Promoting mental health and well-being in EcCoWell 2 communities

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The impact of the coronavirus pandemic has led to an increase in anxiety, depression, and various forms of mental illness. While this is one of the most devastating impacts of the pandemic, there had been a growing concern at the rising tide of mental illness before the pandemic marked by action taken by the World Health Organisation (WHO), while in Australia the Productivity Commission set up an inquiry into mental health and the government of Victoria did the same. WHO estimated in 2008 that depression will be the number one health concern in both developed and developing countries by 2030 (WHO, 2008). Clearly recovery from the pandemic will require a serious look at what can be done about the mental health impacts of the pandemic. This has been recognised as one of the priorities of the EcCoWell Community Recovery Program.

There are good foundations to build on in addressing the community role in promoting mental health and well being. Connecting leaning, health, and environment was central to the approach taken by Cork in its work on EcCoWell after 2013. Cork then hosted the UNESCO Third International Conference on Learning Cities in 2017 with the Cork Call to Action on Learning Cities resulting from the conference recognising the need to build cities that were green, healthy learning cities. PASCAL has also addressed the question of well being with several policy review papers on subjects such as happiness and personal fulfilment (learning to be). These are resources that can be built on, along with the experience of learning cities such as Cork and Wolverhampton in strengthening well being and community foundations of mental health.

The coronavirus crisis provides a challenging opportunity, to rethink ways in which EcCoWell ideas can contribute to recovery from the pandemic in communities. The EcCoWell concept of integrating the strands of community development towards a holistic approach take on a new meaning in the context of the post-coronavirus world. As the former Director-General of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura observed in a related context:

> *In this context, grasping the connections between things and linking ideas in such a way as to give coherence and relevance becomes vital responses.* (Matsuura, 2001)

Mental health and well being

The World Health Organisation (WHO) in its Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2029 defined mental health in the following terms:

> *The action plan also covers mental health, which is conceptualised as a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can cope productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.*   (WHO, 2013:6)

The WHO further summed its approach as *involving the provision of comprehensive, integrated mental health and social care services in community-based settings* (WHO 2013: 5).

The Australian Productivity Commission issued the Draft Report on its Enquiry into Mental Health on 31 October 2019. The final report is to be handed to the Australian Government by 23 May 2020. The Draft Report made the case for major reform of mental health in Australia. While most of the reform would involve the public health system, which has been largely designed around the characteristics of physical illness, the Commission also recognised the important role of the community in developing better mental health arrangements.

> *The importance of non-health services and organisations in both preventing mental illness from developing and in facilitating a person's recovery are magnified, with key roles evident for- and a need for co-ordination between-psychosocial support, housing services, the justice system, workplaces and social security.* (Productivity Commission, 2019:2)

The Commission further noted that adjustments made to facilitate people's active participation in the community, education and workplace have, for the most part lagged that made for physical illness with a need for more definitive guidance on what adjustments are necessary, and which interventions are effective   (Productivity Commission, 2019:2).

The challenge of mental health and well-being in the post-coronavirus era

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the mental health and well-being of people has increased the levels of anxiety, isolation and loneliness, and depression and fuelled trends that were already evident before the pandemic driven by structural changes in the economy and society. The impact of the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution aligned with ageing populations in many countries, and a decline in trust and social capital with the growth of more tribal societies pointed to the emergence of a new society. Variously named Society 5.0 and Life 3.0, it heralded a world in which many jobs would disappear with the impact of artificial intelligence and automation, and requirements for new skills in a context of continuous learning to maintain employability. Much remains uncertain, but the post-coronavirus era should be seen as a world giving birth to a different society rather than return of the old. This will put further pressure of mental health and well-being. A clear implication is that communities everywhere will need to give more attention and priority to mental health and well-being. PASCAL has started looking at these requirements in ways discussed below.

The Social Psychology of well-being

Anecdotally, it is already clear that physical distancing, isolation and lockdown are having a generally adverse effect on mental health and well-being; however, few psychologists have featured in news coverage, policy-making or governmental decisions as regards Covid-10 response. Psychology is not just a field of counsellors, according to the British Psychological Society, it is a social science concerned with humans, and how they think, act and react to the world around them (https://www.bps.org.uk/). Social Psychology is a specific branch which studies the ways in which the social world impacts on our thoughts, feelings and behaviours as humans, as well as how we humans impact upon the social world around us. Therefore, increasingly psychologists are entering the debate on how we can embed well-being and 'positive psychology approaches' (discussed below) into government and societal responses to Covid-19 (see special issue of The Psychologist Magazine

for diverse responses https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-33/april-2020/coronavirus-psychological-perspectives).

The space in which social psychologists may have the most to offer is in the area of promoting collective identities, which in turn promotes shared experience and a sense of belonging. Identity and belonging have remained core research areas for psychologists, particularly social psychologists, over many decades (Allport, 1954). Many psychologists have proposed potential stages in our development as humans, as regards our sense of self (e.g. Erikson, 1968; Maslow, 1943), and how it may change as we age- however few are embedded in a crisis context such as we are experiencing. One of the most popular social psychological theories - Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) - concerns the ways in which we humans categorise ourselves as being members of many groups in society, and combined with its later theory iterations- does much to explain poorer mental health outcomes during the present crisis.

SIT posits that self-categorisation offers us the feeling of belonging, for instance to our families and communities, though a process termed 'social identification' (*Ibid*). Affiliation with a group enables us to meet our belonging needs, although it may also lead us to prioritize the needs of our group over others (in-group bias). We describe these processes more fully in Lido, Swyer & De Amicis (In Press) in regard to media influence on our identity processes, where we state:

> *Social psychology concerns not only the introspective aspect of our identity (our 'personal' self-perception), but also our social identity, which is the aspect of our self, derived from belonging to groups which are important to us (see Brown, 1988; Brewer et al, 1998; Brown & Pehrson, 2019). These may be groups into which we are born (ascribed groups such as your family or national group), or groups we acquire and choose to join (based on interests, such as clubs, or peer groups).* (Ibid)

Belonging, and its counterpart isolation, has therefore featured at the centre of negative Covid-19 crisis- because physical distancing may in some instances lead to isolation. Social Psychology tells us that humans need to belong to groups, to feel a sense of connection to humans around us, and to share a sense of identity and purpose- all of which may be compromised for already vulnerable groups, such as older adults and people in precarious households in deprivation. Technology has played a massive role in helping to reproduce virtually this sense of 'us' or 'we-ness'; however- as we pointed out in a recent blogpost- "the most vulnerable in society may lack access or skills necessary to maintain social connection during physical distancing" (see Lido, 2020 blog at http://cradall.org/content/wellbeing-resources-help-you-through-lockdown).

Therefore, whilst the tips we are providing here are a great first step toward a pro-active approach to mental health maintenance, sadly they will not reach those already marginalised within society. Moreover, this group lacks the resources or skills to access online support, leading to further marginalisation of older adults, even within Learning City approaches (see Lido et al 2016; 2019 for inequalities in Learning Cities, and Lido, Hirsu & Wessels, 2020, for digital inequalities specifically).

The PASCAL approach to well-being

PASCAL became interested in links between learning and health through the development of the EcCoWell approach to integrated and holistic development for all. The EcCoWell approach was taken up by the city of Cork which hosted the UNESCO Third International Conference on Learning Cities in

2017, and which endorsed the concept of green healthy learning cities in the Cork Call to Action on Learning Cities resulting from the conference. This may be regarded as the core of the initial phase of development of the EcCoWell concept.

More recently, PASCAL has produced several policy review papers on aspects of well-being, while well-being in the later years was taken up in 2018 in the PASCAL/PIMA report on *Towards Good Active Ageing for All (Kearns & Reghenzani Kearns ed, 2018).* The important learning neighbourhood role in supporting well-being in communities has been taken up in an EcCoWell 2 paper on this subject prepared for this initiative.

These sources involved an initial interest by PASCAL in addressing well-being in the context of our approach to building learning cities, particularly the EcCoWell approach.

- *Integrating happiness in sustainable learning cities* (2018)
- *Learning to be as the core of learning in later life* (2018)
- *Towards good active ageing for all: Report of the PASCAL & PIMA SIG on learning in later life* (2018)
- *Building inclusive learning neighbourhoods in the EcCoWell 2 Community Recovery Program* (2020).

There has been a growing international interest in happiness since the emergence of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals agenda in 2015 with annual World Happiness Reports now produced which provide measures of happiness in a large number of countries though subjective assessments of well-being. The 2017 World Happiness Report concluded that happiness should be seen as "the proper measure of social progress, and the goals of social progress".

The World Happiness Reports have shown the clear links between poverty and deprivation in these assessments of well-being, with the poorest countries at the bottom of the country lists. They also point to the success of the Scandinavian countries with their philosophy of balanced development. Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, Finland all appear in the top ten, year after year. The success of the Scandinavian model, with its long history of investment in human resource development, and concern for equality and inclusion illustrates an approach to fostering well-being deeply rooted in the culture of these counties, A good example of the Denmark approach to happiness is given by Meik Wiking, CEO of the Happiness Research Institute in Copenhagen, in his book *Hygge: The Danish Way to Live Well* (Wiking, 2016).

The contextual shifts outlined above have given particular significance to questions of identity, meaning, and purpose. In responding to these questions, PASCAL went back to the 1972 Report of the UNESCO International Commission titled *Learning to Be* which articulated a quest for personal fulfilment throughout life. This was seen as giving meaning and purpose to lives, a concept particularly important in eras of radical change, such as now, when dislocation and uncertainty call for something beyond the usual goals of life.

The impact of COVID-19 has reinforced existing trends and made it clear that we need to think of well-being in a wider context throughout all stages of the life-course. The holistic approach flowing from the EcCoWell principles can be adapted for this purpose. There are many good practice examples evident around the world, such as the mental health literacy development in Welsh schools. These need to be identified and brought into learning city initiatives directed at a good sustainable future.

Positive Psychology & Resilience approaches to Well-being

Positive Psychology is a relatively recent branch of psychology, advocating a move away from talk of 'mental illness' to reframing the concept of 'mental health', as something all humans have, and all humans should invest in mental health maintenance, much like we work toward maintaining physical health (Seligman, 1998). Positive Psychology builds upon the fundamentals of social psychology in highlighting not only personal growth, but also the importance of social network support growth for well-being, and communities are seen as integral for happiness (*Ibid*). The founder of the movement, Martin Seligman, has since developed the PERMA approach based on investing in Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships and Accomplishments (see Seligman, 2011 for details). It is easy to see how such approaches align with the EcCoWell approach and Learning Cities more widely for health at the regional level, considering 'Engagement' in tasks and activities that one is passionate about- very much key to a lifelong learning for healthy cities approach. In addition, 'Relationships' focuses not just on partners and immediate family, but social psychology approaches to belonging and developing positive group identities more widely. Finally, 'Accomplishments' link with lifelong learning concepts of 'mastery' and psychological concepts of 'self-actualisation' but can be applied in education, work-based, or community-based settings to show how such mastery directly impacts psycho-social well-being. Therefore, we can see how the wider field of Positive Psychology provided an evidence base for Pascal's EcCoWell goals above, as clearly the benefits can be seen not just at an individual level, but for investing pro-actively in building 'resilient' communities and regions, which can strengthen from adversity, and rebound stronger form crises, such as COVID-19. Despite criticism of Positive Psychology and resilience-based approaches, that they may lay onus or blame on individuals for poorer mental health, a deeper reading of these concepts advocates making well-being something that is explicitly discussed, taught, practiced and invested in- and we argue this includes city, region, national and global investment in well-being of citizens, urgently needed to move forward post-COVID-19.

Towards good active ageing for all

The *Towards Good Active Ageing for All* PASCAL & Pima SIG report carried over themes from both these PASCAL policy review papers outlining a philosophy of good active ageing which also drew on ideas from positive psychology on the value of activities such as volunteering by seniors. A feature of the PASCAL & PIMA SIG Report was the examples of the work of community learning centres such as Volkshochsschulen in Germany, Kominkan in Japan, and Neighbourhood Houses in Australia. A question arising from the SIG report is whether the role of such institutions can be taken further from their historical roots in enhancing the well-being of their members in harsh times marked by recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

Overall, the PASCAL& PIMA SIG concluded that there was the need for a new paradigm to guide learning in later life built around a learning, ethical, and moral framework "that gives meaning and purpose to lives in a period of dislocation, and which contributes to a sustainable learning society" (Kearns & Reghenzani-Kearns, eds, 2018:56).

As one example of the types of best practice evidenced by this active ageing approach for all comes from a charity and social enterprise called Food Train, and their evidence and impact initiative, Eat Well Age Well- University of Glasgow partnership project (https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/education/research/currentresearchprojects/assessingolderadultsnutritionalandwellbeingoutcomesassociatedwithageinginplacewithsupportedfoodaccessibility/).

A recent blog by colleague Dr Kate Reid detailed how Food Train found itself on the frontline in Scotland's response to the Covid-19 pandemic to support and ensure food security for some of the most vulnerable, socially isolated older adults in our communities (https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/education/research/currentresearchprojects/assessingolderadultsnutritionalandwellbeingoutcomesassociatedwithageinginplacewithsupportedfoodaccessibility/foodinsecurityinatimeofcovid-19/). Virtually overnight, many of their customers were cut off from any physical social support they had from friends and family. This is a time of collective concern for all of us, but we must look at how best to meet the physical and mental health needs of vulnerable older adults, to ensure we minimise catastrophic inequalities widening in our communities.

 Food Train demonstrated great resilience being quick to increase and adapt their services to meet the needs of their growing customer base- including quick service expansion, mass recruitment of volunteers and moving face to face befriending and meal-making to phone-based and social distance based befriending services. In just 4 weeks, Food Train increased its service by 59%, expanding its reach to 685 more older people to get fresh grocery supplies, with 340 new volunteers on board and 775 check in phone calls made to older people at home. This exemplifies a relatively small, grassroots, community-led charity, demonstrating agile flexibility in expanding their services, whilst at the same time recognising the need for a continued individualised, holistic approach to their community services. Such an approach is very much in line with EcCoWell, as it ensures the dignified meeting of physical and mental health, on vulnerable older adults' own terms, via services comfortable for them, and supported with the ground-up volunteerism of their fellow community citizens- thus, keeping older folk healthy, happy and in their homes longer.

The learning neighbourhood role

Learning neighbourhoods should be seen as an arena in which civil society and public institutions and spaces come together in collaborative action to enhance the quality of life, well being, and resilience of their people. The PASCAL paper on learning neighbourhoods written for the EcCoWell 2 Community Recovery Program (http://lcn.pascalobservatory.org/pascalnow/pascal-activities/news/rethinking-sustainable-learning-communities-extraordinary-times-ecc) draws on practical examples from learning neighbourhoods in Taipei and Cork of initiatives taken in local communities. These include community projects, cultural festivals, intergenerational learning activities, environmental repair, as well as other initiatives to connect people to their community, address isolation, and bring a sense of meaning and purpose.

The city of Cork initially undertook a pilot initiative with two leaning neighbourhoods, and then extended these to five. The option exists for Cork to extend this initiative to the remaining five neighbourhoods so that the community objectives of the Cork learning city will filter down to people in these local communities in enhancing their quality of life and well-being, while

Communities will play a key role the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, not only in bonding people and strengthening resilience, but also in giving meaning to the experience of the pandemic, and the character of the world beyond the pandemic. This was well put by Frank Furida in a newspaper extract from his book *How fear works: The culture of fear in the 21st century.*

> *History tells us that disasters do not simply have an impact on physical health, but are also a source of profound moral disorientation. They disrupt the way we think and behave because they call into question the taken-for-granted aspects of daily life. How we manage to deal with the disruptive forces unleashed by a disaster*

such as COVID-19 ultimately depends on society's ability to give meaning to the experience. (Furida, 2020:22)

Taking steps towards a long-term reform agenda with generational change

The draft report of the Productivity Commission *Enquiry into Mental Health* advocated a long-term reform agenda, implemented in stages. While this would involve fundamental changes in the health system, it also recognised the need for enhancing the well-being of the wider community through more rewarding relationships, more opportunities for careers, and scope for greater contributions through voluntary and community groups (Productivity Commission, 2019:4). This is an area where learning communities can make a larger contribution in adding meaning and purpose, and well-being, to lives.

Enhancing the well-being of people through the EcCoWell2 Community Recovery Program

A central challenge for the EcCoWell 2 Community Recovery Program is to enhance the psycho-social well-being of people in the communities collaborating in this program following the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Responding to isolation, depression, and loss of confidence and meaning in lives has been made more difficult by trends evident before the pandemic with increases in isolation and loneliness reported (Productivity Commission, 2019).

While PASCAL has addressed longevity questions in the report of the PASCAL & PIMA SIG, a further key area to be addressed lies in the experience of many young people in the transition from school to working life, with long-term careers increasingly uncertain for many, youth suicide rates rising, and youth unemployment rates remaining high. While transition from school to working life has been recognised by many governments as a problematic area, the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, resulting in rapid structural changes in the economy and society, make this a critically urgent issue for addressing future inequalities and negative psycho-social outcomes.

The PASCAL sources cited in this paper may be seen as a starting point in addressing well-being issues that have been heightened by the trauma of the pandemic. The PASCAL EcCoWell 2 concept of integrating the strands o9f development in the search for a holistic sustainable approach, provides a framework for addressing questions of mental health and well-being from a community point of view. Much innovation will be needed.

Questions such as the following will need to be taken forward in discussions and action for learning agendas, directed at enhancing mental health and wellbeing in learning communities.

1. What can learning neighbourhoods contribute to enhance the well-being of their people?
2. What strategies are needed for the most vulnerable groups in the community?
3. In what ways can the transition of young people from school to working life be enhanced to support their well-being and sense of purpose during these years in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic?"
4. Longevity poses a challenge to the well-being of many, but also opportunities. What is needed?
5. What can business and industry contribute to enhancing the overall well-being of people in the aftermath of the co0ronavirus pandemic?

6. In reimagining the future, what strategies can participants in the EcCoWell 2 Community Recovery Program adopt in fostering an empathic learning culture that brings meaning and purpose to lives in uncertain times through local and global consciousness and citizenship?

The PASCAL EcCoWell 2 Community Recovery program has been designed to test the premise that civic and personal well-being are intimately linked. The ancient Greeks knew this, with their concept of eudaimonia. What is needed now to take PASCAL work on EcCoWell 2 to a further stage as a contemporary vision of eudaimonia, supporting communities and their people in a sustainable personal and community recovery from the coronavirus pandemic? We call on members of PASCAL, and affiliated organisations such as UNESCO-UIL, to work across disciplines, countries and platforms, to embed mental health and well-being at the heart of Learning Cities agendas, but more importantly at the heart of local communities, because well-being is often effortful, and it is the duty of lifelong learning practitioners to invest in the future well-being of our learners, as well as our friends, families and colleagues. It is only by making mental health and well-being an explicitly taught practice that we will truly achieve resilient citizens, communities and nations- and resilience is what we are in most need of moving forward in a post-COVID global society.

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