

Frog ponds and baby beanies: How one school fosters student and teacher wellbeing through connecting with their community

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The Context

It is Tuesday afternoon at Prescott College, a Seventh-day Adventist high school in an inner suburb of Adelaide. Students and teachers are packing up their books, pens, computers and folders. But next, some are gathering garden tools, others are setting up a puppet theatre and still others are tuning up musical instruments. Students and teachers are all engaged in purposeful activity. It is service learning time, a program that fosters wellbeing for both students and staff.

A focus on wellbeing

The concept of wellbeing is not new, but with increased rates of teenage anxiety and depression in Australia (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2015), wellbeing is high on the agenda of most schools. The term wellbeing has several facets and contains elements of contentment, happiness and health, particularly mental health. It involves a growth mindset and is also linked to resilience and grit (Ryan & Beamish, 2018). This article briefly explores what one positive psychologist, one wellbeing and lifestyle researcher, one leading Australian social researcher, two Christian authors, and the Bible have to say on the

topic of wellbeing, and then evaluates one school's service learning program using these ideas.

A pioneer in the field of positive psychology is Martin Seligman (2010, 2013) whose work identifies several mind-sets and human behaviours that contribute to personal wellbeing. These include positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Seligman's PERMA model has gained traction in education, and has informed multiple publications of recent research, including that of Goodman, Disabato, Kashdan & Kauffman (2017, 2018); Kern, Waters, Adler, & White (2015), Khaw & Kern (2015) and Morton, Hinze, Herman, Kent, Beamish, ... Przybylko, (2017). Morton and Hinze (2018), in working with tertiary students, found that using an activity-based intervention that targeted a healthy lifestyle and the positive psychology practices promoted by Seligman, enhances student wellbeing significantly. Australian social researcher and commentator, Mackay, in his books *What Makes Us Tick* (2010), and *The Art of Belonging* (2014) elaborates on some of the same themes. Additionally, Christian writers, including Weber (2010) and White (1903) advocate for a similar model, but approach it through the lens of Christianity, therefore, adding another dimension to wellbeing. Finally, the Bible itself addresses the important area of human flourishing, or wellbeing.

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Positive psychology and wellbeing

Optimism is an important attribute of wellbeing. Seligman (2010) has conducted clinical trials using activities as simple as writing down three things that went well each day and learning to speak positively. He has found that these practices cultivate positive emotions. Weber (2010, p.132) also recognises this connection and believes that “those who flourish have the capacity for positive emotions.” Morton (2018, p. 3) further elaborates on this idea, reminding us that “feelings follow focus”, and White (1942, p. 286) gives this advice. “Instead of thinking of your discouragements, think of the power you can claim in Christ’s name. Let your imagination take hold upon things unseen. Let your thoughts be directed to the evidences of the great love of God for you.” These ideas are also supported by King Solomon who recognised that, “a cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones” (Proverbs 17:22, NIV).

Engagement is another important attribute that contributes to wellbeing. Seligman (2012) describes engagement as total absorption in activities, an attribute that Csikszentmihalyi (1997) calls *flow*. Flow is a state in which a person is totally immersed in what they are doing, usually an activity of their choice. The Bible encourages this state of total engagement, urging that “whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might” (Ecclesiastes 9:10, NIV). Obviously, for wellbeing, the idea is to be engaged in positive activities such as learning a new skill, taking up a hobby or reading a good book.

One does not need to visit positive psychology to find support for the idea that healthy relationships add quality to life. From a Christian perspective, the trinity is the epitome of relationships; God, who is three in one. This theme continues through the Genesis account (Genesis 2:18), and we see the results of broken relationships with others and with God in the biblical metanarrative. Weber (2010) reminds us that “our relationship with God and others is what life and love are all about. If we don’t have love, we cannot thrive or flourish” (p.79). Relationships signify an authentic connection with others; the knowledge that someone will be there for us. In Christianity, this is the saving relationship with Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Relationships may be fleeting or longstanding. McKay (2010, p. 151) identifies the need for relationships as “the desire to belong” and claims that “our default position, as humans is together, even for those of us who also cherish time alone”. Seligman (2010) agrees that positive relationships are crucial to wellbeing and Hinze and Morton (2018) identify that not only building relationships, but repairing them through the act of forgiveness is a contributor to wellbeing.

McKay (2010, p. 128, 130) leads into the next attribute of wellbeing by calling it “the desire to be useful” and claiming that “altruism is one of the most attractive characteristics of humans.” Seligman (2010) calls it accomplishment; the sense that one has done something worthwhile, a feeling of success. White (1903, pp. 8, 262) on this topic, states, “A Christian reveals true humility by showing the gentleness of Christ, by being always ready to help others, by speaking kind words and performing unselfish acts,” and also points out that “success in any line demands a definite aim.” The ability to set goals and achieve them fits with this attribute.

Live a life where you learn to think positively, engage in worthwhile activities, build positive relationships, engage in acts of service for others, and you begin to come near the point where you find meaning in life. Christians believe that connection to God brings meaning to life. Service to others also gives meaning to life. White (1903, p.13) in speaking of Christian education claimed that “it prepares the student for the joy of service in this world.” However, the importance of finding meaning in life is not limited to Christian authors. McKay (2010, p 67) identifies meaning as “the desire for something to believe in”. Everyone wants to live a life with purpose. Everyone wants to believe their life has meaning. Schools that demonstrate a passion for participation in community programs and events are setting an example for their students of what it means to live with purpose.

One school’s wellbeing program

Prescott College is a small Adventist high school in Adelaide. The support for service learning, that is, community engagement without expectations, began at Prescott College with a single Storm Co. trip (Service To Others Really Matters) that one of the teachers ran with a group of students. Peter Charleson recognised the value of students serving communities and the Storm Co. trip became an annual event. Over time, Charleson, in his role of principal, began to think that he wanted to extend service learning opportunities to every student and teacher and began to search for ways to offer service learning opportunities as part of the regular school program. In collaboration with the College spiritual committee, he devised the service learning project described below. The purpose of the program is twofold: to involve the whole school in an intervention that promotes personal wellbeing, and to connect in positive ways with the community in which the school is situated.

The service learning initiative at Prescott College is conceptually based on Ephesians 2:10, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do

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good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” and operationalised through the following vision, mission, and values statements:

Vision Every student developing talents and interests that create a better world for others and increased wellbeing from finding the joy in service.

Mission Leading students to find joy and purpose in regular service to others without expectation of reward.

Values Prioritised values are

Community—We celebrate the strengths of others, including those we serve, recognising that when we give our best for others, there are no losers.

Faith—We hold Christ’s example as the ultimate act of service and act as a reflection of Him and fulfilment of His call to be His disciples.

Creativity—We seek to find creative solutions.

While the logistics of running a school-based service learning program in the community may appear daunting, Charleson maintains that if you believe in something, you can find a way to make it happen. The service learning program at Prescott College occurs in fourteen week blocks (approximately) each semester and has replaced the afternoon sports program that normally ran during that time, (a reorganisation of the curriculum allowed the sporting opportunities to be facilitated in another way). The program runs for Years 7-10 and almost every teacher is involved, either leading or facilitating a group. Community volunteers with expertise help where needed. Each group is designed so that students can make a contribution to their local or church community. Students are able to choose a group that appeals to them and/or where they feel they have skills. Students also have input into what their projects will be and how they will take them to the community. The service learning projects include some of the more traditional ways that schools interact with the community as well as some innovative ideas.

Teams are comprised of a group of students with a teacher or community volunteer to facilitate. Up to ten groups may operate in any given service learning block. The diversity of opportunity for engagement can be seen in the broad spectrum of activities that the school offers its students.



Prescott College Grade 10 student Maddie Hann creating a frog habitat. (Photo credit: Prescott image file)

The environmentalists

This group partners with a local Bunnings store to install and landscape frog habitats in the local neighbourhood. Bunnings provides the resources, people in the neighbourhood provide the location, and the rest is done by ‘student power’. Once the habitat is created, frogs are reintroduced. The students created their first frog habitat on the school grounds, and then moved into the neighbourhood. There are also plans to partner with the local council to create frog habitats in public spaces.

The artists

This group of budding artists contracts themselves at no cost to create artworks such as backdrops for local church events, the school’s Week of Spiritual Emphasis and Storm Co. At the Adventist church convention this year, some backdrops in the meeting venues were planned and painted by this group. This has created a sense of community with the Adventist church in South Australia.

The puppeteers plus

The puppetry team make puppets and prepares short shows for pre-school age children. They also tell stories and help with arts and crafts. Across the road from Prescott College, there is a kindergarten and there are several other day care centres in the neighbourhood. It is in these centres that the puppeteers find an enthusiastic audience.

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The front yard clean-up gang

Some children choose to spend their group time outside doing volunteer work in the front yards of neighbouring houses. Taking their cue from television programs like 'Backyard Blitz', Prescott students work under supervision to do yard and garden maintenance such as rose pruning and leaf raking for elderly and other residents in need of a helping hand.

The creative arts team

While many Christian schools operate various music ensembles that assist in worship at community churches, Prescott College students are also planning to work on a repertoire of music so they can go carolling in shopping centres closer to Christmas and be involved in other Christmas community events.

The gardeners

One enthusiastic group of students have been creating a kitchen garden on site with plans to extend this to growing seedlings in order to make these freely available for the local community in time for the spring growing season. They are also planning, long term, to partner with the local council to create community gardens.

The knitters

The maternity ward staff from a local hospital are the grateful recipients of baby beanies, made with love,



Prescott College Grade 10 students Duksak Lal (left) and Nazia Hussaini cooking for the ADRA Café
(Photo credit: Prescott image file)

for their premature babies. Students are developing their knitting and crocheting skills at the same time.

The chefs

The Adventist church in Adelaide operates an ADRA (Adventist Development & Relief Agency) café. This café provides wholesome food each Thursday evening to homeless and low income people. A group of students have completed their food handling certificates and spend Tuesday afternoons cooking, pre-preparing and freezing food for the café.

The companions

One group of students have learned how to play games like Chinese checkers and each Tuesday they head out to local retirement homes to play a game or two with the elderly residents. This program is not limited to games, but may also involve reading to the residents or just having a conversation.

The internet specialists

This group has started their own YouTube channel on how to keep your internet banking secure. In addition, they plan to partner with the local council and advertise for people who need help with computers to come to the school on Tuesday afternoons where an enthusiastic team of students will be waiting to troubleshoot and give help.

Is the effort really worth it?

While this program was not specifically designed around the wellbeing attributes listed earlier, it is interesting to note that it ticks many of the boxes. The service learning opportunities work towards student and staff wellbeing in the following ways. Teachers and students choose their groups based on their interest. This triggers positive emotions, which may last as the project develops and the students focus on helping others. Reflecting on what went well in each session may add to the feeling of positive emotions. Since students are engaged in an activity of choice, they may not only feel positive about it, but are more likely to be engaged in it, especially if they are involved in planning and leading out in the project. When they are engaged, they are more likely to learn and practice new skills or further develop existing skills, and this leads to a sense of achievement. Furthermore, when effort, perseverance and creativity are praised, in relation to the product or the person, a sense of accomplishment results that is tied to a strong sense of self-esteem. Responses supporting self-esteem can be authentic and affirming of relationships. These develop as students and staff work alongside each other to achieve a common goal. Also, depending on the service learning activity,

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there may be opportunities to develop appropriate relationships with community members who live in the neighbourhood, guide by casual supervision and advice. Finally, because the students and teachers are serving 'real' people in a 'real' community, they develop a sense of meaningful purpose, that is identified in their personal vision, mission and values for this project, and most importantly operationalised.

Teachers and students debrief in their groups at the end of the fourteen week block. They discuss their challenges and accomplishments. Their success is celebrated and where needed improvements are planned. Ways of taking their service to the next level are explored, and they anticipated how they may contribute in the next round of service learning opportunities.

Charleson sums up by saying, "Service Learning at Prescott College is only in its infancy and the teachers and students are still feeling their way. However, both the students and the teachers are finding the time valuable and there are encouraging signs in the outcomes. The quotes below from a student and a teacher indicate that we are beginning to meet our objectives for the program."

I like service learning because you get to do the things you love and give back to the community at the same time. You don't need anything in return to feel happy. (Ty, a Year 9 student).

Service Learning has provided an opportunity for me as a teacher to do something that is completely out of my comfort zone. Creating a Knitting Project has fostered intergenerational relationships between students and our 'expert' helpers, allowed for students to learn a new [old] skill outside of this technological age, whilst growing an opportunity to bless our hospitals with knitted goods. At first, students are reluctant, but once they get the hang of it, they relax and enjoy the challenge and appreciate the fact that the little they do can actually make a world of difference in someone else's life. (Jane Talamaivao, Teacher).

Committed to optimising wellbeing within our school community, our school finds this curriculum component increasingly successful in achieving both measurable tangible outcomes as well as the integrated components of "a good life". **TEACH**

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Beverly Christian is a senior lecturer in education. Her research interests include quality teaching and learning, nature as a conduit to God, and the philosophy, purpose and practice of Christian education on which she is writing her doctoral dissertation.

Peter Charleson first taught in Papua New Guinea. On return to Adelaide he began teaching Design and Technology at Prescott College, serving there in a variety of roles for more than 20 years. Peter shares, "Since 2011, I have taken on the role of school administrator, working with students, parents, staff and the wider community. Helping students to grow Christ-like characters to become successful citizens is a passion that has not faded over that time."

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