

# Learning for Well-being Magazine ④

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## Learning for Freedom and Well-being: Reflections About Unfolding our Unique Potential

By Alberto Paganini & Els Laenens

### Alberto's story

#### School frustration and longing for freedom and well-being

On 7 April 1974 my long and beautiful journey in the uplifting fields of learning for freedom and well-being began. We were celebrating my 17<sup>th</sup> Birthday in Bolzano, a beautiful city surrounded by mountains in the north of Italy. A 'crazy' and hopeful idea filled the minds of most of the students of our class at the high school for science. We were 23 young, intelligent, vital, creative and courageous students, struggling between the joy of having vibrant interests and wanting to discover our highest potential, and old school structures which suffocated our creativity and joy in learning. Liberation from old paradigms and imposed school learning became a necessity for us. It was a kind of last hope of being and becoming ourselves, in a world that demanded we betray our deepest self, aspirations and dreams.

On a week-long school trip in the beautiful Dolomite mountains we experienced the uplifting power of being in harmony in a sincere and open community with nature. We discovered common interests, beautiful dreams, projects hidden in our hearts and a deep interest in learning how to live in harmony with each other and with nature. We shared with each other our aspirations for living in a just, healthy and happy world, whose goal would be the development of the human potential of each of us with respect and love for the resources of nature.

For me it was a revelation to learn that none of us were happy with the way we lived and learned at school.

Learning for Freedom and Well-being:  
Reflections About Unfolding our Unique Potential

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'Why wait until after the diploma to be free? Why wait to be an adult to be myself? Why not here and now? We have to be at school so why not learn about what really interests us, like the deep meaning of our life and how to co-create our happiness and freedom in a beautiful world? Why not take our sources of inspiration, wisdom and consciousness from history, religion, poetry, arts, philosophy and science instead of from boring subjects that more or less unhappy teachers try to instil in our brains? Mankind's development is full of people who looked for liberation and happiness, who realised the meaning of life, and broke deep-rooted and restricting rules. Why are the needs, dreams, feelings and aspiration of all the beautiful young students suppressed at school? Is school not meant to be there for our development and inner growth?'

For the next two hours we discussed how we would like to be and how we would learn from this moment on. We came up with some wonderful ideas. We would stay in the circle and with open hearts we would invite teachers to collaborate with us in our experiment. Students would work in groups, according to their interest and attitudes: they would research on the chosen subjects, with or without the help of teachers, and would report the result of their work to the rest of the class in creative ways. We would cover the year's curriculum, but in a nice and creative way. School is not meant to make us suffer but to enjoy learning: this was one of our mottoes.

The teachers were divided, some followed our ideas with enthusiasm; others vigorously tried to restore 'order'. We studied more intensely than ever before: cooperation instead of competition, loving relations, interdisciplinary research, open minds, open hearts and fresh eyes opened up infinite sources of inspiration and joy in our learning. We were invited for interviews and conferences to present our work and ideas. We became famous and respected all over Italy, becoming widely known as IV C, and we grew enormously as individuals and as a group in those days. Our parents, after their initial doubts, helped us, and so too did the students, workers and most teachers of the school.

From then on, each one of us has been motivated to look for his or her unique way in life. We still meet each other occasionally and we value this time as a precious milestone in our life.

## Els' story

IV C is a living example of the following quote by Peter Senge (Senge, 2006). 'We all know that the education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century must change profoundly from the education of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This requires space for innovation, not just pressures for performance. Young people are acutely aware of this. They know they need to grow up as citizens of the world. [...] And, the young people are eager to be part of this. The real question is, "Are we?"'

### Different levels of education

Alberto's story beautifully illustrates the different levels of education as distinguished by MIT action researchers Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer within the framework of theory U (Scharmer, 2009; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013). The old way of educating is found in Education

1.0 which is input-centred, authority-centred and teacher-driven, and in Education 2.0 which is outcome-centred and testing-driven. Education 3.0 is student-centred and learning-driven, where teachers turn into study coaches. In Education 4.0 learners get opportunities to realise their highest potential and access their authentic sources of creativity, knowing and entrepreneurship. IV C were not given this opportunity, but they co-created it. They sensed the need for new learning environments and no longer wished to allow the old paradigms of education to dominate their learning.

### My childhood education

My parents really wanted their very best for me. And they succeeded in their goal: I became **their** very best although I often felt that I wanted to become **my** very best. I tried at least eight times to bring about a major correction or change in my educational journey in an attempt to bring it more in line with my learning desires. But they considered themselves as the authority (Education 1.0) and the experts (Education 2.0): 'we are adults and teachers, you are only a child, we know what is best for you, therefore we decide for you.' It was so clear to them that this was for my own best interest, but I remember my frustration as a child when I wanted to learn something and was not allowed to or when I heard for the umpteenth time 'that's for later, you are too young for that.'

During our secondary education my peers and I received a brilliant scientific education from the best teachers in all subjects in order to be well prepared for the most difficult studies at university. Besides school, I was part of an intensive national training programme for talented young tennis players. But I fell ill – glandular fever with complications – so I had to stop playing tennis and missed most of the last year of school, which was indispensable for studying mathematics at university, according to my teachers and the system. My doctor gave me the status of 'tourist' at school, meaning that I could decide for myself, whether or not to go and when to arrive and leave. I found this freedom very enjoyable after 13 years of strict school timetables. My teachers saw two options: either I would repeat the year, or I would go to university unprepared, knowing that I would have to repeat the first year of mathematics. I chose the second option. To their surprise, I passed all the exams at the end of my 'tourist' year and passed my first year university exams – one of only four out of 84 who succeeded in the first year examinations. How was that possible? Maybe my year as a tourist was the key to success. It gave me time to breathe, relax, reflect and study without any imposed tasks or pressure. I was given a holding space in which I could meet myself.

### Our children's education

When I was pregnant I started reading about different educational approaches to prepare myself to make a conscious school and education choice. In Waldorf education, we found more than we were looking for, an education firmly rooted in an inspiring philosophy of human development. This is the education we wanted for our children, both at home and at school. The work of the educator and social innovator Rudolf Steiner has inspired our parenting ever since.

With full confidence in our choice, we sent our son Beniamino to the local Waldorf school. However, at the age of 11 in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, he gave us several wake-up calls. First, he was an

unhappy child after school and when he said ‘for you it is easy to be always kind and loving, but you always send me to that gang at school ...,’ we understood that he perceived his environment at school as not very favourable. The second was that he and his peers did extremely badly at a math and language test designed for 4<sup>th</sup> graders organised by an external centre for student support. We started looking at Beniamino’s school situation with fresh eyes and saw that his teacher was applying an Education 1.0 approach while claiming to follow Education 3.0. Moreover, the relationships in the class were very poor. Together with the anthroposophical<sup>1</sup> school medical doctor we decided that Beniamino should not stay any longer in this socially sick environment. He needed a different environment to develop and flourish. The solution we found was to let him stay at home for the last 3 months of the school year and then let him join the 7<sup>th</sup> grade with a different teacher and other peers, after the summer holiday. Beniamino was so happy to hear this – a weight was lifted from his shoulders. The three months at home turned out to be the first episode of his self-schooling journey. Studying at home was fun and efficient, and there was plenty of time for his ‘projects’ and for play. He started to bloom again. He evolved from a bad student in 5<sup>th</sup> grade to an excellent 7<sup>th</sup> grader in 3 months of following his own learning path instead of 13 months of school – a fascinating and inspiring experience for all of us. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, he grew in confidence in a good social atmosphere. But near the end of the school year, our next wake-up call came. ‘Mum and Dad, if you don’t mind that by the time I am 18 and finish school, I will not be capable of doing many things, then you just have to continue letting me go to school’. He wanted and needed plenty of time for his musical development and several attempts to find a solution at school had failed.

What he missed so desperately at school was someone who was interested in him as a person, someone who would take his learning wishes into account (Education 3.0 and 4.0) and who would aim for the highest future possibilities. We were faced with the huge gap between our experience with this Waldorf school and our ideal, the original Waldorf intention, as described in Steiner’s work (Education 4.0-driven).

With no other Waldorf school in the neighbourhood, we decided to take Beniamino out of school. Our home schooling became home self-education in the Steiner sense. ‘Essentially, there is no education other than self-education, whatever the level may be. Every education is self-education, and as teachers we can only provide the environment for children’s self-education. We have to provide the most favourable conditions where, through our agency, children can educate themselves according to their own destinies.’ (Steiner, 1996), and ‘Where is the book in which the teacher can read about what teaching is? The children themselves are this book. We should not learn to teach out of any book other than the one lying open before us and consisting of the children themselves.’ (Steiner, 2004). In a materialistic approach, a young child is considered to be an empty book, so Education 1.0 and 2.0 are the natural choices to make. But there is another approach to education, considering children as The Book for their education brings us to Education 3.0 and 4.0. We need to ‘read’ the children with an open curious mind, a compassionate heart and a courageous will, to find out that their book is not empty at all and that it helps us to help

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<sup>1</sup> Anthroposophic medicine is an integrative approach to medicine developed by Rudolph Steiner in the 1920s. For more information see: <http://www.anthroposophy.org.uk/pages/medicine.php>

them. They are our guides in our educational tasks. As a parent, I experience myself as a student of my children; as a professor, as a student of my university students. In Education 3.0 and 4.0 we all become teachers and learners of one another.

When our daughter, Chiara, informed us – halfway through 5<sup>th</sup> grade – that she preferred not to go to school anymore, the decision to allow her to follow a personalised learning path, as her brother did, was easier to make. We had noticed that she had started to lose herself at school and that she needed more and more time after school to reconnect. Just like Beniamino, Chiara is an enthusiastic self-schooler. Yet their approaches are completely different as illustrated below.

Children need educators who create spaces for their learning and development in which they can follow their own paths. Below we give you a flavour of the personalised learning environments of our kids – both during their years at school and during self-schooling – It is worth noting that in the formal school system they each had teachers (both at school and art school) who attempted to develop in them ‘better’ ideas: Beniamino was required to learn to listen to music rather than play it and Chiara was told to drop her dreams of creating a musical because they were not feasible and far too challenging for a 15-year old. In contrast to these Education 1.0 and 2.0 reactions, Education 4.0 treasures such co-created environments, allowing for the integrated development of intellectual intelligence, emotional intelligence and spiritual intelligence, and resulting in a remarkable enthusiasm for learning. They even show great interest and a lively study approach to the subjects imposed by the Flemish Examination Commission for those who want to obtain a high school degree.

### Beniamino and his Baroque music

For his 12<sup>th</sup> birthday party, Beniamino’s friends from the music academy brought their instruments with them. After each gave a short performance, they continued playing and exploring music together; when they started playing *Pachelbel’s canon*, the field in the room shifted. Their concentration and enthusiasm grew when they started to realise – to their surprise – ‘wow, we can play this all by ourselves!’ After this experience, Beniamino developed the idea of performing Christmas concerts in baroque style with a group of children. He ‘founded’ his ensemble and choir Musica Gloria and motivated peers to join. He had been directing the best orchestras on cd in our living room for years, but directing a group of children with limited musical experience – some of them older than himself – turned out to be a very challenging learning experience for a 12-15-year old, especially because he did not want to direct with a baton, but to conduct while he himself played the harpsichord, the organ, the flute or the recorder. After school the children of Musica Gloria rehearsed in our living room, singing and playing the harpsichord, violin, cello, contrabass, harp, flute, recorder and oboe. In addition, Beniamino created flyers, posters, programmes including songs for the audience to sing along to, and a presentation of the Christmas story linking all the music in their programme. With their baroque music, singing, story-telling and theatre, the members of Musica Gloria created an exceptionally warm, intimate and wonderful atmosphere which, to their great delight touched the audience deeply. They performed this concert for four consecutive years and received a very enthusiastic reception from the 200–300 people in the audience – mostly families with children. The adults were

astonished at what a group of young children was able to co-create. This is an example of what Alberto and I have seen happen when children are supported in taking leadership of their own learning – becoming entrepreneurs in their self-education journeys.

### Chiara taking care of, and teaching little friends

Chiara has always loved taking care of little children. Children love to be with her. When she was 7, a friend of ours asked her to help with her toddler and newborn baby. With the baby on her lap, Chiara played with the toddler. The parents and I were amazed at how naturally she could create a happy and secure environment in which children (and parents) got what they needed: peaceful play, food, drinks and loads of loving care. Aged 9 she prepared herself when going to play with little friends by filling a bag with materials for age-appropriate activities that she had found in my books on Waldorf education. She always seemed to know how to create an atmosphere in which she and the children could thrive. Parents told us that she had given them inspiration for the healthy education of their children.

After a year of self-schooling, Chiara started talking about creating a children's choir with friends. Shortly after, her former Waldorf teacher, asked her to help with the weekly choir lessons in her second grade. For three years, Chiara led the weekly choir lessons in grades 2 to 4, together with the teacher. When she was 13, she wanted to create a children's yoga week during Alberto's yoga week. Every day she organised a 3-hour children's yoga session with story-telling, music and play. Chiara finds teaching opportunities wherever she goes. She has been enjoying giving lessons to young friends in lyre, recorder, piano, violin, music theory and yoga.

Her most challenging project emerged last September when she started planning a performance of the *Wizard of Oz*. Chiara involved two mothers and two elementary school children in the Theory U case clinic methodology – a practice in which a group of people opens up at all levels around an issue, observes with open minds, looks at it with fresh eyes, senses from the field and allows the highest future possibility to emerge. As a consequence, Chiara's performance has become the project of a local school community, grades 1-6. She has been making detailed plans for the scripts, the music, the songs and the play. The teachers and the children are creating the set; parents are taking care of the costumes. For the first rehearsal period, Chiara was invited to work at school with the children every afternoon for 3 weeks, preparing for the big performance in October 2017 in the theatre hall.

### Concluding remarks

We have experienced over and over again that all adults – including Alberto and myself – who witnessed Beniamino's and Chiara's self-education stories are flabbergasted by what all these kids – their friends also – did, how they did it, and how it emerged from within themselves. I remember friends telling me 'This kind of education works for Beniamino because he is such a special child, but it obviously will not work for Chiara who is very different'. Now that it also works for Chiara, they say 'It works for your children, but they are exceptions. It wouldn't work for other children.' Fortunately, our children made me realise



that university students also need space for self-education in order to flourish. And indeed, providing them with learning environments focused on self-education, turned out to make a major difference to their motivation, self-regulation and sense of well-being (Laenens, Stes, Hofkens, Vandervieren, & Van Petegem, 2016; Laenens, Vandervieren, Hofkens, Stes, & Van Petegem, 2017). Did it work for all of them? No, it did not. And for those students, the major obstacles seemed to be their educational past or a wrong study choice, As Einstein said: 'The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education.' and 'Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.'

From my experiments, experiences and research – at home, school and university – I came to understand that more freedom (in the curriculum, in learning outcomes, in school timetables), less external pressure and a transformed (Education 4.0) relationship between learners and teachers, improves learning and student well-being, and that the sooner a child can learn in such learning environments, the better for their development. Yes, we still need Education 1.0, 2.0 and 3.0, but not as dominating paradigms, an Education 4.0 teacher or educator will sense at any moment and in any situation which of these are to be applied for the highest or best future possibility of all involved.

## Authors

Prof. Dr Els Laenens is a mathematician, computer scientist and educator. She is a senior lecturer at the University of Antwerp (department of Mathematics and Computer Science), cloud coordinator of EAPRIL (European Association for Practitioner Research on Improving Learning), and vice-chairperson of CNO, Centre for continuing professional teacher development, Antwerp School of Education. Her main interests include improving learning and individual, collective and global well-being through profound innovation in education in a way that allows every human being to genuinely connect to their own sources of humanity and creativity.

Alberto Paganini is 'Dottore in Filosofia' with the maximum of points at the University of Siena. He started studying and teaching yoga when he was a student. He has continued to deepen his knowledge of yoga over the last 38 years and has studied with many teachers and masters all over the world.

He is the founder of Yoga Soma and Soma Yoga Teacher Training. He is the author of the book *Prana Yoga Flow* and writes for different Yoga Magazines. He lives with his family in Bruges (Belgium).

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