



## “Imagine if schools could teach both the skills of wellbeing *and* achievement”

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Girlguiding UK's *Girls' Attitudes Survey 2019* has highlighted the issue of exam stress in girls, with the charity finding that 64 per cent of girls and young women aged 11-21 think there is too much pressure and focus on doing well in exams, while only 21 per cent say they are getting the help they need to manage the stress of tests and exams. Half of girls say that exam stress affects their happiness and 59 per cent fear that a bad performance in their exams could ruin their future.

Girlguiding UK's youth panel, Advocate, wrote in the report's foreword that it was “shocked” that growing up as a girl today has become so stressful. However, as reported by Robert Booth in the *Guardian*, “publicity-hungry schools and pressure to post results on social media are driving up exam stress in girls”. Not only are UK schools putting up banners posting about their A-level results, but girls are under pressure to post their individual results online.

Emma Dixon, a member of Girlguiding UK's Advocate panel, told the *Guardian* that: “In a world full of filtered photographs and online bullying, the last thing girls need to face is a worrying amount of academic pressure. Yet exam stress is very real and forms the perfect storm of pressure on girls, [to] the detriment of their mental wellbeing.”

Why are girls more stressed about exam results than boys? Professor Alan Smithers of the University of Buckingham told the *Guardian* that exam stress is growing and that while most students bounce back from feelings of failure and work out that exam grades are not that important, in some cases it “could tip people over into mental health problems if they were already predisposed to them”. Girls, in particular, says Smithers, are “very keen to please”, which may be a factor in explaining why girls suffer more exam stress than boys.

There is growing recognition that the constant emphasis on measuring outcomes and celebrating exceptional success is negatively affecting the mental wellbeing of young people, but what are the alternatives? Should we ban league tables and publishing individual and school results? Should we investigate Scandinavian models of education where student achievement appears to come without the accompanying competition and stress? Is it as simple as copying the much-lauded Finnish education system?

Internationally-renowned Finnish academic Pasi Sahlberg, now based at the University of New South Wales, and Peter Johnson, Director of Education in the Finnish city of Kokkala, recently argued in the *Washington Post* that while Finland unexpectedly topped the PISA rankings in the early 2000s, so much of what has been written about the Finnish education system since then is incorrect. It is not true, they write, that Finnish children do not have homework or that Finnish authorities have scrapped subjects and replaced them with interdisciplinary projects or themes. It is also not true that all schools in Finland use the same teaching method called “phenomenon-based” or “project-based” learning.

Rather, write Sahlberg and Johnson, what *is* known is that some education systems, including those in Finland, Japan and the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Ontario, “perform better year after year than others in terms of quality and equity of student outcomes”. In contrast, England, Australia and the United States are examples of countries which have been unable to improve their school systems despite implementing large-scale reforms and spending “truckloads of money” in the past two decades.

Among the “important lessons” that have been learned about why some education systems continually improve while others stagnate are that schools should not be run like business corporations based on competition, measurement-based accountability, and performance-based pay. Nor should the quality of education be judged by literacy and numeracy scores alone. Indeed, write Sahlberg and Johnson:

Successful education systems are designed to emphasize whole-child development, equity of education outcomes, wellbeing, and arts, music, drama and physical education as important elements of curriculum.

While Finland does have a national core curriculum, it is, in Sahlberg and Johnson's words, "a fairly loose regulatory document in terms of what schools should teach, how they arrange their work and the desired outcomes". In fact, Finnish schools have "a lot of flexibility and autonomy in curriculum design, and there may be significant variation in school curricula from place to place".

Sahlberg and Johnson write that recent reforms in Finland are aimed at developing a safe and collaborative school culture and promoting holistic approaches in teaching and learning. At the school level, the aim is that "children understand the relationship and interdependencies between different learning contents"; "be able to combine the knowledge and skills learned in different disciplines to form meaningful wholes"; and "be able to apply knowledge and use it in collaborative learning settings". However, this does not mean that reading, writing, numeracy or subjects will disappear from the Finnish curriculum. Instead, schools will be required to design at least one week-long interdisciplinary project for all students.

This seems a very different approach to that adopted in Australia, New Zealand, the UK and other countries where a competitive approach is taken to education, resulting in students being pressured to achieve — and even boast about — "top marks", "perfect scores" and "prestigious scholarships" to study their "dream" career at a highly-ranked university.

Australian psychologist Dr Lea Waters recently explored the topic of strength-based parenting and how it supports a range of wellbeing outcomes including life satisfaction, self-confidence, positive emotions and greater academic achievement. Dr Waters and her colleagues were inspired by the "father of positive psychology", Martin Seligman, who wrote in 2009 that:

The schooling of children has, for more than a century, been about accomplishment, the boulevard into the world of adult work ... but imagine if schools could, without compromising either, teach both the skills of wellbeing and the skills of achievement.

Waters' article, published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, states that a strength-based approach to parenting — in which parents regularly acknowledge and encourage their child's unique personality, abilities, talents and skills — not only predicts perseverance and engagement, but is also linked to academic achievement. Parents, therefore, "can play a crucial role in promoting wellbeing and academic achievement in their children".

In addition, "strength-based parenting may be an important factor for schools to address in boosting student wellbeing and academic achievement". Waters recommends that schools help parents understand strength-based parenting and better know their child's strengths through parent education evenings, book clubs and regular school communications on strengths, as well as parent-teacher interviews that specifically discuss their child's strengths.

## References

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