

“Race to Nowhere”: Stress and Our Youth

Part II

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Last month I discussed “Race to Nowhere: The Dark Side of America’s Achievement Culture,” a thought-provoking documentary that is receiving well-deserved publicity throughout the United States. 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 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. Several factors prompted her to create “Race to Nowhere,” perhaps the most important of which was witnessing her 12-year-old daughter being diagnosed with stress induced illness. Abeles writes, “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 stress, 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.” In addition to viewing the movie, Abeles urges all those concerned about our youth to visit the website <http://www.racetonowhere.com> for additional resources and ideas about making changes in our schools, homes, and communities.

In last month’s article I highlighted the demands placed on and stress experienced by even young children. Academic requirements have replaced time for play in many of our kindergartens. I cited an article in the *New York Times* by Paul Tough in which he

referred to 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. Tough notes, "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. 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."

I also shared my thoughts about two dominant beliefs that research indicates may be more myth than fact. One is that grades and test scores are the foundation for future success and thus must be attained at any price. "Race to Nowhere" emphasized that many individuals who were not stellar students were very successful in their careers. Also, one can question what entails a "successful" life. I have argued that while a certain income level is important to lead a more satisfying, less stressful life, success and resilience are better measured in terms of the quality of one's 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.

The second myth I highlighted is the supposed correlation between homework and achievement. Many of the students in "Race to Nowhere" reported doing five or six hours of homework a night. I think that five or six hour expended for homework each evening is exhausting and in most instances may be counterproductive and lessen any joy in learning. Interestingly, research shows that for elementary school children no amount of homework, large or small, has an impact on achievement. In middle school and high school achievement improves with more homework, but those who have studied this improvement (please see last month's article) recommend that homework in all subjects should be between 75-120 minutes and no greater than two hours a night.

Two Other Areas of Consideration

In my April piece I wrote that I would address two other issues triggered by "Race to Nowhere" in this month's article. They are:

Different educational approaches. The first issue is based on the high scores that students from Finland obtained on the Program for International Student Assessment

(PISA). In a *Time* magazine article Joshua Levine writes 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 PISA.” In the latest PISA testing Finland placed second in science literacy, third in mathematics, and second in reading, while students in the United States tended to be in the middle of the pack, about 15th. Levine quotes Katja Touri, a counselor in Finland, who reasons, “An hour a day of homework is good enough to be a successful student. These kids have a life.”

Some may question the difficulty of comparing achievement scores attained by students from different countries, especially between what is seen as a more homogeneous population in Finland with a more diverse population in the United States. While this point has some merit, it can still prove useful to examine the different philosophies and practices that guide different nations.

Levine captures some fundamental differences between Finland and the United States in their educational practices. One intriguing difference is that “one teacher ideally stays with a class from first grade through sixth grade. That way the teacher has years to learn the quirks of a particular group and tailor the teaching approach accordingly.”

When I mentioned this difference at a recent workshop, several teachers questioned this approach. One wondered, “What if a teacher tires of the same students over a six-year period?” Another asked, “What if a teacher and student have a real personality clash? It wouldn’t be in either’s best interest to be together for so many years.” Still another raised the point, “That would require teachers to have expertise in teaching curriculum that spans six years. I don’t know how many first grade teachers would feel comfortable teaching sixth grade subjects or how many sixth grade teachers would feel comfortable teaching beginning reading at first grade.”

I responded that their concerns were all valid but noted that it was still important to consider different paradigms. I added, however, that what I found most interesting about Finland’s system was its high regard and respect for teachers. Andrea Schleicher, who directs the PISA program for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), asserts, “It’s the quality of the teaching that is driving Finland’s results. The U.S. has an industrial model where teachers are the means for conveying a prefabricated product. In Finland the teachers are the standard.”

Levine observes that given their high regard for teachers many Finns want to enter that profession. In examining the most recent figures, 1,258 undergraduates applied for training to become elementary school teachers, but only 123 or approximately 10% were accepted into the five-year teaching program. In Finland, every teacher is required to have a master's degree and annual salaries range from \$40,000 to \$60,000 with teachers working 190 days per year.

Levine quotes Jari Lavonen, head of the department of teacher education at the University of Helsinki, who notes, "It's very expensive to educate all of our teachers in five-year programs, but it helps make our teachers highly respected and appreciated." In a critical, seemingly harsh comment comparing Finland's perspective of teachers compared with that of the United States, Dan MacIsaac, a specialist in physics teacher education at the State University of New York at Buffalo, argues, "Their teachers are much better prepared to teach physics than we are, and then the Finns get out of the way. You don't buy a dog and bark for it. In the U.S., they treat teachers like pizza delivery boys and then do efficiency studies on how well they deliver the pizza."

In the *Time* article Levine observes that while some of Finland's educational practices can probably be exported, it's questionable whether other aspects can. The philosophy that might be most difficult to apply in other countries is Finland's de-emphasis on competition, which is one of the conditions captured in "Race to Nowhere" as a major contributor to the stress experienced by our youth. Reijo Laukkanen, a counselor at the Finnish National Board of Education, says, "Finland is a society based on equity. . . . In Finland, outperforming your neighbor isn't very important. Everybody is average, but you want the average to be very high."

This philosophy was reflected in the PISA scores. Finland's worst students did 80% better than the OECD average for the lowest testing group, while its brightest students fared 50% better than average for the brightest students in other countries. In examining these results, MacIsaac asserts, "Raising the average for the bottom rungs has had a profound effect on the overall result."

Several of the teachers at my recent workshop questioned the applicability of Finland's model in the highly diverse and competitive United States society. However, all applauded the excellent training and high regard for teachers in Finland. They also

commented that while there might be little applicability of Finland's approach in the United States, it is still worthy of review and discussion.

The relevance of test scores. The second issue concerns the question, "What do test scores actually mean?" Since I discussed the PISA rankings in the point above, I do not want to come across as talking out of both sides of my mouth when I raise this second issue. Although Finland's standing on the test scores may be important, I was actually more impressed by the respect shown for the status they accord not only their teachers but their students as well, even those who tested most poorly. As I wrote last month, what does ranking second or third on the PISA compared with ranking 15th really signify in terms of predicting future accomplishment and happiness? 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 test scores 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 serve as blinders, keeping us from appreciating other factors that may be more important predictors of success and happiness than a percentile rank? Does a child's social-emotional development assume a distant second place to a math or reading score?

I as well as many others have long advocated that our educational pursuits focus on "the whole child," that even at a time when high-stakes testing dominates the educational scene, it is important that we also attend to the emotional and social lives of our students. A student's intelligence or competence is more than a score or a percentile on an IQ test or achievement test. It should also include an appreciation of the student's "emotional" and "social" intelligence, concepts about which psychologist Daniel Goleman has written extensively and which involve a child's coping, motivation, and interpersonal skills.

Unfortunately, when I suggest a focus on a student's social-emotional development I have been met with the following comments from some educators: "I wish I had time to think about social-emotional factors, but I can barely get through the academic curriculum I am required to teach" or "I was not trained as a therapist to offer emotional support to students."

Given all of the demands on teachers I would hesitate recommending the addition of even more responsibilities to their professional activities. However, it is unfortunate

that a belief has emerged that if teachers expend energy on what might be considered the emotional lives of students (e.g., their sense of security, their confidence about learning, their view of the teacher), it will divert time from teaching academic content. I am convinced from my own experiences as well as the feedback I have received from numerous educators that strengthening a student's self-worth is not an "extra" curriculum that siphons time from teaching academics; if anything, a student's sense of belonging, security, and self-confidence in a classroom provides the scaffolding that bolsters the foundation for enriched learning, intrinsic motivation, more effective coping abilities, self-discipline, and caring.

Obviously, the responsibility for the development of skills such as 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 reinforced further in our schools with no interference to the task of teaching academic content. Compared with homes, schools also hold the advantage of having many children under the same roof affording each child opportunities to learn interpersonal skills with a large group of peers.

Next month I plan to discuss research findings from the past year that are somewhat disquieting. They indicate that today's college students are less empathic than those of a generation ago. We have an obligation to prepare our youth to possess those skills that are keeping with the ever-increasing demands of our technological society. However, as Goleman has advocated, the skills associated with emotional and social intelligence are equally important to technical skills if individuals are to experience success in both their work and home environments. Success in school and effective teaching should not and cannot be boiled down to measures on standardized tests. To address social-emotional issues is not to add more pressure to the lives of teachers, parents, and students but rather to create an environment in which a "race to nowhere" will be replaced by schooling housed in a model that truly embraces the development of the "whole child," a child who possesses the emotional and social maturity to meet successfully life's many challenges.

A Concluding Observation

David Brooks (I should note that we are not related although the name is dear to my heart since it was my father's name), a renowned and highly-respected author and Op-Ed columnist for the *New York Times*, wrote a piece this past March that resonates with the points I have offered in this article. It is titled "The New Humanism" and I will refer to it in greater detail in my next article when I examine the need to remove the blinders that obscure our seeing the richness of a child's development. However, I would like to end this article with a few of David's observations from "The New Humanism." He writes:

For the past 30 years we've tried many different ways to restructure our educational system—trying big schools and little schools, charters and vouchers—that, for years, skirted the core issue: the relationship between a teacher and a student. . . . 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.

These are indeed words upon which to reflect. They are thoughts to which I will return in my June article.

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