



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

How well is youths' social wellbeing?

Some young people seem to have been dealt a weak hand.

During these last months, I was involved in collecting data for a piece of research on young people who are at the margins of our community.

If we really want to address the scourge that these young people are going through, we need to engage with their voices, with the issues that they have to face on a day-to-day basis. In fact, in this Column I will be making reference to some of these voices, real life stories, of young people who have been subjected to ominous life situations.

These narratives make me realise that most of us live in our comfort zones, secure and protected and sometimes our anxieties sound almost ludicrous compared to what these young people have to go through.

In the narratives I will be documenting in this Column, most surfaced issues around victimisation, rejection and dismissal. There is also another concerning train of thought that seems to suggest disenchantment with social services, NGOs and a general lack of family functioning.

These bruised young people are positioned at a social disadvantage. They try to find solace in family and community life and try to access welfare and other state and voluntary support systems. These young people would typically be seen as vulnerable in myriad ways, economically, socially and culturally.

Too often, we turn these young people into scapegoats instead of trying to understand them and their contexts, their frustrations and their vexations.

Young people are being short-changed because communities do not always offer them the 'spaces' they promise they would and are often perceived as 'the stranger'.

Read some of the statements made by young people:

I wanted to die, I wanted to end it all then and there
Janet, young person with an eating disorder.

Bullying at a certain point in my adolescence was rife and it was creating in me a sense of social anxiety. I would be called names and would be made to feel abnormal
Mark, gay young person.

I feel so lonely. Day-in day-out it feels as if there is nothing in life for me.....

Simon, low education achiever.

I feel so ashamed being in prison but the truth is that I know I have an addictive personality and didn't get the necessary support at any stage of my life. ... I admit that I was at fault for what I did and do not in any way try to excuse my behaviour and actions. However,

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The biggest challenge that we have is that professional and support services and the voluntary sector need to be more proactive and engaged with vulnerable young people

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since I was young the immense problems there were at home were for all to see and being so young, if some of those issues were nipped in the bud, I would have done well for myself. I knew that with the right type of support I wouldn't have ended up where I am now. The social work agency left me on my own - I never got any support from them. When I needed them most they turned their gaze away from me.

Gianella, young person with a drug addiction problem and currently incarcerated

I had a difficult time as I was growing up. My parents weren't good role models but I still wanted to have a family. My life was so hard. I know I am a good person deep down. I am so angry at my parents, I lacked so much love. I was brought up in a children's home and the experience was terrible. I had a family history of family members taking drugs; my grandfather was on drugs and so were my mother and father. Eventually even I started taking drugs - it was almost the natural thing to do. I'm not feeling sorry for myself but nothing comes easy for me in life and it is a constant uphill. ... I try to make the best use of my time whilst I am here but I must say that there are no services. Even YOURS (Young Offenders Unit Rehabilitation Services) lacks services. There are no councillors I can refer to and no Youth Workers or any other professional. However, my biggest pain is that at times I feel so isolated and alone, forgotten by everyone.

Noel, young offender

I am a Maltese Muslim girl. My father is Syrian but my mother is Maltese. I have lived in Malta all my life and identify completely with the Maltese culture. I was born and

bred in Malta and I deserve to be respected. I wear a hijab which I feel is not only a symbol of the religion I pertain to but also an icon of the struggle for religious inclusion. ... I experience discrimination, bullying and oppression continually in my life and even though I have generally got used to it, I still can't understand how come people are so insensitive towards me. I feel exceptionally bad and sad when people discriminate against black people or any other minority. Even student colleagues at University tell me to my face that they hate Muslims! I've had people spit at me and tell me to go back to my country, when my country is here! This hatred that is thrown at me happens all the time even on Face Book and as I walk down the street, but I still believe that my life is a political statement and I need to pursue this struggle. ... Schools are not doing enough to educate ... that should be the main drivers to overcome stereotypes.

Saadah, young Muslim

I am 24 years old and consider myself a mental health survivor. When I used to go to school I enjoyed myself a lot. At a certain stage I developed a nervous tick and people would laugh at me including teachers and I didn't want to go to school anymore. Eventually I started collapsing every time I felt stressed - I started passing out. I did not have any friends and my only friend was at secondary school. ... I am very critical of the teachers in general and the PSD teachers in particular. They never supported me in my life. There was a teacher who even made fun of me.

Irene, mental health survivor

I do not have any friends who understand me

Oliver, low education achiever.

My mother used to throw me out of the house when she had her boyfriend at home

Colin, young person with an intellectual disability.

Whenever I needed the support of the police I never found it and now I do not trust them because they take our issues lightly

Nancy, young person with ethnic minority background.

The worse thing is that there are a lot of family doctors that are not aware of this condition and wouldn't know how to deal with it

Cindy, young woman with disabling illness.

I am very critical of the teachers in general and the PSD teachers in particular. They never supported me in my life

Irene, mental health survivor.

I know I have an addictive personality, but that doesn't mean I don't get the necessary support

Grace, drug addict and prisoner.

We clean, we wash our clothes, we cook and we play football - but there are no helpers and social workers. At times I want to kill myself, I feel very sad but some of my friends here help me. It is all because I am a Libyan - it is always the same story, Maltese people hate us

Idris, migrant and young offender.

It is so difficult to 'come out' and be accepted, especially in certain areas of Malta

Greta, young lesbian.

I used to try to work but in most cases I used to spend hours on the street and if I was given work they would not pay me

Connor, homeless young man.

I am sure that some of us will feel that this is their fault, that they have all the opportunities to make it up the ladder, that they are benefit frauds, that they are playing the victims and that they are expecting us to mend the chaos that their families created.

I really don't subscribe to this analysis.

These are vulnerable young people who really want solutions to their problems and who with their limited social capital are trying hard to make sense of their disordered, muddled and messy life. They are young people who had they been given the opportunities and had they been situated in the right context would be reading a degree at university or maybe thinking of starting a family or possibly running their business or perhaps pursuing careers in dance and music.

We are all at fault because we cannot see beyond the pain that they are going through; not feeling loved, not accepted and making them feel that they are surplus to the community.

But the biggest challenge that we have is that professional and support services and the voluntary sector need to be more proactive and engaged with vulnerable young people, who often need to be sought out and actively supported and encouraged. We need to recall that welfare emerged from the need to negotiate and reinvigorate the social responsibility for collective needs and the soul of Welfare is in doing this.

You might consider studying with us by reading a BA (Hons.) in Youth and Community Studies (full time day course or part-time evening course), MA in Youth Justice, MA in Community Action and Development or an MA in Youth and Community Studies. If interested please contact andrew.azzopardi@um.edu.mt for more details.

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