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Competent Systems

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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 principles [2] 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?

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[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.

References

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