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HUMAN ECOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION FOR WELL-BEING¹

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In this presentation I will do four things. First, I will show how human well-being is used at the political and even policy level as an indicator for measuring the quality of life of a county's citizenry. The degree to which a country's citizens do and are able to live a flourishing life has been proposed and used as a measure for the success of a country's policies and practices. Second, based on this idea for such measures, I will suggest that school education needs to be primarily about helping students develop the capabilities to be and become well, in other words, to be able to live a flourishing life. Then I will argue that there is a mismatch between the measures of quality of life suggested at the political and policy level and how we currently measure and, thus, understand school and student success in Manitoba and Canada. Finally I will suggest how curricula like the newly developed human ecology curriculum can help us overcome this mismatch – *if* those curricula are understood and implemented with the concern in mind for the need to help students develop the capabilities needed for living a flourishing life.

Well-Being as an Indicator of Quality of Life

The notion that well-being should be of concern to policy makers has received greater attention at the highest political level over the last two decades. Let me give you two examples.

First, launched in 2011 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has developed a Better Life Index (OECD, n. d.). The OECD has been collecting data from OECD countries – including Canada – in the following areas as the domains for the Better Life Index: housing; jobs; education; civic engagement; life satisfaction; work-life balance; income; community; environment; health; safety.

While the Better Life Index of the OECD is a measure that governments *could* use to guide their policy decisions, the government of the small, mountainous country of Bhutan in South-East Asia *actually* uses a well-being index to guide its policy decisions. Bhutan has developed the Gross National Happiness Index to assess the success of the government's political policies and practices (The Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, n. d.). The index collects

¹  (see <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/>) Some sections of this presentation are taken from my opening address at the Working Conference “Understanding and Assessing Well-Being and Well-Becoming in Manitoba Schools”, 19th December 2015; University of Manitoba; <http://www.eswbrg.org/conference-2015.html>).

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information on 33 indicators categorized in nine domains. These nine domains are: psychological wellbeing; health; education; time use; cultural diversity and resilience; good governance; community vitality; ecological diversity and resilience; living standards.

Seeing the quality of life as more than or even quite distinct from the quantity of material wealth we are able to accumulate has a long tradition in the West, especially in different philosophical approaches to what it means to live well, like the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle and modern philosophers of education (see, for instance, Aristotle, trans. 1976). From where we stand here in Manitoba, we can also point to the Indigenous philosophy of “*mino-pimatisiwin*” – the philosophy of “the good life” (see, for instance, Bell, in press; Hart, 2002) – to go even further back in time than Ancient Greece and go even closer to where we are located to see that throughout history and across cultures, there have always been more holistic perspectives on what makes for quality of human living.

That these more holistic views of what it means for humans to be well become now more talked about and considered at the political level in Western countries is probably due to the fact that disciplines like psychology, sociology, and economics have picked up the question of what makes for the quality of human living, leading to a great number of empirical studies on well-being (for an overview see Falkenberg, 2014). Leaving the important question of cultural relativity here aside, those studies give us a very good insight into what generally makes for a flourishing life (see, for instance, Aked, Marks, Cordon, & Thompson, n.d.). The domains considered in the above mentioned two examples of indices for measuring quality of life are a very good reflection of those findings.

Well-Being and School Education

So, why do I bother stepping so far outside the realm of school education to talk about human well-being and the quality of life? Because there is, or better to say there should be, a direct link between how we understand what it means to live a flourishing life – that is, to be well and to live well – and what school education is, or better to say should be, all about. Here is the link: The qualities that characterize well-being in the indices referenced above require capabilities that need to be developed through some form of education, and, as I will argue, school education is the most meaningful and responsible way for developing most if not all of these capabilities. Before I make this argument, let me first give you two examples that human well-being requires indeed certain capabilities and that those capabilities require some form of education, in other words, those capabilities are not generally developed naturally but require some form of external support to develop adequately.

Take as the first example the work-life balance considered in the OECD Better Life Index mentioned above. For almost all of us the non-life aspect of that balance will involve a meaningful and fulfilling relationship with a significant other, and for many of us it will involve raising children. Living in an intimate relationship with another person requires – as, I am sure, all of us can attest to – quite sophisticated capabilities, including communication skills and social-emotional capabilities. Raising children requires these and additional capabilities, like the understanding of early human development and educative capabilities. The development of these capabilities requires or at least will greatly benefit from some form of education.

Take as the second example the concern for the psychological well-being of its citizens considered in Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Index. However we understand “psychological well-being”, it clearly would include our capability of coping with traumatic experiences in our

life and our capability of giving meaning to the life that we live. Trauma of some kind is unavoidable in anyone's life – the loss of something or someone we cherish is just around the corner for all of us. Also, without having a sense that our life is meaningful, we are not just thrown in an existential crisis (Frankl, 1949/2006; Yalom, 1980), but it is also impossible to thrive toward self-actualization, considered by many psychologists at least since Maslow (1954) the highest level of psychological well-being. The literature on trauma-therapy, psychotherapy more generally, and on self-actualization gives rich testimony to the many capabilities that humans require to cope with traumatic experiences and to give meaning to their lives, and to the fact that some form of education is required for the sufficient development of those capabilities.

I now want to provide three reasons why *school education* is the form of education best suited to develop these and other capabilities required for the qualities that characterize human well-being. First, at its very core, school education is our communal way of taking responsibility for raising the children in our community so that they can thrive in a world we envision for them but that we also know they have to create for their generation. So, what else can be the mandate of such school education than the mandate to provide them with the capabilities needed to live a flourishing life in the world we are shaping and they will have to continue shaping. So, if we measure human flourishing in terms of the qualities measured in the human well-being indices like the ones referenced above, what else can then be the mandate of school education but to help students develop these capabilities?

Second, that the community takes on raising its children through its school system is also a matter of social justice. We cannot and should not let the quality of the development of a child's capabilities to live a flourishing life depend on the child's social, economic or any other aspects of its familial context. It is the very idea of public school education that we as a community bring up together *all* children in order to enact our responsibility that comes with each child's right to be helped to develop the capabilities needed to live a flourishing life. The equitable addressing of this right for *all* children is a matter of justice.

Third, school education is by design education that involves learning experiences created by professionally educated and publically certified educators. This set-up should imply, at least as a rule, quality experiences for all students for the purpose of helping all students develop the capabilities needed to live a flourishing life.

For at least these three reasons, I think that school education is the form of education best suited to develop the capabilities required for the qualities that characterize human well-being. As I will later argue, human ecology as a school subject has the potential to contribute greatly to this very core purpose of school education – if given the chance. But before I do so, let me first turn to what I see is a core challenge in Manitoba and Canada more broadly to this vision of school education, which is the mismatch between this vision and how we measure and seem to understand school and student success at the public discourse and at the policy level. In other words, the concern for the well-being of a country's citizens as, for instance, expressed in OECD's Better Life Index does not match what is officially of concern for school education in Manitoba and Canada more broadly.

A Mismatch with How We Measure School Success

Aside from graduation rates, the Manitoba government has been consistently using as measures of K-12 school and student success in Manitoba the results of standardized testing in three areas: mathematics; reading and writing; and science. Particularly the almost annual test

results on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) have been used in the public discourse as the primary indicators for the degree of success of the Manitoba school system. The recent changes in Manitoba to the teacher certification requirements, to the K-8 mathematics curriculum, and to the funding focus of programming support are clear indicators for the seriousness that also the government is giving to those test results.

While part of the governmental response can be explained by the media-based public discourse around, particularly, the PISA and PCAP results, there is also clear indication that governments across the country do consider these results as core indicators of school success. Here is what the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC), who developed and coordinates the PCAP testing, says what the purpose of PCAP is:

to inform Canadians about *how well their education systems are meeting the needs of students and society*. The information gathered in these cyclical tests of *student achievement in mathematics, reading, and science* provides the provinces and territories with a basis for examining their curriculum and improving their assessment tools. (CMEC, n. d.; my emphasis)

Similarly at the federal level, in the “Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program” of the federal government, the sole measures used for student achievement are the PISA and PCAP results. In its 2011 report *The Well-Being of Canada’s Young Children* (Government of Canada, 2011), the Canadian Government uses as the only measure for reporting on the cognitive development of 6-9 year old children “standardized classical scaled math scores” (p. 53).

This primary, almost sole, focus on measuring school and student success in terms of what students can demonstrate on the standardized tests in these three specific subject areas suggests a clear mismatch between how we measure how well our school system is doing and how OECD’s Better Life Index and other human well-being indices measure quality of life. If school education is indeed best suited to help students develop the capabilities required for the qualities measured by these indices, should school and student success not be best measured by assessing the degree to which students have developed these capabilities?

We should not so exclusively value what we measure if what we measure does not reflect fully what we value. I do not want to suggest that we should not care about student learning in the areas of mathematics; reading and writing; and science, but I do want to suggest that we have a far too narrow set of measures, and thus understanding, of success of our school system. If we accept that a core purpose of school education, maybe *the* purpose of school education, is to help students develop capabilities that they require to live a flourishing life, then our understanding of and our way in which we assess school and student success need to be more inclusive of the contributions of other subject areas and educational practices in the school system.

Let me illustrate this point by showing you two specific grade 9 learning outcomes from two different subject areas:

- 9.N.6. Determine an approximate square root of positive rational numbers that are non-perfect squares.

- S1 4.1.1 identify, analyze, and demonstrate effective communication skills to create healthy relationships, e.g., sending a clear message, effective listening, barriers to communication, negotiation, decision making.

The first learning outcome is, as you probably have guessed, from the Manitoba grade 9 mathematics curriculum. The second learning outcome is from the grade 9 family studies curriculum, which most of you are probably familiar with. Which of these two learning outcomes is closer linked to capabilities required for living a flourishing life? Which of the two subject areas is mandated for *all* students in our school system and which is not?

Again, I am not arguing against mathematics school education, but I do want to make the case for the mismatch between what measures of human flourishing suggest to us we should care about in school education and what provincial governments and a large portion of Canadians consider when assessing school and student success.

Giving this state of mismatch, what are we to do on the occasion of the launching of the human ecology curriculum for middle years students in Manitoba? I will turn now to this question in the last part of my presentation, and it is here where I will make explicit links to the new human ecology curriculum and its potential contribution to addressing this mismatch.

Addressing the Mismatch

Following I will make four suggestions concerning *the implementation* of the new human ecology curriculum in school divisions and schools in Manitoba to address the mismatch. I will not discuss the design of the curriculum itself, except for a reference to the mission and vision underlying the new curriculum.

First and foremost we have to change the perception of human ecology and the corresponding high school subjects like family studies and food and nutrition as school subjects in light of our understanding of what capabilities are required to live a flourishing life. I have already referenced one learning outcome from the family studies curriculum to demonstrate the immediate relevance of what these subject areas contribute to developing the relevant capabilities for living a flourishing life. I could have also chosen a number of learning outcomes from the new human ecology curriculum to make the same case. Also, the human ecology curriculum is *by design* focused on capabilities needed for human well-being. The mission and vision outlined in the curriculum (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015) speak explicitly to this design focus. Here, for instance, is the curriculum's vision for human ecology education:

Human ecology education strives to

- enhance personal well-being
- develop and apply technical, communicative, and thinking skills
- cultivate skills to participate in a dynamic society.

(p. 2)

Aside from maybe the social studies curriculum, I do not know of any vision of any other subject area curriculum that gets as close to the concern for human well-being as a school educational focus as the new human ecology curriculum.

In order to change the perspective on curricula with this kind of vision for school education we should challenge a biased language use. We need to challenge the use of the term “academic” in phrases like “academic subjects” and “academic success” where these phrases – as commonly is the case – refer only to a very narrow selection of the subject areas that are assessed in the PISA and PCAP testing. This language use is misguided – just have a look at the disciplines that are indeed represented in different faculties and departments at the University of Manitoba, where you can study human nutritional sciences, textile sciences, family social sciences, fine arts, and theatre as *academic* subjects in an academic institution.

We should also question the clustering of human ecology and its higher-grade sister subjects under “technology education”. On its website Manitoba Education says about this cluster of subjects: “Technology Education allows learners to evaluate their strengths and interests in career choices” (Manitoba Education, n.d.). Human ecology should not be understood as a carrier subject for *some* of the students to explore. After what I have argued, it should be understood as a subject for *all* students, because it is a subject central to the school educational purpose of helping students develop the capabilities relevant for living a flourishing life.

My second suggestion for addressing the mismatch is the following: The success of the implementation of the new human ecology curriculum will have to be measured by the number of students who actually take the course throughout their middle years schooling. While the way in which the curriculum is implemented in terms of student experiences is clearly of great importance, if students are not taking or do not have an opportunity to take human ecology, the latter does not really matter.

My third suggestion for addressing the mismatch is to consider teaching human ecology in an integrated way, integrating its teaching with the teaching of other subjects, especially those subjects that in the current language use are considered “academic” subjects. Such integrated teaching would help overcome an unhelpful separation of rightly human ecology learning outcomes into those that are considered “academic” and included into, for instance, the science curriculum and those that are considered more “practical” and which are included into the human ecology curriculum. If the core focus of school education is on capabilities that are required for living a flourishing life, then such subject matter division is unhelpful. In light of this suggestion, I was very pleased to see that in Appendix 1 in the human ecology curriculum document links are made to specific learning outcomes from a number of other subjects, including the natural sciences, that are to demonstrate “how the human ecology curriculum can be used to support, enhance, and connect with other curricula” (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015, p. 81).

My fourth and final suggestion for addressing the outlined mismatch is to implement the curriculum *explicitly* through an Indigenous perspective. As a new curriculum with a focus on supporting students in the development of important capabilities required for living a flourishing life, the human ecology curriculum provides a unique opportunity to demonstrate how our non-Indigenous school system can learn from and truly integrate Indigenous perspectives on and practices of education. As the well-respected Indigenous scholar Gregory Cajete (1994) wrote about Indigenous perspectives on education:

To have authentic empowerment you must have a system of educating that not only trains for vocation but prepares individuals: for self-actualizing themselves, fulfilling their human potentials, enlivening their creative spirit, and finding their personal meaning, power, and what in earlier times Indian

people called medicine. This is exactly what traditional Indigenous processes of education did. This education helped people find their way to the center of their individual and collective power. This is the essential meaning of the word empowerment. The implementation of Indigenous ways of educating is toward this most basic of human need. It authentically empowers and perpetuates the development of the spirit of families, communities, and tribes. (p. 191)

This Indigenous perspective on education would serve so well the implementation of the underlying principles of the new human ecology curriculum (see Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). Thus, the implementation of the new human ecology curriculum can be on the forefront of the much needed reconciliation process with Indigenous peoples through education in the spirit and the meaning of the recommendations by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015).

With this reference to a core responsibility of school education in Canada I come to the conclusion of my presentation. I wish teachers, consultants, principals, and school divisions luck and wisdom with the implementation of a curriculum that has so much potential to contribute to helping Manitoba students develop capabilities required for living a flourishing life.

Thank you.

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