



Increasing Children's Competencies through Wellbeing and Involvement

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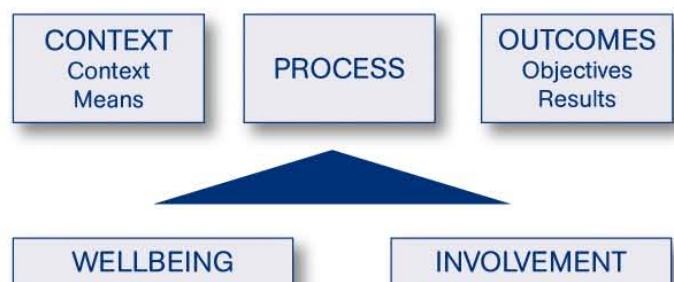
Children who feel at ease, secure and confident are more receptive to deep level learning. Belgian researchers, Ferre Laevers and Bart Declercq maintain that focusing on emotional wellbeing and level of involvement can pave the way to competence development.

In search of quality

What makes young children learn in early childhood settings? From the point of view of the parent or the curriculum developer, the question is often answered by expressing expectations with regard to the educational context and the practitioners' actions - the infrastructure, the content of activities, interaction style. From the policy or government viewpoint, there is a more direct reference to the expected outcome of the learning process. With regular assessments the system of care and education is 'forced' to get better results. In the middle of this stands the practitioner, living and working with children. How can he or she combine context and outcome - together? In this article we want to answer exactly this question.

The quality of the experience

An evident starting point for the assessment of the quality of any educational setting is to focus on two dimensions: the degree of 'emotional wellbeing' and the level of 'involvement'. It helps us to sense if what we are doing, in other words the context, is leading somewhere - to the outcome!



To know how each of the children is doing in a setting, we have first to explore the degree in which they feel at ease, act spontaneously, show vitality and demonstrate self-confidence. All this indicates that their emotional wellbeing is good and that their basic needs are fulfilled. The second indicator, involvement, is linked to the developmental process and requires the adult to set up a challenging environment favouring concentrated, intrinsically motivated activity. Care settings and preschools have to focus on both aspects - paying attention only to emotional wellbeing and a positive climate is not enough, while efforts to enhance involvement will only have an impact if children feel at home and are free from emotional constraints.

Involvement, the key word for increasing competencies

Involvement refers to a dimension of human activity, not linked to specific types of behaviour, nor to specific levels of development. Both the baby in the cradle playing with his voice, and the adult trying to formulate a definition, can share that quality. One of the most predominant characteristics of this 'flow state' (Csikszentmihalyi)¹ is concentration. Involvement only occurs in the 'zone of proximal development'² and goes along with strong motivation, fascination and total implication. Further analysis reveals a manifest feeling of satisfaction and a bodily felt stream of positive energy. Of course, one could describe a variety of situations where we can speak of satisfaction combined with intense experience, but not all of them would match our concept of involvement. Involvement is not the state of arousal easily obtained by the entertainer. The crucial point is that the satisfaction stems from one source - the exploratory drive, the need to get a better grip on reality, the intrinsic interest in how things and people are. Only when we succeed in activating the exploratory drive do we get an intrinsic type of involvement and not just involvement of an emotional or functional kind. One couldn't think of any condition more favourable to increase the competencies of young children. If we want deep level learning, we cannot do without involvement.

Deep level learning

The concept of 'deep level learning' expresses the concern for a critical approach to educational evaluation. We don't see the process of development as a mere addition of discrete elements of knowledge to an existing repertoire. On the contrary, every performance depends on an underlying structure of fundamental schemes. These operate as basic programmes that regulate the way one processes incoming stimuli and constructs reality. Through them we interpret new situations and act competently - or not. They determine which and how many dimensions of reality can be articulated in one's perception and cognition.

Impact on practitioners

Practitioners welcome the concepts of 'wellbeing' and 'involvement' as stimulating and helpful in improving the quality of their work. The concepts match the intuitions of many practitioners and give them a scientifically based confirmation - that when we can get children in that 'flow state', increasing their competencies must and will take place within the area(s) addressed by the activity. In contrast to effect variables - the real outcomes are only seen on the longer run - the process variables give immediate feedback about the quality of interventions and tell us on the spot something about their potential impact. Furthermore, bringing involvement and wellbeing to the foreground as key indicators for quality, engenders a lot of positive energy and synergy. The enthusiastic responses of children are very empowering and give the practitioner deep satisfaction both at the professional and the personal level.

Impact on policy

Impact can also be measured on a large scale. By measuring 'wellbeing' and involvement' in a pre- and post-test design, it's possible to answer the key question, '*Is what we are doing (e.g. the implementation of a training programme) leading to the expected outcomes?*' Multiple research results both in the UK and Belgium indicate significant improvement in both wellbeing and involvement over the course of one year. This increase is strongly linked to improvements in the learning environment, such as the materials and activities on offer, organisation, adult style, degree of freedom for children and climate.

Conclusion

Taking wellbeing and involvement as points of reference in the guidance of professionals makes it possible to respect the actual level of functioning of the practitioner and the setting. When implementing one starts where one stands, with all the limitations linked to the actual situation. This is the real impact - wellbeing and involvement mobilise and enhance energy in people, drawing them into a positive spiral which engenders deep level learning. Only in this way can we make early childhood settings more effective and strong enough to meet the challenge of education. It is quality in progress.

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1 Mihály Csikszentmihályi first proposed the state of 'flow' to describe total absorption in an activity.

2 A concept developed by Lev Vygotsky to describe the range of abilities that an individual can perform with assistance, but cannot yet perform independently.

WELLBEING

When children and adults ...

- feel at ease
- act spontaneously
- are open to the world and accessible
- express inner rest and relaxation
- show vitality and self-confidence
- are in touch with their feelings and emotions
- enjoy life

**...we know that their
mental health is secured**



INVOLVEMENT

When children and adults are ...

- concentrated and focussed
- interested, motivated, fascinated
- mentally active
- fully experiencing sensations and meanings
- enjoying the satisfaction of their exploratory drive
- operating at the very limits of their capabilities

**...we know that deep level
learning is taking place**

