Measuring up

Ferre Laevers’ Process-Oriented Monitoring System builds on his ‘well-being’ and ‘involvement’ scales to create a highly sensitive form of assessment. Jan Dubiel takes a look at how it works.

The work of Professor Ferre Laevers has been one of the most powerful influences in developing our perceptions of how children learn and the preconditions necessary to make them successful learners. It has been critical for enabling practitioners to recognise and describe both the ‘essentials for learning’ and how these ‘essentials’ manifest themselves in a child’s play and behaviour.

His research focuses on how we can help children to become more effective learners, in addition to the ‘content’ of what they know and can do. As well as developing a tool with which to ‘measure’ these important aspects of development – the Leuven Scales – Laevers’ work shows how practitioners can use this information to account for and support children’s learning through the The Process-Oriented Monitoring System (POMS).

Strongly influenced by, among others, Carl Rogers and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Laevers’ theoretical framework focuses strongly on the importance of the process and quality of learning and how these ‘essentials’ manifest themselves in a child’s play and behaviour.

Within this, he specifically identifies two ‘traits’ or ‘aspects of behaviour’ – well-being and involvement – as fundamental underpinnings to a child’s successful development and which lie at the very heart of his approach.

**Well-being**

Laevers describes children in a high state of well-being as being ‘like a fish in water’. This poetic description is a useful one as it refers to an ‘emotional state’ in which a child’s basic physical, emotional and social needs are fulfilled. They are comfortable in their environment, confident with relationships of those around them, eager to explore and experiment from a position of safety and security. It is a particular state or feeling that can be
recognised by satisfaction, enjoyment and pleasure. The person is relaxed and expresses inner rest, feels the energy flow and radiates vitality, is open to the surroundings, accessible and flexible.

The reason that it is a crucial ‘signifier’ and the starting point of both effective assessment and pedagogy is because without this state of well-being, significant development, learning, achievement and attainment are much less likely to occur or be sustained. Any learning, regardless of where and how, has to be underpinned by a feeling of well-being that enables the child to be confident, take risks and move out of their cognitive comfort zone.

Conversely, children with low levels of well-being might appear anxious, nervous, frightened, fearful, dependent and tense. Such traits make it hard for the child to learn in a sustained way, as their basic needs are not being met. Laevers also refers to the link between well-being and mental health, and the ‘learning behaviours’ that become embedded in children’s perception and interpretation of the world during their early experiences.

IN VolVTY

Building on the state of well-being is that of ‘involvement’, a deep cognitive ‘immersion’ in an activity and/or thinking. At these moments, multiple neurological connections take place, thinking is extended, and knowledge and skills are brought together to express an idea, solve a problem, communicate a thought, or achieve an action. Sometimes described as ‘deep-level learning’, it is the point at which learning is expressed in a powerful self-motivated way.

Laevers himself describes this state as ‘a quality of human activity. It can be recognised by concentration and persistence and is characterised by motivation, interest and fascination, openness to stimuli and intense mental energy, deep satisfaction and a strong flow of energy.’

The reason that the concept of ‘involvement’ is so important is that when this is being demonstrated the learning and thinking that happen are intense, meaningful and ‘real’.

As the opposite of superficial ‘rote learning’ or ‘regurgitating’ information on demand, high levels of involvement indicate high levels of thinking, that connections between facts, knowledge, skills and expression are being made, that challenges provoke responses and that the child is using everything they possess to its utmost.

At this point, learning and thinking become dynamic, cognitive risks are taken, new ideas and understanding formed, and achievement, attainment and development occur.

MEASURING WELL-BEING AND INVOLVEMENT

The genius of Laevers’ work is not just to identify these ‘learning

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**THE LEUVEN SCALES**

### SCALE FOR WELL-BEING

**Level 1: Has a difficult time**
Children with a very low level of well-being are clearly having a difficult time. They don’t feel happy in the setting.
- Moments of ‘true’ pleasure are scarce or even non-existent.
- They mostly seem anxious or tense or show hardly any vitality.
- Contacts with their environment tend to be difficult.
- They are either in conflict with others, or they avoid contact.
- They don’t feel at ease in most situations.

**Level 2: Often does not feel OK**
The picture you get shows elements of Level 1, but they are less pronounced.

**Level 3: Feels more or less OK**
Children with a moderate level of well-being in the setting are considered neither happy nor unhappy.
- They look rather indifferent and if they show positive or negative signals these are seldom outspoken.
- Enthusiasm is rarely observed, but neither do they display negative emotions.
- Contacts with other children are rather superficial and have low intensity.
- Basic needs are only satisfied to some extent; many chances for real satisfaction slip away.

**Level 4: Often feels great**
The picture you get shows elements of Level 5, but they are less pronounced.

**Level 5: Feels on top of the world**
Children with a very high level of well-being in the setting feel like ‘fish in water’.
- They have a lot of fun, laugh a lot, they radiate.
- They enjoy what the environment has to offer and the other’s company.
- When they feel unhappy, angry or frightened, they manage to get over it fairly quickly.
- Mostly feel very happy; they enjoy life to the full.
- Their actions affect others and the group climate in a positive way.

### SCALE FOR INVOLVEMENT

**Level 1: Hardly engages in activities**
Children with a very low level of involvement often do not engage in any activity at all.
- They wander around, appear absent-minded and tend to stare aimlessly.
- When any activity occurs it is often short-lived or purposeless.
- They are easily distracted by surrounding noises, voices, movements.
- There is little mental activity; they don’t seem to take anything in.
- They often act without any effort or dedication.

**Level 2: Activity is often interrupted**
The picture you get shows elements of Level 1 but they are less pronounced.

**Level 3: Is busy but seldom absorbed**
Children with a moderate level of involvement are often occupied, but closer observation reveals that they are rarely engaged in what they do.
- They pay attention, but signals of real involvement such as concentration, being absorbed, intense mental activity, are rare.
- They appear to act in a routine manner; without much effort.
- They are also easily distracted and their activities seldom last long.
- The do not show much drive while occupied with activities.

**Level 4: Is often intensely engaged**
The picture you get shows elements of Level 5, but they are less pronounced.

**Level 5: Is mostly completely absorbed**
Children with a very high level of involvement are often absorbed and intensely engaged in their activities.
- Signals of concentration, persistence and energy are strongly represented.
- They readily make choices and as soon as they have started an activity they are completely absorbed.
- Even strong stimuli in their surroundings will barely distract them.
- They take pleasure in exploring the world and operate at the very limits of their capabilities.

*From A Process-Oriented Monitoring System for the Early Years, Laevers et al*
behaviours’ or ‘emotional states’ as vital components of learning, development and progress but to provide a tool through which to understand and measure them.

Central to the POMS are the two simple yet sophisticated ‘Leuven Scales’ (named after the university where Laevers is based) within which practitioners make their judgements.

Each scale has five ‘levels’ ranging from one, being the lowest, to five as the highest. In their everyday activity, children demonstrate a range of interpretable ‘signals’ that indicate their levels of well-being and involvement. From observations and knowledge of children, practitioners ‘screen’ the children (explained later in this article) and come to a professional conclusion about the child’s – and group’s – levels of well-being and involvement and the implications these have for the quality of provision and the appropriateness of the experiences available to the children.

Evidently, children’s emotional and cognitive behaviour is not a single constant, but varies considerably in response to different aspects. However, the scales indicate a ‘general’ or ‘typical’ overview of the child so that the information can be used effectively.

**POMS IN PRACTICE**

POMS uses the information gleaned by practitioners about the nature of children as learners and their typical levels of well-being and involvement to help to identify aspects of learning and development that require investigation, support and challenge.

As a tool, POMS can serve a range of purposes to support and increase the quality of provision and children’s attainment. After discussing and reflecting on the well-being and involvement information they have garnered, practitioners can consider how to use this effectively. Within the POMS, Laevers suggests specific ‘interventions’ and approaches to make best use of this information.

Screening is the process by which practitioners make a judgement on a child’s levels of well-being and involvement using the scale to define their decision.

This would be garnered from their knowledge of the child, observations within the setting and discussions with parents, carers and other practitioners. From these, practitioners would plan ‘interventions’ and interactions accordingly.

For example, if a child had consistently low levels of well-being, the practitioner would seek to identify the reason then draw up an informal ‘action plan’ to help the child feel more comfortable and less anxious in the setting, so creating conditions in which the child could achieve more.

Equally, a child might be observed with good levels of well-being, but low levels of involvement. This would suggest that the child is content and secure within the environment but prevented from achieving through insufficient challenge or motivation. In this instance, ‘interventions’ would focus on identifying aspects of the child’s interests and fascinations to establish ways in which to truly inspire the child and so encourage high levels of involvement.

Screening is also an invaluable means of assessing the effectiveness of provision. Practitioners could collate their information in a group ‘screening’ to help them decide how to support the individuals discussed above or to assess the effectiveness of a specific area of provision and the resources within it.

Predominantly, low levels of involvement in a particular area would suggest that the quality, accessibility, flexibility or attractiveness of resources would need to be improved to optimise the opportunities for effective ‘deep-level’ learning.

Using this technique, practitioners could also view the activity of a few children in each session to ascertain their levels of well-being and involvement. Over the course of a day, the practitioner will then have a body of information that indicates the children’s ‘typical’ state, which could help inform their overview of the child and provide ongoing examples to discuss as a team within the setting.