have come despite the adults in their lives telling them that change is not possible. Toby Young, former director of the New Schools Network, said about the school strikes in the U.K addressing climate change:

'Calling this a strike is ridiculous. What are they going to do? Down pencils? This is just truanting.' Further, Young proposed that 'the fact that so many students have been taken in by Greta Thunberg's crude propaganda is an argument for raising the voting age to 21, not lowering it to 16.'. To explain the insult, 'down tools' was a phrase used by UK Unions when striking.

These statements and reactions continue even in the face of the obvious impact of bringing awareness to the various situations of gun control, education, climate change, and so forth. For example: at the time of this article, the impact of Greta Thunberg's action, and those who have joined with her, has been linked to more than 670 governments in 15 countries declaring climate emergencies.[1]

These children persisted, sometimes dismissed and sometimes aided directly by adults, or cheered on by others, such as the statement from the National Association of Head Teachers: 'When you get older pupils making an informed decision, that kind of thing needs to be applauded. Society makes leaps forward when people are prepared to take action.'

I would emphasize that the earlier children and young people are prepared to take action, the more options there are for the kind of 'leaps forward' that our society needs.

3. How do we know youth are capable of participating fully?

If we are to involve children as active citizens in our organizations and our society, how do we manage that? Do we involve them in every part of our organizations? Do children actually want to be involved? How do we determine whether they have the capacity, and if we do not determine they are capable of active involvement, how do we help prepare them?

These are only some of the questions we need to be asking ourselves as adults, taking responsibility for the environment in which we want young people and children to live and thrive. While recognizing that we too will be part of this, and as such acknowledge what we need, so that the relation too, can thrive,

If we go back to the original text of Article 12 in the CRC:

Article 12
1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

The text does not give children full rights to be heard. Instead it offers the right to express an opinion and specifies that opinion be given 'due weight *in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'.* These caveats are then used by adults to decide what is the best interest of the child.

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[1] According to date from Innovation for Cool Earth Forum.

This phrase 'best interests' can be used to justify that somehow children are not competent to make decisions for themselves.

We are aware that children are born with limited physical abilities, which in most children, develop as they grow. It is tempting to correlate development of competency with age. For instance, it is generally accepted that children learn to crawl between 6 to 10 months. However, even with this simple act, some children development specialists refuse to acknowledge any standard child development graphs. The fact is simply that children develop at their own rate, and the degree of divergence from child development norms increases with age. Quickly we can realize that age is a poor indicator of competency, even in terms of physical growth and development.

We continue to ask: when is a child competent enough to make decisions? And which decisions?

If we look to legislation, in the UK the magic age of competency is 18. The law assumes that prior to this age a child is incapable of making decisions without guidance, and after this date an adult (change of status) is totally competent. For this to be true, all of the divergence in child development graphs should converge at the point of someone's 18th birthday. We know this is not the case.

Looking to our politicians for answers, the answer we get is often confusing. As an example: in February 2019, Shamima Begum, a UK national, petitioned her government, to return to the U.K. At the age of 15 Shamima and two of her friends joined ISIS in Syria. At the time of her plea to return home she was 19 with a 3-week-old baby.

Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt[2] denied the request, publicly stating: 'The mother chose to leave a free country to join a terrorist organisation,' and went on to say 'Shamima knew when she made the decision to join Daesh, she was going into a country where there was no embassy or consular assistance. I'm afraid those decisions, awful though it is, do have consequences'. Essentially, he concluded that at 15 she was competent to make a life-changing decision and she and her family had to face the consequences of that choice. This episode is one small example of the continuing confusion as to when children are capable of making their own decisions. The policy seems to suggest that children under the age of 18 are incapable of making many life decisions, unless they have been brainwashed by a terrorist organization, and then they become fully responsible for their actions. This conclusion does not make sense at many levels.

If competency is not linked to age then how do we begin to gauge it?

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[2] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-47512659

In his book *Bounce*, Mathew Syed[3] proposes that there is very little evidence for what we might call talent. Instead, he proposes practice and experience. He claims that if you speak to anyone who is 'talented', and ask them how many hours they have spent on their chosen passion, be it football, violin or knitting, then you will find they have probably spent hundreds if not thousands of hours honing their 'competencies'.

Syed's premise is that to get better at anything, you have to practice, and practice with the purpose to improve. It is through this emphasis on process (the manner in which we participate) and the practice on ways to participate that Learning for Well-being approach complements the UNCRC's approach to participation.

4. Striving for engaged participation

Learning for Well-being (L4WB) describes the principle of participation as:
Supporting the engaged participation of those concerned, involving everyone in decisions that impact them. It emphasizes *engaged* participation as possible only when those participating have sufficient information, experience, and training in order to participate fully. In other words, when they have been offered opportunities to practice, they get better at doing it – whatever 'it' may be.

This principle of engaged participation incorporates the ideas of family therapist Jesper Juul[4] about competency between children and adults. Juul suggested that schools and families need to adapt a healthier balance between content and process, and adults need to find a way of interacting with young people beyond the limited and outdated intellectual polarization of 'strict rules and consequences' in one extreme and 'free education' in the other.

Juul proposed a new paradigm, with two key concepts: equal dignity and responsibility.

Equal dignity is offered as a new standard for interpersonal relationships, especially for the relationship between adults and children. It draws its potential from seeing each relationship as a 'subject-subject-relationship', meaning that two parties meet in equality as humans. He is not suggesting that partners are equals in information and experiences but that each partner has specific expertise about their own circumstances. He acknowledges that adopting a perspective that does not put the needs of one before the needs of the other can be difficult emotionally and intellectually, particularly for adults who generally have authority over young people simply as a matter of age.

The second key is *responsibility*, specifically understood as *personal responsibility* – i.e. the responsibility we must assume for our own behaviour, feelings, reactions, values and so forth. Juul stresses that 'in any meeting between an adult and a child the adult is primarily responsible for the quality of their relationship. When children are forced to assume this

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[3] Bounce: The Myth of Talent and the Power of Practice Paperback – by Matthew Syed. Publisher: Fourth Estate (GB) (1 April 2011). Language: English. ISBN-10: 9780007350544
[4] Juul, J. (2011). Your competent child: Toward a new paradigm in parenting and education. Balboa Press.

responsibility, because the adult is not willing or able, the child (and the relationship) suffers.' This statement of responsibility returns us to the question of when a child or young person is competent to take personal responsibility for the relationship, under what circumstances, and within what limitations.

Although specifics may differ, *engaged* participation requires preparation and training *for both adults and young people* to engage with one another as partners in appropriate and relevant ways.

In 2004, I was Executive Director of Funky Dragon (the former Welsh Youth Assembly), a child-led organization. I, and other adult staff, were responsible to the board which consisted entirely of 3 young people under 18, 3 young people aged 18-25, elected by the membership, and 3 professionals selected by the young people (to our knowledge, the only Charity in British history to have under 18's recognized as trustees). Using the guidelines of the UNCRC we began exploring what was meant by participation, what made good participation and what were the structure and processes required to allow and encourage good participation. Working with a consortium of Welsh children's organizations led by Save the Children, we developed the first set of participation standards. These seven standards included: Information, free choice, no discrimination, respect, you get something out of it, feedback and working better for you. What is critical about this step is that it began to move forward the question of how do you recognize competency and how do you prepare young people to engage more fully. We were asking – as young people and adult staff – what conditions are necessary to allow this competency to emerge.

These standards were then expanded by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, in their General comment No 12, in 2009, to produce the nine conditions of participation. They now include: transparent, voluntary, respectful, relevant, child-friendly, inclusive, safe, supported and accountable.

In our work today with child participation, these nine conditions remain valuable tools, applied in situations from planning to evaluation. They are important for looking at structures and processes. What they don't do, and which has become increasingly recognized as vital, is to consider the quality of relationships, and how to enhance them. The UNCRC conditions state a need for openness, respect and honesty (conditions that allow participation), but what is also required are ways to improve relationships, to help young people practice the processes implicit in these conditions, and to acknowledge and work with individual differences.

It is important to note the movement in the last 30 years from the guidelines provided by the UNCRC as legal rights of children and responsibilities to adults. At first, participation was defined by external regulations, largely determined by adult experts in the field of child rights. Gradually, children became more involved as consultants, collaborators, and even in some cases, such as Funky Dragon, leading organizations. This is a movement that increasingly has taken into account the importance of internalizing the notion of participation.

As Daisaku Ikeda,[5] educator, activist, and Buddhist philosopher wrote: 'Human rights will be a powerful force for the transformation of reality when they are not simply understood as externally defined norms of behavior but are lived as the spontaneous manifestation of internalised values.'

5. ACT2gether: Children and adults working together for a fair and just society

ACT2gether, through the stewardship of the L4WB Foundation, represents a way for bringing together the strengths of the nine conditions of the UNCRC, and the process orientation of L4WB, specifically cultivating core capacities. What we have realized is that **engaged** participation requires that children/young people and adults must all work together to ensure that everyone has the opportunities to practice participating. In the 30 years since the Rights of the Child were endorsed by the United Nations, we have moved from the phase of adults consulting with children, to that of children leading their own organizations with the support of adults, but there has remained a division between adults and children. We believe that the time has arrived for children/young people to come together with adults to act as competent partners. Only through true intergenerational partnerships can we create a world that is fairer, more sustainable, and where everyone can realize their unique potential.

We recognize that you cannot just put everyone – children and adults – in a room and stand back hoping that it will work. The first impulse is always to talk about how to prepare children to work with adults – to know how to participate within the norms and procedures of adult organisations – but partnership requires preparation of **both** adults and children. In my time with Funky Dragon, I was always surprised at how many politicians were nervous or even, to quote one minister, 'terrified' of meeting young people. Before putting these two 'groups' together, we need to consider that each will have their own excitements as well as trepidations or apprehensions concerning the upcoming encounter. There are ways in which both children and adults will attempt to assert their privilege. Allowing intergenerational partnerships to bloom requires preparation at every level, sensitivity to the needs of each individual, monitoring to ensure all are still included and on task. Most importantly it requires a framework that gives a common language and a structure to enhancing those relationships through reflection and dialogue.

The Learning for Well-being approach is based on a living systems perspective, using nature as its underlying model. Its primary elements are four perspectives, seven principles and nine core capacities. Together, they place emphasis on recognizing our individual and collective strengths and cultivating our relationships. The core capacities provide a means for exploring the individual qualities, aspirations and innate ways of processing of each person. They offer ways to address, with respectful awareness, the differences between people. Their practice helps enhance the quality of our participation, as well as a way to deepen relationships and transform communications of all kinds. We believe that the L4WB

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[5] https://www.daisakuikeda.org/main/educator/edu/edu-02.html

approach, specifically cultivating core capacities, provides a solid foundation for helping to transform and enhance intergenerational partnerships.

a. Building a movement through modelling our core values
The central premise is that ACT2gether is a social movement. As such, anyone who wants to be part of it, can. In launching the idea of competent partnerships between adults and children, we are beginning by training ourselves and creating new structures and processes to support genuine efforts.

To do this we are considering each aspect, level and action of the ACT2gether organization, and the L4WB Foundation, as stewards of the initiative. Here are three examples of how we – as adults and young people – are preparing ourselves to be competent partners, with our peers and across generations.

b. ACT2gether Youth
Within ACT2gether, we have created a section known as ACT2gether Youth. The young people involved in developing the idea wanted to be both part of something and have their own agency within the larger context so they can meet together collectively for discussions, ideas, preparing and most importantly, accountability.

This growing number of young people are exploring ideas of 'What does it mean to be part ACT2gether Youth?' and 'How we can work together?'.

Along with the L4WB team the ACT2gether Youth members have been involved in developing the organization policies. They have been involved as equal partners to staff in all of the naming, logos, colours and overt aspects of the design process; they are attending events and running workshops with L4WB staff. And of course, they maintain an active role in the Core team for 2getherland.

c. L4WB Foundation Board
In September 2019 the board of the L4WB foundation began experimenting for the first time with 6 adults, 6 young people (3 under 18 and 3 between 18 and 21). The Board addressed working on the Foundation's entire operational plan, in a co-creative way. It is intended the plan will consider, not just how we do the work, but how we do the work together?

To achieve success at this meeting, information on the foundation and its activities were prepared and shared with those attending. Pre-meeting calls via internet, gave the young people an opportunity to prepare and digest information for the meeting.
We spent a full day prior to the meeting with the young people to further prepare them, address their expectations and most importantly to give them what they needed to fully engage in the process.

During the meeting they had the support of all staff but in particular they had a Participation Worker whose role was dedicated to supporting them. 'Checking in' with the young people was a continual process throughout the event.

Post Board meeting sessions will be held again via internet to reflect on the process and hopefully improve.

d. Development of the Toolbox for Training

For the last 18 months the L4WB foundation has been working in partnership with Eurochild, and the Eurochild Children's Council as it was formed:

> The first Eurochild Children's Council (ECC) and the new Child Participation Reference Group (CPRG) will work towards mainstreaming children's voices through all of Eurochild's work, with a focus on events, advocacy and strategy planning. They support the Eurochild network in reaching a gold standard in participatory practice by 2020. The mandate for both groups is just under two years – from July 2017 until April 2019.

This has given both L4WB-F and Eurochild as well as the adults and young people involved the chance to develop, try out and evaluate training around the issue of child participation. Much of this training has been developed around Eurochild events such as the General Assembly or BI annual conference. These events have traditionally been mainly adult orientated, still today the vast population of participants is over 18. However, members of the children's council have been able to take an active role within these events. In Opatia 2018 (the Eurochild Conference), this included giving speeches, running workshops, playing games and facilitating research activities. The events have also been an opportunity for young people to meet dignitaries and key players within the fields of education, health and other key areas in children's lives, to further both the causes of Eurochild and the children they represent from their home countries.

'Europe needs to strive to get closer to children. It needs to find new ways to get in touch with the reality of children coming from diverse backgrounds. No child is voiceless – it's just a matter of whether that child is given the chance to use that voice.' – Sharon, Member of the Eurochild Children's Council.

This training has been developed into a toolbox/manual that will be available in late 2019.

6. Conclusion

We know many examples of children and adults, across the world, working co-creatively. However, we also know that working with children on the basis of competent relationships is still far from the norm for most adults and in many societies. There are still people who believe children should be dutiful students and not given a voice in their environments until they are 18 years old. Some even advocate the age of competency being raised to age 21. Yet, we have met children and adults who have benefited the communities in which they live by working together. These same children and adults have told us about the benefits, learning and positive consequences for all those involved.

ACT2gether is not just waving the flag of intergenerational partnering – although we are very proud to be a part of any movement that works towards the inclusion of children in our societies. We want to promote, innovate and showcase examples of good practice – examples that offer ways to enhance the relationship between children and adults and to provide a platform on which these good ideas, issues and dreams can be shared, discussed and celebrated.

7. Author

Darren Bird has spent all his professional career working with children and young people: working for NGOs, local government, and private practice in the fields of play work, education, youth work and children's rights. For 12 years he worked as Chief Executive Officer of Funky Dragon – the Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales (UK). His work also consists of advising organizations on how to listen to children and implement participatory approaches within their structures.

8. Dedication

In pagan folklore there is a goddess called Brig. She is a triple-headed goddess, she is the mother, the child and the grandmother. For me, this is Jean, a goddess of feminist strength, who was many things to me, but most of all she was my friend. Thank you.

Healthy Systems Are Built on Collaboration, Cooperation and Coordination

By Mihaela Ionescu

You might wonder what Greta Thunberg has to do with this article? Maybe just as much as trying to answer to the question: to what extent can individuals change big complex systems that are ruling their lives and they feel unsatisfied with? To a great extent, bottom-up approaches have proved to be successful when shared values and goals are jointly defined and then translated through dialogue, negotiation and a culture of cooperation and mutual respect, into convergent strategies of actions that meet the real needs of an increasing (i.e. dominant) number of people. That is how a system can be healed. This article is an invitation to think what role each of us can and should play in building up those mindsets that (re-)invent systems that listen to and are loyal to children's rights and potential. To all children. Is there something to be learned from the early childhood systems that are celebrating child's agency, protagonism in their development and learning and their uniqueness?

This viewpoint takes an inside-out perspective from the individual to system level, stressing that systems are living organisms which change due to top-down and bottom-up interventions made by *people*. The extent to which systems meet people's needs depends on how much they rely on real dialogue and participation to model that mindset that will enable 'healing' changes in the system. I used the example of the early childhood systems which strive for a narrative where children are listened to and valued for their uniqueness, believing that such narratives are to be modelled by ACT2gether through dialogue and participation across generations.

1. Introduction

Systems (von Bertalanffy, 1968) are living 'organisms' that function, react, adapt, transform, re-shape etc. depending on the driving forces (conservative or progressive) that influence their existence, acting upon them independently or simultaneously. In times when societies are increasingly challenged by tensions between various aspects of human and societal life, systems (be they economic, political, educational, social, cultural, etc.) are also challenged. Their response to human and societal challenges is a blended result of how different agents of change (seeking for a healthier functioning of the system) recognize the need for: acting in a convergent way, sharing an aligned vision, being animated by common values, learning to collaborate, to cooperate and even more important to coordinate among themselves. This article will share possible pathways to be taken to drive a bottom-up change in early childhood systems and beyond, towards more holistic approaches, re-learning that no purposeful 'healing' action can be successful if little collaboration exists between children and adults, in a dialectical relationship that is the key to the system's overall development.

2. Systems are made by people: top-down and bottom-up approaches

Systems are made by and of people, of all ages. Although they are made for people, not everyone is participating in their creation, functioning, and becoming.

In a top-down approach, people invested with a decision-making role are deciding what changes are needed for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the systems based on a vision that they define and the information they gather about the inputs, processes and outputs. Decisions are applied, and only then will the system (i.e. people) start to learn about such changes happening *to* them, and to un-learn the old way of functioning. The more complex the system (layers of governance and types of stakeholders), the harder and longer it will take for the change to happen, as a new mindset will *have to* take the place of the old mindset.

In a bottom-up approach, islands of change are created within the system by people searching for solutions to problems that the system (i.e. people) is facing, given the ever-changing environment in which the system exists. The changes are explored and spread at the grassroots and, when largely embraced and endorsed, they mature in widely agreed decisions influencing the entire system. The new mindset is built through participation and ready to further support the change.

3. The image of the child and the mindset

We might all agree that we are constantly challenged by changes that we have not necessarily anticipated in our societies and feel sometimes overwhelmed by their complexity and impact on our lives, and in some cases even disempowered.
Each of us as living and complex systems, feel sometimes threatened in our 'smooth' functioning and strive to reach our comfort zone. Tensions at the individual level, when trying to adapt to life trajectories that may very much seem uncharted today, as a young

person, a parent, an employee, a grandparent or senior person (how many people can firmly say how their life will be in 10 years?), influence to a great extent the individual's commitment to change or adapt himself/herself, and also to create changes in his/her environment. Such tensions may be positive drivers in the individual's search for better ways of being and living with him/herself and others. Some may be strong barriers. However, these tensions require changes that are sometimes difficult to achieve, especially when taking a broader perspective of micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) within which each individual lives. How can individuals influence the systems they are living in, so that those are more responsive to their needs and more relevant for individual and collective well-being? Where to start? How to do it? Big questions.

The departing angle we propose in our discussion about 'healthy' systems is the diachronic perspective over a child's life, from when they are born. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework for human development developed in the '70s still provides today a solid foundation for understanding the intertwined relationships between the individual and the layered contexts corresponding to the four levels of the ecological system, with some levels being within the reach of direct influence exerted by the individual (micro-systems like family, pre/school, peers), some acting as indirect envelopes for the individual's development (e.g. mass-media, culture).
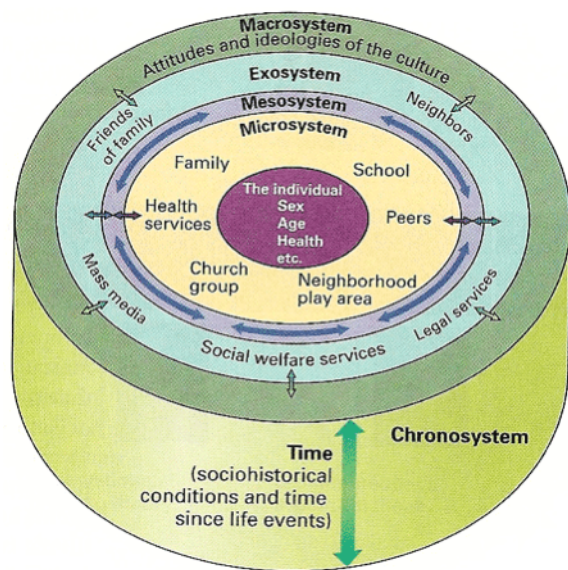

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner: ecological theory of child development (Source: Santrock, 2008, retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Bronfenbrenner-ecological-theory-of-child-development-Source-Santrock-2008-p33_fig1_308606611)

If we think about a child coming into this world (we would argue no matter where), their developmental trajectory will highly depend on the grounding image about the child that adults have in both explicit and implicit narratives. Starting from family moving to the broader society, across generations, these narratives are shaped by intertwined interactions between all levels of the system as Bronfenbrenner describes them. Seeing children or not seeing them as competent, with agency, owners of rights, ready to learn and assert their unique diversity and potential – still to be discovered and understood by others – engines

of society's development, etc. shapes in a particular way the nature of the interactions between them and families, services, neighbourhoods, communities, society at large. It also determines the extent to which these environments (i.e. adults) value (or not) and create (or not enough) opportunities for children to be and become aligned with their uniqueness in their ongoing development. The dominant narrative around the image of the child in a society can be distilled into what we would call the *mindset(s)*. It is not homogenously distributed across all levels of the ecological system, across all generations, and all sectors, but it can be recognized especially when various systems in the society (e.g. welfare systems, health systems, education systems, etc.) go through reforming changes.
And such narratives accompany the child at least until they officially become adults (i.e. parents themselves, having a job, self-sufficiency, and full autonomy over their life) and influence their life.

4. Changing mindsets and the systemic changes

Changing mindsets about a child's development, their agency and role in their own being and becoming, means influencing the narratives in various contexts, from the micro- to macro-system level (see Bronfenbrenner's ecological model).

Changing such narratives to reach a common place from where generative systemic changes can occur requires time, a co-constructed theory of change and strong and pertinent evidences. Multiple actors need to be involved (from children and family to community level, from professionals to policymakers, across sectors, from local to national level, and cross-country), multiple types of actions have to be enacted (from community mobilization to community debates, from testing new approaches to collecting evidences, from campaigns to roundtables), and multiple channels for communication and true dialogue (formal, non-formal, informal) need to be created and enabled (including the new technology). The final destination is where the new narrative is no longer questioned: it becomes the foundational rationale for which changes are enacted.

Working at the micro-system level (family, school, workplace, etc.) means engaging with children and families (across age groups) in a meaningful way, providing platforms for open dialogue and intergenerational learning and negotiations around the rationales for change, what needs to be changed and how change will happen. A new narrative can emerge only if the voices of each other are heard through co-constructive approaches, facilitated and enabled towards creating relevant changes in the environments where they live.
The bottom-up approach (moving from micro-systems to meso- and exo-systems) is highly efficient in terms of building a new mindset, but its power relies not only in co-participation, but also in:
· discussing and aligning forward-looking values across various actors, ages, sectors and levels of governance
· building shared understandings across actors of different ages and sectors, while valuing the diversity of views
· incorporating answers to the real and emerging needs and concerns of children, families and communities

- modelling new ways of 'doing things' while building on the diversity of strengths the actors and services bring together
- reflecting on setbacks and adjusting processes to the dynamics of the local contexts
- celebrating documented achievements and building further on them
- creating the co-ownership of the changes made step by step.

In systems that serve and affect the children's and families' lives, changing mindsets in a bottom-up approach that is driven by a child- and family-responsive paradigm may lead to systemic changes, but top-down systemic changes that are not based on a true dialogue with children and families do not lead to changing mindsets, thus to unsuccessful and/or not lasting changes.

5. Learning from the early childhood field

Let's take a closer look at what is happening at least at the European level in the early childhood field, the scientific domain that focuses on studying and addressing the first period of life of an individual – pre-natal to 8 years of age, a period with a tremendous impact on the child's healthy development and well-being.

What are the main and current narratives there and to what extent could they be expanded beyond the young ages, while keeping at the heart the child's best interest?

Here are only a few affirmations that are currently the main drivers in shaping and improving the early childhood systems pertinent to all levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system. As a reflective exercise, we propose the following demand: How relevant are they for the systems addressing older age groups, beyond childhood?

- *Child development needs to be addressed in a holistic way*. The progress in one developmental domain impacts the advancements in the others. The holistic perspective on a child's development counter balanced the too 'care'-focused approach in service provision in the first two years of a child's life and the too academic-focus during the pre-primary years. The child needs a constant concern for their holistic development, no matter the age.
  The lack of continuity in addressing equally and appropriately across age groups the child's 'even' need for physical, nutritional and health, social-emotional, cognitive development as a rounded person, was recognized as being a major obstacle in building a strong foundation for children's healthy rounded development. The child's holistic development became one of main ingredients in the dominant narratives of the experts in the field.
  This has impacted the way the early childhood education and care services (including parenting support) are to be designed and provided, from curriculum to staff preparation and continuous development, from policy regulations to daily programmes in services. However, this holistic perspective has not been embraced with the same intensity by all sectors – education, health, social protection and also has not been implemented with the same accuracy within and across sectors.

- *A holistic view on **the** child's development requires a holistic view on the family's well-being.* Different aspects of family life directly impact child development and well-being. The quality of the home environment affects the child's healthy development – access to health services, family's level of income, housing conditions, access to education, quality of neighbourhoods, etc. The interdependence between the different aspects of life is particularly stronger in the case of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families. For example, in the case of families living in severe poverty, providing children with a nurturing environment is limited by the family opportunity to improve their life conditions. The family micro-system has to be supported by other micro-systems (health services, education services, cultural services, social assistance, community networks, etc.), and the quality of their interaction may contribute to improving the quality of the home environment for the child.

- ***A*** *child and family-centered approach is a pre-requisite for designing and implementing quality services and for improving them.* Low access to services and low outcomes in children's development may indicate not only that services might not be within the reach or affordable to families, but also that they are misaligned with or non-responsive to children's and families' needs and demands, they are shaped and function based on *mindsets* that to a great extent ignore the actual views and needs of the children and families that they serve. The departing point in re-thinking/improving the current services is learning about children's and families' views, understandings and needs, and jointly developing plans for improving the quality of services.

- *The 360˚ view on child and family needs require collaboration, cooperation and coordination between professionals, services and levels of governance when addressing them.*
There is strong agreement among early childhood experts (Geinger et al., 2015) that fragmentation is one of the problems to be addressed within early childhood systems: across age groups, across sectors, across services, across levels of governance and policies. The historical legacy of different (national and local) authorities governing different sectors across all age groups – from infancy to senior ages (health, education, social protection, etc.) led to services that are addressing the same children and families in parallel without communicating, cooperating and without coordination.
In the case of young children, especially the most vulnerable, this lack of cooperation and coordination is a missed opportunity to effectively and efficiently contribute to improving the quality of the home environment and of the support to parents, and therefore a missed opportunity for children right from the start of their life.
There are many examples in various countries of how cooperation and coordination across age groups and services have been addressed at different levels of the system: professional level, institutional level, inter-institutional level, governance level.

Such narratives pertaining to an already consolidated 'image of the child', but also because of its intrinsic connection with the image of the family, have been built over the at least past two decades by bringing together research evidence, policy and practice examples from various countries, confirming that this is the way to move forward if we are to improve existing systems serving children and families. They are the current ingredients for

consolidating a new collective *mindset* nurturing the further development of early childhood systems.

If such narratives were also in the mainstream thinking around older children, would education systems be/look differently? It might be the right time to work together, across sectors and across generations, on building such narratives.

6. Author

Dr. Mihaela Ionescu is the Program Director in ISSA (the International Step by Step Association) a membership association that connects more than 90 member organizations from 42 countries in Europe and Central Asia, working in the field of early childhood development (www.issa.nl). She is deeply involved in the strategic program development of ISSA (see ISSA's Initiatives), in developing and implementing policies and programs aimed at providing equitable and high quality early childhood services in countries from ISSA regions, and in providing opportunities for ISSA members and other partners for shared learning across countries through annual thematic meetings and ISSA's Annual Conferences. She coordinated the development of several resources in ISSA, most of them focused on process quality and professionalism in early childhood services (see Roads to Quality, Quality Framework for Early Childhood Services for Children Under Three, A Systemic Approach to Quality in Early Childhood Services) and more recently on strengthening integration in early childhood systems (see INTESYS).

7. Dedication

In memory of Jean, a brilliant mind and a strong ally in making children's voices heard when shaping policies that impact their lives. A privilege to advocate with her for competent (early childhood) education systems across ages, starting from an aligned image of the child, as a competent, *rich*, and active partner in their learning.

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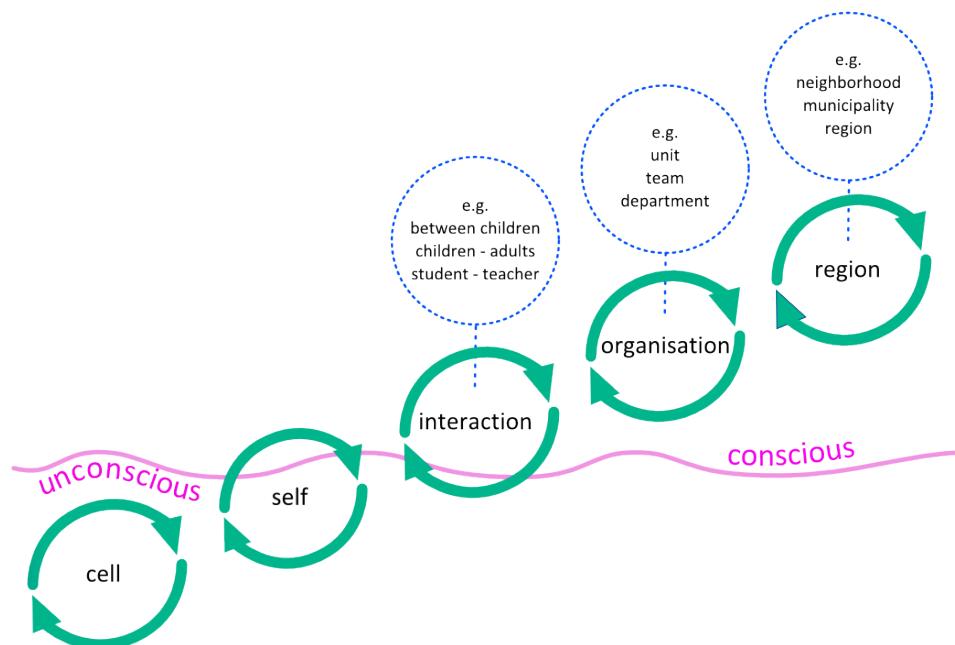
How Feedback Can Strengthen Competent Partnerships Between Generations: An Example from Youth Policy in the Netherlands

By Erik Jan de Wilde & Shanti George

'Measuring what matters' is a subject of enduring interest for researchers like the two co-authors of this article, especially since we come from the very different fields of (respectively) psychology and anthropology and thus bring contrasting – yet mutually enriching – perspectives to bear on the subject. Both co-authors have a special interest in

children and young people and are aware that these groups are often explicitly or implicitly excluded from discussions of what matters and how it should be measured. The first author was able to draw on his close experience of good practice in consulting children and youth for local policy and practice.

1. Introduction

In everyday speech, 'feedback' is often treated as desirable, even necessary, but to be requested at a later stage and added on when carrying out an activity. The question 'Were you able to get feedback afterwards?' can elicit the reply 'No, we had to conclude in a rush before we got to that stage,' implying that feedback is to be ascertained mainly towards the end of a process.

Influential thinkers in competitive industrial manufacture have underlined the moment of 'feedback' in the processes that they attempted to make more efficient, for example in the 'PDCA cycle' that originally underpinned innovation within the car industry and was subsequently extended to much else – including the formulation and carrying out of social policy – within the sequence of Plan-Do-Check-Act where the third step refers to obtaining feedback. 'Check' was later sometimes changed to 'Study' to emphasize analysis within feedback rather than supervision and the short form was altered to PDSA. The initial association with supervision underlines how feedback is usually associated with hierarchies, with individuals 'reporting' to their superiors.

Given these overtones in use of the concept of 'feedback,' it is not surprising that children traditionally have not been included in formal feedback cycles. School reports, for example, provided feedback from the school to parents and were often given in sealed envelopes for pupils to take home and then return to the school authorities with the parents' signatures. In the process, stern words from parents would convey the feedback to pupils, urging better performance the next time. Such denial of an active role for children within formal feedback on their education was associated with what critical childhood studies describe as a view of children as 'becomings' to be shaped by relevant adults rather than as 'beings' in their own right. Children could then mainly insert their agency by using what James Scott called 'weapons of the weak.' One author of this article remembers classmates who steamed open school reports in order to check how bad the news actually was and then resealed them to hand to parents, and even a daring spirit who forged parental signatures on highly unfavourable school reports. Parents might in their turn employ carrots or sticks, as when a parent was heard to advise others at a school meeting: 'Just cut pocket money when the report is bad and you'll see how quickly the grades improve.' (The first example is from a South Asian country and the second from a Western European one).

An environment of harsh judgement and insensitive pronouncement can carry over to relationships between peers in informal environments, where a pupil who is labelled a 'low achiever' in school parlance may hear jeers of 'Loser!' in the playground. Cyber bullying is an extreme example of negative feedback from peers.

The present article follows the principles and core capacities that are part of Learning for Well-being perspectives, especially as embodied in the ACT2gether initiative that urges children and adults to 'act together' by recognizing that children can be competent partners, both with regard to their education and more widely. We therefore argue for an understanding of feedback that is radically different from conventional usages that largely ignore children. A positive example of the PDCA approach from the field of youth policy in the Netherlands – with which the first author was closely associated – will show that it is possible to embark on good practice that draws sensitively and steadily on feedback from children and young people.

2. Adopting nature as our guide

Rather than drawing on images from industrial production to visualize feedback, we will in this article seek insights from natural rhythms and processes, following the Learning for Well-being approach. This allows us to grasp how feedback is much more ingrained in daily life than some formal step towards the end of a sequence of planning and activity. Each cell in our bodies is constantly seeking and giving information to its neighbours and more generally to the body as a whole, mostly unconsciously, and this process stops only when we are dead or severely impaired in some way. Around us, birds migrate as they draw in information about the changing seasons, and animals and insects change their habitats as they perceive in various ways that the conditions which support them have altered.

Similarly, parents are usually alert to signals from an infant that enough nourishment has been drawn from breast or bottle for the time being, or in due course that the moment of readiness for toilet training has come. We may not grasp fully how children in turn are keenly aware from very early on of their environments and of significant adults, as when they show pleasure or distress in response to particular acts of care. The most nurturing support comes from a parent or grandparent or neighbour or creche worker who is sensitive to feedback from the infant or toddler or young child, and who is able to provide information in ways that do not necessarily involve words but that reassure the child that all is well and will continue to be well.

3. Feedback within the school system

Ideally, when a child is at the age to receive formal reports on performance in school, this form of feedback would extend and build on the continuing nurturant exchange that was just described, in order to support steady further development. Instead, however, there is too often a shift to formal hierarchically organized 'judgement' delivered from above a child's head by adults – in other words, a shift from more natural to more industrial models.

Scholarly analyses of feedback within the classroom are helpful here, as when Hattie and Timperley (2007) extensively reviewed existing studies and distinguished between classroom feedback at the levels of task, learning process, self-regulation and the persons themselves.

Other authors (such as Harris et al., 2015) have argued that some forms of self-feedback work positively. Such analyses buttress our suggestion that children and young people should be protagonists in feedback systems around their own development and progress, not merely the objects of adult judgement, and that feedback is primarily about *self-*organization rather than adult direction.

Certain core capacities from everyday life, as emphasized in Learning for Well-being perspectives, can come effectively into play here, both for children and young people who are organizing themselves and their lives and for related adults who are providing feedback and receiving it themselves. *Relaxing* enables learning far more than does a situation of tense judgement. *Inquiring* and *listening*, related to *reflecting*, allow feedback to be transformed from information into understanding and knowledge. *Noticing* is an example of the everyday use of the senses to follow developments that can be enhanced through *enriching sensory awareness.* This can be taken further by *subtle sensing* that draws on intuition about what is being said between the words or what is being indicated by bodily posture or facial expression. *Empathizing* allows resonance with someone rather than only judgement about them. *Discerning patterns and systemic processes* are essential to self-organization and to supporting this in others.

These basic capacities may seem relevant for children and adults who share everyday situations closely to exchange feedback in the form of impressions and experiences, as when a family talks over the evening meal about how various members have spent the day or when a child approaches a sympathetic teacher to confide a problem at a moment when both are alone in the classroom. But can such core capacities be used in ways that feed into and influence macro-policies within complex organizations that determine the well-being of young people and relevant adults? The example that follows suggests an affirmative answer.

4. The Rotterdam Youth Monitor

The first author of this article draws on extensive familiarity with youth policy in the Netherlands and gives in the case study below an example of how the PDCA cycle can be infused judiciously and sensitively with the core capacities described above.

Policy, within such an approach, is formulated in consultation with those whose lives it concerns, not least when it comes to a new generation whose activities play out in what are often drastically different contexts from those that policymakers remember from their own youth; similarly, with the professionals who are employed within the services provided for young people. Reviewing and analysing a number of studies about the use of regular client feedback in psychological services with youth, Tam & Ronan (2017) conclude that collecting and applying continuous feedback from young clients improves the outcomes for youth. The influence may appear small when measured by conventional techniques, but the authors put forward plausible arguments for positive effects – that the young clients gain structured opportunities during formal sessions within therapeutic processes to voice their perceptions as a basis for active involvement in decision-making, thereby allowing the professional consulted to monitor progress in terms of the young person's own satisfaction. Such an alliance is close to that of the competent partnerships between young people and adults that are envisaged in the ACT2gether initiative. Beck (1995) also supports the systematic assessment of progress through listening to clients as a core element of interventions and therapies within effective cognitive behavioural theory more generally, as such listening helps to advance *mutual* understanding of the progress towards therapeutic goals.

Clearly the core capacities of inquiring, listening, reflecting and discerning patterns and processes are to the fore here, and ideally those of relaxing, empathizing and subtle sensing as well. The case now described was based on such an exchange between school nurse and pupil, but then used the perceptions and experiences of pupils to inform and enrich social policy at different levels and in multiple forms, in order to enhance the environments and well-being of young people – first in Rotterdam, then in the Netherlands more widely and in certain cases in other countries that drew on the Dutch example of the Rotterdam Youth Monitor (De Wilde & Diekstra, 1997).

> All children in the Netherlands from birth to 19 years are provided with routine health examinations, approximately 15 times between birth and four years of age and three to five times in primary and secondary education. This legally mandated task is performed by staff within youth health care – youth doctors, youth nurses and doctors' assistants who take care of the logistics and procedures of the health checks. The aims are to detect development problems early (both individually and within cohorts), to optimize immunization and to promote health more generally.

> In 1997, the city of Rotterdam established the first systematically implemented Dutch monitor in which individual and collective feedback was linked to these primary processes in youth health care and embedded in local youth policy. At a collective level, individual results are combined to produce statistics at the school, neighbourhood and municipal levels. By legal requirement, municipal data must be collected at least once every four years. Most data take the form of self-reports based on questionnaires. For children younger than ten years, questionnaires are filled in by parents and teachers, and for children aged ten to eleven self-reports are combined with data from these same adults. From the age of 12 onwards, children and adolescents respond for themselves.

The method generates feedback cycles at different levels, beginning with the young person. Measuring here is intervening. By asking questions about a variety of topics, children become familiar with these topics and also with the fact that they are apparently subjects of adult interest. In addition to asking health questions, the Rotterdam Monitor also made room for questions about non-health issues: what do you think of the city, how safe do you find the streets, how do you feel about people with a different sexual orientation… all the way up to what are your ideals?

The data teach relevant professionals what are potentially important issues with individual children and in doing so, channel attention to children. Schools learn what the most important topics from the pupils' viewpoint are and which should be taken into account in school policy. At the level of the district and municipality, the data provide a kind of thermometer for the state of the youth. The practice of data-informed youth policy as implemented in the Rotterdam Youth Monitor is now more common in many countries.

Programmes such as the above are predicated on policymakers' interest in feedback from young people. This can wane, not least in response to political considerations, and thus programmes that successfully institutionalize feedback from young people – inquiring about their experiences, listening to their responses, reflecting on their opinions and discerning patterns and processes whereby policy can be formulated or reformulated on this basis – are vulnerable to budget cuts when school pupils are seen as less important people to consult than adult voters and tax payers. The number of sessions with health care professionals are then reduced, as are the frequency of sessions and the areas explored in discussions with school pupils, and the feedback ascertained may be used less responsively and creatively, all of which then leads to a decline in youth well-being.

5. Conclusion

If feedback between children or young people and adults – at various levels up to the national planning organization – can draw on the core capacities that are made good use of in the case described (inquiring, listening, observing, reflecting and discerning patterns), the positive outcomes will transcend a limited circle of project planning and management to achieve an ever-widening upward spiral that draws on what young people think and feel in order to enhance the various social environments that they share with adults – and thus to 'act together' more effectively. In children and young people's immediate surroundings, the additional core capacities of empathizing, subtle sensing, relaxing and enriched sensory awareness should be constantly in play, with them and by them.

6. Authors

Erik Jan de Wilde (1963) trained in clinical psychology and methodology. Early work as a psychologist/researcher in an academic children's hospital was combined with doctoral research on adolescent suicidal behaviour (1992), leading to an appointment as assistant professor of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion at Leiden University. In 2001 he transferred to the local policy domain as head of the Youth Research Department of the Rotterdam Municipal Health Service. He subsequently worked at the Netherlands Youth Institute, Utrecht, as an expert in Youth Monitoring and Policy (2007-2019). Recently he started the company HanSei.nl, that specializes in monitoring support. His numerous papers are predominantly about emotional (un)well-being of children and adolescents. His two children are now young adults, and he resides in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Shanti George, an independent researcher as well as a Senior Associate at the Learning for Well-being Foundation, is now based in the Netherlands and has worked across three continents at universities and at foundations that focus on children. Her five books and many articles have in some cases been translated widely. In her professional life, she attempts to weave together the generation of knowledge for positive social change, the understandings of good practice in varying contexts, philanthropic initiatives and activism for children.

7. Dedication

Both of us knew Jean Gordon well and respected her deeply. We are delighted to contribute to this issue of the L4WB Magazine – that is dedicated to her memory – an article that reflects on subjects that she was passionate about, such as engaging children and young people in positive social change and carrying out research that resonates with the real world around rather than research locked up in some ivory tower. Jean would have embraced the ACT2gether initiative and the importance of measuring what matters to young people and children.

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