Wellbeing NOTEBOOK

Growing wellbeing

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I had the unique experience of growing up on a farm. From a young age I was taught soil health equals plant health. However, in the wake of the green revolution struggling crops likely receive a dose of spray or fertilizer rather than the soil care that is needed. It is common to address a visible symptom instead of its cause, which tends to be complex and systemic.

We see this with climate change, rather than reducing carbon emissions, it is easier to build sequestration plants. We see this in medicine, instead of prescribing a salad and regular exercise we prescribe cholesterol medication. Treating symptoms does not require a painful overhaul of the behaviours that are creating the problem. Humans will go to great lengths to maintain the activities we enjoy or have become reliant on, even if those activities are unsustainable in the long run. As a species we seem to crave the summit without the struggle, answers without doubt and maturity without sacrifice. In terms of time theory (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008), our collective disposition is arguably more inclined towards present hedonism than future optimisation.

If we are to take this lens and apply it to the wellbeing of adolescents in the 21st Century, it raises a number of important questions. We must consider the extent to which modern life is actually arranged to facilitate human flourishing. This is an extremely confronting question that if taken seriously, would transform the metrics that governments, policy makers and educators use to make decisions. One example of a step in this direction is the "Gross National Happiness" (Lepeley, 2017) metric used by the government of Bhutan to measure its success as an administration. Bhutan's lead may be one worth following. Alternatively, we continue with business as usual and keep treating the symptoms of declining mental health as they arise.

The 2017 NAB report found that "globalisation, the future of work, housing affordability, cost of living pressures and climate change" were key contributors to the low hum anxiety that has become commonplace for teens (Oster, Pearson, De Iure, McDonald & Wu, 2017, p. 1). Instead of strengthening local communities, establishing pathways into meaningful work, creating affordable housing and addressing climate change we put more funding into counselling, wellbeing programs, new apps, hotlines and medical interventions. We are focusing on the urgent at the expense of the important. We jump into action when a crisis arises but fail to prevent the crisis from happening in the first place.

In his book *Drive* Daniel Pink highlights the link between autonomy and wellbeing (Pink, 2011). Perhaps going upstream from the symptoms of stress and anxiety, enhancing autonomy could be a preventative measure in schools. An external locus of control contributes to stress and poor health outcomes (Tsey, 2008). Martin Seligman's book Homo Prospectus goes so far as to claim that a positive forward-looking disposition defines humanity and that "evaluating future possibilities for the guidance of thought and action is the cornerstone of human success" (Seligman, Railton, Baumeister & Sripada, 2016, p. 6). The concept of "Homo Prospectus" re-frames mental illnesses as being more akin to "diseases of despair" (Case & Deaton, 2017), in which an individual has limited (subjective) positive prospects for the future. Those in despair are out of alignment with a core purpose of human psychology; to look forward. Hope theory operates in this space also, by providing a framework to understand "the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways" (Snyder, 2002, p. 249). Therefore, it can be seen that young people need to see a way forward, not just for the treatment of their immediate mental health symptoms, but more importantly, a pathway towards the

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Figure 1. Macquarie College Outdoor Club provides for a choice to be in the bush.

dismantling of the systems that are causing the problems in the first place.

In addition to a lack of adolescent autonomy, loneliness is a further example of a systemic problem that needs to be addressed. Rates of loneliness and single person domestic occupancy are increasing in Australia and elsewhere. Drawing upon census data, Hugh Mackay notes that "the largest single category of household type in Australia, and it's also the fastest growing category, is the single-person household, now accounting for about 27 per cent of all households" (2014, p. 5). Ergo the need for COVID "singles bubbles."

Arguably the 20th century saw the "privatisation of the self" (Oestereicher, 1979) and the early 21st century has given rise to "i-Gen" (Twenge, 2017).

These psychosocial shifts, along with rapid technological change, have resulted in a more isolated and relationally depleted expression of human life, particularly in developed western countries (Pinker, 2014). However, a positive sense of belonging operates as a protective factor against a wide range of physical and mental

health conditions (Booth & Crouter, 2001; Pinker, 2014; Waldinger & Schulz, 2016).

So, without casting the net too wide, let's take a small sample and consider what can be done about these two societal challenges; loss of autonomy and loneliness. How can we respond to the cause rather than the symptom? When it comes to praxis I can only speak from personal experience and will borrow from Thoreau to excuse this self-reflection, "I should not talk about myself so much if there were anybody else whom I knew as well" (2018, p. 4). At Macquarie College we encourage teachers and students to meet in special interest groups or 'clubs'. These groups are completely voluntary and open to a range of ages to encourage cross grade integration. In recent years I have been facilitating a Bonsai Society with approximately 20 students from grades 7-11 who meet once a week and care for their trees, propagate new cuttings and build their own display hardware. A colleague and I also started an Outdoor Club for any students who wanted to do more hiking and get out in the bush.

These groups provide a safe place for like minded individuals to spend their time. There

is no particular program, outcomes or syllabus. The lack of formality creates an atmosphere of playfulness and relaxation that are absent in more traditional, mandatory or large group settings.

Students are primarily interested in one another, for teenagers everything else seems secondary. Joining a village sized group within the city of their school allows students to be known. The crowd becomes a clique. Shoulder to shoulder conversations open up when we are working side by side on a shared project, this posture removes the teacher from a position of aloof authority and reconceptualises them as a guide and mentor.

Similar feelings are regularly expressed by students in sports teams, music groups and other extracurricular activities that allow people to feel like an 'insider.' The secret ingredient is student choice, if it's optional you know they want to be there, they arrive in a completely different mindset. In addition, the new skills being developed in these groups creates a sense of mastery and therefore a heightened internal locus of control. Students have a say and flourish as they build connections within the group. Without intending to, we may have accidentally recreated some of the richness of school that used to just happen incidentally in a less busy world. Perhaps this is one part of what it looks like to grow wellbeing from the ground up.

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Joshua Brown teaches at Macquarie College and is the incoming senior school leader of Humanities. He is the founder of the Invictus Wellbeing Institute, and is interested in the wellbeing of students.

Figure 2. The "MC Bonsai Society" sign was designed and produced in Macquarie College's MCX Lab by Year 9 student Macy Lane.