Life Worth Living

Caring for our Educators and Principals

Evaluation and Impact Report

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"To be an educator is to stand on holy ground – people's lives."

Thomas Groome, *Educating for Life*

"*Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced*."

James Baldwin, 'As Much Truth As One Can Bear'

"The true opposite of depression is neither gaiety nor absence of pain, but vitality—the freedom to experience spontaneous feelings."

Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*

Dr Joshua Forstenzer
University of Sheffield

Executive Summary

Introduction

The 'Life Worth Living: Caring for our Educators & Principals' (LIFE) project was an initiative funded by the European Union through the ERASMUS+ programme, aiming to enhance the well-being of primary and secondary school teachers and principals in Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Iceland, and Italy. Recognizing the pressing challenges faced by educators across Europe—such as low wages, high workloads, and job dissatisfaction—the project sought to address these issues by fostering personal growth, meaningful reflection, and supportive communities among educators.

Project Objectives and Implementation

The LIFE project set out with three primary objectives:

1. Facilitator Training: Train at least 10 facilitators from the participating countries in the content, approach, and relational pedagogy of the Life Worth Living programme.

2. In-Person Retreats: Deliver three in-person LIFE retreats to a group of 60 teachers and principals—two national retreats in each country and one international retreat—to engage participants in deep reflection and dialogue.

3. Digital Platform Development: Create an online learning community to support continued engagement among participants through asynchronous and synchronous digital experiences.

Led by NORTH Consulting (Iceland), in collaboration with partners from the University of Iceland, the National Management School (Bulgaria), KMOP (Greece), Centro per lo Sviluppo Creativo 'Danilo Dolci' (Italy), Djapo (Belgium), and Blue Room Innovations (Spain), the project unfolded over a series of events:

- Facilitator Training: An intensive workshop in Bansko, Bulgaria, in early September 2023, where 14 facilitators were trained.
- National Retreats: Two in-country retreats between the autumn of 2023 and the early summer of 2024 were conducted in local languages.
- International Retreat: A culminating international retreat in Kasterlee, Belgium, in October 2024, bringing together all facilitators and participants.

Life Worth Living Approach

The LIFE methodology builds on the foundations of the Life Worth Living (LWL) approach, originally developed at Yale (and enriched by other universities along the way), but goes beyond the more properly academic versions of Life Worth Living by incorporating the use of rituals, embodied

practices, and artistic expression into its core framework. In general, the Life Worth Living approach invites participants to contemplate fundamental existential questions, such as:

- What is the shape of a flourishing life?
- What constitutes a life worth living?
- What is the place of suffering in the good life?

The Life Worth Living approach is grounded in four pedagogical principles:

1. Pursuit of Existential Meaning: Equipping participants to discern and live out their answers to life's fundamental questions.

2. Commitment to Truth-Seeking Pluralism: Engaging with diverse religious and philosophical perspectives as 'live options' that make truth claims affecting our lives.

3. First-Person Engagement: Encouraging personal investment and reflection, allowing participants to explore their own commitments deeply.

4. Participation in a Community of Practice: Fostering vibrant, 'life-giving' learning communities where participants can be their whole selves.

While LIFE observed the four pedagogical principles of Life Worth Living, the LIFE approach aimed to go even further in its commitment to pluralism by engaging with diverse cultural perspectives as captured in key literary texts and artefacts from different cultures.

Key Findings

1. Fulfilment of Objectives: All project objectives were met and exceeded. Fourteen facilitators were trained, all retreats were successfully conducted, and a digital platform was developed, resulting in sustained engagement across all countries.

2. High-Quality Interventions: Participants reported overwhelmingly positive experiences (with 88% of the participants finding their experiences to be 'Excellent' or 'Very Good' during in-person retreats). Surveys also indicated that the retreats and online units were engaging, transformative, and professionally enriching with key success indicators consistently rated highly across all retreats and online units.

3. Enhanced Well-Being: The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) results showed a significant increase in participants' present sense of meaning and purpose in life, suggesting the project's effectiveness in enhancing well-being.

4. Strong Engagement and Participation: High response rates to surveys (just under 85%) and consistent attendance at events demonstrated strong engagement throughout. Participants actively participated in discussions, activities, and expressed eagerness for continued involvement.

5. Quality of Facilitation: Facilitation was rated extremely high across all events, averaging 9.33 out of 10. Facilitators effectively created safe, open environments conducive to deep reflection, fostering caring relationships, and inviting authentic and meaningful dialogue.

6. Personal and Professional Development: Participants reported significant personal growth, increased self-awareness and self-acceptance, and a renewed sense of personal and professional purpose. Many intended to apply the insights gained through their participation in LIFE to their personal life (by, for example, renewing or starting mindfulness practices) and professional practice, emphasizing greater empathy, active listening, and fostering dialogic and reflective practices in their classrooms.

7. The Value of an Experiential Approach and an Appetite for More: Many participants reported wanting to learn more about the practice of facilitating Life Worth Living interventions and almost all facilitators mentioned benefitting from first having experienced the Life Worth Living approach as participants before acting as facilitators.

8. High Quality Resources: Resources across the project were well selected and increased familiarity with them led to an increased appetite to engage with them meaningfully. The LIFE Facilitator Manual is a new, rich, and useful resource for supporting facilitators leading Life Worth Living activities. In addition to the Manual, a large set of scripts (approximately 30) for facilitating different fundamental life questions based on the approaches applied in each of the 5 participating countries were designed and shared among facilitators.

9. Building Supportive Communities: The project fostered strong learning communities, with participants valuing the connections and friendships formed. The collaborative environment enhanced the overall experience and facilitated meaningful exchanges across cultural and generational divides. The physical spaces were highly valued by participants, especially noting the importance of nature, opportunities for artistic engagement, and embodied practices.

10. In-Person Better Than Online: In-person retreats were consistently rated more highly than online activities. But in-project improvements in the online experience were also visible. Overall, the digital part of this project seems to have gone very well and has permitted

a good deal of learning regarding the best use of digital tools for engaging in this kind of intellectual and emotional work.

11. The Value of International Interactions: Being part of an international learning cohort significantly enhanced participants' experiences, their understanding, and their learning. It also positively shaped their opportunities for reflection. This overwhelmingly positive feedback highlights the value of international collaboration and diverse perspectives in enriching educational experiences.

12. Key Themes: Comments in the surveys highlight the importance of supportive learning environments, transformative learning, and the value of connection to natural environments. They also underscore the value of asking existential questions in a dialogic approach that integrates both emotional depth and intellectual rigor, the importance of education that aims to heal and guide rather than simply instruct, and the rich value of communities that permit personal transformation, enabling the sharing of experiences and facilitating the expression of deep feelings.

Conclusions

The LIFE project successfully demonstrated that providing educators with structured opportunities to engage deeply with questions of meaning and purpose can significantly enhance their sense of well-being and professional fulfilment. Key success factors included:

- Effective Pedagogical Approach: The Life Worth Living approach proved adaptable and impactful across diverse cultural contexts, effectively engaging educators in philosophical and existential reflection.
- Skilled Facilitation: Well-trained facilitators were crucial in guiding discussions, managing sensitive topics, and fostering inclusive environments.
- Holistic Design: The well-designed combination of in-person retreats, online engagement, and a supportive community successfully addressed various dimensions of well-being.

Recommendations for the Future

1. Integration into Educational Practice: Develop strategies to help educators incorporate the Life Worth Living approach into their classrooms, benefiting students directly.

2. Long-Term Support: Establish ongoing support mechanisms and alumni networks to sustain the benefits of the LIFE programme beyond its formal conclusion (possibly, as a first step, by linking in with the wider Life Worth Living network).

3. Enhancing Online Engagement: While in-person events were highly effective, efforts should be made to improve online experiences

further still.

4. Addressing Emotional Depth: Provide clearer guidelines and support for managing the potentially highly emotional aspects of the programme, including considerations for involving mental health professionals when appropriate.

5. Scaling and Sustainability: Explore opportunities to expand the programme to more countries and regions, as well as to other vocational groups, leveraging the successful model established by the LIFE project for fostering well-being.

Final Remarks

The LIFE project underscores the critical importance of investing in educator well-being as a pathway to improving educational outcomes and fostering resilient and thoughtful educational communities. By empowering educators to explore big questions about life and purpose within supportive communities, the project has made a meaningful contribution to their personal and professional lives. Continuing to refine and expand upon this model holds significant potential for positive impact across the education sector in Europe and beyond.

1. Introduction

The 'Life Worth Living: Caring for our Educators & Principals' (LIFE) project was funded by the European Union through the ERASMUS+ programme. LIFE's central goal was to foster well-being among primary and secondary school teachers and principals in five European countries, namely: Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Iceland, and Italy. To achieve this, the project set itself the following objectives:

- Train at least 10 facilitators from these participating countries (2 or more from each country) in the content, approach, and relational pedagogy of Life Worth Living;

- Deliver three in-person LIFE retreats to a group of 60 teachers and principals, with two of these taking place in-country and one taking place at an international retreat regrouping all project participants;

- Develop a digital platform that serves as an online learning community to support continued engagement with the project for all project participants.

The LIFE project was led by NORTH Consulting (based in Iceland), who worked closely with the University of Iceland, the National Management School (based in Bulgaria), KMOP – Social Action and Innovation Centre (based in Greece), Centro Per Lo Sviluppo Creativo 'Danilo Dolci' (based in Italy), Djapo (based in Belgium), and Blue Room Innovations (based in Spain) to deliver on its objectives.

The initial intensive facilitator training took place in Bansko in Bulgaria from the 5th to 8th of September 2023, the first in-country retreats took place after that and before the middle of March 2024, the second in-country retreats took place in the spring and early summer of 2024, and the final international retreat took place in Belgium at *de Hoge Rielen* in Kasterlee from the 15th to the 17th of October 2024.

After receiving the initial training (which was delivered by Rev. Dr. Angela Gorrell and Dr. Joshua Forstenzer), the partner organisations recruited 12 self-selecting teachers and principals from their home countries. The initial training and the final international retreat were conducted primarily in English while the in-country retreats were conducted primarily in the local tongue.

The facilitator teams were composed of experienced professionals, coming from a variety of highly relevant fields (psychology, psychotherapy, group facilitation, higher education, educational leadership, continued professional training). The facilitator teams for each country were made up of the following people:

Belgium: An Yskout & Anniek Gavriilakis

Bulgaria: Alexander Evtimov, Magi Blagoeva & Lachezar Afrikanov

Iceland: Maria Kristin Gylfadottir, Andrea Rose Cheatham Kasper, Ólafur Páll Jónsson & Eirikur Thorvarðarson

Italy: Lisa Avarello, Antonella Alessi & Giulia D'Annibale

Greece: Marinetta Kritikou, Georgia Alexandrou & Angeliki Kakou

The first headline finding is that all of the project objectives were fulfilled. By the end of the project, 14 facilitators received the training; each facilitator group conducted two-in person retreats in their national languages and the international retreat successfully took place; the digital platform was developed supporting two online and asynchronous learning experiences per country. The second headline finding is that these interventions were of a very high quality and were enthusiastically appreciated by the participants: the participant feedback received after each element of the project were, on the whole, exceptionally positive. Survey responses suggest that the overwhelming majority of teachers and principals involved in the project found the experience deeply meaningful, personally beneficial, and many of them felt like the experience was transformative. This report will delve with more granularity into both facilitator and participant experiences throughout the project.

To this end, this report will begin by articulating what the Life Worth Living approach involves (2), before briefly presenting the project rationale (3), describing the sequence and content of the project activities (4), and then explaining the research methodology adopted (4). This report will then present the key empirical findings drawn from the surveys collected throughout the project and from a focus group with the facilitators (6), as well as further findings (7), and the findings from the responses to the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (8), before sharing a case-study from the second retreat conducted in Italy (9). The report closes with a conclusion where the study's limitations and pathways for future action and research are addressed (10).

2. What is the Life Worth Living Approach?

Life Worth Living is a pedagogical approach that first took shape at Yale University in the United States of America in 2014. In its original form, it aimed to change the dominant mode of engagement in higher education and invite students to contemplate the most central questions in life for themselves. The vision resulted in the development of one of Yale's most popular undergraduate courses. Its central questions include: What is worthy of our humanity? What is the shape of a flourishing life? What

constitutes a life worth living? What is worth wanting? How does the good life feel? What is the place of suffering in the good life? What should we hope for? What, if anything, is the value of failure?

Starting in 2016, versions of this course were developed, adapted and delivered at the University of Hong Kong (in China) and the University of Sheffield (in the United Kingdom). This initial expansion led to the formation of a small group of international educators with a distinct interest in giving reflective form to what had been until then a set of practices, with the Yale Center for Faith and Culture playing a leadership role. This resulted in the articulation of a set of pedagogical principles that, taken together, constitute the Life Worth Living approach. They are as follows:

- *Pursuit of Existential Meaning*

"We equip students for the lifelong process of discerning and living the answers to the fundamental question of our lives: 'What is the shape of flourishing life?' Students are hungry for opportunities to delve into historical and contemporary religious and philosophical answers to the big questions of life, and to rigorously reflect on their own answers within a carefully designed curriculum."[1]

- *Commitment to Truth-Seeking Pluralism*

"We include a diverse range of religious and philosophical perspectives—not as mere anthropological data, but as 'live options' that make truth claims with bearing on our lives. The social fact of cultural, religious, and ideological diversity around the globe and in our neighborhoods is difficult to make sense of. Many young people confuse the fact of disagreement with the idea that, therefore, there are no answers. We aim to convene truth-seeking conversations about fundamental questions within pluralistic contexts. Ultimately, we strive toward a world where deep reflection on the good life is central to undergraduate education and public discourse in pluralistic communities."[2]

- *First-Person Engagement*

"Personal investment is essential to the Life Worth Living approach. We invite students and instructors to ask what makes life most worth living and to reply with their lives. Courses pair rigorous philosophical and

1 Life Worth Living Key Principles: https://lifeworthliving.yale.edu/key-principles#pursuit-of-existential-meaning [Retrieved: 22/11/2024]
2 Life Worth Living Key Principles: https://lifeworthliving.yale.edu/key-principles#pursuit-of-existential-meaning [Retrieved: 22/11/2024]

religious textual engagement with the tools for examining and shaping students' own commitments. Discussions and assignments are crafted to inspire dialogue between course texts and lived experience, while guest practitioners lend insight into the particularities of their visions of the good life. As they move through the Life Worth Living approach, students are better equipped to articulate their present, ever-revisable vision of a life worth living and to test the reality of living it."[3]

- *Participation in a Community of Practice*

> "We attend carefully to convening life-giving, holistic learning communities in which students and instructors together strive to answer life's biggest questions. We convene life-giving learning communities that offer space for students and instructors to be their whole selves and to marry their most profound existential questions with the best of their intellectual energies. Invited to draw on their personal histories and daily lives throughout the course, participants are taught to critically examine philosophical and religious texts but also each others' lives. Offering a model of vulnerability, humility, and empathy paired with intellectual rigor, we ask students to hold each other accountable to the pursuit of existential meaning. Cohorts of Life Worth Living students emerge with the courage and tools to have conversations that matter within and far beyond campus life."

These principles amount to inviting people to reflect ever more deeply on their own life, on their own values and commitments, on their own implicit and explicit beliefs about what defines a flourishing life, as well as on those of others through dialogic interactions with people, texts, and other relevant cultural artefacts.[4] The Life Worth Living approach is deeply relational in that it aims to put the learner in relationship with themselves, with others, and with religious and philosophical traditions by presenting ideas that stimulate respectful conversations across lines of enduring difference.

At present, there are over 50 different institutions of higher learning

3 Life Worth Living Key Principles: https://lifeworthliving.yale.edu/key-principles#pursuit-of-existential-meaning [Retrieved: 22/11/2024]

4 Even with these characterising elements, those of us involved in this work do appreciate that it can still be difficult to ascertain exactly what a Life Worth Living approach looks like without first participating in a community of practice dedicated to it. However, for a helpful deepening of one's understanding without benefitting from first-hand experience, the book *Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most* (New York: The Open Field, 2023) by Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, and Ryan McAnnally-Linz provides an excellent sense of what it is really like to generate a conversation between one's own life and important philosophical and religious texts about what is of ultimate value in life. Volf and McAnnally-Linz first designed the course at Yale and Croasmun has been a key architect in its expansion to other institutions.

worldwide where a Life Worth Living course is offered.[5] Yale and other members of the international network have had some limited engagement with primary and secondary schools,[6] but the LIFE project is the first systematic application of the Life Worth Living approach to the pre-tertiary educational context (albeit focusing on teachers and principals rather than pupils). To this end, LIFE has expanded on the Life Worth Living approach, combining its textual approach with ritual, embodied practices, engagement with nature, and blended learning.

3. Rationale

The stated goal of the LIFE project is to improve the well-being of primary and secondary school teachers and school principals. The plan is for this intervention to generate concentric circles of impact from the individuals involved in the project outward, with the potential of impacting at the school level (especially with 17 principals involved) and hundreds of students. With 43 teachers involved in the project, with an average of 22 students per teacher, this reaches almost one thousand students in the first year.

Pursuing wellbeing in education is a laudable goal in itself. But evidence suggests that European teachers are particularly in need of support at this time. Indeed, a Euronews report explains that "[m]ost EU member states see a large proportion of their teaching vacancies unfilled at the start of each school year, often thanks to low wages, high workload, and an ageing teacher population."[7] More generally, a relatively recent meta-study focusing on teacher well-being suggests that social relationships play an important role in fostering subjective well-being among teachers and that teacher well-being has an impact on the quality of the education they deliver.[8] In other words, many European countries are currently experiencing challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers in primary and secondary education due to job dissatisfaction, therefore working on fostering

5 Now, the wider Life Worth Living network includes a broad array of tertiary institutions, but it is still led by the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. For more information about this wider network see: https://lifeworthliving.yale.edu/ [Retrieved 01/11/2024]

6 This engagement included a competition for primary and secondary school (K-12) teachers: https://faith.yale.edu/media/lwl-secondary-competition [Retrieved 03/11/2024]

7 Inês Trindade Pereira, 'At least 24 EU countries struggle with teacher shortages — here's why', *Euronews*, 28/08/2024: https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/08/28/at-least-24-eu-countries-struggle-with-teacher-shortages-heres-why [Retrieved 23/11/2024]

8 Tina Hascher & Jennifer Waber, 'Teacher well-being: A systematic review of the research literature from the year 2000–2019', *Educational Research Review*, Vol. 34 (2021): https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2021.100411 [Retrieved 01/20/2024]. For a discussion of potential factors impacting teacher wellness, see Joy C. Nwoko, Theophilus I. Emeto, Aduli E. O. Malau-Aduli, and Bunmi S. Malau-Aduli, 'A Systematic Review of the Factors That Influence Teachers' Occupational Wellbeing', *International Journal of Environmental Research in Public Health*, Vol. 20, No. 12 (2023): https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20126070 [Retrieved 12/10/2024]

beneficial social relationships among teachers could help improve teacher well-being. In addition, fostering a conversion that encourages teachers to reflect on their own values and conceptions of purpose and meaning can play an important part in a wider journey of self-discovery and personal growth.

This is not to suggest that the structural factors that are the primary causes of low levels of job satisfaction for educators are less important than the cultural context in which education occurs daily in schools. Rather, the idea here is that a cultural change in the nature of conversations within and around education could be beneficial for educators, regardless of the wider structural constraints within which they have to operate. This cultural change is not likely to be easy or seamless. Busy and stressed educators can benefit from support to reflect on themselves, on their evolving sense of educational vocation, and on their own lives. Creating space for reflection is an educational task in itself, because as the great educationist, Parker Palmer, once puts it: "If we want to grow as teachers – we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives – risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract."[9]

The Life Worth Living approach applied in the LIFE project through retreat, asynchronous and synchronous online environments directed to teachers and principals aimed to help create space for reflection, because it was thought that it had the potential to help teachers and principals to deepen their relationships with themselves and with others in a series of supportive, open, non-judgmental, respectful, intellectually stimulating, highly diverse, and dialogic interactions. At the heart of this approach is a commitment to freely exploring existential and ethical questions and a belief in the fact that certain competences make this more meaningful and rewarding. As the training manual notes:

> "Each participant will, no doubt, take different messages from the readings and the dialogues. By reading the texts together and engaging with them in a community of learning, participants deepen their understanding of the texts, the questions and their own lives. Through the reading and discussion of texts, participants engage with certain content, but the focus is not on the content as such but on much wider understanding and on certain skills, such as the skills to think about the big questions in life, to help others think critically about those questions, and to think aloud in a community of inquiry."[10]

9 Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p.12.
10 LIFE, *Facilitator Manual*, internal document, p.8.

4. Describing the Activities Involved in LIFE

Given that the Life Worth Living subject-matter can be highly sensitive and often fraught for newcomers (as indeed it often is for more experienced hands as well), it is essential that the entire learning journey be carefully designed from the very beginning to the end. In anticipation of the facilitator training event (in Bansko), NORTH Consulting liaised closely with the trainers to develop a welcome letter (introducing the project and the trainers), a resource pack (with all of the necessary readings), a thematic structure (built around the LIFE questions), and a detailed schedule for the training. Facilitators were also asked to contribute songs they associated with a ' life worth living' and with 'suffering', as these would eventually be used in facilitated group activities. These were anticipatory steps designed to facilitate the creation of a community of inquiry on the big questions about the good life.

The LIFE facilitator training intensive itself started with a detailed introductory session where all of the participants got to know each other in semi-structured dialogic exchanges (for example, everyone was asked to answer the questions: "Where is home for you? And why?"). Then, the rest of the event prepared the teams of facilitators from each country to design the LIFE course for educators and principals in their own countries by engaging them in Life Worth Living discussions, with each topic being connected to a specific group of texts and a distinctive pedagogic technique to facilitate open-ended dialogue. These courses were thus organised around several philosophical questions which participants explore by reading philosophical, cultural, and theological texts from diverse traditions, cultures and religions, across time and from various regions of the world, reflecting on these through the various participative educational practices. Each session was followed by a 'debrief' session in which facilitators could share their experiences and ask questions to the trainers about the practices associated with the presented facilitation technique. At a rather general level, the topics are all connected to the good life or the worthy life, and how teachers and principals can be supported in making the personal and collective quest to discern the feature of the good life central to their own lives and to their work. This equipped the facilitators with knowledge content (related to the texts), facilitation techniques, session structures, and templates. It also gave them a first-person experience engaging with the LIFE questions (these are detailed below).

After the initial facilitator training event, facilitators continued to meet online and share their thoughts and expertise as they developed the LIFE Facilitator Manual, planned and designed their first retreat, selected appropriate texts (mostly in their national language), and ultimately implemented LIFE in their in-country retreats.

As a whole, the LIFE course was structured around 9 sessions. The two

in-person national retreats, two national online (asynchronous and synchronous) sessions, and one final international retreat bringing together all participants into one LIFE learning community were structured around these sessions. The themes of the sessions are as follows:

1st session: *Opening and coming together*
2nd session: *To whom are we responsible?*
3rd session: *How do I act?*
4th session: *What should I hope for?*
5th session: *How should I respond to failure?*
6th session: *What role does suffering play in a good life?*
7th session: *What is worthy of my time?*
8th session: *How does the good life feel?*
9th session: *Closing ceremony and gratitude sharing*

However, the LIFE Facilitator Manual explains well how these sessions were to be understood by the facilitator teams:

> "Each session is given a framework and suggestions for how it can be held as part of LIFE. Does this mean that there is only one way of implementing the LIFE course? Is LIFE a course that moves along one narrow path where everyone must follow exactly in the steps of those who developed this? The answer to these questions is "No". And although we call this a "facilitators' manual" it is not describing a step-by-step way of successfully completing some task. Different facilitators can, and must, find their own specific ways of moving through the different sessions of the course. And yet, each sessions has a specific role; there is a good reason why the course is composed the way it is, and the descriptions of the activities have been adjusted after various trial and error attempts by different facilitators in multiple countries. Anyone attempting to travel the path of LIFE must find their own distinctive way and create their own unique LIFE sustaining community."

In addition, one of the key pedagogical statements of principle adopted by the trainers was the notion that, in the words of Rev. Dr. Angela Gorrell, "places teach". Thus, facilitators were encouraged to think about the likely effects of the different places in which they might wish to conduct these discussions. Nature came to play an important part in the retreat settings. But, we should not suppose that the sessions were delivered in the same manner, or in the same kinds of spaces, across the different national facilitator teams. In fact, the trainers were enthusiastic when encouraging facilitators to think creatively, authentically, and resourcefully about how to best adapt these session plans to their own contexts. And yet, given the likely resulting diversity of practices, it is noteworthy that the participant feedback is remarkably consistent across different national cohorts (more on this in section 6).

Furthermore, between the retreats, participants were invited to engage

in the use of a digital learning space where asynchronous interaction with materials and communication occurred for the sake of deepening engagement with the materials and the questions related to the project. These were combined with synchronously facilitated online meetings – except in the case of the Italian and the Bulgarian context where one of these online meetings was turned into an in-person meeting for local reasons.

5. Methodological Approach

The research underpinning this report adopts an ethnographically informed,[11] mixed methods approach.[12] The overarching goal is to put different voices in direct conversation with one another, through a process of layering, to be able to investigate in some detail the experiences connected to, and the impacts flowing from, this project.

Data gathering for this research involved the following activities:

a. The 14 facilitators responded to a qualitative survey and one quantitative question after the initial facilitator training workshop.
b. Participants in the five participating countries (a total of 60 educators) responded to qualitative surveys and one quantitative question following each in-person retreat (Retreat 1 and Retreat 2) and after completing the digital activities associated with the project (Unit 1 and Unit 2).[13]
c. I acted as a participant observer in the second retreat (Retreat 2) conducted in Italy, resulting in a case study.
d. The facilitators also participated in a focus group near the end of the international retreat (Retreat 3).
e. The participants and facilitators were asked to respond to the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), which is a quantitative questionnaire, at the start of their involvement in the project and at the end. The MLQ is a 10-item measure of the Presence of Meaning in Life, and the Search for Meaning in Life, which is used by the wider Life Worth Living network to seek to ascertain whether or not Life Worth Living interventions correlate with changes in participants' subjective experiences about meaning and purpose in their own lives.[14]

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11 For an excellent introduction to ethnographic research, see James P. Spradley, Participant Observation (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980).

12 See Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*, (London: Sage, 2013)

13 To be more precise, each of the surveys included one question that sought to provide a general overview of the quality of the facilitation provided by asking respondents to give it a numerical value out of 10. All the other questions prompted verbal responses, some of which expressed a valence towards aspects of the experiences and so can be represented statistically; others invited open and free verbal expression.

14 For a strong discussion of the benefits of the MLQ, see Michael F. Steger, Patricia Frazier, Shigehiro Oishi, and Matthew Kaler, 'The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Assessing the Presence of and Search for Meaning in Life', *Journal of Counseling Psychology,* Vol. 53, No. 1 (2006): 80–93. For a more introductory discussion of the MLQ, see Michael F. Steger

I, acting as the external evaluator, received the anonymised data from these surveys on a regular basis and produced three interim reports to help guide the project leadership team along the way. One of the functions that these surveys hoped to serve was to ensure a strong measure of continuous quality control. As a result, a number of practical and logistical questions regarding comfort, learning materials, and the quality of facilitation, as well as more open ended questions figured prominently.

The use of a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques, offers a robust framework for evaluating the quality and outcomes of a project aiming to improve the well-being of educators and school principals. Well-being is a multidimensional construct that encompasses subjective experiences, psychological states, and potentially measurable changes in behaviour or performance. In our case, the quantitative dimension of the study (the rating of the quality of facilitation and the MLQ) focuses on seeking to establish a measure of quality and a measure of change in participant feelings and attitudes connected to personal meaning and purpose. The qualitative dimension of the study (the post-intervention surveys after each event and the facilitator focus group) pays particular attention to the narrative understandings of the facilitators and participants.

Understanding the complexities of how a one-year international project, conducted by teams of facilitators heralding from different professional backgrounds and conducted in different languages, influences teacher and principal well-being requires a methodological framework capable of addressing both measurable changes in subjective experiences and the more dialogic, rich, narratively informed, personal nuances of participants' contextual experiences. Mixed methods research facilitates this exploration by integrating the strengths of qualitative and quantitative approaches to form a more holistic understanding of the experiences of facilitators and project participants.

A mixed methods approach can also give us some reasonably strong indication of the effectiveness and of the quality of implementation of the undertaken project. Indeed, the MLQ is used to capture any general trend that might emerge regarding the correlation between engagement with the LIFE project and participants' subjective experiences of well-being, purpose, and meaning, while with the multiple open-ended survey questions and the focus group were used to gather the more personal accounts, perceptions, and recollections related to the experiences connected with the project.

Crucially, an ethnographically informed research approach allows for an approach which honours and highlights the experiences of participants and facilitators in their own words. It also acknowledges the positionality

and Joo Yeon Shin, 'The Relevance of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire to Therapeutic Practice: A Look at the Initial Evidence', *International Forum for Logotherapy*, Vol. 33 (2010): 95–104.

of the researcher. In this case, it is important to acknowledge that I am not a neutral observer in this research process. First, I am Franco-American with a significant attachment to the European ideal. Second, since 2016, I have been involved in teaching Life Worth Living and have played and I continue to play various roles in developing the network (including being a member of the international project team and co-directing the European Life Worth Living Centre for Pedagogical Excellence). Third, I, along with another long-time Life Worth Living educator, trained the facilitators involved in this project. Fourth, I am deeply committed to democratic principles of education, informed by John Dewey's philosophy of education and Matthew Lipman's philosophy for children (P4C). All of these elements of my positionality have likely played a role in how I perceived what I saw and heard and how I have interpreted the written feedback.

It was agreed with the project leadership at the outset that the project would primarily be evaluated according to the following indicators of success:

The quality of discussion: Socratic, open, kind, and respectful dialogue

LIFE aims at lifting the quality of discussion on the big questions in life. In a group context, this means improving the quality of dialogue between diverse people. We all enter Life Worth Living spaces against our own political, religious, cultural and personal backdrop. In those contexts, there is a certain expected way in which conversations tend to go. These can be beneficial, but they can also be stunting. We can fail to ask that crucial question because we are embarrassed by our own ignorance. We can proclaim something as true when we are, in fact, not entirely sure. We can fail to listen to others because we think we know what they are about to tell us. A good Life Worth Living discussion is a good dialogic interaction. It is not a series of monologues. It is not a passing commentary on the beliefs of others. It consists in genuine, vulnerable, and humble exchanges on topics that are of relevance and concern to the community having the discussion. Reaching this ideal is an achievement. Maintaining it over long periods of time is probably impossible. But our goal should be to make it so that our participants feel always respected and, as often as possible, heard by all in our community of reflection.

Personal development or growth: non-prescriptive, person-centred and subjective

Another indicator of the success of LIFE activities is participants' perceptions of the impact it is having on their own sense of personal development or personal growth. Personal development is notoriously hard (perhaps impossible) to quantify or even to define. However, one way of attempting to glean this is by asking the participants to share their sense of their own personal development or growth throughout the lifespan of the project. Engagement with this reflective practice might in itself be an indication of the effect of the activities, but so would the qualitative first-person narrative reflections shared by participants. Overall, if participants self-report an improvement in their sense of personal development, this would plausibly be an indication of the positive impact of the activities.

Personal Questioning: More questions, better questions

In the same opportunities for self-reflections, we will be looking for an increase in the tendency to question one's own beliefs and assumptions. Engaging more willingly in critical self-questioning or reflecting on the challenge presented by alternative views are also indicators of expanding minds engaging in Life Worth Living activities effectively. One particular marker we may wish to look for is the use of thick ethical concepts from various traditions in the practice of self-reflection. Although use is not the same as understanding or appreciation, we might expect that use is at least an indication of engagement with the intellectual content of the questions and traditions under discussion. Furthermore, use is a marker of shifting from being a consumer of knowledge or wisdom to being a producer of knowledge or wisdom.

Engagement: Showing up and wanting to show up

The simplest and most important marker of engagement is presence and active engagement. If there are many absences or if there is a marked drop-off in attendance over time, we should take that to be an indication of a problem in need of remedy. The second layer of engagement is, however, no less important: How much do participants actually participate? Speaking during the retreats is one way to participate, though it is not the only one. Helping set things up, asking questions outside of formal group activities, expressing a desire to learn more, vocally appreciating the opportunities to relax and reflect, offering to engage in activities beyond the formally scheduled activities in the retreat – these are all markers of

engagement. If participants are engaging with the holistic experience of the retreats, then the project is likely succeeding; if not, then it is probably not going as well as one would hope.

Satisfaction with the Quality of Retreats

Although in strictly educational contexts 'satisfaction' can distract from learning, when the goal is to improve well-being, participants experiencing a reasonably high level of satisfaction is an important indicator of the quality of the experience. At the very least, if any participants are explicitly dissatisfied, the project team should seek to understand the source of that dissatisfaction and aim to address it reasonably quickly.

Appropriateness and Quality of Resources

Given that the project aims to spark a change that goes beyond the experiences of the beneficiaries across languages and countries, a reasonable assessment of the quality of resources used is going to be a useful indicator of the project's potential to go beyond this first project.

6. Findings

Response Rate

The first remarkable feature of this study is that we had very high response rates. They were as follows:

- To the survey after the facilitator training event in Bulgaria, 11 responded out of a possible 15.
- To the survey following the first in-person retreats, 60 responded out of a possible 60.
- To the survey following the second in-person retreats, 46 responded out of a possible 60.
- To the survey following the first online event, 49 responded out of a possible 60.
- To the survey following the second online event (i.e. the asynchronous unit), 43 responded out of a possible 60.
- To the survey following the international retreat, 50 responded out of a possible 50 participants who were able to attend the international retreat. (Note: 10 participants reported being unable to attend for a variety of personal reasons.)

The overall response rate across all surveys is 84.9% (with total responses at 259, out of a total of possible respondents of 305). This is a strong response rate, indicating significant engagement. It is clear that

it was harder to collect feedback after online-only events than in-person events. But the high rate of overall responses demonstrates a robust and willing engagement with the surveys, despite their high number over the length of the project.

Overall satisfaction and meeting expectations for in-person retreats

There was a clear overarching sense that the in-person retreats went exceptionally well. When asked to rate the overall quality of the in-person retreats' learning experience, all respondents were positive (across the lifespan of the project, 83 responses answered 'Excellent' (or 51.6%), 58 said 'Very Good' (or 36.1%), 14 said 'Good' (or 8.7%) (see Figure 1). This indicates that 88% of the participants found their experiences to be 'Excellent' or 'Very Good'. None were neutral or negative. This indicates that the central experience of the in-person retreats were overwhelmingly positive with a large majority valuing the experience highly.

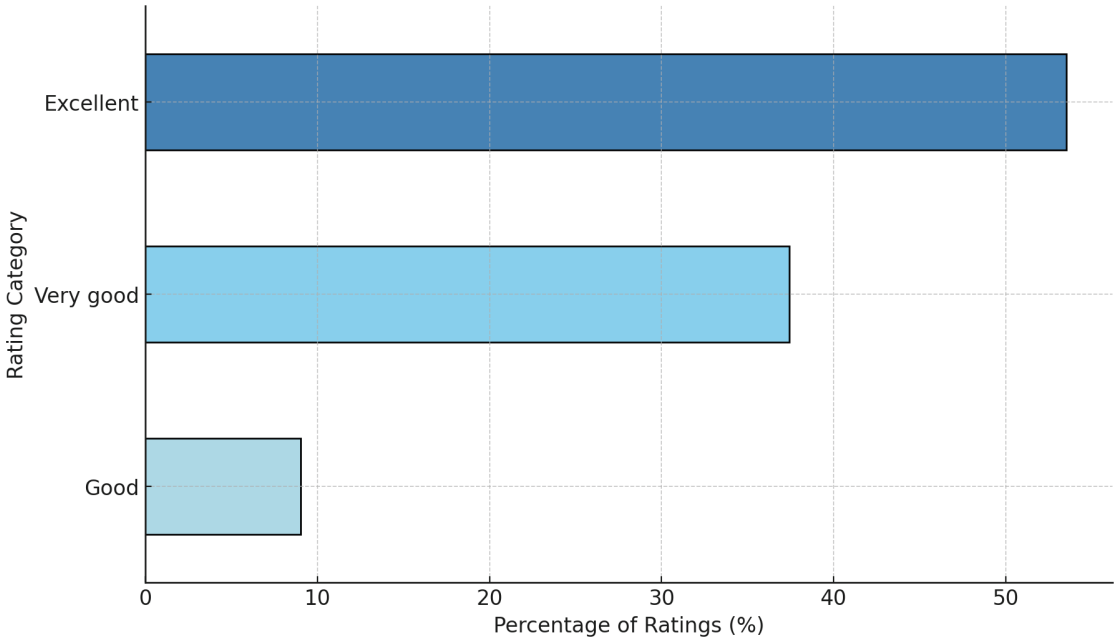


Figure 1: Comparative Rating of Overall Quality of Retreat Learning Experience for All in-Person Retreat Experiences (Percentages)

Participants were also asked if the retreats met their expectations. The responses were also overwhelmingly positive. Figure 2 shows an overwhelmingly positive response with a narrowing of the range of responses over time. The trends over time of the responses merits a special comment:

a. It makes intuitive sense to assume that exceeding expectations becomes harder and harder over time, since the initial experience presents a bigger break from the habitual way of experiencing the world

than the second or third experience.

b. It is interesting to note that the most negative responses disappeared over time. This might indicate that expectations were adjusted as the project became more familiar to participants. It could also indicate that those who really felt disappointed were not as diligent in their participation in the retreats or in the surveys. It could also indicate an improvement in the experiences of those participants. Yet, since the numbers of negative comments were very low to start off with, it is hard to assess what exactly explains this shift.

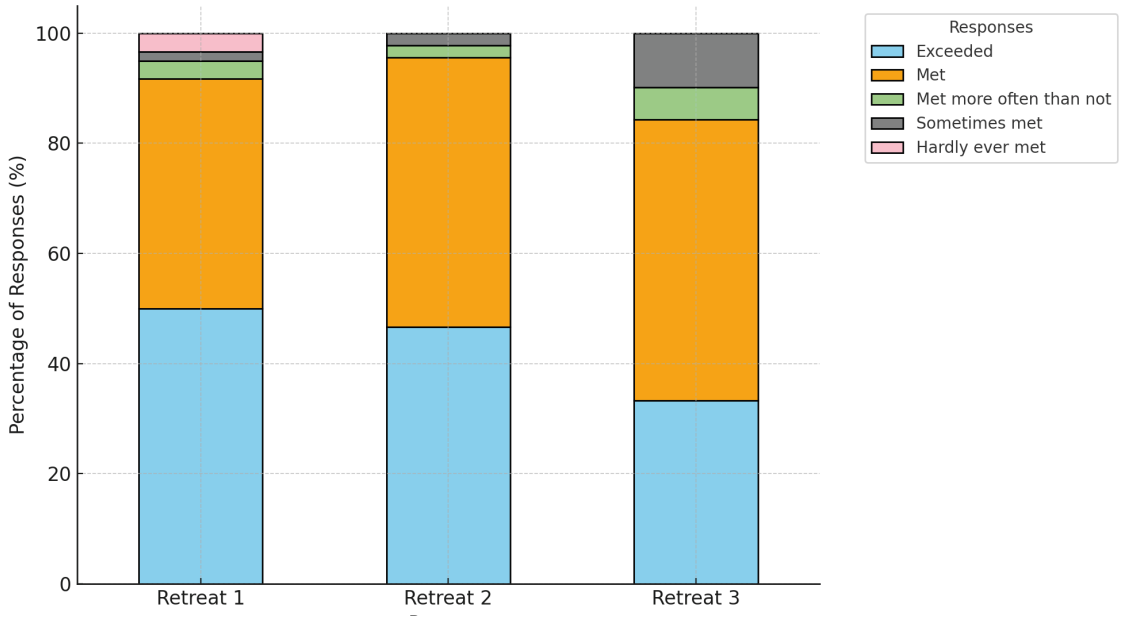


Figure 2: Percentage distribution of responses across retreats to the question 'Did the retreat experience match your expectations?'

The overwhelming majority of other participants felt positively about the quality of the retreats. Although there were a few negative comments scattered throughout the survey responses, they were far outnumbered by the overwhelming majority of extraordinarily positive comments throughout. To provide but a few examples of these positive comments, consider that when given the opportunity to freely reflect on the international retreat, one Belgian participant wrote: "It was a once in a lifetime experience". Another Belgian participant simply said: "It was extraordinary experience for me." For a good number, it was a deeply personally significant experience – this was reflected in many very personal comments. But, to illustrate, one Icelandic participant, reflecting on the significance of the second retreat, explained: "The retreat helped me a lot since there was a death in my family two weeks after the retreat and [...] the things we discussed and the tools we were given were very useful regarding helping myself and others through[...] that."

Overall satisfaction and meeting expectations for online experiences

In addition to the in-person retreats, participants were invited to participate in online, asynchronous learning units and online meetings to further support their engagement with the materials and the LIFE questions. Figure 3 shows that there was a broad set of responses, with mostly positive responses. Perhaps what is most remarkable is that the second unit has double the number of 'Extremely satisfied' responses (16) compared with the first unit (8) and the negative responses almost disappeared (with only 1 person stating that they were not satisfied at all after Unit 2). This might suggest greater familiarity with the online platform, but it might also suggest that efforts to improve the platform were effective. There is insufficient information in the survey responses to ascertain which is the most likely explanation of this change.

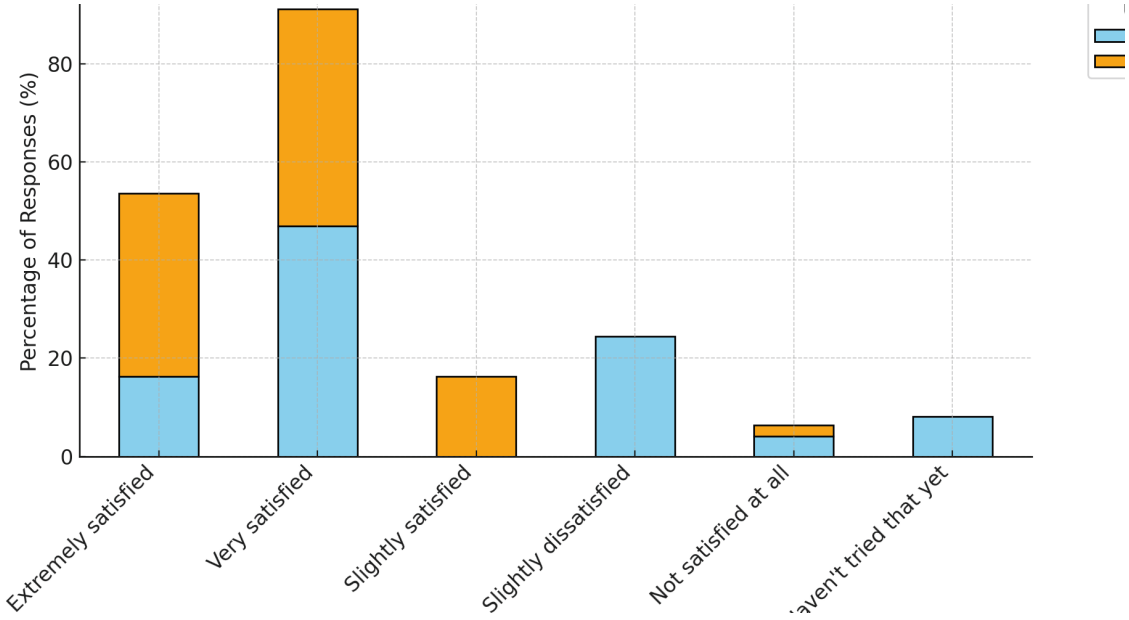


Figure 3: Percentage Comparison of Satisfaction Ratings Across Asynchronous Units (Ordered)

When asked to rate the overall user experience (out of 10), participants expressed a broad range of views, with the average rating tallying at 7.06 after Unit 1 and at 7.9 after Unit 2 (see Figure 4).

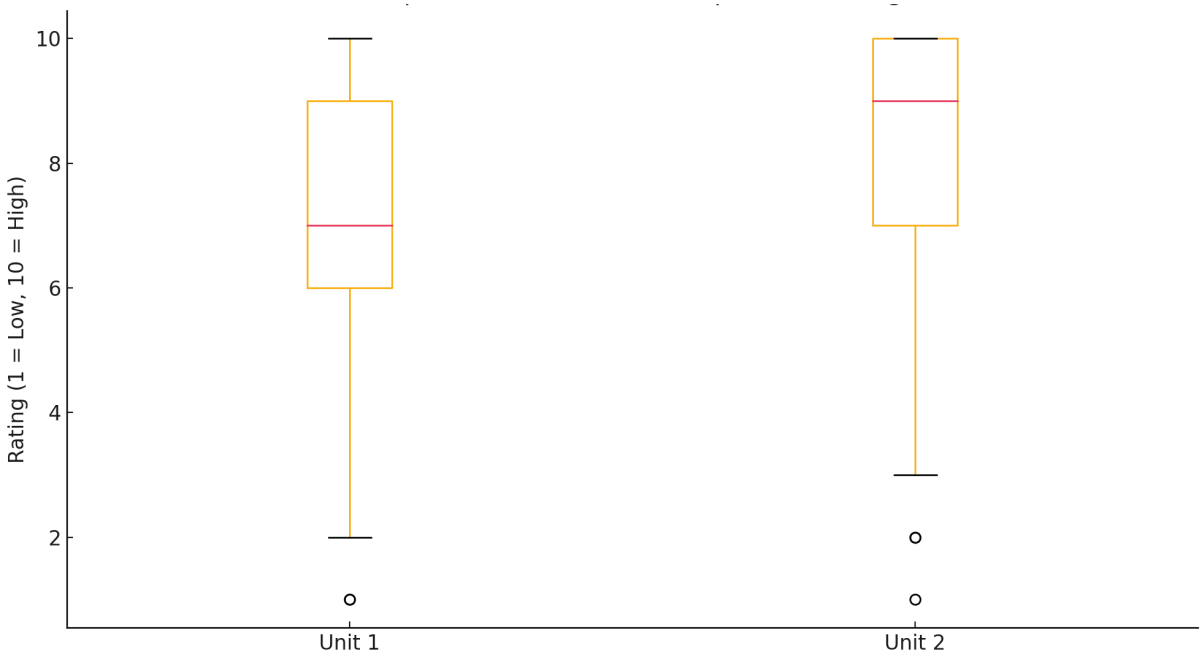


Figure 4: Comparison of Overall User Experience Ratings

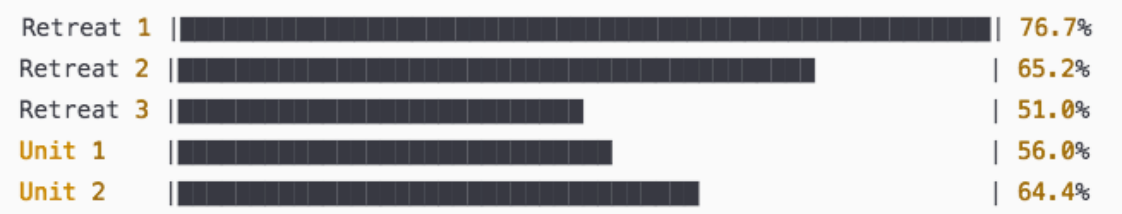
Again, the change between Unit 1 and 2 suggests either that users grew accustomed to the platform or that changes made to it were rather effective. The available data does not permit a determination.

Overall, the online dimension of the project was comparatively less highly rated than the in-person dimensions. This disparity suggests a strong preference for in-person events. But, it is important to stress that this disparity is likely the result of the exceptionally impressive level of enthusiasm expressed after in-person retreats rather than because of clearly negative experiences on the online platform. This is consistent with anecdotal evidence from other educators involved in the Life Worth Living community: in-person discussions, generally, seem to be preferred to online versions of the course by participants, since it allows for a more organic and natural way of exploring, revealing, and discussing potentially sensitive information. A few, however, commented on the advantage of regular contact with others that the digital platform presents. Still, taken on its own terms, the digital part of this project seems to have gone very well and has permitted a good deal of learning regarding the best use of digital tools for engaging in this kind of intellectual and emotional work.

Appropriateness and quality of resources

When asked about how useful the resources were in preparation for and during sessions, participants responded mostly positively, with 76.7% of respondents saying 'Always' about Retreat 1, 65.2% saying 'Always' about Retreat 2, 51% saying 'Always' about Retreat 3, 56% saying always about

Unit 1, and 64.6% saying 'Always' about Unit 2 (see Figure 5).



'Often' accounted for 20% of responses in Retreat 1, 32.6% in Retreat 2, 40.8% in Retreat 3, 34% in Unit 1, and 28.9% in Unit 2. 'Sometimes' accounted for 3.3% of responses in Retreat 1, 2.2% for Retreat 2, 8.2% for Retreat 3, 10% for Unit 1, and 6.7% for Unit 2.

This shows that the majority of participants across all sessions consistently found the materials 'Always' appropriate and useful, but that there was a decreasing trend in 'Always' answers from Retreat 1 to Retreat 3. This suggests that there is a potential for improvement here. It is possible that the international retreat's internationally coordinated whole-team-facilitation may well have made the connection between texts and activities less evident than in settings where there was only one facilitator team in charge of programming the materials and of the delivery of the discrete activities. It is also possible that it is simply harder to cater to the cultural and linguistic tastes of a large hyper diverse cohort.

Furthermore, although there were no directly negative responses, the distribution of 'Sometimes' responses (see Figure 6) suggests that the materials for the online units, though less well connected to the activities, did improve over time.

Figure 6: Percentage of 'Sometimes' Responses Across Sessions

On the whole, this is a positive result, which is captured in some of the free text responses shared by participants. After Retreat 1, one Belgian participant said:

> "Look to people and situations with loving eyes and a loving heart. There is so much wisdom in written text[s]. Diving into this material together with others to find your own keys and these that I desire to

give to the world. Wonderful!"

Another Belgian participant said that their favourite activity was "[w]orking with the texts and the conversations afterwards". A Bulgarian participant reflected after the first online unit:

> "The materials were very thought-provoking. So I took my time. Then, in peace, I reflected over the ideas and my ideas too. As if I stopped, found time, in order to think and feel and realise some things which are important."

One Icelandic participant noted that, though engaging with the texts was enjoyable, many did not read the texts in advance, noting that

> "[i]t was difficult to pull out the meaning of all the texts in the time we had for the task. [...] Many of us, I included, had not read the texts before the retreat, which made it harder to find their meaning during the discussion in pairs. I will make sure to read everything before the next retreat/gathering."

This suggests that the resources were, on the whole, well selected and that increased familiarity with these in turn led to an increased appetite to engage with them meaningfully.

Engagement

The first thing to note is that there was excellent uptake of the retreats across all countries participating in the project. This was not a given. In fact, early on there were some doubts in the project team about the appetite for this kind of activity among educators and school leaders in some of the participant countries. This turned out to not be an issue: every country recruited well, with all of them reaching capacity.

One of – if not the most significant – indicator of success agreed at the outset, was the subjective sense of engagement among participants involved in the project. This is because it is a good indicator of shared ownership in a common project and good indicator of personal involvement in an intellectually and emotionally demanding series of activities. Across all three in-person retreats, the majority of participants responded positively, indicating that they found the retreat learning programme to be interactive and engaging. 'Strongly Agree' responses were highest in Retreat 1 (76.7%) and lowest in Retreat 3 (52%). 'Agree' responses increased from

Retreat 1 to Retreat 3, suggesting a slight shift from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Agree' over the retreats. Neutral responses were minimal, appearing only in Retreats 1 and 3, with a combined total of 3 responses. There were no 'Disagree' or 'Strongly Disagree' responses in any of the retreats. The data indicates a consistently high level of satisfaction among participants regarding the interactivity and the engaging quality of the retreat learning programmes. While there is a slight variation in the levels of 'Strongly Agree' and 'Agree' across the retreats, the overall feedback remains overwhelmingly positive.

Although the best indication of sustained engagement was probably the low levels of attrition, there is a strong indication in the feedback that many participants were continually hungry for more engagement of the kind provided by LIFE retreats. Participants after the first in-person retreat wrote: "I am REALLLLLY looking forward to the next retreat"; "This was fantastic I'm looking forward to the next meeting online in March"; "I really liked it and I am happy to continue this journey"; "It was great and I'm really happy to be participating"; "I hope this is just the beginning of something that will continue for a long time"; and "I feel richer and eager to learn more about some topics addressed in these days". One wished to "make it last longer". Another participant said that they wished to "prolong the experience" and another still even went so far as to generalise their experience, writing: "Teachers need more moments and meeting[s] like this one."

These are all excellent markers of authentic and desired engagement on behalf of participants.

Quality of Discussion

A good Life Worth Living discussion is a good dialogic interaction consisting in genuine, vulnerable, and humble interpersonal exchanges in group contexts on topics that are of relevance and concern to the community having the discussion. There is ample evidence in the surveys that this was consistently achieved. Indeed, the strongest and most substantive piece of evidence is the exceptionally high overall rating of the facilitation provided throughout the project.

The surveys asked the participants to rate the quality of the facilitation (out of 10) they experienced after each of the three in-person retreats (see Figure 7). Participants ranked the quality of the facilitation extremely high: 9.25 on average for the first in-person retreat (total count of 60); 9.5 for the second in person retreat (total count of 46); and 9.27 for the third in-person retreat (total count of 50). The overall weighted average rating was 9.33 out of 10. These are exceptionally high scores for a practice of facilitation

that can be highly fraught with intellectual and emotional risk for participants, and hence the potential risk of public humiliation. This result is all the more remarkable when the evaluators are themselves teachers who facilitate discussions in their classrooms most weekdays. Interestingly, there does not seem to be a significant variation between countries. This shows that the project partners were well selected by NORTH Consulting and all of the facilitators on this project performed exceptionally well, delivering a high quality experience to participants.

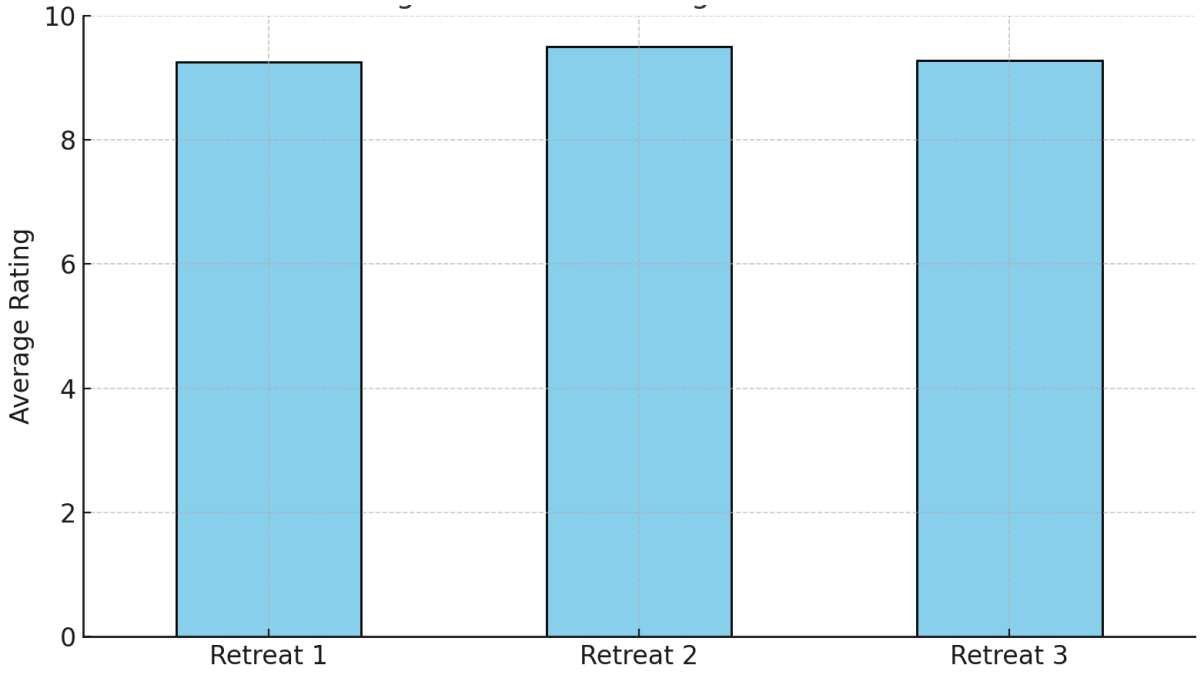


Figure 7: Average Facilitation Ratings Across In-Person Retreats

Participants were also asked to rate the quality of facilitation of the two online meetings. Here the high ratings are quite similar to in-person facilitation, with the first online meeting receiving an average of 9.06 and the second an average of 9.32. This positive change between the two could be the result of familiarisation with the online format or it could be due to effortful adaptation on behalf of the facilitators. There is insufficient information in the survey responses to ascertain which is the most likely explanation of this change. Again, as with in-person retreats, there does not seem to be remarkable differences between the different national cohorts' survey responses. Participants seem to value the opportunity to meet with others online quite highly in their free-text responses to other questions.

In addition, the cohort effect seems to have been positive, with most participants valuing the group dimension of the retreat. This further suggests that group dynamics were handled well by facilitators and that the balance between personal and collective experiences was well struck. Many participants noted this, after the first retreat, valuing the following

features of their experience:

- "Engagement of the participants";
- "Feeling good";
- "[M]eeting new people and the perspective changing activities";
- "Meeting people with similar interests and motivation but enriching perspectives!";
- "Listening to others; sharing thoughts and emotions";
- "Sharing their experiences and thoughts on different matters".

Overall, the quality of facilitation was rated extremely highly. This is an exceptionally positive result which shows the talent, dedication, diligence, and empathy of all of the facilitators involved in the project.

Another indicator of the quality of discussion is how participants felt about the relationships developed throughout the project. In both national in-person retreats, a significant majority of participants reported that being part of a learning cohort enhanced their experience either 'Extremely' or 'Very Much'. Indeed, in Retreat 1, 93.4% responded with 'Extremely' or 'Very Much'. In Retreat 2: 97.8% responded with 'Extremely' or 'Very Much'. Moderate Enhancement represented a small fraction indicating a 'Moderately' enhanced experience (Retreat 1: 6.7%; Retreat 2: 2.2%). No participants selected 'Not at All', indicating universally positive feedback regarding the cohort experience. Some participants were very vocal about this. For example, one Belgian participant, after the first in-person retreat wrote:

> "I missed the retreat as soon as I was home. I realise that I find very much energy by connecting with other people who share pieces that are in your life to[o]. I love being alone processing and recharging. But whaw, how powerful to connect with other travellers on the way."

In the case of the international retreat, a majority of participants (84.3%) reported that being part of an international learning cohort enhanced their experience to a great extent, selecting either 'Extremely' or 'Very Much'. 15.7% of participants indicated a 'Moderately' enhanced experience, suggesting room for further engagement or support for some individuals. No participants selected 'Not at All', indicating that all participants experienced at least some level of enhancement from being part of the international cohort. The data thus shows that being part of an international learning cohort significantly enhanced participants' experiences, understanding, and learning. It also positively shaped their opportunities for reflection. This overwhelmingly positive feedback highlights the value of international collaboration and diverse perspectives in enriching educational experiences. The facilitators also regularly mentioned the value of international collaboration and the feeling of being a part of an international team. For example, one said: "I really liked the international aspect.

The connection between us and all the different personalities, talents and gifts coming together, for me, [it] is a very powerful and complete team. But the main road was that it felt right and natural. Thank you!"

A small number of participants noted that they had hoped for even more exchanges across national lines. They suggested that the national cohorts could have been smaller to maker for easier integration across national boundaries, that the international retreat could have been extended to make more time for deeper connections to be formed across the different national cohorts, and that the 'free time' could have been more structured and made to encourage more cross-cultural interactions (for example, by assigning people to diverse seating arrangements at meals or organising cross-national games). It was also mentioned that the fact that the final 'closing ceremony' of the international retreat did not happen due to practicalities meant that they had fewer chances to say 'goodbye' to people from other countries. It is not clear which of the suggested paths would be most beneficial to participants, but focusing minds, resources, and time on opportunities to further deepen international exchanges at international events is worth considering for next time, since international exchanges were clearly a highlight of this project.

Personal Questioning

In a project like this one, where the space of uncertainty is explored and inhabited, an increase in the tendency to question one's own beliefs and assumptions reveals a capacity to engage more willingly in critical self-questioning. It also shows the capacity to reflect on the challenge presented by alternative views. In other words, acquiring more questions and better questions is an indicator of expanding minds, of engaging in LIFE activities effectively. Evidence of this is most apparent in the free text elements of the various surveys.

After the first retreat, one participant reported valuing above all the following features of the retreat: "Calm my mind from everything else. Yoga in the morning. The questions we worked with gave me good thoughts." Another said: "I had to go a little out of my comfort zone and share, I felt the environment and people so inviting and felt tremendous trust in the group. It got me really thinking differently about things." Another writes: "I have been thinking a lot about who I am responsible too." Yet another says that they valued the most the fact that they got "[t]o think deep inside and for the whole." One participant even said: "I felt that the seminar was meaningful even if we didn't finish to answer any questions. It feels as a relief, that I can enjoy the togetherness and the enquiry with no other end in mind." They added that they intend to "[s]how more curiosity, care and love to myself and other people" after the retreat. One Italian

participant noted after the second in-person retreat: "I tend to ask myself more questions than before. I think more time is needed to find the right answers." Another Italian participant wrote: "I don't know if there are absolute answers to ethical questions. The retreat helped me understand other people's points of view and this is always good." A Belgian participant expressed a radical hermeneutic openness when reflecting on the final retreat: "[D]eep listening is the start to connecting [...] everyone has their own medium to communicate in depth."One of the Italian facilitators, noted that the facilitation and the openness of the discussions enabled them to share more deeply and to connect with others in a new way.

Many participants reflected on the value of the questioning dimension of the retreats, with them noting the following as the greatest benefit of the first retreat to them:

- - "Self reflection"
- - "Different perspectives, complementary experiences, group methodologies and techniques";
- - "Recognizing myself in others, feeling less alone, opening my mind";
- - "I recognized myself in the other";
- - "Lots of food for thought".

After the second retreat, a Greek participant noted: "Answers are always difficult because there are no answers but more empowered to discuss and understand". This relationship between vigorously asking and investigating responses to questions that appear to not have any determinate answers and the growth in self-confidence occurs a number of times in the various survey responses. One Bulgarian participant, after the second retreat, even went so far as to say that they wanted more since they "'wished to have heard more about 'what do people do to react to failure'. It was touched upon, but maybe I wished [for] more depth there. And also maybe to explore deeper what is the impact when we face or not face the suffering (pain)." In other words, this respondent continued to long for further discussion after spending an entire weekend thinking about this topic. Another Bulgarian participant said: "The questions are well chosen and after our discussions and all the shared thoughts and feelings, I have new concepts and ideas, I encountered new points of view." After the international retreat, a Bulgarian participant noted:

"I really enjoyed creating our own question with my new friends after watching the video with [...] the child, the flowers and the fox/dog. It was a perfect exercise for listening to other people, showing empathy and creativity."

The project aimed to elicit exactly these kinds of responses in the participants, as they show a growing curiosity and intellectual humility. This shows an excellent engagement with the subject matter and with the

process of personal and collective questioning. One of the facilitators noted the unique value of using texts in supporting this kind of questioning.

Personal Development

The ultimate indicator of the success of LIFE activities is probably participants' own perceptions of the impact it is having on their sense of personal development or growth. This is most visible in the free text responses provided to survey questions. Though a small number of participants seem to have been little affected or not affected at all by the LIFE experience, the majority of participants report important movement and big realisations as well as a deepening relationship to themselves and others. Consider, for example, one participant writing that the greatest benefit they received from the first retreat is "[c]onnection, being seen and heard, empowered by the light that shined brighter after the retreat". Another reported: "A renewed sense of belonging to this wonderful species of human beings, all of us struggling with the big questions of how to live the good life." Another wrote: "I was able to engage in the group and experiencing to be seen/heard. I am exploring now the topics we met this weekend... the work goes on. I really like that."

Two participants offered even more lyrical assessments after the first retreat:

> "Once again I will say – the very adventure, beginning somewhere within the conscious, manifesting in life thereafter and giving expanded meaning. A breath of freshness from the omnipresent Reason. Of course, it gives rise to questions, some of which may never have been asked due to fear, shame, or misunderstanding, but listening to them brings about lightness, peace, and love."

> "Hmmmm, I felt more alive! Or rather being reminded of how it feels! I appreciated having the chance to get out of my regular life for a moment and have space to reconnect with parts of me I have missed for a while. Also it gave me a chance to experience depth and lightness together, which is something I struggle with often. The location was also really beautiful! "

Many participants reported that they intended to repair relationships with others, with themselves, or to continue to investigate certain questions and traditions. They also wrote that they want to take up or have taken up new or old but abandoned activities (like yoga or journaling) to better look after themselves. These are all indicators of personal growth.

Furthermore, early on in the project, many participants expressed a desire to develop greater self-awareness, to grow stronger in their connection to their personal values, and to engage in inner-reflection. Clarity in themselves and growth in their relationship to themselves and to others were longed for. As the project progressed and turned to the discussion of suffering and failure, a focus on emotional resilience, overcoming failure, and reflecting on past challenges emerged. Participants aimed to better understand their responses to life's hardships and share these insights with their communities.One Bulgarian participant noted after the second retreat: "Perhaps the greatest benefit I received from participating in this retreat is the sense of inner peace, tranquillity, understanding, and acceptance of things as they are – without judgment, regrets, and unnecessary emotional attachments." In the final retreat, which addressed the way a life worth living feels, participants expressed continued desires for deeper self-knowledge, mindfulness, and renewed purpose. For them, this final retreat emphasised resilience, happiness, and finding ways to incorporate personal lessons into everyday life.

Reflecting on this final retreat, a Bulgarian participant shared the following evocative words:

"Even though I tried not to have any expectations, deep down I hoped that this retreat would change, renew, and inspire me to take bolder steps in my life—and it did. I truly believe that. What am I taking away? So much. I still have time ahead to reflect and fully appreciate everything that happened to me, not just during these four days in Belgium, but also throughout the entire year as a participant in the Life Worth Living program. I'm taking away, above all, a good mood, a bit more self-awareness, a release from built-up stress, and a desire to continue in some form of participation moving forward.".

After the second retreat, one Icelandic participant stressed the lasting effect of these LIFE experiences, noting:

> "The reflection is intertwined with everyday life. Memories from the [retreat], discussions, interactions with people and the texts keep coming up and color whatever is going on. The reflection has helped me gain better balance in my life and I am very [grateful] for it for we have had some difficult experiences within the family that we have had to breathe our way through. The energy from the retreats and unsynchronized unit have helped me stay calm through those difficult days: Remember to hope for a better world, remember that mistakes are a part of a balanced life, remember that pain is a message of caring."

In one case, a Greek participant expressed a strong sense of personal transformation:

"As a result of the LIFE journey, I intend to incorporate more structured reflective practices into my daily routine, such as setting aside dedicated time each week for personal and professional goal setting and review. Additionally, I aim to focus more on work-life balance, ensuring that the insights and experiences from this journey positively influence my well-being and interactions both professionally and personally. This experience has highlighted the importance of continuous self-assessment and alignment with core values."

After the final retreat, a Bulgarian participant said:

> "I would sincerely share that I wish to connect with people more easily and openly. I want to actively participate in communication and exchange ideas even more freely. I intend to live my life in a way that I truly deserve—with gratitude, action, presence, emotion, and the ability to accept and understand others."

These statements demonstrate a remarkable impact on the private lives of these participants. Others, though by no means the majority, shared a sense of profound personal change. Many said that the experience had enabled them to recommit to things that were already important in their lives. A very small number seemed to suggest that they were entirely unaffected, but their statements were somewhat ambivalent and hard to interpret.

Still, the responses to the survey after the second retreat indicate that the LIFE retreats have had a significant positive impact on participants' confidence and empowerment in developing answers to important ethical questions. Key factors contributing to this outcome include the retreats' supportive environment, thoughtful exposure to diverse perspectives, and explicit engagement with opportunities for personal growth and self-expression. Indeed, participants appreciated the chance to engage deeply with ethical issues, share openly with others, and enhance their understanding both of themselves and of different viewpoints. Even those who felt confident prior to the retreat found value in the new experiences and insights gained. One facilitator, commented on the combination of personal and intellectual work required by the project: "I felt challenged in a good way."

When asked after the final retreat to identify the greatest benefit participants received from participating in LIFE, one central theme and several other key themes emerged. The central theme was the value of connection, community, and friendship: many participants highlighted the importance of meeting new people, forming connections, and feeling part of

a questing community. The other key themes were: improved self-awareness; broadening of horizons; contemplation, calmness and peace; authenticity. In different ways, participants affirmed how their encounters with others had permitted them to reflect on their own beliefs and values, while deepening their sense of personal purpose and meaning.

During the focus group, one of the facilitators expressed the transformative quality of that LIFE has had on them as follows:

> "When we started with the project we were a bit sceptical about it, because it seems too philosophical [...] less concrete than our daily issues, less concrete than our context where we live, which is kind of difficult, especially for teachers and the neighborhoods we live in [...] But from the Bulgaria experience, last year, I speak personally that it was really transformative, really impactful in terms of reflection, personal growth. It arrived at a moment in my life where I really needed to talk, to open, to reflect more, to care about myself. [...] personally it was really impactful."

They went on to assert that doing it first as a participant and then again as a facilitator had a major impact on the depth to which they were able to go over the course of the year, noting that the impact on teachers was also very visible, with no drop outs, and a rich engagement that built a strong sense of community. Another facilitator also stressed the transformative quality of her engagement in the project.

Overall, the emphasis on community, self-awareness, and valuing new perspectives suggests that the programme effectively creates a supportive environment for both interpersonal and intrapersonal development.

Professional Development

In a very real sense, the personal dimension in this project also includes the professional dimension of life, since LIFE is directed at teachers and school principals. The surveys indicate that there was significant change in the professional lives of many of the participants. One Greek participant explained:

> "As an educator, this LIFE journey has inspired me to bring a more reflective and student-centered approach to my teaching. I plan to incorporate more opportunities for students to reflect on their learning, encouraging them to set their own goals and evaluate their progress. Additionally, I intend to introduce more flexible, personalized learning strategies that consider each student's unique needs and experiences. This experience has reinforced the value of fostering a supportive, open-minded classroom environment where both students and teachers can grow through reflection and collaboration."

A Bulgarian participant explained:

> "As a result of this LIFE journey, I intend to be more empathetic and open-minded in my practice as an educator. I want to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for my students, encouraging them to express themselves freely and share their ideas without fear of judgment. Additionally, I plan to incorporate more reflective practices in my teaching to foster deeper connections and understanding among my students."

Throughout, many participants also expressed a thirst for surprise and an openness to the unexpected, as part of their journey towards personal growth. For example a Belgian participant wrote:

> "Step by step action. Loving eyes and heart in connection with all others. Also I am worthy to be here. It's nice and 'careful[...]' to have others to reflect your mirrors and to be their mirrors."

Many participants expressed the hope to turn their personal journey into something that is directly beneficial to their students and to their professional community. For example, a Greek participant reflecting about their hopes prior to the final retreat wrote:

> "I hoped to gain practical tools for incorporating reflection and self-care into my daily routine, as well as insights on how to bring these practices into my work as an educator. I wanted to leave with a clearer understanding of how to balance personal growth with professional responsibilities, along with strategies for maintaining resilience and staying aligned with my values in challenging situations. Ultimately, I aimed to return feeling re-energized, with a renewed sense of purpose and actionable steps for fostering growth, both for myself and my students."

Greater empathy and listening figure prominently in many of the participants' resolutions to affirm their values or change in the professional context:

- "I will listen to the kids' feelings a lot more closely";
- "I am going to keep supporting my staff and showing understanding";
- "Using more philosophical approach with my coworkers and students";
- "Be empowering to other[s], everybody [is] doing the best they can - student[s] and staff";

- “Listen better”;
- “Be even more open minded”;
- “[T]o not consider ‘wasted’ the time spent trying to listen to and understand students. There’s much more than just curricular [learning] activities”;
- “I want to try to understand the point of [v]iew and moods of my pupils”’;
- “Always find time with my students to listen to their stories”;
- “In the openness with colle[a]gues and attitude with pupils”;
- “Listen to pupils, see them as they are, give them space and time, let them experience themselves”.

Others took a more pragmatic approach, resolving simply to “consider including more thought-provoking texts or questions or videos or discussions”, or using some of the new pedagogical practices they have been introduced to throughout the year. One of the facilitators resolved to “explore new ways of doing things we like”. One participant, after the second retreat, simply said: “More dialogue in the classroom. More dialogue in the classroom. More dialogue in the classroom.” Another mentioned wanting to introduce more ‘critical thinking’ into the classroom. These are all signs of educational commitment to dialogue, critical inquiry, and existential questioning.

Overall, the key themes that emerged when we asked participants if they intended to make meaningful changes in their professional lives as a result of the LIFE journey after the final retreat were captured in Table 2. Becoming more open and responsive was a high professional priority, as was engaging in self-reflection, encouraging others to engage in self-reflection, and renewing a focus on personal growth. The manner most commonly identified to do this was by connecting with others, building spaces of authentic communication, emphasizing the value placed on fostering meaningful relationships and emotionally attuned dialogue. Mindfulness, time management, setting clear priorities and boundaries also appeared as important themes. The image that comes to mind here is that of the combination of an outstretched hand, seeking connection, and firmly placed palm, resisting the pressures of everyday life to create space for meaningful exchange and reflection.

Key Theme	Frequency
Openness / Being More Open	9
Self-Reflection / Self-Awareness	8
Time Management / Prioritizing Time	7
Connecting with Others	7
Mindfulness / Being Present	6
Changing Attitude / Perspective	6

Table 2: Key themes in response to 'What if anything about your practice as an educator do you intend to change as a result of this LIFE journey?' after Retreat 3

Overall survey responses suggest that some of the activities undertaken as part of LIFE can be transposed to school contexts, but some participants were still keen to hear more about how this could be practically achieved. This suggests that the next step for LIFE should involve working more closely with teachers to help them identify real-world classroom strategies that could generate the same quality of community, conversation, and reflective practice as LIFE.

A number of facilitators mentioned that, at first, the Life Worth Living approach was an unsettling experience for them. But they also expressed that it had been a valuable discomfort and that their own practice in other projects already has been affected by their participation in LIFE activities. Most facilitators, in fact, shared that they hoped to continue the project in whatever form they can. The main changes in their professional life noted were the team building effect of co-facilitating LIFE retreats, a renewed sense of commitment to certain principles or values, and the manner in which the resulting personal growth has sustained a deepening of workplace relationships. Some facilitators also mentioned the added benefit of having developed familiarity with new facilitation techniques. One of the facilitators said that "professionally, as a facilitator, it made me better [...] meaning that I have a variety of tools that I didn't have and attitudes towards people that I wasn't aware existed." They also mentioned that her 'active listening' and methods learned from other facilitators (like the World Cafe) were beneficial to her. Another facilitator said: "It brought me closer to what I want to do with my life [...] During this journey you get to know other parts of yourself, insecurities or powers, getting new light on things, taking steps forward in my private and professional life... anyway, they are interconnected, it's one pot." They then said that they hoped to include "more dance" in their work practice, because they felt "more empowered to bring in things that [they] believe in".

Interestingly, participants expressed mixed feelings about how much or how little the LIFE project actually *trained* them to use – as opposed to merely *introducing* them to – the facilitation techniques they had experienced. A number of participants seemed to feel confident that they could adapt them to their professional settings without a tailored training programme. Others did not and expressed frustration at not being given the opportunity to access facilitator resources, further training, and opportunities to practice the techniques. Crucially, almost all facilitators mentioned benefitting from first having experienced the Life Worth Living approach as participants. They also stressed that they had benefited from the encouragement to envision delivering on the overarching goals of the project in a manner that was resonant with their own values, national contexts, and skill sets.

What does this show? At the very least, it suggests that experiential learning plays a crucial role in reaping the full benefits of the Life Worth Living approach.[15] Merely training people in various pedagogical techniques that facilitate discussion around key texts would fail to communicate or effectively empower those seeking to go on to facilitate LIFE experiences and discussions. Experiencing it as a participant is a necessary step towards developing one's own approach in doing this kind of work, because it puts learners in direct contact with the significant vulnerability experienced by the participants which must be navigated, honoured, and respected by facilitators.

Summary

Taking together both the in-person retreats and the online units, the evidence shows that the design, the organisation, and the facilitation of the LIFE project came together to successfully deliver an exceptionally high quality experience that was engaging, regularly transformative, and highly valued by the vast majority of participants. All who contributed to generating this result should be lauded for systematically producing such an impressive result and for demonstrating a desire to learn, adapt, and improve along the way.

7. Further Reflections

Throughout this project a number of important topics and themes that went beyond the key success indicators emerged. These also merit some discussion.

15 Although the idea of experiential learning owes much to Dewey's theory of 'learning by doing', it has taken on new forms in the last few decades. For an interesting introduction to experiential learning theory, see David Kolb, *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*, second edition, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2014).

Physical Spaces: Nature, Food, and Comfort

It is worth noting that the physical conditions for a successful retreat were well met throughout the in-person retreats of the project. There strong approval of the locations of the first and second in-person retreats (with 39% rating the space as 'Excellent', 47.6% rating it as 'Very Good', 11.4% as 'Good' and 1.9% as 'Acceptable), pointing to the overall suitability of the chosen spaces for the retreats' objectives. Closeness to nature figured prominently in open-ended participant responses for those and the vast majority of comments about the spaces, however, were very positive.

In the case of the international retreat, there was a small change from the in-country retreats, since 39.4% of participants rated it as 'Excellent', 23.5% as 'Very Good', 33.3% as 'Good', and 3.9% rating it as poor. More generally, there were a lot of positive comments about the location being in the forest, about the chance to swim in the cold pond, the feeling of being in a slightly remote environment. In terms of the negative comments about Retreat 3, a Bulgarian participant wrote: "The group was too big, the room small and others." In fact, respondents who rated the overall space for Retreat 3 as 'poor' complained about more general concerns than strict comfort – such as the fact that national groups seemed to end up sticking together rather than mingling and that the geographic location made flying necessary in a time when the climate crisis should dissuade us from such use of carbon intensive travel options. Another person mentioned wishing that there were more bikes for participants, as the space of the camp was quite large. Another mentioned the quality of the beds being a problem and another said that co-sleeping was a challenge (because of others' snoring). However, the participant who expressed the wish for a better bed still wrote: "I think De Hoge Rielen was a great place for this retrea[t] it made it a little bit exotic and fitted well to the material." There were also mostly positive responses to whether participants felt nourished by food and drink during the retreats. There were, however, a few comments related to dietary needs in the case of the international retreat. This disparity between the in-country retreats and the international retreat could indicate that working across cultures and at a larger scale was more challenging in terms of negotiating spaces and providing bespoke and appropriate food options to all participants than when working within smaller, national cohorts.

Overall, the consistency of positive responses suggests that the project team did an excellent job of making sure that the retreats occurred in appropriate physical locations with good provisions of food and drink. The material conditions matter a great deal for a well-being retreat, so it would probably be worth paying special attention to the limited negative

comments and anticipating how future retreats could attend to likely future concerns. Specifically, catering appropriately for alternative diets is an important goal for generating inclusive communities. Also, although it is hard to envision their practicability when working with countries as far removed from each other as Iceland and Greece, putting ever more consideration into reducing carbon-intensive travel options would be a desirable next step for a project like this one.

Friendship, Teams, & the Value of Difference

A recurrent theme found in the survey responses and mentioned in the focus group was the significance of friendship, relationship, and community. One of the Italian participants said that the greatest thing they have received from participating in the LIFE journey is "think[ing] of my traveling companions as a community." Another Italian participant said: "... gaining a group to talk about th[ese] topics", and another Italian participant wrote: "Opening to others". In response to the same question, a Greek participant simply answered: "The people I met". A Bulgarian participant said: "The people I met, the questions and some of the answers to the questions have been really meaningful! The meaningful time spent with my group members!" Another Bulgarian participant wrote: "To meet wonderful people." A third Bulgarian participant shared: "The people that I met (the facilitators, my group, and the other international groups), the whole journey and experience we went through together, going through all the questions and the different ways to see them." Another simply said: "New friends". When asked a very similar question about the value of one of the retreats, a Greek participant said: "Rest, friendships, group activities".

This focus on friendly relationships was also visible for facilitators. When asked what was the most beneficial part of their engagement in the project, one of the Belgian facilitators said: "It brought a friendship". As they said that, they gestured to their co-facilitator, who vehemently nodded in agreement. Interestingly, this sense of the value of the collective experience and the exchanges that occurred within them was commented upon by most facilitators. For example, one of the facilitators on the Bulgarian team, said: "The most precious thing to me is really that I worked with [the other Bulgarian facilitators] usually people like us, [...] we are super different and we are a little individualistic, but now there is a circle". The three facilitators for the Italian team stressed that they felt like they had become a much more meaningful team than they had been before. In fact, they mentioned that their differences had become an asset in this project. Another facilitator also reflected on the benefit of the team work and clarity that emerged in the Icelandic facilitator team, noting the value of coordination and structure in the planning stages to allow for a free flow of conversation when leading the retreats. This would suggest that

the LIFE experience has spill over benefits in terms of facilitating positive working relationships among conversation partners. This feature might be of interest to those who lead and manage teams beyond the context of education, since LIFE may well prove to be a powerful team-building tool.

Caring Relationships, Deep Sharing, and Consent

The data points to the importance of the quality of relationships within the groups. Many participants write about wanting to be more 'caring', or 'kinder', or more 'empathetic'. Some of the participants explain that this related to the quality of the relationships they experienced during the project's activities. Others commented that LIFE interactions were experienced as caring and supportive of personal growth. This quality of relationship is likely the result of careful facilitation as well as caring and careful engagement on behalf of participants. In the facilitator focus group, one of the Bulgarian facilitators, said the following:

> "Probably the most important thing was observing the participants. It's like a big chest of treasures that is coming out: all of them, the good and the bad. We had a very intense process that sometimes was at the edge of therapy. We had a lot of cries, a lot of tears, a lot of emotions, and this is something that always changes me. When I see the heart of another person, I will never be the same."

This mention of therapy points to an interesting tension that sits at the heart of the project: the spaces created aim to enhance subjective well-being, but they were not therapy. This is, minimally, because most of the facilitators are not trained psychologists or psychotherapists (although some were). In a small number of cases, this was a source of concern for participants (this was raised by one participant in the Italian retreat I engaged in, see section 9). This emotional dimension was something that challenged some of the facilitators when they first experienced the Life Worth Living approach. For example, one of them mentioned that when they first participated in the Bansko training, they found it to be "more intense" than they had expected. Another mentioned being surprised by their "crying". More widely, the facilitator survey after the training revealed that emotions had played an important part in facilitator experiences. Although this was highlighted in a positive hue by most of the facilitators, one did mention in that survey that they wished that there had been a 'trigger warning' prior to the retreat, as some of the discussions were emotionally impacting and were difficult to handle in a professional setting. In light of this survey response, facilitators were invited to consider using a trigger warning for in-country retreats, but I do not have access to data regarding their eventual use. In many cases, facilitators engaged in ground rule-setting or

expectation-setting practices, where participants agreed to specific ways in which they wanted this community to behave. This seems to have been very beneficial.

Although the Life Worth Living approach is not therapy and does not specifically aim at personal healing of past trauma, in its retreat formats, it can sometimes invite these experiences to surface. Evidence suggests that this risk was mostly clear for participants and that their expectations were well aligned with this aspect of the experience. In the case of at least one facilitator, it was not clear that they had fully grasped what emotional space they would be entering prior to the first training.

Crucially, given the sensitivity of the topics and the care needed to exchange with others, it is very important that all involved give their informed consent at the outset and can reasonably easily opt out along the way. This means that being clear about what kind of experiences and emotions can emerge, what kind of support will be on offer, and about what help participants can reasonably hope to receive from the facilitators and other participants is essential. In the case of LIFE, the participants did receive a good deal of detailed information prior to the retreats, they self-selected into the project, and could drop out at any time. In addition, most facilitators developed processes for agreeing to clear community expectations and guidelines to support their collective conversations. So, the conditions for informed consent were well met in the overwhelming majority of cases.

For the facilitators, however, things were a bit more complex, since at least one of the facilitators was assigned to work on this project and was not in a position to opt out along the way without receiving the formal ascent of the executive unit of their home organisation. In light of the sensitivity of the topics and the engagement required by facilitators, my recommendation would be to minimise situations in which facilitators have not personally and freely opted into running the programme.

Challenging Education: Combining Heart and Mind

In general, teachers tend to have a positive emotional connection to education. They often like learning. They often like working in schools. They can be prone to even celebrate the importance of the national education systems in which they participate. So it is not surprising that many of the participants were happy to engage with the more formal features of the project (for example, academic texts and learning intellectual content without much explicit justification or coaxing). Enthusiasm for the intellectual or academic nature of the engagement was also present among facilitators. For example, one facilitator said “it was rewarding to be in a

project where teachers were so grateful for doing philosophy." Another, that for her the Life Worth Living approach "starts with the texts but [it is] 100% relational." They added that "the beauty of the texts" played an important role in her approach, "but everything gets illuminated through relationships". This suggests that reconciling the more formal educational dimension of LIFE with the more experiential or emotional dimension appeared achievable to these facilitators.

Among other facilitators, however, there were more complex feelings relating to education, as a body of knowledge, as a lived experience, and as an institution. One of the Belgian facilitators, shared the following:

> "I have two kids and I see them struggling at school. It made me [...] indifferent. And at the same time I just wanted to burn the school [...]. So that was my 'rebellion' vibe on everything about education. I can still feel it now. I always thought there is 'education' and schools, and then there is us. It also broke my heart to bring my children [to school]. So it was a very confusing relationship I had with education and schools. And then [I was] invited [...] to step into this project and I was like: 'Oh my god! education! I don't believe in it in the way we organise it today in Belgium'."

They went on, however, to explain that after an initial phase of uncertainty, the project enabled a kind of reparation of their relationship with education, when they said:

> "But I softened. I softened and it brought me closer to the school of my kids, to education in general. And I found my place in it. [The project] helped me to connect with teachers and schools. And that gave me so much. It was so fulfilling for me to find a new position or role in this whole big topic in society. It gave me also a sense of purpose that I could contribute in a positive way to this system. So that was a very personal evolution that I have gone through, thanks to you guys [facilitators] and thanks to the Belgian group. So it was very transformational for me."

It is worth noting that most facilitators mentioned that they really enjoyed the intellectual dimension of the approach and that they had grown in confidence working with texts. One even went so far as to suggest that this work hard renewed a sense of humble curiosity:

> "Maybe the first thing is that most of these big questions, in my way, I found some answers and that tricked me into thinking that I've reached a certain level in answering these questions... But meeting these people reminded me once more that the answers to these

> questions are dynamic and it is good to dust them and reopen them from time to time. The same thing happened to me in terms of texts that I had read before [...] they had some new parts mirroring my new parts."

Rather interestingly, one of the Icelandic facilitators shared set of complex feelings:

> "I am the one who hasn't been completely committed to the [Life Worth Living] programme. I think I found it, these days, that I haven't been completely honest with myself about the programme. I believe in the programme, but I have not allowed myself to completely go there."

They went on to explain:

> "I represent the system, which is crazy [...] because I have been so tired of it. For the last 3 or 4 years, I have been trying to get [...] the school system, the welfare system, and the health system together to talk together. So a lot of [...] energy has gone into that. I guess I am a stubborn [person]. But I can see that the system definitely needs something like Life Worth Living. And I can see that the teachers are asking for more support. And I think the tools are there [in Life Worth Living]. To be honest, I need to take the step, but I guess I am afraid of the task I have at work, that I would have to give it up, change it. And maybe I am just a little bit afraid of change. Maybe [I am] not ready. But I guess I am getting there."

Participants were even more enthusiastic than facilitators about the prospect of bringing heart and mind into closer contact in their classrooms and in their school leadership practices. This might not be surprising, since the participants typically have a strong measure of control over their classrooms, for the teachers, and over their schools, for the principals. But it could also surprise us, since the dominant mode of education, what Paolo Freire called the 'banking system'[16] of education, imposes a strict dichotomy between personal experience and disciplinary or academic knowledge. So, it was heartening to see so many teachers embrace a wider conception of education. bell hooks writes evocatively about the notion of the teacher-as-healer by drawing on a Buddhist teacher:

> "In his work Thich Nhat Hanh always speaks of the teacher as a healer. Like Freire, his approach to knowledge called on students to be active participants, to link awareness with practice. Whereas Freire

16 See Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York : Seabury, 1974).

was primarily concerned with the mind, Thich Nhat Hanh offered a way of thinking about pedagogy which emphasized wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit."[17]

hooks goes on to explain that this engaged and holistic education focuses on 'well being', while challenging dominant power relations. Although there was little direct reference to challenging power relations in the data, the idea of reconciling the mind with the body and the spirit was touched upon in various ways by participants and facilitators alike in the surveys and the focus group.

Transformative Learning, Adult Learning Communities, and Gratitude: "Precious moments"

Emotions play a critical role in good Life Worth Living discussions because they are often the mediating space between thoughts and actions. They are also a source of interest and sometimes confusion for most people. The data is replete with talk of emotions and of 'depth of emotion' or 'going deep'. There is also talk of 'authentic' or 'raw' emotional sharing. This is resonant with the Alice Miller quote in the epigraph of this report: vitality assumes a kind of emotional freedom. For this to surface, however, spaces need to be marked by a sense of trust so that the participants can express their feelings authentically without fear of judgment. This too was often highlighted by participants: the sense of not being judged. Facilitators mentioned this as well. One facilitator shared after the first training: "you offer so much love, depth, space, fun..." Another facilitator wrote: "Thank you for bringing in or adding things from within the group. You are so attentive to what is needed in the group. This makes it feel incredibly safe and warm."

Interactions with nature, the value of working through the body (by, for example, engaging in artistic expression, yoga, or other conscious bodily movements) were also significant for participants when reflecting on their emotional interaction with the project. Indeed, they report being able to deepen their sense of inner- and outer-connection through embodied practices in non-judgmental spaces, with many expressing trust and joy. For most, this was also strongly connected to considering different beliefs to their own and to engaging with people who are different from them. Journaling also emerged as a renewed or initiated practice for many participants.

The experiences of facilitators and participants alike echo Jack

17 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 1994): 14.

Mezirow's 'Transformative Learning Theory'. According to this theory, "transformative learning is the process of effecting change in *a frame of reference.*"[18] It can be a challenging process, since our present frame of reference has staying power: habits of mind, like habits of the body, are hard to break. Our preconceptions thus shield us from the experience of the genuinely new. But we are capable of transforming our frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions that undergird our more quotidian beliefs and thoughts. Although we encounter cognitive and emotional resistance when encountering novel ideas or culturally distant ways of thinking about life, we are capable of becoming more comfortable with navigating this experience of difference over time. Not only that, it can, under the right circumstances and with the right level of collective effort, generate a new set of habits. These are habits to self-reflect, greet differences with an open-mind, and carefully attend to our own parochial beliefs and to those of others with patience, kindness, and compassion. Mezirow explains:

> "Effective discourse depends on how well the educator can create a situation in which those participating have full information; are free from coercion; have equal opportunity to assume the various roles of discourse (to advance beliefs, challenge, defend, explain, assess evidence, and judge arguments); become critically reflective of assumptions; are empathic and open to other perspectives; are willing to listen and to search for common ground or a synthesis of different points of view; and can make a tentative best judgment to guide action. These ideal conditions of discourse are also ideal conditions of adult learning and of education."[19]

The evidence provided in the data gathered for this project suggests that Mezirow was right: adults partaking in this kind of educational activity overwhelmingly find it to be valuable and meaningful.

In fact, time and again many participants and facilitators shared unprompted expressions of gratitude in their survey responses. These include, for example, the following:

- "Thanks for bringing us together. I real[l]y loved seeing everybody that also followed this course together. Unity."
- "Thankful to be part of this journey of [...] this team "
- "I loved it, and I only want to repeat: thank you."
- "Such a meaningful experience, thank you!
- "Thankful for shared moments."
- "I'm quite impressed and thankful for the dare and boldness of our

18 Jack Mezirow, 'Transformative learning: Theory to practice', New directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 74 (1997): 5.
19 Ibid: 10.

facilitators so I'd only recommend to keep the same spirit ".
- "[T]hank you for everything!"
- "Thank you a lot for this opportunity"
- "Big THANKS for the idea and the realization."
- "To thank everyone for the experience."
- "My gratefulness for this excellent retreat,which exceeded my expectations."
- "I am very grateful for the experience. I felt a lot of curiosity and care, a healthy longing for growth."
- "[T]hank you for the experience."
- "Keep up the same spirit. Thank you for everything."
- "Just that I´m very thankful I get to be a part of this project. Thank you."
- "Thank you for making all this happen, organizing it and guiding us safely throughout this process."
- "Thank you all for this great experience!! Hope we can meet again through a LWL.2 project!"

These expressions suggest that the benefits of the LIFE learning programme were widely felt, both by participants and facilitators. I would note that some facilitators even went so far as to speak of LIFE as renewing their sense of hope in the world in the focus group. It would have been interesting to run focus groups with the participants as well to see what else they might have shared.

8. MLQ Results

The MLQ survey responses were received and analysed by a team led by Ólafur Páll Jónsson at the University of Iceland. Participants and facilitators in the Erasmus+ project, Life Worth Living – Caring for our Educators and Principals answered the MLQ questionnaire in the early stage of the project and again after the last retreat in September 2024. Data was analysed at the Educational Research Institute at the School of Education, University of Iceland. The questionnaire is originally in English but has been translated into various languages. In all the participating countries, Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Iceland and Italy, the questionnaire was translated into their respective language and both participants and facilitators answered in their mother tongue. It should, however, be born in mind that phrases such as "meaning of life", "purpose of life" and "significance of life" may be tricky to translate in a questionnaire of this kind.

The questions were as follows:

1. I understand my life's meaning.

2. I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful.

3. I am always looking to find my life's purpose.

4. My life has a clear sense of purpose.

5. I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful.

6. I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.

7. I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.

8. I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.

9. My life has no clear purpose.

10. I am searching for meaning in my life.

The questions were then answered on the following scale:

Absolutely untrue – 1;

Mostly untrue – 2;

Somewhat untrue – 3;

Can't say true or false – 4;

Somewhat true – 5;

Mostly true – 6;

Absolutely true – 7.

Participants

A total of 58 participants took part in round 1, while 51 participated in round 2 of the MLQ questionnaire. The presence score indicates the perceived presence of meaning and purpose in life. The search score represents the active search for meaning and purpose.

Although the dataset is rather small, this study suggests that the Life Worth Living approach is positively correlated with an increase in the subjective experience of the presence of meaning and purpose in life for participants.

Country	Number of participants	
	Round 1	Round 2
Belgium	10	9
Bulgaria	15	11
Greece	9	7
Iceland	12	12
Italy	12	12
Total	58	51

Table 3: Number of participants from each country for round 1 and round 2

Indeed, the presence scores increased across all countries from round 1 to round 2. Overall, the search scores did not show a consistent trend between rounds, indicating varying levels of engagement with the search for meaning across countries (see Table 4).

	Average presence score		Average search score	
Country	**Round 1**	**Round 2**	**Round 1**	**Round 2**
Belgium	24,0	27,0	27,4	30,4
Bulgaria	27,7	29,5	21,0	19,4
Greece	25,7	28,1	26,6	27,0
Iceland	28,3	30,8	22,9	22,9
Italy	24,0	24,4	19,6	21,3

Table 4: Average scores for participants from each country for round 1 and round 2

The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test[20] was employed to test for differences between round 1 and round 2 for presence scores and shows a significant difference: $W= 85.000$, $p=2.61\times10^{-4}$, whereas there was no significant difference for the search scores: $W=335.000$, $p=0.811$. Only overlapping individuals from round 1 and round 2 were used for this statistical test.

The increase in presence scores suggests participants may have developed a stronger sense of life's purpose between rounds due to the intervention (but other factors can't be ruled out). The lack of significant

20 The non-parametric Wilcoxon-test was used as the distribution of scores for round 2 (both for presence and search scores) was not normally distributed.

change in search scores implies that participants' exploratory behaviours regarding meaning remained steady. The upward trend in presence scores suggests a likely positive impact of the project.

Facilitators

A total number of 10 facilitators took part in round 1. A total number of 13 facilitators in round 2. The number of overlapping facilitators in round 1 and round 2 was 8. This indicates that there were too few participants in this survey to test for statistical significance. However, the results indicate a marked upward trend in the scores for facilitators' response to presence questions and a slight decrease in the scores related to search questions.

9. Case Study: The Second Italian Retreat

The Context

On Saturday 13th and Sunday 14th of April 2024, Lisa, Antonella and Giulia led (on behalf of CSC Danilo Dolci) the second in-country and in-person retreat for Italian educators and school leaders as part of the LIFE project. This took place in a large farmhouse converted into an eco-tourism hotel and restaurant venue approximately 30 minutes outside of Palermo, in the Sicilian hills. The venue provided plentiful high quality food and drink at regular intervals. To facilitate participant and organiser shuttling to the venue, a central pick up point for two large commissioned taxis was set near the *Palermo Centrale* train station early on Saturday morning. The return on the Sunday evening took the same route in reverse.

The venue and logistics were carefully selected and clearly thought through. They met all of the essential features of a well-being retreat venue: the rooms were comfortable, the ferrying to and from the venue was smooth, the food was excellent and well adapted to different dietary needs, and the unavoidable and unexpected problems that popped up were expertly and seamlessly handed by the organising team. Beyond that, the venue was in a peaceful setting surrounded by impressive natural beauty: the hotel itself sits at the foot of a mountainous rock exposure and overlooks a richly green quiet valley of rolling hills. The staff in the setting were also highly professional and regularly on-hand.

The Group

The 12 participants came from different schools. Although none worked together on a day-to-day basis, some did know each other previously on a social level. Most (but not all) were Sicilian. Here are some more notable demographic features of the group:

- Gender: Perhaps the most notable feature of the group of participants was that it skewed heavily in favour of women (out of 12 participants only 3 were men and 9 were women). In private discussions, the participants told me that the gender split is likely simply reflective of a wider gender imbalance in the teaching profession in Italy. It did not seem to play a big role in the discussions I witnessed. But I should hasten that I may have missed subtleties here, since (a) I am a man and (b) not a fluent Italian speaker, so I am very likely less sensitive to subtle forms of gendered interactions in this context. Still, a few participants shared with me the challenges involved in gender dynamics in the schools where they work but did not say that the same held in the LIFE group.

- Age: The other immediately remarkable feature of the group was its age split: with about half of group of people being aged 50+ and the other half were in their 20s, 30s or early 40s. I gathered from conversations with participants that this generational split is often highly significant and potentially fraught within Italian schools, with – to perhaps over-simplify – the 'old guard' representing an established pedagogic order, and the 'new guard' often aspiring to changing or adopting newer (or foreign) pedagogic practices. Early on, some participants mentioned some apprehension about being heard by those who belong to the other side of this generational divide. I should hasten to add that in the closing remarks at the end of the Sunday, many participants noted the fact that they had been pleasantly surprised by the fact that this had not proven an impediment to discussion and that deep connections of thought and feeling had formed across this potential divide.

- Educational Hierarchy and Status: There was a mix of educators occupying different roles with different ranks in the formal and informal hierarchies relating to educational roles: a good number worked with disabled students (often as teaching assistants or educational support), some were 'tenured' teachers in core disciplines (Italian and Italian history), others were 'tenured' teachers in English, others still were untenured teachers, and one participant was a school director. So there was a potential for these hierarchies of status – which seem to be highly important in this local context – to impede horizontal co-inquiring. Although I expected this to be an important issue (possibly because of my own cultural bias), I could not really see any trace of this playing a major role in interpersonal interactions during the retreat. I wonder if this was partially the result of a clear expectation that had been set in the previous retreat by the facilitators to try to engage with the retreat materials 'as a person' rather than 'as an educator'. Both facilitators and participants noted that this had seemed to enable people to avoid "talking shop" too much,

where they might end up discussing educational frustrations more than their life experiences and questions. There was one important comment made in the group discussion that struck me as highly germane to this point: the sole school director made a point of saying that she thought that the freedom of speech ('liberta di parole') she was able to enjoy within the group would not have been possible had she been surrounded by other school directors. This strikes me as an important consideration for future retreat work with educators: too much status homogeneity can make it hard to overcome professional norms that prevent or constrain authentic personal sharing on sensitive topics.

Getting going: Introducing suffering

The first half of the Saturday morning was dedicated to an 'ice-breaker-style' warm up sometimes known as 'personality bingo', where each group member was asked to find other group members with pre-determined characteristics. This activity lasted approximately an hour and permitted a kind of reintroduction for participants and an easing in to exercising their voices in dialogic interactions. The second morning activity started with the reading of an Italian poem on suffering and then involved reading key texts (one from the Buddhist tradition and the other by Nietzsche) on the role of suffering in a life worth living. This was conducted following the *Havruta* model of paired textual engagement where each participant reads out loud for a short-while and then each becomes the listener while the other member of the pair becomes the reader, followed by wondering out loud and discussing how to interpret the text.[21] A carefully facilitated whole group discussion was then ensued. This process culminated in a group activity where participants were asked to place themselves on a physical line tapped to the ground signalling on one end 'agreement' and on the other end 'disagreement' in response to various statements selected in the texts at first, and then in response to other statements proposed by participants as the conversation evolved. Participants were highly engaged, exchanging animatedly and listening with interest. These specific texts invited participants to reflect on the relative value of regret or remorse. This whole process took approximately an hour and half.

It seemed to me that the warm up activity, the paired textual reading, and the substantive facilitated discussions worked extremely well. The participants were happy to engage with one another, to receive the thoughtful directions from the facilitators, and to engage with the texts and each other's questions and statement. In fact, they were surprisingly

21 For more information on Havruta, see for example, Orit Kent, 'A Theory of Havruta Learning', *Journal of Jewish Education*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (2010): 215–245.

enthusiastic in their engagement given the topic (i.e. suffering), which struck me as a sign that the session was going well, that it was well designed, with a strong understanding of the participants' likely responses to prompts and set activities. When I asked (at the break) the facilitators about their decisions and their thought process in planning the morning session, they made abundantly clear to me that they had anticipated suffering being a potentially difficult topic and that as a result they were keen to bring both levity and clarity about the first set of activities to tried to ease the participants into what can be a truly challenging topic for anyone to broach. This revealed to me that a great deal of care, diligence and creative intelligence (clearly grounded in solid previous experiences) had been the basis of the decisions made by the facilitator team. Not only that, when I witnessed the responses of participants during the sessions, I was able to tell that these had been well-judged and responded well to the pedagogic and well-being goals of the project, since there was rich and open dialogue between, as well as kind and respectful engagement among, participants. Further prompting and gentle challenging questions from facilitators were also well received.

Into the heart of the matter: Failure

After a short break, there was a fishbowl discussion (with three chairs) about the place of failure and restorative practices in the good life. This was very well-facilitated and the discussion flowed quite naturally.

After lunch, the facilitators invited participants on a nature walk that lasted approximately one hour, followed with a one hour discussion in nature about collective failure. The framing of the discussion took the climate crisis and our collective failure to address it so far as a starting point. Since there had been wild fires the previous summer in this region of Sicily, one of the facilitators also shared a Sicilian poem. This spurred on a rich and gentle conversation among participants about the relationship between personal and collective failings, with the climate crisis looming large in the discussions. The following questions were thus opened up for discussion: How should we think about the relationship between individual (personal wrongdoings) and collective moral failure (the poor treatment of particular groups/the environment/animals etc.)? Should we address individual and collective failure differently? How are they intertwined? Who is responsible for making amends in moments of large societal or cultural failure?

On the way back, we encountered the challenge of walking through a herd of cows that had strayed onto the walk path. It was an interesting, if a little unsettling, encounter with the awkward relationship we humans entertain with nature: when far away, we treasure its vastness and awesome

power, but up close we prefer it domesticated and in its place. Once all participants were able to pass the cows, a rich discussion naturally ensued about the strangeness of our predicament: wishing for a healthier environment free from human interference, but struggling to make space for the unexpected parts of some of the most domesticated animals in the world.

When we arrived back at the hotel, we held an informal group discussion and then had dinner all together.

Going Deeper: Some more suffering

The following morning, we came together around two large circular tables. Each table held around 100 cards. On the one table, these were Dixit cards with ambiguous images. On the other table, these were teddy bear cards that seemed to illustrate specific emotions. We were then asked to spend about five minutes looking at the cards and selecting one card from the 'bear table' that captured our mood of the moment, and one card from the 'Dixit table' that illustrates how we think we confront suffering in our own lives. We then came together and the facilitator asked us to explain our bear card, but to show the Dixit card without providing any explanation. Instead, the group was invited to provide an explanation or an interpretation of the choice of the card for the person who stayed quiet. After a few minutes, the card holder set the record straight, telling us why they had chosen that card. This proved to be a highly effective form of engagement, as it bonded the group and encouraged public expressions of kindness and empathetic questioning. It also, to my surprise, spurred on appeals to the texts that had been discussed the previous day, but this time with much more personal engagements with them. When one participant broke out in tears and shared some difficult personal experiences, the group responded impressively by supporting the speaker, demonstrating a great deal of respect and empathy.

After a short break, the participants were asked to break out into small groups (of three or four people), interviewing one another by following the prompts set by the facilitator, namely:

- Tell us about a time a story in the news of suffering or someone else's grief impacted you.
- Tell us about a time something you experienced shattered the way you saw the world or yourself or your life.
- Tell us about a time of grief. Tell us about a time that something you thought would break you, birthed something new in you instead?

Although these discussions remained 'private' (i.e. within the small groups), they seemed to go well, since many participants shared with me after that this

had proven to be a valuable way of reflecting on their own lives.

We then sat in a small space, protected from the sun and the wind, and engaged in '*caviardage*', which involves blotting out large portions of text on a printed book page, such as to form a new sequencing of words. We were directed by the facilitator to make meaning in this manner such that it would reflect how we personally related to suffering. I struggled to engage in this, given my poor Italian. But two words in my text remained with me: '*parole*' *and* '*magiche*'. I rather wondered if Life Worth Living ended up feeling like that sometimes: like magical words, not because they defy the laws of science, but because they often lead to unexpected, seemingly inexplicable personal growth.

Life Worth Living: A meta discussion

Along the way, the facilitator team suggested that it would be beneficial to the group to hear from me about the origins of the project and about the international Life Worth Living network. So, I spoke in English for about 15 minutes about that and about my role within the network. We then opened up the discussion for questions. The questions ranged from the hyper personal to the highly professional. They were all valuable, engaging, and rewarding for me to interact with, but one question stood out. One participant asked me whether it was quite reasonable to take people on this kind of journey of self-development without the presence of a psychotherapist, since these discussions can be highly triggering for people who are currently or have recently experienced depression. I answered that this was a very sensible question and one which we face regularly when we teach Life Worth Living courses at university. I also added that my preference would be to include a psychotherapist or a psychologist in these discussions, but that it is not always feasible. Ultimately, I said that it is a risk, but a relatively small one, to engage in these facilitated discussions without a mental health professional and that the likely benefits outweigh the risks to my mind. But this question has remained with me since then.

Closing session 1: Writing a letter to oneself

In this session, we were invited to write a letter to our future self. This letter was to be held by the facilitators until we reunite in Belgium at the international retreat. We were encouraged to think of advice we might give to ourselves and to share things we had learnt so far. The letters themselves were obviously private, so I only know what I wrote and the impact it had on me when I opened in Belgium: it was powerful. I had anticipated experiencing grief in the intervening months and it came. So the gentle

words of the not yet grieving me came as a balm when the letter reappeared some six months later.

We were however encouraged to take an extract of the letter and place it in a bag, so that each person could take out one piece of advice written by someone else. This was a fun and heart-warming experience. Then we collected our bags and made haste towards the taxis.

Closing session 2: Throwing a ball yarn around

In this final session, we engaged an activity where we threw a ball of yarn to each other while

keeping the thread and give some feedback on the two-day retreat. It was fun and pretty.

General reflections

This was a sensitively, carefully, and diligently planned retreat. It was very well-facilitated, with clear efforts to respond to the needs and emotional reactions of participants. The professionalism of facilitators was always high even when situations went a little sideways (like with the cows) and they worked extremely well as a team: having clear roles but also being able to turn to one another when in need of support for decision-making or additional support. Perhaps most importantly, participants were clearly engaged and even energised by the activities that were presented to them. It was a vocal and comfortable group, so they were open about their likes and dislikes and the likes far outweighed the dislikes, which is a prima facie indicator of things going well in my book.

10. Conclusion

Judging by the collected evidence, the 'Life Worth Living: Caring for our Educators & Principals' (LIFE) project successfully achieved its central goal of fostering well-being among primary and secondary school teachers and principals across Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Iceland, and Italy. By training 14 facilitators, conducting multiple in-person and international retreats, and developing a supportive digital platform, the project not only met but exceeded its initial objectives. The findings from this evaluation indicate that the LIFE project was highly effective in delivering an engaging and transformative experience for the vast majority of participants. High response rates to surveys and overwhelmingly positive feedback highlight the project's significant impact on both personal and professional development. Participants reported enhanced self-awareness, renewed purpose, and a deeper connection to their personal values, which

translated into commitments to exhibit greater empathy and to improve relationships with students and colleagues. Key success indicators such as overall satisfaction, quality of resources, engagement, and the depth of discussions were consistently rated highly across all retreats and online units. Facilitators played a crucial role in creating safe and open environments, enabling participants to explore existential and philosophical questions meaningfully and fostering strong learning communities. The project's emphasis on personal questioning, confronting head on darker emotional subjects (like suffering and failure), and engaging with their own conceptions of flourishing, clearly empowered educators to reflect critically on their beliefs and assumptions, develop or renew well-being practices, and leading to profound personal insights and professional renewal. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) results showed a significant increase in participants' present sense of meaning and purpose in life, suggesting the project's effectiveness in enhancing well-being.

Overall, the LIFE project successfully demonstrated that providing educators with structured opportunities to engage deeply with questions of meaning and purpose can significantly enhance their sense of well-being and professional fulfilment. The adoption of an effective pedagogical approach committed to experiential, artistic, and bodily expression, underpinned by the Life Worth Living approach, proved to be key. It showed that this is an adaptable and impactful approach, which is effective across diverse cultural and educational contexts, effectively engaging educators in philosophical and existential reflection beyond the traditional classroom context. The project also benefited from skilled facilitation by well-trained facilitators, who proved to be crucial in guiding discussions, managing sensitive topics, and fostering inclusive environments. The well-designed holistic combination of in-person retreats, online engagement, and a supportive community successfully addressed various dimensions of well-being.

However, the project also faced certain limitations. While in-person retreats were overwhelmingly successful, online units received comparatively lower satisfaction ratings, suggesting a preference for face-to-face interactions. Some participants expressed a desire for more guidance on integrating the Life Worth Living approach into their professional contexts, indicating an area for future development. Additionally, managing the emotional depth of discussions without the systematic presence of mental health professionals emerged as a consideration, underscoring the need for clear guidelines and support mechanisms. It is also important to note that participation in the project was entirely voluntary for the teachers and school principals and that was probably a crucial felicity condition. For the future, all facilitators should, within the limits of practical feasibility, also self-select into the project to ensure that no one feels constrained to engage with discussions on topics that they are not comfortable addressing in small groups of people.

The limitations of this present study include the fact that it is a small

scale study (n=60 for participants; n=14 for facilitators), over just longer than one calendar year, and that the data was gathered in the context of an ongoing project which had a dual objective: assuring quality control and learning about the experiences of the participants and facilitators. Future research could include a larger number of participants, and focus on the long-term impacts of the LIFE project on participants' well-being and on their teaching practices.

My practical recommendations stemming from this report are the following:

- Exploring and developing methods and strategies to better integrate LIFE into classroom settings in primary and secondary schools could further amplify its benefits for students. Further investigation into facilitator training and ongoing support could enhance the delivery and scalability of the programme.
- Establishing ongoing support mechanisms and alumni networks to sustain the benefits of the programme beyond its formal conclusion. As a first step, linking participants and facilitators into the existing wider Life Worth Living network by exploring opportunities for collaboration would be beneficial.
- While in-person events were highly effective, making efforts to improve online experiences, exploring in particular the modalities for further dynamic and personal dialogue, would be beneficial.
- Providing clearer guidelines and support for managing the potentially highly emotional aspects of the programme, including considerations for involving mental health professionals when appropriate.
- Given its strong indicators of success, exploring opportunities to expand the programme to more countries and regions, leveraging the successful model established by the LIFE project seems highly desirable.

In conclusion, the LIFE project has also keenly demonstrated that providing educators with opportunities to engage deeply with questions of meaning and purpose, in carefully facilitated dialogic settings, can significantly enhance their sense of well-being and professional fulfilment. The project's impressive response from participants underscores the importance of investing in educator well-being as a pathway to improving educational outcomes and fostering resilient, reflective educational communities. The experiences of facilitators and the innovative ways in which they adapted and expanded on the Life Worth Living approach was also remarkable. By continuing to refine and by expanding upon the retreat model developed by LIFE, there is substantial potential to positively impact educators and, by extension, the students they serve across Europe and beyond.

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As ever, the usual disclaimers apply.