



Core Capacities

Learning for
Well-being



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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.

Inspired by major international resolutions on children and definitions of well-being, the Learning for Well-being framework offers an ecological perspective on realizing one's unique potential in the context of the society in which one lives.

This framework considers all aspects (physical, emotional, mental) as well as their spiritual dimension and how these are expressed. It relates to the process of developing and strengthening the capacities necessary to live life fully.

Regardless of the sector or discipline from which we consider children's learning and well-being, the framework provides a language through which one can map and address all aspects in the lives of individuals and communities. Having a common language is an essential tool for working together.

Cultivating children's core capacities is a central expression of Learning for Well-being

Learning for Well-being has two goals related to cultivating core capacities:

1. Through acquiring values, attitudes and practices, more and more children and young people are able to make choices that support their well-being and those of others through their life journey.
2. More children become aware of their rights and the unique and distinct ways in which they learn and develop (and adults listen to them, encourage, and facilitate ways to implement this awareness.)

A preliminary list of core capacities/practices includes:

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| • Relaxation | • Listening |
| • Cultivating sensory awareness | • Inquiring |
| • Paying attention | • Empathy |
| • Subtle sensing | • Discerning patterns and systemic processes |
| • Reflection | |

Learning for Well-being relates to UNESCO's Four Pillars of Education

In *Learning: the Treasure Within*, the Delors Commission described the components of learning necessary for individuals and societies to thrive in the contemporary world. Briefly:

Learning to know is concerned primarily with the mastery of learning tools. It implies learning how to learn "by developing one's concentration, memory skills and ability to think."

Learning to do extends well beyond occupational training to involve broad-based personal competence, the capacity to innovate, and the leveraging of interpersonal skills.

Learning to live together addresses our need to be aware of our similarities and interdependence as human beings and to recognize our individual differences, and the diversity of the human experience.

Learning to be addresses the inner life of the individual: "to give people the freedom of thought, judgment, feeling and imagination they need in order to develop their talents." (Delors et al., 1996)

The Commission report underscores the value of all four pillars: "A broad encompassing view of learning should aim to enable each individual to discover, unearth and enrich his or her creative potential, to realize the treasure within each of us... in order to achieve specific aims ... that emphasize the development of the complete person." This includes the ability to weigh options and to make decisions and take actions that serve ourselves, others, and the environment.

Learning for Well-being encompasses all four pillars, capturing the need to understand how to use one's physical, emotional, mental and spiritual resources to enhance, deepen, and develop one's capacities for inner and outer action (an inner journey of self-discovery and an outer journey of self-expression and choices.)

The core capacities that we have identified are foundational and implicit in the various components of the four pillars. Taking any one of the core capacities – listening, for example – we can consider it in relation to each of the four pillars: how listening informs learning to know ("learning how to learn"); learning to do ("increasing innovation"); learning to live together ("awareness of our differences"); and learning to be ("listening to our inner stories".) Explicit awareness and practice of core capacities in a variety of situations gives us the fundamental tools to master ever more complex and emerging circumstances. Simply stated: as we develop these basic human capacities, we enhance our ability for realizing our unique ways of contributing to the fullness of our own life, and the lives of those around us.

The Learning for Well-being core capacities represent ways of being and doing that are natural for young children.

In using the phrase “cultivating core capacities”, we are highlighting the desire to nurture and help expand capacities that are naturally present in young children. The aim is to make these core capacities explicit in all learning environments so that we, as children and adults, have the means to deepen our practice of these capacities over the course of a lifetime. Focusing on core capacities, and working on them directly, allows the individual qualities, aspirations, and innate ways of processing of each person to be addressed with respectful awareness of the differences.

Core capacities are distinguished from key competences

Increasing attention in European educational and social policy areas has focused on identifying transversal key competences for lifelong learning – knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are appropriate to ensure personal development, social inclusion, active citizenship, and employment. One example of a key competence is “sense of initiative and entrepreneurship” which includes such components as creativity, innovation, and risk-taking. With core capacities we are identifying basic elements that are the “building blocks” for developing these key competences, including complex behaviors such as problem-solving, emotional self-regulation, critical thinking, learning to learn, and many others. Working directly with core capacities provides greater flexibility and depth; it also allows each child to explore and express his or her own unique way of addressing these more complex key competences.



Description of the Core Capacities/Practices

These capacities can be approached from the most simple to the subtlest levels. Each core capacity can be addressed early and must continue to be developed throughout a lifetime.

Each core capacity engages the physical, mental, emotional aspects – along a continuum from the material to the spiritual¹ – and in relationship to oneself (the inner world), to others (the social world), and to the environment (the physical world, both natural and human-made.)

Relaxation

Relaxation implies being awake and fully present, with minimal tension or stress. For Cloninger (2006), relaxation is the fundamental activity on which self-aware consciousness depends; for neuroscientists, it is the most critical factor in learning (OECD, 2010.)

Like the other core capacities, relaxation needs to be experienced physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

Generally we think of physical relaxation solely in terms of the physical body, but there is also a relaxing into the environment that is beneficial – allowing yourself to be fully present to where you are (site specific.) Anyone who has ever picked up a sleeping child has experienced full physical relaxation.

Mental relaxation leads to an experience of stillness, quiet, and clarity; it often allows opinions, judgments and personal “rules” to ease.

Emotional relaxation often aligns with mental relaxation: is there a difference in how I feel when I have relaxed my judgments? 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.)

Enriching sensory awareness

Our physical senses provide the raw material (the content) for our experiences of the world, including the images with which we think, feel and act. Cultivating our sensory awareness implies proper care and healing of one’s senses, but also attending to our senses so that we expand and enhance our capabilities -- to see, hear, taste, smell, and touch ever more finely.² The term “sensory awareness” is intended to encompass both the input of the physical senses and how we perceive and relate to those senses (what do we think and feel as a result of increased sensory awareness.)

¹ Physical, emotional, mental aspects can be understood as existing on a continuum from the material dimension to the spiritual. The spiritual dimension is experienced as wholeness, and by definition, one does not make sharp distinctions between the aspects.

² Evidence shows significant decline in sensory abilities in the last few decades, particularly in children.

Paying attention

Both inner observation and outer observation are part of this capacity. Paying attention involves being intensely, objectively and exquisitely aware of the details of life, including one's inner life (paying attention to one's inner world is a mindfulness practice.) Observation is a central factor in paying attention, but it is not a passive or distant type of observation; it requires cultivating a deep desire and motivation to engage intimately with oneself, others and the environment.

Children often express this "motivation" through their natural curiosity and their capacity to stay intently engaged in something as seemingly simple as watching a bug.

Subtle sensing

This capacity acknowledges that there are senses or faculties that are beyond what we typically consider "the five senses." Increasing evidence in neuroscience and educational fields point to the value of engaging energetic ways of knowing. Familiar sources of this kind of knowing are intuition, use of the imagination, and attuning to resonance with an object or a person. All of these subtle ways of knowing are related to different aspects: resonance (or vibration) may be experienced as a sensation, feeling, or thought. The ability to sense subtle signals, whether through the imagination or vibration, is often not reinforced in traditional educational settings.

Reflection

Reflection involves considering events, feelings, thoughts in a way that makes explicit what has been tacit. Generally reflection requires looking back and when cultivated, it encourages knowing what you could have done differently. Although there is often a quiet and contemplative opening to other ways of noticing what has happened, there is also a more active aspect, particularly with regard to other people and the environment. The action is reflecting in the sense of feedback loop, offering what has been seen, felt or sensed, and accepting and receiving feedback into the system. Reflection is the basis for metacognition – thinking about how one thinks.

Listening

Listening creates a space in which one can hear much more than the words spoken or the sounds present in the environment. One listens to the wisdom of one's body; the integration of mind, emotions and body; one's personal history; the change of seasons and ways of knowing – to name only a few. Active listening involves an action -- the creation of a space in which one can hear oneself, as well as other people; one can hear the spaces between the words as well as the words themselves. To make a distinction, the capacity of "Paying attention" is focusing on the details; "listening" is expanding into the space.

Inquiring

Inquiring is sometimes mistaken as a synonym for asking questions, but it is far more expansive than simply using techniques such as open-ended questions, paraphrasing ideas or being respectful. Inquiry is tracking an experience with true curiosity – whether it involves your self, other people, or the environment. Children do this naturally and are the best sources for demonstrating the meaning of "true curiosity." In human interactions, listening and inquiring often occur together, but they are different capacities, and can be nurtured in different ways.

Empathy

Empathy involves the active and deliberate resonance with the thoughts, feelings and direct experience of others. It is central to relating and engaging with other people – a sharing that builds stronger social bonds, and allows an opening of one's heart. Equally, it involves offering that same experience to oneself, and receiving it from others (allowing yourself to be changed through receiving new understanding from others.)

Recent research on the mirror neurons phenomenon has suggested this "understanding action" as the basis for empathic feelings, thoughts and responses. In our discussion of empathy as a core capacity it is important to note that we are talking about the full cycle of experiencing understanding and resonance, but choosing to make this understanding operational – to do something about one's understanding – to complete the cycle. In this sense, empathy is the basis of all attempts to understand other people, manage conflict, and engage in joint projects (UNESCO's "learning to live together" pillar.)

Discerning patterns/systems

At quite a sophisticated level, discerning patterns involves the ability to switch between macro and micro perspectives, as well as looking at whole systems and seeing the sub-systems within them. However, cultivating this core capacity begins in a very simple way – with the awareness of oneself as part of the group and the environment. This implies that you understand (and act from the understanding) that you are influenced by everyone/thing around you, and you are also influencing those people and environments. Seeing the patterns and the relationship between patterns occurs whether it is a matter of developing storms, organizational dynamics, or one's own behavior. Intrinsically, discerning patterns as a core capacity recognizes the impact of me on the world, and the world on me, and makes choices on that basis.

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