Lessons in wellbeing

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Making our children 'future ready' requires more than time at a screen.

Teenage mental health is one of the most critical social issues of our time. One in four young Australians is experiencing mental health problems; the same number report being unhappy with their lives; and suicide is now the biggest killer of young Australians, including teenagers, accounting for more deaths than road accidents.

I've been thinking about these dreadful statistics a lot over the past week, since attending a school council meeting at my children's primary school, where it was announced that from next year, every student must own their own iPad/device, which they will use in most of their classes, then take home at the end of each day, so that they can continue to work on them at home.

There are many reasons schools, like ours, are introducing BYOD (bring your own device); one of them is to allow schools to create virtual classrooms, and encourage students to become "remote" and "independent" learners, allowing them to extend themselves as far as they can. Those lucky children can now take the classroom home in their bag each night, in a sad echo of what so many of their parents do with their jobs. Another one of the benefits, I've been told, is that children can all work remotely on the same document - editing one another's work and receiving teacher feedback - without even having to talk to one another. Apparently it saves everyone a huge amount of time.

And I keep coming back to those heartbreaking statistics about teenage mental health, with the knowledge that my children and their friends will be among this statistical group in a handful of years; that dozens of these adorable children will contemplate suicide, and that some of them might even go through with it. I wonder if now, while they're young, while we've still got them, if we're doing the right thing by them. I wonder why we're putting so much energy into working out how to make our seven, eight and nine-year-olds achieve better academic results and become better "independent", "remote" learners, when the conversation should really be about how do we create happy, resilient children?

In any case, putting a focus on student wellbeing would be the best way to improve school results - research shows that when students are unhappy they have trouble learning; inversely, happy children want to learn. With one-quarter of young Australians unhappy, academically, we're off to a terrible start.

Like many parents, I watched Revolution School on the ABC in June - the documentary series on Kambrya College, a school in Berwick that rose from being in the bottom 10 per cent in Victoria to being in the top 25 per cent. For me, the most powerful story within this story was that of the group of year 9 boys pulled aside into a separate class because they were "at risk" kids: trouble-makers, truants, likely to fail and drop out of school. The turnaround point for these boys was when their teacher took them hiking in Wilsons Prom for a week, with no screens, and carrying all provisions on their backs. These children, who had been failing and hating school, returned from camp and got stunning marks. At the end of the year, one of the boys who had been constantly in trouble and on the verge of dropping out a year earlier, ran and was elected for a school leadership position, so that he could help mentor other "at-risk" boys.

It was a wonderful, inspiring story. But it also prompted the question: if these kids had experienced more team-building, resilience-building activities in primary school, and fewer activities that focused on academic achievement and encouraged social disengagement, would they have become so disengaged with education in the first place?

There have been a small number of studies performed to investigate the effect of educational-setting screen-use on student achievement; the results fall either way and seem to suggest that it all comes down to how the screens are used, and the ability of the teacher using them.

There are people, such as the principal of prestigious Sydney Grammar, who claim that over-investment in technology in schools has been a scandalous waste of money and has had a negative impact upon discussion, debate and general learning. There are other teachers who say screens have reinvigorated the classroom. One thing that doesn't ever seem to be discussed though is the effect of prioritising screen-focused learning over other modes of learning on a child's wellbeing. Not that time spent on a screen is, in itself, a bad thing; but time on a screen, even if for extra maths homework, is time that that child is not laughing, playing, drawing, cartwheeling, kicking a footy, and doing things that we know are good for a young child's mental health; things that will help build the resilience and social confidence that will assist that child in navigating their teenage years ahead.

One of the catchphrases of educationalists behind the current ICT push is about making our students "future ready". But when we look at
the mental health of today's teenagers, it's clear educationalists, among others, have failed. Because many of today's teenagers aren't future ready; they don't even want to be alive. This is the issue educationalists really need to be looking at.

Kids Helpline 1800 551 800, Lifeline 131 114, Beyondblue 1300 224 636

Caption: ILLUSTRATION: Jim Pavlidis

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