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Editorial: Meaning and Purpose in All Our Endeavours

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Introducing the theme

'Potential' is a rather over-used and under-defined term, particularly in educational systems where national and supra-national policies commonly talk about enabling children to 'reach their potential' or their 'full potential,' with the meaning often left hanging. In many cases, the implementation of the policies anyway goes against the expressed intentions or may even be an indirect way of justifying streaming or other mechanisms for 'sorting' children. The collection of articles that we have brought together in Issue 4 of this magazine illustrate, individually and collectively, the links between the notion of 'potential' and the vibrant energy and motivation that comes from the feeling that one has a sense of direction and purpose.

Mamphela Ramphele — South African political activist, academic and doctor — considers the unique assets of each child as essential to learning, to the process of finding meaning and purpose in one's life and environment, and to understanding how best we 'learn how to be human in a world that's changing' (Ramphele 2015). Learning for Well-being (L4WB) describes 'unique potential' as the vital energy and qualities that provide meaning, purpose and direction to an individual's life. We explore this in Issue 4 along with authors living and working in very different situations and settings whom we have invited to contribute. Their articles together illustrate some different ways in which the unfolding of each person's unique potential encourages self-discovery towards the expression of particular gifts and contributions, what L4WB and Scherto Gill in her article here call 'flourishing.'

By highlighting the importance of going through life with meaning and purpose, we give priority to processes that contribute to the well-being of individuals as well as whole communities and societies. In one of the two Viewpoints that opens this collection of articles, Linda O'Toole argues persuasively that a strong sense of self can enhance rather

than undermine a strong sense of connectedness to others. Scherto Gill suggests that authentic energy comes from the intersection of individual and collective potential, referring to the pulsing energy and qualities that provide meaning and direction to individual and collective life. Aviva Gold's article in this Issue draws resonantly on Ubuntu philosophy from South Africa to emphasize that it is only through our engagement with other persons that each of us becomes a full person.

Key to nurturing young people's unique potential is the development of holistic processes that take account of all aspects of children's lives - what the Italian educator Loris Malaguzzi called the 'hundred languages' of childhood, framing an image of the child as 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and connected to adults' (Moss in Cameron & Moss 2011). Agnetha Birgersson's contribution to this Issue provides a beguiling account of how parents can support children on the basis of such an image.

We now live in societies whose underpinning philosophies and history have created governance and institutions that often produce and reproduce fragmentation at multiple levels. This concern provides the background to the collection of essays titled *The Connected School; a design for Well-being*, edited by Colleen McLaughlin (McLaughlin 2015). In one essay, Colleen McLaughlin and John Gray report that school connectedness has emerged as a positive influence on young people's well-being where it describes a 'linked group of activities and experiences, including relationships between peers and with teachers, levels of pupil satisfaction with school experience and feelings of membership and belonging to the learning community of the school and the classroom. It is about making a valued contribution, which, in turn, can develop a sense of agency. Pupils who feel valued, connected to school and cared for by people at school have a higher degree of well-being' (McLaughlin & Gray 2015).

That schools can aspire to such connectedness is well illustrated by the short films of inspiring teachers and school leaders that bring to life the piece by Hartger Wassink and Shanti George in this issue, with a counterpoint provided in the article by Alberto Paganini and Els Laenens on the lack of connection that children can experience in current educational systems. Maaïke Nap's contribution reflects – from a teacher educator's viewpoint – on how connections are established when a teacher is wholly present in the classroom, relating to each pupil as a whole person. Meg Freeling's article describes how in her writing classes she encourages her students to think about what it means to be a human being, beyond the specific activities.

How do we ensure that the spark of unique potential burns bright, unextinguished, through the long adult years that follow formal education? Aviva Gold presents art, in her contribution to this Issue, as profoundly revelatory and potentially transformative; a deep and joyful experience that allows us to seek out what truly motivates and moves us in our lives. Szymon Brzoska's piece eloquently evokes his personal experience of music as life spark. In a striking contrast, Yakarah Attias-Rosen recounts compellingly how the sense of discovery is rekindled through shared expeditions by groups of women – who are relative strangers – to participate in extreme sport in unknown terrain.

The common thread linking the articles in this issue can also be found in some contributions to Issue 3 around the theme of 'Engaged participation', as when Carolyn Conway and her colleagues wrote about providing highly disengaged young people with opportunities to be active citizens that then stimulated them with the energy to reach out to others in more difficult circumstances than their own. This common thread concerns the engagement of individuals that strikes deep inner chords and that mobilizes their energies towards those activities and ways of being that give them profound pleasure and satisfaction — and above all, feelings of mutual worth and mutual esteem, of being connected to the world around and of contributing something worthwhile.

The articles

Two 'Viewpoints' open this Issue, beginning with an overture by Polish composer Szymon Brzóska that is entitled 'Meaning and Purpose of Music Throughout my Life.' From his childhood onwards, he writes: 'There is no other world that I'd rather be in than the world of sounds.' The meaning he draws as a listener ranges across the emotional, aesthetic, philosophical and transcendental registers, with a shift when his professional purpose is to perform and compose. Readers are privileged to share in one of his early experiences of transforming the emotions of the moment into a short piece of music and in this way to share also the 'epiphany and bliss' when Szymon realizes his unique potential for transmuting life into creative sound.

After this overture, in her Viewpoint entitled 'An Insufficiency of "I",' Linda O'Toole addresses an aspect of learning that she thinks is too often ignored: cultivating an individual sense of self. She considers that discovering and expressing one's unique potential is a critical factor in how we learn, relate and work together. Though frequently the concepts of individualism and interdependency are experienced in opposition to one another, her view is that there is not a simple choice between valuing the group vs. emphasizing individual consciousness. Instead, our individual and collective well-being requires a balance of the needs of both individuals and the group – not privileging or giving undue weight to one or the other. In fact, an insufficient awareness of each individual's distinctive meaning and purpose in life significantly reduces the effective contributions to the group.

Philosophical perspectives on individual and human potential are taken further in the first article by Scherto Gill, 'Cultivating Human Potential – Towards Flourishing of All'. Individual and collective human potentials depend upon and enrich each other, she argues, with each person's unique potential best achieved by engaging in joint endeavours. All attempts that support our personal growth will therefore equally enhance our human system, together facilitating and expanding social transformation. In the example provided of the work of the Spirit of Humanity (SoH) Forum, it is posited that where individual and collective potential intersect, authentic energy will be generated and a space created that engenders peace, justice and flourishing as the basis of wholeness, values and relationships. This spiritual nature of our life can be shared in safe spaces of dialogue and contemplation in order to further inspire individuals to pursue lives of integrity that are based on the right relationships with oneself and with the greater unity to which we all belong.

The following four articles avail of different entry points that illuminate the quest for meaning and purpose in education, given that schools are where individuals meet within a collective setting from early on in life.

How high school students in an English class in a US college explored their own sense of purpose – through a sequence of experiential writing exercises that ended with each student starting a small business – is the fascinating subject of Meg Freeling’s article ‘Doing Your “Bit” - Because You Can; English Composition Meets Accounting.’ Activities were organized as springboards to address such questions as ‘What does it mean to be a human being?’ and ‘How do I find my “bit” to do in life?’ Practical experience with accounting enriched the learning process when English composition was expanded to include a self-created business enterprise that responded to a wider need, and in this way moved the students from abstractions to action. Their writing became grounded in new meanings through processes of creating a business, exchange and book keeping, that in turn generated fresh responses and new lines of thought.

The next two articles are rooted in the Unfolding symposium organized in the Netherlands by NIVOZ and the Learning for Well-being Foundation in February 2017. Hartger Wassink and Shanti George, who were centrally involved in the design and organization of the conference, take a step back to reflect on the deep purpose of this symposium and its messages for educational systems. In their article ‘Enabling Human Potential to Unfold Within School Environments: Education as Dialogue and Narrative at Multiple Levels,’ they describe how the symposium approached sensitive subjects innovatively, through dialogue rather than debate and they highlight the strengths of dialogue. The valuable narratives that can emerge from dialogue are illustrated by the short films of inspiring everyday practice within schools that led each session of the symposium and that demonstrate how a nurturing school can enable every child to seek her or his life purpose and meaning within clusters of mutually supportive relationships. We highly recommend that readers watch these short films that are rich in reflection and that exemplify what can be done.

A second article has grown out of one of the films from the Unfolding symposium: it is by Maaïke Nap who is an experienced teacher educator from the Netherlands and her article is titled ‘What Lies at the Heart of Teacher Education? Boxes Within Boxes, Worlds Within Worlds, Seeing and Being Seen.’ How can trainee teachers find such rich meaning and purpose in their experience of teacher education that they are moved and enabled to support their pupils through similar processes of inner development? The author’s reflections on this question are illustrated by exercises that she uses to increase trainee teachers’ sensitivity to pupils. Her own story is one of unfolding purpose from childhood onwards to be a teacher (undeterred by the arid pedagogy of her own years as a schoolchild), a purpose that was rewardingly achieved and taken further in her current position as teacher educator.

What if certain children find that school undermines their learning instead of nurturing it? Among the articles in this Issue that focus on education, the final one – ‘Learning for Freedom and Well-being; Reflections About Unfolding our Unique Potential’ by Alberto Paganini and Els Laenens – answers this difficult question by advocating the steps taken by

their two children when they found the school curriculum at odds with their own learning trajectories. The authors/ parents describe their own personal educational journeys from a generation earlier as background and context for the personal educational journeys undertaken by their children. Self-schooling, projects that motivated the children, sufficiently challenging learning environments at home – these were some of the creative responses whereby the parents supported their children in their choices to find meaning and purpose related to their personal learning paths, outside conventional schooling.

Following on from the article just described where home became school, the article by Agnetha Stagling Birgersson – ‘Giving a Space for Me to be Me – Parenting with Intention’ – focuses on the invaluable space that the home provides for powerful and fundamental learning about the inner self within the intimate relationship of parent and child. The emphasis is on mutual learning and especially on the opportunities for personal development among parents through connection with oneself as well as with one’s child. ‘Intentional parenting’ denotes meaning and purpose for both child and parent, as they develop in synergy. Using as an example a situation that would constitute a nightmare for parents with mischievous children (i.e. most parents), the article offers steps to respond to such a situation in ways that combine practical use with reflective depth.

This Issue is rounded off with two articles that go beyond school and home to illuminate continuing meaning and purpose in adult lives, by turning the spotlight onto adventure travel and transformational art.

‘Queen of the Desert – a Journey’ by Yakarah Attias-Rosen describes — in an appropriately lively and energetic tone — her first-hand experience of the ‘women empowerment trips’ organized by the Queen of the Desert organisation. These are challenging journeys that often stimulate the women who undertake them to explore their inner selves as well as the new landscape around and to search for the special qualities that each one can contribute to the group. Participants embark on a difficult journey that calls for much energy and commitment, yet with very little prior information. The excitement and pleasure of building trust within the group and of challenging oneself through encounters with the other relatively unknown members of the group as well as with local women in the country visited, amidst the demanding physical activities of extreme sport, together engender a parallel internal adventure of self-discovery.

The final article ‘Answering the Call: The Role of Transformational Art Processes’ by Aviva Gold presents art in all its manifestations as potent magic available to humankind for spiritual revelation and healing, as well as a universal language to open the heart. Aviva’s life-long creative work ‘Painting From The Source[®]’ involves spontaneous and intuitive expression through painting enhanced by the additional dimensions of sound, movement and poetry, drawing widely on ancient tribal traditions as well as on theories such as Jung’s Individuation. Readers can glimpse an experience that has enlivened and transformed many lives and are invited to paint – either alone or with others, whether with earlier experience or not – in the knowledge that engaging in transformational art can render us aware of what excites us and what makes us feel more fully alive.

Enjoy reading this collection of articles illustrated by photos, paintings, a piece of music and several short films!

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