

WELL-BEING AS WHOLENESS: THE PERSPECTIVE, PROCESS, AND PRACTICE OF LEARNING FOR WELL-BEING

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INTRODUCTION

Our use of technology has created a world that is more connected, more capable of individualization and yet more fragmented than ever. We are all working to respond to the challenges that these factors create. Indeed, if we accept the shift in world view from Newtonian physics to that of quantum theory, we recognize that it is necessary for all of us to work together to imagine and co-create our shared reality – there is no possibility of working in isolated or partial ways within an interdependent system without losing connection to the whole of it.

David Bohm, renowned quantum physicist, suggests in *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* that the Newtonian perspective of everything being reducible to separate parts leads to thinking and acting that is fragmented and which has contributed to a vast array of environmental, political, social, and inter- and intra-personal conflict. If we only see the world around us as distinct parts, it follows that we describe and experience ourselves as primarily divided into parts (“how I am with my family,” “how I am at work,” “how I am as a citizen” and so forth) leading to strife within and against ourselves and each other. This view creates areas of specialization and division (“silos”) in which we live at a distance from one another – creating relationships with other people in which they become “the other”, assuming responsibility for others without regard for their desires and competence, separating the domains of family, school, health care, and so forth.

Learning for Well-being describes the journey of learning to realize our unique potential through physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development in relation to self, others and the environment. It is learning to be and become me ... in the context of the community and society in which I live and to actively contribute to them in ways that truly nurture the uniqueness of me.

Speaking of wholeness at a conceptual level offers individuals and organizations approaches to collaborate in meaningful and practical ways. Through developing a shared purpose, language, and community of practitioners we can begin to capitalize on shifting our ways of thinking, our methods and our organizational structures towards more holistic ways of operating. Engaging in joined up actions allows more effective development and efficient use of resources, fosters innovative approaches, and provides opportunities for more human-centered services – whatever the context.

“Be the change you want to see in the world” is attributed to Gandhi, and often interpreted as suggesting that personal transformation is all that is needed to make a difference. It is needed, but it is not sufficient. Personal transformation and social transformation go hand in hand. By emphasizing the need to “start with the personal” we are asserting that too often we forget – as policy makers, as educators, as parents – that we must embody the qualities and characteristics that we want to see in and for our children, and for ourselves as well.

The purpose of this article is to describe the perspective, process, and principles of Learning for Well-being (L4WB), to relate these to collective practices of advocacy, capacity development, and localized programs, and to invite the reader to participate in the L4WB community.

1 VISION, HOLISTIC FRAMEWORK & PRINCIPLES

The vision of Learning for Well-being is one of inclusive and supportive societies where children, young people and adults respect each other as competent partners and learn how to realize their unique potential throughout their lives.

In seeking to synthesize overarching principles with which numerous individuals and organizations can agree, Learning for Well-being incorporates a broad spectrum of research and practices and takes inspiration from resolutions adopted by major international bodies.

The World Health Organization describes a state to be achieved by defining health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.

The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emphasizes a child’s right to achieve their full potential and participate in decisions that affect their lives.

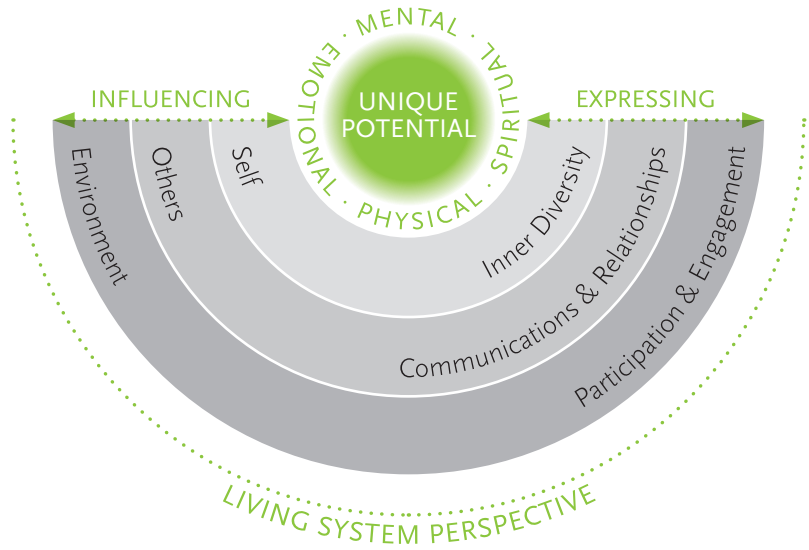
UNICEF stresses the responsibility “to advocate for the protection of children’s rights and to help meet their basic needs and expand their opportunities to reach their full potential”.

The ‘four pillars of learning’, as defined in the 1996 report to UNESCO by the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century, Learning: the Treasure Within: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together underline learning as process.

The Council of Europe has described well-being as a universal human right, using the phrase “Well-being for All” to include individual well-being as well as societal and global well-being, extending to future generations.

Also contributing to Learning for Well-being as described in this article was the development of a L4WB review and advocacy document from 2010-2012, *Learning for Well-being: a policy priority for children and youth in Europe. A process for change* (Kickbusch 2012a) aimed at providing the basis for a common conceptual understanding and guideline for policy makers at all levels in Europe. Focusing across sectors (e.g. health, mental health, social affairs, education, etc.) the document draws on multiple consultations, and state-of-the-art and multidisciplinary research. Crucially, it proposed policy imperatives and ideas about how to “make it happen”.

FIGURE 1. LEARNING FOR WELL-BEING FRAMEWORK



Encompassing these various perspectives, Learning for Well-being offers an integrative framework and focuses on cultivating capacities and environments that support learning to lead happy, healthy and meaningful lives. The emphasis is on the process of learning (values, attitudes, practices, and choices). What we mean by a “process approach” is addressing not just *what* is happening, but *how* it is happening (why and by whom also being important elements of a process.) Integrating approaches and services across sectors, ages, cultures, etc. requires sharing a vision and finding common language that is meaningful in very different contexts. A holistic perspective of well-being is necessarily experiential yet general, allowing us to derive essential principles that translate into actions aligned with the vision and framework. Partners who engage with Learning for Well-being occupy widely different arenas but share a space for gathering different actors to collaborate beyond their silos, creating a common language towards a common agenda.

The integrative framework is designed to provide points through which diverse organizations can recognize their interdependency while still maintaining their uniqueness (this is very much in keeping with a living systems perspective).

Walking through the figure, we see the following elements:

Ensuring conditions for self-organization and mutual learning

The double arrows indicate a continuous dynamic interplay between the individual and the environment, including other people – of influencing and being influenced, of expressing and being expressed. The capacity to be uniquely myself can only occur if supported by the people and systems around me, and expressing my unique qualities adds value to those people and systems.

Self-organization is the way in which living systems adapt to their environments and create themselves anew, through a constant process of influencing and being influenced. The principles apply to individuals, classrooms, communities, as well as forests, oceans, and so forth. Impositions or assertions of external control have a direct impact on the quality and sustainability of the system. When control is internal – through following the interests, motivations, and enthusiasm of the individual – it is possible to optimize potentials for growth, learning, and well-being.

Expression of one's unique potential as a central focus

Unique potential refers to the vital energy and qualities that provide meaning, purpose and direction to an individual's life. The unfolding of every person's unique potential requires us to encourage self-discovery and the expression of each one's particular gifts and contributions, thereby nurturing the flourishing of the undivided and evolving self within each of us.

By acknowledging the importance of meaning and purpose in every life, we give priority to processes that contribute to the well-being of individuals as well as whole communities and societies.

Developing the whole child

Physical, emotional, mental and spiritual perspectives are placed around the inner circle in the diagram yet relate to *all* elements of the framework, for, as stated earlier, Learning for Well-being aims at realizing our unique potential through physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual development in relation to self, others and the environment.¹ These four perspectives represent a way of describing basic aspects of the human experience that are common to many cultures and diverse belief systems, from the ancient Vedic scriptures to contemporary scientists and philosophers (O'Toole & Kropf, 2010.) Briefly:

- *physical* refers to the physical senses, to the material and natural environments, and to the functions of doing, producing, and acting;
- *emotional* refers to the inner feelings and motivations, and to the functions of relating, and imagining;
- *mental* refers to the cognitive and rational processes, and to the functions of planning, analyzing, and seeing objectively;
- *spiritual* refers to the sense of connection to all things – experienced through interconnectedness, awe, mystery, and beauty.

By taking account of all four perspectives, we engage with the whole child and emphasize life-long development. Children are thereby encouraged to grow and develop by adults who are themselves continuing to develop their human capacities.

¹ On occasion "social" replaces or is used with "emotional," as in the phrase "social-emotional learning," but for the purpose of this article we regard "social" as a larger construct which contains the basic dimensions of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

Respecting the uniqueness and diversity of each individual

Acknowledging *inner diversity* recognizes the uniqueness of every child and pays special attention to individual processes through which children learn, communicate, and develop. These are the “inner differences” – the ways in which children uniquely frame their perceptions and understandings – that are often not so readily apparent. Respecting these inner differences is at the heart of a vision centered on learning and the individual learner.

For the unfolding of one’s unique potential, we need to understand our inner processes – our way of being in the world and how we learn and develop – and that we must encourage and support diverse perspectives and multiple expressions.

Focusing on the nature and quality of relationships

We are hardwired for social interactions, and learn primarily through our relationships with family, peers, teachers and children and adults in our environments. The nature and quality of communications and relationships is critical to our learning for well-being. We also learn through our relationship to non-human creatures and the natural environment. Self-esteem, self-confidence and self-expression stem from the relationship to self that is central.

We need to cultivate the ways in which we communicate and express ourselves – how to nurture relationships with ourselves, with others, and with the environments in which we find ourselves.

Participation of children, young people and adults

To learn a child must take ownership for his or her own learning outcomes and be an active participant in that learning. Adults can act as catalysts and enablers in creating diverse environments for the benefit of children, but well-being is sustainable only when consciously and actively engaged with and pursued by young people. Internalizing the value and practice of well-being is the beginning of choice, responsibility and action.

Consider the whole person, the whole process, whole systems

Nature itself, and everything in it, works as a living whole system. The shift from a mechanistic and fragmented model to an organic system changes our view of the world. The nature of reality is perceived differently when we understand human functioning within a web of living relationships or a “living systems perspective”. Living systems are greater than the sum of their parts, and in learning for well-being we need to consider the various aspects of the person, the process and the environment – all in dynamic interaction with one another.

Our lives are interwoven with the systems within and around us so that the individual and the context – of other people, organizations, human constructions or natural environments – influence one another in ways that are both seen and unseen. O’Toole and Kropf (2010) provide a fuller description of the principles of living systems, and the elements of the framework.

These seven elements of the framework, plus the vision of inclusive and supportive societies, are the basis for the principles of action that guide the process and practice of the Learning for Well-being partners.

2 PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION: SUMMARY AND EXAMPLES

We use the term, “principles,” to describe those essential characteristics of the system that function as guidelines for translating ideas, values, and vision into actions. In describing Learning for Well-being from a living systems perspective, we are taking nature as our model. Like nature, the basic perspective is organic, sustainable, and capable of continuous development.

The importance of summarizing the L4WB principles is that we are balancing several considerations: the need for clarity; the diverse sectors and contexts in which partners are working; the difficulty of describing wholeness in practical and concrete terms; and the insistence on allowing diverse perspectives and multiple expressions to emerge. In this section we state briefly the L4WB principles derived from the Framework as foundational to the perspective, process, and practice of Learning for Well-being, and then provide brief examples of the different ways these principles can be used in specific contexts.

Principles derived from the L4WB vision and framework:

- 1 Realizing one's uniqueness and life purpose is crucial to well-being.
- 2 People learn, grow, and develop in different ways – diverse perspectives and multiple expressions should be encouraged.
- 3 Cultivating physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development is a life-long process that includes decision-making capacities which contribute to individual and collective well-being.
- 4 Qualitative relationships and mutual learning are central.
- 5 Children and adults respect each other as competent partners.
- 6 Engagement and participation of everyone is required for developing inclusive and supportive families, communities, and societies.
- 7 Well-being is a process as well as an outcome.
- 8 Environments for learning for well-being encourage self-organization, individual determination, and working actively across sectors and boundaries of all types.

But there is one additional principle of any living system that must be included in the above list: Feedback! Whether we are speaking of a person, an organization, or a natural system, knowing what is happening is essential for health and well-being: this is measuring what matters. Therefore:

- 9 Measuring what matters is critical.

Any of the above principles can be broadly applied – to individuals, groups, and organizations. Here are two examples of how we are applying these principles in current work:

Charter for Children

Jointly developed by the Universal Education Foundation and Eurochild in order to develop and articulate a vision for children growing up in Europe, the Charter builds on the policy imperatives that emerged from *Learning for Well-being; a policy priority for children and youth in Europe. A process for change* (Kickbusch 2012a) and that affirm (in brief) the need for all of society to contribute, for sectors to work together in integrated and multidimensional ways, and for children and young people to be part of the policy process.

The process approach within Learning for Well-being involves taking the child's perspective, encouraging the expression of each child's unique potential, focusing on strengths and inner differences, emphasizing the nature and quality of relationships, being holistic and measuring what matters – all relating directly to the L4WB principles described above. From these imperatives, the Charter for Children promotes five underlying principles that need to underpin how policies are developed, implemented, and monitored:

- Children need to be treated as competent partners.
- Achieving well-being is understood as a process as much as an outcome.
- It is the quality of relationships that matters the most to children's well-being.
- Health is much more than disease prevention or treatment.
- Education needs to nurture the individual capacities of every child.

These principles need to be understood as interdependent and as supporting integrated approaches to policy and practice in which all sectors are actively engaged. A reference group brings together Eurochild member organizations and external experts with a strong interest in and a solid understanding of effective advocacy towards change. The objectives of the reference group are to examine how the Charter can best be applied in practice as a tool for effective advocacy, how it can be used for communication with policy makers, and how it can influence the design, monitoring and evaluation of policy interventions.

Parenting/early childhood care givers:

If children are citizens from the time of their birth, then the home needs to become a place of democratic practices that shape the relationship between parents and children (George 2013). Within a family, both adults and children must respect each other as competent partners within processes of shared learning, and should recognize diverse perspectives and multiple expressions. Accepting these principles of Learning for Well-being is particularly difficult in the case of children below the age of ten years, and more so with regard to children under five, yet a paradigm shift which registers that people learn and develop in different ways *from birth onwards* could provide a solid basis for democracy within the home and the early childhood center, which in turn would build foundations for more formal democracy in the wider society (George op. cit.).

3 CULTIVATING CORE CAPACITIES TO SUPPORT LEARNING FOR WELL-BEING

Cultivating certain capacities and practices enhances our ability to realize our unique ways of contributing to the fullness of our own life and the lives of those around us; to paraphrase Albert Schweitzer, they allow us to become more finely and deeply human. The phrase “cultivating core practices and capacities” highlights the desire to nurture and help expand capacities that are naturally present in young children; therefore, we speak not of “building” or “creating” these capacities, but instead speak of “cultivating” or the act of providing environments, including models and mentors, that allow for their natural growth. Making these core capacities explicit in all learning environments is a way that we, as children, young people and adults, deepen our practice of being more fully human, uniquely ourselves, and more capable of contributing over the course of a lifetime.

A preliminary list of core capacities and practices include:

Relaxation – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual relaxation

Paying attention – keen, engaged and consistent
inner and outer observation

Reflection – pondering: looking back, looking from
other perspectives, offering feedback

Listening – connecting to words, sounds, and spaces in
oneself, others and the environment

Inquiring – asking questions to track an experience with
openness and curiosity

Empathy – active and deliberate resonance with others – their
thoughts, feelings, experiences

Discerning patterns and systemic processes – recognizing
interdependency and the relationship of the parts to the whole

Subtle sensing – including intuition, imagination and resonance

Enriching sensory awareness – nurturing, stimulating, and expanding
the capabilities of our five senses

These capacities and practices can be approached from the most direct to the most subtle: for example, *listening* involves hearing the words and tone of another person, and it also involves expanding into the space around one, to listen to the wisdom of one’s body, the change of the seasons, the intentions behind words, to name only a few. Core capacities engage the physical, mental and emotional aspects – along a continuum from the material to the spiritual – and in relation to the inner world within oneself, the social world with others and the physical world, both natural and human-made. They provide means for exploring the individual qualities, aspirations and innate ways of processing of each person; ways to be addressed with respectful awareness of the differences that exist between people. Their practice helps deepen relationships and transform communications of all kinds. Engaging and practicing core capacities contributes to the nature and quality of our participation, responsibility and decisions.

In connecting to all elements of the Framework the core capacities and practices provide a substantial, accessible, and practical basis for working with the process of L4WB. By focusing on core capacities as *practices* (rather than as competences, qualities, abilities, or desirable outcomes), Learning for Well-being is stressing that these capacities are a solid basis for all life activities (including learning, creativity and inner resourcing). The practices of these capacities help children understand how they frame their thinking, experience feelings, engage in imagining and discover motivations, and so forth. At another layer of functioning (within society, in a classroom, in an occupation) these core capacities underpin and support the development of key competences and skills for lifelong learning. In the broadest sense they can be termed a key competence for living and functioning in society: personal fulfillment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment.

Over the last two decades all the named capacities have been the subject of research and studies. Some are already the subject of evaluated programs used in schools, such as the Canadian-based Roots of Empathy (www.rootsofempathy.org/) that brings together for teachers the results of studies and research from different perspectives including in the neuroscience field. Other researchers, such as Cloninger and Claxton, both present the case for relaxation. For Cloninger (2004), relaxation as it applies to body, mind, and feelings is the fundamental activity on which self-aware consciousness depends. Guy Claxton in *Wise-Up* (1999) cites a study demonstrating the value of relaxation on memory. In this study subjects were shown a picture and then, once it was removed, asked to draw the details of the picture. Following the first drawing, they were given a period of relaxation designed to calm and quiet the mind. Then, without being shown the drawing a second time, they were asked to draw the original picture again. The second drawings were rated by independent judges to be more accurate and detailed than the first drawings – even though a longer period of time had elapsed since the first drawing was made.

All of the core capacities and practices relate to physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development; one illustration: *relaxation implies being awake and fully present, with minimal tension or stress*. In terms of the physical, it goes beyond body relaxation to relaxing into a beneficial environment or allowing yourself to be present fully wherever you are (in a specific place). Mental relaxation leads to an experience of stillness, quiet and clarity, and allows opinions, judgments and personal ‘rules’ to ease. Emotional relaxation is often the first step in allowing one to listen and be with one’s emotions – to relax into feelings that may have been unnoticed or set aside. By ‘spiritual relaxation’ we mean allowing flow (in some traditions, referred to as an experience of grace).

The nine core capacities that Learning for Well-being has identified constitute key practices for a process approach – by exploring one’s inner resources, enhancing relationships with others and encouraging participation in the environment. The core capacities have been described above in adult language, but they are equally relevant for very young children. Each of these practices is recognizable to caregivers, although they may speak of them in slightly different terms. As an example, ‘reflection’ is often considered a rather sophisticated concept, but it begins in early childhood

with simply talking with young children about the relationship between certain behavior and subsequent outcomes: “A child can use a parent as a sounding board to test out verbally ideas that she has for addressing particular situations or relationships. Often the opportunity to think aloud to a trusted adult about possible options can help her in making a decision”. (George 2013: 11). As parents and teachers, we know that it matters *how* we offer feedback, the extent to which we encourage children to reflect for themselves, and the quality of the reflection that we share. The core capacities address *how* subjects are offered to children, rather than being extra curriculum topics. Much also depends on the extent to which adults, as role models, embody and work with these capacities.

The reason we put considerable emphasis on the core capacities is that they offer a means for enlivening the L4WB Framework and the aspirations that we have for our children – indeed for each of us. The following statements ‘point to’ (indicate) a dynamic state of well-being that is holistic and addresses the multi-dimensional life of a child.

- **Autonomy** – I have a sense of my own independence and uniqueness.
- **Appreciation** – I feel respected and valued for who I am – and respect others.
- **Agency** – My choices have meaning/significance, and I am able to make decisions that impact on me.
- **Achievement** – I have opportunities and am encouraged to work at my highest and best level.
- **Attachment** – I have relationships in all aspects of my life for which I care, and by which I am cared for.
- **Altruism** – I have the means/opportunities to express my caring for others through specific acts/attitudes.
- **Adventure** – I have opportunities to exercise curiosity and am encouraged to try out new experiences /ideas.
- **Aliveness** – I am filled with vitality, play, a sense of being alive!
- **Awe** – I feel wonder, peace and connection with the world around me.

This list is informed by the work of various academics, practitioners, and policy-makers who have addressed the topic of children’s well-being, ranging from characteristics of positive psychology (e.g., Richard Lerner’s Five Cs of traits that contribute to successful development) to the very pragmatic work of the *Self-Evaluation Instrument for Care Settings* developed through the Research Center for Experiential Education at Leuven University.

In the broadest sense of the term, these statements of aspirations are “indicators” of the wholeness implied in defining well-being as realizing one’s unique potential – whether we are referring to a child, an adult, an organization or a society.

The principles derived from the Framework offer guidelines for developing measurable indicators which allow us to monitor – for example – how we maintain well-being as a central purpose for our activities and organizations, and how we represent diverse perceptions and multiple expressions in processes and content. The core capacities not only guide research on indicators but can constitute an essential part of the research

process, notably in qualitative research: for example, one study that was based on personal narratives explicitly compared the research process of eliciting such narratives to experiences of accompanying a musician (George 1997), and implicitly highlighted the importance of relaxation, paying attention, listening, subtle sensing, empathy, reflection and inquiry in discerning patterns and systemic processes – some fifteen years before the publication of the Learning for Well-being review and advocacy materials. This researcher says that she would explicitly cite these core capacities when describing her qualitative research, now that she is familiar with Learning for Well-being.

As researchers and practitioners, we recognize that measureable indicators – those that allow monitoring and evaluation of policies, programs and practices – need to be developed within specific contexts (the school, the health clinic, the media, the family, the parliament) and reflect the research questions that are most critical for such endeavors.

Thus, as we proceed to develop criteria for research on indicators, the questions we are asking ourselves include: How do the core capacities support the realization of unique potential? What kind of feedback and measurements do we need to develop to assess whether children have opportunities to develop core capacities? Do these contribute to our identified aspirations for children? Do children share these aspirations for themselves?

4 MOBILIZING THE LEARNING FOR WELL-BEING COMMUNITY: AN INVITATION

We want to call for an even greater community to develop around Learning for Well-being – whether it is one of a formal association of partners or of advocates who embrace the ideas or individual researchers and practitioners who want to share in developing ways to work together. To date, the major areas have included: advocacy, capacity-development and local initiatives that support well-being and bring together different sectors, settings, and age groups. All of the activities are undergirded by the L4WB principles.

Here are examples of how we are working at this time:

The *Alliance for Childhood* European Network Group is a special partner and this significant relationship is described in the introductory chapter of this book. The Unfolding Conference in October 2013, co-sponsored by the Alliance for Childhood and the Universal Education Foundation (UEF) with the participation of Eurochild, and hosted by the Higher Institute for Family Sciences in Brussels, brought together many sectors of society, all of whom are vitally interested in the well-being of children, to find common ground.

Eurochild works actively to improve the quality of life of children and young people across Europe, undergirded by the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and with members in thirty six countries both inside and outside the European Union, addressing both policy and practice with special reference to children living in poverty. Eurochild is partnering with Universal Education Foundation around advocacy of

L4WB, through the Charter for Children, developing and testing – as a first step – an evaluation framework and template for large-scale government policy interventions. The aim is that this evidence framework will help build a base for advocacy work around children’s well-being, by identifying through the L4WB lens what is working and why (drivers); what does not work (obstacles) and how the policy/ system works at the different levels.

CATS: The Children as Actors for Transforming Society conference in Caux (Switzerland) has been co-sponsored in 2013 and 2014 by Initiatives for Change, the Child to Child Trust, and UEF as the convener of Learning for Well-being. A week-long event aims at bringing together people from very diverse backgrounds, co-designed and co-led by children and adults. CATS creates a space for children and young people to engage and exchange perspectives with adults in order to enrich, challenge, and expand their respective understanding of children’s situations and create the potential for meaningful partnerships and participation. As an example, the L4WB workshop is being designed and delivered by multigenerational collaborators, working in parity and delight, with a span of fifty years between the oldest and youngest of the three facilitators.

The *European Peer Training Organization* has adopted Learning for Well-being as a framework that underpins their capacity-development program against discrimination and exclusion. Strengths-based and holistic perspectives are thus brought to peer training, and notions of diversity are expanded to include individual differences in learning and communicating. Further programs are being developed that address young people’s well-being and their ability to manage risk. A competence framework and certification process to support young peer trainers in lifelong learning draws on L4WB’s identification of core capacities.

These examples will multiply as the Learning for Well-being Community expands through partnerships with organizations – and with individuals in these organizations – who intend to be the change they wish to see in the society around them.

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For extensive discussion of the sources and literature that underpins Learning for Well-being, see Jean Gordon and Linda O'Toole (forthcoming) 'Learning for Well-being: Creativity and Inner Diversity,' *Cambridge Journal of Education*.

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BIOGRAPHY

Linda O'Toole is a consultant to the Universal Education Foundation (UEF) which functions as a catalyst for the Learning for Well-being community (current information available at www.learningforwellbeing.org). O'Toole brings over 30 years of experience in the human development field to her role as a well-being and inner diversity specialist. She began working with UEF in early 2006 and has participated in creating the Voice of Children surveys, various communication strategies and materials, and youth and adult workshops for cultivating capacities that contribute to physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development.