

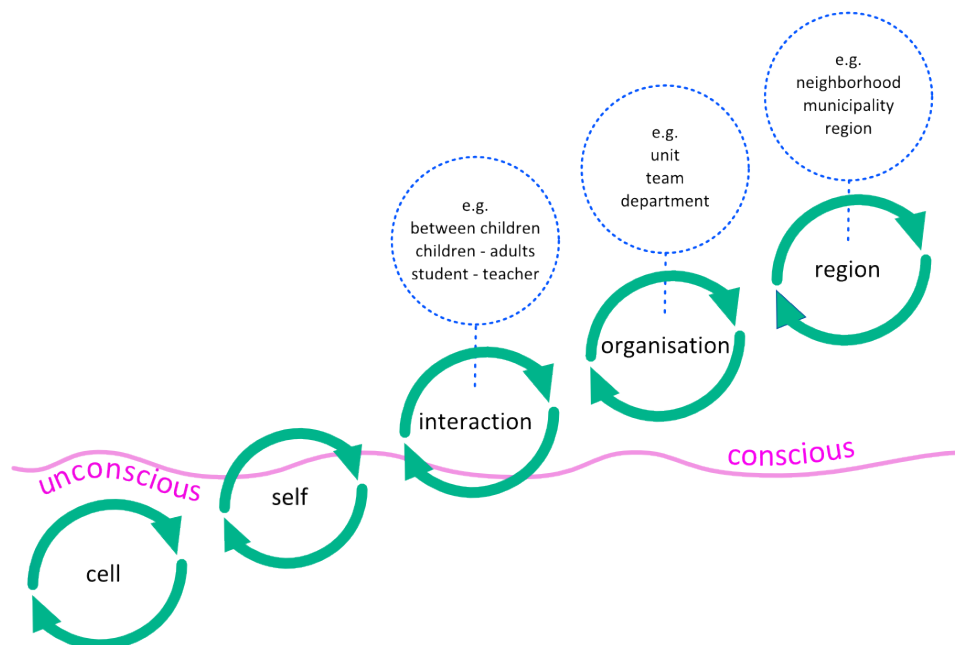
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How Feedback Can Strengthen Competent Partnerships Between Generations: An Example from Youth Policy in the Netherlands

By Erik Jan de Wilde & Shanti George



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

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

2. Adopting nature as our guide

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

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

3. Feedback within the school system

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

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

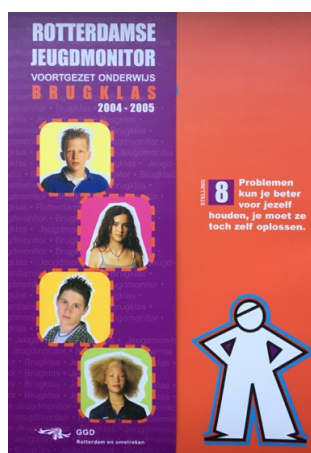
Other authors (such as Harris et al., 2015) have argued that some forms of self-feedback work positively. Such analyses buttress our suggestion that children and young people should be protagonists in feedback systems around their own development and progress, not merely the objects of adult judgement,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

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

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

4. The Rotterdam Youth Monitor

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

6. Authors



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



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

7. Dedication

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

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