

SYMPOSIUM ON “STUDENT MENTAL WELL-BEING AND WELL-BECOMING”
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FACULTY OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

Focus 4:

**What might school education that foregrounds student mental well-being look like?
How would foregrounding student mental well-being transform curriculum and pedagogy?**

Well-Being, Curriculum, & Transformative Envisioning in the Anthropocene

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Background

There is much to consider in these two questions. At issue is nothing less than the overhaul of conceptions and models of education that have been variably mainstream since not only the advent of public schooling in the 1800s, but also going back to the 16th century and critiques of scholasticism that led to a rethinking of education with new focus on efficiency, usefulness, simplicity, instruction, method, application, humanism, and disciplinary separations. Peter (Petrus) Ramus (1515-1572) was a key figure in curriculum reform along these lines. What we find in this time are the beginnings of mechanistic, scientific, secular, and utilitarian modern European worldviews that sought to bring order and reason to a society in crisis, recovering from the plague, famine, social unrest, warfare, superstitions, religious abuses and breakdowns. These worldviews would expand in the following centuries, comprising the scientific revolution from the 1500 to 1700s and the agricultural and industrial revolutions of the 1700s and 1800s. Among numerous other emphases, these centuries pursued knowledge acquisition and categorization, validity, production, linear time-keeping, urbanization, colonization, social efficiency and control.

We well know that education is interminably challenged to respond well and wisely to its time and context. Yet, here we are in the twenty-first century, and educational systems by and large continue to echo age old mandates and curriculum imperatives, and remain inclined to emphasize parts rather than attend to the whole. Despite initiatives by numerous child-centered and holistic educators -- among them, Montessori (1870-1952), Steiner (1861-1925), Krishnamurti (1895-1986), for example, schooling today very much continues to be challenged by mechanistic and instrumentalist logics steeped in narrow and fragmented prescriptive grammars of “how to,” and “if this, then that,” grammars voicing linear time, measurable, and efficiency-oriented investments. In certain ways, this inherited grammar has become a habit of our time, one exceedingly difficult to break.

Our Context

We are entering an increasingly uncertain future characterized by climate change, losses of habitat, technological dominance, a consumerist ethos, and overpopulation. Indeed, our current epoch is being called the Anthropocene, when human beings are dominating every corner of the earth and altering its natural rhythms and cycles (Zalasiewicz et. al., 2010). In this new geological age,

we are participating in what some are describing as the “sixth extinction” – our mass genocide of animal and plant species – and others are calling an environmental holocaust (Kolbert, 2014; Macy, 2007; Zalasiewicz et. al., 2010). As Heesoon pointed out this morning, young people are reporting anxiety and depression. Additionally, as Turkel (2015) observes, many are attesting to loneliness and distraction resulting from social media use. Some, such as Richard Louv (2008), maintain that youth are experiencing nature deficit disorder. And, I recently read that a 2013 UK UNICEF poll attests that 74% of British children aged 11-16 expressed worry about climate change (https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/ccc_final_2014.pdf). I wonder if the same is true of Canadian youth.

The point here is that foregrounding youth mental well-being entails considerations of not only schooling and community but also our relationships with the natural environment and with pressing societal-ecological issues.

The Invitation

Given contemporary times, then, how might we begin to re-envision schooling in ways that can address the anxieties, alienation, suffering, and dis-ease of youths, and prioritize their well-being in the context of an unknowable but, by many accounts, a potentially traumatic future characterized by the effects of climate change? We want to stress that this re-envisioning has to entail more than attending to a part of the problem – such as educating for student resiliency in the face of ecological devastation – because the problems ahead are simply too complex for fragmentary and partial responses. Instead, we are challenged to begin to think more radically, deeply, and holistically. In other words, for this symposium, we are advocating freely participating in re-imagining schools in their contextual entirety, from the roots up – attending to systems, structure, design, spaces, subjects, populations (teachers, students, staff), curriculum, pedagogy, communities, societies, and, importantly, the natural environment.

Here we might here contemplate differences between change and transformation. While change entails a rearranging of parts, transformation is more radically marked by interruption, disruption, intervention (Eppert et. al. 2015). From a transformative perspective, the question of “how might foregrounding student mental well-being transform curriculum and pedagogy” compellingly calls upon us to intervene and think outside of past and prevailing educational models that have, for example, narrowly emphasized efficiency and inculcation at the expense of child well-being, or that reinforce unsustainable practices of consumerism or sink or swim individualism. Transformative envisioning contests the notion that we can alter or ‘treat’ one aspect without restoring our relationships to the whole. Indeed, as Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012) remark, current times call us to get out of “business as usual” rhetoric, ideologies, and practices, and instead participate in what they and others are calling a “Great Turning,” one that is already significantly underway, as evidenced in countless grassroots movements around the world (Hawken 2007).

What we are inviting this afternoon, then, is a collaborative out-of-the-box envisioning that addresses not only the mind, body, emotions, souls, and spirits of young people, but also the integration of youth, subjects, communities, and natural environment – including relationships with animals. In other words, instead of a utilitarian business-as-usual and/or one-size-fits-all approach, we are inquiring into the possibilities for a more organically, holistically, and interdependently imagined understanding of the meaning, purpose, and possibilities of schools in both their unique and shared contexts. In my view, the question at issue, therefore, is: what might an ecologically – relationally and creatively – guided vision of schooling that foregrounds, supports, and enhances student well-being and well-becoming look like?

The monk and Nobel prize nominee, Thich Nhat Hanh (2012) provides an example for contemplation along these lines. He says that a sheet of paper is not what it seems -- an

independent, self-contained object. Instead, it is composed of sun, cloud, water, wheat, mind, logger and innumerable other non-paper elements. Without these qualities and conditions, a sheet of paper, in all its variations, cannot come into existence. In other words, he points toward an interdependent reality and consciousness. In this recognition, we can benefit from attending to the abundant relational conditions that enable the hearts and spirits of our youth to flourish.

Another example, along similar lines, is this youtube on addiction, which I think connects nicely with the talks from this morning by emphasizing the importance of community relationships, senses of belonging, and love: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ao8L-0nSYzg>

Finally, we might also consider our process of engaging in transformative envisioning. I am much inspired by the writings of ecologist Macy (2003) who recommends we depart from what she calls an outdated “battlefield” *Weltbild*. She describes such a worldview as embedded in antagonistic dualistic either/or, right/wrong, good/evil, us/them, and my way or the highway currencies. In my view, among what is vital here is that we attend not to the flourishing and well-being of young people as we want them to be but rather to the many contexts and conditions in which they might most realize their own potential for the future. In this regard, we might participate in transformative envisioning in ways that embrace multidimensionality, inclusivity, nondualism, synergism, playfulness, and harmony.

Along these lines, I would add that it is important that we do not regard transformation through a deficit lens – a trying to rigidly control, correct, or fix all that we identify as broken. Rather, we might consider and work with what is already resourcefully and generously available (Eppert et al. 2015). That is, we might, for example, contemplate where joy, empathy, altruism, goodness, curiosity, wisdom and other innate indicators of well-being already diversely manifest in and among youth, and explore possibilities for furthering the conditions for their elaboration and enhancement.

Moreover, it is vital that transformation be contemplated experientially rather than conceptually and from the top down (Eppert et al. 2015). That is, we can learn significantly from the diverse voices of young people, and also from our own multiply lived, internally known and on-the-ground insights of what brings joy into our hearts and world. As Miller (2007) evocatively observes, “many approaches to implementation are problematic as we are usually trying to implement something abstract (for example a model of a curriculum) rather than focusing on aligning ourselves with the basic processes of life” (p. 195).

In sum, it seems all that is being pointed to here today is no less that the cultivation of relational, caring, contemplative, engaged, energetic, creative, joyful, and ecologically-minded consciousness. Thomas has asked me to talk a bit more on what a heart-full curriculum informed by such consciousness might look like.

So, briefly, for instance, we know and it is well-documented by now that we experience well-being after time spent outdoors and in nature. Along these lines, I am inspired to learn more of what are being called Forest and Nature Schools, which I understand are springing up all across Canada. (<http://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/into-the-woods-rain-or-shine-forest-school-students-spend-all-day-outside>).

I am also inspired by visions of a Shambhala society (Mipham 2013) and by recently reading about how we might be given to understand a holistic curriculum (Miller 2007). As well, I am intrigued by Montessori, Waldorf, Krishnamurti and Summerhill schools, which have been around for a long time now. Additionally, generative for me are schools that emphasize engagement and activism. I believe it is critical that young people be provided with numerous opportunities in which they can cultivate and recognize themselves as actively and variably participating in the instantiation of a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world.

Again, however, the emphasis for me is less on re-envisioning schools as separate and isolated entities per se, and more on cultivating engaged and relational consciousness – contemplating and recognizing a well and active, organic web of life in which schools play a significant part. Walking my dogs around my little neighborhood in Edmonton, Alberta, I have often playfully imagined it re-configured as a village, with its three schools much involved in bringing the community together – by growing organic produce in the large park in the neighborhood’s center for a community market day, for example. And in this sense, I am reminded of the saying that it takes a village to raise a child.

Finally, in conclusion, I am also much inspired by Gregory A. Cajete’s (2005) discussion of American Indian education as a process “that unfolded reciprocal relationships between one’s social group and the natural world. This relationship involved all dimensions of one’s being while providing both personal development and technical skills through participation in the life of the community” (pp. 69-70). He elaborates that such an education includes the following characteristics, among others:

The sacred view of Nature permeates and contextualizes the foundational process of teaching and learning.

Integration and interconnectedness are universal traits.

Relationships between elements and knowledge bases radiate in concentric rings of process and structure.

Its processes adhere to the principle of reciprocity between humans and all other things.

It recognizes and incorporates the cycles within cycles, that is, that there are always deeper levels of meaning to be found in every learning-teaching process.

It presents something to learn for everyone, at every stage of life.

It recognizes the levels of maturity and readiness to learn in the developmental process of both males and females. This recognition is incorporated into the designs and situations in which indigenous teaching takes place.

It recognizes language as a sacred expression of breath and incorporates this orientation in all its foundations.

It recognizes that each person and each culture contain the seeds of all that are essential to their well-being and positive development.

It recognizes and applies ordering through ceremony, ritual, and community activity.

It recognizes that the true sources of knowledge are to be found within the individual and entities of nature.

It recognizes that true learning occurs through participating in and honoring relationships in both the human and natural communities.

It recognizes the power of thought and language to create the worlds we live in.

It creates maps of the world that assist us through our life’s journey.

It resonates and builds learning through the tribal structures of the home and community.

(Cajete, 2005, pp. 70-71)

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