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Healthy Systems Are Built on Collaboration, Cooperation and Coordination

By Mihaela Ionescu

You might wonder what Greta Thunberg has to do with this article? Maybe just as much as trying to answer to the question: to what extent can individuals change big complex systems that are ruling their lives and they feel unsatisfied with? To a great extent, bottom-up approaches have proved to be successful when shared values and goals are jointly defined and then translated through dialogue, negotiation and a culture of cooperation and mutual respect, into convergent strategies of actions that meet the real needs of an increasing (i.e. dominant) number of people. That is how a system can be healed. This article is an invitation to think what role each of us can and should play in building up those mindsets that (re-)invent systems that listen to and are loyal to children's rights and potential. To all children. Is there something to be learned from the early childhood systems that are celebrating child's agency, protagonism in their development and learning and their uniqueness?

This viewpoint takes an inside-out perspective from the individual to system level, stressing that systems are living organisms which change due to top-down and bottom-up interventions made by *people*. The extent to which systems meet people's needs depends on how much they rely on real dialogue and participation to model that mindset that will enable 'healing' changes in the system. I used the example of the early childhood systems which strive for a narrative where children are listened to and valued for their uniqueness, believing that such narratives are to be modelled by ACT2gether through dialogue and participation across generations.

1. Introduction

Systems (von Bertalanffy, 1968) are living 'organisms' that function, react, adapt, transform, re-shape etc. depending on the driving forces (conservative or progressive) that influence their existence, acting upon them independently or simultaneously. In times when societies are increasingly challenged by tensions between various aspects of human and societal life, systems (be they economic, political, educational, social, cultural, etc.) are also challenged. Their response to human and societal challenges is a blended result of how different agents of change (seeking for a healthier functioning of the system) recognize the need for: acting in a convergent way, sharing an aligned vision, being animated by common values, learning to collaborate, to cooperate and even more important to coordinate among themselves. This article will share possible pathways to be taken to drive a bottom-up change in early childhood systems and beyond, towards more holistic approaches, re-learning that no purposeful 'healing' action can be successful if little collaboration exists between children and adults, in a dialectical relationship that is the key to the system's overall development.

2. Systems are made by people: top-down and bottom-up approaches

Systems are made by and of people, of all ages. Although they are made for people, not everyone is participating in their creation, functioning, and becoming.

In a top-down approach, people invested with a decision-making role are deciding what changes are needed for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the systems based on a vision that they define and the information they gather about the inputs, processes and outputs. Decisions are applied, and only then will the system (i.e. people) start to learn about such changes happening *to* them, and to un-learn the old way of functioning. The more complex the system (layers of governance and types of stakeholders), the harder and longer it will take for the change to happen, as a new mindset will *have to* take the place of the old mindset.

In a bottom-up approach, islands of change are created within the system by people searching for solutions to problems that the system (i.e. people) is facing, given the ever-changing environment in which the system exists. The changes are explored and spread at the grassroots and, when largely embraced and endorsed, they mature in widely agreed decisions influencing the entire system. The new mindset is built through participation and ready to further support the change.

3. The image of the child and the mindset

We might all agree that we are constantly challenged by changes that we have not necessarily anticipated in our societies and feel sometimes overwhelmed by their complexity and impact on our lives, and in some cases even disempowered.
Each of us as living and complex systems, feel sometimes threatened in our 'smooth' functioning and strive to reach our comfort zone. Tensions at the individual level, when trying to adapt to life trajectories that may very much seem uncharted today, as a young

person, a parent, an employee, a grandparent or senior person (how many people can firmly say how their life will be in 10 years?), influence to a great extent the individual's commitment to change or adapt himself/herself, and also to create changes in his/her environment. Such tensions may be positive drivers in the individual's search for better ways of being and living with him/herself and others. Some may be strong barriers. However, these tensions require changes that are sometimes difficult to achieve, especially when taking a broader perspective of micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) within which each individual lives. How can individuals influence the systems they are living in, so that those are more responsive to their needs and more relevant for individual and collective well-being? Where to start? How to do it? Big questions.

The departing angle we propose in our discussion about 'healthy' systems is the diachronic perspective over a child's life, from when they are born. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework for human development developed in the '70s still provides today a solid foundation for understanding the intertwined relationships between the individual and the layered contexts corresponding to the four levels of the ecological system, with some levels being within the reach of direct influence exerted by the individual (micro-systems like family, pre/school, peers), some acting as indirect envelopes for the individual's development (e.g. mass-media, culture).
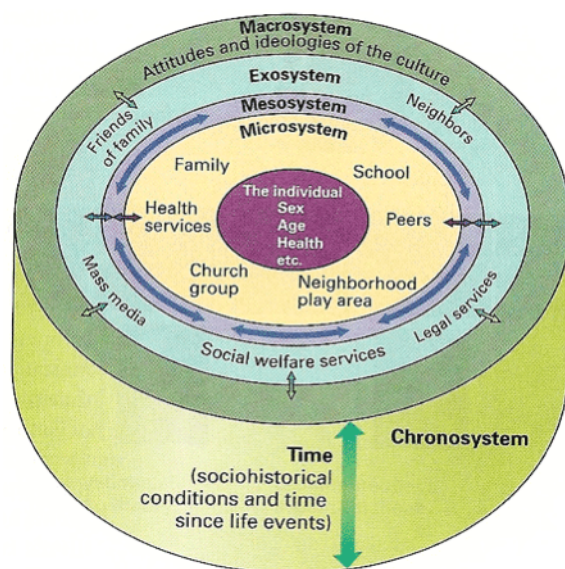

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner: ecological theory of child development (Source: Santrock, 2008, retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Bronfenbrenner-ecological-theory-of-child-development-Source-Santrock-2008-p33_fig1_308606611)

If we think about a child coming into this world (we would argue no matter where), their developmental trajectory will highly depend on the grounding image about the child that adults have in both explicit and implicit narratives. Starting from family moving to the broader society, across generations, these narratives are shaped by intertwined interactions between all levels of the system as Bronfenbrenner describes them. Seeing children or not seeing them as competent, with agency, owners of rights, ready to learn and assert their unique diversity and potential – still to be discovered and understood by others – engines

of society's development, etc. shapes in a particular way the nature of the interactions between them and families, services, neighbourhoods, communities, society at large. It also determines the extent to which these environments (i.e. adults) value (or not) and create (or not enough) opportunities for children to be and become aligned with their uniqueness in their ongoing development. The dominant narrative around the image of the child in a society can be distilled into what we would call the *mindset(s)*. It is not homogenously distributed across all levels of the ecological system, across all generations, and all sectors, but it can be recognized especially when various systems in the society (e.g. welfare systems, health systems, education systems, etc.) go through reforming changes.
And such narratives accompany the child at least until they officially become adults (i.e. parents themselves, having a job, self-sufficiency, and full autonomy over their life) and influence their life.

4. Changing mindsets and the systemic changes

Changing mindsets about a child's development, their agency and role in their own being and becoming, means influencing the narratives in various contexts, from the micro- to macro-system level (see Bronfenbrenner's ecological model).

Changing such narratives to reach a common place from where generative systemic changes can occur requires time, a co-constructed theory of change and strong and pertinent evidences. Multiple actors need to be involved (from children and family to community level, from professionals to policymakers, across sectors, from local to national level, and cross-country), multiple types of actions have to be enacted (from community mobilization to community debates, from testing new approaches to collecting evidences, from campaigns to roundtables), and multiple channels for communication and true dialogue (formal, non-formal, informal) need to be created and enabled (including the new technology). The final destination is where the new narrative is no longer questioned: it becomes the foundational rationale for which changes are enacted.

Working at the micro-system level (family, school, workplace, etc.) means engaging with children and families (across age groups) in a meaningful way, providing platforms for open dialogue and intergenerational learning and negotiations around the rationales for change, what needs to be changed and how change will happen. A new narrative can emerge only if the voices of each other are heard through co-constructive approaches, facilitated and enabled towards creating relevant changes in the environments where they live.
The bottom-up approach (moving from micro-systems to meso- and exo-systems) is highly efficient in terms of building a new mindset, but its power relies not only in co-participation, but also in:
·   discussing and aligning forward-looking values across various actors, ages, sectors and levels of governance
·   building shared understandings across actors of different ages and sectors, while valuing the diversity of views
·   incorporating answers to the real and emerging needs and concerns of children, families and communities

- modelling new ways of 'doing things' while building on the diversity of strengths the actors and services bring together
- reflecting on setbacks and adjusting processes to the dynamics of the local contexts
- celebrating documented achievements and building further on them
- creating the co-ownership of the changes made step by step.

In systems that serve and affect the children's and families' lives, changing mindsets in a bottom-up approach that is driven by a child- and family-responsive paradigm may lead to systemic changes, but top-down systemic changes that are not based on a true dialogue with children and families do not lead to changing mindsets, thus to unsuccessful and/or not lasting changes.

5. Learning from the early childhood field

Let's take a closer look at what is happening at least at the European level in the early childhood field, the scientific domain that focuses on studying and addressing the first period of life of an individual – pre-natal to 8 years of age, a period with a tremendous impact on the child's healthy development and well-being.

What are the main and current narratives there and to what extent could they be expanded beyond the young ages, while keeping at the heart the child's best interest?

Here are only a few affirmations that are currently the main drivers in shaping and improving the early childhood systems pertinent to all levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system. As a reflective exercise, we propose the following demand: How relevant are they for the systems addressing older age groups, beyond childhood?

- *Child development needs to be addressed in a holistic way*. The progress in one developmental domain impacts the advancements in the others. The holistic perspective on a child's development counter balanced the too 'care'-focused approach in service provision in the first two years of a child's life and the too academic-focus during the pre-primary years. The child needs a constant concern for their holistic development, no matter the age.
  The lack of continuity in addressing equally and appropriately across age groups the child's 'even' need for physical, nutritional and health, social-emotional, cognitive development as a rounded person, was recognized as being a major obstacle in building a strong foundation for children's healthy rounded development. The child's holistic development became one of main ingredients in the dominant narratives of the experts in the field.
  This has impacted the way the early childhood education and care services (including parenting support) are to be designed and provided, from curriculum to staff preparation and continuous development, from policy regulations to daily programmes in services. However, this holistic perspective has not been embraced with the same intensity by all sectors – education, health, social protection and also has not been implemented with the same accuracy within and across sectors.

- *A holistic view on **the** child's development requires a holistic view on the family's well-being.* Different aspects of family life directly impact child development and well-being. The quality of the home environment affects the child's healthy development – access to health services, family's level of income, housing conditions, access to education, quality of neighbourhoods, etc. The interdependence between the different aspects of life is particularly stronger in the case of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families. For example, in the case of families living in severe poverty, providing children with a nurturing environment is limited by the family opportunity to improve their life conditions. The family micro-system has to be supported by other micro-systems (health services, education services, cultural services, social assistance, community networks, etc.), and the quality of their interaction may contribute to improving the quality of the home environment for the child.

- ***A** child and family-centered approach is a pre-requisite for designing and implementing quality services and for improving them.* Low access to services and low outcomes in children's development may indicate not only that services might not be within the reach or affordable to families, but also that they are misaligned with or non-responsive to children's and families' needs and demands, they are shaped and function based on *mindsets* that to a great extent ignore the actual views and needs of the children and families that they serve. The departing point in re-thinking/improving the current services is learning about children's and families' views, understandings and needs, and jointly developing plans for improving the quality of services.

- *The 360° view on child and family needs require collaboration, cooperation and coordination between professionals, services and levels of governance when addressing them.*
There is strong agreement among early childhood experts (Geinger et al., 2015) that fragmentation is one of the problems to be addressed within early childhood systems: across age groups, across sectors, across services, across levels of governance and policies. The historical legacy of different (national and local) authorities governing different sectors across all age groups – from infancy to senior ages (health, education, social protection, etc.) led to services that are addressing the same children and families in parallel without communicating, cooperating and without coordination.
In the case of young children, especially the most vulnerable, this lack of cooperation and coordination is a missed opportunity to effectively and efficiently contribute to improving the quality of the home environment and of the support to parents, and therefore a missed opportunity for children right from the start of their life.
There are many examples in various countries of how cooperation and coordination across age groups and services have been addressed at different levels of the system: professional level, institutional level, inter-institutional level, governance level.

Such narratives pertaining to an already consolidated 'image of the child', but also because of its intrinsic connection with the image of the family, have been built over the at least past two decades by bringing together research evidence, policy and practice examples from various countries, confirming that this is the way to move forward if we are to improve existing systems serving children and families. They are the current ingredients for

consolidating a new collective *mindset* nurturing the further development of early childhood systems.

If such narratives were also in the mainstream thinking around older children, would education systems be/look differently? It might be the right time to work together, across sectors and across generations, on building such narratives.

6. Author

Dr. Mihaela Ionescu is the Program Director in ISSA (the International Step by Step Association) a membership association that connects more than 90 member organizations from 42 countries in Europe and Central Asia, working in the field of early childhood development (www.issa.nl). She is deeply involved in the strategic program development of ISSA (see ISSA's Initiatives), in developing and implementing policies and programs aimed at providing equitable and high quality early childhood services in countries from ISSA regions, and in providing opportunities for ISSA members and other partners for shared learning across countries through annual thematic meetings and ISSA's Annual Conferences. She coordinated the development of several resources in ISSA, most of them focused on process quality and professionalism in early childhood services (see Roads to Quality, Quality Framework for Early Childhood Services for Children Under Three, A Systemic Approach to Quality in Early Childhood Services) and more recently on strengthening integration in early childhood systems (see INTESYS).

7. Dedication

In memory of Jean, a brilliant mind and a strong ally in making children's voices heard when shaping policies that impact their lives. A privilege to advocate with her for competent (early childhood) education systems across ages, starting from an aligned image of the child, as a competent, *rich*, and active partner in their learning.

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