What Contributes to Education Systems Being Nurturing for All Children?

By Jean Gordon

1. Introduction

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 is this happening on the ground? For the Learning for Well-being Community Day in April 2018, the Learning for Well-being Foundation decided to commission a paper (Gordon and Ionescu, 2018) to provide context for discussions on how EU policy is evolving in ECEC and school education. This article is a contribution to the follow-up to that first phase (see Editorial of this issue).

Whatever we do, children nevertheless experience their lives as a whole. As Eurochild has said, children don't grow up in silos, despite the best attempts by many authorities to address just the problem for which their office has a responsibility (and funds to do it). Children as 'whole' individuals somehow get lost in complex systems, but so do their parents/carers and their teachers and early childhood professionals. In the field of early childhood there are examples in some European countries of creating spaces for families where all their needs can be dealt with in an integrated manner. Once children move into compulsory education the examples decrease. Schools work with doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, etc. but the latter's possibilities of working closely with schools promoting health and well-being (rather than dealing with problems when they occur) is affected by current debates about what to prioritize amongst competing agendas.

Education systems are complex and continually under development. They address a very wide age range and have to respond to very different needs: socialization, personal development, preparation for citizenship (now and in the future), their professional future and of course developing knowledge and competence. Changes whether small or substantial are frequent, but at the same time there is a perception that education systems

are too slow to change. There is frequently an incompatibility between the 'political' timetable of elections, changing governments and priority agendas and the need to take time to understand how best to address major issues, identify shared understanding and goals and identify implementation strategies that everyone agrees to.

These brief observations led the Learning for Well-being Foundation to ask whether our Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and education systems contain the policy proposals or guiding principles for working towards systems that are competent to nurture all children from birth to 18, and function in an integrated way across institutions, levels and sectors. Within that questioning, how can the principles developed by the Foundation make a contribution?

When we wrote the paper for the Community Day in April 2018 our focus for schools was on the European Commission's Working Group on Schools 2016-2018 (see article by Hannah Grainger-Clemson in this issue). For this article I wanted to turn the initial question on its head to reflect on some of the factors that may contribute to education systems being nurturing for all children. To what extent can the L4WB principles contribute to developing a vision or overarching goals for childhood that include ECEC, health, social services, youth policy, cultural, etc. as well as school education?

2. Nurturing all children

Over the last decade or so (learner) agency has become a more prominent factor in education research and practice, but perhaps less so in policy. Why is it important in nurturing children's development? Participation is fundamentally about democracy in practice and as such is enshrined in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In article 12, the latter unequivocally states that: 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'

Participation in learning (and other) activities and having some control over your own life in the context where you live necessarily links you to other people and requires you to develop skills and capacities for making decisions about your life and understanding how those decisions relate to others and the environment (Gordon, 2018). That suggests that paying attention to the quality of relationships will be another factor in building systems that nurture children's development. These relationships interact within the diversity of the children/people involved. Each of these three elements is dealt with in more detail below.

2.1 Agency: participation and voice

A recent issue of the European Journal of Education on Learner Agency at the Confluence between Rights-based Approaches and Well-being brought together perspectives that took account of the articulation of agency with the increasing visibility in the education sphere of child and human rights; and an increased focus on well-being as an important and valid aim for human and social development (Gordon, 2018). Colleen McLaughlin (2018) argues the important role schools should play in enabling children to develop their sense of agency,

flourishing and self-efficacy (McLaughlin, 2018). The experience of being listened to, of experiencing that one has a voice and can act as a valued citizen is important for personal development and in addressing the major global challenges towards social and ecological transformation (Gordon, 2018) 'Democratic convictions thrive on experience. Nothing will contribute more to the stability of democratic ways of life and institutions than the commitment of the young generation rooted in the experience of active participation and empowerment.' (Edelstein, 2011).

'If children are to be able to express their views, it is necessary for adults to create the opportunities for children to do so' (Lansdown, 2001). Furthermore, there is no lower age limit imposed on the exercise of the right to participate. Very young children are capable of both holding and expressing views, as long as appropriate forms of expression are used (Lansdown, 2005). In their article in the issue of EJE referred to above, Ferre Laevers and Bart Declerq present the experiential approach to education especially for very young children in early childhood settings, who cannot directly voice their concerns and wishes. 'Its underlying assumption was that if we could not expect babies and toddlers to tell us how happy they were with the educational arrangement we offered, it was our role to check in a systematic way how each child was experiencing "being in an early childhood setting."' (Laevers and Bart, 2018). Through structured screening and observation, the Leuven Experiential Education project takes the perspective of the children into account to try to understand how the pedagogical environment can be optimized. In another article Jeroen Bron, Norman Emerson and Lucia Kákonyi share insights from an Erasmus Plus project – the BRIDGE project (2016–2019) in which student voice is the central purpose. In the five countries involved in the project, collaborative learning at policy, school and classroom levels is encouraged and it seeks to enhance student voice by encouraging relationships based on trust, openness and engagement. Tools for use in the classroom are being developed to support students in expressing themselves in different situations. In the Netherlands tools for communicating, cooperating and negotiating in small groups and class groups were developed based on the argument that young people are entitled to the right to have a voice in matters that affect them, including the curriculum. For the authors it illustrates that 'students develop democratic qualities by participating in curriculum negotiations' (Bron, Emerson and Kákonyi, 2018).

The EU Commission Working Group on Schools reports acknowledge that learner voice is a fundamental right set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and emphasizes that it is a prerequisite for creating a school culture where the learners feel valued and able to give their opinion and make a difference. Making this possible entails both the willingness of the adults to share responsibilities, suitable infrastructures as well as monitoring of learner participation. While all learners need to be supported in order to be able to participate with confidence, those in more vulnerable or marginalized situations will need more support to ensure that their voices are heard too. This is not an easy step for teachers and school leaders who have been educated and trained in systems that do not prioritize students' participation whether in the classroom or across other school activities and who need support to develop the practices and tools to do it with confidence through in-service training, team working in schools and networking across schools (European Commission, 2018).

Reminding us that the purpose of education is to enhance well-being and that schools can play a major role in creating agency, Colleen McLaughlin contends that taking agency seriously would entail integrating it into all aspects of education in a coherent manner (McLaughlin, 2018). It is clear from the Working Group reports that this is neither common nor easy. Michael Fielding in his typology, Patterns of Partnership has suggested six forms of interaction between young people and adults with a school. One of them is 'intergenerational learning as lived democracy' with a shared commitment and responsibility for the common good entailing receptivity and mutual attentiveness (Fielding, 2016). This last point leads us to the next consideration – relationships.

2.2 Relationships

As Jon Vogen points out the effects of technological growth, mobility, the desire for economic prosperity and societal well-being have led to increased interdependence but also complexity in our interactions with each other (Vogen, 2016). He underlines the importance of making conscious choices to move along the spectrum from transactional relationships to the more generative, the first being more focused on producing specific outcomes whereas 'Generative relationships on the other hand are based on interactions that shift the fundamental nature of the relationship and can lead to enhanced levels of engagement, learning, collaboration and growth. These interactions build capacity and provide a different value as a result of the engagement' (Vogen, 2016). The currently prevalent approach to education with its dominant values of cognition, competition, calculation of best returns on investment, commodification and individual consumer choice (Fielding and Moss, 2012) are at the transactional end of the spectrum in terms of relationships, and are unlikely to support a holistic process focusing on the whole child.

Similar issues are inherent in the relationships within the health system between patients and care providers. A recent study carried out in France of women living with HIV/AIDS raised issues about the quality of communication between the patients and their care providers; the former did not feel listened to, or that they were being offered adequate support, which was detrimental to how they lived with their illness (Guiguet, 2016). In the domain of non-formal learning, three projects in the UK (HERO, BREAKOUT and LINKS-UP) addressed the issues posed for another group in a very vulnerable situation – young offenders – moving right away from 'current' notions of caring as the inculcation of prescribed norms, values and behaviours based on 'normalization' and 'responsibilization', and replaced these with caring regimes that were founded on 'co-produced knowledge' where the young people were actively working in collaboration with the research team in developing 'caring interventions' (Cullen, 2016). While the researchers identify outcomes as variable, the young people reported positive benefits in terms of their personal self-development, technical skills, team working, and communication skills and in improved awareness of the issues around offending and the consequences of offending (Cullen, 2016). These examples illustrate both the negative effects of relationships that remain too transactional and the positive effects of engaging in caring relationships in a situation where the typical approach has been one of normalizing behaviours.

Coming back to formal education, the school's culture, policies, practices, curriculum, pedagogy and relationships all contribute in a synergetic way to the development of

students' social and emotional learning and well-being and teachers need to be supported in their role as caring educators (Cefai and Cavioni, 2016). This should include training about teaching social and emotional learning in the classroom, fundamental to the quality of relationships, but the support of the administration, staff engagement and collegiality, as well as school-home relations are also critical (Cefai and Cavioni, 2016). Research demonstrates the connections between emotion, social functioning and decision-making with recent findings underscoring the critical role of emotion in bringing previously acquired knowledge to inform real-world decision-making in social contexts. Emotional processes are required for the skills and knowledge acquired in school to transfer to novel situations and real life. (Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2007). This suggests that relationships (because emotional and social interactions cannot exist outside of them) play a role in learning.

The DG Education Working Group on Schools reports also emphasize the quality of the learning environment including those that nourish learners' social and emotional well-being within the school as well as their creative, cultural and civic opportunities outside school, and addressing issues of violence (bullying) in an inclusive way.

Coming back to The Patterns of Partnership typology, developed by Michael Fielding, it proposes that the different types of roles enable us to 're-see each other as persons rather than as role occupants and in doing so nurture not only a new understanding, sense of possibility and felt respect between adults and young people, but also a joy in each other's being and a greater sense of shared delight and responsibility.' (Fielding and Moss, 2012). This constitutes a multifaceted engagement between young people and adults based on a dialogic approach, a pedagogy of listening within a more holistic frame of reference (Fielding and Moss, 2012). The current context in which this would be taking place is one of considerable diversity.

2.3 Diversity

Education settings are all dealing with diversity of different types. The more exterior forms are the most commonly referred to: gender, poverty, vulnerable situations, migration, disability, etc. They present substantial challenges to education systems in terms of understanding, mindsets, objectives, resources, etc. Many of these issues, such as poverty and social exclusion are very complex needing multi-agency and multi-sector approaches if root causes are to be addressed effectively (Gordon, Peeters and Vandekerckhove, 2016) In Europe reducing the percentage of early school leaving is a major target of the European Union because it creates huge inequities for young people during their sensitive adolescent years and later in their adult life as difficulties encountered in childhood become major issues affecting not just socioeconomic circumstances and possibilities, but also self-esteem, self-confidence and agency. And we could point to many other issues of equity and inclusion in education and training whether for very young children, children and young people of school age or adults for different reasons.

But when we focus attention on learning, another set of questions comes into the equation. Though diversity as described above is increasingly taken into account in education systems (with greater or lesser success), consideration of 'inner' differences is largely overlooked including by researchers and policymakers concerned with children's well-being, possibly

because of the perceived and real difficulties of structuring such research as well as developing the competences of staff to understand and work with these differences. (Gordon and O'Toole, 2014)

It is significant that the reports of the Working Group on Schools underline the importance of recognizing schools as learning organizations and not just organizations dispensing learning. On the one hand, this means that the values of inclusivity and diversity considered important for learners will also apply to teachers and, on the other hand, that developing team work among teachers will stimulate peer learning building trust and hence quality relationships. This is linked to acknowledging that the learning pathway for each child is an individual one involving their diverse needs and experience, though critically all these pathways must be coordinated at system level. (European Commission, 2018)

While many elements could be classified as inner differences, Learning for Well-being is referring specifically to the unique ways each child learns, communicates, and develops. It is not hard to observe how different people function, communicate and learn differently, in ways that are specific to each of them. We have all observed when starting a new project how different team members need different types and amounts of information at different points in the process, some will need time on their own to process the information, others need to talk it through. We have different senses of pace and time in carrying out a piece of work and will measure our progress in different ways – against the objectives of a plan, in relation to what the group has achieved, in terms of our own priorities, etc. (Gordon and O'Toole, 2014).

The notion that all individuals learn and make sense of their environments is certainly not a new idea but whether teachers have the approaches to deal with it in the classroom situation may depend on many factors – teacher education, space to experiment in the classroom, pressure of testing and accountability. Even though they observe and understand that children learn differently, they often do not know how to teach students who have different ways of learning and all of them at the same time. Their difficulties are further compounded by the perceived challenge of developing child-centred pedagogy with 30 or more children in the classroom, a prescribed curriculum and external assessment systems, lack of support for new teachers, etc. (Gordon and O'Toole, 2014). Understanding how we learn and develop, cultivating the ways in which we communicate and how to nurture relationships are all essential. Allowing students to understand and share their learning process with teachers and other students is part of learner agency by providing opportunities that give students a choice about how they undertake an activity, particularly how they choose to begin and being open and explicit about all options having value. Allowing space and time for reflection both before undertaking a task and when it is complete and encouraging self-assessment, according to the learner's own criteria, allows children to speak about their own approach. It is important for all children in learning settings and elsewhere in their lives to feel recognized for who they are (Gordon and O'Toole, 2014).

3. From learner-centred education to a societal vision of childhood

The economic crisis has raised many questions about what sort of society we want to live in including how to balance the mainstream approach to measuring progress in society through Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with new and more complex measures that take account of more aspects of the individual's and societal well-being. OECD's Better Life Index includes 11 topics including education and health but the indicators taken into account (e.g. for education: years in education, educational attainment and students' skills) do not give us information that constitutes a holistic approach or a 'whole child' perspective.

> 'But there are other stories we can, and have, told ourselves about education, stories that are hopeful about education as an emancipatory project, for flourishing individuals, communities and societies – a narrative of education in its broadest sense.' (Fielding and Moss 2012).

For ASCD, working mainly in the USA, a whole child approach to education will develop and prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of today and tomorrow by addressing students' comprehensive needs through the shared responsibility of students, families, schools, and communities. Their Whole Child approach is an effort to transition from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and success of all children associating education, arts, health, policy and community sectors.

But what is needed for the education sector to have the competence to implement a learner-centred approach to children's education? I will look briefly at two aspects here: they need to be holistic in approach and perspective and have the ability to communicate between different sectors.

Over recent decades much has been written and discussed about 'competence' with the emphasis predominantly on the learner and frontline staff, i.e. teachers and educators and sometimes also on leadership. It is rare for there to be scrutiny of the 'competence' of levels higher up in the system: national policy level, regional or local levels or whether there is a reciprocal relationship between the different levels and an articulation between individual and collective competence. The concept of competent systems was developed in a report on early childhood education and care services for the European Commission in 2011 (Urban *et al.*, 2011). Building competence at all levels in the system improves the likelihood of increasing alignment, convergence, coherence and cohesion within systems and among services. Significantly a competent system should be grounded in values that are translated into knowledge and practice at all levels (see article in this issue by Mihaela Ionescu). This vertical level could be further enhanced by being complemented at the horizontal level through cross-sector working, an area in which the L4WB Foundation can bring a valuable contribution through its work in building a community of organizations and individuals from different fields of work who have an interest in working together towards a shared vision.

Through its work over the last 15 years and with its partners, the Learning for Well-being Foundation has developed a set of principles that underpinned the Community Day discussions in April 2018. They are as follows.

Learning for Well-being principles:

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

2. **Purpose**: Allow the unfolding of unique potential in individuals and communities: nurturing behaviours that provide purpose, meaning and direction in every activity.

3. **Diversity**: Respect individual uniqueness and diversity: encouraging diverse perspectives and multiple expressions.

4. **Relationships**: Emphasize the quality of relationships: focusing on process and seeing the other as a competent partner.

5. **Participation**: Support the engaged participation of those concerned; involving everyone in decisions that impact them.

6. **Systems**: Recognize nested systems as influencing one another: providing opportunities for different sectors and disciplines to work together.

7. **Feedback**: Ensure conditions for feedback and self-organization: measuring what matters for the well-being and sustainability of any system.

In section 2 we looked briefly at some factors that have an impact on nurturing children:
*   being recognized for who they are in all their diversity;

*   the importance of the experience of being listened to and of experiencing that one has a voice and can participate with confidence as a valued citizen;

*   both of these in situations where quality relationships are valued and encouraged.

All three are among the principles of the Learning for Well-being Foundation. Two others provide a thread that reinforces the holistic approach: wholeness and purpose. Furthermore, we have seen the many synergies with the most recent work of the Working Group on Schools that were more fully described in the initial paper (Gordon and Ionescu, 2018). Together these reports bring a set of guiding principles that can ensure coherence among the different levels in complex education systems, provide guidance on cooperation and networking, align key principles of a learner-centred approach in schools as learning organizations that are growing, developing and can be innovative through supportive multi-level governance and active collaboration with a range of partners.

But what can the Foundation bring in addition? Though they work substantially with public sector authorities, foundations do not have the same constraints as the latter where mission and budget are aligned and may not encourage cross-boundary working. Foundations, however, can act as a space to bring together actors from different sectors and disciplines that would not normally have the possibility of meeting and working together. The INTESYS project is a good example of this. It is a space where policy, research and civil society can meet and work together productively towards shared goals.

Learning for Well-being aims to support initiatives that take into account whole systems where the different parts are nested and communicating, thus very different from fragmented and partial approaches to addressing complex problems. Working with its partners it also encourages and supports cross-sector working within a shared vision, which in a sense is the glue that holds together the other factors contributing to nurturing children from birth through to adulthood.

The political will to develop and disseminate key principles of a learner-centred approach in schools as learning communities exists at EU level. In addition, there are many initiatives at practitioner level, whether within a given area, a country or across Europe, that are piloting integrated approaches (such as INTESYS or START – see articles in this issue by Mihaela Ionescu and Van Laere *et al.*). Policy formulation of guiding principles and bottom-up pilot initiatives are present in the education sector, but can they expand out to propose dynamic peer learning processes that encourage a reflection on a vision for childhood? Such a vision would be for all children growing up in Europe and would reach across all the policy areas that affect children's lives (education, social services, health, justice, culture, etc.). This is one way the Learning for Well-being Foundation can continue to build and contribute to partnerships and systems whose values and holistic vision of childhood are competent to nurture children's flourishing from birth to childhood.

Author

Bringing change and improvements to education and training and all situations where children, young people and adults are learning so that everyone can flourish and lead happy, healthy and meaningful lives is the core of Jean Gordon's work. She worked for many years for the EIESP, a European institute based in Paris (where she was director from 2003 to 2013), working mainly with the European Union, countries across Europe, and the Mediterranean region. Her work aims to contribute to lifelong learning opportunities and personal development through improving access to learning and its recognition, individualizing pathways, developing key competences and increasing transparency of learning and qualifications. Jean is now a consultant, was Joint Editor of the European Journal of Education from 2004 to 2015 and is currently Co-editor of the Learning for Well-being Magazine. She is a member of the CATS (Children as Actors for Transforming Society) core team for design, planning and organization.

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