

Competent Systems

By Linda O'Toole and Jean Gordon

1. Introduction

Welcome to the sixth issue of *L4WB Magazine*.

A key objective for this magazine is to give readers multiple perspectives on selected themes. In a world where there is a frequent tendency to stay with one's familiar reference points, we are delighted to offer a space for researchers and practitioners from various fields and sectors to write about their experiences and areas of practice for an audience living and working in different countries and circumstances.

For the current issue of *L4WB Magazine* we have selected the theme of *competent systems*. In using this phrase, we are drawing attention to the structure, processes, policies, and characteristics that allow and encourage systems, at all levels, to have the competencies necessary for nurturing the holistic development of all those involved in the system. The Learning for Well-being Foundation encourages a vision for childhood that includes health, social services, youth policy, cultural arenas, etc. as well as early childhood education and care (ECEC) and school education. On a specific level we are interested in how the L4WB principles might act as a guide for this vision so that various sectors can function collaboratively both within a particular system and between systems.

Our focus on the concept of *competent systems* is sourced in a report for the European Commission in 2011 on early childhood education and care services (Urban et al., 2011). The concept asserts that building competence at all levels in the system improves the likelihood of increasing alignment, convergence, coherence and cohesion within systems and among services. The overall aim is better efficiency in achieving the outcomes sought, and enabling individual professionals, teams, institutions and governance bodies to pursue their professional goals. A competent system is grounded in values that are translated into knowledge and practice at all levels (Urban et al., 2011). The L4WB Foundation considers

this approach a practical format for interpreting the living systems approach which brings an understanding of the organic way in which all complex systems function and evolve.

In early 2018 the L4WB Foundation commissioned a paper to examine the extent to which our ECEC and education systems contain the policy orientations and guiding principles for working towards developing systems competent for nurturing children's holistic development from birth through school.¹ The discussion paper provided a first step in exploring if, where and how L4WB principles² are reflected in current policy orientations in ECEC and school education in Europe. We decided to take as our focus European policy orientations for ECEC and schools because even though EU-level documents do not tell us what is happening in every Member State, they do give us an overview of key issues under discussion and areas of questioning and exchange.

This paper was presented at the L4WB Community Day on 24 April 2018 in Brussels, during which a panel of researchers and practitioners discussed the issues from their various perspectives, complemented by a panel of youth sharing factors they perceived as influencing their holistic development in education settings.³

As a result of this preliminary exploration, we have an increasing interest in this complex and vitally important topic, and many questions.

There is a general acceptance by educators, researchers and some policymakers of the importance of taking a holistic approach to education in order to support deep learning and nurture the well-being of children. But how does that work in practice? Are our early childhood and education systems actually designed to reach such goals? Children as 'whole' individuals somehow get lost in complex systems, but so do their parents/carers and their teachers and early childhood professionals. ECEC services are continually under development but do those changes target the deep problems facing children, their families/carers and more broadly our societies?

The work of the Foundation has led to asking whether our ECEC and compulsory education systems contain the policy proposals or guiding principles for working towards competent systems that promote a holistic image of children and whether they function in an integrated way. Is there coherence and continuity in the vision, values and principles expressed in European and/or Member State policy documents, commissioned studies and practices regarding early childhood services and school education? Does this vision actually serve the realization of each child's unique potential building on their inner diversity?

¹ Gordon and Ionescu, 2018. https://www.learningforwellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/Towards-competent-system_a-discussion-paper20Apr2018_Final.pdf

² <https://www.learningforwellbeing.org/our-approach/7-principles/>

³ <https://www.learningforwellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/L4WB-COM-DAY-18-REPORT.pdf>

For this issue of the magazine we want to broaden the discussion to a range of perspectives and examples, including some personal viewpoints on what is required for a system to be 'competent.'

The Articles

Issue 6 features six articles and three viewpoints, all related to the theme of competent systems and highlighting different perspectives of what is needed to support and encourage holistic development. Many of the articles in the issue acknowledge a widely stated desire for children, and the adults who support them, to be supported as whole human beings, and they cite the need for various parts of any system to communicate and coordinate both vertically (within the same organization and institution) and horizontally (across different sectors.) As Graham Leicester writes in Article 4, the L4WB discussion paper mentioned above, 'reveals a gap between our aspirations and the reality of practice on the ground.' The frequently perceived gap between practices in the field and stated policies, procedures, and intentions is one of the themes running through most of the articles. What is hopeful are the ways in which various authors suggest how the disconnection between aspirations and reality can be addressed. It is especially inspiring that these suggestions are most often human-centred experiences – shifts in processes, how we see ourselves and how we relate to one another. This is not viewed as a replacement for systemic changes at the levels of institutions and societies; rather it points to the roles that we can each play with our own actions and interactions. As Gordon and Ionescu (2018) conclude: 'individual competences cannot thrive in a system that is not, itself, competent, i.e. a system that does not provide the enabling conditions for individuals to be fully nurtured.' In reading the articles and viewpoints of this issue, we suggest that there is mutuality in the relationship between individual competences and the competences of systems: individuals can only thrive in competent systems and competent systems rely on individuals who are growing and developing their own competences.

Briefly, we want to share some of the highlights of each of the articles and viewpoints.

We are pleased to begin this issue with 'Learning Communities: Supporting Change in European School Education.' Education and Training 2020 (ET2020) 'is a strategic framework ... (exchanging) best practices, mutual learning, gathering and dissemination of information and evidence of what works, as well as advice and support for policy reforms.' Hannah Grainger Clemson relates her experience as a coordinator of this two-year collaboration of governmental policymakers and education stakeholders resulting in their ET2020 Working Group Schools report. She describes how the group applied a collaborative process for interacting and working together; functioning as a learning community as a model for the behaviour and attitudes they were recommending for their own education systems. Resolving issues of trust, vulnerability and multiple challenges is remarkable given the diversity of the working group participants and their specific school contexts throughout the EU. In describing the human-scale process of the working group, one of her phrases particularly resonates: 'I am talking about people in a room, in a shared space.'

The second and third articles focus on reviewing progress being made in early childhood services: the importance of developing the quality of the process while also addressing the structural elements that impact the process. In 'It Takes a System to Achieve Quality in Early Childhood Services', Mihaela Ionescu shares the work ISSA (International Step by Step Association) has done over nearly 30 years to promote dialogue around process quality and to track the impact of those efforts. There are a number of highly significant experiences, findings and insights in this article that relate to developing competence within a system. For example, building a culture around quality based on a shared understanding of practices that are relevant for teachers, focusing on the systemic nature of process quality, being systematic in documenting both the effectiveness and the challenges, and the commitment to continuous quality improvement based on democratic, child-centred values.

'Sustaining Warm and Inclusive Transitions Across the Early Years (START): Facilitating Collaborative Learning of Childcare Workers, Preschool – and Primary School Teachers' by Katrien Van Laere and her co-authors presents preliminary findings from the transnational participatory action-research study carried out in four countries: Italy, Slovenia, UK and Belgium. One of the key concepts in the article that especially resonates with the L4WB principles is the distinction between two different perspectives on 'transitions': the children's *school readiness* vs. *children-ready schools*. As stated in the article, the latter perspective underlines 'the importance of the educational contexts valuing multiple ways of learning, not only teacher-directed but indeed co-constructed by all actors involved, starting from the children's needs and interests.'

Graham Leicester, in his article 'Learning for Well-being: Closing the Gap Between Aspiration and Practice' uses the Community Day discussion paper as a touchstone. He shares the Three Horizons framework for understanding systems transition. In setting up the opportunities for the practice of transformative innovation, he notes that 'our systems are not competent in at least one critical aspect: the capacity to grow, develop and change over time in response to a changing world.' What is fascinating and hopeful is the pragmatic impact of shifting a paradigm through offering a new vision, discovering the places where aspects of that vision are already present, and working to embody those features more fully. The article inspires a view of what is possible to truly move forward in ways we know are necessary.

In Article 5, 'Everything is Connected. Really?,' Karin Morrison shares personal stories of young children who are overlooked by the education system in which they spend such a large part of their young lives. Often the ways in which they are ignored or not served occur because there is a lack of connection or continuity between the education system and other sectors – medical, welfare, community services frequent lack of continuity between education in many of those connections between sectors of health. Morrison comprehensively points to the many ways in which systems are not competent because they allow too many parts and holes to exist in what they are offering young people. She suggests that resolution may be possible by everyone – including the children involved – doing what is possible immediately in front of them.

In the sixth article of this issue, 'What contributes to education systems being nurturing to all children?' Jean Gordon considers to what extent the L4WB principles may contribute to a vision or overarching goals for the various sectors that are involved in childhood services and experiences. She examines three specific factors which are represented in the L4WB principles: learner agency (participation), relationships and diversity. While pointing to the importance of allowing education systems to be more learner-centred, she also suggests that developing a competent system requires moving towards a new societal vision on childhood: 'a vision for all children growing up in Europe and reaching across all the policy areas that affect children's lives (education, social services, health, justice, culture, etc.)'.

Lastly, we present three viewpoints which are based on the personal experiences of the authors in creating diverse environments which allow young people to thrive holistically: a particular English school; a specific family; and the inner preparation of teachers to engage more fully with their students.

In the first viewpoint 'Is It Time to Rethink Our Perspective on Holistic Education?' Emilie J. Martin shares her experience as a teacher in a UK school that incorporated sustainability principles. As she started teaching in the school, it was in the early stages of developing a curriculum that reflected the interconnectedness of the natural world. She shares that inspiring journey with us in her viewpoint and asks us to consider the impact of 'an educational experience which goes beyond the *whole* person to focus on the *whole* system.'

'How My Parents Brought Me Up' by Zoe Phoenix is the reflection of a 16-year old, based on interviewing her parents about what they did to nurture her holistic well-being. She reflects on the importance of developing trust, operating with mutual respect, and encouraging diverse opportunities to follow one's interests. This is a viewpoint that any family will benefit from reading because it offers practical pointers about living as a teenager in a family environment. It also reminds us of the essential values implicit in relationships of all kinds.

We conclude this issue with Ellen Hall's viewpoint, 'Considering the Soul in Education' in which she reminds us that children arrive in schools as whole beings: body, mind, heart and soul. With decades of experience as an educator, her view is that explicit and implicit recognition of soul qualities within the learning environment opens possibilities for greater joy, creativity, and higher levels of academic achievement. In preparing teachers, she stresses the need for them to explore their own inner nature – their soul qualities – in order to be able to communicate with their students, one soul to another. It is a viewpoint that points to another way of understanding and developing 'competence'.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue of *L4WB Magazine*. We will be very pleased to receive your feedback.

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Learning Communities: Supporting Change in European School Education

By Hannah Grainger Clemson

Introduction

Recently the European Commission's ET2020 Working Group Schools¹ published their report with the title 'European ideas for better learning: the governance of school education systems'. The work involved close collaboration by governmental policymakers and education stakeholders in a series of meetings and 'peer learning' events over the course of two years. Although a small task in comparison, choosing the title was a similar challenge to the whole process of assimilating and reflecting different perspectives and priorities. And, in the end, it was not difficult to come to an agreement when the key shared values of the Group were brought to the fore.

The phrase 'European ideas' was chosen because the report represented all of the members and the way in which they had generously shared practices and listened to each other with curiosity. The Group also favoured 'better learning' because they were searching for ways to support schools to continually develop in creating meaningful learning experiences for all young people. It is not accidental that the members – government policymakers and educational organization representatives – applied the same collaborative pedagogical approach to their work as that which they desire for their own contexts. This collective desire regarding school education is also notable in the prevalence of key words in the report: 'collaboration' is mentioned 79 times in the 260 pages. 'Autonomy' is mentioned 92 times; 'capacity' (i.e. the ability to do something) 94 times; 'trust' 82 times.

¹ Education and Training 2020 (ET2020) is a strategic framework of the European Commission which creates fora for exchanges of best practices, mutual learning, gathering and dissemination of information and evidence of what works, as well as advice and support for policy reforms. Members of expert groups come from all ministries of education across Europe plus European stakeholder organizations.

This article explores the collaborative process of sharing and developing ideas on the governance of school education and how that process – with both its opportunities and challenges – closely relates to the concept of ‘schools as learning organizations’ that underpins the Group’s work.

Collaboration and community

Collaboration and community are concepts and ways of interacting and working together that are fundamental to both how the Group worked together and what the Group wants to say about school education. This link between process and content is evidence of the strongly held shared values of the members as well as something that contributed to the success of their work in terms of effective peer learning.

When one talks about business, enterprise, research, innovation, the word ‘collaboration’ is never far away. Even unbeknown to ourselves as citizens, algorithms also pull us into societal groups via digital technologies. But it is not as if we avoid such relationships. We are human, and we arrange ourselves into partnerships, clusters and groups.² We benefit from such interactions and we worry when we see the opposite happening: the individual student locked in their own mind; the isolated teacher hidden away in their classroom. Fragmentation has become a dirty word.

For schools and for national and regional policymaking and decisions, the Group’s work was underpinned by the concepts of schools as ‘learning organizations’ within school education as a ‘learning system’.

Schools as learning organizations

...encourage and enable teachers and school leaders to improve both their pedagogical and their organizational practices concurrently through local collaborative research and networking. Developing the capacity and role of teachers and school leaders is essential for schools to provide a clear strategic vision and leadership that guides and fully supports teaching and learning, and which enables effective communication with other practitioners and stakeholders.³

² See the report on ‘Networks for learning and development across school education’ for the way the Group distinguishes these in school education: https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs5-networks-learning_en.pdf

³ For more on these concepts, see the main report at https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs1-governance-school_en.pdf

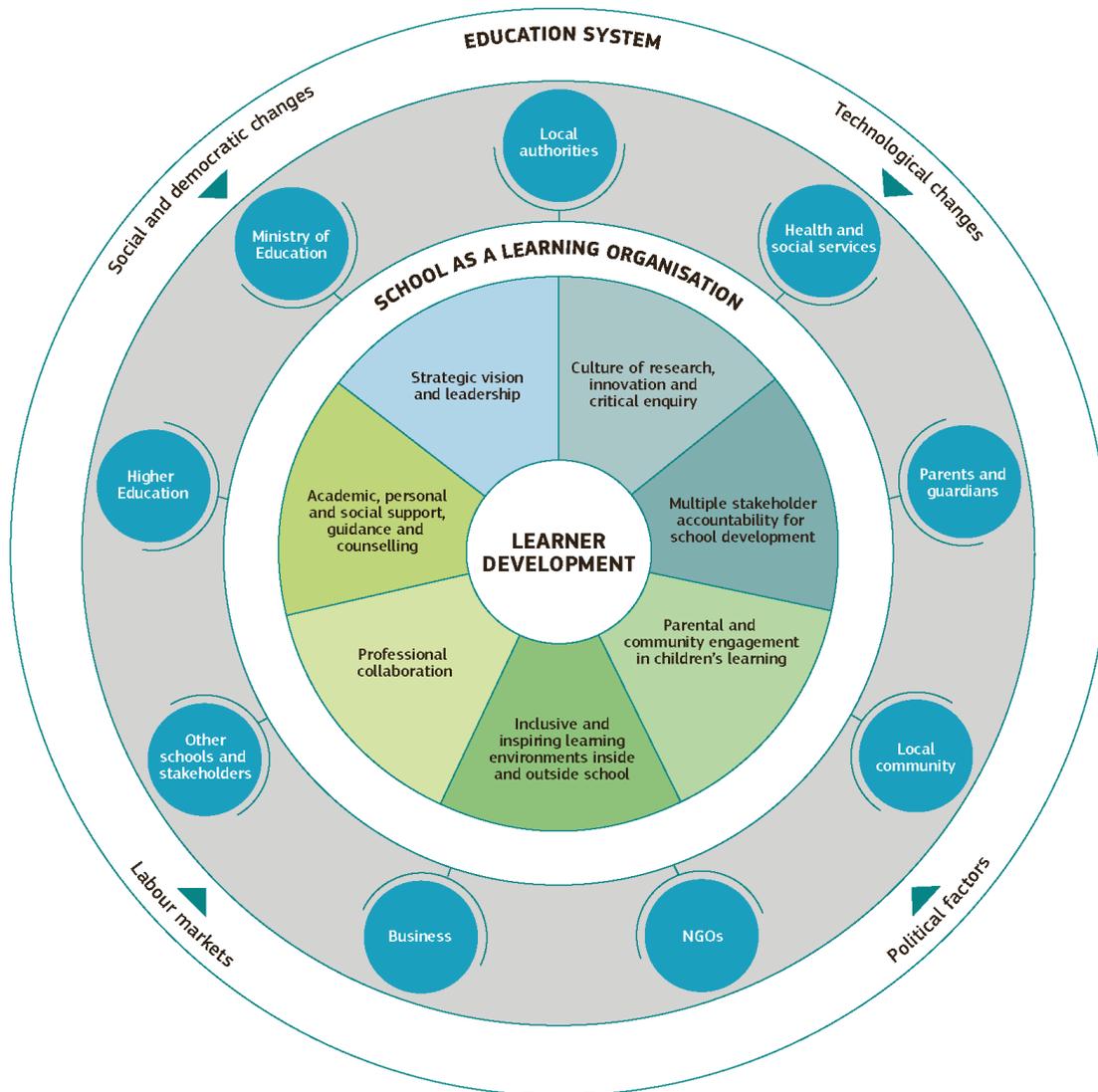


Figure 1: The different elements of schools as learning organizations. This was developed in several contexts: the thematic work on Teachers and School leaders using a similar OECD/UNICEF (2016) model; the Study on Supporting school innovation across Europe (European Commission 2018); and Working Group discussions on the aims and activity of education systems.

Working Group members – who are not only ministry representatives but also come from education organizations – are very much aware of the key barriers to teacher collaboration. These barriers include not having enough time in addition to classroom work and a fear of negative judgement by others or simply the very personal nature of teaching style cultivated over time that feeds an attitude of working in ‘safe’ isolation. For ministries with very different education systems, built in different political and cultural contexts over decades, the common perspective or understanding of why or how a particular initiative takes place may not immediately or always be there, even if the curiosity is. Therefore, even though the curiosity or common interest may exist, other factors may inhibit collaboration and it is a particular feature of the ET2020 Working Group Schools that they are in a position to transcend these. In many ways the Group itself was operating as a learning organization and was very much aware of the particular nature of this methodology.

Taking the leap from 'collaboration' – working with another to produce something – to 'community' requires a particular attitude and environment but can reap rewards other than the output, and even enhance the output itself. 'Schools as learning organizations' and schools within 'learning systems' share the characteristics of 'Communities of Practice' as developed by Lave and Wenger:

- Shared interest and a commitment to that interest;
- Working together, helping each other and establishing relationships that foster learning from each other;
- A shared repertoire of resources or expertise that is built over time.⁴

For the individual young learner, there is power to be gained with a developed skill of working in teams; of negotiating with others. One hopes for these learners a future of being able to live and work in harmony with others but to also learn from each and gain new perspectives in doing so. In the present, these learners may already be feeling the heightened joy of succeeding at a task through combined effort, which depends on the way the teacher has shaped and facilitated the learning experience.

Part of the Working Group mandate for these two years was to examine the development of learners and support their variable pathways. In their report, the Group stresses the importance of collaboration between institutions, particularly concerning the point at which learners transition from one to another. This does not just mean taking care to share learner data but also considering each other's learning approaches, the physical learning environment and the potential involvement of other services, such as career guidance. This is not automatically achievable, and the Working Group recognises the challenge of a variety of tools and other resources needed to support such interaction.

Early in their work, the Group were clear that a long-term, step-by-step approach to school education development, with piloting, reflection and feedback, is necessary in order to ensure the sustainability and legacy of education policies. Strengthening and exploiting both horizontal and vertical (hierarchical) connections help to organize collective intelligence in order to understand and act upon what is — and what needs to be — happening in different parts of the system (see also Figure 2 below).

⁴ <http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/> Accessed 5 October 2018.

In Portugal, the Priority Intervention Educational Territories Programme (TEIP) promotes inclusion through the support of schools and school clusters located in the most disadvantaged/challenging regions. The programme takes preventive, sustained and networking action with a community, in order to promote a good school climate and the educational success of/for all students, as well as to combat school drop-out and to strengthen the relationship between the school, family and the community. It has also been the basis for the negotiation of additional resources.

Schools Clusters and non-grouped schools in Portugal are organized in a way to develop continuous professional development activities but a set of networks goes beyond the internal organization of the school clusters and their relationship with local communities. Presently there are 91 School Associations Training Centers (CFAE-Centro de Formação de Associações de Escolas), located in one of the associated schools, which provide ongoing training to associated schools, TEIP and non-TEIP, through the development of continuous training plans based on the needs identified in each school.

The Directorate-General for Education has taken a multi-level approach through the organization of national, regional and local meetings to promote networking between teachers, technicians, middle and top leaders, families, critical friends and institutions of higher education.

More on this is available in the report on Networks – see footnote 2.

In time and space

In the official language of the European Commission, Education and Training 2020 (ET2020) 'is a strategic framework... It is a forum for exchanges of best practices, mutual learning, gathering and dissemination of information and evidence of what works, as well as advice and support for policy reforms.' From a coordinator's perspective, I am not referring to the equally useful digital work sharing policy documents and crunching numbers about education reforms; I am talking about people in a room, in a shared space.

The meetings and activities that take place under the banner of ET2020 are different to the mere informative approach one might expect. They are designed to explore current issues and difficult problems. Members present case study examples of their own current practice (policy approach) to each other which is more immediate than reading an edited report some time after an initiative has been instigated – both for the presenter and the listener. In a unique safe space, members are able to talk about their current priorities and 'work-in-progress,' and gain constructive feedback from others. This takes both trust and skills as acting as a 'critical friend' – both discussed below.

The Group has had to invest equally in both the developing of concepts – an 'approach' to school education governance – and the sharing of country or organization examples to prompt or explain these concepts. They discovered very quickly that it was useless to remain in the abstract. The numerous examples are what made the meetings and the final outputs come alive and so this sharing, and the generosity of the members in doing so, has been crucial to the success of the work.

One of the underlying principles of the Group is the importance of creating meaningful learning experiences. It is important to note that the Group does not discuss classroom practice although it has discussed the work of teachers and school leaders in the broadest sense and what measures might support them. Nevertheless, there is an assumption with the word 'meaningful' that the pupil should find value in the work; that it is relevant and useful to their lives and motivates their curiosity and desire to develop further. Pupils are invited to question problems and search for solutions in a creative way, which involves imagination, negotiating with the ideas of others, and critical reflection to find innovative routes forward. Such problem-solving is at the core of the Group's understanding of school development which relies upon an attitude – by the education system as a whole – of striving for high quality and continuous development through the sharing of expertise and different perspectives or evidence.

This relates to the Group's exploration of the different mechanisms of external and internal review of schools; for example, school inspectorates and self-assessment.⁵ The work explored the interplay between such mechanisms and began to uncover possible solutions to the problem of taking an integrated and system-wide approach to quality assurance. In the examples shared, there is evidence of a keen desire to involve different stakeholders – teachers, families, regional decision-makers, and government policymakers – in the process of generating, analysing and reporting evidence on school and learner development. During a peer learning activity, they explored, among others, Estonia's exploration of the online sharing of school data. Such tools can help address the notion of shared time and space but through digital means – potentially giving a more immediate reflection of a school in development, aspiring to a national and more long-term understanding of quality and development, and a common 'virtual' space with information that can be provided and accessed by different stakeholders.

Critical reflection

In the Working Group Schools, we – as facilitators and members – have developed an approach to peer learning known to us as 'critical friends.' The Group takes this approach in particular when a smaller group (approximately one third) of the members come together for a 'Peer Learning Activity': an event of 3-4 days where participants will present a specific policy development. They will problematize it for the group with key questions, then open up the discussion for constructive feedback, the 'audience' identifying both strengths and suggestions in order to help the presenters create the beginnings of an action plan for the future.

⁵ See more on the Working Group exploration of quality assurance at https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs2-quality-assurance-school_en.pdf

The competence and contextual demands on the participants are clear. First, for the work to be truly useful, participants need to be honest and able to share the good times and bad in terms of their policy development. While one can understand on a human and political level the difficulty with labelling something a 'mistake', the lessons that can be learned from something not sustaining its early impact, if making the desired impact at all, are just as valuable as ones from successful initiatives.

From my observations as coordinator, it is also important that participants are willing to reflect upon approaches even if they would not normally occur in their own context. This is because getting caught up in the peculiarities of another system may become a barrier to making pertinent suggestions. Indeed, the participants need to be open and curious to the needs of their fellow Group members and find some bond over the shared interest (the particular topic selected to focus on). This places quite a significant demand on members who often have to grapple with the intricacies of multiple education systems other than their own and to imagine other possibilities on their behalf, based on their own experiences.

Dealing with an unknown future, there cannot be any absolute right or wrong in the suggestions a member might make, which also might be queried by other participants in the spirit of teasing out workable solutions. Indeed, the members actively encourage each other to ask pertinent and sometimes difficult questions to help each see the problem differently and improve their possible responses. Working in this fashion one might observe that they quickly come to the limit of peer learning here in the discussion phase. They are not bound by or imposing benchmarks or other such indicators on the outcome of policy action that might draw clear lines of 'success' and the eventual action could have any number of possible outcomes. Does this make the work easier? Does such an approach translate to national education systems? This flexibility and lack of control over outcomes is certainly a broader issue in school education governance when there is value placed on encouraging schools and teachers to be more autonomous and take ownership for their own development.

Another key feature of the Group's peer learning process as critical friends is the sense of narrative and journey that is created through the work. Not only do members spend a significant period of time together working deeply on complex issues to emerge tired but satisfied at the end, but they are also within that expressing their own work as a story with a beginning, middle and (possible) end. They describe the characters (stakeholders) involved, the setting, the struggles and resolutions. They draw each other into their worlds in a very human way, expressed as a personal quest. It strikes me that this is similar to the 'Children as Actors Transforming Society' (CATS)⁶ approach to treating humans as owners and narrators or their own journeys – as living 'books'. Participants are asked to 'tell their story' and invite other participants to be actively curious and engaged. In return, the 'books' (the members and their policy examples) are able to feel supported and to consider their own story in a new light.

⁶ More information on CATS is available at <http://catsprogramme.org/>. Accessed 5 October 2018.

Learning from work-in-progress that cannot already be labelled an accomplished success might seem to operate in a tricky liminal space of subjectivity and possibility rather than certain direction. It cannot seem possible that national policymaking can be based on such evidence and yet coupling research literature with multiple examples seems to find its own robustness. The same might be said to be true of teachers and schools learning from each other, all still finding their way and yet drawing on each other's experiences to boost their own confidence and creative thinking.

On another level the very nature of parallel development and mutual exchange creates a special relationship which adds to the sense of all actors aspiring to high quality together rather than working in isolation.

In Serbia, the SHARE project focuses on the development and verification of a programme of horizontal learning and implementation among schools based on the networking of the teachers between schools. High-performing schools mentor and provide support and capacity building for schools with poor performance which have been identified in external evaluations. The aim is to improve quality in specific areas of school work and life. SHARE project is a joint project of the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation (IEQE), Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD), Centre for Education Policy (CEP) and UNICEF. The programme was very successful in its pilot phase and is looking to expand.
More on this is available in the report on Networks – see footnote 2.

Trust

The Working Group acknowledge that increasingly, national governments are shifting greater control to the local level while maintaining responsibility for the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of the overall system. With a range of mechanisms in place to assure quality, genuine trust between the different levels of the system is paramount and this is reflected in the direct reference to the term in the Group's outputs. Despite the growing autonomy of schools and a genuine desire that they will steer their self-development, some mechanisms are understood to also inflict pressure, competition and even fear in teachers and school leaders that inhibit their capacity to innovate and adapt according to the needs of their students.

Working Group members are perhaps fortunate to exist on the fringes of the political arena. They are trusted by their ministry (or organization) to represent their country (or stakeholders) without the need for fighting a particular opinion over another. They are at liberty, to a certain extent, to share the inner workings and concerns of their institutions for which the ET2020 framework is explicitly and formally set up. However, in practice, the social space within which the members meet is still dependent on an informal trust that encourages people to speak without fear of judgement, sense of competition, or even being ignored.

There are stakeholders within school education systems that are at risk of being isolated or ignored, and this was raised in particular in the context of the work on learner pathways. A

‘Whole School Approach’⁷ has been a concept understood and aspired to for some years; this being where policies and actors across a range of sectors – health, social services, families, etc. – are joined to support or add to a holistic understanding of learner development. Such an approach is particularly important in the case of vulnerable learners. A balance also needs to be struck so that each stakeholder feels genuinely involved and not just exploited for their service or evidence to support another priority.

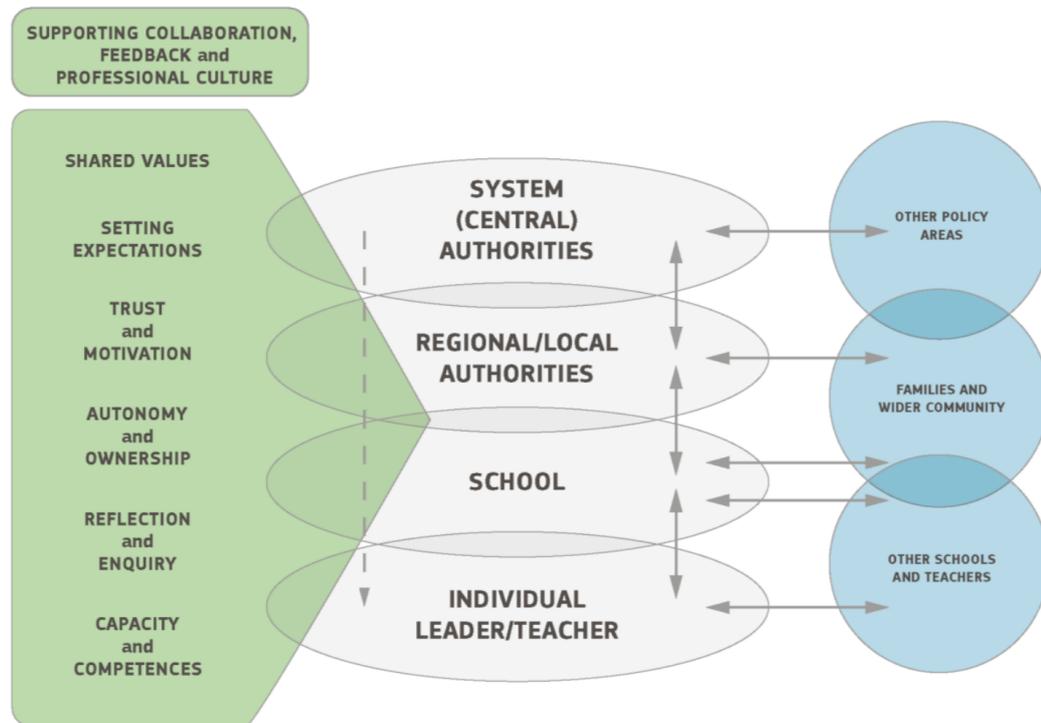


Figure 2 – Vertical and horizontal relationships within school education systems with an approach to governance.

The Working Group acknowledge the difficult positioning of parents and families in school education decision-making. On the one hand they are encouraged to be engaged in the education of their own children and in supporting the local school community and yet are rarely consulted as key voices in policy development. This can then be detrimental to the trust the parents have in the system. Closely linked to the notion of trust is flexibility; in particular, the choices that young people have and the ability to change their path and adapt as their aspirations change.

⁷ More information on the ‘Whole School Approach’ can be found in an earlier report from the Working Group Schools: http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/experts-groups/2014-2015/school/ireland-school-approach_en.pdf

Some countries have found recent success in allowing these marginalized voices to be heard, such as in Finland and Ireland.⁸ As it was expressed in the 2018 conference of the Working Group, these local actors – teachers, school leaders, pupils and their families – should somehow be left space to choose their own path yet still brought to the table to support decision-making.

Leadership, ownership and responsibility

For change to happen teachers and schools need a strong sense of leadership at school level. For that leadership to be able to strategically embrace development there needs to be a sense of ownership in all stakeholders. And for that development to be sustained and coherent with a broader shared vision for a national system there needs to be a sense of responsibility. These three elements are inseparable.

The Working Group has certainly witnessed this on different levels, beginning with their own existence where the work was born out of member priorities and challenges. It was critical to the process that the programme of work was developed in discussion with the members rather than imposed upon them. This may surprise those who were not part of the Group, but it would have been impossible for the members to be as engaged in the work and find it as useful if it had not organically grown around their own perspectives, interests and needs.

In the ‘Study on innovation in schools across Europe,’⁹ which ran at the same time as the Working Group, one of the key findings was the enormous influence of the school head in changing teacher mindsets and driving change to happen. These school leaders were described to have particular skills in people management and acute awareness of the whole school community from where they could gain extra support, even in more deprived areas. In the work on ‘Continuity and transitions in learner development’¹⁰ it was also acknowledged how learners themselves need a blend of good access, broad choice and sufficient capacity/skills to direct their own pathway through formal and non-formal education.

⁸ In 2018 Finland surveyed a range of actors, including children and parents on their experiences of morning and afternoon school activities. The report (Finnish) is available at: https://www.oph.fi/julkaisut/2018/aamu_ ja_ iltapaivatoiminnan_ tila_ ja_ kehittamistarpeet Accessed 5 October 2018. Ireland also consulted a range of stakeholders, including young people, in the recent development of the Junior Cycle (lower secondary curriculum). A video interview describes these changes, available at: <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/viewpoints/interviews/education-talks-listening-to-.htm> and detailed information is provided on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment website: <https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/framework-for-junior-cycle> Accessed 5 October 2018.

⁹ See <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/resources/innovation> Accessed 5 October 2018.

¹⁰ See report ‘Continuity and transitions in learner development’ at https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs3-learner-development_en.pdf

Finally, the teachers themselves as ‘agents of change’ need the same grounding of leadership competence and sense of ownership – of their own career as well as pedagogical approach – in order to reach their full potential and strive collectively for better learning outcomes for all pupils. In Flanders (Belgium), schools and teaching staff are supported by pedagogical counselling services, which are set up by the educational umbrella organizations and funded by the government. A decree sets out the tasks of these services, some of which specifically aim to support and train managerial staff and support the professional competence of members of staff who have particular roles across their school.¹¹

Working Group members regarded ‘distributed leadership’ as having a significant part to play within and between schools to ensure such capacity. In complex organizations such as education systems, hierarchies with a long chain of command can lose their effectiveness and one of the guiding principles within the work on Teachers and School Leaders promotes the approach of involving teachers and school leaders from the outset in the design of new initiatives and reforms. This is with the belief that it will empower more staff to engage in school development, be innovative and take (as well as manage) risks.

Such approaches cannot be automatically introduced, and this is where communities of practice and peer mentoring are vital. The members’ report highlights some personal qualities of leaders, such as empathy, open-mindedness, and communication skills. It is not surprising that these should be the same that teachers might encourage in their pupils or indeed those qualities of Working Group members in a well-functioning community.

Meaningful learning

Earlier in this article, I considered the merits and challenges of creating meaningful learning experiences. As a former school teacher, teacher educator and now facilitator of a stakeholder working group this has certainly been a career-long challenge for me personally.

Not only pupils, their teachers and school heads, but also the policymakers through these peer learning opportunities are invited to question problems and search for solutions in a creative way, which involves critical reflection and negotiating with the ideas of others.

Just as a pupil or teacher might ask themselves, ‘Is this useful? Will it make a difference?’ so we ask it ourselves of our own work. As I was sharply reminded by a young student participant of a Learning for Well-Being community day, big ideas and abstract concepts described by European institution staff are of no use if they are not rooted in local and national practice and can support real change. Just as it is fundamental to the Group’s peer learning process, it is about ‘ideas into action’.

¹¹ See report ‘Teachers and school leaders in schools as learning organizations’ at: https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs4-learning-organizations_en.pdf

And so to return to where we began – and ended – I believe that the title of the final report, *European ideas for better learning*, really means that and more. It embraces and finds power in the key issues facing education systems: those of collaboration and community; time and space; critical reflection; leadership, ownership and responsibility; and trust.

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All of the views expressed in this article are my own and do not reflect those of the European Commission or other parties referred to.

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It Takes a System to Achieve Quality in Early Childhood Services

By Mihaela Ionescu, Program Director, ISSA

Point zero

We are making a deliberate choice to not begin this article by evoking the many convincing evidences already produced at least in the past decade around the importance of early years in the life of an individual. We start from the assumption that everybody reading this article shares the common understanding about the sound foundations that are laid in the first years of life, a period of opportunities which should never be missed (Vandell, 2010; Moore et al., 2017; Mathers et al., 2014).

What we would like to discuss is the *quality* of the child's 'life experience' in the early years which is highly dependent on what the adults around them are able and capable of offering to young children. While families are the first environment where most of the children grow, develop and learn, their life experience expands much beyond that, to neighbourhoods, communities, to public and private spaces where interactions, communication, actions and events are happening. Nothing is meaningless for the young children, everything is about making meaning of the world they live in while observing and learning from and with their peers and adults. There is however, an important difference: some environments are more formally organized, therefore intentional, planned, resourced and outcome oriented, and carry an important social responsibility for children and their families. These are the early childhood services. And the quality they provide is of utmost importance for both children and families (Sylva, 2014; Slot, 2018; Melhuish et al., 2004).

We start from the understanding that quality is a very complex, dynamic and complicated concept. The 'definition' of quality is rooted in constructed beliefs 'impregnated' with values. Quality is never value free and therefore is a (conscious or 'unconscious') axiological choice. For this reason, when we talk about the quality of services, we very much talk about both the values that are embedded in the everyday life operation of services and those that

are the flagship of any intention to create changes to improve the quality of those services. On a more systemic level, these values have strong political connotations, therefore quality becomes a political choice. Do quality services mean also equitable and inclusive services? Does quality mean agency and participation of stakeholders and children in decision-making and co-creating changes aimed at better results? Do quality services mean also to reach out to the most vulnerable?

We would like to share some reflections and what we have learned in ISSA¹ about *process*² quality and its systemic nature and invite you to reflect together on possible strategic approaches that may sustain a culture of quality across the early childhood and the education system. For this reason, we will use the ‘competent system’³ concept in sharing our learning and propose a four-tier reflection around nurturing the *process* quality improvement, departing from the individual level, moving to the institutional level, then to the inter-institutional level and to the policy and governance level. The lessons we learned over the years emerged from working with a group of ISSA member organizations from 25 countries from Central-Eastern Europe and Central Asia and collecting data about their work on quality improvement in countries. All 25 members have been using a package of resources⁴ developed in ISSA which is focusing primarily on quality pedagogy and strengthening professionalism among preschool and primary school teachers, but also other key stakeholders in the early childhood and the education system.

Building a culture about ‘quality’ – spinning the wheel of change in systems

ISSA has extensive experience in generating knowledge and practice towards supporting practitioners working in early childhood services up to primary school. Many of its core programmes are aimed at finding meaningful, relevant and effective ways to reach out to individual professionals to stimulate their professional growth, knowing that to a great extent the quality of the child’s learning and development experiences depends on professionals’ competences, as well as on their agency, self-confidence and attitude towards their profession. (Siraj et al., 2018)

Our concern for *process* quality is deliberate. We strongly believe that this is the place where values are given meaning, where theories, research evidences and policies are

¹ ISSA is an early childhood international association founded in 1999. Currently, ISSA has more than 80 member organizations from 40 countries in Europe and Central Asia. Its main programmes and initiatives revolve around issues of quality and equity in early childhood service. For more information about ISSA: www.issa.nl.

² By process quality we mean the everyday interactions with peers, adults and the environment, and the everyday experiences (play, routines, structured or unstructured activities) through which children learn, impacting their overall development.

³ Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Peeters, J., Lazzari, A., and Van Laere, K. (2011). *Competence requirements in early childhood education and care. CoRe Final Report*. Brussels: European Commission.

⁴ For more information about the ISSA’s Quality Resource Pack, visit: https://www.issa.nl/publications_search?field_main_category_tid=2&field_all_tags_tid=All

translated into practice, and understandings, actions and learning are tested, demonstrated and co-created through inter-actions between children and adults. It is the most dynamic area of quality because of its multifactorial and intertwined nature, therefore much harder to be controlled and measured, but very fertile in the effects that it may determine on both children and adults (Slot, 2018).

When talking about process quality in preschool or primary school, the first thing that comes into many people's minds is the teacher – the key holder of the quality 'equation'. They are seen as the main authors of the everyday blueprint, the ones filtering or creating the conditions and opportunities for learning to happen. For this reason, much relies on their competences to reflect, plan, decide, act, inter-act, re-act to the ever changing social-emotional-mental landscape they encounter (and also 'de-code') in each and every day when they meet children and families. And each day is different, therefore strengthening their competences is key. In fact, many of the reforms in early childhood and in education systems relied to a large extent on the capacity of teachers to adapt to new contexts, to learn and do things in a different way. But not that many took into consideration that by building the capacity of individuals or by demanding more from them, you are not necessarily managing to change a system. We often talk about people's mindset as being the main barrier in creating opportunities for change to happen. And indeed, the mindset counts tremendously when the required changes are demanding a new positioning in relation to people, actions, processes, but means also challenging someone's individual values, feelings and behaviours. And for such changes to happen, an enabling environment is needed too.

ISSA was founded in 1999 uniting 28 non-governmental organizations from Central-Eastern Europe and Central Asia who were implementing since 1994 a child-centred, democratic value-based early childhood programme called the Step by Step Program created by the Open Society Network and Children's Resources International. The program was requiring a re-positioning of the teacher in relation to the child, family, community, learning environment, and most of all, towards their role in the learning process, towards families, and towards the child's 'academic' outcomes. It was a new approach based on evidence-based developmental and pedagogical theory⁵ which was celebrating the child's agency and was empowering teachers to make pedagogical choices based on (democratic) values that were not necessarily fully embraced by the practice and policy of those times. An immense investment was put into creating competent individual teachers to implement the new pedagogical approach within the existing curriculum and policy. Quality Standards have been defined (2003), mentoring capacity and programmes built in the programme, communities of professionals created, tools for self-evaluation and improvement developed, and certification processes recognizing high-quality practice were introduced. In a study developed in 2008,⁶ ISSA was interested in learning about the impact of the work

⁵ Theories of Jean Piaget, Lev Vigotski, John Dewey, Howard Gardner, Erik Erikson laid the theoretical foundation of the programme.

⁶ See *Study on the Implementation of ISSA Pedagogical Standards and Their Impact of ECDE Policies and Practice in the Region of ISSA Network and Beyond (2001-2008)*, (2010). <https://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/pdf/Publications/quality/Implementation-Quality-Executive-Summary-FINAL.pdf>

done at country level through the training and mentoring programmes put in place and by using the ISSA Pedagogical Standards within mechanisms for quality assurance and improvement.

The insights at that time were quite interesting looking from a systemic perspective.

1. At the individual practice level, while the teaching, mentoring and teacher support skills were improved, the recognition and professional status of the teachers were elevated, and innovative mentor training models were identified as best practices, after more than 10 years of investment, the lack of national and local understanding and acceptance of the new approach was still noted among the challenges, together with the variation in resources and classroom conditions.
2. At the institution and inter-institutional level, the involvement of managers/leaders of preschools and schools led to the creation of a 'culture' of quality. In addition, the creation of peer learning communities, creating networks of (pre)schools in the same region and creating partnerships with training institutes and universities were mentioned among best practices, as well as involving parents in trainings to become informed 'consumers' and advocates for quality. However, the lack of understanding the quality standards as a quality improvement strategy, the poor programme or structural quality remained as main challenges in many countries.
3. At the policy level, the ISSA Pedagogical Standards influenced in a number of countries the national curricula, the teacher standards, and the quality improvement guidelines. However, the misalignment of the Standards with other national education system requirements and guidelines remained a challenge in many countries.

In conclusion, by engaging different stakeholders at different levels in the system, but mostly practitioners (teachers, mentors, supervisors, managers), the wheel of change started spinning in many countries, but still there was a long way to go to align structural quality with process quality, or in other words, many policies with practice, and to build a coherent culture about 'quality' at all levels in the system, including parents as important partners.

For the next ten years ISSA continued to revisit its 'definition' of quality pedagogy (including moving from quality *standards* to quality *principles*) in order to reflect the priorities in the changing early childhood contexts. It co-created with its members and other experts a package of resources⁷ aimed at influencing the multi-layered systems, while ensuring its members receive the technical support they need for working with the resources, and embarked again in a reflexive exercise. This time, ISSA's main purpose was to learn even more about how far it reached by incorporating new knowledge coming from both practice and research and leveraging the power of an international community to enable changes in practice and policies to happen in countries. Which are the key factors

⁷ The package included: a guidebook for educators, a professional development tool to be used by educators and mentors/coachers, an assessment instrument to be used for monitoring and guiding the professional development plans, a guidebook for pre- and in-service training providers, advocacy leaflets targeting educators, parents and decision-makers, and a video library.

that contributed to new advancements in 25 ISSA members' work on quality improvement at country level by using the 'know-how' created in the network and by benefiting from being a member in such a learning community. And where did we fail?

The two-year work on documenting this work⁸ shed some light on some insightful conclusions.

Supporting practitioners and services – how far can we reach?

The findings indicated that long-lasting changes in practice have been noted where practitioners embarked in professional development processes where they found safe and meaningful guidance on how to improve themselves 'allowing' others to support them. The result was that observing others and wanting to be observed (videos accompanied by guided discussions played an important role), reflecting on own and others' practice, engaging in respectful discussions with peers where solid arguments are based on scientific evidence and strongly connected with daily practice created a climate of support for quality improvement. Teachers felt empowered to become better professionals in a safe and respectful professional environment.

'I feel more autonomous and aware that I am doing the right thing. I see how much children are growing and developing. This raises my professional confidence.'
(Kindergarten teacher, Slovenia)

In many contexts, quality mentoring and coaching programmes accompanied by meaningful resources focusing on quality pedagogy aimed at supporting dialogical processes, were key to creating a culture of quality.

'In the process of mentoring based on QRP⁹ each teacher provided a kind of demonstrative lesson for a group of other teachers. It gives us an opportunity to compare our practices with each other. We don't feel any stress during those visits, and almost every day somebody else is in my classroom. Whenever a teacher has free time, she can go to observe another teacher. We also plan together and, in this process we use the Professional Development Tool.'
(Primary school teacher, Armenia)

In other countries, communities of learning among practitioners have been created at the level of services and also across services (e.g. Slovenia, Armenia, Croatia, Moldova, Kosovo, etc.) aimed at providing a structured context for pedagogical guidance to happen.

⁸ <https://www.issa.nl/node/550>

⁹ ISSA's Quality Resource Pack.

‘Educators are more willing to take risks because the environment is more supportive. Before, educators were not listening to each other, were not discussing important things and were not preparing examples of practice [to illustrate quality – Ed.]. The work in the learning communities helps them understand their own strengths.’

(Director of primary school, Slovenia)

The dialogue around process quality at the level of the setting has been pivotal to building a culture around quality, because it created a platform for building a shared and negotiated understanding of what quality means in practice, which was relevant to teachers. Quality was not an abstract concept ‘given’ solely by some theory from some scientific publication or policy paper, but one that was co-created by teachers by building on both research-based evidence and teachers’ accumulated knowledge and experience.

While teachers felt empowered to be active contributors to changes in their own practice to better respond to children’s and families’ demands, their pro-active and reflexive attitudes towards self-improvement required a participative, forward-looking management interested in investing in pedagogical leadership and in recognizing the importance of nurturing professionalism at the service level.

‘The topics of discussions among teachers started to become different. Before this project (Mentoring with QRP), teachers almost never communicated among themselves, but now we observe much more cooperation and it is strongly focused on professional issues. They plan together and after observing each other’s lessons, they discuss what was good and what should be changed next time. The relationships are much warmer. Finally, teachers are able to explain their goals and the steps they need to take in order to achieve their goals. All those changes indicate that they have improved their understanding of the educational processes and are more confident in discussing them with others.’

(Deputy Director, primary school, Armenia)

In two of the countries where more in depth data has been collected (Slovenia and Croatia), the efforts put into building the capacity to create and support professional learning communities at the level of services by using and adapting the resources created in ISSA led to a sustainable model of professional development. There the communities of professionals periodically meet, discuss and plan together their professional development agenda. In these two cases, a considerable effort has been made equally in leadership training for the facilitators of communities of practice/learning communities. These facilitators specifically received from the ISSA member ongoing and continuous training at least three times during the school year to help them manage and facilitate the learning process within learning communities.

‘In the coordinators’ meetings, we exchange information and gather different content. Others are always bringing new information to us. We do not feel a burden to know everything. We are constructing knowledge together.’

(School coordinator in Slovenia)

The findings in the study indicated that for such professional fertile contexts to exist, certain structural conditions need to be in place: a sufficient space to meet; paid time to meet, have a dialogue, document, plan, and reflect on work; a shared quality framework (such as the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy and QRP) to monitor and evaluate practices; and guidance for staff, showing appreciation, and ways to document growth.

This is the point where we reach the other levels of the system (institutional and policy level) and learn about the extent to which these levels are responsive in creating the appropriate conditions for enabling effective professional development programmes. In many countries, such forms of professional development are not valued and therefore not recognized as the main avenues for strengthening professionalism. In such cases, it is more likely that the provision of short-term, theory-based training will lead to short-term changes in practice, fading away in time, leaving space to the practice that pays a tribute to the legacy of the past or to routine work that is hardly questioned and/or critically reflected upon.

We also learned through our research that in some countries there is little alignment between the pre-service, the in-service training and the real demands coming from practice, from working directly with children and families in very diverse contexts. Future practitioners are not well prepared to respond to the increasing demands of the teaching profession, or the in-service training does not necessarily continue their preparation for the profession in line with the practitioners' potential and the challenges of working in particular and dynamic contexts. Such inter-institutional misalignment indicates a discontinued or diverse understanding within the early childhood system of the profile of the professional in relation to the actual job context, but also of the role of the early childhood service. Consequently, this indicates a lack of shared understanding of what quality pedagogy means.

It was clear from the findings of our documentation study that the main barriers to quality improvement reside in the diversity of 'languages' about quality and less common places for dialogue between policy and decision-makers, researchers, pre-service and in-service providers, supervision agencies, managers of services, practitioners and parents. The plurality of perspectives may be an asset as long as they focus on children's and families' well-being and there is a dialogue about quality and about creating mechanisms for empowering professionals to become better professionals and for services to become more meaningful for children and families. Research is providing enough evidence of what works to strengthen professionalism in teachers. Practice is demanding professional competences that are highly responsive to increasingly complex contexts and needs of children and families. However, the reality demonstrates that practice is not changing as fast as we would expect, despite the many efforts put into supporting practitioners and services.

What can be done to continue spinning the wheel?

Enlarging the backpack of expectations for practitioners and even creating evidence-based 'innovative' programmes to enhance their competences is only half of the way towards ensuring early childhood services where children are finding the well-deserved opportunities to grow, learn and develop, and families the rightful support.

We learned that working on the individual and institutional level has proven to be effective and long lasting in terms of changing the pedagogical paradigm and the practices in those places where the institutional leadership had a vested interest in building a culture of quality that was child and staff centred and loyal to the current demands of children and families, as well as in enabling structural conditions for meaningful professional development for the staff. Professionals felt empowered, supported and stimulated to think critically and innovatively, generating themselves new knowledge and practice that were animated by creating quality learning experiences for children and building stronger partnerships with families. Such services/institutions are only illustrating that change can happen and can last in spite of the challenges they encounter, but will not change a system, they are only striving within a system.

The wheels of change moved slower when engaging with pre-service providers and governmental institutions, both more responsible for the structural quality – professional qualifications, pre- and in-service training policies, as well as remuneration, career development policies, etc.

Both structural and process quality go hand in hand and they should reflect common values. This would imply an alignment between the political choice (ensuring enabling conditions through certain policies and mechanisms for policy implementation, including finances) and the pedagogical choice (creating enabling conditions through practices) both rooted in values.

While documenting the work done by ISSA members in their countries, we learned that in many countries policies have changed their language and embraced a more child-centred discourse, but practice is still lagging behind, meaning that the 'mechanisms to create' child-centred practice at the level of the system are not working. New concepts penetrated the mainstream pedagogical and policy language, but child-centred practices did not become the mainstream practice in many early childhood systems. This is the very symptom of the lack of shared and profound understanding of the child-centred philosophy at all levels of the system. Moreover, it indicates that there is lack of dialogue between the diverse stakeholders who play an important role in shaping the systems, only then will they understand that although they might speak the same 'language' their understanding is different. And only then will they find the lack of coordination in their (fragmented) actions.

Within our study we learned that the democratic culture of dialogue is the most fertile place for quality to strive, be it on the level of the service, or among different institutions, governmental and non-governmental organization, and parents. It is there where different voices are heard, understandings are negotiated, elaborated and shared, thus leading to a more cohesive approach, more coordinated actions at different levels in the early childhood system. Platforms where research, policy and practice meet and discuss about quality and explore more cohesive and better coordinated ways to improve early childhood systems need to be established, so that we talk about the same child, the same families and the same services.

Author

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Sustaining Warm and Inclusive Transitions Across the Early Years (START): Facilitating Collaborative Learning of Childcare Workers, Preschool and Primary School Teachers

By Katrien Van Laere / Caroline Boudry, Arianna Lazzari / Lucia Balduzzi , Mateja Režek and Angela Prodger

Introduction

In the last decade, the relationship between early childhood education and care (ECEC) and compulsory school education (CSE) has gained increased attention both in academic and in policy debates. As indicated in the 'Study on the effective use of ECEC in preventing early school leaving (ESL)' – concluded under the commission of DG EAC – positive experiences of transition between educational levels can be a critical factor for children's future success and development, while negative experiences can have lasting difficulties leading to poorer educational performance (Dumčius, Peeters, Hayes et al., 2014). It is well documented by a growing body of research that paying particular attention to smoothening transitions – by adopting a more unified approach to caring and learning across educational settings in order to sustain continuity of children's experiences over time – can significantly improve children's educational achievement and socio-emotional development (Brooker, 2008; Woodhead and Moss, 2007). In these regards, promoting professional exchanges among ECEC practitioners (childcare workers/preschool teachers) and primary school teachers as well as involving parents in the transition process are considered to be key factors in ensuring successful transitions (Dunlop and Fabian, 2007; Margetts and Kiening, 2013; Moss, 2013). Taking these crucial elements into account, practitioners and researchers from

four different countries have collaborated in a transnational action research study (START/ Erasmus +) in order to foster warm and inclusive transitions across the early years. This article will discuss preliminary findings from this pioneering work preceded by a short analysis of current academic research on transitions.

School-ready children versus children-ready schools?

Our literature review conducted by our START partners, confirms that all studies underline how transitions mark a very significant phase in the lives of young children. For some children the experience of their transition can be critically important in terms of their future learning, education, and life chances due to them having a special educational need or/and disability or because they live in families characterized by complexity or who experience poverty, disadvantage, and social isolation. Transitions are complex and multidimensional phenomena involving many interrelated spheres: from the political level to the pedagogical one, from the institutionalized practices to the working cultures of services and schools, from the possibility of children's agency to the acknowledgement of different families' cultures. Although the concept of 'transition' is fairly common in literature, the review reveals that there are two different perspectives from which transitions are studied and that deeply affect how educational practices are implemented in ECEC and school. The first perspective focuses on transition in term of children's *school readiness* while the second one relates to *children-ready schools* (Dumčius, Peeters, Hayes et al., 2014; Moss, 2013; Vonta et al., 2011).

In the *school readiness* perspective, learning in ECEC is functional to what comes next; school years and school grade are represented in a linear and hierarchy perspective in which the ultimate goal of schooling is to prepare responsible workers for the labour market. In that perspective little, if any, attention is paid to the educational, caring and pedagogical needs of the child; the emphasis is firmly upon classroom management and the needs of the teacher to be able to control the children's behaviour and provide structured teacher-led sessions. In relation to the disadvantaged or special needs children, this perspective emphasizes the importance of early intervention, particularly through specific programmes, formalized learning and a narrow curriculum approach. Some researchers, however, warned us how implicit and explicit ideas and practices of unidirectional readying children for preschools or primary schools has paradoxically contributed to marginalizing and stigmatizing children considered disadvantaged (Bloch and Kim 2015; Lehrer, Bigras, and Laurin, 2017).

The *children-ready school* approach emphasizes the necessity to empower all the actors involved. This means giving particular importance to negotiated values and pedagogical assumptions of families and professionals, to recognize and to enhance the children's agency, to overcome a top-down model of curriculum and to develop a co-constructed and shared one. The studies, in this perspective, underline the importance of the educational contexts valuing multiple ways of learning, not only teacher directed but indeed co-constructed by all actors involved, starting from the children's needs and interests. Another strength is related to a teacher's team work seen as extended collegiality, to enhance and support teachers' shared reflection on practice and educational approaches. In the children-

ready schools' approach, different researches pay particular attention to children and parents from marginalized groups. The key question is how preschools and primary schools can be supported to deal with a diversity of children, families and local communities while resisting the homogenization of the school population.

Pedagogical and professional continuity during institutional splits?

Transitions between childcare and preschool settings (e.g. Belgium, Italy) as well as between these and compulsory school (e.g. UK and Slovenia) mark a significant change in the life of children, particularly in those countries where ECEC systems are split. The countries involved in this transnational action research project have been dealing with these issues in different ways. In Belgium (FI) the Department of Education, Welfare and Integration recently started to collaborate to smoothen the transition between childcare/home environment and the preschool environment with a specific interest in ensuring pedagogical and professional continuity within a split system. Italy decided to transform their historical split system into a more integrated one. This new law of 2017 needs to be understood within the context of a long pedagogical and cultural tradition, reinforced by the Children Rights perspective. In the UK, they also recently changed the historical split system into a more integrated one. Even in an integrated system, a country like Slovenia experiences problems during institutional splits between ECEC and primary school. As the school system is less successful in reaching out to Roma children and their families, this transition has become a recurrent policy topic. Irrespective of the system, all countries are faced with an international tendency of increasing schoolification in which the value of childcare and preschool is foremost understood as preparing children for what comes next in primary school, secondary school and eventually the labour market. This schoolification tendency, typical in a social investment logic of governments, risks focusing again on solely making children (pre)school ready at the expense of creating equal opportunities and outcomes for all children.

Despite the increasing schoolification, the latest Starting Strong report on transitions (OECD, 2017) made a strong plea to focus more on making schools ready for children instead of children ready for schools. In this perspective, both the Starting Strong II and V report (OECD, 2006; 2017) recommended the development of a 'strong and equal partnership' that links, along a continuum, services from childcare into early education and thence into compulsory schooling. Other international policy organisations like UNESCO, also underlined the importance of continuity of educational approaches – grounded on shared pedagogical principles that start from a holistic development of children due to an increasing policy attention dedicated to children's participation in ECEC programmes worldwide (UNESCO, 2010;). Within this line of thinking, the goal of the transnational START project was to think and rethink pedagogical continuity in relation to how a diversity of children and parents can feel welcome, participate and recognized in an educational community/society.

Ricerca-form-azione

The methodological approach that we chose was action research *ricerca-form-azione*¹ in which practitioners work side by side with academic researchers – in shared processes of critical reflection aimed at generating transformative change in educational institutions starting from situational analysis, data collection and interpretation and leading to joint planning, documentation and evaluation of experimental projects (Asquini, 2018). In a first phase children were observed or interviewed (e.g. comments on drawings), parents were interviewed individually or in groups. The researchers presented the data and together with the practitioners analyzed and reflected on the different standpoints in order to develop new actions and practices. The second phase of the research aimed to implement some new actions and practices in order to smoothen the transitions between childcare/home environment and preschool and between preschool and primary school. According to *ricerca-form-azione* methodology, recurring meetings in learning networks involving childcare workers, preschool and primary school teachers, coordinators and researchers in the different countries were organised to share, to make decisions and to reflect on the implemented practices. The main themes that have been discussed is the establishment of a welcoming and familiarization policy in both institutions by exchanging practices and ideas and rethinking the anticipation process of going to preschool or primary school from the perspective of children and families. Furthermore, all the participants of the different countries had the opportunity to meet colleagues from the other countries in two exchange/training weeks in Corby (UK) and Tisina (Slovenia). These international weeks were crucial in order for professionals from the different countries to be inspired and to be able to think out of the (institutional and cultural) box. During the first meeting, ideas were shared on action research methods and how to build sustainable, trustworthy relationships with parents. During the second meeting ideas were shared on observation methods and how to create inclusive ECEC centres and primary schools. After the experimentation of new transition practices children, parents and professionals were questioned again.

Experiences of children and families in transitions

By observing and analysing children's drawings, it became clear how aspects of time (shorter/ fragmented vs integrated experience) and space (rigid vs flexible organisation) drastically change in institutional transitions, which makes it especially more difficult for children with additional needs. Moving on to a new environment also signifies an implicit change in rules and expectations. This can be seen in the children's drawings in which children experience a sense of loss of control over the learning environment. The older children become, the more they need to get used to adult-initiated and directed learning activities.

¹ The Italian term *ricerca-form-azione* is the combination of three different words, meaning respectively research (*ricerca*), professional development (*formazione*) and action (*azione*).



Parallel to this, children seem to experience a fundamental change in identity. Whereas they previously are perceived by childcare workers in childcare centres or preschool teachers in preschools as competent and autonomous children, they are often perceived in the next stadium (preschool or primary school) by the preschool teachers or primary school teachers as 'incompetent novices' who are hindered by their own caring needs (e.g. wearing diapers, crying,) or behave too 'childlike and wild'. Moreover, the drawings and observations point out how children also transition into a new group of peers in which they need to redefine their roles. Furthermore, parents pointed out how peer relationships are changing for their children and they expressed the hope that their child would be able to connect and find new friends. In general, parents also expressed how they face big changes during transition. Our interviews and focus groups show how they found themselves in rather complex positions in which they both adhere to and challenge dominant school and school ready practices/ideas.

Aren't children normally ready to go to the toilet autonomously when they are three-years old or older? My child is two and a half-years old and needs to start preschool soon. I feel the pressure to make him already potty trained although I think he is not ready for this. I experience some fears when he has to go to school. What if he is not potty trained and will not be seen by the preschool teacher? I have the impression that a child in preschool suddenly needs to grow up. (Parent, Belgium, FI)

It should be noted that irrespective of the context and the ECEC/school system, many questions on emotional and physical care and safety were addressed by parents in these transitions. Especially when parents are more at risk of societal exclusion (e.g. Roma parents, parents from children with special needs, parents living in severe poverty,...) these caring questions seem to also represent a political need to belong and be included in the (pre)school and broader society. It is remarkable how the questions on care are related to the overwhelming need of parents to talk and exchange information about the transition of their child with professionals from childcare, preschool or primary school.

Well I don't know whether he has eaten in primary school, I don't know whether he has had a good day, bad day, don't know what kind of mood he is going to be in, don't know anything! The preschool was more relaxed...more friendly and welcoming... Now, you have to stand in the playground, you have to stand outside. The children come out one by one, go straight to the parents and then you leave so you don't even get to talk to a teacher or find out anything...I felt like I could tell the preschool staff anything...now I don't feel like I can say anything. The only place you can go into is the office of the principal, which always seems to be locked, or you go through the office and sit in the corridor. (Parent, UK)

Main changes

Children's and parent's needs as focal point

By understanding and discussing the different standpoints in transition, the practitioners in the different countries gradually worked towards a pedagogy in which caring and learning of children, irrespective of age, is inseparable, while also taking into account that parents and families are crucial partners in the transition story. By stimulating collaborative learning of professionals from different settings (childcare, preschool and primary school) and from different countries, we experienced that all practitioners gradually moved beyond thinking from a solely institutional, historically engrained perspective: they started thinking from what children and parents expressed as to what they need in these transitions. Professionals from different settings and countries realized: why are we looking and acting so differently towards the same children and parents?

It is actually amazing to notice what children are already capable of before they enter primary school. (Primary School Teacher, Italy)

Working towards a more democratic approach of pedagogical quality

It was remarkable how the initial research on the voices of children and parents, as part of the first phase of the action research, slowly became a continuous focus of the professionals in the different countries. For example, in Italy the success of the transition actions and practices was also supported by the positive feedback the professionals received from parents. At the beginning of the school year, parents were asked to describe their own children using artefacts such as pictures, videos, words... and after that they could tell about their transitional experience in video interviews.

I had another child who attended the school some years ago. I saw the difference... everything was smoother, no child was crying, we had enough time to prepare the child but also our self. (Mother, Italy)

Also in Belgium the positive and critical feedback from parents on the new transition practices (e.g. parents can come into the classroom everyday (this was not allowed previously), more pedagogical attention towards the importance of sleeping, play ground, ...) gave a boost to the pre- and primary school team:

I used to say to parents that ‘my door was always open’ and I really believed this was the case. Since parents are able to take time to say goodbye to their child and talk to the teachers in the classroom, I can really say that we have more and better contact with parents. Parents often come to me and talk and I also easily start talking to them. I often go outside to be able to talk to parents, even about small things.
(Schooldirector, Belgium)

Increasing shared responsibility among professionals

By doing this project, it was remarkable how mutual respect and understanding was growing between the professionals from the different settings. Although broader society often gives different praise and acknowledgement (e.g. difference between childcare worker and primary school teacher), the various groups of professionals felt more connected in their mission to develop educational practice that is suitable and meaningful for a diversity of children and parents.

We feel that the project has connected us more. Previously, it almost felt like we were part of two separate institutions, even if formally we belong to the same one. Now we gather at informal as well as at formal ones. Quite a few teachers from the primary school went to observe practice in the preschool and reflected together on the observation afterwards. I think that this was one of the best collaborations achieved. We were all positively surprised and enthusiastic about the dynamics of groups or classes and about the work of our colleagues. We were comparing methods of our work, methods of work with children who need different approaches. Just recently, preschool teachers of the oldest preschool group participated in structuring the first grades (which children go to which group) in order to support them in the most meaningful way, knowing the dynamic of the group and the future teacher. (Primary school teacher, Slovenia)

Conclusion

Whereas at the beginning of the project we solely perceived the institutional splits as a huge problem, we gradually understood that these institutional splits are actually an opportunity to think outside the institutional and cultural box: by collaborative learning and confrontation of childcare workers, preschool teachers, and primary school teachers coming from four different countries, traditional child and family images were deconstructed and based on this pedagogical practices were recontextualized and reinvented. Although we admit that we definitely have a long way to go still, it is also remarkable how the initial focus of professionals on making children (pre)school ready gradually disappeared. In our experience systematic change, even in an increasing international context of schoolification is possible by taking small steps in which relationship, care, trust and community are considered key levers. This is possible by:

- constantly engaging with children and families to keep us focused on the issues that matter to them in transitions;
- constantly supporting and connecting practitioners from different settings and countries in dealing with the challenges that such a transformative process implies;

- investing in recursive interaction between research and experimentation, between theory, policy and practice.

We would like to thank all the children, parents and professionals from the childcare centres, preschools and primary schools for participating in this exciting, yet sometimes anxious adventure. And special thanks to the European Commission, DG Education and Culture. Without your financial support of the Erasmus+ fund this innovative work would not be possible.

The results of the START project (main changes, policy recommendations and a toolbox for professional learning) will be presented in Brussels on the 26th of April 2019 in one of the European institutions.
Check out the project website (<http://start.pei.si>) and Facebook for updates or contact katrien@vbjk.be if you would like to receive an invitation for this event in the near future.

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Learning for Well-being: Closing the Gap Between Aspiration and Practice

By Graham Leicester, Director, International Futures Forum.

1. Introduction

In April 2018 Jean Gordon and Mihaela Ionescu produced a comprehensive discussion paper for the Learning for Well-being Foundation: 'Towards systems competent for nurturing children's holistic development from birth through school: coherence and continuity'.

The paper adopts a 'competent systems' framework to explore progress towards education and other public systems adopting a holistic, 'whole person' approach to the development of children. A 'competent' system is both effective and coherent in terms of knowledge, practice and values across the four dimensions of individual actors in the system, institutions and teams, inter-institutional collaboration and overall governance.

This is a revealing set of lenses and a useful one. Not least because it acknowledges the truth that children develop in a context and that child and context must therefore develop in parallel. Gordon and Ionescu echo Winnicott's classic view of child development – a natural process of maturation in a facilitating environment – when they write that 'individual competences cannot thrive in a system that is not, itself, competent, i.e. a system that does not provide the enabling conditions for individuals to be fully nurtured.'

My reading of the report suggests that our systems are *not* competent in at least one critical aspect: the capacity to grow, develop and change over time in response to a changing world and our deeper aspirations for the future. There is a persistent gap 'between inspiring policy orientations and the reality on the ground' which echoes like a drumbeat throughout the report. It concludes: 'It is clear from our brief review that the Learning for Well-being principles are not represented fully in the policies and implementation in either ECEC or school education. In some cases, we see alignment with some of the principles but there

are significant gaps between what is espoused and what happens in reality. A major issue seems to stem from our collective view of what is possible.'

In what follows I offer the Three Horizons framework and the practice of transformative innovation or 'systems transition' as a complement to the competent systems approach to help address this aspiration/practice gap. (Leicester, 2016)

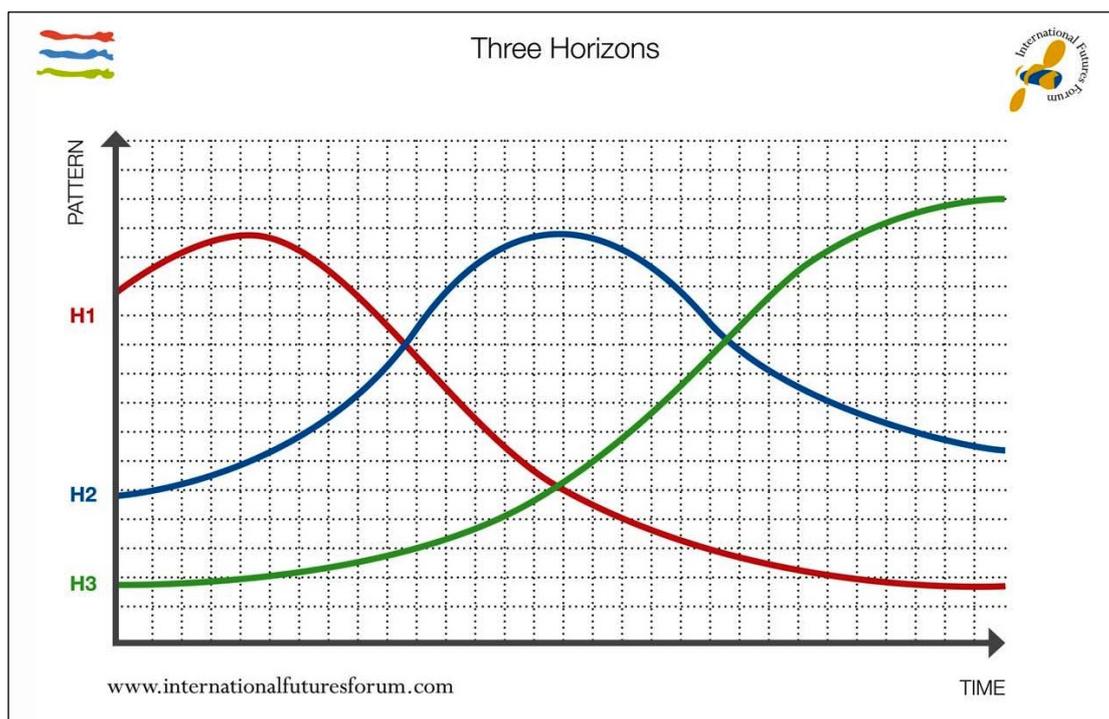
2. Three Horizons: a framework for systems transition

Three Horizons is a deceptively simple framework for thinking about social change over time (Sharpe, 2013). At first sight, it looks like the short-, medium- and long-term perspectives that we all bring to strategic planning. The reality is much more complex – and revealing. We are all, in fact, always navigating the established (and essential) patterns of the first horizon, new patterns envisioned in the third horizon, and the transition activity of the second horizon.

The first horizon (H1) is the dominant system at present. It represents 'business as usual'. We rely on these systems being stable and reliable – like our statutory care services. But as the world changes, so aspects of business as usual begin to feel out of place or no longer fit for purpose. Eventually 'business as usual' will always be superseded by new ways of doing things.

The third horizon (H3) emerges as the long-term successor to business as usual. It grows from fringe activity in the present that introduces completely new ways of doing things which turn out to be much better fitted to the world that is emerging than the dominant H1 pattern. There are always pockets of the future in the present.

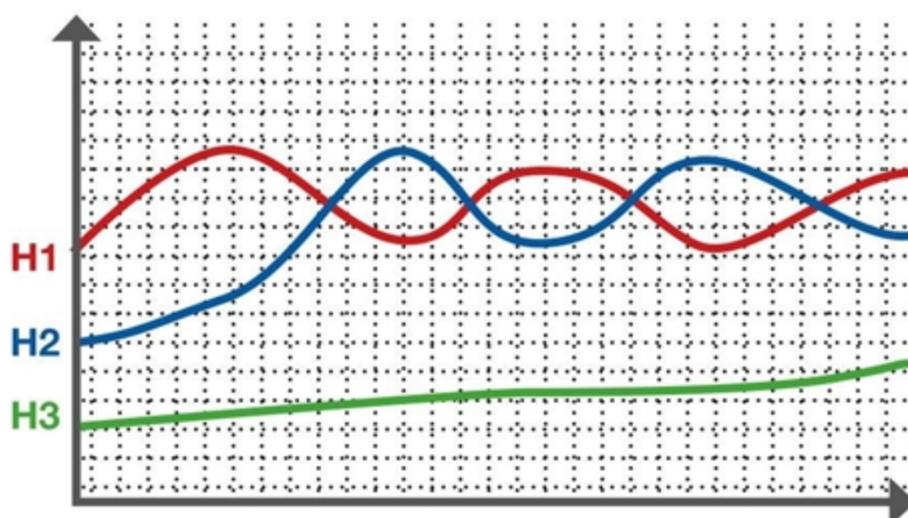
The second horizon (H2) is a pattern of transition activities and innovations, people trying things out in response to the ways in which the landscape is changing. Some of these innovations will be absorbed into the H1 systems to prolong their life (IFF calls this 'H2 minus: H2-') while some will pave the way for the emergence of the radically different H3 systems (IFF calls this 'H2 plus: H2+').



As the framework with its three lines suggests, all three horizons are always present. Aspects of H1 will persist in any new 'business as usual'. The importance of safety, for example, or child protection. Aspects of H3 are always evident, if not obvious, in current discourse and argument and in all kinds of activity on the fringes of the dominant system – we can all point to inspirational projects in our field. And H2, like a moving border between past and future, is all around us in examples of innovative alternative practice.

But the first horizon's commitment is to survival. The dominant system can maintain its dominance even in a changing world either by crushing second and third horizon innovation, or by co-opting it to support the old system. These behaviours lead to variants on the smooth transition depicted above – notably the common 'capture and extension' scenario in which innovations in H2 are 'mainstreamed' in order to prolong the life of the existing system against the grain of a changing world.

Variant: Capture and extension



This framework gives a quick and intuitive feel for three critically useful concepts to help close the aspiration/practice gap:

2.1) *Transition*: the framework clearly indicates a process of systems transition over time. The old slowly gives way to the new. In practice we observe that in order to start out on the journey to a transformative third horizon vision the first horizon must just not say no. But in order to realize that vision in practice sooner or later the first horizon system will have to say 'yes' – transferring resources sunk in the old pattern into the new. The late California senator John Vasconcellos suggested that this kind of social transition involves a twin task: 'we must be hospice workers for the dying culture and midwives for the new' (Leicester and O'Hara, 2009). It takes time and patience, but also an ongoing subtle reading of the dynamics of change across the system. Different parts of the pattern may well change at different rates (for example, it may be easier to eliminate corporal punishment in the school system than centralised written examinations) – such that our vision is consolidated only over time, just as the existing dominant system has been. The transition can also be seen as a values transition. Values that were present but difficult to realise in first horizon structures become central in third horizon structures specifically designed to honour them (the shift from a siloed, bureaucratic structure, for example, to a more ecosystemic structure based on life and relationship).

2.2) *Transformative Innovation*: distinguishing between H2- and H2+ innovation is critical to systems transition. H2- is sustaining of the old pattern. H2+ is transformative, helping to grow a radically new pattern. The distinction is not a property of the innovation itself but of the intention and values of the innovators. The introduction of tablet computers for all students, for example, is an innovation. It can either feed the dominant pattern (e.g. monitoring student participation and progress, delivering the central curriculum more efficiently, automating continuous assessment etc) or it could feed the shift towards something very different (e.g. enabling self-directed learning, including outside the institution). Innovation in the first horizon is for efficiency, innovation in the third is about the embodying of a new vision. If we do not hold to our visionary intentions, then our innovation will inevitably either lose support or 'succeed' by being absorbed into the mainstream status quo.

2.3) *Project to Pattern*: in order to shift a culture, you have to start by doing something counter-cultural (H3 in the present). But such innovation can only be sustained if it is absorbed into a wider pattern of self-reinforcing activities. It cannot survive for long on its own. Just as children live in a pattern of relationships, so do projects. Any new project, any new pocket of innovation, needs to combine with other innovations, other projects, other activities and structures in order to become established as part of a new H3 pattern that has the internal coherence to maintain itself over time. The veteran scholar of evaluation Michael Quinn Patton puts it well when he observes that social innovations that 'succeed' have usually found some protected space outside the dominant system where they can be assessed on their own terms, while those that fail have usually been judged by mainstream standards and found wanting. In either case, Patton points out, we must draw the same

conclusion: projects do not change systems.¹ This confirms my own experience. It is patterns that change systems. Successful systems transition means moving from project to pattern.

3. Value tensions and dilemmas

Seeing the landscape in Three Horizons will reveal tensions between the present dominant system and our vision of something radically different. Often these are value tensions. The systems transition we envisage is difficult in practice because we do not want to give up what we value in the first horizon pattern even if it is in tension with our aspirations for the third. For example, universal provision and equity might be in tension with personalisation; a foundational national core curriculum might be in tension with teacher and learner autonomy. These are not choices but dilemmas, in which we want to preserve if possible the best of both worlds.

Some tensions of this sort are highlighted in the Gordon and Ionescu paper: between timely and responsive democratic politics and the need for longer term, reflective, systems transition; between doing things right (first horizon) and doing the right thing (third horizon); between effective, well-managed individual services and the needs of whole persons; between the need for quality assurance and for innovation and experiment; between accountability and autonomy for professionals working in the system; between delivery and development. Even if none of these is present, we can always find the core dilemma in any system: between the needs of the part and the needs of the whole – 'being me and also us'.

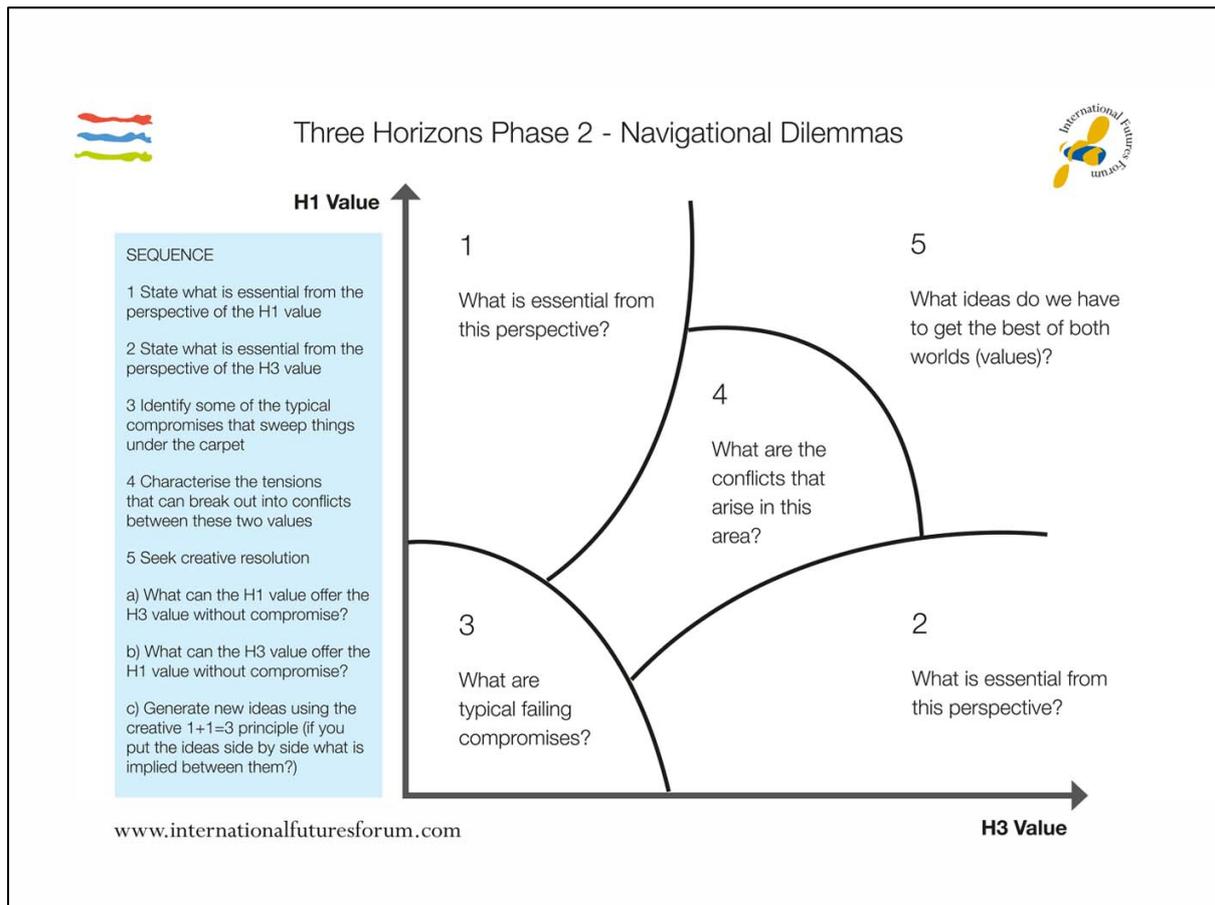
So long as these tensions are treated as choices, they will remain intractable. But if treated as dilemmas we can find a way forward. There will always be a vigorous and often heated debate, even conflict, between the two 'horns' of the dilemma. Typically, it is resolved in one of three ways: one or other side wins the argument, or they will find a compromise that satisfies neither side but at least ends the conflict.

It is in the nature of a dilemma that if we favour either 'horn' at the expense of the other, the other will inevitably reassert itself in time. If we favour accountability, for example, there will sooner or later be an autonomous revolt for freedom. If we favour local autonomy there will sooner or later be a move to reassert central control to restore some degree of consistency and order. And if we settle for a little of both, a typical compromise, we gain the true benefits of neither.

Treating these tensions as dilemmas rather than choices opens up a fourth option – the best of both worlds. We can ask what the first horizon value might offer the third horizon value with no loss of integrity. And vice versa. We can look for the $1 + 1 = 3$ resolution – and use that as a navigational beacon for the journey of systems transition. Sometimes we will need to steer towards the first horizon system for political reasons, perhaps, or to maintain resourcing and credibility. But then we will need to steer back towards the third horizon

¹ See video presentation at <https://youtu.be/7reYSwXVwNA> (accessed 9/11/2018).

vision to avoid absorption into the first horizon pattern and to maintain the integrity of our vision.



Template for working with the dilemmas inherent in systems transition: from the International Futures Forum Three Horizons Kit (see <http://www.iffpraxis.com/three-horizons>).

4. Vision and hope

Finally, the Three Horizons framework offers practical grounds for hope. The Gordon and Ionescu report, whilst largely about systems, also highlights the role of individual actors. 'What can I do', they ask, 'as a professional, to embody the Learning for Well-being principles into my family, my organization, and my community, in order to contribute to the mindshift necessary for a new vision for children?'

In my experience the place to look for answers is the third horizon in the present. Once we have a vision, we can look to see where features of that vision are already present in practice, even if only at small scale. We can then add our own efforts to the nascent new pattern. The practice of transformative innovation is not about planning for the future we desire, but about embodying it in the present and working to grow the scale and scope of our new pattern over time.

The report is right to insist that our vision, the future we envisage, matters. It questions whether there is a coherent 'image' of childhood across different services and whether we

have a shared 'collective view of what is possible.' The paper itself reveals this ambivalence, sometimes using the image of an ecosystem or a living system of care and development with the whole child at the centre, other times using the more conventional language of restructuring to bring together care and education and other sectors, 'shared understanding' of quality across services, 'policy coherence' and so on.

My recent experience supporting the government in Scotland with the development of a refresh of their 'Getting It Right for Every Child' strategy revealed this same tension. GIRFEC is conceived in a frame that puts 'the whole child' at the centre of a pattern of relationships with family and professionals in an ever-changing landscape of the outside world.

But in practice, when we come to design policy and deliver services, we are always in danger of falling back to a simpler picture of the child as an individual rather than living in a pattern of relationships. And we tend to define the individual's progress largely in relation to the institutions of society ("pre-school", "not in education, employment or training", "on the waiting list for mental health services") rather than as a process of human development and growth. This makes it easier to assign policy responsibility across departments and to measure progress. Our vision becomes compromised in order to fit existing patterns of delivery.

In my experience in refreshing GIRFEC people across the landscape were asking for a more holistic framework to configure their contribution and make sense of how it might relate to the whole. They are asking that this framework should be explicitly relational – seeing the child as living in a pattern of relationships. That it should be developmental - seeing the child in terms of its social and psychological development not just as passing through a series of preordained ages and stages. And that it should be this model and thinking, rather than a government organogram, that really guides and shapes policy and practice.

If it is this vision of healthy, holistic development that characterizes our Third Horizon then we will find plentiful encouragement in the present. The Learning for Well-being examples that have inspired IFF over the years have more likely grown from a public health perspective than an educational one, perhaps reflecting the natural tendency to think in terms of whole persons living in patterns of relationship and health as an outcome from a complex system of living. I would point to the All Children Thrive movement in the US, for example, which takes a place-based approach to whole child development.² The city (not just its government and services) as competent system. The Radical Childcare project in Birmingham has likewise taken a broad-based view of the child as living in a place, in a pattern of relationships – both of which will yield to artful design.³

² See <https://www.allchildrenthrive.org/> (accessed 9/11/2018).

³ See <https://birmingham.impacthub.net/mission/radical-childcare/the-movement/> (accessed 9/11/2018).

Both can draw lessons from the famous Peckham Experiment from the 1930s in which two pioneering doctors in a deprived part of South London sought to provide the enabling conditions for health for children and families in the area rather than only treatment for illness. They discovered that 'health is as infectious as disease' and that it is impossible to be healthy alone – critical insights for system design which are largely ignored in our traditional services. The Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham reopened by popular demand after the war but was closed down later as incompatible with the new National Health Service.⁴

In short, if we can add the Three Horizons perspective and the practice of transformative innovation or systems transition to our competent systems approach then we will start to see, and more importantly experience, the aspiration/practice gap close.

Author

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Everything is Connected. Really?

By Karin Morrison

Introduction

How quickly we know what books are worth reading, what films to see, the most popular game and trends that have arisen. We can connect with friends or family in another country, hear about a new medical treatment, know when our favourite foods are on special offer at the local supermarket and when traffic authorities know we have exceeded a speed limit. Even if we are just thinking about a holiday and browse the internet to explore some destinations we have been wondering about, very quickly advertisements featuring these places appear on our screens, and family members can know where we are, both locally and further afield, even if we don't tell them. We are so interconnected without even trying!

Yet are the different systems that have a role in education interconnected?

Why is it that in this interconnected world in which we live, the whole child is rarely seen, realized and appreciated, nor is his or her holistic development nurtured?

Untold stories

Reading skills are judged early in schools. Children who are not reading by a certain age are seen as failures. How can it be that the parents of a little boy, Fred, were asked to keep their son in Grade One for another year, as he wasn't reading at the end of the year and other children were. This little boy was so upset that all his friends were going into Grade Two and he wasn't allowed to be with them. All through school he did not like this, he kept in touch with his friends, but was never in the same grade as them. Over time he did learn to read, but never really liked to. His mother advocated for him so strongly, but the teachers focused on what he couldn't do until, when he was a teenager, they realized this unhappy boy was good at mathematics. So good that he was accepted into a very highly ranked Australian university to do actuarial studies and his first job was in a major international company. His career went in leaps and bound and continues to do so. He now also has an

MBA from Oxford University. But it did take him a very long time to feel comfortable in his own skin.

Another little boy, Rob, wasn't good at 'reading, writing and arithmetic', so wasn't well regarded at school either. A happy little boy who loved riding his bike, playing hockey and taking things apart, putting them back together and making new things. Rob's parents were great advocates for him, believed in him and even though they were advised to withdraw him from school as soon as he reached the legal age to leave school, they simply moved him to another school where there were more subjects offered that were hands-on and creative. Rob did complete secondary school but his Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) results, now named ATAR – the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank, which were an aggregate of scores in all subjects in which Rob had enrolled in his final years, were very poor.¹ It ranked him in the lowest third of senior secondary school students in the state. So what? Marks/grades/scores are only numbers. Rob's happy disposition and his joy and skills in taking apart computers, putting them back together into functional machines and knowing how each part related to others led to Rob's leading career in IT.

Another child, Mary, who had a happy start in an Early Learning Centre and then in primary school even though she didn't read till later than other students, climbed over her first real hurdle when moving from primary/elementary school to secondary/high school. Part of the admission process was assessments. Mathematics in this secondary school was streamed, and as Mary did very well in the maths assessment, she was placed in an accelerated maths class. Unlike in her earlier years, maths tests became a regular occurrence. Half way through the year, Mary's parents were advised that Mary was being moved to a lower level maths class as she wasn't doing well enough for an accelerated maths class. In discussion with her parents, Mary said she liked maths but didn't like tests. The lack of familiarity with the testing process was the problem, not lack of ability or understanding, which Mary showed so clearly in later years.

These stories are only three of many stories where students were labelled in different ways because they were perceived as not achieving what was expected of them in the time-sensitive sequence of events in school settings.

Young people spend a major part of their lives in schools, not just being taught what is on the curriculum, but also mixing with others, building relationships, playing, exploring their environment, ideas and more. As stated in the Editorial of the *European Journal of Education* on 'Learner Agency', referring to schools, 'It would be difficult to deny the critical role they lay, successfully or unsuccessfully, in the nurturing and well-being of students.' (Gordon, 2018).

¹ Victoria is a state of Australia and the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) is the end of secondary school certificate.

Parts, wholes and holes

How can it be that individuals are often perceived in parts? Their strengths and weaknesses often elicit labels. But what about the parts that are missed completely? Is wholebeing ever explored and understood? These missing parts are like holes that diminish the authenticity of what is perceived. How could these holes be filled to provide coherence and continuity in the ways children progress from birth through school, rather than accepting only the parts perceived as the whole picture of each child? In the words of Professor Reuven Feuerstein, 'Don't accept me as I am', and sometimes would preface this statement as follows, 'If you love me, don't accept me as I am.'² What a difference it makes to look beyond the surface of another person. How different do you appear to others, depending on your relationship to them, the contexts and your self-image? There is always a story behind the story.

In the stories above so many parts of these children's wholebeing were missed.

Why weren't the implications of Fred's battle with ear infections throughout his first five years of life taken into account? With ongoing intermittent hearing loss, how could Fred be expected to read at similar times as healthy children? The school also knew that a close family member was battling cancer for all of this child's years at school. This family member lost the battle when Fred was in his final years at school. What could have happened to this student if he didn't have a family that believed in him? Where were the health services and social services? Why wasn't his uniqueness valued other than his mathematical skills when later in school he scored highly in quantitative assessments? Why weren't the social and emotional aspects of development and sense of community belonging considered when this boy was removed from the peers he had spent years with in an Early Learning Centre and the Preparatory year and First Grade at school? What about the emotional trauma of a family member slowly dying before their eyes?

Being able to create something new in addition to rebuilding objects that have been taken apart are not subjects in school that are quantitatively assessed, yet does that result in students like Rob being viewed as failures at school? Here there are large holes in what is valued.

Within schools there are so many separate parts, if the missing parts were sought, understood and appreciated, would not holistic development be fostered?

There are more parts than schools that contribute to children's holistic development. Health systems, government departments, community and social services and more have roles in this. There are connections, but how tenuous are they with schools?

² Professor Feuerstein, a clinical psychologist who studied at the University of Geneva under Jean Piaget, Andre Rey, Barbel Inhelder, and Marguerite Loosli Uster, went on to earn his Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology at the Sorbonne. His research in cognitive modifiability and the clarity with which he showed that intelligence is not fixed, but a dynamic system and all can learn how to learn have had a major impact. He was the founder and director of the International Centre for the Enhancement of Learning Potential, now known as The Feuerstein Institute.

Why aren't medical practitioners in direct contact with teachers? When parents are given troubling news about their children, how much do they absorb and process when they are upset. Medical records have value, but that is limited if information is not clearly communicated to teachers too.

Why are decisions about curricula and pedagogy often made by adults in bureaucratic positions often far removed in time and distance from what is happening in schools today? The world children are growing in is so different to the one in which these adults were at school. Where is the voice of children?

Education in Australia has so much to offer young people, and in so many ways children's holistic development is fostered well. However, there are puzzles too. When looking at the whole picture there are so many parts. Education in itself has so many decision-makers who influence what is happening. Federal and state ministers of education together with the public schools, independent schools and Catholic schools sectors each having their own leaders and structures is just the beginning. This is even before we look at health services, social services, youth policy, cultural and more. Each has different perspectives, people in each work in their own ways and while there is connection between the different parts, how comprehensive and effective is this? Does a reliable and regular pattern of communication exist between the different parts? Learning is both developed and impacted by what happens within and outside of schools.

Perspectives

There are so many stakeholders associated with education and while most would share the goal of students receiving a 'good' education, what are their roles in this? Regarding student assessment everything seems to be limited to numbers. Students see that teachers and parents value high numbers and there can be competition between students to get the highest numbers. Funding debates are a major factor in government decisions and different education sectors are often viewed as competitors with limited collaboration between them. Health services have much to offer, and offer expert help when needed, but how often do all these parts come together to co-create the 'whole', the best in education, that is the professed goal of all?

Governments would like to see their countries ranked highly internationally for their education services and outcomes. For example, in the Programme for International Student Assessment ([PISA](#)), an international assessment which measures student performance in specific areas including reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, which ranks countries and is published globally.

Over the last few decades there has been a dramatic rise in the number of assessments Australian students undergo during their school years. Quantitative measures have significant impact on teaching and learning in Australia. There is nationwide testing. The National Assessment Program (NAP) – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), is an annual assessment for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The results of these tests are publicized nationally, and schools are often judged according to the results. These tests are in English,

on paper or online. 'NAP provides the measure through which governments, education authorities and schools can determine whether or not young Australians are meeting important educational outcomes.' ([NAP](#))

They are a snapshot of learning taken from assessments over a three-day period and there is much controversy over the accuracy of these assessments and the power and influence they have. It is not unusual for the perspectives of education ministers, school leaders, teachers, parents and students about NAPLAN to vary considerably.

Another quantitative measure is the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). The ATAR is calculated solely for the use of tertiary institutions to compare the overall achievement of students who have completed different combinations of VCE subjects. Again, schools are publicly ranked according to scores achieved by their students.

While the term 'holistic' is rarely used when parents and teachers discuss their hopes and goals for education, when parents are asked what they want for their children their responses confirm that it is more than numbers achieved in assessments and 'covering' the curriculum. They want their children to be respected and valued for their unique identities, a sense of belonging in their schools and communities, and active participants in the shaping of their learning purposefully so they are intrinsically motivated learners.

Holistic development is often the unspoken perspective of parents, sometimes partially framed in the words, 'I just want my child to be happy'.

Media reports and the [My School](#) website increase the prominence of competition in education. At the end of each school year, front page headlines and photos highlight schools and students who achieve the highest ATAR scores. There are also long lists of all schools in a particular state ranked according to these scores.

NAPLAN results and controversies related to NAPLAN are also prominently reported in the media and also on the [My School](#) website which also includes school profiles. Parents often use this website when making their choices about schools for their children. Schools also often integrate NAPLAN and/or ATAR scores and ranking in their marketing.

Very little attention is paid to the fact that some of the schools that attain less than favourable scores have student bodies whose primary language is not English, and/or the schools are in a low socioeconomic area. The quality of education in these areas is not necessarily poor; in reality, several of these schools have a holistic view of their students' development. What and how these assessments measure however, does not provide a complete picture of students at these schools.

The big picture of health systems is connected to education, and safety measures are in place regarding immunisations, first aid, sun safety and more, yet direct connection with educators and management of specific health issues is limited or of a general nature.

Actions

More information about the ways education, government and health systems are now interconnecting to nurture the holistic development and provide coherence and continuity in the ways children progress from birth through school, and also provide students with the skills required to access healthcare when school is over, is available.³

Speaking with students of various ages, teachers and parents from different schools and medical practitioners also provides examples of first-hand experiences.

There is much diversity in education settings across Australia. Diversity of educational philosophies, for example, early learning centres and schools inspired by Reggio Emilia, cultural and religious diversity, some inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream schools, education institutes in children's hospitals and community involvement, with a large force of committed volunteers in organizations that support seriously and terminally ill children in holistic ways seeing them as so much more than patients.

The Department of Education and Training in the State of Victoria now has a Strategic Plan for 2018–2022. Until recently Early Childhood, Schools and Technical and Further Education were separate entities. This has now changed.

'The Plan is to deliver our vision to build a world class education system that creates opportunities for every Victorian, regardless of background or circumstance and gives every learner the best possible chance at achieving excellence. This Plan highlights the work the Department is leading to drive implementation of the Education State reforms by providing early years settings, schools and higher education and training providers the tools they need to drive improvement. The Plan provides coherence across our three portfolios to strengthen our ability to deliver better outcomes for Victorian learners. No sector operates in isolation, just as a person's education and development progresses along a continuum that is not bounded by sectors or institutions. We are focusing our efforts on those areas and key projects that will have the greatest impact and there are already promising signs and improvements in student performance..... Across all of our key sectors – the kindergartens, the TAFEs, the schools, the flexible learning programs and pathways to work, \$3.6 billion in the 2018-19 State Budget has been invested in the work we do and the futures of Victorian learners.'⁴

Health and education: Nathan Fioritti, University of Melbourne, refers to the symbiotic relationship of health and education. 'Happy, healthy and resilient students learn better,

³ <https://mdhs.unimelb.edu.au/news-and-events/health-and-education-a-symbiotic-relationship> (September 2018).

⁴ (<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/strategicplan.pdf>) (September 2018).

stay in school longer, and achieve more. The Victorian Government is developing and funding two new programmes, Doctors in Secondary Schools and Glasses for Kids, that integrate healthcare delivery within schools.’ At the launch of the Doctors in Secondary Schools initiative, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews echoed what the evidence tells us. Health and education are inextricably linked.

There is growing concern about mental health issues and during October 2018, there has been much discussion about substantial funding to provide mental health support in schools.

‘Every Victorian government secondary school will soon have access to a mental health professional, thanks to the Andrews’ Labor Government. Minister for Education James Merlino today announced a new Mental Health in Schools program, which will ensure students are receiving quality mental health care when they need it most.

One in seven Victorians between the ages of 4 and 17 are estimated to have a mental health issue, with prevalence higher in secondary school.

This \$51.2 million program will allow schools across the state to employ over 190 qualified mental health professionals such as counsellors, youth workers or psychologists.

The Labor Government will also partner with the Orygen National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health to promote student well-being within secondary schools.

Schools will have access to expert advice online through a central web portal which will support school-based health and wellbeing teams to deliver mental health plans and support to students and receive advice on how schools should interact with allied community and health services.’⁵

What about you? Where are you in this complex web of education?

‘Be the change you want to see in the world.’ Ghandi

Where do you fit in the picture of nurturing holistic development of children as they grow? Educators and parents communicating openly with each other and working together play a strong part in this. Learning isn’t limited to what happens in classrooms or learning parts of things. There are learning opportunities in almost everything we do. Learning by wholes, as Perkins writes, is in the spirit of learning the whole game.

‘Schools and other settings of learning ask us to do many things that aren’t all that enthralling. We feel as though we are playing the school game and not the *real* game..... Learning by wholes is a theory of teaching, or more broadly, educating. Learning is a much broader category than education. Learning happens incidentally all the time – in casual conversations, in the supermarket, on the street, playing shoot-’em-up video games, puzzling over stock market

⁵ <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/expanding-mental-health-support-to-victorian-students/>

investments.....Learning by wholes is very constructivist, embracing the idea that learners always in some sense construct their own meanings from learning experiences.' (Perkins, 2009).

Building on the ideas of constructivism, when learners actively lead their learning, they will explore subjects or ideas they are really interested in and want to find out more about these. Listening to and getting to know your students and/or your children can help you co-construct learning opportunities and provide provocations that connect with the students interests for learning too. The combination of passion and purpose are driving factors that motivate and engage students and this learning is relevant to them. 'Adolescence and emerging adulthood are particularly affected, however, by the presence of purpose, and purposeful youth not only avoid the risks of self-destructive behaviour but also show a markedly positive attitude that triggers an eagerness to learn about the world. Purpose leads to personal satisfaction by bringing people outside themselves and into an engrossing set of activities.' (Damon, 2008).

Students, remember: 'If it is to be, it's up to me.' You are not too young, too little or not clever enough. You have ideas worth listening to, are able to do things and solve problems in your own ways. While you are younger than many people making decisions, often about you and your friends, and you don't have the same experiences as people older than you, you are curious, open to ideas, have many questions and lots you think about. You often become aware of different possibilities. Even experts don't know everything. Don't doubt yourself when your thoughts are different to those of experts about what is true. Howard Gardner agrees: 'Of course, establishment of truth is not the exclusive province of the expert. Sometimes experts have it wrong – briefly or even over long periods of time. Sometimes the rank amateur has discerned a state of affairs missed by those with much more knowledge and experience.' (Gardner, 2011).

Speak up! Your point of view is important and needed too. 'Children are not the people of tomorrow, they are people today.' (Korczak). Take responsibility for your actions. Don't be afraid to ask for help and offer help too!

Conclusion

The more we consider education and the strengths and challenges of providing learning that matters, the more we become aware of the complexity of this and the number of parts and systems involved.

'We see everything as this or that, plus or minus, on or off, black or white; and we fragment reality into an endless series of either-or. In a phrase, we think the world apart.' (Palmer, 2007)

If we revisit the words of Aristotle, 'The whole is more than the sum of its parts', value the excellent practices and connections that are already present and changes that are taking place, seek to understand the challenges and together we can assist the joining of these

many parts with the analogy of jigsaw puzzles in mind, until we form the beautiful picture of children's holistic development. If each of us participates, even if only moving one piece each, imagine what can be.

Author

Karin Morrison is an educator committed to helping children live their rights, foster understanding, learning and deep thinking. Her career has included teaching from preschool to postgraduate levels, senior executive positions and the establishment of collaborations with renowned international educators, leaders and organizations including Project Zero at Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Her roles have included being inaugural Director of The Rosenkranz Centre for Excellence and Achievement at Bialik College, Director of the Development Centre at Independent Schools Victoria, faculty member at Project Zero Summer Institutes: Project Zero Classroom and Future of Learning and co-author of the book, *Making Thinking Visible* together with Ron Ritchhart and Mark Church. She has also been inspired by the work of Janusz Korczak, Reggio Emilia, Dream a Dream and the Feuerstein Institute.

Karin now works independently as an education consultant, a Core Team Member of CATS, researcher, volunteer with sick children and develops projects responding to current needs.

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What Contributes to Education Systems Being Nurturing for All Children?

By Jean Gordon

1. Introduction

There is a general acceptance by educators, researchers and some policymakers of the importance of taking a holistic approach to education in order to support deep learning and nurture the well-being of children but is this happening on the ground? For the Learning for Well-being Community Day in April 2018, the Learning for Well-being Foundation decided to commission a paper (Gordon and Ionescu, 2018) to provide context for discussions on how EU policy is evolving in ECEC and school education. This article is a contribution to the follow-up to that first phase (see Editorial of this issue).

Whatever we do, children nevertheless experience their lives as a whole. As Eurochild has said, children don't grow up in silos, despite the best attempts by many authorities to address just the problem for which their office has a responsibility (and funds to do it). Children as 'whole' individuals somehow get lost in complex systems, but so do their parents/carers and their teachers and early childhood professionals. In the field of early childhood there are examples in some European countries of creating spaces for families where all their needs can be dealt with in an integrated manner. Once children move into compulsory education the examples decrease. Schools work with doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, etc. but the latter's possibilities of working closely with schools promoting health and well-being (rather than dealing with problems when they occur) is affected by current debates about what to prioritize amongst competing agendas.

Education systems are complex and continually under development. They address a very wide age range and have to respond to very different needs: socialization, personal development, preparation for citizenship (now and in the future), their professional future and of course developing knowledge and competence. Changes whether small or substantial are frequent, but at the same time there is a perception that education systems

are too slow to change. There is frequently an incompatibility between the 'political' timetable of elections, changing governments and priority agendas and the need to take time to understand how best to address major issues, identify shared understanding and goals and identify implementation strategies that everyone agrees to.

These brief observations led the Learning for Well-being Foundation to ask whether our Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and education systems contain the policy proposals or guiding principles for working towards systems that are competent to nurture all children from birth to 18, and function in an integrated way across institutions, levels and sectors. Within that questioning, how can the principles developed by the Foundation make a contribution?

When we wrote the paper for the Community Day in April 2018 our focus for schools was on the European Commission's Working Group on Schools 2016-2018 (see article by Hannah Grainger-Clemson in this issue). For this article I wanted to turn the initial question on its head to reflect on some of the factors that may contribute to education systems being nurturing for all children. To what extent can the L4WB principles contribute to developing a vision or overarching goals for childhood that include ECEC, health, social services, youth policy, cultural, etc. as well as school education?

2. Nurturing all children

Over the last decade or so (learner) agency has become a more prominent factor in education research and practice, but perhaps less so in policy. Why is it important in nurturing children's development? Participation is fundamentally about democracy in practice and as such is enshrined in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In article 12, the latter unequivocally states that: '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.'

Participation in learning (and other) activities and having some control over your own life in the context where you live necessarily links you to other people and requires you to develop skills and capacities for making decisions about your life and understanding how those decisions relate to others and the environment (Gordon, 2018). That suggests that paying attention to the quality of relationships will be another factor in building systems that nurture children's development. These relationships interact within the diversity of the children/people involved. Each of these three elements is dealt with in more detail below.

2.1 Agency: participation and voice

A recent issue of the European Journal of Education on Learner Agency at the Confluence between Rights-based Approaches and Well-being brought together perspectives that took account of the articulation of agency with the increasing visibility in the education sphere of child and human rights; and an increased focus on well-being as an important and valid aim for human and social development (Gordon, 2018). Colleen McLaughlin (2018) argues the important role schools should play in enabling children to develop their sense of agency,

flourishing and self-efficacy (McLaughlin, 2018). The experience of being listened to, of experiencing that one has a voice and can act as a valued citizen is important for personal development and in addressing the major global challenges towards social and ecological transformation (Gordon, 2018) 'Democratic convictions thrive on experience. Nothing will contribute more to the stability of democratic ways of life and institutions than the commitment of the young generation rooted in the experience of active participation and empowerment.' (Edelstein, 2011).

'If children are to be able to express their views, it is necessary for adults to create the opportunities for children to do so' (Lansdown, 2001). Furthermore, there is no lower age limit imposed on the exercise of the right to participate. Very young children are capable of both holding and expressing views, as long as appropriate forms of expression are used (Lansdown, 2005). In their article in the issue of EJE referred to above, Ferre Laevers and Bart Declercq present the experiential approach to education especially for very young children in early childhood settings, who cannot directly voice their concerns and wishes. 'Its underlying assumption was that if we could not expect babies and toddlers to tell us how happy they were with the educational arrangement we offered, it was our role to check in a systematic way how each child was experiencing "being in an early childhood setting."' (Laevers and Bart, 2018). Through structured screening and observation, the Leuven Experiential Education project takes the perspective of the children into account to try to understand how the pedagogical environment can be optimized. In another article Jeroen Bron, Norman Emerson and Lucia Kákonyi share insights from an Erasmus Plus project – the BRIDGE project (2016–2019) in which student voice is the central purpose. In the five countries involved in the project, collaborative learning at policy, school and classroom levels is encouraged and it seeks to enhance student voice by encouraging relationships based on trust, openness and engagement. Tools for use in the classroom are being developed to support students in expressing themselves in different situations. In the Netherlands tools for communicating, cooperating and negotiating in small groups and class groups were developed based on the argument that young people are entitled to the right to have a voice in matters that affect them, including the curriculum. For the authors it illustrates that 'students develop democratic qualities by participating in curriculum negotiations' (Bron, Emerson and Kákonyi, 2018).

The EU Commission Working Group on Schools reports acknowledge that learner voice is a fundamental right set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and emphasizes that it is a prerequisite for creating a school culture where the learners feel valued and able to give their opinion and make a difference. Making this possible entails both the willingness of the adults to share responsibilities, suitable infrastructures as well as monitoring of learner participation. While all learners need to be supported in order to be able to participate with confidence, those in more vulnerable or marginalized situations will need more support to ensure that their voices are heard too. This is not an easy step for teachers and school leaders who have been educated and trained in systems that do not prioritize students' participation whether in the classroom or across other school activities and who need support to develop the practices and tools to do it with confidence through in-service training, team working in schools and networking across schools (European Commission, 2018).

Reminding us that the purpose of education is to enhance well-being and that schools can play a major role in creating agency, Colleen McLaughlin contends that taking agency seriously would entail integrating it into all aspects of education in a coherent manner (McLaughlin, 2018). It is clear from the Working Group reports that this is neither common nor easy. Michael Fielding in his typology, *Patterns of Partnership* has suggested six forms of interaction between young people and adults with a school. One of them is 'intergenerational learning as lived democracy' with a shared commitment and responsibility for the common good entailing receptivity and mutual attentiveness (Fielding, 2016). This last point leads us to the next consideration – relationships.

2.2 Relationships

As Jon Vogen points out the effects of technological growth, mobility, the desire for economic prosperity and societal well-being have led to increased interdependence but also complexity in our interactions with each other (Vogen, 2016). He underlines the importance of making conscious choices to move along the spectrum from transactional relationships to the more generative, the first being more focused on producing specific outcomes whereas 'Generative relationships on the other hand are based on interactions that shift the fundamental nature of the relationship and can lead to enhanced levels of engagement, learning, collaboration and growth. These interactions build capacity and provide a different value as a result of the engagement' (Vogen, 2016). The currently prevalent approach to education with its dominant values of cognition, competition, calculation of best returns on investment, commodification and individual consumer choice (Fielding and Moss, 2012) are at the transactional end of the spectrum in terms of relationships, and are unlikely to support a holistic process focusing on the whole child.

Similar issues are inherent in the relationships within the health system between patients and care providers. A recent study carried out in France of women living with HIV/AIDS raised issues about the quality of communication between the patients and their care providers; the former did not feel listened to, or that they were being offered adequate support, which was detrimental to how they lived with their illness (Guiguet, 2016). In the domain of non-formal learning, three projects in the UK (HERO, BREAKOUT and LINKS-UP) addressed the issues posed for another group in a very vulnerable situation – young offenders – moving right away from 'current' notions of caring as the inculcation of prescribed norms, values and behaviours based on 'normalization' and 'responsibilization', and replaced these with caring regimes that were founded on 'co-produced knowledge' where the young people were actively working in collaboration with the research team in developing 'caring interventions' (Cullen, 2016). While the researchers identify outcomes as variable, the young people reported positive benefits in terms of their personal self-development, technical skills, team working, and communication skills and in improved awareness of the issues around offending and the consequences of offending (Cullen, 2016). These examples illustrate both the negative effects of relationships that remain too transactional and the positive effects of engaging in caring relationships in a situation where the typical approach has been one of normalizing behaviours.

Coming back to formal education, the school's culture, policies, practices, curriculum, pedagogy and relationships all contribute in a synergetic way to the development of

students' social and emotional learning and well-being and teachers need to be supported in their role as caring educators (Cefai and Cavioni, 2016). This should include training about teaching social and emotional learning in the classroom, fundamental to the quality of relationships, but the support of the administration, staff engagement and collegiality, as well as school-home relations are also critical (Cefai and Cavioni, 2016). Research demonstrates the connections between emotion, social functioning and decision-making with recent findings underscoring the critical role of emotion in bringing previously acquired knowledge to inform real-world decision-making in social contexts. Emotional processes are required for the skills and knowledge acquired in school to transfer to novel situations and real life. (Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2007). This suggests that relationships (because emotional and social interactions cannot exist outside of them) play a role in learning.

The DG Education Working Group on Schools reports also emphasize the quality of the learning environment including those that nourish learners' social and emotional well-being within the school as well as their creative, cultural and civic opportunities outside school, and addressing issues of violence (bullying) in an inclusive way.

Coming back to The Patterns of Partnership typology, developed by Michael Fielding, it proposes that the different types of roles enable us to 're-see each other as persons rather than as role occupants and in doing so nurture not only a new understanding, sense of possibility and felt respect between adults and young people, but also a joy in each other's being and a greater sense of shared delight and responsibility.' (Fielding and Moss, 2012). This constitutes a multifaceted engagement between young people and adults based on a dialogic approach, a pedagogy of listening within a more holistic frame of reference (Fielding and Moss, 2012). The current context in which this would be taking place is one of considerable diversity.

2.3 Diversity

Education settings are all dealing with diversity of different types. The more exterior forms are the most commonly referred to: gender, poverty, vulnerable situations, migration, disability, etc. They present substantial challenges to education systems in terms of understanding, mindsets, objectives, resources, etc. Many of these issues, such as poverty and social exclusion are very complex needing multi-agency and multi-sector approaches if root causes are to be addressed effectively (Gordon, Peeters and Vandekerckhove, 2016) In Europe reducing the percentage of early school leaving is a major target of the European Union because it creates huge inequities for young people during their sensitive adolescent years and later in their adult life as difficulties encountered in childhood become major issues affecting not just socioeconomic circumstances and possibilities, but also self-esteem, self-confidence and agency. And we could point to many other issues of equity and inclusion in education and training whether for very young children, children and young people of school age or adults for different reasons.

But when we focus attention on learning, another set of questions comes into the equation. Though diversity as described above is increasingly taken into account in education systems (with greater or lesser success), consideration of 'inner' differences is largely overlooked including by researchers and policymakers concerned with children's well-being, possibly

because of the perceived and real difficulties of structuring such research as well as developing the competences of staff to understand and work with these differences. (Gordon and O'Toole, 2014)

It is significant that the reports of the Working Group on Schools underline the importance of recognizing schools as learning organizations and not just organizations dispensing learning. On the one hand, this means that the values of inclusivity and diversity considered important for learners will also apply to teachers and, on the other hand, that developing team work among teachers will stimulate peer learning building trust and hence quality relationships. This is linked to acknowledging that the learning pathway for each child is an individual one involving their diverse needs and experience, though critically all these pathways must be coordinated at system level. (European Commission, 2018)

While many elements could be classified as inner differences, Learning for Well-being is referring specifically to the unique ways each child learns, communicates, and develops. It is not hard to observe how different people function, communicate and learn differently, in ways that are specific to each of them. We have all observed when starting a new project how different team members need different types and amounts of information at different points in the process, some will need time on their own to process the information, others need to talk it through. We have different senses of pace and time in carrying out a piece of work and will 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. (Gordon and O'Toole, 2014).

The notion that all individuals learn and make sense of their environments is certainly not a new idea but whether teachers have the approaches to deal with it in the classroom situation may depend on many factors – teacher education, space to experiment in the classroom, pressure of testing and accountability. Even though they observe and understand that children learn differently, they often do not know how to teach students who have different ways of learning and all of them at the same time. Their difficulties are further compounded by the perceived challenge of developing child-centred pedagogy with 30 or more children in the classroom, a prescribed curriculum and external assessment systems, lack of support for new teachers, etc. (Gordon and O'Toole, 2014). Understanding how we learn and develop, cultivating the ways in which we communicate and how to nurture relationships are all essential. Allowing students to understand and share their learning process with teachers and other students is part of learner agency by providing opportunities that give students a choice about how they undertake an activity, particularly how they choose to begin and being open and explicit about all options having value. Allowing space and time for reflection both before undertaking a task and when it is complete and encouraging self-assessment, according to the learner's own criteria, allows children to speak about their own approach. It is important for all children in learning settings and elsewhere in their lives to feel recognized for who they are (Gordon and O'Toole, 2014).

3. From learner-centred education to a societal vision of childhood

The economic crisis has raised many questions about what sort of society we want to live in including how to balance the mainstream approach to measuring progress in society through Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with new and more complex measures that take account of more aspects of the individual's and societal well-being. OECD's [Better Life Index](#) includes 11 topics including education and health but the indicators taken into account (e.g. for education: years in education, educational attainment and students' skills) do not give us information that constitutes a holistic approach or a 'whole child' perspective.

'But there are other stories we can, and have, told ourselves about education, stories that are hopeful about education as an emancipatory project, for flourishing individuals, communities and societies – a narrative of education in its broadest sense.' (Fielding and Moss 2012).

For ASCD, working mainly in the USA, a whole child approach to education will develop and prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of today and tomorrow by addressing students' comprehensive needs through the shared responsibility of students, families, schools, and communities. Their [Whole Child](#) approach is an effort to transition from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and success of all children associating education, arts, health, policy and community sectors.

But what is needed for the education sector to have the competence to implement a learner-centred approach to children's education? I will look briefly at two aspects here: they need to be holistic in approach and perspective and have the ability to communicate between different sectors.

Over recent decades much has been written and discussed about 'competence' with the emphasis predominantly on the learner and frontline staff, i.e. teachers and educators and sometimes also on leadership. It is rare for there to be scrutiny of the 'competence' of levels higher up in the system: national policy level, regional or local levels or whether there is a reciprocal relationship between the different levels and an articulation between individual and collective competence. The concept of competent systems was developed in a report on early childhood education and care services for the European Commission in 2011 (Urban *et al.*, 2011). Building competence at all levels in the system improves the likelihood of increasing alignment, convergence, coherence and cohesion within systems and among services. Significantly a competent system should be grounded in values that are translated into knowledge and practice at all levels (see article in this issue by Mihaela Ionescu). This vertical level could be further enhanced by being complemented at the horizontal level through cross-sector working, an area in which the L4WB Foundation can bring a valuable contribution through its work in building a community of organizations and individuals from different fields of work who have an interest in working together towards a shared vision.

Through its work over the last 15 years and with its partners, the Learning for Well-being Foundation has developed a set of principles that underpinned the Community Day discussions in April 2018. They are as follows.

Learning for Well-being principles:

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. **Diversity:** Respect individual uniqueness and diversity: encouraging diverse perspectives and multiple expressions.
4. **Relationships:** Emphasize the quality of relationships: focusing on process and seeing the other as a competent partner.
5. **Participation:** Support the engaged participation of those concerned; involving everyone in decisions that impact them.
6. **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.

In section 2 we looked briefly at some factors that have an impact on nurturing children:

- being recognized for who they are in all their diversity;
- the importance of the experience of being listened to and of experiencing that one has a voice and can participate with confidence as a valued citizen;
- both of these in situations where quality relationships are valued and encouraged.

All three are among the principles of the Learning for Well-being Foundation. Two others provide a thread that reinforces the holistic approach: wholeness and purpose. Furthermore, we have seen the many synergies with the most recent work of the Working Group on Schools that were more fully described in the initial paper (Gordon and Ionescu, 2018). Together these reports bring a set of guiding principles that can ensure coherence among the different levels in complex education systems, provide guidance on cooperation and networking, align key principles of a learner-centred approach in schools as learning organizations that are growing, developing and can be innovative through supportive multi-level governance and active collaboration with a range of partners.

But what can the Foundation bring in addition? Though they work substantially with public sector authorities, foundations do not have the same constraints as the latter where mission and budget are aligned and may not encourage cross-boundary working. Foundations, however, can act as a space to bring together actors from different sectors and disciplines that would not normally have the possibility of meeting and working together. The [INTESYS](#) project is a good example of this. It is a space where policy, research and civil society can meet and work together productively towards shared goals.

Learning for Well-being aims to support initiatives that take into account whole systems where the different parts are nested and communicating, thus very different from fragmented and partial approaches to addressing complex problems. Working with its partners it also encourages and supports cross-sector working within a shared vision, which in a sense is the glue that holds together the other factors contributing to nurturing children from birth through to adulthood.

The political will to develop and disseminate key principles of a learner-centred approach in schools as learning communities exists at EU level. In addition, there are many initiatives at practitioner level, whether within a given area, a country or across Europe, that are piloting integrated approaches (such as INTESYS or START – see articles in this issue by Mihaela Ionescu and Van Laere *et al.*). Policy formulation of guiding principles and bottom-up pilot initiatives are present in the education sector, but can they expand out to propose dynamic peer learning processes that encourage a reflection on a vision for childhood? Such a vision would be for all children growing up in Europe and would reach across all the policy areas that affect children's lives (education, social services, health, justice, culture, etc.). This is one way the Learning for Well-being Foundation can continue to build and contribute to partnerships and systems whose values and holistic vision of childhood are competent to nurture children's flourishing from birth to childhood.

Author

Bringing change and improvements to education and training and all situations where children, young people and adults are learning so that everyone can flourish and lead happy, healthy and meaningful lives is the core of Jean Gordon's work. She worked for many years for the EIESP, a European institute based in Paris (where she was director from 2003 to 2013), working mainly with the European Union, countries across Europe, and the Mediterranean region. Her work aims to contribute to lifelong learning opportunities and personal development through improving access to learning and its recognition, individualizing pathways, developing key competences and increasing transparency of learning and qualifications. Jean is now a consultant, was Joint Editor of the European Journal of Education from 2004 to 2015 and is currently Co-editor of the Learning for Well-being Magazine. She is a member of the CATS (Children as Actors for Transforming Society) core team for design, planning and organization.

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Viewpoint 1

Is It Time to Rethink Our Perspective on Holistic Education?

By Emilie J. Martin

Introduction

As educationalists, we use the term 'holistic' as shorthand for an education that goes beyond academic achievement – an education that also supports the individual's development of socio-emotional skills and their physical, mental and (sometimes) spiritual well-being.

For most teachers, this is not something that needs a label. It is one of the reasons we step into the classroom in the first place and one of the things we find the most rewarding about our jobs. I have never met a teacher who claimed their primary motive for going into teaching was to increase the number of young people getting a grade A in Biology or improving the SATs data of their local authority.

By planning for the development and progress of the *whole* person, we aspire to create an environment in our classrooms in which every young person can acquire, apply and fine-tune the attitudes, behaviours and skills they need to live successful and healthy lives.

There has been renewed interest within the education community in recent years in how well we support our young people in acquiring social and emotional skills and whether this is being done – or can be done – as consistently and as systematically as we teach young children phonics, for instance.

The OECD has now turned its attention to this issue. Earlier this year, it launched its two-year Study on Social and Emotional Skills, which aims to assess how successfully young people around the world are acquiring socio-emotional skills. These skills include things

such as open-mindedness, collaboration and emotional regulation, which have been linked to life outcomes ranging from educational attainment, job satisfaction and mental and physical health.

What is interesting, as far as this Viewpoint is concerned, is that the literature surrounding the study pays considerable attention to the link between the individual's development of socio-emotional skills, and the well-being of the community and society of which they are part.

The development of social and emotional skills is important not only for the well-being of individuals, but also for wider communities and societies as a whole. The ability of citizens to adapt, be resourceful, respect and work well with others, and to take personal and collective responsibility is increasingly becoming the hallmark of a well-functioning society. (Chernyshenko et al., 2018)

Is it time, then, that we moved beyond a view of holistic education centred on the individual, towards a more systems-based definition that would also nurture that individual's understanding of their connectedness to the wider world and the connectedness of all life? And, if so, how can we create an educational experience which goes beyond the whole person to focus on an individual's sense of themselves in relation to something bigger?

There are, no doubt, many ways that this could be achieved. In this article, however, I will focus on the approach that one school is taking to the development of a curriculum that supports children's understanding of their own connectedness and the interconnectedness – indeed the interdependence – of all living things. It is a school that I was lucky enough to teach at as it started its journey towards what we might term a more 'connected' curriculum and approach to learning.

Harmony in education

A little over five years ago, I joined the teaching staff at Ashley C of E Primary School in the suburbs of London. It is a relatively large – and expanding – primary school with 540 children, aged 4-11 years currently on roll.

Over the course of many years, the school had developed a curriculum built around concepts of sustainability and had integrated meaningful sustainability practice into the everyday life of the school. The school hadn't just created a garden where children could learn about growing vegetables. Its allotment was supplementing the school kitchen's procurement programme. The school wasn't simply aiming to reduce food waste. The children were weighing and monitoring the food discarded at the end of every lunch sitting and using the data to help the kitchen staff revise menus and refine portion sizes.

At the time I started teaching there, the school was embarking on the next chapter in the development of its curriculum. It was beginning to develop a curriculum informed by principles that help maintain the health and harmony of systems in the natural world.

The concept was inspired by the ideas of HRH The Prince of Wales, set out in his book *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World*. This explores how principles in the natural world can guide us in the choices we make in our daily lives and in the collective choices we make at a societal level. The book makes the case that we have not only become disconnected from nature but disconnected from the way systems within nature work.

The school was looking at how the ideas in the book could be developed in an education context and applied to learning. From my perspective as a teacher at the school, three of the concepts underpinning the project were of particular interest.

Firstly, children would develop a better understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things and a deeper appreciation of – and connectedness to – the natural world. They would start to understand that, as HRH The Prince of Wales has said, ‘we are nature’ and that nature is part of us.

A body of research already links our sense of connectedness to nature with improved mental health and well-being (Catling and Willy, 2018; Louv, 2005), and specifically with having a better sense of purpose, social connectedness and life satisfaction (Cervinka, Röderer and Hefler, 2011). What impact would the new curriculum have on the well-being of the children, their teachers and the school community as a whole?

Secondly, they would start to explore how effect is linked to cause on a more global scale. They would begin to explore the link between our degradation of the natural world and the damage this ultimately wreaks on our own well-being. Critically, though, they would also be supported in developing a more proactive role in finding solutions to problems.

Thirdly, the children’s learning would be structured in such a way that reflected the interconnectedness of the natural world. Their learning would support them in drawing upon their knowledge, understanding and skills across the curriculum to further their educational experience. This would build on work the school had already begun on structuring learning as enquiries.

The head teacher at the school, Richard Dunne, has discussed the principles of Harmony on which the school’s curriculum is built in his article, ‘Why We Need an Education Revolution’ (Dunne, 2018) so it is not my intention to review the principles themselves here.

Instead I would like to share a brief, teacher’s-eye-view of developing and delivering this new curriculum.

Learning to see the world around us

When the new Harmony curriculum started to be explored in the school, teachers were asked to devise and deliver activities linked to the Geometry of the natural world. These would allow the children to observe and explore the forms and patterns that we see everywhere in nature if we learn to look closely enough. The teaching staff was supported in developing this aspect of its practice by the Prince’s Foundation School of Traditional Arts.

As you might expect, for the very youngest children in the school, these activities were very simple. The children made prints using an apple cut in half horizontally and discovered that the pips were arranged inside five cavities that took the shape of a star. From here, they looked for other places in nature where they could find this five-part form repeated: the human hand, a horse chestnut tree leaf, a star fish.

Meanwhile, older children used sets of compasses to construct quatrefoils and used these to record their observations of a variety of four-petaled flowers in sketches.

These activities required the children to stop and quietly observe one tiny aspect of the natural world that they may never have noticed before or reflected upon in such depth. They began to see forms repeated in the world around them and to learn about the proportions and ratios of nature's patterns. They started to develop a sense of the way in which the natural world organises itself and replicates successful designs. It helped make tangible to these primary school-aged children the idea that there is an order to the natural world that results in harmony and balance.

Among the teaching staff, we reflected on the skills we thought the children were developing as a result of the introduction of nature's Geometry to learning. Things such as improved fine motor skills, came up frequently, as did better attention to detail, accuracy, concentration and resilience. More importantly – in my mind, at any rate – than any of these, was that the children began to see the natural world in a new way, they began to appreciate and wonder at its complexity and beauty.

Developing interconnectedness in learning

Primary schooling in England has a long tradition of cross-curricular teaching built around a central idea or 'topic'. But teaching through topics has fallen out of fashion in recent years, as the standards agenda in education has put pressure on timetables and pushed cross-curricular learning to the sidelines in many schools. Where this is the case, the structure of teaching and learning too often reverts to the structure of the National Curriculum, which divides learning into neat but artificial subject silos, with little reference made between them. Organising a curriculum in this way, contributes to an educational experience that can be piecemeal and disjointed.

The approach to learning that is still evolving at Ashley School seeks to marry a cross-curricular approach that links learning across all areas of the curriculum with the acquisition of robust skills and understanding in Maths and English. Harmony principles provide a unifying thread that is woven through all areas of learning.

By teaching in a highly interconnected way, children are encouraged to make links between their learning in different areas of the curriculum. They experience first-hand through the curriculum the interconnectedness that exists in the world around them. And by starting to draw on knowledge, skills and understanding gained in different academic subjects, their thinking starts to become more 'joined up'.

The school hopes that giving learning this structure will help to achieve a shift in mindset from one that sees things in isolation to one that sees the complex ways in which one thing is connected to another and one outcome is connected to a series of actions. It is in this way that a Harmony curriculum helps children to develop a sense of their own connectedness to the wider world.

This is the kind of thinking that our young people need if they are to take on some of the greatest challenges that threaten the future well-being of humankind and of all life.

Towards a new perspective

Richard Dunne, the head teacher of Ashley School, has argued in his article for this publication for a revolution in education. The revolution I have been fortunate enough to be a part of at Ashley School is changing the way that children look at the world around them.

More than that, it is changing the way they see themselves in the world around them – and how they see the world in themselves. It is helping the children cast themselves in the role of agents of change. As the head teacher of another school that is developing its own curriculum around principles of Harmony in Nature sums up:

'We want to encourage the children to look beyond themselves at the wider world that they will one day play a greater part in. Integrating Harmony principles into learning helps achieve this.'

The revolution is still in its infancy, but it is growing as other schools come on board. And the more schools and practitioners that explore the possibilities that Harmony learning offers to connect children in a more meaningful way to each other and to the wider world, the better the prospects for the future of education of our young people.

Author

Emilie Martin is a teacher and writer. She began her teaching career in central London schools and has been involved with Ashley C of E Primary School for the last five years. She is a contributor to [The Harmony Project](#) which seeks to bring together and support those applying principles of Harmony across many different areas. Emilie has documented the work being done around Harmony at Ashley School and the report is available at The Harmony Project website.

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Viewpoint 2

How My Parents Brought Me Up

By Zoe Phoenix

1. Introduction

In April 2018 I was invited by the Learning for Well-being Foundation to go to Brussels to participate in a panel discussion on '*What contributes to education settings being competent to nurture the well-being of young people*'. On the panel I was asked to think about how school and families nurture well-being. After the panel I was encouraged to express my opinions in an article, so I decided to address this by interviewing my parents and asking them two key questions:

1. What did my 'holistic well-being' mean to you and what was your ideal image for me to be fully myself?
2. How did you go about providing the environment, experiences and attitudes through which I could grow into being all I can/could be?

2. Holistic well-being

2.1 Opportunities

My parents always wanted to give me the broadest opportunities possible to develop independence and widen my horizons. They have both always made sure that money was not an obstacle to enabling me to try new activities and experiences. I was a very privileged child in the sense that I could try and do any new activities I wanted such as dance, theatre, martial arts, acrobatics, music etc. This doesn't mean I was particularly good at any of them, but I had the opportunity to try them all and was in fact encouraged to do so. Having all the possibilities from a young age helped me figure out what I wanted to do or didn't, what I was interested in or wasn't. It helped me understand who I was.



2.2 Personal space

In order to become fully myself my parents have understood that freedom and personal space is very important. Even though we are close as a family, my parents know the boundaries; simple things like micro-managing my homework and outings. As I get older, they see that in order for me to grow and figure out what I want, I must do most of it on my own. When it comes to school, for the past couple of years we have this mutual understanding that as long as my grades and behaviour in school are in check then there is no reason to be all over me. This helps me a lot because I work best on my own and I tend to procrastinate like everyone else, but if I had someone constantly nagging me, I would eventually just get frustrated. In terms of personal space my parents are very respectful. They understand that as a teenager I might not always want to do things and some days I would rather stay at home in my bed and binge on TV shows on Netflix.

2.3 curiosity & exploration

They respect me, so therefore I also have to do my part. One thing that is key to them is 'family time', my parents would ensure this through insisting on having meals together. When I was younger, I remember getting jealous of some of my friends because they would get to eat in front of the TV or whenever they wanted, and they didn't have to sit and wait for everyone to finish before going back to their lives. Now I realize how important this was because it really pushed us to communicate with each other. Family activities and vacations are also very big for us. Once a year we have one big holiday together in which we go explore new things; last year we went backpacking for 120 km across Spain, this year we went exploring Colombia and Japan. It was amazing. I had the opportunity to discover whole new cultures and ways of living. For a really long time my parents have always given me and brother amazing new experiences which have given us a hunger for explorations and a deeper understanding of different cultures.



2.4 Art

My father is an artist and he always thought it important for me to experience art in different forms so from the early age of 3 months I have been taken to theatre and music festivals. I personally am no artist and the best I can do is to draw a fantastic stickman, but those experiences really opened my eyes up to different worlds. They are a really big part of me because thanks to my parents I have an appetite for them.

3. All I can/could be

3.1 Positive & diverse environment

To be everything I could/can be my parents have always ensured that the environment that I was in was a positive one. To achieve this, they made sure I had other adult figures to look up to. This not only bought more love into my life, but it also bought more diversity. By having different types of people around me it gave me different perspectives and understandings. From a young age my mother and father introduced me to different cultures and ethnicities, which meant I never had any prejudice towards them. My mother really insisted on embracing everyone and someone's colour is not a bad thing and should be celebrated and respected.

3.2 Social environment

They also made my environment a welcoming one. Every Friday from the age of four, my mother invited a family friend who is an art teacher to come and do a class in our cellar with 6 or more children. These people were friends of my brother's and mine. The class was an hour after school and a chance for us to hang out while painting, drawing and doing other crafts. After the session my mother would set up an 'Apéro' in which she invited all of our friends and the parents of the children to come and share food, a drink and good conversation. This made me realise the importance of friendship and human connection. Seeing my mother being so sociable really encouraged me to be sociable too.



3.3 Open and communicative environment

Openness is very important for my family. Having an open attitude enables us to communicate with each other well. Open communication is one of the main things that I personally think keeps a relationship working whether it's a romantic or a family one. At one point in my life I cut myself off from my family and during that time I was lonely because I felt that there was no one there for me. I learned from this because after a while I couldn't do it alone anymore, so I let my parents back in by just talking to them and letting them know what was going on. This made me realise that they had always been there for me, but I had chosen to exclude them and if I wanted to have a relationship it had to go both ways.

3.4 Trusting environment

This attitude to being mutually open has also led to us mutually trusting each other. These days my parents generally know everything about my life – unlike many teenagers. Since I am a teenager I do go out and party a lot and even though many parents can guess what goes on, many parents actually don't have a clue. But I always share with my parents what goes on because in my case it benefits me more to be open as it means they trust me more. For example, if I am to go out, I will tell my parent where I am going, what is probably going to happen and what time I will be home. This system works well for us

because consequently they don't worry and stay up late wondering what is going on. It also works because there are three conditions, firstly if there ever is a problem, I call them or I update them on what I am doing if there is a change of plan, secondly I make sure that I am safe and most importantly I must always stay in control. I am quite responsible and over time my parents have realised this and from experience they know they can trust me, so I therefore have no reason to breach their trust.

I am so beyond lucky to have this life and I truly admire and respect my parents for what an amazing they job they do looking after my brother and me. They have given me everything I need and so much more. I truly believe that the key to having a strong sense of holistic well-being is to just have a supportive entourage, including people you love and care about and being open and trusting with them.



Author

Hello, my name is Zoe Phoenix and I am 16-years old. I was born in Switzerland of English and Italian/English parents. From the age of 2 years I have lived in France and been schooled in the French educational system. I am bilingual in French and English but have always considered myself British. I really love music and I listen to all genres from rock to Disney. I like sport and enjoy being part of a rugby club. My friends are an important aspect of my life and I socialize a lot with real people and online (Instagram: zoephoenix). I don't like school, but I work and want to do well so that I can have as many opportunities as possible when I leave. I want to travel and learn to speak Spanish and Italian fluently. I have a lot of anxiety, but I have a great friends and family that are always there to support me. I don't know what I want to do in life, but everyone tells me that's normal, so I guess we'll see where life takes me.

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Viewpoint 3

Considering the Soul in Education

By Ellen Hall

Introduction

For this viewpoint I draw on decades of teaching and administering, from preschool through high school. I am committed to bringing the soul more into focus in education after witnessing the dramatic results for teachers when they shift their perspective to include the soul. When I refer to 'soul', I am referring to that which infuses our lives with compassion, inner-knowing and purpose; it also affirms the child's inherent uniqueness and destiny. It is a secular approach to the soul, not a sectarian or religious one.

What do we mean by soul in education?

Each of us has an inner and an outer life. Children are no exception and they arrive at school whole: body, mind, heart and soul. We are asking, 'How can schools nurture children's hearts and souls as well as their minds?' *A bold new vision for our schools is needed – one that reclaims them as soulful places of learning where the spiritual dimension is welcomed.... teaching the whole child can include welcoming the wisdom of a child's soul into our classrooms.* (Lantieri, 2001)

As Lantieri says, the vision needs to be 'reclaimed.' Soul-Inspired education **is nothing new**. Plato's theory of education was that truth and ideas are present within our minds. It recognized that people possessed a soul, prior to their incarnation, which knew what always is. Learning was essentially a rediscovery of truth. *(In Plato's theory) 'the emphasis was not upon an authority figure coercing students toward the truth on a topic, but on one's personal use of reason and questioning to uncover the truth of one's self. ...Soul was seen as something within each person that was sacred.'* (Peterson, 1999)

Based on more than a decade of scientific research, Dr. Lisa Miller, a professor of Psychology and Education and the Director of the Clinical Psychology Program at Columbia University, Teachers College, concludes that the child, whose spiritual life is supported, is more likely to thrive in every aspect of life, including higher levels of academic success.

'Our children have an inborn spirituality that is the greatest source of resilience they have as human beings, ...natural spirituality in fact appears to be the single most significant factor in children's health and their ability to thrive.' (Miller, 2015). The result of her research proposes that an 'inner spiritual compass' is an innate, concrete faculty, which has a biological basis. According to Dr. Miller the evidence is 'hard, indisputable and rigorously scientific.'

Bringing a sense of purpose

Soul-inspired education means discerning the intention of each child and letting that guide their education. Of course, each child also needs the skills to respond to their soul's calling so that basic literacy and numeracy are essential and assumed as foundational to any education.

My own experience over many decades is that children know what their purpose is for coming to earth. I began asking children the question, 'Why did you come here to earth?' over 45 years ago. Having worked with many hundreds of children since, I have asked it whenever I could. In most cases, children can quickly answer, especially the younger ones. They will tell us either in words or through our careful observation of their interests.

One doctor friend told me that his son, one of twins, was lying on his chest at around three years old and said, 'Dad, I'm an artist.' That child is now in his teens and spends all the time he can in the art room at school, is taking a pottery class after school and is an accomplished violinist. His twin brother shares none of those interests. Another example – is a child who responded to her teacher about this quote from Albert Schweitzer 'The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others,' the eighth-grader responded to the quote by frankly stating 'I believe I was made to entertain, inspire creativity and guide others – having a strong passion for art and Broadway plays.' Her confidence in her own 'passion,' and her self-knowledge about what she was 'made to' do, is clearly evident. These two examples demonstrate how the knowing about life's purpose comes from within, from children's inner life, from their self-knowledge. Based on his acorn theory, James Hillman simply states, 'each person bears a uniqueness that asks to be lived and that is already present before it can be lived,' just like an acorn, which has the entire blueprint of a magnificent oak inside. (Hillman 1996)

The tragedy of education

The tragedy of education is that the soul, the inner life is not addressed. As children enter the system they clearly get the message that, 'This is a material world. You must learn about it with all of your attention. Focus on your instruction and your tasks. You are not to daydream, look out the window, doodle, or miss your mom. You must focus your mind and

still your body.’ Most children believe us and do their best to comply. Others are restless and can become disruptive.

The content delivered and the tasks given to children are standardized largely by age and grade level, not by interest or skill level. Frustration at not being able to **keep up** or at being **held back** to the speed of the class is a common result. It is well established that by around 3rd grade, creativity, enthusiasm for learning and for school drop significantly. With every individual on earth being a unique creature, why are we so determined to create standardized education?

Ellie was a student at a school where I was the principal. She could not spell and was failing the weekly 20-word spelling test. She was bright in many ways, but due to a medical mishap had some brain challenges with literacy. The teacher spoke with her privately and asked her how many words did she think she could spell accurately on the test. Ellie said ‘probably three,’ so they agreed to start with three. Ellie worked hard to pass the tests for a few weeks and felt her confidence and joy steadily increase. The teacher then asked her if she thought she could add a few more words. Ellie agreed and continued to spell them all correctly. The process continued until she aced her first 20-word test. The teacher called her home to congratulate her, delighting her parents and an overjoyed Ellie. Ellie had academic interests that she wanted to pursue which motivated her to struggle with her challenge. Ellie is now studying for a Masters degree in finance.

If we understand that we are teaching an individual child with inherent intelligence and a unique gift to give the world, we approach each respectfully and with curiosity. What are this child’s gifts and how might I help him/her to be prepared to give them? What does this child need? Soul-inspired education is clearly counter to delivering a set, standard of information into a child’s brain at a predetermined time in their life.

As an illustration, please watch this five-minute film of teacher, Timothy Hall, called ‘Meeting Students Soul to Soul.’ It is about a student, Ian, who was disengaged from school and how through the soul qualities of trust, compassion, respect, honesty and faith in each other, Ian could begin on his road back to academic learning.

<https://vimeo.com/album/5497999>

A soul-inspired classroom – What does it look like?

A soul-inspired classroom can succeed in any educational setting because it is dependent wholly on the consciousness held by the teacher. It does not need a different curriculum or new educational materials. It can be brought into any learning environment and make a huge difference. If a teacher has the perspective that the children present in the class are developing bodies and minds with tender hearts and wise souls, the children will relax into a more joyful, safe learning environment. Here are two examples:

Thirty minutes a day for the souls of thirty children

In the early days of his career in education, Lawrence Williams, the founder and president of Oak Meadow School (www.oakmeadow.com) writes about a teaching job where he was given a difficult and challenging class at a Waldorf school. His description of the class was 'as interesting as the Mongol hordes.' For months he tried different strategies to settle the class to no avail.

His wise Director offered 'It sounds like you're seeing them as little personalities. You need to see them as souls. If you want to reach them, you have to speak to who they really are, not who they appear to be.' And then he offered the following exercise. Lawrence spent one minute a day on each child before leaving for school, seeing that child as a soul, seeing the beautiful essence of each. For him, some children were quite easy to visualize, for others not so much. 'After several weeks I noticed the class begin to settle and deepen and an inner stillness began to pervade the class.' (Williams, 2014)

You might observe that this was in a Waldorf school, where working with the soul was to be expected. What about a teacher in a public school? What if you knew the children in your class came with unique gifts and talents to share with the world? Would you listen more and instruct less? Could you see the gifts beyond the behaviour?

Rocky on my side:

Tim Hall had a 38-year bilingual teaching career, where he taught in public and private schools, in the barrio in East Los Angeles as well as the bucolic suburbs. Tim tells one of the many stories that demonstrate the transformative power of seeing the essential nature of his students.

'I was warned about the bully and troublemaker, Rocky, who threw a lot of "attitude" my way at first. The school had a hard time trying to control him. The other students looked up to Rocky and followed his lead. Instead of trying to shut him down, I saw the charismatic natural leader in Rocky. I addressed him respectfully and lovingly and asked him to help me lead the class. He stepped right up to the role, keeping order in the large class and was my 'amigo' visiting me for years to come.'
(from a recorded conversation with the teacher)

Essentially a shift in our perspective on children, a shift to seeing their inherent intelligence and unique gifts, brings out their soul qualities of wisdom, kindness, and joy. In Rocky's case, he was a natural leader who switched from the dark side to light through a teacher's love and recognition of his gift. A soul-inspired classroom is a safe place, free from fear, ridicule, bullying and coercion. The classroom needs to be safe for the maximum learning to take place – if a classroom is not safe, the result is that the soul withdraws.

Classroom management is generally considered to be about how to 'manage' or control the disruptive or misbehaving children in the classroom. In a soul-inspired classroom, it is about how to facilitate learning a life lesson for the disruptive child, this incoming soul. Loving the child or the children motivates us to help them learn from every situation.

Here is an example of school vandalism that demonstrates the classroom management issue and the two approaches: rewards and punishments (Kohn, 1999.) and a soul-inspired approach.

It was reported to a teacher that two girls carved words into the bathroom walls. The teacher, after confirming the action, could have had them punished, shamed in front of classmates, perhaps even expelled or sent home. What would they have learned? Instead, the teacher understood what a life lesson this event presented about making mistakes. The teacher from a soul-Inspired classroom asked them, privately, to write the full definition of 'vandalism' and also an exact description of what they had done and how they thought the best way to 'balance' the act of defacing the wall.

For 'balancing,' the two girls asked their fathers to help them sand, fill and paint the wall on the weekend which made them feel a great relief.

So, what were the results of this event? The girls learned how to correct a mistake. Their relationship with their teacher became more trusting and affectionate. Their families were grateful for the experience and the learning. They were not humiliated or punished. Through writing their definitions the students came to understand 'vandalism', which they said they had known nothing about before.

It must be recognized here that the teacher was committed to what was best for the girls, what would serve their soul, their inner life. It was a lot of extra time and energy for her. She could have just sent them to the principal's office or ignored the whole thing. After all, she was very busy.

Teaching and learning – making it happen

Children learn by absorbing everything in their environment. They pick up every nuance, every subtle emotion, every hidden prejudice, every deep resentment, every wave of fear as well as every appreciation of beauty, every delight in the poetry of words, every joy in nature, and every affection of the adults in their world – including the influence of parents, teachers, relatives, neighbours and friends. All children are naturally keen learners and absorb these lessons with clarity and speed. Children are eager to learn how to live on this planet from the adults in their lives.

Traditionally we have trained teachers how to impart the acquired knowledge of our civilization – yet the children are learning how civilized the teacher is by their every nuanced move. Teachers have been trained to get information into the child's brain, often ignoring the whole child. But the whole child is getting the whole picture every minute.

'The right kind of education begins with the educator, who must understand himself and be free from established patterns of thought; for what he is, that he imparts' (Krishnamurti, 1953). Ideally teacher preparation should include an opportunity for teachers to explore their own essential nature, their own soul qualities. In this way, teachers can communicate with their students soul to soul. To this end, a group of seasoned educators and I are creating a graduate school that offers a Masters Degree in Soul-Inspired Education. At the

moment [Alma Education International](#) offers six online courses for teacher enrichment, which will develop into a teachers college. Other programmes exist as well.

‘Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together.’ (Parker Palmer, 1998)

Responding to the needs of our children’s souls in education is accomplished through supporting the inner lives of teachers. It is through soul-inspired teachers in a soul-inspired classroom that we ‘make it happen.’

Author

Ellen Hall draws on decades of teaching, from preschool through high school. She also served as an administrator in schools and as the principal of Oak Grove School of the Krishnamurti Foundation of America in Ojai, CA. Always seeking innovation to improve children’s school experience, she co-founded four schools and co-authored the book, *High Schools in Crisis: what every parent should know*, Westport, Praeger Publishers 2004.

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