The Quest for a Purpose to Encompass the Highest Moral Values: Introduction to the Special Issue

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After decades of focusing narrowly on measuring students' academic attainment in literacy, mathematics, and science, educational systems have recently shifted their attention to the domain of student well-being. Even the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), source of the Programme in International Student Assessment (PISA) tests that focused worldwide attention on comparative achievement data, began in 2016 to publish comprehensive league tables of student well-being. Since then, nations, think tanks, and school systems have focused more and more on well-being.

For most educators, this recognition that learning involves more than mastery of narrow academic content is long-overdue. Educators have seen that our young people suffer from rising rates of anxiety, depression, and a lack of purpose, and they generally welcome the newfound

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though belated recognition among policymakers that well-being matters. Educators are enthusiastically endorsing new strategies to improve student well-being in their classrooms and schools. Indeed, any system that neglects student well-being is increasingly seen as deficient in contemporary educational debates. Rather than displacing this movement, the current coronavirus epidemic is in many ways accelerating policymakers' and educators' focus on student well-being.

But is all of the attention to well-being properly informed by educational research? Scholars have documented the large, heterogeneous set of approaches to well-being that are now being advocated (Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning Laboratory, n.d.; Wortham et al., 2020). If we do not attend carefully to the many differences among proliferating approaches to well-being, could this well-intentioned effort suffer the same fate as the ill-advised "self-esteem movement" or the push toward "emotional intelligence," which came to be seen as overly focused on fleeting emotional states of the individual, at the expense of a concern for the long-term flourishing of all?

To answer these questions, the guest editors of this Special Issue of the *ECNU Review of Education* have invited several pre-eminent educational scholars from around the world to contribute both conceptual and empirical papers that critically assess the rising popularity of student well-being as an educational goal. This gives us an opportunity to learn from reforms now underway in jurisdictions as diverse as the People's Republic of China, Korea, Singapore, Mexico, the U.K., Canada, and the U.S. We have gathered a range of opinions, from the enthusiastic to the skeptical, to scrutinize both approaches to well-being and emerging attempts to go beyond well-being.

Our first essay in this collection, by Wortham et al. (2020), sets out the terms for debate in an article entitled "Educating for Comprehensive Well-being." They review 11 approaches that advocate for student well-being and find striking discrepancies among them. The approaches range from classical Aristotelian virtue ethics to Indigenous education and contemporary reforms that focus on social and emotional learning. While every approach advocates human flourishing in one sense or another, the way in which this is understood and the way in which it is related to other concerns such as ethical behavior or responsibilities to the community and the natural world are framed very differently. For educators and policymakers, the implication of this article is that we should not uncritically embrace one or two offerings from among "the cacophony of heterogenous approaches" to well-being. Instead, we need first to ask what exactly is assumed by the different reform agendas advocating well-being, "acknowledge the depth of disagreement" among them, and "examine the conflicting assumptions made by various approaches before making a choice." Only in this way will it be possible to avoid the mistakes made by prior efforts to incorporate noncognitive goals into education that have not had the promised outcomes.

The second article in this special issue, by Ng (2020) of the National Institute of Education in Singapore, explores how that country addresses the issue of student well-being indirectly. It does this by focusing on the education of the whole student, understood in the broadest possible terms, and then addressing well-being as a component of this goal. Only recently has well-being appeared on Singapore's reform agenda, and Ng describes how it has done so without compromising academic rigor. Their theory of action is that "the more we focus on holistic education, rather than student well-being narrowly, the more wellness the students may actually and eventually experience." Singapore's approach is supported by research, as findings document that a sense of well-being is best attained not through its direct pursuit, but instead as a secondary effect of pursuing a larger purpose (Konow & Earley, 2007).

While Ng's article may reassure educators who wish to promote student well-being while securing students' academic achievement as traditionally measured, Rincón-Gallardo (2020) offers a bracing alternative perspective. Citing research indicating that "stress and boredom are defining features of conventional schooling," and noting that "as students grow older, their engagement and enthusiasm with school declines sharply from one year to the next" (p. 454), Rincón-Gallardo urges us to rethink education fundamentally. From his perspective, learning should be "a practice of freedom" that cannot be pursued in the controlled organizational hierarchies of traditional schooling. Rincón-Gallardo asks that all educators, both inside and outside of schools, recall "the four drivers of intrinsic motivation: purpose, autonomy, mastery, and connectedness" (p. 464). Only thus will it be possible, he argues, "to link learning and well-being" properly. This is a call to go far beyond familiar approaches to well-being.

The challenges entailed in doing so are formidable, however, given contemporary pressures on educators globally. In "Educating for Wholeness, but Beyond Competences: Challenges to Key-Competences-Based Education in China," Zhao (2020) notes the formidable power of the OECD, the European Union, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization in driving a new international agenda based upon vocational skills and training. He describes the national participation of the People's Republic of China in this new agenda as a "local response to a global imperative," in which the government combines competences-based education with indigenous national traditions of educating whole people. These efforts have been thwarted in important respects, however, because the bureaucratic forms of organization and standardization that Rincón-Gallardo decried persist and undermine students' desire for richer, interior experiences of learning and development.

Could the problems we encounter in creating schools that go beyond well-being, toward an education for wholeness and purpose, extend even beyond the school-based and neoliberal dilemmas identified by Rincón-Gallardo and Zhao respectively? In her essay entitled "Education for the Whole Person in a Modern East Asian Context: 'Caring-About the World' as a Form of

Self-Love," Kwak (2020) describes how traditional concepts of "liberal education" or "education as self-formation (Bildung)" have enduring relevance in Korea. While many international observers see her country as worthy of emulation because of students' high ranking on the OECD's PISA tests, she identifies the human costs of using academic achievement results as the only way in which the young can experience themselves as "living up to others' expectations was a way of being virtuous" (p. 493). Kwak turns to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's distinction between *amour-de-soi*, which refers to a healthy self-regard, and *amour-propre*, or "self-love in a relative sense," to illuminate the problems created by Korea's competitive academic culture. When the young are taught that their only value resides in how well they rank against others, she argues, they are incapable of developing "wholeheartedness" in their pursuits. Their "strongly developed *amour-propre* lead them into self-alienation as a form of dehumanization" (p. 494). What can be done to counteract this "self-alienation"? In general, the message that young people receive when their parents or society foists academically competitive values upon them is that any form of resistance must be selfish. For Kwak, this objection is based on an inability to conceptualize *amour-de-soi* as interwoven with love of others and care for the world. Educating the emotions, and promoting the interior growth of the self in a way that produces this attachment to others and the world, then becomes a central task for educators.

While this might sound abstract, it has practical ramifications, since "students' individual flourishing can be best cultivated when they are motivated *to love* subject matter or vocational skills" (p. 501). For Kwak, there is nothing inherently wrong with extrinsic motivation in schools, as long as it is connected with the experience of "wholeheartedness" that comes from freely chosen projects. Hence, there is no reason why schools cannot simultaneously develop "both the structure of one's volitional rationality and the mode of freedom that this structure of the will ensures" (p. 500). Kwak concludes by illustrating how a seminal text of Confucianism, *Classic of Rites*, written over two millennia ago, espoused such a harmonious reconciliation of intrinsic and external motivation. This is only possible in contemporary schools if educators acknowledge the "existential imperative" (Shirley, 2017, p. 133) in which a rising generation has opportunities to develop its own aims freed of the powerful societal constraints now common in competitive nations like Korea.

What might these kinds of educational opportunities look like, in practical terms? In his article on "Spiritual Development as an Educational Goal," Moulin-Stożek (2020) describes how the 1944 Education Act in England mandated that school should contribute "to the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development" (p. 505) of students. Spiritual development in the English context, writes Moulin-Stożek, "is an umbrella term for any activity across the curriculum that may stimulate pupils' reflection, creativity, imagination, wonder, or enlarging of experience or emotion" (p. 514). It is not explicitly tied to Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, or other faith traditions,

although in religiously affiliated schools it could be. Moulin-Stożek notes that the promotion of spiritual development in England can manifest certain types of "Britishness," focusing on "a narrower, political goal" that reduces its universal appeal. The resolution to this dilemma is not, he argues, the abolition of spiritual development, but rather its elevation to "an international goal of schooling." As this Special Issue of the *ECNU Review of Education* helps establish, "concerns for peace, cooperation, and personal holistic development are certainly still held among educators internationally" (p. 515). These axiological purposes of education become "all the more important globally" as "increased technological power" brings all of the world together—now more than ever, in the wake of the coronavirus.

Moulin-Stożek's goal of spiritual development as an aim of education will be appealing to many, but as his commentary on the dangers of anachronistic definitions of "Britishness" implies, this line of theory-building has substantial dangers. Kim's article (2020) on "Learning Language, Learning Culture: Teaching Language to the Whole Student" offers a way out. Drawing upon what has been described as "three generations" of cultural-historical activity theory (Engström, 2001), Kim shows how new technological tools make it possible "to expose language learners to language use in context" (p. 531). Understanding the ways in which language is embedded in cultures that stretch back through centuries enables "deeper intercultural communication" through which learners can "experience personal transformation" in dialogical encounters with others. This philosophy of education "goes beyond mere 'well-being' as an end, to a broader account of collective flourishing" (p. 537) in which all can participate in "creating a better world." As in the article by Rincón-Gallardo, this locates the desire to go beyond well-being in the context of larger social transformation.

The theme of going "beyond mere well-being as an end" is picked up and expanded by Shirley (2020) in the final essay in this volume. Building upon recent research findings from Ontario, Canada (Hargreaves & Shirley, in press), Shirley argues that an essential part of an adequate education for *human beings* involves preparation for the unpleasant facets of life beyond *well-being*. Learning to be self-critical when one has acted unfairly, directly confronting examples of social injustice, and learning about phenomena such as climate change or the coronavirus are not pleasant tasks. Nonetheless, they are crucial to moral development. Shirley asks that these foundational components of an education for wholeness and purpose be taken up by educators, and he identifies specific "purpose interventions" that can help educators adjust their pedagogies. Beyond these, he pushes for broader cultural and organizational transformations in schools, such that the development of students as whole people with their own freely chosen projects is not peripheral, but rather central and foundational.

Taken together, the articles for this Special Issue of the *ECNU Review of Education* affirm the importance of well-being as an important goal for educational change, but at the same time they

also identify important limitations in the ways that well-being is currently conceptualized and implemented. The authors share a common concern that education not be reduced to testing and competition on the one hand, nor to transient emotional states of satisfaction or well-being on the other. Education possesses an inner grandeur that is diminished when we narrow and trivialize its goals in this way. The timeless themes of educational philosophy—the growth of individuals in conditions of maximum inner freedom, the pursuit of social justice, and care for the world—encompass well-being, but we should not restrict ourselves to well-being and thus limit our vision.

One final note: The contributions to this volume were all written before the coronavirus epidemic had killed hundreds of thousands of people and devastated economies around the world. While some of these deaths were inevitable given the nature of the virus and our globalized world, others resulted from failures of leadership that divided nations when international solidarity was required. Educators now need to ask ourselves what we can do to build a better world in which those who are most vulnerable to diseases and other challenges of this kind receive the support that they need. The frontline workers who have gone to serve the infected in our hospitals—and the countless educators who have answered the call to serve their students under challenging conditions—offer prime examples of what it means to think beyond one's immediate well-being to take care of others and the world. Their courage and determination illustrate what it means, in concrete terms and in dire circumstances, to give oneself as a whole person to a purpose that encompasses the highest moral values.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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