

# INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME OF THE CONFERENCE<sup>1</sup>

Opening Address at the Working Conference  
“Understanding and Assessing Well-Being and Well-Becoming in Manitoba Schools”  
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The purpose of my introductory remarks is to provide you with some background ideas that underlie the theme of this working conference and as such provide you with a sense of its purpose.

I want to start with the following observation: The notion that well-being should be of concern to policy makers has received greater attention at the highest political level over the last two decades. Let me give you three examples.

First, there is the United Nations’ Human Development Index (HDI). Here is what the UN writes about the HDI:

The HDI was created to emphasize that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not economic growth alone. . . . The Human Development Index (HDI) is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living. (United Nations Development Programme, n. d.)

Second, launched in 2011 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has developed a Better Life Index (OECD, n. d.). The OECD has been collecting data from OECD countries – including Canada – in the following areas as the domains for the Better Life Index:

- housing;
- jobs;
- education;
- civic engagement
- life satisfaction
- work-life balance
- income
- community

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- environment
- health
- safety

While the two well-being indices from the UN and the OECD are measures that governments *could* use to guide their policy decisions, the government of the small, mountainous country of Bhutan in South-East Asia *actually* uses a well-being index to guide its policy decisions. Bhutan has developed a Gross National Happiness Index to assess the success of the government's political policies and practices (The Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, n. d.). The index collects information on 33 indicators categorized in nine domains. These nine domains are:

- psychological wellbeing;
- health;
- education;
- time use;
- cultural diversity and resilience;
- good governance;
- community vitality;
- ecological diversity and resilience; and
- living standards.

Let me have a closer look at the genesis of OECD's Better Life Index, because I think school education can greatly benefit from the concerns and the approach taken that led to the Better Life Index.

In 2008, following the economic turmoil of the stock market and the consequences for the world's economies, the then French president Nicolas Sarkozy invited two Nobel Prize winners in economics – Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen – and the French economist Jean-Paul Fitoussi to head “The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress”. The Commission was appointed

in response to increasing concerns about the adequacy of current measures of economic performance, in particular those based on GDP figures, and to broader concerns about the relevance of these figures as measures of societal well-being, as well as measures of economic, environmental and social sustainability. (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2010, p. xvii)

In its report, the Commission does two things. First, it demonstrate the limitations of using primarily GDP to measure societal progress. GDP measure a society's economic activity, regardless whether that activity contributes to the well-being of the people in that society. For instance, an oil spill on the west coast of Canada would *increase* the GDP, because the clean-up increases economic activity, although clearly the quality of life and well-being of those living in the concerned area is negatively affected. Second, in the report the economists identify “quality of life” as an end, and economic activity as a means. They write: “Quality of life is a broader concept than economic production and living standards. It includes the full range of factors that

influence what we value in living, reaching beyond its material side” (Stiglitz et al., 2010, p. 61). The report of the Commission has led to the development of the Better Life Index.

The slow but progressing shift at the political and economic level on what we should actually measure to assess social progress in a country is informative for the kind of discourse this conference would like to promote and accelerate, namely the discourse of shifting what we measure when we assess the quality and success of public school education in Manitoba. Let me illustrate this parallelism by starting out with a quotation from the already mentioned report by “The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress”, headed by Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi. In the preface of their report, they write:

In an increasingly performance-oriented society, metrics matter. What we measure affects what we do. If we have the wrong metrics, we will strive for the wrong things. In the quest to increase GDP, we may end up with a society in which citizens are worse off. Too often we confuse ends with means. (Stiglitz et al., 2010, p. xvii)

Let me just make a few minor changes to the quotation to demonstrate what the core issue is that this working conference aims to address:

In an increasingly performance-oriented society, metrics matter. What we measure affects what we do. If we have the wrong metrics, we will strive for the wrong things. In the quest to increase **our rankings in PISA and PCAP**, we may end up with a society in which **students** are worse off. Too often we confuse ends with means.

As GDP says something about a country’s economy, so do PISA and PCAP results say something about student learning. No questions there. However, a problem arises if GDP is taken as a measure for quality of life of a country’s citizens, and when GDP is taken as an end of public and economic policy. Similarly, a problem arises if PISA and PCAP results are taken as measures for quality school education, and when the learning that PISA and PCAP measure is taken as an end of school education rather than as a means.

To me, there is indeed clear indication that PISA and PCAP results are indeed taken as ends of school education. PCAP, the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program developed and coordinated by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), tests student achievement in mathematics, readings and science. The purpose of PCAP is

to inform Canadians about how well their education systems are meeting the needs of students and society. The information gathered in these cyclical tests of student achievement in mathematics, reading, and science provides the provinces and territories with a basis for examining their curriculum and improving their assessment tools. (CMEC, n. d.)

Similarly at the federal level, in the “Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program” of the federal government, the sole measures used for student achievement are the PISA and PCAP results. In its 2011 report *The Well-Being of Canada’s Young Children* (Government of Canada,

2011), the Canadian Government uses as the only measure for reporting on the cognitive development of 6-9 year old children “standardized classical scaled math scores” (p. 53).

What are the problems here? Let me point to three problems, all linked directly to the purpose of this working conference.

First, all those measures assess educational outcomes, but they are not concerned with the actual educational experiences of students, with the quality of life as a student. The study “What did you do in school today?” by the Canadian Education Association (<http://www.cea-ace.ca/programs-initiatives/wdydist>) and the case study undertaken by Denise Pope and published as a book under the title “Doing School” (Pope, 2001) demonstrate the importance of assessing the quality of students’ educational experiences in school.

Second, what is assessed is educational attainment in very few selected subject areas, namely mathematics, reading, and natural sciences, in the case of PCAP and PISA. There is no consideration given to educational attainment in, for instance, the arts, physical education, technology, or the so-called technical education subjects.

Let me illustrate the problems that come with such narrow focus by showing you two specific grade 9 learning outcomes from two different subject areas:

- 9.N.6. Determine an approximate square root of positive rational numbers that are non-perfect squares.
  
- S1 4.1.1 identify, analyze, and demonstrate effective communication skills to create healthy relationships, e.g., sending a clear message, effective listening, barriers to communication, negotiation, decision making.

The first learning outcome is, as you probably have guessed, from the Manitoba grade 9 mathematics curriculum. The second learning outcome is from the grade 9 family studies curriculum. All of you know the difference in status that these two subject areas have in the Canadian school system. However, if we encounter other Manitobans, whether youth or adults, would we not rather wish that they have mastered the latter outcome?

Third, the focus is solely on subject area learning. But there are many capabilities that students do and are expected to develop as part of their life in school and also with an eye toward their life after school: getting along with each other; conflict resolution skills; socio-emotional capacities like empathy and compassion. Should we not care about the success in the development of those capabilities in our children and youth?

As Stiglitz et al. (2010) have warned: “If we have the wrong metrics, we will strive for the wrong things” (p. xvii). While I do not want to suggest that PCAP and PISA are “wrong metrics”, I do want to suggest that they are too narrow as primary measures of school educational success, and they receive too much attention and concern.

And it is the latter point that is particularly problematic. With allusion to the Stiglitz et al. (2010) quotation, I expressed the concern that in the quest to increase our ranking in terms of those narrow metrics, we may end up with a society in which our students are worse off – in terms of their well-being. They might be worse off, because the attention given to and the concern with those narrow metrics impact political decisions, for instance about finite resource allocation, and they influence public discourse about the purpose and success of public school education. Those with insights into recent changes by the Manitoba government in terms of funding allocations and teacher certification have a sense of the stark reality of too narrowly

focusing on these metrics. As Stiglitz et al. (2010) suggest: “What we measure affects what we do” (p. xvii).

What are the alternatives?

This conference is based on the idea that we need to develop an alternative to the current approach to measuring and assessing school education success in Manitoba. As such the conference fits well with, for instance, the project by the Ontario-based group People for Education (<http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/>), which has started the research project *Measuring What Matters* (<http://peopleforeducation.ca/measuring-what-matters>). This research project tries to establish a broader set of measures for school success, measures that “reflect the broad skills students will need in the workforce and to take their place as engaged citizens” (People for Education, n. d.). The project has identified five domains that need measuring when assessing success of school education:

- health;
- creativity & innovation;
- social-emotional skills;
- citizenship; and
- quality learning environments.

The conference approach fits also well with recent initiatives by the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS), and the recent discussion paper by Brian O’Leary and Jon Young (2015) published by MASS on the need for a shift of attention from what they call trailing indicators to leading indicators of school educational success. It also fits to some degree with the Healthy Child Manitoba initiative by the Manitoba Government (<http://www.gov.mb.ca/healthychild/pdre/index.html>)

The second idea underlying the conceptualization of this working conference is that we should conceptualize “well-being” as an important *end* of school education and that we, thus, should develop measures to assess how well the means used by school education actually help achieve this end. The well-being scholarship referenced above provides the rationale for this idea. Well-being, so it is suggested, characterizes quality of life and purpose of life, and it drives much of our pursuits in life. If that is indeed the case, then we should clearly care about students’ quality of life while they are attending school, and we should care about well-being as a central goal of school education, because as the well-being literature suggests, we do need to develop capabilities in order to live well and be well – and would that not be an important incentive for school education to focus on those capabilities?

There is, of course, no single understanding of “well-being” in the literature – and there is no single understanding assumed here at the conference. Also, the literature uses different terms for what we call here “well-being”; some use “happiness”, others “flourishing”, and there are a number of other terms used. If well-being is a school educational end, its meaning is linked to our individual and communal values. As such the understanding of “well-being” as a focus of measuring school education success needs to be negotiated and co-constructed by and within the community. However, the well-being literature does provide us with some general ideas for such co-construction. At the end of my presentation I would like to share with you from the literature a general framework for a concept of well-being that can help with such co-construction.

First, student well-being as a school educational end needs to give consideration to students’ quality of life *as students*. Educational ends generally are conceptualized as something

you achieve at the time of graduation. However, as the child rights movement has so influentially pointed out, concern about child well-being needs to also care about how well children *are*, not just how well they are prepared for a flourishing life as adults.

Second, student well-being as a school educational end needs to be understood as a holistic concept that gives consideration to multiple domains and qualities of human living. To be well needs to be understood as requiring the satisfaction of our needs in all these domains of human living. You can find this holistic approach to well-being reflected at this conference in the range for themes of the working sessions, including outdoor education – giving recognition to the need we have as human beings of interacting meaningfully with the natural world. As the economist Max-Neef (1991) has suggested, living a life in poverty does not just refer to material poverty. For instance, a life without a meaningful satisfaction of our creative needs is a life in poverty.

Third, student well-being as a school educational end needs to be more than the absence of ill-being. This idea is at the core of the Positive Psychology movement and its forerunner Humanistic Psychology. Positive and humanistic psychologists are concerned with the question what in addition to the absence of ill-being we need to live well, to live a fulfilled, flourishing life.

Fourth, student well-being as a school educational end needs to include student well-*becoming*. As the Capabilities Approach to assessing quality of life has pointed out (e.g., Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1993, 2009), to live well we need to develop inner powers into capabilities that allow us to actually live well. School education needs to be measured against the expectation that students are helped to develop the capabilities they need to live well – in the present *and* in the future. That concern for well-*becoming* has to be also a concern for future generations. This links the concern for well-being with the concern for sustainable development and sustainable living, which is also the reason why our research group is concerned with education for *sustainable* well-being.

Fifth, student well-being as a school educational end needs to give consideration to the ecological aspect of well-being. “Ecology” means the study of the house or home. Student well-being is directly dependent on the quality of the schools ecology, which means, the well-being of the adults that are part of that ecology, like school staff and parents, as well as the quality of the material ecology in which students live for about half their awake-time, like the quality of the school building and the school yard.

The ambition of this working conference is to inspire and support you in your thinking about the importance and the possibilities of well-being and well-becoming as school educational ends that need to be considered when assessing the quality of school education in Manitoba. We also need to think about measuring well-being and well-becoming of students in schools to inform and guide us in policy and practice of school education in Manitoba, because as Stiglitz et al. (2010) have pointed out: “Metrics matter. What we measure affects what we do. If we have the wrong metrics, we will strive for the wrong things” (p. xvii). I wish you productive and insightful working sessions.

Thank you.

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