

Pinto, L.M (2019) 'An Attempt at Wholeness: Using Four Perspectives in Creating Intergenerational Events,' In Learning for Well-Being Magazine, Issue 7, published by The Learning for Well-Being Foundation.

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

By Luís Manuel Pinto

### 1. An attempt at wholeness

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

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

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

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

### The right to be a whole person

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

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

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

## 2. Understanding wholeness

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

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term 'child' refers to people aged up to 18 years old.

<sup>2</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), General comment No. 1 (2001), Article 29 (1), The aims of education, 17 April 2001, CRC/GC/2001/1, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4538834d2.html> [accessed 26 July 2019].

<sup>3</sup> Smuts, J. C. (1927). Holism and evolution. Macmillan. Retrieved from [http://krishikosh.egranth.ac.in/bitstream/1/2048242/1/0198\\_2688A.pdf](http://krishikosh.egranth.ac.in/bitstream/1/2048242/1/0198_2688A.pdf)

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

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

### Four perspectives into wholeness

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>4</sup> Clark, E. T. (1991). Holistic Education: A Search for Wholeness. New Directions in Education. Selections from Holistic Education Review, 53-62. Brandon, US: Holistic Education Press.

<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/whole> [accessed 26 July 2019].

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/classical\\_element](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/classical_element) [accessed 26 July 2019].

Table 1: Equivalences between four perspectives

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

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

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

- The *physical perspective* relates to the function of **doing**. It can be experienced as **sensations, actions** but also as a connection to, and between, **environments**. Its most subtle and universal expression can be felt as a sense of **will** or power to create and change.
- The *emotional perspective* relates to the function of **feeling**. It can be experienced through **subjective expression** and **relationships** but also in the multiple and dynamic **connections** between people, animals, ideas. In its most subtle expression, it can be experienced as pervasive and universal **love**.
- The *mental perspective* relates to the function of **thinking**. It can be experienced through **concepts** and **values**, but also a sense of **structure** that keeps the boundaries of spaces, roles, or organisms. In its most universal and subtle expression it can be felt as the quality of **light** or clarity.

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

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

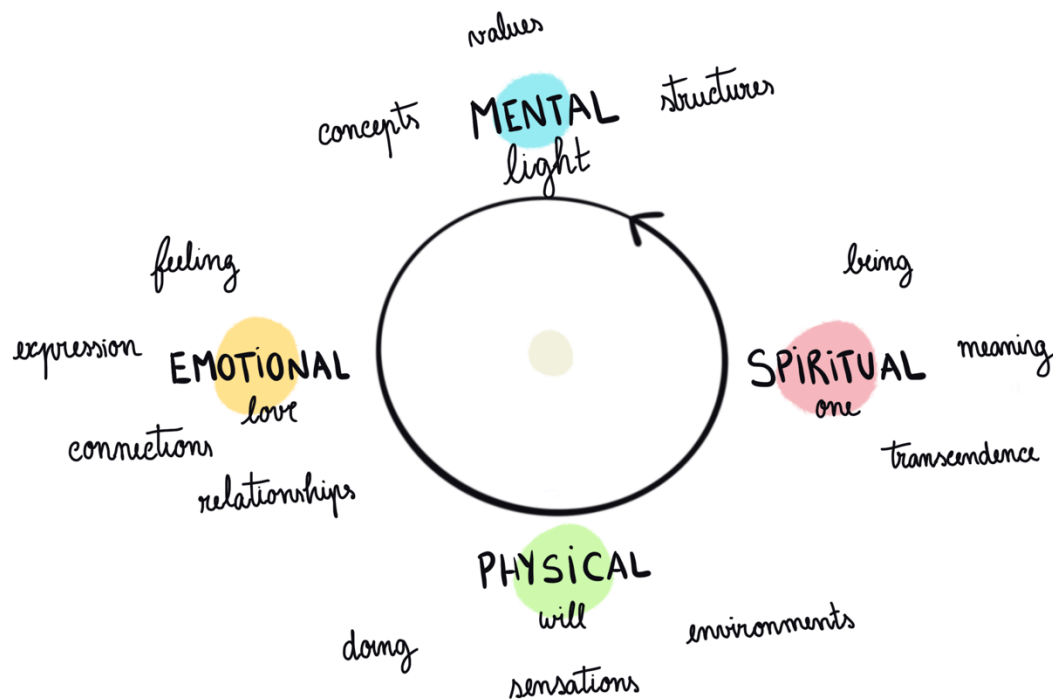


Figure 1 – Keywords associated with the perspectives around a wheel

### Facilitating four perspectives

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

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

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

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

Source: Luis Manuel Pinto

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### a. Creating a rhythm for the event

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

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

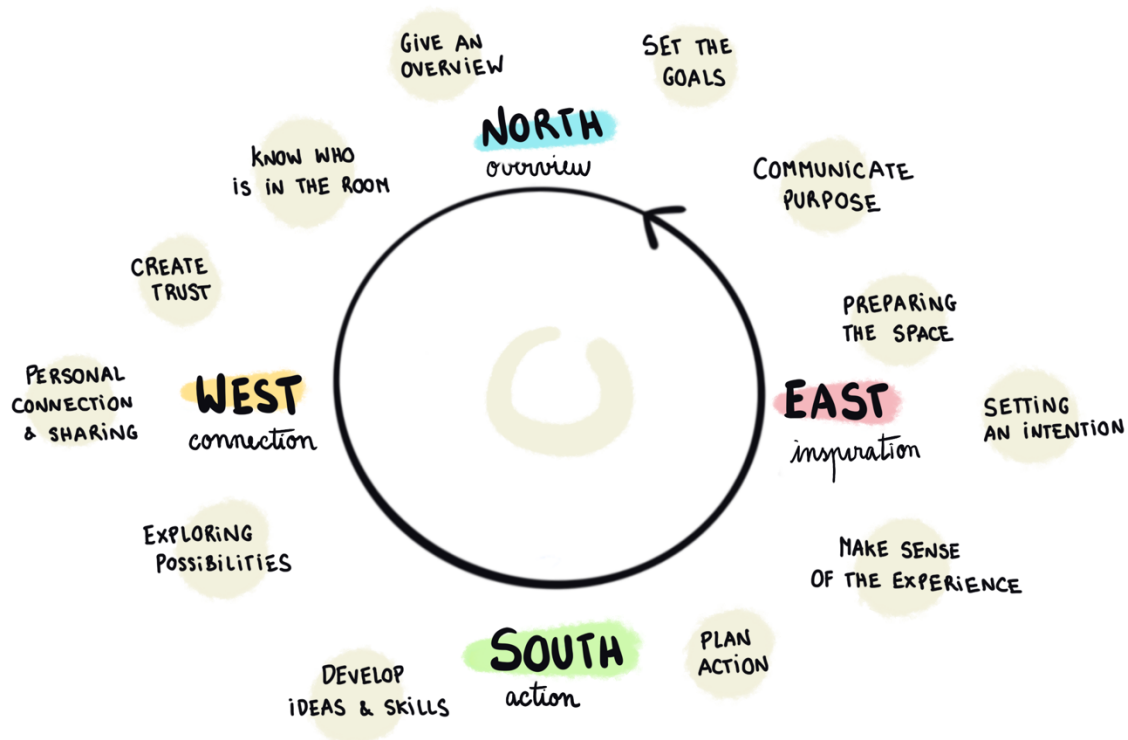


Figure 2 – Planning event through four perspectives

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

- Setting the tone of the event from the beginning by making sure there is a shared spirit in the hosting team, that the space conveys the intention of the event, and that the very first activity is above all, inspiring [spiritual perspective].
- The next moment should put the necessary structures in place for participants to know how to navigate the event. This means making clear what will happen, who is there for what, what are the boundaries (child protection) and where heading [mental].
- After the foundational information is given, space is given to know who the part of the group is, what their aspirations are. We give space for creating personal connections through storytelling and networking so that there is basis of trust for the next moment [emotional perspective].
- Once there is a bedrock of self-confidence and trust in others, and ideas have started emerging from interaction, the direction of the programme starts moving to give space for participants to suggest and develop their own actions. [physical perspective].
- At the end of the programme, we come full circle by reviewing and integrating the event experience into a 'new self', stimulating a sense of purpose and meaning, and inspiring the group to apply and share their learning with the outside world [spiritual perspective].

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

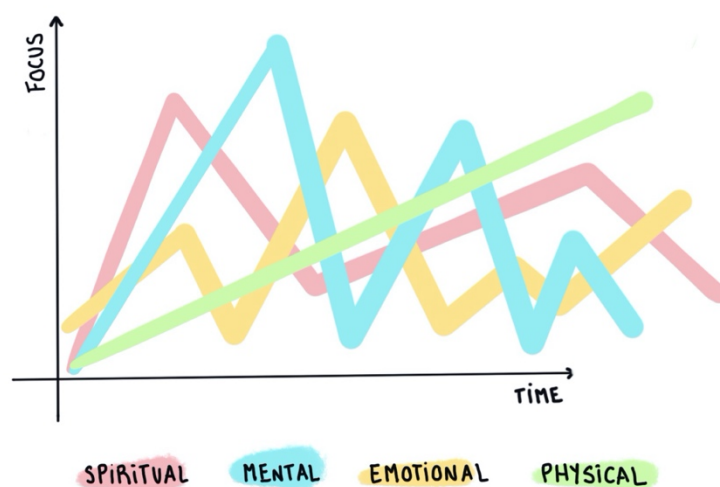


Figure 3 – Focus on different perspectives during an event



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

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



Photo 1

Wheel with four perspectives drawn on the floor

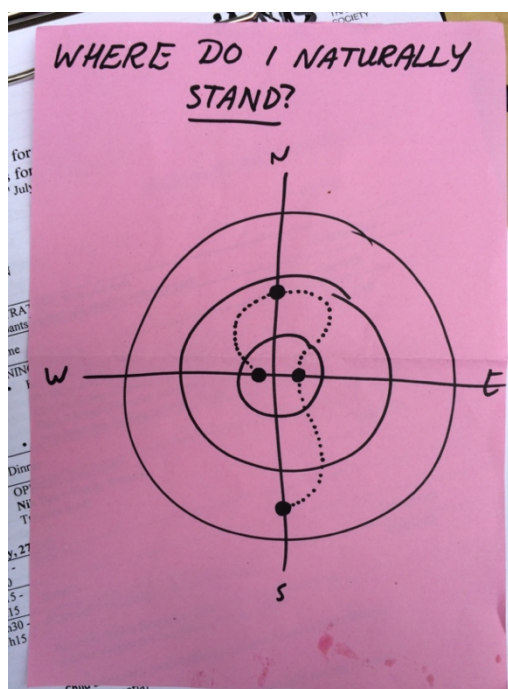


Photo 2

Exercise reflecting on which perspectives feel more natural

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

### c. Giving clarity and choice in the programme

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

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

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

#### d. Taking care of space

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

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

#### e. Evaluating the experience

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

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

I gained enough clarity about aims, content and roles (Head)

I felt heard and I have opportunities to express myself (Heart)

I felt welcomed and I had chances to contribute (Hand)

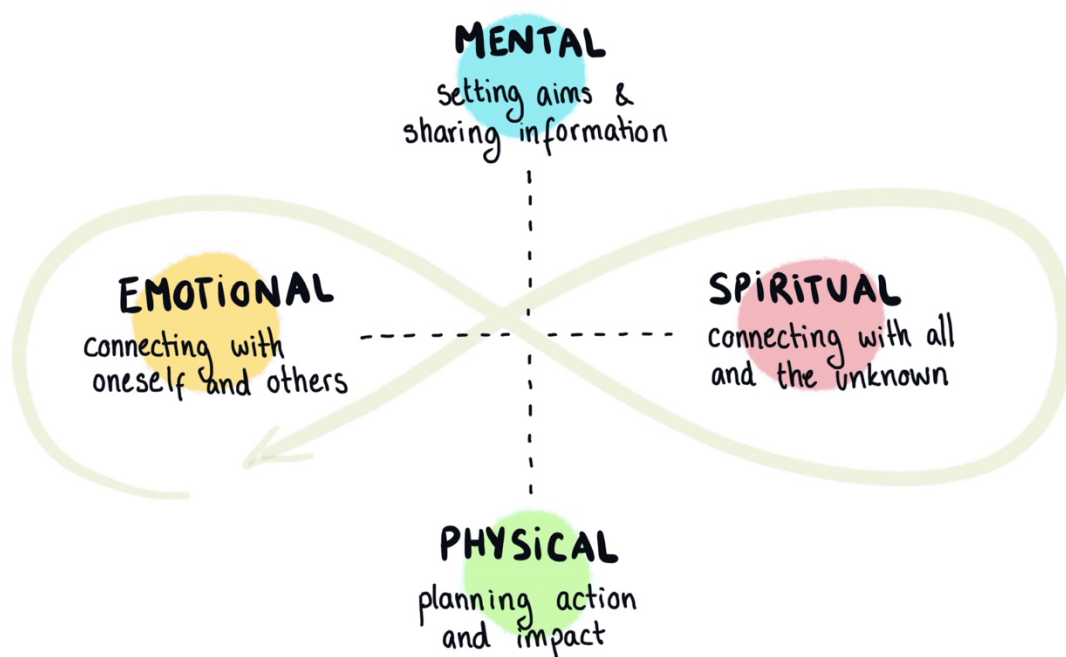
I felt inspired and part of a larger family (Spirit)

## 4. Why cultivate wholeness?

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

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

Figure 4 – Emphasis on vertical and horizontal axis in relation to the four perspectives



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

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

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

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

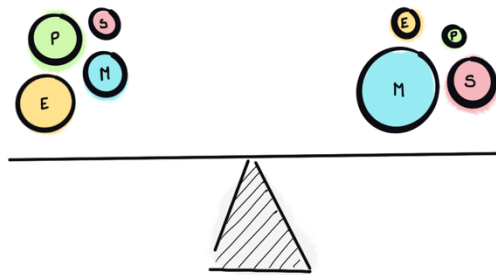


Figure 5 – Dynamic balance between different ratios of the four perspectives

## 5. Author



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

## 6. Dedication

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

Thank you for staying with me until now.