

“Race to Nowhere”: Stress and Our Youth

Part I

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Recently I had the opportunity to view “Race to Nowhere: The Dark Side of America’s Achievement Culture,” a riveting documentary that is receiving much-deserved publicity throughout the United States. 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 watched the movie with hundreds of others at the Charles River School in Dover, Massachusetts and then served as the moderator for the lively discussion that followed.

Vicki Abeles is the documentary’s creator and director. She writes that “Race to Nowhere” was created “by a series of wake-up calls that made me look closely at the relentless pressure to perform that children face today.” Abeles is very open about her experiences with her own children that prompted her to examine the increasing rates of depression, anxiety, suicide, and cheating among youth in all of our communities.

“I saw the strain in my children as they navigated days filled with school, homework, tutoring, and extracurricular activities. But it wasn’t until the crisis of my 12-year-old daughter being diagnosed with stress induced illness that I was determined to do something. After months of long evenings battling homework assignments, studying for tests and panic attacks in the middle of the night, we found her doubled over in pain, and rushed her to the emergency room. Her cheerful façade and determination to keep up had masked her symptoms to us, to her friends, and to her teachers.”

Abeles reports that although she and her husband initiated changes in their home to ease the pressure, she recognized that “the pressures on my children and family felt more systemic and beyond my control.” In an attempt to understand the roots of these pressures she interviewed experts in the fields of medicine, mental health, and education as well as children and their families across the country and arrived at the conclusion that teachers, parents, and students felt “powerless to address these issues in the face of

current education policies focused on high stakes tests and competitive college admissions.”

Abeles’ goal in creating “Race to Nowhere” was not only to increase awareness of the problem but also to bring communities together to consider what might be done to address and lessen the pressures faced by our youth. In addition to the film, she urges people to visit the website <http://www.racetonowhere.com> for additional resources and ideas about making changes in our schools, homes, and communities.

Stress in Youth: A New Problem?

In discussing the stress evident in today’s youth, I am often asked if it is of greater magnitude than that experienced by previous generations. Certainly, earlier generations of children and adolescents were not immune from stress, especially prior to the emergence of child labor laws and other edicts to protect our children. However, in our very fast-paced, technology-driven world, there appears to be a noticeable increase in anxious, depressed, stressed out youngsters living in homes in which their parents display these same emotions. Of course, when parents are fatigued and stressed they cannot easily hide these feelings from their children. In these households each family member’s stress serves to build a negative atmosphere that compromises harmonious family relationships, effective parenting, and periods of fun and relaxation.

When I visit schools and interview students I continue to be taken aback by third and fourth graders who are already worried about the college they will attend, how well they will do on standardized tests, how well they will perform on sports teams, and whether they will be able to complete all of their homework. Worries about being accepted by peers or being bullied, problems that are not unique to the current generation but perhaps are more pervasive and insidious given the emergence of cyber-bullying, also permeate their lives. These kinds of worries among elementary school children become even more intense as they enter adolescence.

Downtime and play are becoming the exception rather than the rule. Complaints about youth being overscheduled are very valid. In my October, 2009 article I discussed the academic demands being placed on kindergarten children at the expense of play and quoted pieces in *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*, both of which cited a report released by the nonprofit advocacy group Alliance for Children. The report, “Crisis in

the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in Schools,” examined the findings of nine studies of public school classrooms in the United States.

Patti Hartigan from *The Boston Globe*, referring to the report, notes, "Kindergartners in the studies spent four to six times as much of the school day being drilled in literacy and math as they did playing. Recess has been truncated or has disappeared entirely in some schools, a double whammy, since children are stressed out by the demands and also deprived of their major stress reliever. The report cites study after study showing increasing stress, aggression, and other behavior problems, and even breakdowns."

In a *New York Times* piece, Paul Tough emphasizes, "Kindergarten has ceased to be a garden of delight and has become a place of stress and distress. There is too much testing and too little free time and kids are being forced to try to read before they are ready." Tough notes that the authors of the Alliance for Children report advocate an increase of "unstructured play" in kindergarten. "If kids are allowed to develop at their own paces, they will be happier and healthier and less stressed out. And there will still be plenty of time later on to learn how to read."

At a recent workshop someone asked me if the stress experienced by children in the United States and other Western countries is small compared with that felt by children living in abject Third World poverty or in war zones or in other toxic situations. I replied that all of these situations, regardless of where they occur, are terrible for children and rather than debating which are more devastating, it is important for each of us in whatever ways we can to help address and remedy at least one condition that is harmful to children.

Two Dominant Beliefs: Truth or Myth

“Race to Nowhere” takes aim at factors that appear to contribute to an inordinate amount of stress and depression in our youth. Those who were interviewed in the documentary spoke of hours and hours of homework each night, high stakes testing, engaging in extracurricular activities not necessarily for enjoyment but rather to add to their list of credentials on college applications, involvement in sports, and, in general, the desperate need to achieve. They acknowledged that they cheated in school to reach their goals, and several observed that almost all of their peers engaged in similar behaviors.

For some, the acceptable norm appeared to be an “A” average and anything less was considered a failure. Thus, long hours of work and cheating were justified to avoid this failure. But where were these students truly heading? As one of the adolescents in the documentary observes, “Students get caught up in a ‘race to nowhere.’”

An important feature of the documentary was an articulation of those beliefs that fuel this frenetic race. However, when these beliefs were closely scrutinized, they were exposed not as truths but as possible myths that did not deserve the status they had received in some quarters. Two of these seeming myths especially stood out for me.

One is that grades and test scores are the foundation for future success and thus must be attained at any price. An “A” average and high achievement test scores are seen to be essential ingredients in one’s early life journey, leading to admission to a prestigious college that leads to a prestigious job that leads to happiness. The converse would be that a “C” average closes off many avenues for a successful life. However, while it is true that a degree awarded from a particular university may open doors more easily than a degree from a university that is not as well-known or well-regarded, how far and how long the door stays open are not just a result of your grades or the school you attended. As Daniel Goleman writes, success seems to be rooted more in one’s “emotional” and/or “social” intelligence than in one’s grade point average in academic subjects.

One must also consider a definition of “success.” Without even realizing it, many equate success with the college one attended, one’s income, the size of one’s home (or homes), the kind of car one drives, and the designer clothes one wears. But in fact while a certain income level is important to lead a more satisfying life, success and resilience are better measured in terms of the quality of interpersonal relationships, a feeling of purpose and passion for activities both at work and outside of work, a contribution to the well-being of others, and a connectedness to others.

A point made in the documentary was that in examining the lives of individuals who head different companies, many were not stellar students, and a number did not graduate from college. This is not to lessen the importance of a college degree but rather to assert that such a degree or where one obtained the degree are not necessarily the key determinants of success or happiness. Not everyone is going to excel in school, but that

does not mean that they are left with few options in life. I have witnessed many people who discover and apply their strengths or “islands of competence” outside the school environment.

The second myth I wish to highlight concerns the correlation between homework and achievement. I think for students to be doing five or six hours of homework a night as reported by some in “Race to Nowhere” is not only exhaustive but in many instances can be counterproductive and squash the joy of learning. The question can be raised if homework actually results in better school performance. Interestingly, in the research I have reviewed, especially that conducted and reported by Harris Cooper of Duke University, homework was found to have a noticeable positive relationship with achievement only at the secondary school level.

Cooper notes in an article published in 1989, “The optimum amount of homework also varies with grade level. For in elementary school, no amount of homework—large or small—affects achievement. For junior high school students, achievement continues to improve with more homework until assignments last between one or two hours a night. For high school students, the more homework, the better achievement—within reason, of course.” The parameters of “within reason” offered by Cooper for high school students was four to five assignments a week, each lasting 75 to 120 minutes or no more than two hours per night. This recommendation for the amount of time devoted to homework is small compared with the hours reported being spent by students in “Race to Nowhere” and with students I have interviewed.

Cooper, whose research about the relationship between homework and student choice I highlighted in my February, 2011 article, advocates, “Districts need to state clearly the broad rationale why homework is given, why it is sometimes mandatory, and what the general time requirements ought to be. Schools need to further specify time requirements, coordinate assignments between classes, and set out the role of teachers and principals. Teachers need to adopt classroom policies that outline what is expected of students and why.”

When I have discussed these studies detailing the efficacy of homework at some of my presentations, they have been met, at times, with skepticism or resignation. School teachers and administrators, especially at the secondary level, have questioned a 75 to

120 minute maximum time for homework. One teacher lamented, “I wish we could keep time spent on homework to under two hours per night, but I don’t know how we can achieve that goal. Given all of the pressures we feel to cover a certain amount of material and to have our students pass proficiency tests, often each teacher will assign at least 60 minutes of homework a night.” Another teacher added, “We’re constantly being reminded how the scores of students in the United States are falling further and further behind that of other countries. The solution seems to be more homework.”

Housed in these comments is the belief that more homework contributes to higher achievement scores, but as Cooper contends such a result is true only at a secondary level and only given a reasonable amount of homework. Any of us can lose interest and proficiency in an activity when we reach the point of exhaustion. If doing homework late into the night lessens the amount of sleep that many students get, it is easy to understand why stress, anxiety, and depression rather than higher test scores are the outcome. This is why serious consideration must be given to Cooper’s suggestion that teachers coordinate their homework assignments.

A related issue posed by Cooper centers on articulating the purpose of homework, which also touches upon the content and format of the homework assignment. Questions such as the following can be considered:

Does the assignment primarily require repetitive rote learning?

Are any creative activities involved in completing the homework?

Is the student offered any choice within the homework assignment?

Although Cooper found a positive relationship at the secondary school level between homework and achievement, there are those who even question that finding and whether there are benefits to homework at any grade level. In an article appearing in the educational journal *Phi Delta Kappan* in 2006, Alfie Kohn, a well-known critic of homework, analyzed research pertaining to its effectiveness. Since there has been so much publicity about students in the United States falling behind students in other countries in math, reading, and science scores, Kohn looked at data across 50 countries on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). He notes that even the researchers were surprised by the findings as they report:

Not only did we fail to find any positive relationships, but the overall correlations between national average student achievement and national averages in the frequency, total amount, and percentage of teachers who used homework in grading are all *negative!* If these data can be extrapolated to other subjects—a research topic that warrants immediate study in our opinion—then countries that try to improve their standing in the world rankings of student achievement by raising the amount of homework might actually be undermining their own success. . . . More homework may actually undermine national achievement.

Recently, educational practices in Finland have been receiving a great deal of attention. A *Time* magazine article by Joshua Levine notes that the Finns “do as little measuring and testing as they can get away with. They just don’t believe it does much good. They did, however, decide to participate in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), run by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In the latest PISA survey, in 2009, Finland placed second in science literacy, third in mathematics and second in reading. The U.S. came in 15th in reading, close to the OECD average, which is where most of the U.S.’s results fell.”

And what is the place of homework in Finland? Levine quotes Katja Tuori, who directs student counseling at Kallahti Comprehensive, a school that educates students up to 16 years of age. Tuori observes, “An hour a day of homework is good enough to be a successful student. These kids have a life.”

While some may argue that it is difficult to compare achievement scores attained by students from different countries, especially between what is seen as a more homogeneous population in Finland and a diverse population in the United States—an argument that has some merit—it can still prove useful to examine the different philosophies and practices that guide different nations. I plan to discuss some of these differences more fully in next month’s article.

And returning to the first myth identified above, one can even question what does ranking second or third on the PISA compared with ranking 15th really mean in terms of predicting future accomplishment and happiness. In considering educational practices and the demands placed on students, are we taking a much too narrow approach 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 numbers eclipse a focus on social-emotional well-being? I will also share some views about these questions in my next article.

A Concluding Thought about a Documentary

I believe that Vicki Abeles has accomplished one of her major goals in creating “Race to Nowhere,” namely, to prompt people to examine the increased anxiety and depression in our youth and to consider changes that are necessary to lessen these debilitating emotions. However, the dialogue and subsequent actions must continue beyond a day or two after viewing the documentary. I hope that all who see “Race to Nowhere” and visit its website will give serious consideration to the demands currently placed on our children and adolescents. I also hope that we can move towards a position in which we give more than lip service to the notion of educating the “whole child.” It is imperative that we insure that in both our home and school environments children learn in an atmosphere that is free of the anxiety and depression that are so prevalent at the present moment.

And finally, if you have not had an opportunity to view “Race to Nowhere,” I would recommend you obtain information about having it screened in your area.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>