



Competency Framework: Self-Directed Learning (SDL) and Wellbeing

Conceptualization of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) and
Wellbeing across SWELL Partner Institutes

Project title: Self-Directed Learning for the Wellbeing of Educators and Lifelong
Learners (SWELL)

Project code: 101249353
Work Package 2

Authors: Éabha A. Hughes, Dr John O'Reilly*, Dr Diarmuid Verrier

*Corresponding Author: john.oreilly@ul.ie

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.



Table of Contents

Introduction

Introduction	i
Educational Purpose	i
Clarifying Terms	iii
Teacher Professional Learning within the SWELL Academy	v
Development of this Framework	v
Metaphors supporting SDL from participating countries	vi

Self-Directed Learning

Self-Directed Learning Concept Map	1
Definition of Self-Directed Learning	2
Assumptions and Ideologies Surrounding Self-Directed Learning	4
Structural Needs of Self-Directed Learning	7
Questions and Issues Surrounding Self-Directed Learning	10

Wellbeing

Wellbeing Concept Map	15
Definition of Wellbeing	16
Assumptions and Ideologies Surrounding Wellbeing	18
Structural Needs of Wellbeing	20
Questions and Issues Surrounding Wellbeing	23

Findings

Understanding of Self-Directed Learning	28
Existing incorporation of SDL in curriculum	32
Perceived value of SDL	38
Opportunities to enhance SDL incorporation in the curriculum	41
Structural requirements for SDL	44
MOOC development	47
Perspectives of graduates from Democratic Schools	51
Summary of core curricular areas where there may be SDL affordances	53
Key Levers for the SWELL academy	62
Conclusion	68

Appendix

Glossary of Terms, Acronyms and Abbreviations	70
References	78



Table of Figures

<i>Figure 1: SWELL Self-Directed Learning Conceptual Map</i>	1
<i>Figure 2: Self-Directed Learning Definition</i>	2
<i>Figure 3: Self-Directed Learning Assumptions & Ideologies</i>	4
<i>Figure 4: Structural Needs for Self-Directed Learning</i>	7
<i>Figure 5: Questions and Issues Surrounding Self-Directed Learning</i>	10
<i>Figure 6: SWELL Wellbeing Conceptual Map</i>	15
<i>Figure 7: Wellbeing Definition</i>	16
<i>Figure 8: Wellbeing Assumptions & Ideologies</i>	18
<i>Figure 9: Structural Needs for Wellbeing</i>	20
<i>Figure 10: Questions and Issues surrounding Wellbeing</i>	23
<i>Figure 11: A possible pathway from curriculum conformity to schools having the freedom to be different (NCCA, 2010, p. 27)</i>	69



Table of Tables

<i>Table 1: List of SWELL partners and associated country codes</i>	28
<i>Table 2: Comparison of SDL Affordances across partner contexts</i>	32
<i>Table 3: Highlighted pedagogical approaches to SDL</i>	34
<i>Table 4: Curricular and Structural Affordances for SDL across partner contexts</i>	54
<i>Table 5: Ranking of levers presented during SWELL TPM2</i>	65
<i>Table 6: Final ranking of Levers for SWELL</i>	66



Introduction

Introduction

The development of the SWELL Academy takes place in a time of significant global debate about the purpose of education and calls for educational change and development. UNESCO (2022) have warned that democracy is backsliding, flawed and fragile, emphasising the crucial role that education must play in building student capacity for active citizenship and democratic participation to equip them for rapidly changing futures. The OECD (2019) emphasises the need for 21st century learning competencies to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in action to support learner agency in navigating a complex and uncertain world. UNICEF (2019) conceptualises these challenges within the rights of the child, necessitating a transformation in the culture of learning to strengthen the voices of children within the classroom and through participating in defining education policies. As faith in democracy weakens and the world seems increasingly divided, citizens can become impatient, leaping to judgement, allowing “supremacist ideals and chauvinisms gain force, to the detriment of plural identities and of dialogue and understanding” (UNESCO, 2022). Dewey argued that if people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led (Apple and Beane, 1995).

In response to this there has been a move internationally to Competency Frameworks that recognise the need for increased flexibility and autonomy in schools that take student voice more seriously than has been the case previously. This flexibility however is in tension with curricula that are overloaded with content and tests of memorisation through high-stakes assessment systems.

Educational Purpose

Biesta (2009) argues that concerns about the quality or effectiveness of education are undermined by an excessive focus on measurement and comparison of educational outcomes and effectiveness (PISA and others). All of these measurements are predicated on the assumed “good” of existing, mainstream systems. He calls for a deeper consideration of what constitutes a good education and what an educated person should look like. Three functions of education are proposed:

1. *Qualification*: This is a particular focus for state-funded education and has a large technical-rational dimension to ensure the production of educated citizens to participate in the workforce.



2. *Socialisation*: The focus here is on the perpetuation of norms and values, connected to cultural or religious traditions. This is often experienced through the “hidden” curriculum, those aspects of the daily schooling that may not be explicitly named but nonetheless are significant in the lives of students and teachers. From this perspective democracy cannot stay as a curricular topic, but needs to be practiced and experienced in order to be embodied and protected.
3. *Subjectification*: This is about the process of individuation where a student grows into their unique self. In some ways this might be considered the opposite of socialisation. This is often reflected in the ambitions of school mission statements that students will come to know themselves and reach their “full potential”. The focus here is on autonomy and independence in thinking and acting.

These functions are convoluted, each influencing the other. Biesta (ibid.) raises the issue of normative validity of widespread educational measurement – are we measuring what we value? This must involve consideration of what is desirable – values are therefore at the heart of all considerations of educational purpose, which cannot be considered solely by reference to existing structures.

In the face of proposals for educational change to focus on what is more desirable, such as the move to more flexible systems that facilitate the forms of democratic education called for above, policy makers are often concerned about curricular drift. Concerns reflect the likelihood that given schools will depart from the curriculum due to the very flexibility allowed by it. The SWELL Academy considers that such concerns are mostly focused on the Qualification function of education - what Biesta describes as the “instrumental” value of education. This is also reflected in the Socialisation function of young people and at the expense of Subjectification. The “ultimate” value of education must focus on realising the aims and purposes of education which are often sacrificed by an excessive focus on Learning Outcomes and associated high-stakes examinations i.e. if it cannot be measured, it is of less worth..

More recent work from Biesta (2025) has developed his thinking on what constitutes the “good” of education. He argues that “education only has a point for those things that cannot happen *without* education” (ibid., p.177). This is framed in the context of the original Greek word for school, “σχολή” which he translates as “free time” or time made free that does not require the student to be a productive member of society. He suggests that this time that is set aside should allow for exploration and experimentation to develop critical, emancipatory knowledge that questions power structures and assumptions. Functional knowledge that can be applied in a variety of settings does not lack importance, but can often be developed in practice, “on the job” so as to speak. The SWELL Academy must build the argument that SDL adds something really “useful” that



supports, but extends beyond the functional knowledge required by traditional subjects. This must pertain to the two parties at the heart of education – the student and the teacher. Biesta goes on to argue that the essential role of the teacher in this framing is to “redirect” student attention. This is not to control the student’s attention but to support and encourage self-action, to question assumptions and think critically, to encourage persistence, to consider alternatives and extensions and to open up possibilities that they may not have considered. Biesta (ibid., p. 187) suggests that in so doing “we open a door to the world for our students – the door of mathematics, the door of foreign languages, the door of history, the door of physical education, the door of the arts, and so on – we also open a door to the self, that is, we provide them with new and different ways to meet themselves in relation to what they meet in the world”. In the *didaktik* tradition, this supports sense-making, connecting the student to the wider world.

A rebalancing is therefore required, one that retains a focus on Qualification and Socialisation but that places more of an emphasis on Subjectification. Given the convoluted nature of these functions, an increased focus on Subjectification can be expected to significantly influence Socialisation and be confronted by the inertia of Qualification. This will be particularly the case where existing high-stakes assessment systems are seen to be undermined by Subjectification. The SWELL Academy must therefore attempt to demonstrate how the enhancement of Subjectification through SDL can support Qualification and Socialisation. This can be linked to emerging international policy considerations in relation to the redevelopment of educational purpose that requires more flexibility in the face of uncertain futures, supported by Biesta’s considerations about the “point” of education.

Clarifying Terms

Throughout this conceptualisation, the term “student” is used to refer to young people participating in formal education in primary and post-primary settings. This is the term most used by professionals in school settings and in the SWELL Academy we consider teachers and students alike as “learners”.

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is considered in detail in the following section (p.1) but in brief, SDL involves high levels of student agency in defining what is learned, with whom, why, when and how. It requires that student initiative is taken seriously and has influence within curriculum, that the student has some level of control over their environment. Very often it is driven by student intrinsic motivation to explore issues that really matter to them.



SDL is often confused with Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) which involves students in setting goals and monitoring and evaluating progress towards them. As such, SRL can be said to be a necessary condition for SDL but it lacks the significant agency that characterises SDL, in particular in relation to determining what is learned. All too often, SRL goals are those that are aligned with the formal curriculum and may be more extrinsically motivated. Cosnefroy and Carré (2014) provide a useful and succinct comparison of these concepts.

Voice and Agency are also two terms that have varied meanings and interpretations and are often conflated, assuming that one implies the existence of the other, or indeed that they might be synonymous. Student voice involves students actively shaping their education and building on their insights, acknowledging that they have unique and valuable perspectives on teaching, learning, and schooling itself (Cook-Sather, 2006) (Cook-Sather, 2006). The SWELL Academy draws on the work of Lundy (2007) to argue for attuning to student voice based on Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child so that their full participation in decision-making in school is taken as a legal right i.e. students are positioned as rights-holders. In this sense, attuning to student voice and taking it seriously is not the gift of a teacher but a legal obligation. Lundy argues that to support authentic participation, students need *space* to express themselves; facilitation from teachers to learn how to use their *voice*; an appropriate *audience* who will sincerely listen to them; such that their thinking has *influence*. Interestingly, Lundy's model has found some purchase amongst policy makers and the Irish Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Affairs (2021) has published a National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making. In addition, Lundy's work has attracted attention in Iceland, Denmark, Malta, Taiwan, Belgium, Scotland and New Zealand.

Voice then is about students making decisions that they subsequently act upon. Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) argue that agency is not something that one *has* but is focused on what one *does* – it is relational and reflects the situated, context-sensitive capacity to act. O'Reilly and O'Grady (2024) contend that voice should be seen as the primary driver of agency i.e. that voice is fundamental and that forms of agency emerge from the positioning of student voice. For example, where the students' voice is treated in a tokenistic manner, the resultant agency is at best instrumental, oriented towards external goals. Where student voice is cultivated following Lundy (2007), it is likely that the emergent agency is authentic and truly reflective of intrinsic student goals and values.

Following O'Reilly and O'Grady (2024), we consider student engagement as the most visible expression of the positioning of student voice and therefore agency. Engagement concerns student involvement in purposive activities with positive learning outcomes



(Groccia, 2018). This of course raises questions about what is considered “purposive” and “positive”. The SWELL academy considers the authentic engagement with student voice to lead to SDL (the form of engagement) and resultant agency that is meaningful to students. As described above, SRL can cultivate aspects of SDL. Other forms of engagement that may align with SDL include (but are not limited to):

- Problem-based learning to develop a solution to a problem posed.
- Project-based learning to develop a product of learning.
- Phenomenon-based learning to examine a real-world issue in a multi-disciplinary way.
- Learner-initiated learning.
- Negotiated curriculum (what I know, what I want to know, how to show what I have learned).
- Inquiry-based learning.

A large question here relates to who defines the problem/project/phenomenon.

Teacher Professional Learning within the SWELL Academy

SWELL is very conscious of the wide range of demands on teachers’ professional lives. Therefore, the focus on supporting teacher practice is on creating an environment that is context sensitive, provides multiple routes for entry, facilitates collaboration, recognises professional vulnerability and solves problems. We are very conscious of “initiativitis” (Fullan, 2008) where teachers may feel apathic about ongoing, mandated changes that often seem poorly considered and lack alignment with the realities of their working lives.

We recognise that professional teachers do not “implement” changes but rather “enact” them. The former implies compliance while the latter involves reflection, time to experiment, and the processes required for sense-making that can adapt professional learning to context.

SWELL therefore aims to develop the wellbeing of all learners (teachers and students alike) through SDL experiences that empower participants with meaningful control and ownership in their varied environments.

Development of this Framework

The conceptual mapping of SDL and Wellbeing presented here is based on work that was completed in advance of the first consortium meeting in Cyprus and subsequent



discussions. Each partner country prepared a review of the state of play with respect to SDL and Wellbeing in their respective countries. This was synthesised with peer reviewed literature to produce a detailed description of SDL and Wellbeing to support the consortium in understanding the nature of both concepts. This material would need to be vulgarised for teachers, students, principals and parents.

The Findings section presents data from partners reflecting what are considered to be the core issues relating to developing SDL practices in our respective countries. Each partner prepared a response under the key headings and WP2 members synthesised this to produce an overview of the state of play across the consortium.

From the outset the focus of WP2 has been on identifying “levers” that can shift practice towards SDL i.e. to equip those designing the SWELL Academy with insights as to what to target in terms of learning experiences for participants and dissemination materials for relevant stakeholders.

Metaphors supporting SDL from participating countries

We collect here some creative expressions/phrases that capture thinking relating to SDL from countries within the SWELL network.

In Ireland, the ancient phrase “Cúinne an Ghiorria” means the “Hare’s corner” and refers to the practice of leaving part of a field fallow, as a refuge for the hare and other wildlife. In SWELL we think of this as a protected space that does not have to be put to reductive, “efficient” use, where learners can reflect and make something meaningful.

The German language has various phrases that could relate to SDL, such as “Der Weg ist das Ziel” (“the path is the goal”); “Selbstgesteuertes Lernen”, meaning “self-steered learning”, as the learner is at the wheel, not just “directing” in an abstract sense; and, “Übung macht den Meister”, “practice makes the master” in regards to autonomous skill-building.

In Estonian language, proverbs relate to the concept of “self-direction”: “Kuni elame, seni õpime”, or “as long as we live, we learn”, framing learning as an ongoing self-driven condition of living rather than a bounded, other-directed activity; and, “Targaks ei sünnita, targaks õpitakse”, meaning “one isn’t born wise, one learns to become wise”, focusing on the individual responsibility of the learner for his/her own growth as a result of own effort.

In Finland, common phrases related to SDL are: “Oppia ikä kaikki”, as in “one is never too old to learn”, framing learning as self-initiated at any life stage; and “Ei kukaan ole seppä



syntyessään", or "nobody is born a blacksmith", implying that the craft has to be self-forged through practice.

In Italy, the phrase “Sbagliando s’impara”, meaning “We learn by making mistakes”, frames experimentation, reflection and mistakes as part of the learner’s own learning process. Another saying could be “Impara l’arte e mettila da parte” literally, “Learn a skill and keep it with you.” It emphasises acquiring knowledge and skills (autonomously) because they become resources that the learner carries throughout life. A bit more stretched but really strong proverb is “Volere è potere” meaning something like “willingness is power” or “Where there’s a will, there’s a way” which strongly relates more to motivation and learner agency: personal intention is what initiates and sustains learning.

In French speaking countries the expression “C’est en forgeant qu’on devient forgeron” “It is by forging that one becomes a blacksmith” derives probably from Latin “Fabricando fit faber” or “practice builds the worker” and it expresses learning through practice, experimentation and progressive mastery rather than through passive instruction.

Self-Directed Learning Concept Map

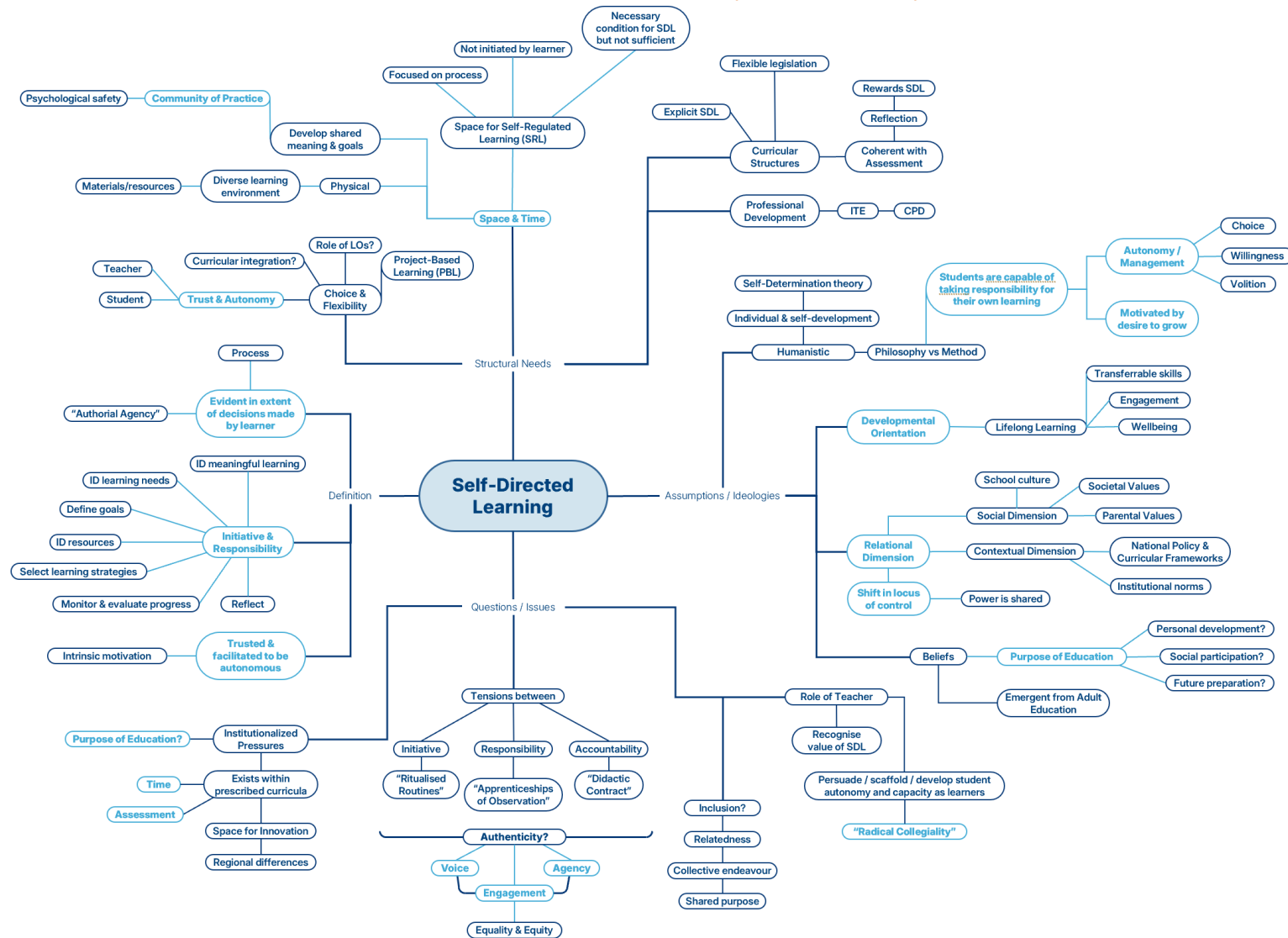


Figure 1: SWELL Self-Directed Learning Conceptual Map.

Self-Directed Learning

Definition of Self-Directed Learning

Across SWELL partners, self-directed learning (SDL) is conceptualised as a learner-driven, cyclical process (multiple iterations of goal setting and reflection) in which individuals are facilitated, supported and trusted to take initiative, responsibility and ownership over their learning. This includes identifying learning needs, setting meaningful goals, selecting appropriate strategies and resources, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes (Knowles, 1975). Central to this is the degree to which learners can make decisions related to what, how, when, with whom, and why learning occurs, positioning SDL as fundamentally defined by and evident in the extent of student agency and decision-making capacity. While more recent work (Morris, 2024 for example) has built upon this definition, none have challenged it in essence but rather suggested categorical dimensions that influence SDL which are captured elsewhere in the SWELL Framework. As such Knowles' definition is suggested as most useful as it places an emphasis on empirical action that is readily comprehensible.

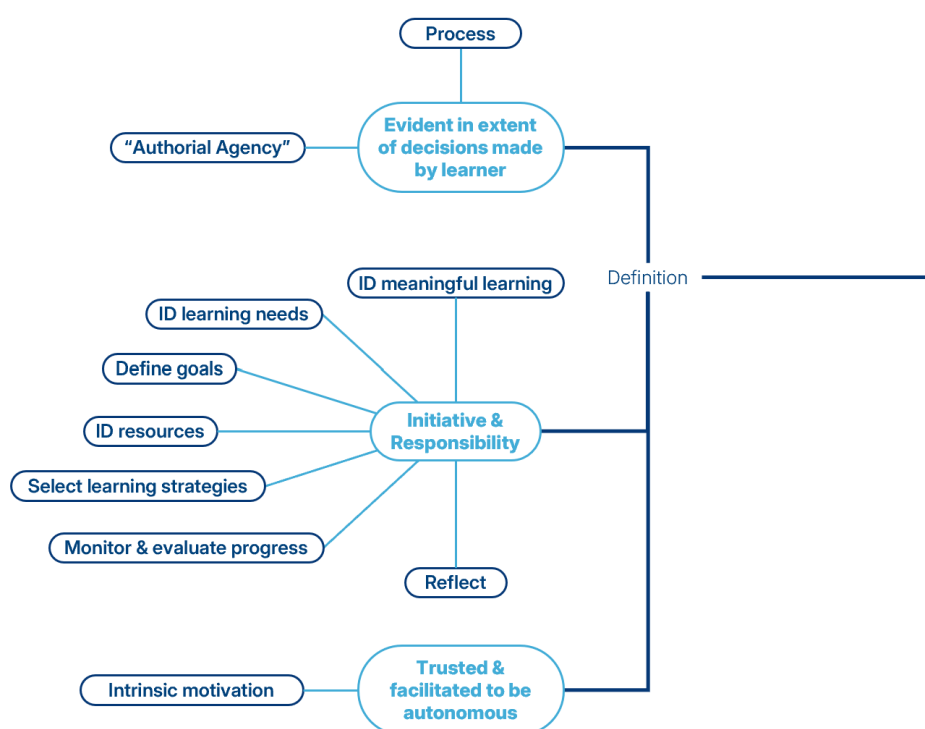


Figure 2: Self-Directed Learning Definition.

This emphasis on decision-making emerges through the concept of *authorial agency*, (Matusov, 2009, Matusov et al., 2016b) whereby students are not merely participants in a prescribed learning processes, but are active authors of their own educational experiences. Within this framing, SDL is not limited to procedural independence but involves meaningful engagement, intrinsic motivation (Bodkyn and Stevens, 2015), self-regulation (Loyens et al., 2008), and the capacity to shape one's own educational



experiences. Students are understood as capable of initiating, sustaining, redirecting, repurposing, and even discontinuing learning based on evolving interests and goals, reinforcing SDL as a dynamic and adaptive process. It is also likely to lead to increased enjoyment and indeed “fun”.

SDL is conceptualised across SWELL as both a process and a competence. As a process, it is ongoing, reflective, and contextually situated (Towle and Cottrell, 1996); as a competence, it represents a critical capacity for lifelong learning, adaptability and participation in contemporary societies (Morris, 2019). This can also be associated with broader educational aims, including the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, *learning to learn* (Thrun and Pratt, 1998) and lifelong learning principles, as reflected in the Introduction (Purpose of Education) (Morris, 2024).

SDL is further underpinned by curiosity, intrinsic motivation, initiative, autonomy, agency and self-regulated learning (SRL) (Zimmerman, 1990). Through this, SDL is both enabled by and contributes to the development of metacognition, self-efficacy and learner independence (Victori and Lockhart, 1995). Reflection and self-assessment are therefore integral, positioning SDL as a recursive process in which learners continuously evaluate and refine their approaches to learning. Hence, SDL can be expanded beyond pedagogy into a rights-based framework, grounded in principles of self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 2012), dignity, and democratic participation, positioning students not only as active participants but as co-constructors of learning.

Core to the conceptualisation of SDL is the necessary repositioning of the role of the teacher within classrooms (Bolhuis and Voeten, 2001, Woods and Copur-Gencturk, 2024). As students become increasingly self-directed, taking ownership over and becoming authorial in their learning experiences, teachers are positioned not as transmitters of expert knowledge, but as facilitators or coaches who scaffold learning, support autonomy, and create the conditions under which SDL can emerge. This involves balancing guidance and independence, ensuring that students are supported in developing the capacities required for effective self-direction while maintaining ownership of their learning.

At its core, Self-Directed Learning can be understood as a learner-driven, reflective and cyclical process in which individuals exercise autonomy and agency to identify learning needs, set meaningful goals, select appropriate strategies and resources, and evaluate learning. It is both a pedagogical process and a lifelong learning competence, grounded in intrinsic motivation, participation, and the development of authorial agency, supported by relational, pedagogical and structural conditions that enable meaningful, sustained engagement.

Assumptions and Ideologies Surrounding Self-Directed Learning

The assumptions and ideologies underpinning self-directed learning (SDL) across SWELL partners are predominantly grounded in humanistic and learner-centred educational traditions. At their core is the belief that learning is a natural, internally driven process, motivated by curiosity, interest, and an individual's desire for growth (Berlyne, 1954). Students are therefore understood as inherently capable, responsible, and oriented towards development, rather than as passive recipients of knowledge. This aligns with humanistic theories of education and psychology, in addition to the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2012), emphasising autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs underpinning motivation and engagement. SDL is also associated with identity-formation and the development of capacity for lifelong learning (Candy, 1991).

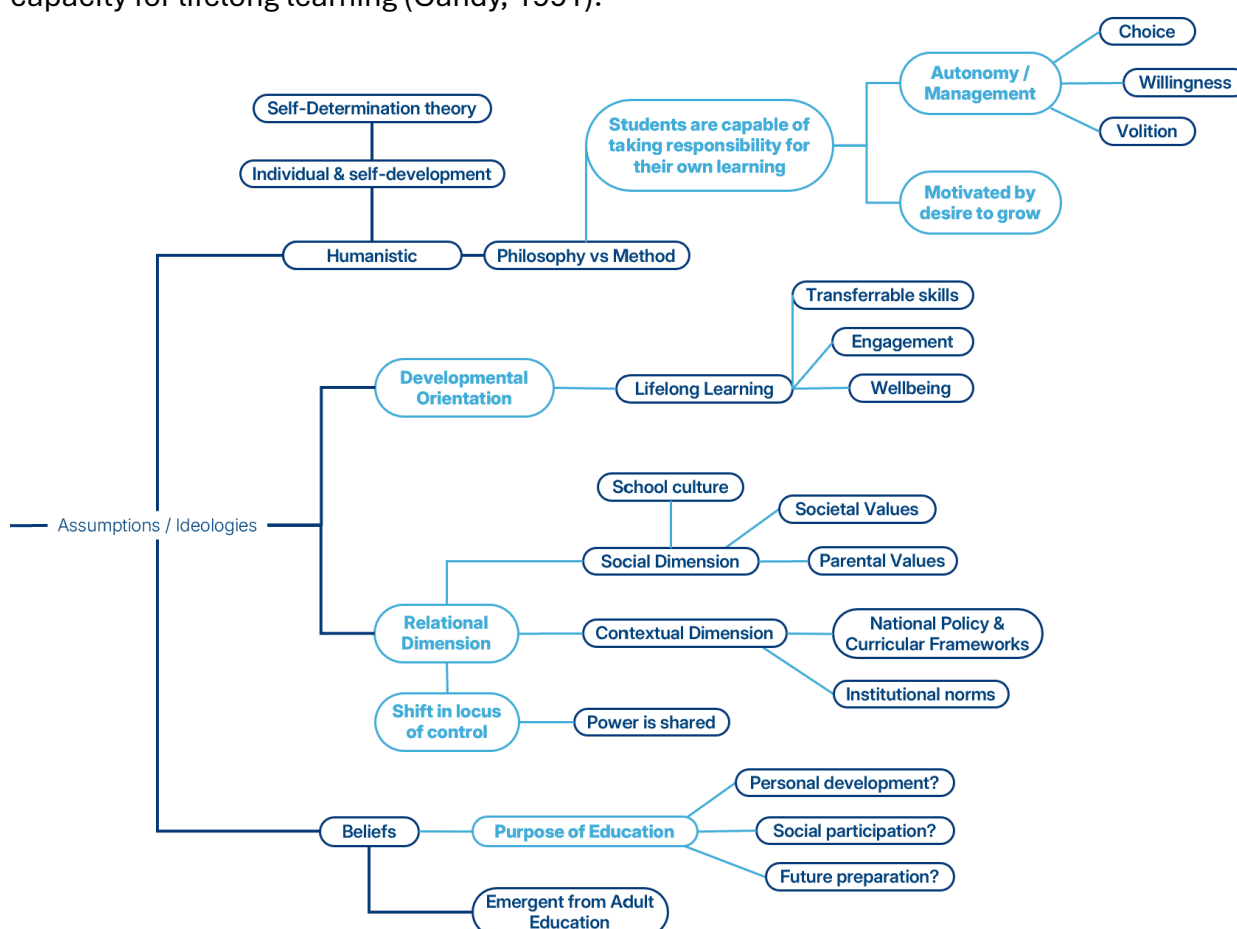


Figure 3: Self-Directed Learning Assumptions & Ideologies.

At the same time, SDL is not conceptualised as an individualistic or isolated endeavour. Across SWELL partners, there is strong recognition of its relational and social dimensions. A central ideology evident across SWELL contexts concerns the locus of control in learning. Traditional models, in which authority resides primarily with the teacher or institution, are increasingly challenged by approaches that position students centrally in education (Bolhuis and Voeten, 2001). Within SDL, the learning intention does not disappear; it instead moves from teacher to student. This shift reflects a broader



commitment to autonomy, agency and self-determination, with SDL framed as a means of enabling students to take ownership of their educational experiences.

Learning is understood to occur within *communities of practice* (Wenger, 2011) characterised by trust, dialogue, and participation, where student-teacher relationships are fundamental in enabling self-direction. Within these contexts, power is shared rather than hierarchical or monopolized, with teachers adopting roles as facilitators, mentors, or co-inquirers (Bolhuis and Voeten, 2001); although the extent to which this shift is realised in practice varies significantly. This relational orientation underscores the importance of supportive environments in which students feel safe to take risks, make mistakes, and engage in meaningful learning processes. Reflection and making mistakes (Chialvo and Bak, 1999) are therefore not only accepted, but are valued as integral components of deep learning.

Furthermore, the treatment of SDL is assumed to be contextually moderated. In the classroom, it is moderated by resources, relationships and classroom and school culture (Brookfield, 2009). In a broader context, prevailing cultural and institutionalised norms centred on accountability, standardization and control, along with, educational policies, curricular frameworks, and parental and societal values continue to shape and, at times, constrain the enactment of SDL. This results in an ongoing negotiation between emancipatory, learner-centred ideals and more traditional, performance-oriented paradigms.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, these assumptions intersect with broader philosophical questions concerning the purposes of education, particularly in balancing individual flourishing with social and democratic participation. Particular thought must be given by SWELL partners to addressing *who* is being educated, *what* is being educated, *how* this occurs, and for what purpose is this occurring, both in local and broader, global contexts (Biesta, 2009). SDL is variously positioned as contributing to personal wellbeing and fulfilment, the development of democratic participation, and preparation for social and economic life (Morris, 2019). In some contexts, particularly within democratic education traditions, SDL is framed as a matter of human rights, grounded in principles of dignity, self-determination, and participation. In others, it is more instrumentally linked to the development of transferable skills, employability, and lifelong learning capacities.

Additionally, an enduring assumption that positions SDL as occurring primarily within adult education contexts (Knowles, 1970) potentially limits its recognition and implementation in post-primary education. The conceptualization of SDL as a socially mediated, context-dependant practice (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978, Candy, 1991) challenges the notion that it is developmentally bound to adulthood, and research has demonstrated that young people are capable of SDL when enabling conditions are met (Gibbons, 2002, Holt, 2009, Morris, 2019).

There is also variability in the extent to which SDL is understood as a pedagogical method versus a broader educational philosophy or disposition. As a pedagogical method, SDL is operationalised through specific instructional approaches; through a philosophical



perspective it represents a fundamental reorientation of the purposes and practices of education (Biesta, 2015).

Overall, the ideological landscape of SDL across SWELL is characterised by a shared commitment to humanistic, developmental, and relational principles, coupled with ongoing tensions arising from structural, cultural, and policy constraints. These dynamics underscore the need for continued critical reflection on how SDL is conceptualised, enacted, and sustained within diverse educational contexts.

Structural Needs of Self-Directed Learning

The enactment of SDL across SWELL partner contexts is consistently understood as contingent upon a set of interrelated structural, pedagogical, and systemic conditions. While there is broad convergence in the conceptual principles underpinning SDL, its realisation in each context varies significantly according to national policy frameworks, institutionalised norms, societal values and pedagogical traditions. These variations range from more structured, scaffolded models, such as guided autonomy, project-based learning, and flipped classroom approaches, to more open, democratic forms of education grounded in participation, learner rights, and shared decision-making. In the latter, particularly within democratic education traditions, SDL extends beyond pedagogy to encompass learners' rights to co-construct and influence their educational experiences, aligning with broader principles of self-determination and educational justice.

A foundational requirement for SDL is the development of enabling learning environments characterised by psychological safety (Van Woezik et al., 2021), trust (du Toit-Brits, 2019) and relational support. Such environments are foundational in allowing students to exercise agency, take risks, and engage in reflective and self-directed processes, in addition to engaging in self-regulated learning. The need for a supportive, relational community (Sze-Yeng and Hussain, 2010) in which SDL can occur aligns with socio-cultural perspectives on learning, which emphasise the centrality of social interaction and supportive mediation in cognitive development (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978). Within SWELL contexts, learning environments are therefore conceptualised as dialogic and participatory spaces, where relationships between students and teachers are based on mutual respect, trust, and shared responsibility, meaning and goals.

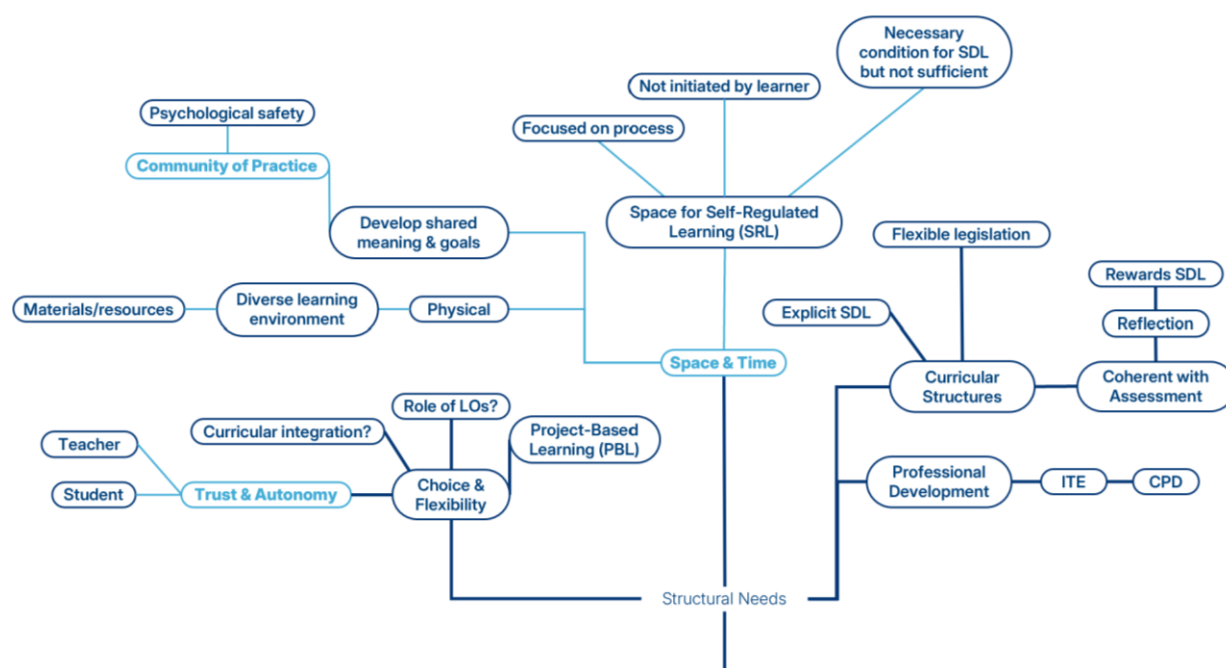


Figure 4: Structural Needs for Self-Directed Learning.



Curriculum and pedagogical design constitute a further critical structural dimension, emphasising the need for flexible and responsive curricula that create space for learner choice, autonomy, and meaningful engagement. Within this space it is understood that there must be the opportunity for choice and flexibility for students, teachers and structurally within schools (e.g., timetables). This necessitates the development of trust between students and teachers, which can be encouraged through pedagogical approaches such as learning contracts and classroom charters (Donnelly, 2019).

Pedagogical approaches such as project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and collaborative learning are widely identified as key enablers of SDL, as they support active, contextualised, and student-driven forms of learning. At the same time, there is a clear recognition that self-regulated learning, while necessary, is not sufficient alone for SDL to occur spontaneously (Loyens et al., 2008, Jossberger et al., 2010); rather, SDL requires broader conditions that enable learners to shape not only how they learn, but also what and why they learn. This reflects a shift from instructional design towards more participatory and co-constructed learning processes.

Assessment practices emerge as a central structural constraint and opportunity in relation to SDL. Across partners, there is strong consensus that dominant high-stakes and standardised assessment models can inhibit the development of SDL by prioritising outcomes over processes and limiting learner autonomy. In response, partners advocate for co-assessment approaches that value reflection, self-assessment, and formative feedback, thereby aligning more closely with the principles of SDL.

The reconfiguration of the teacher's role is another key structural requirement. The role of the teacher as facilitator requires targeted support through both continuous professional development (CPD) and initial teacher education (ITE). For SDL, teachers are increasingly positioned as facilitators, mentors, or coaches who support learners in developing the skills and dispositions necessary for self-direction. This shift necessitates significant investments in both professional development and initial teacher education, including training in SDL pedagogies, scaffolding strategies, and the design of flexible and inclusive learning pathways (Lunenberg and Korthagen, 2003). The capacity to balance guidance with autonomy is particularly emphasised, reflecting the need for what may be termed “structured openness” in SDL environments.

In addition to pedagogical and relational conditions, material and organisational structures play a crucial role. Some structures may be resistant to change, e.g., age segregation, which may limit opportunities for collective student learning and, where possible, structures that allow for age-mixing to share insights should be identified. Access to diverse learning resources, including digital tools, cultural materials and community-based opportunities, is identified as essential in supporting learner choice and exploration. Access to digital technologies and resources expand opportunities for independent inquiry, collaboration, and resource access, supporting learner autonomy and flexibility (Fahnoe and Mishra, 2013). Flexible, unhurried time (Hayes, 2024, Brookfield, 2009) and learning spaces are also necessary to enable sustained, self-paced engagement with learning (Brookfield, 2009), highlighting the need for organisational adaptability in facilitating SDL.



At a systemic level, the realisation of SDL depends on alignment between educational values, policies, and institutional practices. This highlights the need for supportive policy frameworks that allow for school-level autonomy, curricular flexibility, and innovation. Socio-ecological perspectives on curriculum and system change (Priestley et al., 2015, Taguma and Barrera, 2019, Priestley et al., 2021) highlight the importance of alignment and coherence across different levels of the system, as well as the role of participation and shared meaning-making among stakeholders. Furthermore, meaningful participation is identified as a core structural feature of SDL, requiring opportunities for learners to engage in co-design, decision-making, and the evaluation of their learning. This participatory dimension reinforces SDL as not only a pedagogical approach but also a democratic practice, contributing to both individual growth and collective engagement for the development of the "common good".

Overall, the structural conditions required for SDL across SWELL contexts are complex yet remain negotiable, encompassing relational, pedagogical, organisational, and systemic dimensions. Their effective integration is essential for enabling both teachers and learners to exercise agency and engage meaningfully in self-directed learning processes.

Questions and Issues Surrounding Self-Directed Learning

Despite strong conceptual alignment across SWELL partners, the enactment of SDL raises a series of complex and interrelated questions and issues. These reflect ongoing tensions between pedagogical ideals and systemic realities, as well as deeper philosophical concerns regarding the purposes of education, authenticity, and the conditions under which meaningful learner autonomy can be realised.

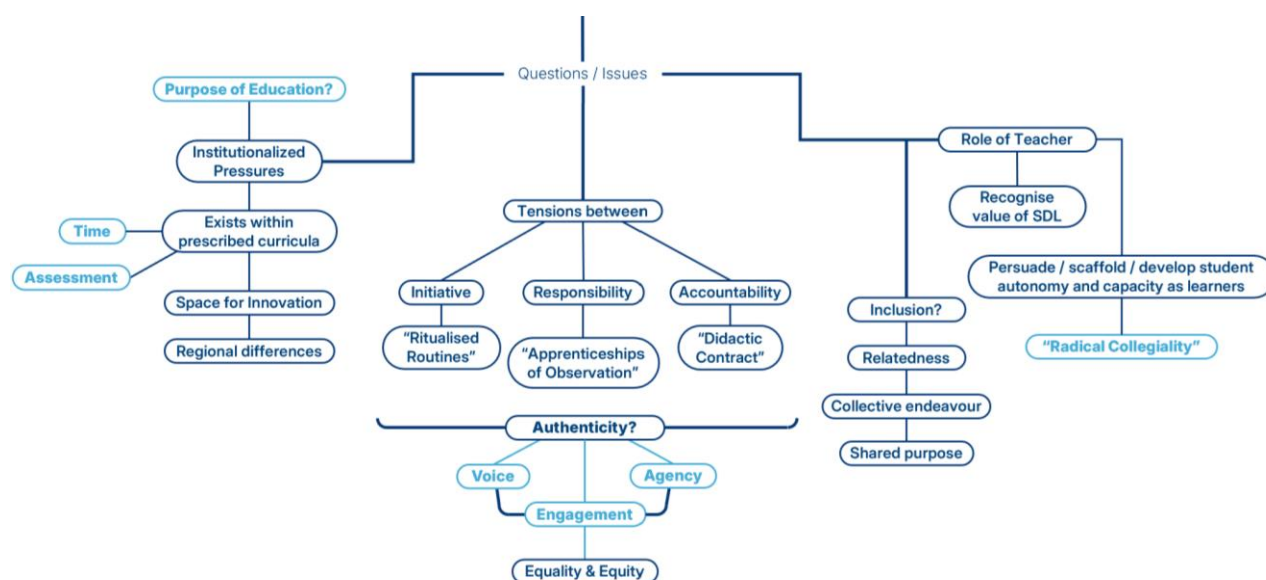


Figure 5: Questions and Issues Surrounding Self-Directed Learning

A central concern relates to the role of the teacher and the balance between facilitation and instruction. Questions emerge regarding how teachers can effectively scaffold learning while preserving student autonomy. This includes the challenge of determining the appropriate degree of structure necessary to support SDL without constraining independence. The notion of “structured openness” becomes particularly salient here, as teachers are required to navigate the tension between guidance and freedom, primarily in environments shaped by accountability pressures and prescribed curricula. This raises questions of responsibility and accountability; in instances where learning goals are not achieved, it remains unclear to what extent responsibility lies with the learner, the teacher, or the system itself. This further brings into question the extant *didactic contract* (Brousseau, 2002) between students and teachers. This (explicit and implicit) contract reflects teachers’ and students’ expectations of their respective roles, relationships and how they should interact. Power relationships are an integral part of the didactic contract and mainstream teachers may resist (perceived) challenges to authority, driven by concerns about accountability, especially in the context of high-stakes external assessment.

Nuthall (2005) highlights the ‘question-answer-comment sequence’ of teaching, noting that this fixed pattern has been identified in a multitude of countries and cultural settings and that it arises from *ritualised routines* born of the difficulty of effectively managing large classrooms of diverse learners. These routines then dictate certain roles and



limitations where students and teachers alike negotiate the most expedient approach to arrive at the desired answer, a ‘cognitive economy’ if you will. To this extent, students participate in their own disenfranchisement, based on hegemonic assumptions that this is the natural order of schooling. Teachers must therefore be supported to embody a form of “*radical collegiality*” (Fielding and Moss, 2010) with students, developing new ways of working together that are explicitly grounded in mutual respect, shared responsibility, and democratic participation.

Professional development, encompassing both Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD), emerges as a significant dimension across SWELL partners. Central to this is the question of how to build teachers' capacity to design and facilitate learning experiences that remain authentically student-centred while navigating systemic constraints. The professional development opportunities for teachers in SWELL must foster not only the pedagogical skills required for SDL, but also the dispositions, motivation, and professional commitment necessary for flexible curriculum management, articulation and meaningful enactment. This may be challenged by *apprenticeships of observation* (Lortie, 1975, Borg, 2004) whereby historical experiences of all stakeholders (notably including parents) reflect deeply embedded traditional teaching models which continue to shape teacher beliefs and practices, potentially limiting the facilitation of SDL. The role of parents appears as an important dimension in the development of SDL, not only in terms of potential constraints, but also as a possible source of support and engagement in the students' autonomy. Considering parents as potential partners in the learning process may offer a more nuanced understanding of how SDL can be supported beyond the school context, how parents can contribute to support the teacher in their role, and may collaborate with schools.

Teacher motivation and “buy-in” is identified as an enabling condition, raising questions about how educators can be supported to recognise the value of SDL within diverse contexts. This includes ensuring equitable access to high-quality professional learning opportunities, resources, and support structures across and within partner countries.

The role of ITE is particularly significant in this regard, as it shapes foundational beliefs and practices (Davies and Ferguson, 1997). Questions exist surrounding the extent to which current programmes adequately prepare teachers for SDL-oriented pedagogies. Similarly, CPD provision varies considerably across contexts. Additional tensions arise in relation to enactment; whether SDL should be approached as a whole-school endeavour, requiring collective engagement and cultural change, or as a “set of tools” individual teachers may adopt within existing structures; and how such approaches might be integrated across both mainstream and alternative educational settings. Together, these highlight the need for coherent, systemic, and context-sensitive approaches to SWELL’s teacher professional development in support of SDL.

Assessment represents one of the most significant and consistent areas of tension, where high-stakes and standardised assessment systems continue to prioritise measurable outcomes and comparability, often at the expense of process-oriented, exploratory, and student-driven approaches. As a result, such systems tend to reward



compliance and procedural performance while penalising experimentation and risk-taking (Wall, 2000, Högberg and Horn, 2022). The misalignment between the principles of SDL and dominant assessment regimes highlights a broader systemic incoherence, wherein policy rhetoric advocating learner autonomy is undermined by assessment practices that constrain it (Hargreaves, 1989). The principle that “what is assessed is what is valued” remains particularly salient in this regard (Berliner, 2011). Curriculum overload and the lack of unhurried time (Hayes, 2024) in formal curricula limits opportunities for depth, flexibility, and innovation. This restricts the capacity of both teachers and students to engage meaningfully in SDL, which requires sustained inquiry, reflection, and iterative learning. Furthermore, regional differences and variation in policy coherence, curricular accessibility, and institutional support presents a dynamic challenge to SWELL partners in ensuring enactment across contexts.

Closely related to this is the question of authenticity in SDL. While many systems espouse commitments to learner voice, agency, and choice across the SWELL network, SDL is often relegated to implicit embedding within competence-based frameworks, adumbrated under constructs such as “*learning to learn*”. SDL is rarely articulated as an explicit organising principle and more commonly is enacted through the hidden curriculum. While SDL can emerge through everyday practices, it remains fragmented and dependent on individual teacher ethos, rather than systematically embedded within formal curricula.

Cultural and systemic barriers also play a significant role in shaping the enactment of SDL. In many contexts, traditional views of teaching and learning, characterised by teacher authority, knowledge transmission and student compliance remain deeply embedded. These are often reinforced by institutional structures and policy frameworks that prioritise standardisation and accountability. As a result, efforts to implement SDL may encounter resistance, both at the level of individual practice and within broader educational systems. Questions of accessibility also emerge when considering SDL approaches, particularly in relation to socio-economic inequalities and cultural contexts, raising the issue of whether these practices are equally accessible to all learners. This invites further reflection on the conditions under which learners can engage in SDL, and on the extent to which access may vary depending on their social and cultural environments.

Finally, tension exists between the individual and collective dimensions of SDL. While SDL emphasises autonomy and self-determination, there is a risk of overemphasising individualism at the expense of community, collaboration, and shared purpose. This tension resonates with questions of educational purpose, and care must be taken to avoid reductive interpretations of learner-centred education. Within SWELL contexts, this necessitates the reconceptualisation of SDL as both an individual and a collective endeavour, embedded within relational, democratic, and socially situated learning processes where learners support each other during the process of identifying goals, strategies and possibilities.

In summary, the questions and issues surrounding SDL across SWELL partners highlight the complexity of translating its principles into practice. While there is broad agreement



on its value, its realisation remains contingent upon the alignment of pedagogical, structural, and ideological conditions.

Summary of Key Questions and Issues Surrounding SDL

Understanding SDL

- What is SDL, and what is *not* SDL? How do we distinguish authentic SDL from related concepts such as SRL and active learning? Is SDL individual or collective?
- How can “non-pure” forms of SDL be recognised as legitimate developmental stages?
- How is SDL shaped by culture, and are we relying too much on Western ideas of autonomy and individual choice?
- How can SDL ensure that students still gain access to essential knowledge, cultural references and shared understandings, including those they may not choose to explore on their own?

Role of Teacher

- What is the role of the teacher? (Moving from instructor to facilitator, coach, mentor)
- How teachers can effectively balance facilitation with instruction and scaffold learning while preserving student autonomy?
- What does effective scaffolding and “structured openness” look like, and how does responsibility over learning progressively transfer from teachers to students?
- How do we introduce SDL to students who are used to highly teacher-directed learning?
- What happens when students struggle to identify their interests, set goals or stay motivated?
- How can SDL work in large classes with very different levels of independence and support needs?
- How do we make sure SDL does not mainly benefit students who are already confident, organised and academically strong?

SDL in Practice

- How can SDL work within real education systems?
- High-stakes assessment is one of the most significant barriers to process-oriented SDL practices.
- Where are the curricular and assessment affordances, and how can SDL respond to rather than compete with existing requirements?
- What conditions are needed for teachers and schools to enact SDL?
- How can ITE, CPD, school culture, leadership, teacher wellbeing and professional communities support sustainable change?
- How can SDL be integrated into everyday teaching, rather than remaining an occasional project or special activity?
- How do we assess students fairly when they are following different learning pathways?



- How can parents understand and support SDL when they expect more traditional forms of teaching?
- Are there situations where SDL is not the most appropriate approach?
- How do we make SDL authentic, equitable and relational?
- How can learner agency be meaningful rather than tokenistic, accessible to all learners, and embedded within collaborative, democratic and socially situated learning?

Wellbeing Concept Map

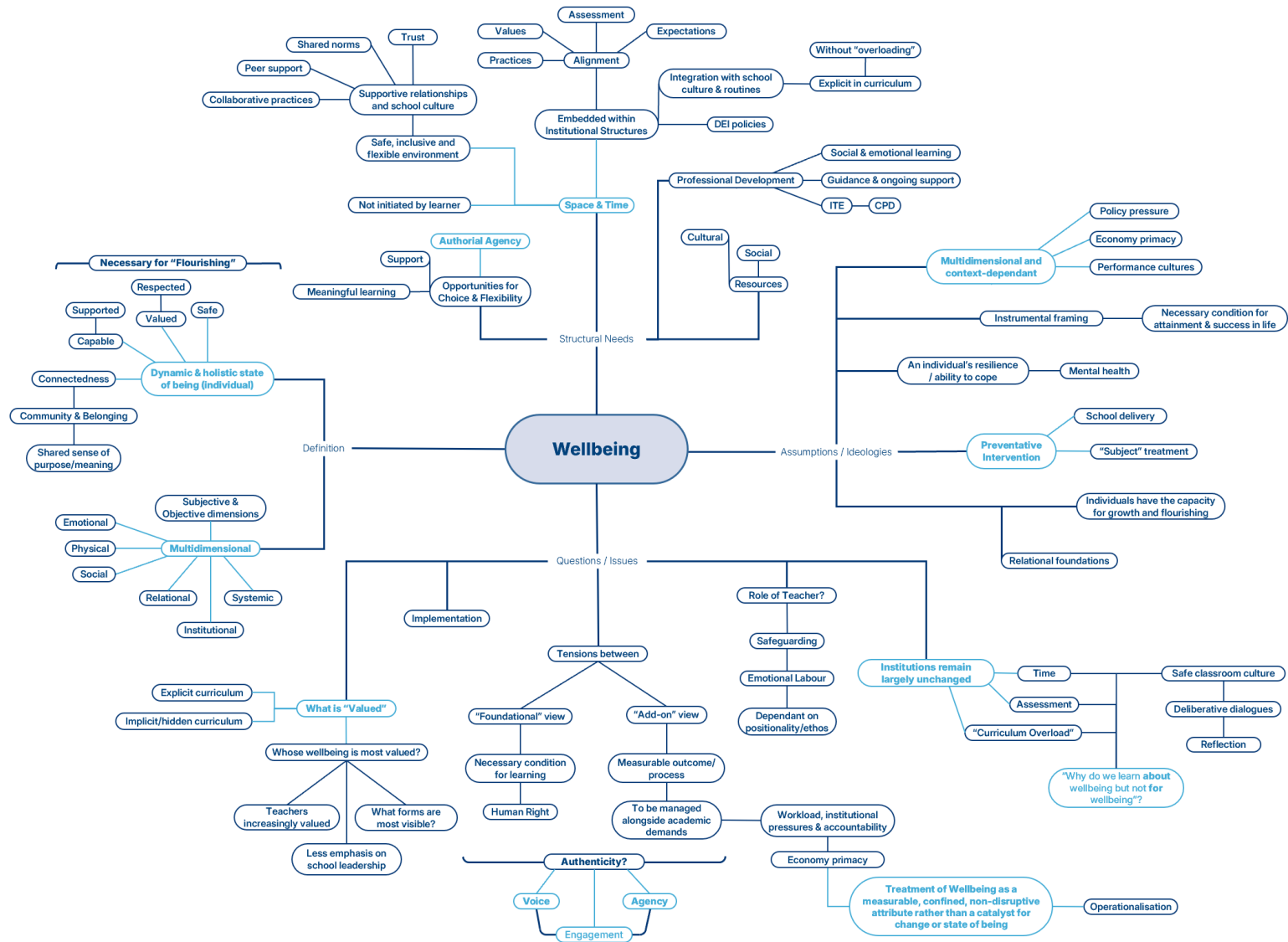


Figure 6: SWELL Wellbeing Conceptual Map.

Wellbeing

Definition of Wellbeing

Wellbeing is understood as a dynamic, context-dependent and multidimensional state of individual and collective flourishing, shaped by the interplay of personal, relational and structural conditions and enabled through safety, belonging, meaningful participation, agency, purpose and supportive environments. Across SWELL partner contexts, wellbeing is consistently conceptualised as a context-dependant, dynamic, holistic, and multidimensional state of being, encompassing interrelated individual, relational, institutional, and systemic dimensions. Wellbeing is framed as an evolving condition shaped by context, lived experience, and social interaction. This perspective aligns with ecological and socio-cultural understandings of human development, which emphasise the interaction between individuals and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Across partners, wellbeing is widely recognised as encompassing emotional, social, physical, ethical and spiritual dimensions, including psychological resilience, life satisfaction, engagement, and vitality (Ryan and Frederick, 1997, Ryff and Singer, 1998, Diener et al., 2010). These dimensions reflect both the subjective experiences of individuals, and the objective structural and environmental conditions in which they exist.

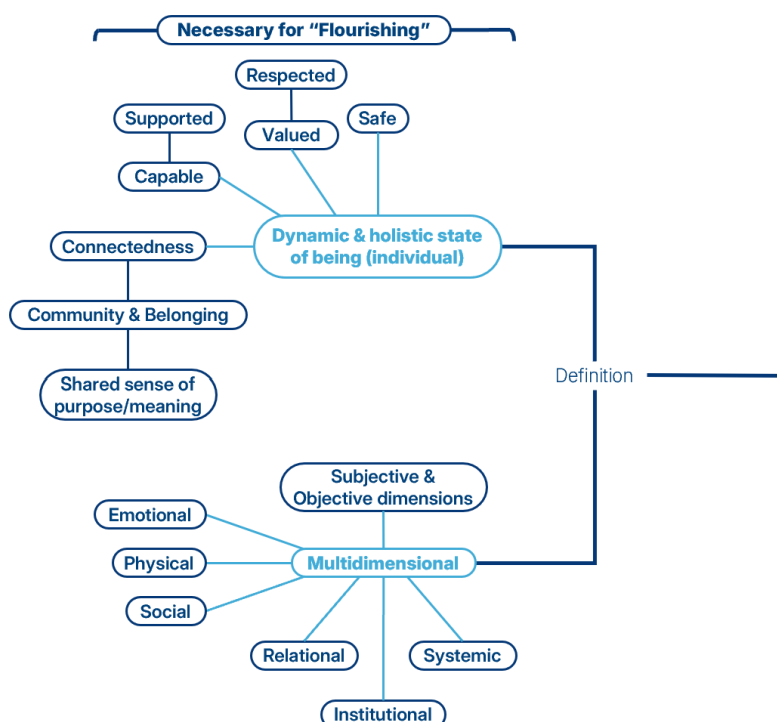


Figure 7: Wellbeing Definition.

A central point of convergence between SWELL partners lies in the emphasis on safe, supportive, and enabling environments as foundational to wellbeing (Nwoko et al., 2023) and critical for growth, learning, and self-expression. Wellbeing is seen as being contextually shaped by environment, culture, policy and schooling structures.



Educational settings are understood as critical sites in which individuals must feel safe, respected, valued, and heard in order to engage meaningfully in learning and social participation. This includes both emotional and physical safety, as well as the presence of trust, recognition, and inclusive practices (Sohail et al., 2023). The relational dimension of wellbeing is particularly prominent across SWELL contexts, which places a strong emphasis on positive social bonds that foster empathy, trust, mutual respect, and social connectedness. Wellbeing is therefore understood not solely as an individual attribute, but as a relational and collective phenomenon, grounded in belonging, community, and a shared sense of the “common good.” Wellbeing can be seen as both a condition for learning and an outcome of meaningful participation.

In addition, wellbeing is seen as participatory, with partners consistently highlighting the importance of agency, meaningful engagement, and purpose (Ryff and Singer, 1996, Priestley et al., 2012, Priestley et al., 2015) as core components of wellbeing. Wellbeing involves the capacity to act, decide, and influence one’s environment, alongside the ability to balance external demands with autonomy, self-expression, and personal needs. This aligns with perspectives from Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2012, Ryan and Deci, 2024), which emphasise autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs. Self-determination, understood as the capacity to act with agency, volition, and purpose, is not only a contributor to wellbeing but is a core condition for its realisation. Self-determination supports wellbeing through autonomy, competence, and relatedness, with increased agency leading to greater engagement and overall wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Wellbeing enables self-determination through safety, belonging, and confidence, and enhances an individual’s capacity for agentic action. From this perspective, wellbeing can be seen as both an outcome and an enabling condition of self-determination. Both wellbeing and self-determination can be conceptualized with causal reciprocity as co-emergent constructs.

This implies the need for learning environments that are not only safe and supportive, but are also genuinely participatory, where learners and educators have meaningful opportunities to influence content, pedagogy, and assessment. Flexible environments that support autonomy through meaningful choice, participation in decision-making, and opportunities for self-directed learning, are seen to foster intrinsic motivation, engagement and a sense of ownership; all of which are strongly associated with positive wellbeing outcomes (Zhou et al., 2024). Wellbeing is closely connected to engagement in meaningful activity, opportunities for growth, and the development of a sense of shared purpose and fulfilment, both individually and collectively.

These perspectives suggest that wellbeing within SWELL can be understood as a dynamic, context-dependent state of being that encompasses social, emotional, physical and psychological dimensions, integrating the multiple dimensions of human experience; and is shaped by the interplay of personal, relational, and structural conditions. It involves individuals feeling safe, valued, capable, and connected, while also having opportunities to participate, exercise agency, and find meaning within their environments. Crucially, wellbeing is both an individual and collective experience, emerging through relationships, shared practices, participation and the conditions that enable human flourishing (Seligman, 2011).

Assumptions and Ideologies Surrounding Wellbeing

The conceptualisation of wellbeing across SWELL partners is underpinned by a set of evolving assumptions and ideological positions, reflecting a shift towards more relational, systemic, and critically informed understandings. While early or more clinical framings often position wellbeing as synonymous with mental health, resilience, or an individual's capacity to cope with adversity (Ecclestone and Rawdin, 2020, Schultze-Lutter et al., 2016, Ecclestone, 2017, Haworth et al., 2017), SWELL challenges this reductionist view. Instead, wellbeing is understood intrinsically as both a human right and as a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon, shaped by the interaction of personal, relational, institutional, and socio-cultural factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

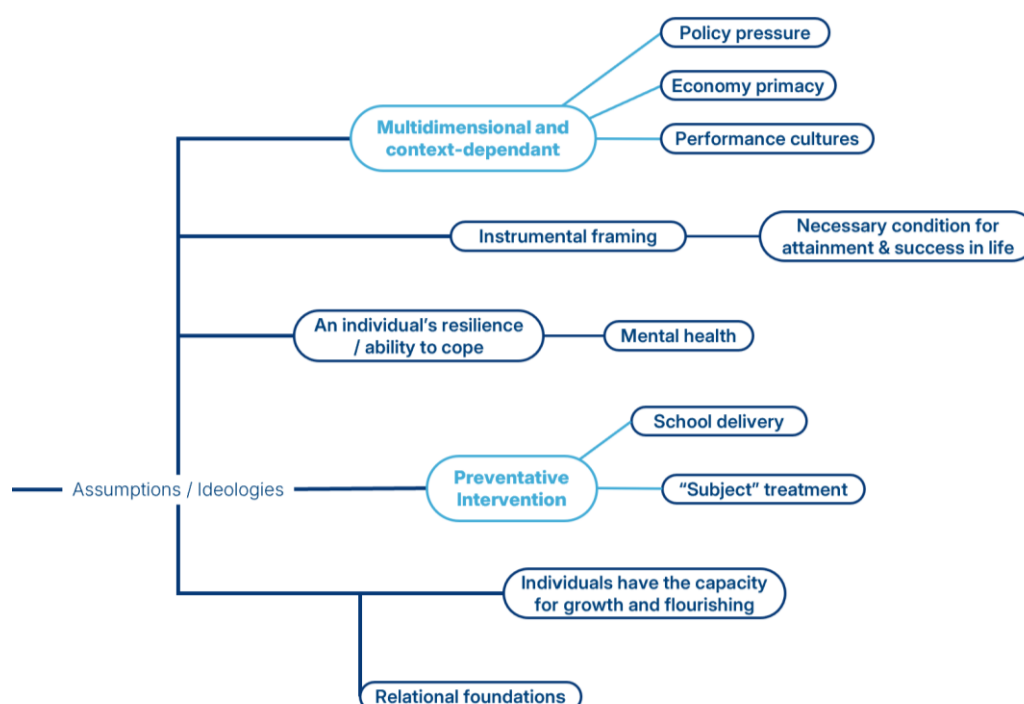


Figure 8: Wellbeing Assumptions & Ideologies.

In many education systems, wellbeing continues to be positioned instrumentally; as a means to enhance academic attainment, reduce dropout rates, prevent burnout, or support labour market-readiness (Ecclestone and Rawdin, 2020). Such framings often manifest in policy as discrete interventions or as curricular “add-ons,” effectively treating wellbeing as a measurable outcome or preventative tool for schools to deliver upon students. However, SWELL argues for a reconceptualization of wellbeing as an educational value in its own right, integral to the purposes of education rather than subordinate to them. This perspective resonates with broader critiques of performative, instrumental education systems (Osberg and Biesta, 2021), which caution against reducing education to narrow metrics of effectiveness and argue for a rebalancing towards *subjectification* (Biesta, 2020), democratic participation, and human flourishing.

Central to this conceptualization, is the rejection of the assumption that wellbeing is solely an individual responsibility. The persistence of individualising discourses,



particularly those centred on resilience, self-care, or notions of a “snowflake generation” risk obscuring the structural and systemic conditions that shape wellbeing, placing undue responsibility on individuals to adapt to challenging or inequitable environments. Across SWELL contexts, wellbeing is more appropriately understood as relational, systemic and collective, emerging through the interaction of relationships, the presence of trust and belonging, and the broader institutional and cultural environment. This positions wellbeing as a shared responsibility across students, teachers, school leaders and wider communities. Within this framing, wellbeing is not something that individuals “possess” or “manage” independently, but something that is both facilitated and co-constructed through social interaction and supported by enabling conditions.

Many partner perspectives are grounded in humanistic assumptions about the learner and the educator. These include the belief that individuals have the capacity for growth, self-acceptance, and flourishing, and that wellbeing extends beyond the absence of illness to encompass meaning, purpose, and positive functioning. This orientation aligns with positive psychology frameworks (Seligman, 2011, Kern et al., 2016, Seligman, 2018) and relational and care-based theories of education (Noddings, 2012, Noddings, 2013), which emphasise the importance of connection, empathy, and mutual recognition, while also intersecting with Self-Determination Theory, foregrounding autonomy, competence, and relatedness as central to wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2024). However, SWELL partners also demonstrate a critical awareness of the limitations of such frameworks when applied uncritically, particularly where they risk reinforcing individual responsibility at the expense of structural analysis. Partners highlight that wellbeing is not merely about coping within existing systems, but about critically examining and transforming those systems to better support human flourishing. This includes recognising the impact of policy and cultural pressures, such as performance-driven accountability systems, hierarchical institutional structures, and economy primacy, which can undermine wellbeing by prioritising efficiency, productivity, and measurable outcomes over relationships, participation, and care.

Finally, there is growing recognition of the pedagogical implications of these assumptions, particularly in relation to participation (Laevens, 2000, Laevens and Declercq, 2018), voice (Lundy, 2007), and *authorial* agency (Matusov, 2009, Matusov and Marjanovic-Shaneb, 2014, Matusov et al., 2016b). Partners emphasise that opportunities for learners to influence their environments, make meaningful decisions, and engage in democratic processes are central not only to learning, but also to wellbeing. This reinforces the interconnectedness of wellbeing with broader educational aims (inclusion, participation, and the promotion of the common good).

In summary, the assumptions and ideologies surrounding wellbeing across SWELL partners reflect a complex landscape; while there is a clear movement towards more holistic, relational, and systemic understandings within SWELL, these coexist within broader enduring instrumental, individualised, and performative framings. This tension highlights the need for ongoing critical engagement with how wellbeing is conceptualised, operationalised, and embedded within educational systems, ensuring that it remains aligned with broader commitments to equity, participation, and human flourishing.

Structural Needs for Wellbeing

The enablement and sustainment of wellbeing is consistently understood as contingent upon a set of interrelated structural, organisational, and pedagogical conditions. Central among these is the creation of safe, inclusive, and flexible learning environments that support physical, emotional, and social security, and flexible, dedicated time for wellbeing. Environments that are characterised by psychological safety, trust, and respect, enable individuals to participate authentically, take interpersonal and intellectual risks, and engage meaningfully in learning (McCallum and Price, 2015, Van Woezik et al., 2021). Flexible classroom environments and timetabling (Kariippanon et al., 2018), humane organisational structures, and protected spaces for wellbeing within formal curriculum are identified as essential, allowing time for reflection, dialogue, non-instrumental wellbeing and the balancing of demands with autonomy (Brookfield, 2009, Hayes, 2024).

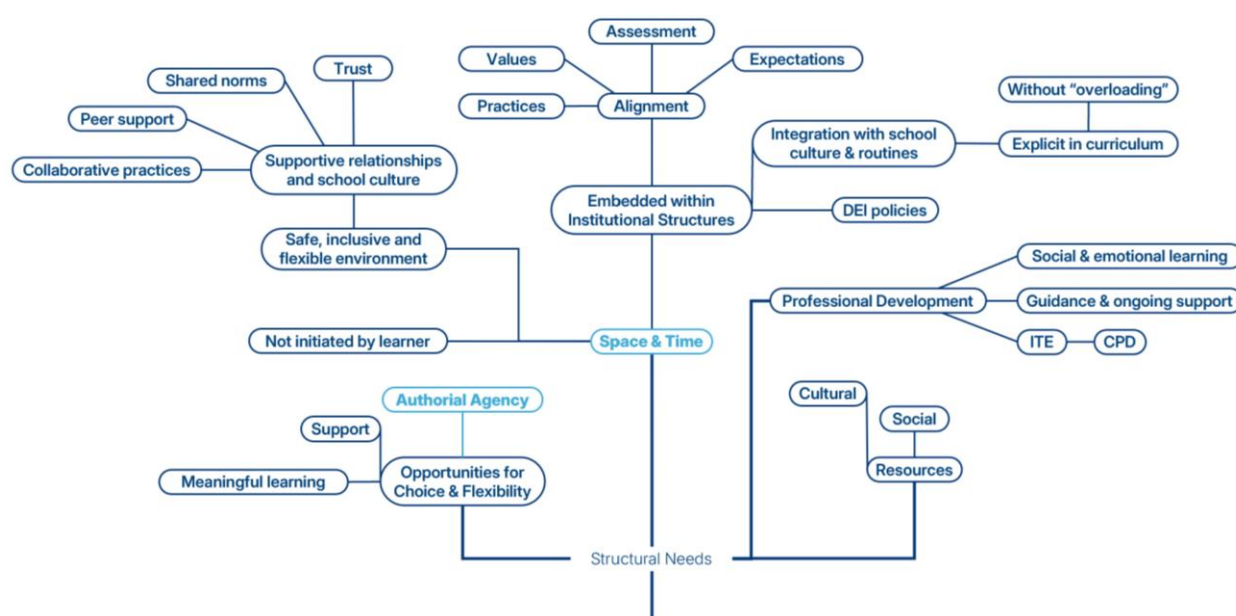


Figure 9: Structural Needs for Wellbeing.

Across SWELL contexts, wellbeing is understood to emerge within relational networks (McCallum and Price, 2015) characterised by trust, empathy, and mutual respect. This includes collaborative cultures, shared norms, strong teacher–student relationships, peer support systems, mentoring structures, and opportunities for collaborative engagement among both learners and educators. Such relational conditions are critical not only for individual wellbeing but also for the development of inclusive, participatory school cultures grounded in shared norms and collective responsibility (McCallum and Price, 2010, McCallum and Price, 2015).

Curriculum and pedagogical structures are central to enabling wellbeing. Partners emphasise the need for wellbeing to be embedded within formal curricula, school routines, and learning objectives, rather than treated as an isolated or “add-on” intervention for schools to deliver upon students and teachers. This includes the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, Sandilos et



al., 2023), reflective practices, and dialogic pedagogies (Matusov, 2009, Teo, 2019), as well as dedicated initiatives such as mentoring programmes, circle practices, and mediation strategies. There is a recognised need for time and space within the curriculum for both individual reflection and collective sense-making, acknowledging that the space for wellbeing is not solely learner-initiated, but also requires intentional, explicit structural provision within formal curricula. The integration of wellbeing within curriculum design must, however, be carefully balanced to avoid curricular overload while maintaining coherence between values, practices, and assessment (Pelletier et al., 2002).

Opportunities and support for choice, flexibility, autonomy and agency are identified as a critical structural requirement. Environments that support meaningful choice, participation, and decision-making enable individuals to experience a sense of control, purpose, ownership, (Lundy, 2007, Ward and Lundy, 2024) and authorial agency (Matusov and Marjanovic-Shaneb, 2014, Matusov et al., 2016a), which are closely associated with wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This includes opportunities for self-directed learning, experimentation, and engagement in meaningful, context-sensitive learning activities.

In addition to pedagogical and relational conditions, access to a wide range of resources is identified by partners as a structural need for wellbeing. This includes psychological, educational and social supports (e.g., for relationship building, conflict resolution, etc.), as well as access to cultural and material resources that enable diverse forms of participation and expression. The provision of differentiated learning environments and flexible, responsive spaces, such as workshops, laboratories, and shared communal spaces, further supports engagement and inclusion (Kariippanon et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the professional capacity of educators and school leaders is identified as a critical structural factor. Initial teacher education (ITE) and continuous professional development (CPD) must include a strong focus on social and emotional learning, emotional intelligence, relationship management, and the development of a strategic vision for collective wellbeing (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). Ongoing support structures, including professional learning communities and mentoring systems that support teachers' professional capital (Zhou et al., 2024), are necessary to sustain wellbeing both in contemporary practice and beyond the lifetime of the SWELL network.

At a systemic level, the realisation of wellbeing depends on alignment between educational values, policies, and institutional practices. Wellbeing must be explicitly embedded within institutional structures such as policy frameworks, curricular structures, and school cultures without contributing to curricular overloading, ensuring coherence between stated aims, enacted practices and lived experiences. This includes the development of shared goals, responsibilities, and meanings, often initiated through co-constructive pedagogies such as class charters (Donnelly, 2019) or whole-school agreements, as well as the promotion of participatory approaches that enable all stakeholders to contribute to the shaping of educational environments. Without such alignment, efforts to promote wellbeing risk remaining fragmented, symbolic or “additional” to education, rather than necessary and transformative.



Overall, the structural conditions required to support wellbeing across SWELL contexts are multifaceted and interdependent, encompassing environmental, relational, pedagogical, organisational, and systemic dimensions. Without effective structural alignment, wellbeing remains a rhetorical ideal, rather than enacted and experienced. Wellbeing must be explicit in curriculum with dedicated professional tools, pedagogies, resources and supports that provide clarity without risking curriculum overload. Positive and supportive relational structures between teachers, students and school leadership are essential for fostering empathy, dialogue, and mutual understanding, creating the conditions under which wellbeing can exist. Finally, the alignment between practices, values, assessments and expectations that embody genuine curricular coherence, and their effective integration into school cultures and routines, is essential for creating educational environments in which individuals and communities can meaningfully flourish.

Questions and Issues Surrounding Wellbeing

The conceptualisation and enactment of wellbeing is characterised by a number of persistent tensions and critical questions amongst SWELL partners. A central issue concerns the tension between the “foundational” and “add-on” views of wellbeing which may be explicitly or implicitly embedded within education systems. Through a foundational lens, wellbeing is seen not as an aspirational ideal, but as a fundamental human right and as a necessary condition for learning to occur (Roffey, 2012). Through an “add-on” lens, wellbeing is conceptualized as a measurable outcome or process to be managed *alongside* academic demands, reducing wellbeing to a measurable, confined and non-disruptive attribute rather than a dynamic, holistic state of being. This risks the operationalization of wellbeing solely for academic performance, narrowing the framing of wellbeing to an individual’s capacity to cope, rather than a systemic, relational and participatory catalyst for change.

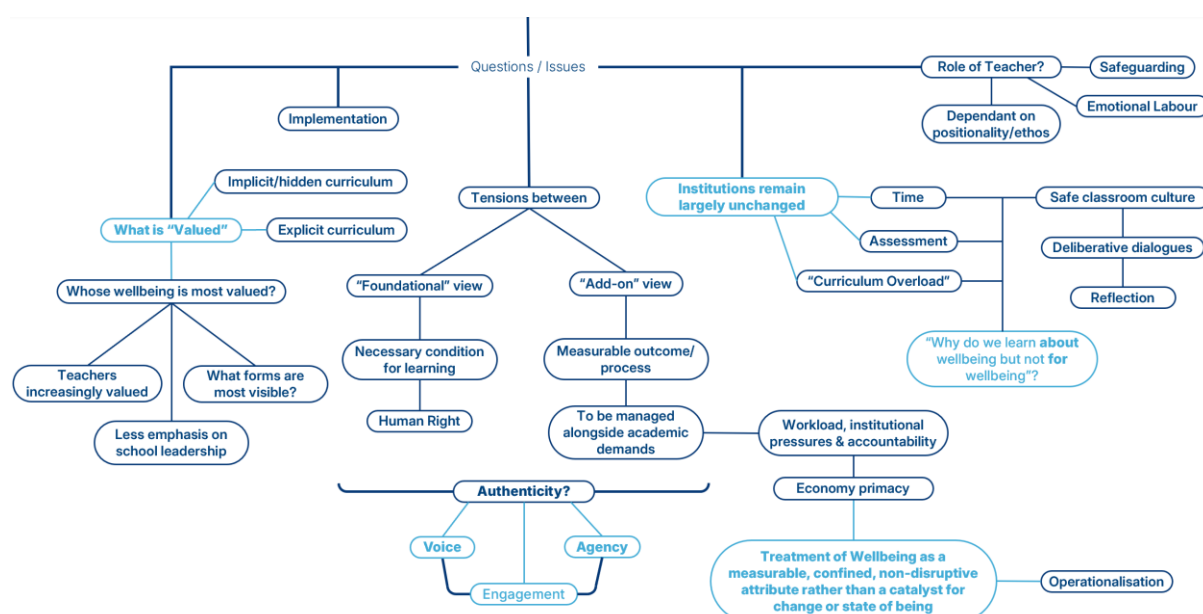


Figure 10: Questions and Issues surrounding Wellbeing.

This raises concerns surrounding equity and prioritisation; whose wellbeing is recognised, and what is valued and supported within educational systems? While student wellbeing has traditionally been foregrounded (Albrecht, 2025), there is increasing recognition of the wellbeing of teachers and school leaders (McCallum et al., 2017, Hascher and Waber, 2021, Albrecht, 2025, Akash et al., 2026). Research has shown that foregrounding teacher wellbeing has both individual and systemic implications (Dreer, 2023), from improving teachers’ sleep (Crain et al., 2017) and enhancing occupational engagement, commitment and satisfaction (Burić et al., 2021, Heidari et al., 2022, Zhou et al., 2024), to contributing to positive student-teacher relationships (Spilt et al., 2011) and supporting student wellbeing (Harding et al., 2019), motivation (Shen et al., 2015), school satisfaction (Ramberg et al., 2020), and achievement (Klusmann et al., 2016). However, despite this growing recognition, the realization of teacher wellbeing remains uneven and often secondary to the demands of contemporary accountability-driven educational systems (Willis, 2024).



From this, fundamental normative questions which interrogate the purposes of education (Biesta, 2009) must be asked; namely, what is valued in education (which is a wider concept than the historical and ideological conditions set by schooling), for whom, and to what ends? In this regard, tensions emerge between explicit curricular commitments to wellbeing and the implicit or “hidden” curriculum (Jackson, 2002), where accountability and performance indicators frequently signal alternative priorities that denote what is valued by neo-liberal societies and market-driven education systems (Apple, 2004a, Apple, 2004b). This raises tensions between teachers and students experiencing genuine, authentic, holistic forms of wellbeing, and the operationalized, adulterated conceptualization of wellbeing which is “learnt *about*” and denotes positive attitudes towards marketable skills. Indeed, SWELL partners consistently identify that there is often contradiction between the espoused values of wellbeing in education and the realities of schooling system structures. This ultimately raises questions about the fundamental authenticity of wellbeing; whether it is intrinsic, democratic and to be genuinely experienced by teachers, or whether it is instrumental, an attribute to be measured, managed, monitored and manipulated to drive student academic achievement (Biesta, 2009).

Increased workload, performativity and time pressures represent a significant and widely noted constraint on wellbeing across SWELL contexts. Unhurried (Hayes, 2024), unstructured, and protected time for sense-making (Blazek et al., 2025) is necessary for wellbeing to occur, but is consistently endangered by the multitude demands of contemporary schooling where teachers perceive stressors from above and below, including principals, school leaders, students, parents/guardians and wider society (Pelletier et al., 2002). High-stakes assessment regimes, content-heavy curricula, and institutional expectations contribute to intensified working conditions for both students and teachers (Acton and Glasgow, 2015, Willis, 2024), often undermining the very conditions necessary for wellbeing to flourish. These pressures are symptomatic of broader performative cultures within education systems, where efficiency, comparability, and measurable outcomes are prioritised over relational and process-oriented dimensions of learning (Ball, 2008, Ball et al., 2011). Consequently, questions arise regarding the sustainability of wellbeing initiatives for teachers within systems that remain fundamentally structurally misaligned with their underlying principles (Daliri-Ngametua and Hardy, 2022).

While there is strong agreement that wellbeing should be embedded within, rather than treated as separate from, teaching and learning activities, tensions persist in balancing wellbeing with academic and social learning goals (Matusov, 2015, Murphy et al., 2020). SWELL partners recognise the need for In-Service (ISTs) and Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) to be empowered to create enabling environments and the conditions of care in which individuals feel valued, uniqueness is respected, and learners are empowered to take ownership over their learning. However, it is also recognised that teachers face the challenge of fostering these supportive environments while also ensuring the development of disciplinary knowledge and skills (Johari et al., 2018).

Professional development for wellbeing must involve teachers being supported in balancing academic demands with autonomy, freedom and experimentation, requiring



embedded practices, supportive relationships, safe environments and shared responsibility. However, SWELL partners raise concerns around the provision of this professional development and creation of safe spaces for wellbeing, when teachers fundamentally, exist within the realities of schooling, leaving them vulnerable and open to increased workload, performance pressures and uneven enactment of practices for wellbeing across contexts. Professional development for wellbeing must seek to address the underlying barriers to its realisation; reactionary initiatives that fail to recognize extant constraints risk to only contribute to teacher workload and burnout (Brady and Wilson, 2021). This is further complicated by the *emotional labour* associated with teaching (Hargreaves, 1998, Acton and Glasgow, 2015, Akash et al., 2026), including responsibilities related to safeguarding, care and relational work, which are often under-recognised within formal structures. Supporting teachers to navigate these demands requires not only professional development but also systemic recognition of the relational dimensions of teaching.

Leadership and school culture are also identified as critical mediating factors (Fullan, 2007, Cann et al., 2021). Questions arise regarding how to cultivate organisational cultures that prioritise trust, collaboration, and reflective dialogue, and how school leaders can support collective responsibility for wellbeing. This includes creating space for deliberation, fostering shared meaning, and enabling participatory decision-making processes within school communities (Brady and Wilson, 2021). Without cultural shifts that prioritize whole-school approaches (Weare, 2015), wellbeing risks remaining peripheral rather than integral to educational practice. Tensions also exist between individual and collective responsibilities over wellbeing. While partners conceptualise wellbeing as relational and systemic, policy and practice frequently emphasise individual coping strategies and resilience. In this sense, wellbeing becomes operationalised as a form of adaptation rather than transformation, raising concerns about its authenticity and emancipatory potential. Effective interventions for teacher wellbeing must balance professional agency, autonomy and individual responsibility, with collective responsibility (Sullanmaa et al., 2024) and communal flourishing (Di Martino et al., 2017).

Finally, implementation gaps and inconsistencies present ongoing challenges. Across SWELL contexts, wellbeing has historically been supported through fragmented initiatives, localised practices, or project-based interventions, rather than through coherent, system-wide strategies. The absence of shared definitions and common ground can lead to variability in interpretation and enactment, limiting both the scalability and sustainability of wellbeing practices. This fragmentation is further compounded by cultural and institutional inertia, with traditional models of schooling, characterised by the hierarchical, teacher-centred pedagogies, which continue to shape everyday practices.

Overall, these issues underscore the complexity of embedding wellbeing within educational systems. While there is strong consensus regarding its multidimensional and relational nature, its realisation remains contingent upon the alignment of ideological, structural, and cultural conditions. Addressing these challenges requires sustained critical reflection, systemic coherence, and collaborative engagement across all levels of the SWELL network.



Summary of Questions and Issues Surrounding Wellbeing

Understanding Wellbeing

- How is wellbeing understood? As an individual or collective responsibility, as foundational or an “add-on”? Wellbeing must be understood as a necessary condition for learning and a human right, rather than an additional outcome to be managed alongside academic demands.
- Wellbeing cannot depend solely on individual resilience or coping strategies. SWELL should emphasise shared and collective responsibility and identify the organisational conditions that enable wellbeing.
- SWELL must account for contextual differences between schools, countries and contexts in how wellbeing is understood.

Purpose of Wellbeing

- Whose wellbeing should be prioritised?
- What is the purpose of wellbeing in education? SWELL needs to distinguish between wellbeing as intrinsic, holistic and relational and wellbeing as an instrumental tool for improving attainment, performance or employability.

Role of Teachers and Supporting Teachers

- How can teachers balance care, autonomy and academic responsibilities?
- How should wellbeing be embedded in teaching and learning?
- What professional learning do teachers need? ITE and CPD should develop not only knowledge and strategies but also reflection, relational competence, professional agency and capacity to create conditions for wellbeing.

Wellbeing in Practice

- What role do leadership and school culture play? Trust, collaboration, psychological safety, reflective dialogue and participatory decision-making are critical to creating sustainable whole-school approaches.
- Is there coherence between policy rhetoric and educational reality?
- How can wellbeing be protected within constrained systems? (time, space, trust, psychological safety)
- How authentic are existing wellbeing practices?



“Just as it “takes a village to raise a child,”
it also takes a village to care for teachers.”
(Albrecht, 2025)

FINDINGS

This section presents a synthesis of all reports that were submitted by partners. Under each heading, a focus is placed on actionable findings for the SWELL Academy. As such then, repetition is avoided and where relevant, the reader is directed to the Appendix for useful detail from partners. At the end of the Findings, the results of consultation with graduate students of democratic schools are considered to give context to the state of play in mainstream schools. The following country codes have been used:

Table 1: List of SWELL partners and associated country codes.

Country	Code	Country	Code
Belgium (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles)	BE-FWB	Ireland	IE
Belgium (Flanders)	BE-F	Italy	IT
Bulgaria	BG	Portugal	PT
Cyprus	CY	Romania	RO
Finland	FI	Spain	ES
Germany	DE	Sweden	SE

Understanding of Self-Directed Learning

Across all national contexts, there is broad agreement that SDL involves learners taking a more active role in their own learning, developing greater ownership, responsibility, autonomy, and capacity for decision-making. However, there are significant differences in how SDL is understood, the language used to describe it, and the degree to which it is established within educational discourse and practice.

Respondents from some countries collectively defined SDL in ways that capture a lot of the richness and breadth of the definition used within this project. For example, Finland's collective definition included ideas around SDL as a set of metacognitive skills, as dependent on skills that develop over time, and as a process that happens within relational contexts. However, some definitions were more superficial, or captured a more narrow range of ways in which learning could be self-directed.

In addition, some countries showed a fundamental lack of familiarity with SDL concepts. For example, respondents from Bulgaria characterised "*autonomy*" as "*the responsibility of the student to do his/her homework and the tasks given, without the need that the teacher reminds them*". Indeed, Bulgarian participants suggested that there was no scope for students to demonstrate SDL, as they "*need to follow the curriculum*" and expressed scepticism about the feasibility of SDL at all – will children be able to "*choose the right things*" or "*direct their learning in the 'right direction'*".

That said, there was convergence across all countries in their understanding that SDL involves transferring some degree of responsibility from teacher to learner. Terms such



as agency, ownership, choice, autonomy, responsibility, and participation recur throughout the interviews. In Belgium (F), SDL is described as placing students “*at the steering wheel*” of their learning. Romania similarly defines SDL as learning with “*increasing responsibility and ownership*,” while Ireland emphasises learner agency, voice, and autonomy. Even in countries where the concept itself is less familiar, such as Bulgaria and Cyprus, participants tended to interpret SDL in terms of learners choosing what or how to learn. Across contexts, therefore, SDL is fundamentally understood as moving beyond teacher-directed transmission toward greater learner participation and ownership.

However, there are important differences in emphasis. The greatest variation across countries relates to the concepts of autonomy, agency, self-regulation, and collaboration. While some countries, particularly Belgium (F) and Bulgaria tend to equate SDL with autonomy or self-regulation, others such as Ireland, Portugal, Finland, and Italy emphasise broader relational and collaborative dimensions.

There is also variation in where autonomy is seen to operate. Some interpretations focus primarily on learner choice and independence in terms of curriculum content and topics of study, whereas others focus on self-regulation around “*managing one's own pace, process and organization*” (BE-F). German participants used the terms “*self-determined learning*” (more fundamental) and “*self-directed learning*” (less fundamental) to capture these contrasting concepts.

Over all countries, there was a rejection of a simplistic interpretation of SDL as independent learning without support. Rather than describing SDL as learners working independently without guidance, most countries understood SDL as a process requiring scaffolding, structure, and supportive relationships. Teachers are consistently seen as facilitators, guides, or “*architects of learning*” (PT).

Portugal provides the clearest articulation of this position, with participants unanimously rejecting the idea of the solitary learner. Similarly, Finland strongly emphasises that SDL is not unsupported learning but a process that develops within a supportive relational context. Germany, Romania, Italy, and Ireland all express comparable views.

This consensus directly challenges common misconceptions that SDL means reducing the teacher's role. Instead, the teacher remains essential, but their function shifts from directing learning to supporting learners in directing themselves.

However, even when SDL was explicitly discussed as something that was teacher supported, there was often an implicit framing of SDL as something that happens “within” individuals, rather than as a process that could, for example, happen as part of a classroom characterised by group democratic decision making. For example, Belgium (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles and Flanders) mainly interprets SDL through the lens of autonomy and self-management. Bulgaria similarly demonstrates a strong focus on self-regulated learning skills, particularly cognitive, metacognitive, and motivational processes.



By contrast, countries such as Ireland, Portugal, and Italy advocate broader conceptualisations that extend beyond self-regulation to include agency, relationships, participation, and social learning. For example, Italy extends SDL beyond classroom learning into school governance, positioning student participation in institutional decision-making as part of a broader culture of agency.

This suggests a tension between viewing SDL as a set of individual learning skills and viewing it as a broader educational philosophy that operates within classrooms and schools.

Another major theme was the qualified and developmental nature of autonomous learning. Across the countries, autonomy is rarely seen as absolute freedom. Instead, it is conceptualised as graduated, contextual, and developmentally appropriate.

The idea of gradual release of responsibility is especially prominent in Finland, Portugal, Romania, and Germany. Learners are not expected to become self-directed immediately; rather, SDL is viewed as a developmental trajectory supported by carefully designed learning experiences. Finland presents perhaps the richest account of this idea. Participants emphasise that autonomy develops over time, in safe and structured environments, and must be adjusted according to age, readiness, and context. Germany similarly describes SDL as existing on a continuum ranging from highly structured choice to genuinely learner-determined learning.

Another common theme is the close relationship between SDL and wellbeing. Most countries associate SDL with greater motivation, confidence, engagement, self-efficacy, fulfilment, and meaningful learning. Spain provides perhaps the most wellbeing-centred interpretation. Participants view SDL as promoting emotional safety, reducing comparison and pressure, protecting mental health, and fostering healthier relationships with learning. Indeed, Spanish participants suggest that SDL might even “*repair*” the damage done by previous “*negative educational experiences*”.

There were some interesting variations on this broad SDL-wellbeing narrative. For example, Italy’s discussion of this topic draws on a broader conception of wellbeing that encompasses the ways in which cognitive capacities (e.g., self-regulation) might be increased by SDL, as well as social-emotional factors. Ireland’s participants suggest that working within SDL classrooms may be good for *teachers’* mental health as well as students’.

In contrast, some Bulgarian participants did not see much connection between SDL and wellbeing. There was also a recognition across several countries that SDL may create challenges if poorly implemented, especially when learners are expected to take responsibility without sufficient support. SDL can generate anxiety, uncertainty, or stress for both students and teachers when the necessary conditions are not in place.

Cyprus notes that unmanaged SDL may lead to negative outcomes if “*individuals lack the guidance or experience to identify what they actually need*”. Portugal highlights teacher anxiety associated with losing pedagogical control. Ireland argues that students must



already possess a degree of wellbeing to engage successfully in SDL. Flanders cautions that SDL can become another form of obligation if implemented without genuine ownership.

These findings suggest that wellbeing is a likely, but not necessary, consequence of SDL, for both teachers and students. It depends on “how” the SDL is happening and the dispositions of the students and teachers in the classroom.

Summary

Taken together, the national perspectives reveal substantial convergence around the core principles of self-directed learning. SDL is widely understood as a process through which learners assume increasing ownership of their learning while developing autonomy, self-regulation, reflection, and responsibility. Across countries, there is strong agreement that self-direction does not imply isolation and that teacher support remains essential.

The principal points of variation concern the balance between individual and collaborative learning and the parameters within which learning might be self-directed. These two issues overlap with each other – a more individualistic perspective on SDL, which focuses on learner characteristics such as metacognitive skills and self-regulation, is necessarily more limited in scope than a broader conception that situates SDL within a collaborative social context that encompasses an entire classroom or school environment.

Existing incorporation of SDL in curriculum

The following Table represents the relative comparison of the affordances for SDL in the curriculum of each partner. As such, it is quite subjective, and further discussion would be useful for accuracy. An attempt has been made to represent the ranking within each category, with those towards the top appearing to have more explicit accommodation of SDL in their curriculum which is translated into practice (to a greater degree than other countries).

Table 2: Comparison of SDL Affordances across partner contexts.

Some structures with SDL affordances	Pedagogical approaches that have SDL elements	Limited affordances for SDL
Sweden Germany Italy Finland Romania Ireland Spain	Belgium (FWB) Belgium (F) Cyprus Portugal	Bulgaria

In all countries there is a lack of explicit reference to SDL in curricular documents despite Frameworks that emphasise the development of competencies and skills that are very closely aligned with or indeed would require SDL if they are to be truly realised. In two countries, SRL is explicitly named (Finland and Ireland in a more limited context). Terms such as “autonomy” and “agency” are frequently utilised in a manner that they may be considered synonymous with SDL. In Ireland for example, SDL is considered to be implicit in certain aspects and to some degree to have been “*hidden under a cloak of other words*” where a macro-level participant argued that it is time to “*unfurl the concept to make it more explicit.*”

There are tensions therefore between rhetoric and reality and Italy presents a particularly interesting case:

“Italian participants present a complex picture: a regulatory framework that formally endorses student autonomy, a long tradition of school-level autonomy (since 1997), and a classroom reality where SDL is practiced by a minority of committed educators but is far from being systemic.

Meso-level participants agreed that despite a strong international theoretical consensus, there is no explicit, systematic reference to SDL in Italian institutional frameworks.

Nano-level participants observed no explicit curricular link to SDL, but identified implicit connections through civic education (a subject treated transversally across the curriculum) and through peer learning structures such as study circles and peer tutoring. They flagged the difficulty of assessing soft skills and SDL-related competencies as a key structural barrier: what is not measured is not valued.”

IT



There is clear dissonance therefore between curriculum-makers from the supra- to nano-levels and indeed new national guidelines (Mi - Ministero dell'istruzione, 2018, Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2025) have removed the valorisation of student autonomy in a manner that is seen as “... *an institutional step backwards*” (IT).

In all countries assessment is seen to have a core influence on the policy commitment to and delivery of SDL.

“Where competency-based curriculum language does exist, it is often felt to be vague and theoretical, with little practical effect on assessment formats.” DE

“Across all levels, participants felt that there is often a gap between curriculum aspirations and classroom realities. While curriculum documents encourage active and independent learning, assessment systems frequently continue to prioritise knowledge reproduction and standardised outcomes. As a result, opportunities for SDL are sometimes constrained despite policy intentions.” RO

This “backwash” effect of assessment has a profound impact and, according to Irish participants, is strongly endorsed by parents where mater-/pater-nalistic attitudes place a focus on taking good “notes”, factual knowledge to be forgotten post-examination and as students being on a “*fact finding mission*”. The emphasis is on scoring well in terminal examinations to gain university entrance and how one gets there is immaterial (even if at the cost of wellbeing). While other countries did not significantly highlight the role of parental expectations in this section, it would be worthwhile following up to determine if this is the case. In curricular terms then, this would be described as “incoherent” in that there is a lack of constructive alignment between the stated aims of the curriculum and assessment modalities, as noted in Romania: “*If we want students to become self-directed learners, assessment needs to value planning, reflection, self-evaluation, and problem-solving, not only content recall*”. Indeed, Romania offers some succinct insights that likely obtain across mainstream settings in partner countries:

“Pre-service teachers frequently identified this mismatch as one of the main barriers to SDL implementation. They reported that high-stakes examinations often encourage teachers to focus on coverage and performance rather than learner autonomy.” RO

Moreover, “*when assessment is focused on exams, teachers feel pressure to provide answers rather than allow students to explore independently*” (RO).

“While curriculum frameworks generally support SDL principles, participants highlighted ongoing tensions between these aspirations and assessment systems that continue to prioritise knowledge reproduction.” RO

In Ireland, this curricular incoherence was “baked-in” in the reform of the lower post-primary curriculum (the Junior Cycle, JC). Originally, all subject specifications had very open Learning Outcomes (LOs) that were intended to allow for significant local autonomy for schools to decide how to address them. In order for this to be coherent, it was planned that students would be assessed to the point of accreditation by their own teachers (who



would know what was “covered” in class). Teacher union objections led to this being scrapped and now all students sit one (low stakes) state exam in each subject. Interestingly, in Germany “*Alternative assessment formats, such as videos, podcasts or oral presentations replacing written exams, and competency grids without grades in lower secondary years, are officially permitted in some systems but remain the exception in mainstream schooling*”.

This illustrates the significance of assumptions about what counts as important knowledge and how it should be measured. Since the curriculum can be said to represent a distillation of all of human knowledge, developed over centuries, and (in post-primary settings) teachers are subject experts, concerns about curricular drift (departure from what is intended) are inevitably focused on content, propositional or declarative knowledge. While autonomy may be said to be valued, there is an inevitable tension between this and prescription. The irony is that there is significant curricular drift in relation to the very competencies and skills that are held to be of such importance! This is reflected in the retrenchment in Italy and also in Belgium (F) where “*The relevant question for schools is no longer how interesting and innovative the training can be for students and teachers but how directly it serves the goals set by the government*” (BE-F). Alongside a lack of freedom for students in goal setting, external assessment mitigates against student reflection on learning progress, this function devolving to the teacher to ensure high grades.

It follows then that most curricular documents do not offer extensive detail on how epistemic or procedural knowledge might be developed beyond naming them (at a high level) as important goals. No one is explicitly against these forms of knowledge, but they remain more a “*philosophical intent*” (SE) than a practical reality. In most partner countries therefore, what is to be learned (and why) is tightly defined in advance of learning (prescribed) but there seems to be reasonable (micro-level) autonomy as to how it is to be learned, as reflected on by an Irish participant: “*What is taught is largely pre-determined but how it is taught has significant flexibility*”. The following pedagogical approaches were highlighted as having affordances for SDL:

Table 3: Highlighted pedagogical approaches to SDL.

Approach	Country
Creative expression (art)	FI
Dialogue and peer learning	FI
Multidisciplinary projects/phenomenon-based learning/Discovery learning	FI, CY, RO, IE
Problem-based learning	FI
Project-based learning	PT, SE, ES, DE, RO, IE
Flipped classroom	PT
Defining assessment criteria	PT
Portfolios	ES, DE, RO



Note that this list should be considered with some caution and to be complete, follow up work should be conducted to make an exhaustive list of all pedagogical approaches that may have affordances for SDL.

Even within countries where there are more limited SDL affordances there are some subjects which are more open such as History (BE), Health Education (CY), and Wellbeing subjects (IE). In addition, certain school networks/management bodies seem to enjoy more flexibility such as “GO!” (BE), Montessori (ES), Educate Together (IE).

The countries with the highest affordances for SDL include SE where *“The national curriculum for compulsory school (Lgr22) explicitly mandates that schools must help students develop independent study skills and the ability to critically evaluate their own progress”*. This includes bi-annual “development dialogues” where students make individualised learning plans (including their parents). From age 15 students participate in daily planning and evaluation, selecting themes and activities to explore. A “Diploma Project” is completed in the final year which is entirely self-directed. Recent reforms in Ireland present some opportunities for authentic SDL through Transition Year (TY) which should require SDL (and has multiple allusions to it) and ongoing reforms in upper secondary school where Additional Assessment Components (AACs) mandate SDL for work that represents 40% of grade in high-stakes terminal assessment. Germany is in the process of implementing a “personalised learning” model and incorporates project weeks and reduced timetables *“... in favour of long open learning periods...”*. However,

“Overall, incorporation appears to depend more on individual school culture and voluntary innovation than on binding, system-wide curricular requirements, with official frameworks lagging behind practice in some places and actively constraining it in others.”
DE

This highlights the significance of school culture and the variation in SDL enactment. It is also clear in several countries that there is confusion about theory and practice, even in countries where there is significant SDL:

“Participants noted that while the philosophical intent is clear, the terminology is not standardised, and this has led to wide variation in interpretation at school and classroom level.”
FI

This presents multiple challenges to teachers as busy, practical professionals. Assessment systems (especially high stakes) mitigate against SDL and system level clarity and exemplification is lacking. Variation even exists across subjects within the same curriculum such that the differing perceptions of SDL of two teachers *“... are not necessarily both wrong; they may both be accurate descriptions of different realities”* (BE). Given that a move to SDL represents a significant cultural shift (linked to educational purpose) beyond mere pedagogy, it can be argued that it places teachers in a near intractable position. *“Islands of Innovation”* (PT) do exist though and some opportunities for SDL can be found in most countries:



“Teacher autonomy in Finland creates the possibility for SDL, but does not guarantee it”
FI

“Nano participants describe working around systemic constraints to create pockets of SDL. The senior education officer concurs that SDL incorporation depends heavily on the individual educator and is not institutionally embedded in assessment or inspection frameworks.”
CY

“The most explicit examples of enactment come from the school-based interview, where SDL is operationalised through prepared environments, short planning cycles, review and retrospective routines, portfolios, competency rubrics, and systematic documentation of student evidence.”
ES

“One respondent noted that some schools are able to “collapse the timetable” in JC or TY to allow for project-/problem-/phenomenon-based learning but this is rare and ad-hoc.”
IE

“In practice, common building blocks recur across contexts: portfolio-based work, quarterly or weekly plans offering choice, project-based and Scrum-inspired formats replacing some traditional lessons, and regular feedback or reflection conversations.”
DE

“SDL-aligned practices exist (student-designed classroom spaces, debate formats, critical thinking activities) but are associated with schools that have an explicit innovation mission.”
IT

“Despite these challenges, participants identified promising assessment practices that support SDL, including portfolios, project-based assessment, self-assessment, peer assessment, reflective journals, and performance-based tasks.”
RO

The most challenging context for the SWELL Academy is likely to be Bulgaria where SDL does not seem to be named (even implicitly or through synonyms) in curricular documents.

“Micro level said they don’t understand the question of ‘To what extent is self-directed learning included in the primary/post-primary curriculum in your country?’ stating that in Bulgaria, every subject in every grade has a strict curriculum.”
BG

This is a very interesting quote in that it seems to reflect an understanding of educational purpose grounded in factual/propositional knowledge with no room for manoeuvre. Nano participants noted that even flexibility about how something is learned is limited. Additional system constraints are evident in recent changes in some countries such as:

“The mentioned an important indicative example of centralization: the concept of critical literacy introduced in a previous educational reform, was later cancelled as an educational practice and the curriculum went back to the study of the assigned book only.”
CY



“In another jurisdiction, a recent decree caps the proportion of self-directed learning time at a maximum of forty percent, a tightening compared with previously more flexible arrangements, even though a parallel quality framework from the same school inspectorate explicitly champions such approaches — a noted contradiction between pedagogical vision and bureaucratic practice.” DE

This can lead to teacher distrust and cynicism regarding curricular innovation, something that can be exasperated by inspection systems. On balance, it seems that Inspection Frameworks do not formally look for SDL, something that should not be surprising given the lack of explicit inclusion of SDL in curriculum documents. In Cyprus it was noted that teacher evaluation systems disincentivise pedagogical innovation.

Findings from Spain offer a neat synthesis of the overall issues that partner countries will face in developing SDL practice:

“However, the interviews show that barriers remain substantial. These include misalignment between SDL and standardised testing, distrust from inspection systems, limited timetable flexibility, weak institutional recognition, and the persistence of traditional ideas about what legitimate learning should look like. Partial innovation therefore exists, but it often remains fragile because it is layered onto systems still designed for compliance and uniformity rather than self-direction.” ES

Summary

SDL is not explicitly named in any curriculum but is evident through synonyms in many countries. Some curricula have structural affordances for a more authentic SDL and most have pedagogical practices that might be enhanced by SDL inclusion. Bulgaria presents a challenge in state schools. Across all countries the dominating influence is assessment and concerns about curricular drift – what is learned and why is largely predetermined but how it is learned has some flexibility. Most curricula however claim to value autonomy, agency, skills and competencies that can be developed by SDL. There is therefore a tension between rhetoric and reality as there is significant curricular drift when it comes to epistemic and procedural knowledge development which Inspectorate systems do not tend to focus on. This places individual teachers in apparently intractable positions but “islands of innovation” likely exist where schools have a culture that values autonomy, while managing to meet mainstream requirements.



Perceived value of SDL

Across the participating countries, there is a remarkably strong consensus that self-directed learning (SDL) offers significant benefits for learners and society. In particular, it is generally viewed as a powerful means of developing autonomy, motivation, critical thinking, and lifelong learning dispositions. Many countries go on to describe SDL as essential for active citizenship, democratic participation, and adaptability in future professional contexts.

However, these perceived benefits were not universally articulated. Participants from Bulgaria draw attention to some potential downsides of SDL – trying to fit in self-directed tasks on top of an already full curriculum, additional workload for teachers, and the difficulty in moving students along at the same pace when they are all working independently. Similarly, participants from Finland noted that the concept of SDL is politically contested, with some politicians linking SDL to declining standards as part of a critique of progressive educational approaches.

While the overall picture is highly positive, countries vary considerably in how they frame SDL's value. Some focus on motivation and engagement, with presumed impact on learning outcomes. Others discuss personal growth and learner agency, democratic citizenship and societal participation, or inclusion and equity. These differences reflect distinct educational cultures but collectively present SDL as a multifaceted approach with benefits extending far beyond academic achievement.

The most consistently reported benefit across countries is SDL's ability to increase learner motivation and engagement. Participants repeatedly describe learners becoming more interested, invested, and active when they have opportunities to influence their learning. SDL is seen as moving learners from passive recipients of instruction to active participants in the learning process.

In Belgium (FWB and F), project-based and learner-centred approaches were associated with increased engagement, confidence, collaboration, and even students wanting to remain in school longer to continue their work. Cyprus similarly reports that students respond positively when they can investigate topics that interest them, with teachers observing increased participation even among previously reluctant learners.

Several countries explicitly relate SDL to the concept of “intrinsic motivation” (CY, DE, IE, RO), with one participant from Ireland drawing a line between intrinsic motivation and the perceived “epistemological relevance” of learning. Across countries, the common assumption is that people are more motivated when they have genuine agency and responsibility for their learning rather than simply complying with externally imposed tasks. This sense of agency and motivation is also linked to enhanced wellbeing, as described in the “Understanding of SDL” section above.

As well as SDL having the capacity to improve learning through increased motivation, most countries also pointed out that engaging in SDL supports the personal development of students. Nearly all countries identify SDL as a means of helping learners become



more independent and responsible, and become better able to make decisions and manage their own learning.

Romania emphasizes how making learning decisions fosters confidence and accountability. Germany highlights the growth of self-responsibility, frustration tolerance, and problem-solving capacity. Portugal points to increased self-regulation and reduced dependence on constant adult feedback.

These benefits are often viewed as developmental rather than immediate. Participants generally believe that SDL helps learners gradually acquire the dispositions needed to manage increasing levels of autonomy throughout their lives, and that *“benefits depend on appropriate support, scaffolding, and opportunities for gradual development.”* (RO)

Participants across many countries also spoke of the benefits of SDL beyond the school years – building skills needed for adulthood, democratic participation, and lifelong learning. For example, Belgium (F) positions the independent demands of SDL as a *“gradual preparation for adult life”*.

Participants consistently argue that future citizens must possess the capacity to continue learning independently throughout their lives. Romania explicitly describes SDL as a prerequisite for lifelong learning, arguing that individuals must remain adaptable in changing social and professional contexts. Cyprus similarly frames SDL as essential for continuous personal and professional development. Ireland conceptualises the curiosity and motivation that SDL nurtures as providing a foundation for lifelong learning that contrasts with the formal curricular approach to learning that takes place in school: *“education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire”*.

Several countries view the critical thinking skills developed through SDL as particularly relevant in a world characterized by abundant information, technological change, and uncertainty. Participants suggest that SDL develops learners who can evaluate information critically, work independently, and adapt creatively to new challenges.

Cyprus stresses that SDL's value depends partly on learners possessing the critical thinking skills needed to navigate information effectively. Italy connects this through to the informational overload of social media; SDL develops skills that allow people to sort through and evaluate information quickly and efficiently. Meanwhile, Ireland links SDL to creativity and innovation, highlighting its importance in contemporary contexts shaped by artificial intelligence and rapidly changing knowledge landscapes.

The emphasis across these countries reflects a shared recognition that rapid technological, economic, and social change requires learners who can adapt, re-skill, and learn continuously.

Some countries also linked these same critical thinking skills, along with the sense of agency that is supported by SDL, to effective participation in democratic societies.



Cyprus provides perhaps the most explicit articulation of this. SDL is referred to as “*a democratic capability in itself*”, and as both “*a right and an obligation of a democratic citizen*”. Ireland similarly views SDL as “*a necessary condition to support criticality in democratic societies*”. Through their enabling of SDL, teachers can serve as role models of “dispositions for democracy”. Germany links SDL to a shift away from passive, consumer-like attitudes toward more active participation and responsibility.

Italian participants give an example that clearly connects SDL experiences at school to democratic processes. They describe ways in which democratic participation tools (“the Agora, the Cooperation Council, student ‘senators’”) are built into school systems and link this to students who are “*more autonomous, more capable of collaborative work, and better equipped for complex situations*”.

Collectively, these perspectives elevate SDL beyond individual learning outcomes and position it as an important component of democratic education.

Some countries also point to the capacity of SDL to promote education equity, by enabling students to work in ways that work best for them. By supporting diverse learning needs and offering multiple pathways to success, students may become more confident and engaged.

For example, Cyprus notes that students with ADHD and learning difficulties often benefit substantially from interactive, choice-based learning environments. Similarly, Ireland links SDL to Universal Design for Learning (UDL), suggesting that learner-centred approaches can support inclusion and accessibility for diverse populations.

However, countries also highlighted that SDL might be less effective, or even exacerbate inequalities, depending on how it is enacted. For example, Cyprus points out that “*students from more traditional educational systems (e.g. Eastern European backgrounds) may initially resist SDL approaches*”. Belgium (F) warns that learners with greater family support, cultural capital, and confidence may initially benefit more from SDL than others. In other words, those who already have the resources needed to thrive within educational contexts will be further advantaged over those who do not.

Summary

Across countries, SDL is overwhelmingly valued as a means of developing motivated, confident, responsible, and adaptable learners who are prepared for lifelong learning and participation in contemporary society. Importantly, countries do not view these benefits as automatic. The success of SDL might depend on the characteristics of learners (e.g., students’ pre-existing skills and resources) and effective guidance and scaffolding from teachers. However, if the conditions are right, and it is done effectively, SDL is seen as leading to increased engagement, autonomy, self-confidence, critical thinking, wellbeing, and readiness for future educational and professional challenges. These benefits are explicitly described as enabling students to actively and fully engage in democratic society.



Opportunities to enhance SDL incorporation in the curriculum

Few participating countries have ongoing curriculum redevelopment or plans for same in the near future. Sweden's curriculum already mandates that schools should uphold students' rights "*...as active agents in their learning*", actioned through individualised learning plans. However, the high level of autonomy enjoyed by schools means that the lack of a national Framework can lead to variation in interpretation and curricular drift. Finland is experiencing a partial approach focused on assessment systems. Bulgaria has long-standing plans for redevelopment, but nothing has been actioned. Romania is engaging in competency-based curriculum reform. Ireland and Cyprus present interesting cases.

In Ireland, the entire curriculum from primary through to the end of post-primary is in an ongoing state of redevelopment, based on Frameworks that are described in the Appendix. Most notable here are the Short Course structure at Junior Cycle (ages 12-15) where schools are given autonomy to design learning focused on anything they like (to include being driven by student voice). Recent research has indicated that this affordance is not being utilised, but the policy will to address this is present and linked to expectations that this would improve student wellbeing. A new Framework for Transition Year (TY, age 16) has recently been launched, and this year could stand to be entirely self-directed. Historically, not every school has offered TY and enactment has been very variable. Finally, Additional Assessment Components are being rolled out for every subject at Senior Cycle (ages 17-18), worth 40% in terminal, high-stakes exams which require students to be entirely self-directed. The argument can be built that focusing on SDL as early as possible will support higher achievement in this assessment. The Inspectorate are also supporting a process called "School Self-Evaluation" (SSE) where schools can set a target for development and track progress. This might include SDL if the argument can be made that such a focus will enhance outcomes.

In Cyprus, macro-participants report that redevelopment is ongoing, focused on integrating critical thinking and learner autonomy into the curriculum but meso-participants hold reservations about depth and continuity. The Inspectorate see Cyprus in a permanent state of curriculum "*reform*" where recommendations are rarely implemented before the next reform cycle. Nano-participants are not aware of reform except for a teacher of Health Education who views reforms as progressive and aligned with SDL. Concerns about broader implementation were grounded in teacher resistance and inspectorate conservatism.

Belgium (F) noted the dangers of teachers feeling stretched by the demands of new reforms with little willingness to take on anything additional. There are also issues with an "*information gradient*" (CY) where lower-level actors are less aware of reform and sceptical of same. In some cases, there can be a lack of coherence in the reform, arising from what an Irish participant described as "*policy theft*" where successful reforms in other countries are copied without the necessary structures to allow them to fully function.



Several countries suggested a focus on “*consolidation*” (PT) in relation to realising existing policies, see appendices for details. This reflects previous discussion focused on the “how?” of learning (pedagogical approaches) rather than the “what?” or “why?”.

“...the curriculum prescribes what must be learned while leaving how largely open to teachers; as a first step, SDL can be adopted as a methodology for reaching mandatory goals within the new “knowledge-rich” framework, rather than as a competing agenda”.

BE

Assessment practices may provide a more authentic opportunity for SDL incorporation. Here, student goals may be limited by the prescriptive requirements of formal curricula, and indeed may more closely resemble SRL, but goal setting within formative assessment is feasible in most countries. Finland identified this as a “*strategic opportunity*”.

“The focus group discussions suggested that formative assessment creates opportunities for learners to develop self-regulation skills, set learning goals, and evaluate their own progress”.

RO

Whether utilising the opportunities of curriculum redevelopment or illustrating the affordances of SDL in pedagogy and assessment, Irish participants stressed the importance of sharing this as “*craft knowledge*”. It was suggested that the “*threat of a good example*” can lead to “*jealousy and theft*” where development has been clearly shown to have positive impact and solve problems in other schools. Time poor teachers need “*door openers*” (IE) or “*structural entry points*” (IT) to support enactment and to create the potential to challenge beliefs about traditional practices. Romania highlighted the affordances of digital technologies in blended learning environments. Supporting teachers in navigating curricular redevelopment or in making sense of confusing or vague existing policies may contribute to enhanced teacher wellbeing and ownership. This could involve creating networks of innovative schools to share best practice in overcoming institutional resistance (DE).

“Rather than waiting for full systemic reform, SWELL can help schools and teachers work within current constraints by providing tools, language, and examples that connect SDL practice to curriculum expectations and accountability requirements”.

ES

Summary

Many participating countries now have Frameworks with goals that may be confusing or challenging to realise. For example, how does one teach the development of dispositions or critical thinking? Since lower-level curriculum-makers may be unaware of curricular developments or unclear about existing policy, it is important to translate this into plain language and to make connections to SDL visible and practical (RO). Professional development should focus on supporting teacher ownership and wellbeing in communities of practice focused on solving problems. Some countries (FI, IE, RO, SE) have ongoing curriculum redevelopment while in more established curricula, SDL can enhance pedagogy and assessment, at least in terms of SRL. Digital technologies can have some affordances, and varied use scenarios could be modelled e.g. using OneNote



to scaffold SDL for each student, especially in relation to formative assessment. It would likely be worthwhile for the consortium to create a repository of practices (including digital technologies).



Structural requirements for SDL

All partners recognise the centrality of teacher professional development in this section. The necessary conditions are both cultural and practical.

Culturally, Irish participants emphasised the need to ground SDL in a “*big picture view*” related to educational purpose, Italy describing this as a “*...shift in educational posture*”. Several countries referred to SDL in the context of rights-based education. Concomitant with this is the issue of teacher identity (ES) and role. This role needs to view learning as a community activity where learners work together in co-inquiry (CY). Several countries (BE, CY, FI, IE especially) emphasised the significance of psychological safety as teachers may find themselves in a vulnerable space where, as experts they might be “*afraid to not know something, which is antithetical to SDL*” (IE). In the absence of this, “*...freedom becomes anxiety rather than agency*” (FI). They might also have concerns about parental expectations, assumptions and pressures. The need for teacher learning in communities was highlighted by many countries and several recognised the critical role of the leader of learning, the principal, as the gatekeeper to change. The principal needs a shared understanding of SDL and purpose and must trust in the autonomy of teachers (BE). They must also protect teachers against parents (CY) if pushback occurs and educate parents who may otherwise see SDL as superfluous to university entrance (IE). Such conditions can support educators' willingness to enact SDL (DE).

Practically, systemic support is required to create “*institutional readiness*” (RO). Several partners warned of the overarching influence of Ministry/Department expectations, noting that teachers will only accept approaches that are aligned with formal expectations (BG especially). This will be a significant issue for principals and Irish participants noted:

“...school leadership which is currently “suffocated” with a plethora of competing demands for attention”. IE

“Most will not be against the value of SDL in principle, but there is the danger of “the urgent crowding out the important”. IE

“Leaders may also be concerned about ‘over-porosity’ where there is too much freedom/autonomy and we must identify appropriate structures for scaffolding and guidance”. IE

The issue of time was common amongst participants. This includes the necessary, sustained time to come to grips with SDL and the new identities and practices involved. There is also the practical issue of timetabling to create literal hours in the day that might be ring-fenced for SDL. This might be used for flexible, integrated learning through collapsing the curriculum (the “*hare’s corner*”) and allow teachers to participate in co-planning. Several countries highlighted the limiting effects of over-reliance on textbooks which can mitigate against SDL. The school principal is therefore a key actor to create the space (literal and figurative) required for SDL development.



Several conditions were highlighted that are outside of the control of the school management such as class sizes, the absence of validation of SDL in policy/curriculum documents (especially where highly prescribed), potentially excessive bureaucracy, and financial restrictions. The redesign of physical spaces was highlighted by several countries. While this would likely be impossible from an engineering point of view, furniture and classroom arrangement could be altered to better support/encourage SDL and SWELL should provide practical exemplification here.

The training provided to teachers needs to be SDL itself (IE) and ideally take place in a whole-school setting (DE) where teachers are “...*living SDL themselves rather than being trained about it abstractly*” (IT). This echoes advice in previous sections and indeed, school clusters would be more powerful still. In relation to Initial Teacher Education (ITE), issues were identified in relation to excessive focus on theory, transmissive pedagogies and a lack of focus on “... *on human development, community dynamics, and self-directed professional learning*” (FI). Some partners highlighted that ITE does not provide pre-service teachers with SDL experiences and thus enactment is challenging/impossible. CPD poorly equips teachers for SDL – teachers should be self-directed and exposed to case studies (including teachers and students) of effective SDL in their contexts. They should be able to opt-in to rich training aligned with their interests. In both settings, fragmentary exposure to SDL is a significant issue and sustained engagement is required. The importance of critical reflection is recognised:

“The observation that ‘SDL becomes possible when teachers are supported to change not only what they do, but how they understand learning itself’ captures the collective understanding that successful implementation of SDL depends fundamentally on developing new conceptions of teaching and learning.” RO

It was acknowledged by multiple partners that it is difficult to reach key policy decision-makers who must both see value in SDL and believe that it can be practically enacted. SWELL should therefore try to ideally engage with whole-school approaches across clusters of schools which can then act as a demonstration initiative. A coherent approach, aligned with the existing curriculum is critical and would also be helpful in countries like Sweden where there is a growing need for shared Frameworks to avoid curricular drift and promote the overarching national goal of nurturing lifelong learners. This would justify SDL and support a “backwash” effect into the rest of the curriculum which would be of great interest to inspection systems who would see this as a necessary condition to support SDL. It would likely be useful to provide toolkits to measure developments in indicators like engagement, attainment and wellbeing, linked to SDL experiences. It is of critical importance to build the argument that incorporating SDL in the curriculum can support students in high-stakes assessment.

Summary

The core structural requirement for SWELL that is actionable is to secure the support of principals in the participating schools. This is a necessary condition for teacher buy-in and would ideally involve a whole-school approach, perhaps with clusters of schools working together. This requires illustrative case studies of how practical it is to engage with the SWELL academy and how it is a means of solving problems and not just another



initiative to squeeze into the busy school day. These case studies should attend to the basics of timetabling and identifying affordances within the formal curriculum; a practical guide to learning space design that is coherent with SDL. Where a participating country has limited curriculum structure for SDL, it would be useful to develop an argument that supporting student SDL will lead to improvements in attainment in high-stakes assessment. This will likely involve mapping SDL to formative assessment which is known to improve attainment. This implies that SWELL will have to provide multiple routes for engagement of schools across the network, with some being able to leverage new curricular structures while others will work within constraints with limited/no affordances for SDL.

For each participating country therefore, a mapping document must clearly illustrate the links between SDL and the curriculum. This should be succinct and framed in language that is persuasive for principals and teachers. This will create the conditions for teacher PD which must allow for sustained professional learning over a prolonged period with an emphasis on psychological safety. Where possible, it is important to secure the support of school management bodies who can give principals the approval to commit to SWELL. This socio-ecological focus will encourage the dissemination and use of the SWELL academy amongst providers of teacher education (Initial and Continuing).



MOOC development

Across all participating countries, there is strong support for the development of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC; SWELL Teacher Academy) focused on SDL. Participants consistently see a need for professional learning that helps teachers understand, implement, enact, and sustain SDL in practice.

However, there is also consistent agreement that a successful MOOC cannot be a traditional online course consisting primarily of readings and videos. Instead, respondents envisage a highly practical, interactive, collaborative, and enactment-focused learning experience that helps bridge the gap between educational theory and classroom reality: *“online delivery alone is insufficient without active, collaborative, learning-by-doing elements”* (CY).

Participants from all countries emphasise the importance of providing teachers with concrete tools, examples, and implementation and enactment guidance that can be transferred directly into classroom practice. Common requests include: ready-to-use classroom materials and lesson plans (BE and CY), case studies from real schools that describe different age groups and subject areas (CY, FI, DE, IE, PT, RO), and observation of classroom activities (live or video; DE, SP, IE).

While SDL is often viewed favourably in theory, this real-world perspective will help teachers to actually apply it in the classroom. Romanian participants, for example, describe the MOOC as a *“practical instrument for translating broad curriculum aspirations into actionable teaching strategies”*.

Although the emphasis on practical learning is strong, Belgium (FWB and F), Bulgaria, and Germany also stress the necessity for the MOOC to have sound basis in theory. Linked to this, several countries (BE-FWB, BE-F, BU, IE) flag up that the MOOC would need to include clear evidence of the benefits of adopting an SDL approach.

Several countries warn that MOOCs often fail because participants acquire information without receiving support to enact and adapt it within their local contexts. As such, participants point to other aspects of the MOOC that might help successful enactment by teachers, including peer discussion (CY), mentoring (ES) and reflection on practice (DE). Portugal and Spain place particular emphasis on blended approaches that combine online learning with real-world enactment.

Incorporating a social component into the MOOC was suggested across multiple countries as a way of improving motivation, engagement, and quality of learning outcomes.

In Belgium (F), participants stress that the greatest value of SDL-related training often comes from interaction with like-minded colleagues rather than content alone. Teachers describe feelings of isolation when working in school environments where their educational values are not shared.



Ireland argues that the academy should create structured opportunities for social conversation, problem-solving, and collaborative inquiry. Romania highlights the importance of professional learning communities and peer learning for scaling SDL implementation.

Portugal presents perhaps the strongest case for collaborative learning. Traditional MOOCs, which are *“asynchronous, focused on individual consumption, and merely transmissive”*, are explicitly rejected because they isolate teachers and result in limited classroom transfer. Instead, participants advocate for a Social MOOC model based on small peer groups, collaborative reflection, and shared implementation. Similarly, macro level participants in Italy suggest that *“community of practice models (visits, summer schools, peer exchanges, small networks) may be more impactful than formal MOOCs”*.

As well as the broad agreement that the MOOC needed to be theoretically sound and, even more so, practically orientated, several countries also had specific ideas about desirable content or delivery approaches for the MOOC.

For example, Finland expressed a desire for the MOOC to model SDL practices: *“the MOOC must model SDL in its own design — not simply describe it”*. Finland also recommends having *“engaging, high-quality lectures from credible and recognisable figures”* to make it attractive, *“explicitly addressing misconceptions about SDL”*, and having *“a graduated structure that builds understanding from awareness to application to programme design”*.

Ireland suggests that the content should cover *“clarification of terms”* and distinctions/relationships between *“e.g. voice, agency, problem-based learning, SDL, etc.”* They also recommend having a tiered approach to the MOOC, with the highest level being *“difficult to pass”*. This difficulty will make the qualification meaningful and desirable.

Rather than differentiated difficulty, Portugal recommends that there be parallel pathways differentiated by role: *“a pedagogical/didactic track for teachers (focused on the classroom) and a management and leadership track for directors/middle leaders (focused on managing change and creating conditions in the school).”*

Italy described various modules that the MOOC might cover: *“emotional intelligence (Goleman), pedagogy of freedom (Freire), interdisciplinarity (Morin), wellbeing frameworks, communication and relational skills (including collaborative practices such as kindness-based approaches)”*.

Several countries point to the potential for the MOOC to be transformative in terms of teachers’ pedagogical philosophy and professional beliefs. For example, Irish participants noted that the MOOC should address *“the role of SDL with respect to the purpose of education, focused on affordances for democracy as a deliberative process”*. Similarly, Belgian participants suggest that the MOOC should provide space for learners to *“develop their own critical agency as teachers. They need to understand not only how to use pedagogical tools, but also why certain pedagogical choices matter, what social*



vision they serve, and how they relate to questions of equality, democracy and emancipation.”

Beyond the MOOC itself, participants also commented on the importance of the broader CPD and regulatory context.

Countries generally saw the prospect of offering micro-credentials for completing the MOOC as valuable. Micro-credentials recognise teacher learning and can be used to help define professional identity and enhance employability. As such, they can also serve as a source of extrinsic motivation. For example, participants from Cyprus refer to *“micro-credentialing as a motivator and legitimising structure”*.

However, respondents repeatedly argue that credentials should be earned through evidence of enactment rather than theoretical knowledge alone.

Portugal is particularly emphatic on this point, arguing that certification should require portfolios, classroom evidence, or peer validation. Ireland similarly suggests that advanced SWELL credentials should require documented impact and evidence of change in practice.

Meanwhile, Finland, Germany, Belgium (F), and Italy express caution regarding the actual motivational power of credentials if they are disconnected from national recognition systems or career progression frameworks. Participants from Finland noted that *“any certification would need to align with existing national CPD frameworks to be taken up meaningfully”*. In sum, there was *“scepticism about whether credentials alone will drive engagement”* (FI).

Other countries also pointed out that the MOOC would need to co-exist with, or be integrated into, existing national frameworks and governance systems. For example, Cyprus stresses that *“for the Ministry of Education to participate in the dissemination of a MOOC, they would have to be actively involved in its design and implementation”*, while Bulgaria notes that *“MOOC Courses will be useful if they correspond to the regulatory framework of the Ministry of Education and Science”*. Similarly, Romania suggests that *“if SDL is embedded in national priorities, then dissemination through official channels becomes more sustainable.”*

Several countries note that being able to tap into these existing structures would be crucial for the success of the MOOC, as it would enable dissemination of the resource and mobilisation of the intended audience. Various governmental agencies and universities were mentioned as prospective dissemination partners, alongside teacher training organisations and professional networks. Social media was also flagged as a potential access point.

Summary

Across countries, there is consistent support for a SWELL Teacher Academy MOOC focused on self-directed learning. However, the evidence strongly suggests that success will depend on moving beyond a conventional MOOC model.



Participants describe the need for a learning experience that has:

- A strong theoretical basis that captures the benefits of using an SDL approach
- A focus on practice – concrete actions that can be taken within the constraints of real-world classrooms
- A substantive active and social component that encompasses collaboration, peer learning, and mentorship.

This latter aspect will help build sustainable impact through the development of communities of practice. As participants from Belgium state *“the MOOC’s value for at least part of its audience may lie as much in building a supportive professional community/system amongst teachers (e.g. peer exchange, cohort structures, ongoing community spaces), as in transferring new content or skills”* (BE-F).

Participants also point to the need for the MOOC to be thoughtfully positioned in relation to existing credentialling and regulatory frameworks within countries. Successful dissemination and uptake will be dependent on buy-in from influential stakeholders, such as government agencies and national organisations responsible for teacher education and CPD.



Perspectives of graduates from Democratic Schools

This section considers the perspectives of alumni of democratic schools and, as such, presents a picture of what might be achieved were mainstream systems to move in the direction of SDL.

Alumni's perspectives on the nature of SDL reflected the core focus on student autonomy and agency to define the what, why and how of learning. Importantly though, this was co-created in partnership with trusted adults. Time was highlighted as important but for exploration but also to reflect on setting goals that were intrinsically meaningful. Autonomy and ownership were held to support an "*internalised sense of authorship over one's own learning*". Autonomy was institutionalised through governance authentically supporting meaningful, trusting relationships with adults.

SDL did not require formal naming as it was the "*organising principle of daily life*". It was visible in the explicit curriculum through such things as flexible timetabling and mixed age groups but also implicitly (the "hidden curriculum") in the manner of the Socialisation (Biesta, 2009) referred to previously. Assessment was also co-created and served formative purposes but problems arose in the transition to conventional further education, reflecting issues of normative validity in terms of the Qualification function (ibid.) of education.

The Subjectification function (ibid.) of education is evident with alumni reporting strong sense of agency, meaning, self-efficacy and getting to know themselves. SDL was held to support wellbeing and

These educative experiences have positioned alumni with positive dispositions towards managing uncertainty, independence, adaptability, resilience and self-knowledge. On the other hand, working life made facing obligatory tasks more trying with associated commitment difficulties. Interestingly, participants identified the lack of sustained support for long-term planning, "*I missed having someone to help me maintain a longer view*", reflecting the critical importance of the role of the teacher (who should show commitment to democratic education) and other students.

Cultural, structural and credentialism issues were identified as barriers to SDL and participants identified the lack of exposure to working examples as a key problem for policy makers. To combat this five levers were suggested:

1. Adult roles: teacher positioning is critical, requiring them to act as resources rather than as authorities with consistency and coherence
2. Time and space: flexible time is required for co-creation in diverse physical environments. This requires reframing flexible time as essential, not wasted.
3. Voice and Governance: sociocratic decision-making must include governance structures where student input has real consequences.
4. Community and mixed-age connection: mixed-age interaction was held to prevent peer-pressure and support organic mentorship. The relational health of the community is critical in developing a collective culture.



5. Purposeful visibility: it is important to develop a heuristic to bridge the gap between SDL experiences in democratic schools and conventional further education. This will support alumni in giving students agency in representing themselves.



7. Summary of core curricular areas where there may be SDL affordances (including links)

As mentioned in the Existing Incorporation of SDL in Curriculum Section (p.29), there is a lack of explicit reference to SDL in curricular documents across SWELL partner countries, with SDL rarely being identified as a curricular area in its own right. Despite this, curricular affordances exist in each of the frameworks present in partner countries that emphasise the development of competencies and skills which are closely aligned with SDL principles. Affordances tend to occur where curricula already allow for choice, inquiry-based and project-based learning, reflection, self-assessment, cross-curricular and interdisciplinary learning or flexible approaches to achieving prescribed outcomes and curricular goals. A recurring gap is therefore not an absence of potential curricular spaces, but the lack of explicit and intentional connection between these existing spaces and SDL, and the considerable variation in how much autonomy students realistically exercise within these spaces.

“SDL is not named in the Flemish curriculum, and this is confirmed by both interviews and desk research. However, the absence of the term does not mean the absence of space.”

BE (F)

“Although SDL is not explicitly mentioned in official texts, several guiding principles present in the curriculum, such as autonomy, initiative, reflection, problem-solving and the ability to make choices, constitute potential foundations for its development.”

BE (FWB)

“Although participants consistently agreed that self-directed learning (SDL) is not systematically embedded within the Cypriot curriculum, the findings reveal several existing curricular spaces that already provide opportunities for its integration.”

CY

Several countries identify project-based, inquiry-based, investigation-based and interdisciplinary or cross-curricular learning as familiar pedagogical approaches that afford particularly promising spaces for SDL. Cyprus, Germany, Finland, Ireland, Romania, Portugal and Spain all identify these approaches as providing opportunities for students to formulate questions, make decisions, investigate, collaborate and reflect within formal curricula. Germany similarly identifies “project weeks” and cross-subject formats in upper post-primary as recurring affordances, while Ireland's Short Courses and Classroom-Based Assessments at lower post-primary level provide significant opportunity for the development of SDL.

“Project-based learning and inquiry-based learning stand out as the most direct spaces for SDL”

RO

However, interviews suggest that project-based learning (PBL), inquiry-based learning (IBL) and investigation-based learning approaches do not automatically constitute SDL. In several contexts, opportunities for PBL and IBL remain brief-restricted or structurally constrained by time, content-heavy curricula and assessments, with autonomy limited



to task execution or source selection (BE-F, CY, DE, IE, IT, ES). Individual teacher disposition, *phronesis* and professional praxis can also play a significant role in the level to which students can take ownership over their own learning, or whether opportunities for SDL remain teacher-defined and constrained, with Spain suggesting that “these spaces often retain teacher-led assumptions or remain disconnected from assessment reform, which limits their transformative potential”.

“The collective and relational dimensions of SDL (co-inquiry, shared purpose, democratic participation) were entirely absent from how interviewees described current practice.”
BE (F)

SWELL therefore has an opportunity to demonstrate how existing PBL and inquiry-led spaces can be leveraged and redesigned to increase the level of genuine student agency and self-direction.

“Overall, the findings suggest that opportunities for SDL already exist within the Cypriot educational system but remain fragmented and largely dependent on individual teacher initiative.”
CY

The extant competency-based and cross-curricular or transversal curriculum areas present across many SWELL partner contexts provide significant affordances for SDL. The following non-exhaustive table attempts to denote some of the curricular approaches, frameworks, directives and/or competencies highlighted by partners as having affordances for SDL.

Table 4: Curricular and Structural Affordances for SDL across partner contexts.

Country:	Relevant Framework, Model, Policy or Reform:	Cross-/Curriculum Area or Component:
Belgium (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles)	Pact for Excellence in Education (Pacte pour un Enseignement d'excellence) <u>Common Core Curriculum: Cross-curricular areas (Tronc Commun: domaines transversaux)</u>	A major systemic reform of education in the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, progressively implemented since 2017, aiming to improve educational quality, equity, student achievement, and school governance. The Common Core (Tronc Commun) is one of its central components and is being progressively introduced across compulsory education. A major reform implemented by FWB progressively in the French-speaking Community of Belgium from 2022 to 2029 which establishes a common curriculum for all learners from 5 to 15 years old. “Autonomy, Initiative and Reflective Thinking” are woven throughout the Common Core Curriculum through the following 3 transversal competencies:



		1. Creativity, commitment and entrepreneurial spirit 2. Learning how to learn and making choices 3. Learning to find your way
Belgium (Flanders)	New reform: 30% school specific component <u>GO!'s strategic plan for 2030 (Het strategisch plan GO! 2030)</u>	New curriculum reform retains a 30% school-specific component, within which individual schools can develop their own content and approach, providing one of the clearest spaces for SDL at school-level. Names "personalised collaborative learning" as a core vision pillar, explicitly combining differentiation with the development of self-regulatory skills.
Cyprus	<u>Health Education & Investigation–Vision–Action–Change model</u> <u>Common Public Primary School Curriculum: Cross-curricular competencies</u>	Delivered through investigation-based pedagogy, with an emphasis on authentic real-life problems, student inquiry and action-oriented learning. The Investigation – Vision – Action - Change model encourages learners to “formulate questions, seek information, evaluate alternatives and implement solutions.” Following reform, the common primary school curriculum includes cross-curricular competencies of “critical thinking, self-assessment, problem solving, collaboration, digital competence and active citizenship”
Finland	<u>Transversal Competencies (Laaja-alainen osaaminen)</u> - 2014 NCC framework <u>Phenomenon-based/Multidisciplinary Learning Modules</u>	The 2014 NNC Framework explicitly includes “Self-Regulated Learning, metacognition and taking responsibility for learning”. Mandatory in Finnish basic education, these inquiry-based modules “create structural space for student-directed enquiry and cross-subject integration”.
Germany	Design, arts and craft-based subjects.	Repeatedly described as well suited to long, open working periods and free



	Project-based & cross-subject formats (science or project weeks), and vocational and competency-oriented programmes. Primary school Curriculum	choice of topic or technique, since outcomes are less tightly sequenced and more amenable to individual pacing. While these are indicated as having particular affordances for SDL, they typically appear from upper secondary level onward rather than earlier. Primary school is highlighted as a stage with considerable openness, since foundational skills can often be built through exploratory, self-paced activity.
Ireland	<u>Junior Cycle Framework</u> and Wellbeing Subjects <u>Junior Cycle Short Courses</u> <u>Transition Year Programme</u> <u>Senior Cycle Redevelopment (Advisory Report)</u> and	The Framework explicitly names 8 Key Skills and 8 Core Principles underpin all lower post-primary curricula, many of which are strongly coherent with SDL. Every subject requires students to complete at least one Classroom Based Assessment (CBA) where students have to be significantly self-directed, although generally limited by a brief in terms of goal-setting. Furthermore, <u>Wellbeing</u> Subjects such as SPHE, CSPE and PE, which account for 400 contact hours and are not exam-assessed, in addition to wellbeing indicators provide space to leverage for SDL. Designed for 100 contact hours and, in principle, would allow for authentic SDL as schools design learning to be focused on anything, without need to connect to pre-determined LOs. Allows for significant autonomy at school level to flexibly design learning. “Self-Regulated Learning” explicitly mentioned in programme, with affordances for SDL in “Being a Learner” student dimension. Reform/redevelopment is ongoing to upper post-primary school (Senior



	Additional Assessment Components	Cycle). Proposed competency framework focused on 5 Key Skills of “communicating, being personally effective, working with others, critical and creative thinking and information processing” and Dispositions which are best realized through SDL. Every subject requires students to complete an Additional Assessment Component (AAC) worth 40% of subject grade. AACs are research projects which require students to be significantly self-directed, although generally limited by a brief in terms of goal-setting.
Italy	Civic Education (Law No. 92 of 20 August 2019) Social-Emotional Competencies Law 22/2025 Maturity Exam Career counselling/Vocational Guidance	Minimum 33hr/year, distributed across subjects at schools' discretion, focused on cross-disciplinary themes and connected to real-world experiences, provides space to leverage for SDL. Introduces "non-cognitive" and cross-cutting competences (interacting with others, managing emotions, solving problems, adapting to change) across schools, adult education, and vocational training, and sets up a three-year national pilot to teach and assess them, aligned with the EU's "personal, social and learning-to-learn" key competence. Redevelopment of the high-school exit exam into the "Maturity Exam," has shifted purpose shifted to assessing each student's personal "maturity, autonomy, and responsibility", with students reflecting on lived experiences and evidencing their journey through a reflective portfolio Career counselling and vocational guidance is mandated at 30 hours per year in schools and students must set and track personal goals, choose and justify a "signature" piece of work,

	2025 National Indications	and self-assess against a competence framework. The language of Italy's 2025 National Indications has become more focused on student autonomy, including terms such as "self-government, self-regulation, self-assessment, and "person-centered" framing".
Portugal	Vocational Education and Modular Learning <u><i>Students' Profile by the End of Compulsory Schooling (Perfil dos Alunos à Saída da Escolaridade Obrigatória)</i></u> and <u><i>Essential Learnings (AE)</i></u>, Educational Territories of Priority Intervention (TEIP)	Acts as the main curricular lever for the practical enactment of SDL. Transversal competencies are fully integrated into the guidelines of the Students' Profile by the End of Compulsory Schooling, including the explicit development of student autonomy and capacity for problem solving. TEIP schools within vulnerable contexts emerge as ideal laboratories for testing and innovating in SDL. These schools also provide a curricular opportunity to tackle socioeconomic inequalities through structured pedagogical differentiation frameworks.
Romania	Competency-Based Curricula	SDL appears most strongly in competency-based curricula and in pedagogical approaches such as IBL, PBL, digital learning environments, and formative assessment, supporting student autonomy, reflection, and problem solving, especially when learning focuses on competences like critical thinking and "learning to learn" rather than content recall.
Spain	Project Based learning, tutoring, cross-curricular competencies and school innovations.	SDL affordances strongest in curricular spaces where autonomy, inquiry, documentation, and interdisciplinary learning already have some legitimacy (project-based learning, tutoring and advisory structures, arts-based work, science investigations, cross-curricular competencies, and school



		innovations that allow learners to produce evidence through portfolios, projects, and reflective routines).
--	--	---

Finland's Transversal Competencies, Belgium's Common Core (FWB), Ireland's Key Skills and Senior Cycle Competency Framework, Cyprus's cross-curricular competencies, and Portugal's Students' Profile and Essential Learnings all include concepts such as autonomy, critical thinking, reflection, problem solving, collaboration, self-regulation (SRL) and learning to learn. These frameworks and competencies provide strong rhetorical and curricular entry points for SDL, however the connection between them and their affordances for SDL is rarely made explicit. Interviewees in Belgium (F), Cyprus, Spain and Romania each mentioned that despite broader curricular intentions that point towards the development of SDL, these intentions are rarely realized in practice. In particular, interviewees in both Romania and Spain noted that teachers often lack the clarity, direction or support to translate these aims into practice.

“A key gap is that teachers are often not given clear, practical pathways for translating SDL-related curriculum intentions into lesson design. As a result, SDL opportunities remain underused or inconsistently applied. SWELL is seen as useful in making these existing affordances more visible and actionable, supporting teachers with concrete strategies, lesson examples, and assessment approaches that connect curriculum goals with classroom practice.”

RO

SWELL should therefore support teachers in translating broader curricular and competency ambitions into concrete SDL practices and evidence.

“One of the strongest messages from participants was that educational innovation gains legitimacy only when it is aligned with national policies and institutional expectations.”

BG

Assessment is a particularly important curricular space in which SDL can be utilized. Formative and self-assessment are identified in Finland, Italy, Portugal and Romania as opportunities for students to set goals, monitor progress, reflect and evaluate their learning. However, the degree to which formative assessment styles are utilized varies, with Portugal stating that assessment is *“shifting from traditional assessment toward formative assessment structured by knowledge domains”* and Finland noting that it is *“currently under-implemented relative to curriculum intent”*. Similar to Portugal's shift away from traditional assessment styles, Italy is moving towards more formative approaches to assessment.

“INDIRE (Italy's national education research institute) actively promotes formative assessment, rather than one-off grades, via teacher-training tools like observation checklists and self-assessment questionnaires.”

IT

Ireland provides an especially strong example; introduction of mandatory Classroom-Based Assessments at Junior Cycle and the new Additional Assessment Components at



Senior Cycle require substantial student self-direction, although the degree of genuine goal-setting varies by subject specification.

“Since these redevelopments span the entirety of the post-primary curriculum SWELL can argue for early development of SDL to prepare students for the high-stakes requirements of Senior Cycle – a Trojan Horse.” IE

In Italy, similarly strong affordances are seen in the redevelopment of the high-school terminal exam into the “Maturity Exam”, which assesses an individual’s “*maturity, autonomy, and responsibility*” through oral interviews and a student-led reflective portfolio. This represents a rare and valuable opportunity to directly enhance SDL within formal curriculum at a state-assessment level, with Italy highlighting:

“Because this happens in the country's single highest-stakes assessment, it gives SWELL a rare structural argument: schools and families already have a strong, mandatory incentive to help students practice self-directed reflection and self-documentation well before exam year, since the exam now explicitly grades for it.” IT

Across countries, however, assessment systems can simultaneously enable and constrain SDL, suggesting that SWELL should make the relationship between SDL, formative assessment and existing assessment requirements particularly visible. In Italy, although the “*language of student autonomy is genuinely strong throughout*” and “*self-government, self-regulation, self-assessment, and “person-centred” framing all appear prominently*” in the 2025 indications (D.M. 221/2025), one participant noted that this “*tighter framework*” reads more like a “*de facto national program*”, and instead “*narrows the space for co-constructing learning with students or running inquiry-based, student-led projects*”. This overcrowding of curriculum through the learnification (Biesta, 2015) of policy rhetoric is reflected in curricula across the SWELL network, hence the Academy must ensure that SDL is “*framed as easing rather than adding to teacher workload*” (IT) and is “*enacted within, not against, curricular requirements*” (BE-F).

“The language of autonomy remains strong, but the operating room to enact it may be shrinking.” IT

Some specific curricular spaces offer especially strong or distinctive affordances. Cyprus identifies Health Education and its Investigation-Vision-Action-Change model as particularly affording the development of SDL. Italy identifies Civic Education, social-emotional competences, career guidance and individual digital portfolios. Portugal highlights vocational and modular education, where practical and flexible structures provide greater scope for learner autonomy. Germany identifies arts, design, craft and vocational education as areas where flexible outcomes and individual pacing are more readily accommodated. Ireland's Junior Cycle Short Courses and Transition Year provide similar affordances for SDL due to the significant structural flexibility available to schools in designing learning for students at these levels.

Digital learning and portfolios provide additional affordances as highlighted by Finland, Cyprus, Romania, Portugal and Italy. These can support personalised pathways,



independent research, reflection, documentation and self-assessment. However, as noted with PBL and IBL approaches, digital tools in absence of a broader transversal context or supports do not constitute SDL. SWELL can add value by demonstrating the pedagogical structures needed to ensure that technology increases student decision-making and self-direction rather than simply providing alternative ways to complete teacher-directed tasks.

Partners noted important structural differences and institutional pressures between subjects and educational stages. In Germany, stronger affordances are seen in subjects with flexible outcomes and lower content density such as arts-based subjects, while mathematics, heavily sequenced subjects and examination years offer less space. Ireland similarly presents a continuum from highly flexible Short Courses and Transition Year through to increasingly consequential high-stakes Senior Cycle assessment. This suggests that SWELL should avoid presenting SDL as an approach requiring wholesale curriculum redesign, and instead show teachers, and other stakeholders in education (notably, principals, parents and policymakers), where leverage exists to realistically embed different levels of SDL within existing curricular/assessment-led constraints.

“The SWELL project could play a supportive role in translating autonomy into a shared understanding of the gap between the prescribed curriculum into the enacted curriculum. SWELL would provide a space to examine school organisation by encouraging education stakeholders to adopt a reflexive attitude.” BE (FWB)

A consistent gap across countries is translation from curricular rhetoric to classroom practice (BE-FWB, BE-F, BG, CY, FI, IE, IT, RO, ES). Teachers may be expected to develop autonomy, critical thinking, self-regulation or learning-to-learn competences without clear guidance on how these are enacted or assessed. SWELL can provide the missing connection between “what the curriculum says” and “what SDL *looks like*” by mapping existing curriculum requirements to increasing levels of student agency and providing concrete examples, planning tools and assessment approaches that are coherent with the development of SDL.

“SDL can be positioned as a methodology for reaching mandatory goals rather than as a competing agenda.” BE (F)

Summary

The strongest cross-country opportunities for SDL incorporation lie in PBL and IBL pedagogies, transversal competencies and competency frameworks, formative and self-assessment, interdisciplinary learning, vocational/modular education, flexible curricular spaces, and digital/portfolio-based learning. Curricular affordances already exist across each partner context however, it is imperative that the SWELL Academy facilitate and support the development of teacher capacity to recognize and operationalize these spaces for SDL. SWELL should therefore make explicit links between SDL and existing national curriculum language, while showing different levels of SDL incorporation, from SRL within teacher-defined tasks through to authentic student goal-setting, decision-making and evaluation. Country-specific examples and spaces such as those outlined in the preceding table could provide particularly useful, concrete Academy exemplars.



8. Key Levers for the SWELL academy

Across the SWELL network, partners identify a relatively consistent set of levers for the SWELL Academy to utilize in the development and enactment of the MOOC. The strongest are those that connect SDL to existing curriculum and assessment requirements, make SDL concrete for teachers, schools and families, and support enactment at school level rather than presenting SDL as an additional initiative to the existing demands of curriculum.

1. **Make SDL visible within existing curriculum and policy frameworks.**

In most countries, SDL is not explicitly named in curriculum documentation or policy, however many curriculum frameworks already contain related expectations around autonomy, initiative, self-regulation, reflection, critical thinking, learning to learn and student agency. SWELL would therefore benefit significantly from bridging the gap between curriculum rhetoric and classroom reality by mapping the SWELL Academy's conceptualization of SDL directly onto existing curriculum requirements and goals in each country, and showing teachers *where* SDL is already possible. This is particularly important where schools increasingly require a clear connection between professional learning and institutional or national curriculum priorities. The Academy should distinguish clearly between SDL and related concepts such as active learning and SRL, while also recognising that SDL can be incorporated progressively rather than requiring students to determine every aspect of what they learn.

2. **Use assessment as a strategic entry point.**

Assessment is one of the strongest structural levers for SDL across SWELL countries. Formative assessment, self-assessment, traditional or digital portfolios, project outcomes, co-constructed success criteria, competency rubrics and alternative assessment formats provide opportunities for students to set goals, monitor and evaluate progress, reflect and document their learning. SWELL should demonstrate how SDL can support existing assessment requirements rather than competing for scarce time or adding to teacher workload. For example, in Ireland the Junior Cycle Classroom-Based Assessments and Senior Cycle Additional Assessment Components provide particularly strong opportunities. In Italy, the individual High-School exit examination portfolio component, in addition to students' reflective portfolio for guidance provide a strong structural argument for SDL as it already exists within formal, terminal assessment components.

3. **Make SDL practical, concrete and applicable.**

Across countries, participants consistently prioritised practical examples of SDL over abstract explanations and conceptualizations. The Academy should therefore provide classroom scenarios, worked examples, lesson and project designs, planning templates, pedagogical strategies, assessment tools and case studies that teachers can adapt to their own national contexts, schools, subjects, age groups and class sizes. PBL, IBL, interdisciplinary and cross-curricular learning and other existing pedagogies provide useful entry points. For example,



the [BEST Self-Direction Toolkit](#) represents an ability and age stratified toolkit for mapping discrete behaviours and tracking developments in SDL (Building Essential Skills Today (BEST), 2020), which can support teachers in identifying levels of SDL and documenting progression.

4. Pay particular attention to the teacher's changing role and development of their capacity to scaffold autonomy.

Teachers interviewed by SWELL partners repeatedly identified uncertainty about *how much* responsibility, control and direction to retain, and when to step back. SDL requires more than giving students freedom; teachers need to be supported in developing the capacity to scaffold, coach, mentor, facilitate and progressively transfer responsibility over learning to students. The Academy should make "structured openness" concrete and model how teachers can move from directing learning towards facilitating it without leaving behind students who require greater support. The Academy should also pay particular attention to supporting teachers in transitioning their role from teacher to facilitator, namely in the evolution of their professional identities and the extant social, emotional and cultural barriers that may impede this change.

5. Build professional learning around collaboration and Communities of Practice.

SDL is difficult to sustain when individual teachers are working against an established school culture. The Academy should therefore support school-based and cross-school **communities of practice**, peer exchange, mentoring, reflection and collaborative problem-solving. It is recognized by partners that given international scale of the Academy, in-person opportunities for learning and collaboration may not always be possible. This is where the development of whole-school and cross-school communities of practice offer particular affordances for the MOOC and development of SDL across participants. Providing opportunities for schools to learn collectively will help build sustained, collective momentum. Partners highlight that SWELL must also connect with both [Initial Teacher Education](#) and [Continuing Professional Development](#) rather than treating the MOOC as a standalone intervention.

6. Model SDL through the Academy itself.

It is imperative that the Academy embodies the principles of SDL it promotes. Rather than relying primarily on lecture-based online content, the MOOC should include opportunities for choice, inquiry, collaboration, reflection, goal-setting and peer learning. Flexible learning pathways to, and within the MOOC should accommodate different levels of prior knowledge and allow participants to engage with the material according to their own context and professional needs.

7. Connect SDL explicitly to wellbeing, engagement and professional purpose.

In many partner contexts, SDL is identified as more likely to gain traction when presented as a response to existing challenges such as student disengagement, motivation, differentiation and wellbeing. The Academy should make these connections explicit while avoiding presenting wellbeing or SDL as a "simple



solution” to problems or individual responsibilities detached from organisational conditions. Teacher wellbeing must also be considered, particularly in contexts where teachers are already experiencing workload and reform fatigue.

8. Work with school culture and leadership rather than only individual teachers.

School culture emerged as a major determinant of whether SDL is likely to be adopted. SWELL should therefore provide materials for school leaders, management bodies and families *alongside* teacher-facing resources. Whole-school approaches, cross-school communities of practice and links to existing improvement processes such as School Self-Evaluations (IE) may provide strategic structural entry points. Founding/member schools demonstrating successful enactment could also provide concrete, credible examples for more hesitant schools in the future.

9. Provide differentiated and progressive pathways into SDL.

Teachers and schools across partner countries will likely begin from very different positions. The Academy should therefore offer multiple entry points, from introductory material clarifying what SDL is and how it relates directly to curriculum (specific to country contexts), through to more advanced levels requiring evidence of classroom enactment. Resources should accommodate different levels of digital competence, confidence, experience and institutional capacity, including low-resource approaches for priority-school participants.

10. Build evidence, visibility and recognition around SDL (Micro-Credentials).

A recurring issue identified by partners is that evidence of SDL can be difficult deconvolute and make visible within conventional systems of accountability. SWELL should provide tools for documenting student agency, learning processes, assessment evidence, student reflection, wellbeing and changes in teacher practice. **Micro-credentials** are repeatedly identified as a valuable pathway to providing professional recognition for teacher learning, while case studies and evidence from SWELL Academy schools could demonstrate impact to leaders, inspectors and policymakers across contexts. This would help translate SDL from an educational aspiration into something that is visible, “teachable”, transferrable and defensible.

11. Use international examples and networks to build legitimacy.

Several countries identified value in seeing how SDL is enacted elsewhere, particularly where it remains unfamiliar or contested. International case studies should therefore be utilized by the Academy. However, where examples are given care must be taken to contextualise case studies rather than present them as models to be copied wholesale. Further to this, existing national networks, teacher associations, universities and school networks can support dissemination, validation and credibility and should be leveraged accordingly.

12. Address the wider structural constraints for SDL.

The SWELL Academy cannot resolve certain structural constraints of SDL, such as high-stakes terminal assessments, tightly prescribed content, class size,



timetabling, workload or restrictive educational policies. However, it can help teachers identify the spaces available *within* these constraints. SWELL can "box clever" by connecting SDL to existing curriculum priorities rather than presenting it as an additional initiative. Where genuine structural change is required, SWELL should work to provide evidence and language for policy advocacy and longer-term system change.

Prior to the SWELL TPM2 in September of 2026, partners were asked to provide a ranking of the levers based on order of importance, focusing on which levers drive the development of subsequent ones, i.e., the topmost lever is considered as the fundamental lever driving the development of all levers below. Levers towards the top are necessary conditions for levers below them. For a lever to drive development of others, it must be actionable within SWELL. Some partners placed lever 12 towards the top as addressing wider structural constraints would clearly create the conditions that would drive the development of other levers. This large-scale systematic change however is beyond the influential power of SWELL and therefore, in the final sequencing of levers, 12 appears at the bottom. That is not to say that it is unimportant but rather that other levers need to be in place to drive changes in structural constraints.

During TPM2, a final sequencing of the levers was developed which begins with the most fundamental lever for the SWELL Academy to address. In this order, preceding levers function as fundamental conditions which must be met, utilized, addressed or acted upon to drive proceeding levers and enable the development and enactment of the Academy, both for the lifetime of SWELL and sustainment beyond. A table of how these levers were ranked during the TPM2, in addition to the final ordering of levers is presented. Where two or more numbers appear on the same line, this indicates a reciprocity between drivers or an intent to merge levers into one.

Table 5: Ranking of levers presented during SWELL TPM2, Bulgaria, 2026.

Partner Group 1	Partner Group 2	Partner Group 3
4	7	2
8	1, 2, 8	1
3	9	12
2	6, 3	4
7	4, 5	5
6	10, 11	8
9	12	7
1		9
12		11
5		3
10, 11		10
		6

(Table 5 is continued overleaf)

Table 5 (Continued): Ranking of levers presented during SWELL TPM2, Bulgaria, 2026.

Partner Group 4	Partner Group 5	Partner Group 6
7	11	10, 12
11	7	11
1	12	3
2	1	9
12	10	5
8	6	4
5	3	8
9	9	7
3	5	1
6	8	2
10	4	6
4	2	

Table 6: Final ranking of levers for SWELL.

Order:	Lever:
1.	(L1) Make SDL visible within existing curriculum and policy frameworks. (L2) Use assessment as a strategic entry point.
2.	(L8) Work with school culture and leadership rather than only individual teachers.
3.	(L9) Provide differentiated and progressive pathways into SDL.
4.	(L3) Make SDL practical, concrete and applicable. (L6) Model SDL through the academy itself.
5.	(L4) Pay particular attention to the teacher's changing role and development of their capacity to scaffold autonomy.
6.	(L5) Build professional learning around collaboration and communities of practice.
7.	(L7) Connect SDL explicitly to wellbeing, engagement and professional purpose.
8.	(L10) Build evidence, visibility and recognition around SDL (micro-credentials). (L11) Use International examples and networks to build legitimacy.
9.	(L12) Address the wider structural constraints for SDL.

Summary

The strongest lever for SWELL is to bridge the gap between curriculum aspiration and the realities of classroom enactment. Across participating countries, policy increasingly values autonomy, critical thinking, self-regulation, learning to learn and student agency,



but these aspirations are often weakly translated into curriculum guidance, assessment and everyday pedagogy for teachers.

The Academy should therefore begin by making SDL visible; clarifying *what* it is, *distinguishing* it from related concepts, and mapping it directly onto existing national curriculum and assessment requirements or priorities. This is a necessary condition to then persuade school leaders to buy into SWELL and SDL. Their support creates the potential for whole-school approaches that embrace cultural and structural changes and where teachers feel empowered to experiment with new approaches.

This must focus on practical enactment, using concrete and context-specific or context-relevant examples, supportive pedagogies, formative and self-assessments, scaffolding strategies and adaptable, flexible classroom tools.

Enactment should be supported through teacher peer-learning, professional communities of practice (both school-wide and cross-school), and whole-school engagement, rather than relying on individual teacher enthusiasm. The Academy must model SDL through its design and provide progressive, flexible and differentiated pathways, evidence-gathering tools and recognition of developing professional practice through micro-credentials to support sustained engagement.

Ultimately, SWELL must position SDL as a “*richer, more purposeful*” (BE) way of realising goals that educational systems already claim to value, while simultaneously addressing problems around engagement, differentiation, wellbeing and student agency. The completion of this empirical work, grounded in rich evidence will then position SWELL to make the argument for structural change that is aligned with policy aspirations and stated curricular goals and actionable in real schools.



Conclusion

Ultimately the SWELL Academy is involved in a persuasive exercise, one that must convince school leaders who are faced with a wide range of competing priorities that investment will be worthwhile. We must solve problems and offer flexibility through multiple routes of entry. Alignment with the mainstream curriculum is core and we must indicate how participation will work within existing structures and the potential for innovation, especially where curriculum is being redeveloped.

Fundamentally, SDL represents an epistemic shift, one where students, teachers and potentially schools may become knowledge generators in their communities. This has significant implications for Subjectification and Socialisation in a manner that may run squarely into concerns about Qualification. For those schools who have major scepticism about SDL and assessment, SRL may prove an accessible starting point. Curriculum negotiation may also provide a route forwards and in Ireland, this has been achieved to a significant degree in ongoing work (see [NeedsIreland.eu](https://www.needsireland.eu)). Even within relatively constrained conditions, some degree of negotiation is possible, at least towards identifying success criteria, but ideally for learning intentions as well. See Fitpatrick (2018) for details.

Distributed leadership understands that people engage more actively when they are involved in decision-making. From this perspective, leadership is a shared, interactive practice rather than a function tied to formal roles like headteacher or teachers. Leadership tasks are spread across the school community - including young people, gradually. When involving young people, it goes beyond consultation toward genuine co-creation: students actively shape the design and direction of their own learning. Some of the key requirements for distributed leadership are, among others, a school culture willing to “release” some control and tolerate ambiguity, structures that scaffold autonomy gradually (small decisions before larger ones), reciprocal trust between staff and students, and facilitation skilled enough to make co-creation substantive, not nominal. Whenever a learning environment adopts a distributed leadership approach, there is shared agency. Students help plan and make decisions, not just execute tasks; leadership becomes a practice, not a position. A student leading a project team is structurally equivalent to a teacher leading a curriculum team; and inquiry models are boosted; it pairs naturally with phenomenon-based or project-based learning, where students help define the problem or question being explored; or even with restorative circles, where young people learn how to solve conflicts focusing on needs, mending the damage caused, and reaching shared agreements.

The Academy should therefore offer “steps” towards SDL – perhaps best represented in the figure overleaf.

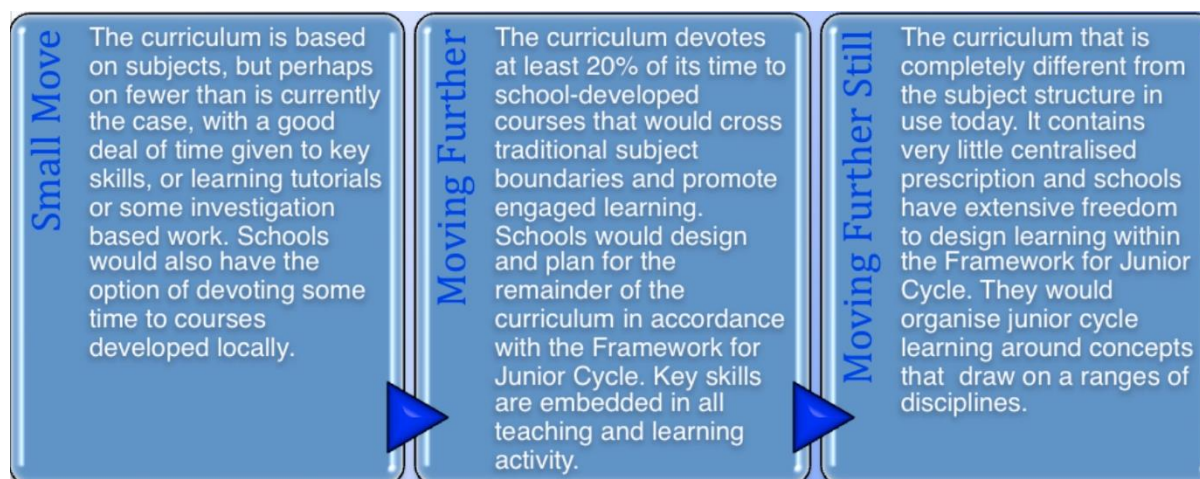


Figure 11: A possible pathway from curriculum conformity to schools having the freedom to be different (NCCA, 2010, p. 27).

Relevant representations could be worked up for school leaders and teachers. Ideally, this would be linked to the formal curriculum and assessment and would be engaged with at a whole-school level. Communities of practice such as school clusters would be stronger still and should be supported and evolved through teacher and principal inputs that persuade other schools that such work is not only practical, but solves problems and is professionally engaging and meaningful. This would build an evidence-base to bring to policy makers and challenge them to deliver on the aims and values that are often incorporated in curriculum but sacrificed due to concerns about curricular drift focused on declarative knowledge (at the expense of procedural/epistemic knowledge). We must not neglect parents in this and indeed, persuading parents that this is to the (holistic) benefit of their children may allow us to leverage the good offices of the likes of the European Parent's Association to put pressure on policy makers. Arguably though, the most important stakeholder to persuade is the principal. They can be considered the key lever to support change.

In essence, we need a few “wins” that can serve as a demonstration initiative encouraging wider dissemination. We can leverage the European dimension here and what one participant called “jealousy and theft” where systems will not want to be left behind. Throughout though, we need to be very sensitive to culture in our participating countries and avoid naive notions that what works in one country can seamlessly be parachuted into another. We cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

We need to frame dissemination beyond the lifetime of the project and consider how do we sustain impact past the project's formal conclusion. To convince policy makers we will need to evidence context-sensitive, adaptable education that leverages existing teacher education structures in each country. This must be replete with a variety of compelling case studies including as wide a range of media as possible. The more we have of teachers, principals and students talking about and reflecting on experience and how they practically did things (with impacts), the better. This alignment with educational goals must be compelling to bring about the cultural shift required.



Appendices

Appendix 1: Glossary of Terms, Acronyms and Abbreviations

Appendix 2: References



Appendix 1

Glossary of Terms, Acronyms and Abbreviations

Ability: The capacity to perform tasks or actions effectively in particular contexts. Abilities may be cognitive, social, emotional, physical, or practical and are developed through learning and experience.

Agency: The capacity of individuals to act intentionally, make choices, influence their circumstances, and shape their own learning and development. Within SWELL, agency is understood as a central component of both self-directed learning and wellbeing.

Attitude: A learned tendency to think, feel, or act in particular ways towards people, ideas, situations, or experiences. Attitudes influence motivation, engagement, and participation in learning.

Authorial Agency: A concept developed by Matusov (2009) describing learners as active authors of their educational experiences rather than passive recipients of instruction. Authorial agency involves learners making meaningful decisions about the purposes, processes, and directions of their learning.

Autonomy: The experience of acting with a sense of volition, ownership, and self-endorsement. Within Self-Determination Theory, autonomy is considered one of three basic psychological needs essential for motivation, wellbeing, and self-directed learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Community of Practice: A group of individuals who learn through participation in shared activities, dialogue, and collective problem-solving (Wenger, 1998). Within SWELL, learning is understood as occurring within communities characterised by trust, participation, and shared meaning-making.

Competence: The ability to effectively apply knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values in particular situations. Within Self-Determination Theory, competence refers to an individual's need to feel capable and effective in their interactions with the environment.

Competency: An integrated combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and dispositions that enables effective performance in specific contexts. Competencies are often developed progressively through experience and practice.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD): The ongoing process through which educators engage in professional learning to enhance their knowledge, skills, practices, and professional capacities throughout their careers.

Decision-Making Capacity: The ability to evaluate options, exercise judgement, and make informed choices. Decision-making capacity is a central feature of learner agency and self-direction.



Democratic Education: An approach to education that emphasises participation, equality, dialogue, shared decision-making, and respect for learners' rights and agency. Democratic education positions learners as active participants in shaping their educational experiences and school communities, rather than as passive recipients of knowledge. Within SWELL, it is connected to SDL and wellbeing through opportunities for meaningful participation, collective responsibility, and the co-construction of learning.

Didaktik: A theoretical and practical approach to understanding teaching and learning that considers the relationship between educational content, pedagogical methods, learners, and the purposes of education. Didaktik extends beyond the selection of teaching techniques to consider what should be taught, why it should be taught, and how educational content can become meaningful to learners. It provides a useful perspective for examining how SDL can be supported through purposeful pedagogical design.

Disposition: A tendency or inclination to behave, think, or respond in particular ways. Dispositions such as curiosity, persistence, resilience, and openness to learning are often associated with self-directed learning.

Digital Wellbeing: The capacity to engage with digital technologies in ways that support health, wellbeing, learning, and meaningful participation while managing risks associated with excessive use, surveillance, data privacy, and constant connectivity in hybrid learning environments

Engagement: The degree of cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social involvement in learning activities. Sustained engagement is often associated with meaningful, relevant, and self-directed learning experiences.

Eudaimonia: A state of flourishing characterized by finding deep purpose and meaning in learning, moving beyond simple "happiness" or "satisfaction".

Flourishing: A holistic state of optimal functioning, growth, and wellbeing in which individuals are able to realise their potential, pursue meaningful goals, develop positive relationships, and contribute to their communities. Flourishing extends beyond the absence of illness or distress and is often associated with eudaimonic conceptions of wellbeing that emphasise purpose, meaning, agency, and personal development (Seligman, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Within SWELL, flourishing is understood as both an individual and collective process enabled through supportive relationships, participation, autonomy, and inclusive educational environments.

Hidden Curriculum: The implicit values, norms, beliefs, expectations, and social practices communicated through educational structures, routines, relationships, and institutional cultures rather than through formally prescribed curriculum content (Jackson, 1968). The hidden curriculum shapes learners' understandings of authority, participation, citizenship, identity, and success. Within SWELL, Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is often found to be enacted through the hidden curriculum, where opportunities



for autonomy, initiative, collaboration, and independent learning emerge through everyday practices rather than explicit curricular requirements.

Human-Centric Skills (Empowering Skills): Transferable capabilities such as empathy, ethical reasoning, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding that support meaningful participation in contemporary societies.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT): Digital technologies used to access, create, store, share, and communicate information. ICT is frequently identified as an important enabler of self-directed learning and educational innovation.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE): The formal preparation and professional formation of teachers prior to entering the teaching profession.

Intrinsic Motivation: Engagement in activities for inherent interest, enjoyment, satisfaction, or personal meaning rather than external rewards or pressures (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Inquiry-based learning (IBL): A pedagogical approach in which learners develop understanding through questioning, investigation, exploration, evidence gathering, and reflection. Rather than relying exclusively on the transmission of information, IBL encourages learners to formulate questions, investigate problems, and construct knowledge through active engagement. Within SWELL, IBL provides opportunities for learner agency, autonomy, critical thinking, and meaningful participation in learning.

Knowledge: Facts, concepts, understandings, theories, and information that individuals acquire through learning and experience.

Learned Helplessness: A condition in which individuals perceive that their actions have little influence over outcomes, leading to reduced motivation, disengagement, and diminished agency (Seligman, 1975).

Learner Agency: The capacity of students to actively shape their educational experiences through decision-making, participation, initiative, and responsibility for learning.

Learning Outcome (LO): A statement describing what learners are expected to know, understand, or be able to do following a learning experience.

Learnification: A term coined by Biesta (2006; 2010) describing the tendency in modern educational language and policy to reduce education to processes of learning; e.g., "education and teaching" to focusing almost exclusively on "learning and learners"; while neglecting broader educational purposes related to qualification, socialisation, and subjectification.



Lifelong Learning: The continuous development of knowledge, skills, competencies, and dispositions throughout an individual's life across formal, non-formal, and informal learning contexts.

Motivation: The processes that initiate, direct, and sustain behaviour. Motivation may be intrinsic, extrinsic, autonomous, or controlled, depending on the source of regulation and perceived autonomy.

Participatory Learning/Education: An approach to learning in which learners actively contribute to the development of knowledge, learning activities, and shared decisions. It emphasises dialogue, collaboration, and meaningful participation in learning communities rather than passive reception of information. Within SWELL, participatory learning connects SDL with democratic education, learner agency, and collective responsibility

Performance Paradox: The tension between institutional high-stakes accountability (grades) and the slow, deep work required for genuine wellbeing.

Phronesis: A concept originating in Aristotelian philosophy, commonly translated as “*practical wisdom*” or “*practical nouse*”. Phronesis refers to the capacity to exercise sound ethical judgement in complex, context-dependent situations where decisions cannot be determined by rules or technical knowledge alone. In education, phronesis is relevant to teachers’ professional judgement and their capacity to make context-sensitive decisions that respond to learners’ needs, relationships, and educational purposes (Dunne, 1993). Within SWELL, phronesis is relevant to educators’ capacity to balance guidance and autonomy while supporting SDL and wellbeing.

Praxis: The intersection and relationship between theory, practice, reflection, and purposeful action, through which practice is critically examined and potentially transformed. In educational contexts, praxis involves acting with an informed understanding of the values, assumptions, and purposes underpinning pedagogical decisions, rather than simply applying established procedures. It emphasises the reciprocal relationship between reflection and action in the development of educational practice. Within SWELL, praxis is relevant to reflective professional learning and the development of educational environments that support SDL and wellbeing.

Project-Based Learning (PBL): A pedagogical approach in which learners investigate and respond to authentic questions, problems, or challenges through extended projects that integrate knowledge and skills.

Psychological Safety: A shared belief that individuals can express ideas, ask questions, take risks, make mistakes, and challenge assumptions without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety is recognised as a foundational condition for both wellbeing and SDL, enabling learners and educators to engage authentically, exercise agency, experiment with new approaches, and participate meaningfully in learning communities.



Qualification: Refers to the purpose of education concerned with acquiring the knowledge, skills, understanding and dispositions that enable learners to do or achieve something. This includes developing the capabilities needed to participate in particular fields of work and social life, as well as gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to engage meaningfully with the world. In Biesta's framework, qualification is one of three interconnected purposes of education, alongside socialisation and subjectification (Biesta, 2009, 2010).

Reflective Practice: The deliberate process of critically examining one's experiences, assumptions, actions, and decision-making in order to enhance understanding and improve future practice (Schön, 1983). Reflective practice supports continuous learning, professional growth, metacognition, and self-awareness. Within SWELL, reflection is considered a central component of both SDL and wellbeing, enabling learners and educators to monitor progress, adapt strategies, and develop greater agency over their learning and professional development.

Relatedness: One of the three basic psychological needs identified within Self-Determination Theory. Relatedness refers to the need to feel connected to, valued by, and cared for by others.

Scaffolding: The structured support provided by educators or peers to assist students in accomplishing tasks they could not yet complete independently. Scaffolding is gradually withdrawn as learners develop competence and autonomy.

Self-Determination: Understood as the capacity to act with agency, volition, and purpose, is not only a contributor to wellbeing but a core condition for its realisation.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT): A framework for understanding human motivation, personality, and wellness, developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. It posits that humans have an innate drive for growth, which is nurtured when three basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are met, leading to high-quality motivation and mental health.

Self-Directed Learning (SDL): A process through which learners take initiative, with varying degrees of support, in diagnosing learning needs, setting goals, identifying resources, selecting strategies, and evaluating outcomes (Knowles, 1975). Within SWELL, SDL is conceptualised as both a process and a competence that supports lifelong learning, agency, and participation.

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL): The process through which learners plan, monitor, evaluate, and adapt their cognition, motivation, and behaviour in pursuit of learning goals (Zimmerman, 2002). Within SWELL, SRL is viewed as necessary but not sufficient for SDL.

Skill: A learned ability to perform tasks effectively and consistently. Skills may be cognitive, social, emotional, technical, or practical in nature.



Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): The process through which individuals develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Socialisation: One of the three domains of educational purpose identified by Biesta (2009, 2010), alongside qualification and subjectification. Socialisation refers to the ways in which education introduces learners to existing traditions, practices, values, norms, and ways of understanding the world. Through socialisation, learners become familiar with the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which they participate. Within SWELL, this concept provides a framework for examining how educational environments communicate expectations about autonomy, participation, responsibility, and wellbeing. It also raises critical questions about whether educational practices reproduce established norms or create opportunities to question and transform them.

Student Agency: The capacity of students to act intentionally, exercise judgement, make choices, and influence their learning and educational environments. Student agency involves more than individual independence; it is shaped by relationships, institutional structures, available opportunities, and the extent to which students' contributions are recognised and acted upon. Within SWELL, student agency is central to SDL and wellbeing because it enables learners to exercise meaningful influence over their learning while participating in supportive and inclusive communities.

Student Voice: The meaningful involvement of students in expressing their views, perspectives, experiences, and aspirations regarding matters that affect their education and learning. Student voice extends beyond consultation to include active participation in decision-making, curriculum design, assessment, school improvement, and educational governance (Fielding, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2006). Within SWELL, student voice is closely connected to agency, participation, democratic education, and SDL, emphasising learners' rights to influence and co-construct their educational experiences.

Subjectification: One of the three domains of educational purpose identified by Biesta (2009, 2010), alongside qualification and socialisation. Subjectification concerns the process through which individuals are supported in becoming subjects of their own lives, capable of acting and responding independently rather than simply conforming to existing social expectations or the intentions of others. It is therefore concerned with freedom, responsibility, and the possibility of independent and considered action. Within SWELL, subjectification is particularly relevant to learner agency, self-determination, and democratic participation, as it raises questions about whether educational environments enable learners to exercise meaningful autonomy and develop their own relationships with themselves, others, and the world.

SWELL (Self-directed Learning for Wellbeing of Educators and Lifelong Learners): A European Erasmus+ project focused on supporting educator professional development, promoting self-directed learning, and enhancing wellbeing among educators and lifelong learners through the development of a SWELL Teacher Academy, MOOC, micro-credentials, and associated educational resources.



Systemic Flourishing: An approach that understands wellbeing as emerging from healthy educational systems, relationships, cultures, and structures rather than solely from individual resilience or coping strategies. Systemic flourishing marks a shift from individual "rescue missions" to organizational health, prioritizing teacher wellbeing as a prerequisite for student success.

Teacher Agency: The capacity of teachers to act purposefully and make informed professional decisions within their educational contexts (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). Teacher agency involves the ability to exercise professional judgement, adapt curriculum and pedagogy, respond to learner needs, and contribute to educational change. It is shaped by the interaction of individual capacities, professional cultures, institutional conditions, and policy environments. Within SWELL, teacher agency is recognised as a prerequisite for fostering SDL and wellbeing, as educators require autonomy, trust, professional support, and enabling structures to create learner-centred and participatory learning environments.

Value: A principle, belief, or standard that guides judgement, behaviour, and decision-making. Values influence educational priorities, pedagogical choices, and conceptions of learning and wellbeing.

Wellbeing Continuum: The understanding that wellbeing exists along a dynamic spectrum rather than as a fixed state, ranging from struggle and distress to flourishing and optimal functioning.



Appendix 2

References

- ACTON, R. & GLASGOW, P. 2015. Teacher wellbeing in neoliberal contexts: A review of the literature. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education (Online)*, 40, 99-114.
- AKASH, R., SURESH, N., SIDHARTH, S. & MAZHAR, S. S. 2026. The Heart of the Classroom: Prioritizing Teacher Social-Emotional Well-Being as a Cornerstone of Retention. *Creative Approaches to Teacher Retention*. IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
- ALBRECHT, J. 2025. Teacher Mental Health and Well-Being: Time to Make It a Priority. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, 17, 48-51.
- APPLE, M. & BEANE, J. 1995. *Democratic Schools* Buckingham. Open University Press.
- APPLE, M. W. 2004a. Creating difference: Neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism and the politics of educational reform. *Educational policy*, 18, 12-44.
- APPLE, M. W. 2004b. Schooling, markets, and an audit culture. *Educational Policy*, 18, 614-621.
- BALL, S. J. 2008. *The education debate: Policy and politics in the twenty-first century*, Policy Press.
- BALL, S. J., MAGUIRE, M. & BRAUN, A. 2011. *How schools do policy: Policy enactments in secondary schools*, Routledge.
- BERLINER, D. 2011. Rational responses to high stakes testing: The case of curriculum narrowing and the harm that follows. *Cambridge journal of education*, 41, 287-302.
- BERLYNE, D. E. 1954. A theory of human curiosity.
- BIESTA, G. 2009. Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability (formerly: Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education)*, 21, 33-46.
- BIESTA, G. 2015. What is education for? On good education, teacher judgement, and educational professionalism. *European Journal of education*, 50, 75-87.
- BIESTA, G. 2020. Risking ourselves in education: Qualification, socialization, and subjectification revisited. *Educational theory*, 70, 89-104.
- BIESTA, G. 2025. Taking the angle of the teacher: The GTC Scotland Annual Lecture 2024. *scottish educational review*, 55, 175-191.
- BIESTA, G., PRIESTLEY, M. & ROBINSON, S. 2015. The role of beliefs in teacher agency. *Teachers and teaching*, 21, 624-640.
- BLAZEK, T., MORRISON, H. J., SULZ, L. D. & GLEDDIE, D. L. 2025. Prioritising teachers' health: The impact of 'unstructured wellness time' on educator wellness. *Health Education Journal*, 84, 695-708.
- BODKYN, C. & STEVENS, F. 2015. Self-directed learning, intrinsic motivation and student performance. *The Caribbean Teaching Scholar*, 5.
- BOLHUIS, S. & VOETEN, M. J. 2001. Toward self-directed learning in secondary schools: What do teachers do? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 837-855.
- BORG, M. 2004. The apprenticeship of observation. *ELT journal*, 58, 274-276.



- BRADY, J. & WILSON, E. 2021. Teacher wellbeing in England: Teacher responses to school-level initiatives. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 51, 45-63.
- BRONFENBRENNER, U. 1994. Ecological models of human development. *International encyclopedia of education*, 3, 37-43.
- BROOKFIELD, S. D. 2009. Self-directed learning. *International handbook of education for the changing world of work: Bridging academic and vocational learning*. Springer.
- BROUSSEAU, G. 2002. *Theory of didactical situations in mathematics: Didactique des mathématiques, 1970–1990*, Springer.
- BUILDING ESSENTIAL SKILLS TODAY (BEST) 2020. Self-Direction Toolkit. Version 1.0 | [best-future.org](https://www.best-future.org/best-future.org/resources/). <https://www.best-future.org/resources/>: BEST FOR THE FUTURE.
- BURIĆ, I., KIM, L. E. & HODIS, F. 2021. Emotional labor profiles among teachers: Associations with positive affective, motivational, and well-being factors. *Journal of educational psychology*, 113, 1227.
- CANDY, P. C. 1991. *Self-Direction for Lifelong Learning. A Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice*, ERIC.
- CANN, R. F., RIEDEL-PRABHAKAR, R. & POWELL, D. 2021. A model of positive school leadership to improve teacher wellbeing. *International journal of applied positive psychology*, 6, 195-218.
- CHIALVO, D. R. & BAK, P. 1999. Learning from mistakes. *Neuroscience*, 90, 1137-1148.
- COOK-SATHER, A. 2006. Sound, presence, and power: “Student voice” in educational research and reform. *Curriculum inquiry*, 36, 359-390.
- COSNEFROY, L. & CARRÉ, P. 2014. Self-regulated and self-directed learning: why don't some neighbors communicate? *International journal of self-directed learning*, 11.
- CRAIN, T. L., SCHONERT-REICHL, K. A. & ROESER, R. W. 2017. Cultivating teacher mindfulness: Effects of a randomized controlled trial on work, home, and sleep outcomes. *Journal of occupational health psychology*, 22, 138.
- DALIRI-NGAMETUA, R. & HARDY, I. 2022. The devalued, demoralized and disappearing teacher: The nature and effects of datafication and performativity in schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 30, (102)-(102).
- DAVIES, R. & FERGUSON, J. 1997. Teachers' views of the role of initial teacher education in developing their professionalism. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 23, 39-56.
- DECI, E. L. & RYAN, R. M. 2012. Self-determination theory. *Handbook of theories of social psychology*, 1, 416-436.
- DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, E., DISABILITY, INTEGRATION AND YOUTH, 2021. Participation Framework: National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making. In: DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, E., DISABILITY, INTEGRATION AND YOUTH, (ed.). Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- DI MARTINO, S., EIROA-OROSA, F. J. & ARCIDIACONO, C. 2017. Community psychology's contributions to happiness and well-being: Including the role of context, social justice, and values in our understanding of the good life. *The Routledge international handbook of critical positive psychology*. Routledge.
- DIENER, E., WIRTZ, D., TOV, W., KIM-PRIETO, C., CHOI, D.-W., OISHI, S. & BISWAS-DIENER, R. 2010. New well-being measures: Short scales to assess flourishing and positive and negative feelings. *Social indicators research*, 97, 143-156.



- DONNELLY, V. 2019. Beyond Borders: A toolkit of creative and participatory approaches for exploring refuge and migration issues in secondary school classrooms. *Galway One World Centre*.
- DREER, B. 2023. On the outcomes of teacher wellbeing: A systematic review of research. *Frontiers in psychology*, 14, 1205179.
- DU TOIT-BRITS, C. 2019. A focus on self-directed learning: The role that educators' expectations play in the enhancement of students' self-directedness. *South African Journal of Education*, 39, 1-11.
- ECCLESTONE, K. 2017. From emotional and psychological well-being to character education: challenging policy discourses of behavioural science and 'vulnerability'. *Emotional well-being in educational policy and practice*. Routledge.
- ECCLESTONE, K. & RAWDIN, C. 2020. Reinforcing the 'diminished' subject? The implications of the 'vulnerability zeitgeist' for well-being in educational settings. *Social and Emotional Learning*. Routledge.
- FAHNOE, C. & MISHRA, P. Do 21st century learning environments support self-directed learning? Middle school students' response to an intentionally designed learning environment. Society for information technology & teacher education international conference, 2013. Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), 3131-3139.
- FIELDING, M. & MOSS, P. 2010. *Radical education and the common school: A democratic alternative*, Routledge.
- FITZPATRICK, J., O'GRADY, E. & O'REILLY, J. 2018. Promoting student agentic engagement through curriculum: exploring the Negotiated Integrated Curriculum initiative. *Irish Educational Studies*, 37, 453-473.
- FULLAN, M. 2007. Change theory as a force for school improvement. *Intelligent leadership*. Springer.
- FULLAN, M. 2008. *What's worth fighting for in headship?*, McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- GIBBONS, M. 2002. *The self-directed learning handbook: Challenging adolescent students to excel*, John Wiley & Sons.
- GROCCIA, J. E. 2018. What is student engagement? *New directions for teaching and learning*, 2018, 11-20.
- HARDING, S., MORRIS, R., GUNNELL, D., FORD, T., HOLLINGWORTH, W., TILLING, K., EVANS, R., BELL, S., GREY, J. & BROCKMAN, R. 2019. Is teachers' mental health and wellbeing associated with students' mental health and wellbeing? *Journal of affective disorders*, 242, 180-187.
- HARGREAVES, A. 1989. *Curriculum and assessment reform*, ERIC.
- HARGREAVES, A. 1998. The emotional practice of teaching. *Teaching and teacher education*, 14, 835-854.
- HASCHER, T. & WABER, J. 2021. Teacher well-being: A systematic review of the research literature from the year 2000–2019. *Educational research review*, 34, 100411.
- HAWORTH, C. M., CARTER, K., ELEY, T. C. & PLOMIN, R. 2017. Understanding the genetic and environmental specificity and overlap between well-being and internalizing symptoms in adolescence. *Developmental science*, 20, e12376.
- HAYES, N. 2024. 'It's not fair': hearing the voices of young children. *Education 3-13*, 52, 830-842.



- HEIDARI, M., HOSEINPOUR, M. A., ARDEBILI, M. & YOOSEFEE, S. 2022. The association of the spiritual health and psychological well-being of teachers with their organizational commitment. *BMC psychology*, 10, 55.
- HÖGBERG, B. & HORN, D. 2022. National high-stakes testing, gender, and school stress in Europe: A difference-in-differences analysis. *European Sociological Review*, 38, 975-987.
- HOLT, J. 2009. *How children learn*, Da Capo Lifelong Books.
- JACKSON, P. 2002. Life in classrooms. *Teaching and learning in the primary school*. Routledge.
- JENNINGS, P. A. & GREENBERG, M. T. 2009. The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of educational research*, 79, 491-525.
- JOHARI, J., YEAN TAN, F. & TJIK ZULKARNAIN, Z. I. 2018. Autonomy, workload, work-life balance and job performance among teachers. *International journal of educational management*, 32, 107-120.
- JOSSBERGER, H., BRAND-GRUWEL, S., BOSHUIZEN, H. & VAN DE WIEL, M. 2010. The challenge of self-directed and self-regulated learning in vocational education: A theoretical analysis and synthesis of requirements. *Journal of vocational education and training*, 62, 415-440.
- KARIIPPANON, K. E., CLIFF, D. P., LANCASTER, S. L., OKELY, A. D. & PARRISH, A.-M. 2018. Perceived interplay between flexible learning spaces and teaching, learning and student wellbeing. *Learning Environments Research*, 21, 301-320.
- KERN, M. L., BENSON, L., STEINBERG, E. A. & STEINBERG, L. 2016. The EPOCH measure of adolescent well-being. *Psychological assessment*, 28, 586.
- KLUSMANN, U., RICHTER, D. & LÜDTKE, O. 2016. Teachers' emotional exhaustion is negatively related to students' achievement: Evidence from a large-scale assessment study. *Journal of educational psychology*, 108, 1193.
- KNOWLES, M. S. 1970. The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy versus pedagogy. *Cambridge Book Company*.
- KNOWLES, M. S. 1975. *Self-directed learning*, association press New York.
- LAEVERS, F. 2000. Forward to basics! Deep-level-learning and the experiential approach. *Early years*, 20, 20-29.
- LAEVERS, F. & DECLERCQ, B. 2018. How well-being and involvement fit into the commitment to children's rights. *European Journal of Education*, 53, 325-335.
- LORTIE, D. C. 1975. *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*, University of Chicago press.
- LOYENS, S. M., MAGDA, J. & RIKERS, R. M. 2008. Self-directed learning in problem-based learning and its relationships with self-regulated learning. *Educational psychology review*, 20, 411-427.
- LUNDY, L. 2007. 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British educational research journal*, 33, 927-942.
- LUNENBERG, M. & KORTHAGEN, F. A. 2003. Teacher educators and student-directed learning. *Teaching and Teacher education*, 19, 29-44.
- MATUSOV, E. 2009. Journey into dialogic pedagogy.
- MATUSOV, E. 2015. Legitimacy of non-negotiable imposition in diverse approaches to education. *Dialogic Pedagogy: A Journal for Studies of Dialogic Education*, 3.



- MATUSOV, E. & MARJANOVIC-SHANE, A. 2014. Democratic Dialogic Education For and From Authorial Agency: An Interview with Professor Eugene Matusov. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 10(1), 9–26.
- MATUSOV, E., SMITH, M., SOSLAU, E., MARJANOVIC-SHANE, A. & VON DUYKE, K. 2016a. Dialogic Education for and from Authorial Agency. *Dialogic Pedagogy*, 4.
- MATUSOV, E., VON DUYKE, K. & KAYUMOVA, S. 2016b. Mapping concepts of agency in educational contexts. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 50, 420–446.
- MCCALLUM, F. & PRICE, D. 2010. Well teachers, well students. *The Journal of Student Wellbeing*, 4, 19–34.
- MCCALLUM, F. & PRICE, D. 2015. *Nurturing wellbeing development in education*, Taylor & Francis.
- MCCALLUM, F., PRICE, D., GRAHAM, A. & MORRISON, A. 2017. Teacher wellbeing: A review of the literature.
- MI - MINISTERO DELL'ISTRUZIONE 2018. Le nuove Indicazioni Nazionali per i Licei. In: MERITO, M. D. I. E. D. (ed.). Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito.
- MINISTERO DELL'ISTRUZIONE E DEL MERITO 2025. Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione. In: ISTITUZIONALI, D. G. P. L. C. E. L. R. (ed.). Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito.
- MORRIS, T. H. 2019. Self-directed learning: A fundamental competence in a rapidly changing world. *International Review of Education/Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft/Revue Internationale de l'Education*, 633–653.
- MORRIS, T. H. 2024. Four dimensions of self-directed learning: A fundamental meta-competence in a changing world. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 74, 236–254.
- MURPHY, T. R., MASTERSON, M., MANNIX-MCNAMARA, P., TALLY, P. & MCLAUGHLIN, E. 2020. The being of a teacher: Teacher pedagogical well-being and teacher self-care. *Teachers and Teaching*, 26, 588–601.
- NCCA, N. C. F. C. A. 2010. Innovation and identity: Ideas for a new junior cycle. NCCA Dublin.
- NODDINGS, N. 2012. The caring relation in teaching. *Oxford review of education*, 38, 771–781.
- NODDINGS, N. 2013. *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education*, Univ of California Press.
- NWOKO, J. C., EMETO, T. I., MALAU-ADULI, A. E. & MALAU-ADULI, B. S. 2023. A systematic review of the factors that influence teachers' occupational wellbeing. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 20, 6070.
- O'REILLY, J. & O'GRADY, E. 2024. 'Our opinions really matter': conceptualising and operationalising authentic student voice through negotiated integrated curriculum. *Education 3-13*, 52, 811–829.
- OSBERG, D. & BIESTA, G. 2021. Beyond curriculum: Groundwork for a non-instrumental theory of education. *Educational philosophy and theory*, 53, 57–70.
- PELLETIER, L. G., SÉGUIN-LÉVESQUE, C. & LEGAULT, L. 2002. Pressure from above and pressure from below as determinants of teachers' motivation and teaching behaviors. *Journal of educational psychology*, 94, 186.
- PRIESTLEY, M., EDWARDS, R., PRIESTLEY, A. & MILLER, K. 2012. Teacher agency in curriculum making: Agents of change and spaces for manoeuvre. *Curriculum inquiry*, 42, 191–214.



- PRIESTLEY, M., PHILIPPOU, S., ALVUNGER, D. & SOINI, T. 2021. Curriculum making: A conceptual framing. *Curriculum making in Europe: Policy and practice within and across diverse contexts*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
- PRIESTLEY, M. R., BIESTA, G. & ROBINSON, S. 2015. *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*, Bloomsbury Publishing.
- RAMBERG, J., BROLIN LÅFTMAN, S., ÅKERSTEDT, T. & MODIN, B. 2020. Teacher stress and students' school well-being: The case of upper secondary schools in Stockholm. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 64, 816-830.
- ROFFEY, S. 2012. Pupil wellbeing-Teacher wellbeing: Two sides of the same coin? *Educational & Child Psychology*, 29.
- RYAN, R. M. & DECI, E. L. 2000. Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American psychologist*, 55, 68.
- RYAN, R. M. & DECI, E. L. 2024. Self-determination theory. *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research*. Springer.
- RYAN, R. M. & FREDERICK, C. 1997. On energy, personality, and health: Subjective vitality as a dynamic reflection of well-being. *Journal of personality*, 65, 529-565.
- RYFF, C. D. & SINGER, B. 1996. Psychological well-being: Meaning, measurement, and implications for psychotherapy research. *Psychotherapy and psychosomatics*, 65, 14-23.
- RYFF, C. D. & SINGER, B. 1998. The contours of positive human health. *Psychological inquiry*, 9, 1-28.
- SANDILOS, L. E., NEUGEBAUER, S. R., DIPERNA, J. C., HART, S. C. & LEI, P. 2023. Social-emotional learning for whom? Implications of a universal SEL program and teacher well-being for teachers' interactions with students. *School Mental Health*, 15, 190-201.
- SCHONERT-REICHL, K. A. 2017. Social and emotional learning and teachers. *The future of children*, 137-155.
- SCHULTZE-LUTTER, F., SCHIMMELMANN, B. G. & SCHMIDT, S. J. 2016. Resilience, risk, mental health and well-being: Associations and conceptual differences. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 25, 459-466.
- SELIGMAN, M. 2018. PERMA and the building blocks of well-being. *The journal of positive psychology*, 13, 333-335.
- SELIGMAN, M. E. 2011. *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*, Simon and Schuster.
- SHEN, B., MCCAUGHTRY, N., MARTIN, J., GARN, A., KULIK, N. & FAHLMAN, M. 2015. The relationship between teacher burnout and student motivation. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 85, 519-532.
- SOHAIL, M. M., BAGHDADY, A., CHOI, J., HUYNH, H. V., WHETTEN, K. & PROESCHOLD-BELL, R. J. 2023. Factors influencing teacher wellbeing and burnout in schools: A scoping review. *Work*, 76, 1317-1331.
- SPILT, J. L., KOOMEN, H. M. & THIJS, J. T. 2011. Teacher wellbeing: The importance of teacher-student relationships. *Educational psychology review*, 23, 457-477.
- SULLANMAA, J., PYHÄLTÖ, K., PIETARINEN, J. & SOINI, T. 2024. Teacher agency in the professional community and association with burnout: a longitudinal person-centred approach. *Research papers in education*, 39, 539-559.
- SZE-YENG, F. & HUSSAIN, R. M. R. 2010. Self-directed learning in a socioconstructivist learning environment. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 9, 1913-1917.



- TAGUMA, M. & BARRERA, M. 2019. OECD future of education and skills 2030: Curriculum analysis. *Disponibile su: https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/skills/Skills_for_2030.pdf*.
- TEO, P. 2019. Teaching for the 21st century: A case for dialogic pedagogy. *Learning, Culture and social interaction*, 21, 170-178.
- THRUN, S. & PRATT, L. 1998. Learning to learn: Introduction and overview. *Learning to learn*. Springer.
- TOWLE, A. & COTTRELL, D. 1996. Self directed learning. *Archives of disease in childhood*, 74, 357-359.
- UNESCO 2022. *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*, UN.
- UNICEF 2019. Every child learns: UNICEF education strategy 2019-2030. NY: UNICEF, 23-36.
- VAN WOEZIK, T. E., KOKSMA, J. J.-J., REUZEL, R. P., JAARSMA, D. C. & VAN DER WILT, G. J. 2021. There is more than 'I' in self-directed learning: an exploration of self-directed learning in teams of undergraduate students. *Medical Teacher*, 43, 590-598.
- VICTORI, M. & LOCKHART, W. 1995. Enhancing metacognition in self-directed language learning. *System*, 23, 223-234.
- VYGOTSKY, L. S. & COLE, M. 1978. *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*, Harvard university press.
- WALL, D. 2000. The impact of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning: can this be predicted or controlled? *System*, 28, 499-509.
- WARD, C. & LUNDY, L. 2024. Space, voice, audience, and influence: The Lundy model and early childhood. *Early childhood voices: Children, families, professionals*. Springer.
- WEARE, K. 2015. What works in promoting social and emotional well-being and responding to mental health problems in schools. *London: National Children's Bureau*, 1, 15.
- WENGER, E. 2011. Communities of practice: A brief introduction.
- WILLIS, A. 2024. Teachers prioritise relationships over curriculum for student well-being. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 32, 473-489.
- WOODS, P. J. & COPUR-GENCTURK, Y. 2024. Examining the role of student-centered versus teacher-centered pedagogical approaches to self-directed learning through teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 138, 104415.
- ZHOU, S., SLEMP, G. R. & VELLA-BRODRICK, D. A. 2024. Factors associated with teacher wellbeing: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 36, 63.
- ZIMMERMAN, B. J. 1990. Self-regulated learning and academic achievement: An overview. *Educational psychologist*, 25, 3-17.



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.