

O'Toole, L; Manuel Pinto, L (2019) 'Partnering Across Generations: Viewpoints inspired by Learning for Well-being,' in Learning for Well-being Magazine, Issue 7, published by The Learning for Well-being Foundation.

## Partnering Across Generations: Viewpoints inspired by Learning for Well-being

By Linda O'Toole and Luis Manuel Pinto

Welcome to the 7th issue of the Learning for Well-being (L4WB) Magazine. This issue represents a slight departure from previous issues of the L4WB Magazine. We structured this issue around the theme, *Partnering Across Generations*, and invited authors to address one of the principles of L4WB, specifically in relation to ACT2gether, a new initiative stewarded by the L4WB Foundation. The featured texts represent viewpoints anchored in the personal experiences of each of the authors.

This editorial provides an orientation to *Partnering Across Generations*, describing four different views on this theme and how these can be integrated by the ACT2gether initiative. We propose the L4WB principles, represented by the viewpoints in this issue, as a meaningful and practical framework. In doing so, we acknowledge the role of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as foundational and make a case for balancing a rights-based approach with one that emphasizes well-being and human development, offering a process-oriented way to remember our humanity. Within the L4WB principles, we highlight the first three principles as critical for allowing the inner life of children and adults to manifest through intergenerational partnerships. Lastly, we touch on cultivating core capacities as a means through which we animate these partnerships. We conclude with an invitation to renegotiate the ways you personally relate with younger and older generations by participating in the ACT2gether movement.

We are dedicating this issue to Jean Gordon, co-editor of the magazine, who died in October 2018. Jean was passionate about societal change through inclusive partnerships and was instrumental in shaping and enlivening ACT2gether. She was a friend and

colleague to all the authors of this issue, who have each included a brief statement about Jean at the end of their viewpoints.

## 1. Why intergenerational partnerships?

Since its beginnings, the Learning for Well-being Foundation<sup>1</sup> has advocated for a shift in paradigm where children are seen and treated as agents of change, rather than objects of care.<sup>2</sup> It seemed evident to us that human systems designed to serve children could only be fair and sustainable by taking their perspective into consideration. Our practice of involving children in reflection and decision-making processes evolved our thinking and led us to three important realizations:

- **The quality of relationships can trump structural opportunities for children’s participation.** Even when policies and infrastructures are in place, the quality of relationships between generations can ‘make or break’ children’s experience of engagement and having an opportunity to participate as their authentic selves.<sup>3</sup>
- **Focusing on the participation of children requires reflecting on the role and practice of adults who interact with them.** On the continuum of consulting with children to totally child-led activities, there are always adults who support, engage with or confront children’s actions. In our experience, adults need preparation to engage in these activities, as much as children do.
- **Children’s perspectives can enrich virtually all areas of life.** Children can contribute to creating environments that are directly designed to support them (school, family, healthcare) but also those that impact them indirectly (business, environment). We have often been surprised by what interests and concerns children, and the level of insight they can offer.

These insights encouraged us to start looking at children’s participation from the perspective of a partnership across generations. Addressing children’s participation acknowledges that the norm is for children to be excluded from offering opinions and being involved in decision-making. In the same sense, addressing intergenerational partnership acknowledges that children and adults can be competent partners in addressing the challenges that face them, together. We want both children’s participation and partnering across generations to become the norm.

## 2. Four views on partnering between children and adults

We are witnessing the emergence of interest and support for co-creative initiatives involving children and young people in policymaking and service provision. Drawing inspiration from

---

<sup>1</sup> At the time Universal Education Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> Ilona Kickbusch and Jean Gordon (2012), Learning for Well-being: ‘A Policy Priority for Children and Youth in Europe. A process for change, with the collaboration of Linda O ‘Toole’, drafted on behalf of the Learning for Well-being Consortium of Foundations in Europe, (published by Universal Education Foundation).

<sup>3</sup> Lundy, L., McEvoy, L., & Byrne, B. (2011). Working with young children as co-researchers: An approach informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Early education & development*, 22(5), 714-736.

the four perspectives in the Learning for Well-being framework [see Viewpoint 1 for a fuller discussion of the four perspectives], we identify four ways that collaboration between generations has been promoted. These approaches have been developed by different groups of academics, practitioners, and policymakers who have advocated for the involvement of children in decision-making from their particular standpoint. They formed pockets of good practice worldwide, that do not always see themselves as sharing a common ground, and at times compete for attention or resources.

### The head argument – a matter of rights

We think of this as a 'head' oriented argument because it defines structures and laws that support the entitlement for children. Several social constructions of children see them as 'people in the making' or 'property of adults', instead of as individuals in their own right, entitled to dignity and to participate in decisions that affect them. This vision of children is translated in many behavioural and structural conditions – like voting age. Almost a third of the world's population are children aged between 0 and 18. Despite having nearly 50% of people living in democratic countries, participation is assumed to happen 'automatically' at age 18 or 21. We firmly believe this situation leads to children's disengagement from their role as citizens and a loss of faith in democratic processes. It is therefore a matter of rights, because children are entitled to be heard and taken seriously. Probably the most important marker of the widespread recognition for children as victims of social injustice is the development of the UNCRC, a comprehensive body of work, with a holistic and systemic view of children's lives, and the factors affecting them. [See Viewpoint 5 for a discussion of shifting views on participation.]

### The heart argument – a matter of well-being

The 'heart' is associated with how we feel about ourselves and the world around us. A recent study of over 60,000 children in 18 countries confirmed a high correlation between positive relationships and subjective well-being. A report from the International Society for Child Indicators (ISCI) gathering in 2019<sup>4</sup> calls for children's involvement in any research on their lives, stating:

Studies of children's well-being have seldom included children's participation, particularly in comparison with similar research on adults' well-being (Huebner, 2004). Indeed, researchers are only starting to listen to children, discover their opinions and evaluations and recognize that the children's points of view may be different from those of adults. ...[...] including children and their own perspectives in research on their well-being is an obligation.

We suggest that many problems of children's mental health result from feeling isolated and not being heard by adults. Partnership is therefore a matter of well-being, and a way for both children and adults to create good relationships with others that help them flourish and contribute positively. [See Viewpoint 4 for the critical role of authentic relationships in determining well-being.]

---

<sup>4</sup> Kutsar, Dagmar & Raid, Kadri. (2019). Children's Subjective Well-Being in Local and International Perspectives. Retrieved from [https://www.stat.ee/publication-2019\\_childrens-subjective-well-being-in-local-and-international-perspectives](https://www.stat.ee/publication-2019_childrens-subjective-well-being-in-local-and-international-perspectives) on 2019-10-25

### The hand argument – a matter of sustainability

The 'hand' relates to what we offer as services, and what is available as resources. Education, economic, health and social welfare systems are failing those they aim to serve. Of all stakeholders, children (in spite of being almost a third of the world population) are the least taken into consideration in systems design and reform. Often this results in services that are inefficient, unsustainable, and unfair. Children and young people are raising awareness of these challenges and rallying others to stand with them. Some examples are Malala (Pakistan) for the right of women to education, the Parkland Secondary School students (USA) for the right to safety, and Greta Thunberg (Sweden) for the right to a sustainable future.

As suggested by the New Economics Foundation, co-production of services suggests doing things 'with children,' rather than doing them 'to' or 'for children'. This approach goes beyond consultation, providing children and young people with the opportunity to 'be the change'. To achieve this, it focuses on children as part of their own solution.<sup>5</sup>

Designing unsustainable systems leads to increased poverty, illness and conflict. Partnering across generations offers the hope of systemic and sustainable outcomes for children, for their peers, and for their families. [Viewpoint 6 describes some paths for improving systems through human connections and bottom-up interventions; Viewpoint 7 offers an example of a co-produced assessment system.]

### The spirit argument – a matter of wholeness

The idea of 'spirit' evokes what connects us with something larger than ourselves. The ways we have constructed our ideas of childhood and adulthood may limit our ability to see ourselves and to be whole human beings. For example: seeing children as victims, makes us see adults as protectors – both are limiting. Another critical reminder is that children and adults are not monolithic groups. [Consider Viewpoint 3 on patterns of individual differences that continue from childhood to adulthood.] By narrowing how we conceive of generational differences, we have created fragmentation: ascribing certain qualities to childhood (spontaneity, playfulness, curiosity) and others to adulthood (responsibility, stability, commitment) – qualities which are often seen as opposite polarities.

The consequence of fragmentation is not allowing ourselves the full expression of our potential at any age. This might be reinforced by what is expected from peers, and what qualities are rewarded (or sanctioned) in our societies. This fragmentation can be the cause of losing connection with others and with our deeper sense of purpose. Suppressing what might be perceived as 'childish characteristics' leads to the loss of the creativity, entrepreneurship and resilience necessary to address individual and societal problems. Creating spaces for partnership between children and adults is a matter of wholeness, allowing both to experience more freedom to be their unique selves, and develop a fuller

---

<sup>5</sup> New Economic Foundation, & Action for Children. (2006). A guide to co-producing children's services. In *Backing the Future* (Vol. 1). Retrieved from <https://neweconomics.org/2009/09/guide-co-producing-childrens-services>

range of human qualities accessible to any age. Children can be serious, and adults can be playful.

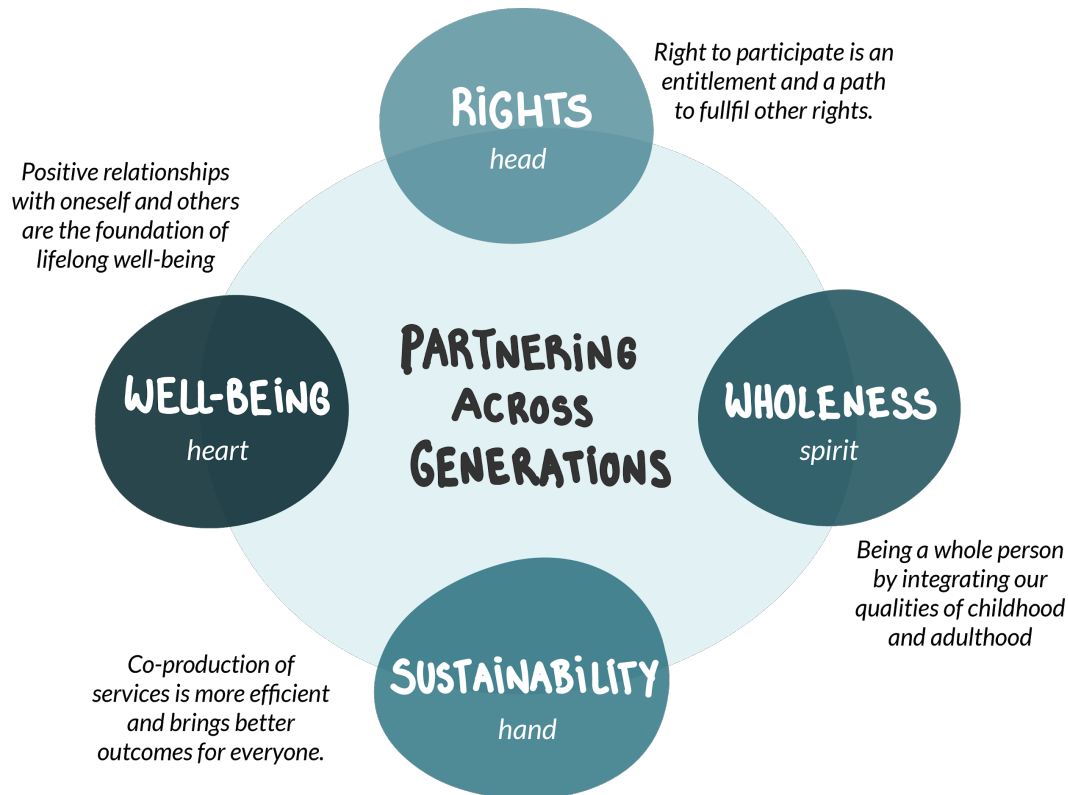


Figure 1. Diagram summarizing the 4 views on intergenerational partnerships.

### 3. Making a case for ACT2gether

With ACT2gether, the Learning for Well-being Foundation proposes to gather all perspectives for a holistic approach to partnering between adults and children. It intends to provide a means for children to engage with their head, heart, hands and spirit while being recognized as competent partners; it encourages adults to reconnect with their innate qualities and take full responsibility for modelling their humanity rather than dominating or exerting power over young people or moulding children into their image of adulthood. Its aim is to help children and adults in every environment work together in addressing the challenges that affect their lives. It is an intergenerational partnership approach to fulfilling children's right to participate in decision-making, and thus create societies that serve everyone, young and old.

We are bringing to light the latent wisdom and intelligence of children, legitimizing and exploring it. From a rights and well-being point of view, as well as from the point of view of driving innovation, there is a lot to be learned by and from children in a way that has broad ramifications for human beings. Elevating this knowledge is an unmined asset that we are not sufficiently utilizing as a species.

More than a project, ACT2gether is an idea and a movement that intends to spread the awareness of the importance and benefits of generations working together towards the

goals of fairness and sustainability that are outlined by the sustainable development goals set for 2030. In 2019, the Universal Declaration on the Rights of the Child celebrates its 30th anniversary. Within it, there is a promise of involving children and young people in the decisions that impact their lives. Fulfilling this promise is crucial to obtain social equity and sustainability in our societies, because only if we ACT2gether, can we reach future-proof solutions for the issues that affect us today.

The particular characteristics of ACT2gether initiatives can be grouped around the questions of WHO partners, HOW they partner, and WHY they partner.

1. **WHO? Children and adults in partnership.**

Activities can be planned, implemented or evaluated in partnership between children and adults. Depending on the possibilities, children might be involved by being consulted, acting as collaborators or leading different components of the activity.

Working in partnership between children and adults – with the necessary experience, inspiration, information and tools – is a catalyst for adults and organisations to move from acting FOR children to acting WITH children.

2. **HOW? A holistic approach (supported by the L4WB framework).**

Activities consider and engage all four perspectives: mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual in order to offer transformative learning experience lived through collaboration between children and adults which links personal transformation with societal change.

3. **WHY? Create fairness and sustainability in their environments.**

Collaboration happens around key questions important to realize the rights of children and adults, ultimately promoting their well-being. Outputs are local or individual actions done through intergenerational partnership, where children and adults contribute to a fair and sustainable world, while realizing their unique potential.

With this initiative, we are building on our collective experience of 6 years organizing Children as Actors Transforming Society (CATS), where we modelled the collaboration between children and adults around different themes. We wish to create the next iteration where we focus on supporting others in creating such spaces of partnership between generations and between peers.

The Learning for Well-being Foundation stewards this initiative through three main activities at international level: (1) by modelling and supporting transformative gatherings that enable those working 'for children' to start working 'with children'; (2) it offers training opportunities and tools that cultivate the necessary capacities for children and adults to act as competent partners; and (3) it develops alliances, offline and online, supported by digital platforms that enable the initiative to extend into the virtual world.

## 4. Remembering our humanity

The Learning for Well-being framework describes 7 principles which are represented through the viewpoints in this issue. The principles encapsulate what any living system, whether individual or collective, needs in order to thrive. The principles are process-oriented, focused on how conditions are put in place to help one consider action in a way that is life affirming. Together, they represent a whole system and support what we want to achieve in ACT2gether, as a ground for partnering between children and adults, and as a practice field for remembering our humanity.



### 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.



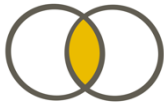
### 2. Purpose

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



### 3. Inner Diversity

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



### 4. Relationships & Communication

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



### 5. Participation & Engagement

Support the engaged participation of those concerned, involving everyone in decisions that impact them.



### 6. Nested 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.

We are proposing ACT2gether as a way to inspire and nurture partnering across generations. In the spirit of a living system approach we recognize that having all of the principles represented is one way to move towards sustaining holistic and systemic environments which support human functioning. The authors in this issue have highlighted examples of how each of the L4WB principles are implemented in ACT2gether – as part of the overall design, the methodology and the content. For events that are part of ACT2gether, Viewpoint 1 on Wholeness offers particularly comprehensive and concrete examples.

The UNCRC, celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2019, is the foundation on which ACT2gether rests. Since its establishment, it has advanced the ways in which children are protected, supported and treated as equals in dignity. In the first years there was a strong focus on gaining widespread adoption, emphasizing children’s rights to provision and protection (less on participation.) In recent years, there has been increasing activity to support children’s right to participate in decisions that affect them. [Discussed in Viewpoint 5.] As a result, there has been greater attention on process elements related to *how* these ideas were being implemented, the need for shifts in attitudes of adults and children involved, and the quality of their interactions. The L4WB approach aims to expand the understanding of children’s rights and participation, extending it to the context of well-being, flourishing and human development.

The UNCRC is comprehensive, with a systemic view of children’s lives and the factors affecting them. However, many discourses around children’s rights take a rather legalistic expression, attracting mainly the legal and social welfare sectors. L4WB, and other advocates for children’s well-being, look at child participation as an important determinant of healthy development, and as a basic human need. Both perspectives contribute to an ever-evolving understanding of children’s rights, and both need to be engaged in a global community of advocates for children’s rights if we are to create a culture shift in relation to the way children are seen and treated.

ACT2gether has the potential, through its emphasis on the relationship between children and adults, to integrate rights-based views, and to galvanize individuals and organizations that identify with a developmental perspective on child participation – a perspective which is often underrepresented. In promoting the use of the L4WB Framework we see the UNCRC as foundational, and the seven principles as a container for a *process approach* that encourages holistic systems and environments. A well-being approach remembers the subjective dimension of life, including the importance of experiencing meaning and purpose in one’s life and of agency, belonging and being recognized as competent.

While all seven principles represent the conditions necessary for holistic environments, we are putting particular attention on the first three principles: wholeness, unique potential, and inner diversity. We regard these central principles as a unique contribution of L4WB,



one that is reflected in how Otto Scharmer, author of Theory U,<sup>6</sup> describes his view on leadership and facilitating corporate change:

We know a great deal about what leaders do and how they do it. But we know very little about the inner place, the source from which they operate. Successful leadership depends on the quality of attention and intention that the leader brings to any situation.

Scharmer describes a 'blind spot' in individuals, organizations, and society as the lack of awareness about the interior condition from which our attention and actions originate. As a society, we have placed significant weight on exploring and creating the externalized structures and processes without considering how they connect to the inner life. With the Learning for Well-being approach, we want to balance this emphasis with how we experience our thoughts, feelings, and souls so that we illuminate our 'blind spots'. We believe that a focus on the central core principles aids this process.

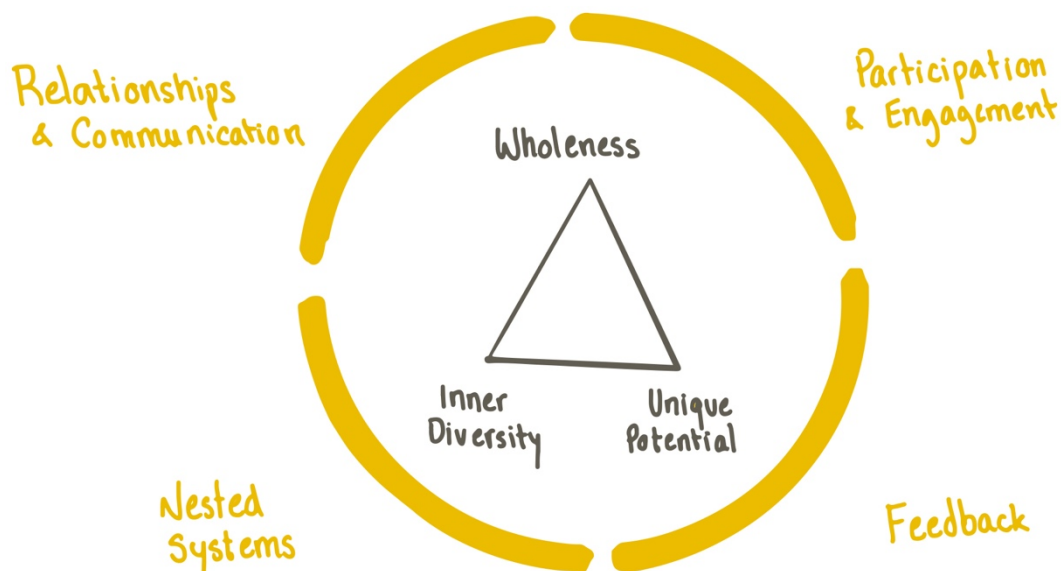


Figure 2. Another view of the L4WB principles.

## 5. Inner place from which we operate

The first three principles of the L4WB framework reflect the inner source to which Scharmer refers. It is our view that these principles are insufficiently acknowledged in daily life and often overlooked in processes involving children; yet recognizing their value is key for encouraging a flourishing life. By highlighting the importance of this inner place from which we operate, we give priority to processes that contribute to the well-being of individuals as well as whole communities and societies. In the L4WB approach there is an underlying assumption and deeply held belief (a matter of both evidence and faith) that systemic change requires the involvement of oneself – iconically stated as 'we must be the change

<sup>6</sup> Scharmer, C. O. (2008). Uncovering the blind spot of leadership. *Leader to Leader*, 2008(47), 52-59. Retrieved on 26 October 2019 from [http://www.allegrosite.be/artikels/Uncovering\\_the\\_blind\\_spot\\_of\\_leadership.pdf](http://www.allegrosite.be/artikels/Uncovering_the_blind_spot_of_leadership.pdf)

we want to see'. These core principles need to permeate every aspect of ACT2gether for it to promote the most effective and expansive practice of partnering across generations.

With these three core principles in dynamic interaction, it is often difficult (and perhaps unnecessary) to differentiate them in practice. What they share is constancy over a lifetime: ways of being that expand and contract and develop over time yet remain uniquely expressive of who we are and how we function. Patterns of inner diversity are closest to the surface of what we can see and hear (see figure 1 in Viewpoint 3 for a depiction of the relationship between personality, behaviour, temperament and patterns of processing.) We know them largely through inference in how they impact the ways in which we learn, communicate, seek to know, solve problems, and develop. They reflect our unique ways of knowing and engaging with others, and from the differences between our own patterns and those of the people around us (regardless of their age) springs a multitude of misinterpretations, lack of understanding, and potential conflict as well as the possibility of being accepted fully.

A practical application of respecting individual uniqueness and diversity in groups is to consider what we mean by 'participating'. Taking into account patterns of inner diversity opens the question of *how* children and adults are participating, rather than *whether* they are participating. Silent observation and listening can look like disengagement, when it might in fact be a way of contributing to a group or be a precursor to later action. Without considering inner diversity, we might privilege a particular form of participation, whether that is cultural or individual, in detriment of other forms.

In groups or relationships, encouraging the unfolding of unique potential in children and adults asks us to consider whether there is a clear purpose for the process in which they are asked to participate, and whether this purpose is meaningful to the individual members of the group. This attention to the immediate purpose of an activity requires that those involved have a deeper sense of what brings meaning and purpose to their lives, and how that connects with the context in which they are participating. There is often an interchangeable use of the terms 'full potential' and 'unique potential', but they are distinct. Full potential implies the maximal, or at least optimal, development and expression of our gifts and talents. Unique potential refers to the centralizing impulse of your life – that which offers a story to be told, a fiery passion, a constant thread, an inner compass, or essential essence. The unique potential is intended to represent the organizing principles of a particular individual: every person is born with the potential to be more fully and deeply her/himself. This is at the core of what it means to be human. Full potential wants a blossoming and full expression of what we can do; unique potential asks us to deepen, to live and to bring forth what only we can offer.

In Viewpoint 2 the author describes discovering her own unique potential. In doing that, she links her journey with realizing her life purpose, knowing what she is called to do and who she is invited to be in that process. Paying attention to individual purpose and its link to group purpose is an opportunity to notice what is unique about each child and adult, and how such uniqueness is expressed as implicit qualities that are available for the individual and in service to the group. This, in turn, reminds us that creating 'safety' needs

to extend beyond physical and emotional considerations to creating safe spaces for our life purpose to express, through acknowledgement of its active presence. If we consider our pattern of inner diversity as *HOW* we function, we might usefully call our core driving force (unique potential) the *WHY* of how we operate. Always, they work together.

The other factor related to our inner life, as we are exploring it in the core principles of L4WB, is represented by Wholeness. Considering wholeness in partnerships between children and adults invites us to nurture ways through which the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of the person (and the experience) are engaged. This is an invitation for everyone to bring their thoughts, feelings, actions and intentions into the present moment. However, we need to remember that the four perspectives are proxy positions to highlight what is, in fact, indivisibly dynamic and complete. The principle of wholeness is intended to reflect the ground on which life, and we through our unique selves, operate. This implies a cultivation of aliveness and presence that celebrates groups of people working together. For example, being motivated by working with children as competent partners will inspire adults to work with other adults as competent partners, contributing to a fairer and more sustainable world. It has been said that we must look to the younger generation to save the world. From the standpoint of wholeness, we must look to *all* generations working together as the ones to make a difference in the trajectory of humanity. A significant contribution to living the principle of wholeness is the practice of core capacities.

## 6. The role of core capacities

Learning for Well-being has proposed a set of core capacities that support the development of more complex competences. These offer simple and natural actions that are seemingly innate so developing them is a matter of refining, engaging, and fully expressing them. The set identified includes: reflecting, noticing, listening, inquiring, empathizing, subtle sensing, enriching sensory awareness, relaxing, and discerning patterns and systemic processes.<sup>7</sup>

These capacities can be experienced through three aspects (**mental**, **emotional** and **physical**) along a continuum from material to **spiritual**. Each of us has an individual relationship with the core capacities: for some, empathizing is experienced as literally feeling what another feels; for others, it registers as the ability to understand another person's motivations and life circumstances. The individualized experiences of the core capacities are useful in discovering and working with one's patterns of processing in educational settings as discussed in Viewpoint 3. The authors of Viewpoint 4 identify the core capacities as 'processes that can be practiced and enlivened to help develop mutual trust and care in partnerships.' The value of the core capacities in evaluation and feedback

---

<sup>7</sup> O'Toole, L. (2016). 'Cultivating Capacities: A Description of the Learning for Well-Being Approach to Core Practices'. In *Improving the Quality of Childhood in Europe* (pp. 14-29). Brussels: Alliance for Childhood European Network Foundation.

is highlighted in Viewpoint 7. All three examples demonstrate the utility of practicing core capacities to enrich partnerships.

Beyond this utility, the core capacities function as mediators, connecting our unique potential, and how it is expressed through our patterns of processing, to the ground on which we live. These are foundational abilities that enable us to be 'more finely and deeply human', enabling the expression of one's soul, through unique patterning of thinking, feeling, and doing. As such they represent a form of *sacred technology* that refines our ability to relate with ourselves, others and our environments.

In an authentic sense, core capacities can be seen as 'building blocks' for more complex life skills AND as qualities of the soul that allow those qualities to manifest in daily life and activate our capacity to engage and serve according to our own specific inner life. This is the heart of what ACT2gether wants to support.

## 7. An invitation

Our hope is that this issue of the magazine will inspire your interest in encouraging collaboration and partnering across generations. If you want to learn more or participate in ACT2gether, there are several ways you can be involved:

- **Share with us any initiative** in any environment or sector, that involves children as partners — not only as beneficiaries — in addressing needs in the community. We will be inviting representatives of these initiatives to share their story in our media, and in our events.
- **Attend one of our 2getherLAND events** and start connecting with an international community of child and adult supporters of intergenerational partnership.
- **Start your own activity and contribute to a growing movement.** If you feel it is aligned with the spirit of ACT2gether, get in touch with us. There is a whole team and a wider community here to help you with connections, knowledge and inspiration.
- **Let us know how we can do this better.** The Learning for Well-being Foundation has been stewarding this initiative trying to make the best of what it has to offer, and what the world needs. Your feedback can help us bridge these two sides better.