

“Race to Nowhere”: Stress and Our Youth

Part III

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

This is my last website article until September. As I have written in previous June articles, I am very appreciative of the many thoughtful e-mail messages I have received from my readers in response to my monthly columns. I always welcome your feedback, questions, and insights as well as suggestions for future topics. Your responses are very meaningful to me. One of my primary goals in writing these articles is not only to share information and ideas but to have the information and ideas serve as a catalyst for self-reflection and self-change.

I hope the next few months prove satisfying and relaxing for you.

* * *

My past two articles were prompted by viewing and serving as the moderator for the documentary “Race to Nowhere: The Dark Side of America’s Achievement Culture.” I noted that concerned school and community groups have arranged to show this movie as a catalyst for parents, educators, childcare professionals, and community members to engage in a dialogue about the epidemic of unrealistic expectations, pressures, and stresses that are confronting today’s youth.

I described in detail what I believe to be certain myths that contribute to an environment that produces stress in our youth. Briefly, one myth is that grades and test scores are the foundation for and prediction of future success and thus must be attained at any price. A second myth is the supposed correlation between the amount of homework assigned and a child’s achievement in school. I also voiced a concern that is shared by many child development specialists, namely, that play activities in kindergarten—activities that foster learning and fun—are being replaced by a more academically-oriented curriculum that in many instances involves the rote learning of facts. A number of educators are alarmed by the practice of pushing children to learn certain material before they are cognitively prepared to do so, a practice that is likely to increase stress and lessen the joy of learning.

Before proceeding, I want to make a distinction between what have been called “tutorial enrichment programs” and “early intervention programs.” The latter are

designed for preschool children who display noticeable developmental delays in a variety of domains such as expressive and receptive language, fine and gross motor abilities, and interpersonal skills. I believe there is universal support for early intervention efforts to address a child's developmental lags before the negative consequences of these lags become more pronounced and more difficult to remedy. In contrast, math and reading tutorial programs for preschool children who are not displaying any lags, while having supporters, also have detractors.

Behind the Curve at an Early Age

Shortly after I wrote my May piece, an article appeared in *The New York Times* written by Kate Zernike titled "Fast-Tracking to Kindergarten?" Zernike's article, which has direct bearing on points I raised in May, highlights the number of parents who are enrolling their preschool children in tutoring programs in math and reading so that they gain an advantage over their peers who do not receive these so-called "enrichment" experiences. Some of the children are just three years old. One parent reported that she wanted to insure that her son "wouldn't be behind the curve when he started kindergarten."

Zernike reports that the market for these prekindergarten math and reading enrichment programs has increased dramatically. One program "has pushed most aggressively, admitting students as young as 2." This program grew by about 12 percent last year, to 250,000 students nationwide with an even greater increase of more than 30 percent for preschool youngsters. Zernike notes that while some parents were hesitant at first to enroll their preschool children, many felt it was beneficial, increasing both the academic skill level of their children as well as their self-esteem.

However, Zernike cautions, "Research suggests that there is little benefit from this kind of tutoring; that young children learn just as much about math, if not more, fitting mixing bowls together on the kitchen floor." She adds that enrichment programs "are gaining from, and generating, parents' anxiety about what kind of preparation their children will need—and whether parents themselves have what it takes to provide it."

Alison Gopnik, a professor of psychology at the University of California at Berkeley, had strong comments in Zernike's article about these early enrichment programs, contending, "The best you can say is that they're useless." She compared the

increase of supplemental education with Irish elk competing to see which had the biggest antlers. “The result is that they go around tottering, unable to walk, under the enormous weight of these antlers they’ve developed. I think it’s true of American parents from high school all the way down to preschool.”

I have little doubt both pro and con positions about early enrichment programs will continue to be advanced. I hope that the dialogue goes beyond considering simply the enrichment of academic skills and embraces the concept of educating the “whole child,” including the development of social-emotional capacities. This leads to the next point, also raised in my last article.

The Meaning of Percentile Rankings

Given the increased emphasis on test scores as well as the spotlight being placed on comparing scores attained by students in the United States with their peers in other countries, I continue to wonder what these standings really mean or how they translate into “real world” functioning. When achievement tests are administered to students around the globe, what does ranking first, second, or third compared with ranking 15th (the latter is approximately the ranking in reading skills of students from the United States) signify in terms of predicting future accomplishment and happiness?

In my two previous articles I questioned whether we are we taking a much too narrow approach to education by focusing on test scores and percentiles. Are students being buried under an avalanche of numbers that serve to place an inordinate amount of stress and pressure on them as well as on their teachers and parents? Does a focus on scores serve as blinders, keeping us from appreciating other factors that may be as, or even more, significant predictors of success and happiness than a percentile rank? Given the interpersonal and motivational skills required to manage the many challenges that arise in both our personal and professional lives, does it make sense that in many instances the nurturance of a child’s social-emotional development is deemed less important than his or her percentile ranks in math, science, or reading?

In reflecting upon these questions I often think of the writings of Daniel Goleman about “emotional intelligence” and “social intelligence” and the importance of these kinds of intelligence in all aspects of our lives, including the quality of our personal and professional relationships. Last month I quoted David Brooks, the renowned author and

Op-Ed columnist for the *New York Times*. His views parallel those of Goleman and others when he asserts, “When we raise our kids, we focus on the traits measured by grades and SAT scores. But when it comes to the most important things like character and how to build relationships, we often have nothing to say. Many of our public policies are proposed by experts who are comfortable only with correlations that can be measured, appropriated and quantified, and ignore everything else.”

A Deficit in Empathy

I also thought about a study reported by Keith O’Brien in *The Boston Globe* last October titled “The empathy deficit: Even as they become more connected, young people are caring less than others.” The article describes the findings of research conducted under the direction of Sara Konrath at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research. The researchers assert, “College students today are 40 percent less empathic than they were in 1979, with the steepest decline coming in the last 10 years.”

O’Brien writes that the study highlighted that today’s college students, while constantly connected electronically to their peers, are not as concerned about each other. Jeanna Bryner, writing about the same study for *Yahoo! News*, elaborates, “Compared with college students of the late 1970s, current students are less likely to agree with statements such as ‘I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective,’ and ‘I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.’”

In his article O’Brien notes that there are those who question the research design of the Michigan study, believing that more data are necessary before making conclusions. However, he observes, “Even some skeptics agree that it’s disturbing to consider the trend laid out in the new research. . . .” Mark Davis, a professor of psychology at Eckerd College in Florida, has reservations about the Michigan findings but still warns, “As awful a species as we can be—and we certainly have the capacity for terrible things—we’re also capable of some pretty wonderful things, noble things, self-sacrifice. And the fear would be, if there really is a genuine decline in our ability to act on this capacity we have, the world becomes meaner.”

O’Brien asks what cultural changes have taken place in the past couple of decades that have contributed to this lessening of empathy. There is no easy answer. Konrath

alludes to the 24-hour bombardment of video games, cable television, laptops, and cellphones. Some wonder if the parents of today's generation themselves are less empathic and less able to model this behavior.

O'Brien cites Daniel Batson, a researcher of empathy and professor emeritus at Kansas University, who offers an intriguing view. "I'd be extremely surprised if it turns out that students were now less capable of caring for other people—their friends, romantic partners, family, or pets. The idea that they're less capable of caring than they were 20 years ago—that just seems unlikely. I don't think we change like that. But our situation may have changed. One may feel pressure to pull back on the scope of one's concern. Pull it back and say, 'I've got to deal with the needs that are pressing right here.'"

While the findings and interpretations of the Michigan study may invite differing views, it is still important to heed Mark Davis' words that if there is a decline in empathy the world will become a "meaner" place. This is why I believe that in our quest to raise scores on academic tests, we must not lose sight that these scores alone do not measure all of the skills required to lead a more meaningful, gratifying life. Caring, compassion, empathy, and other interpersonal capacities must also be reinforced. The ideal is to focus on the "whole child," children whose reading, math, and related skills are in concert with their ability to have effective, satisfying relationships.

As I emphasized in my last article, the responsibility for the development of empathy, compassion, and self-discipline is not solely that of the schools. It is most advantageous that these skills initially be modeled and nurtured in our homes. However, they can be fortified further in our schools with no time taken from the task of teaching academic content. Compared with homes, schools also offer the benefit of having many children under the same roof, affording each child opportunities to practice and learn interpersonal skills with a large group of peers.

I believe that to address the "whole child" does not require more time on either the teacher's or student's part nor does it place more pressure on educators to impart an additional curriculum related to social-emotional skills. Rather, situations arise in any classroom that provide natural opportunities for teachers to model caring and respect and to help children learn these same important qualities. Children learn best in a climate

permeated with feelings of compassion, security, and respect. It is imperative that we replace the “race to nowhere” with realistic expectations and goals that are in accord with raising hopeful, resilient children who are equipped with the various skills they will need to meet the myriad of challenges presented in today’s world.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>