



Stress fractures

Danuta Tomasz warns against taking 'no pain, no gain' too far

Our performance-obsessed culture often requires a trade-off between work ethic and wellbeing. If schools or parents force children to sacrifice one in pursuit of the other they are likely to end up with neither successful students nor fulfilled ones

Student stress has become such an acute issue in recent years that several schools and universities have taken to employing 'therapy pets' to calm nerves. Last year, one companion dog was in such demand at a university that it had to be retired early because its handlers realised it was suffering from overwork.

As metaphors go, it's hard to think of a more apt one to describe our attitude to student wellbeing. Our children's lives are more structured and more intensely calibrated to maximise academic and career performance than ours ever were when we were young. The pressure to succeed has never been greater. Umpteen surveys and polls confirm that too many of our children say they are unhappy. But the response has often been inadequate. And if the solution is to rely solely on the involuntary services of a therapy dog at the end of a young person's educational career, then arguably we need to rethink the issue.

The problem isn't going to go away and, indeed, in some ways it is intensifying. Suicide rates among teenagers in the UK have risen substantially in recent years and we have the dubious distinction of having the highest self-harm rate of any country in Europe. Of course, it's too easy – and misleading – to exclusively blame exam pressure and the rigours of the curriculum for this decline in mental health, but these are undoubtedly contributing factors for many adolescents.

That immediately presents us with a dilemma, because we as educators cannot eliminate stress entirely. A certain amount of pressure is integral to learning. Children are frequently told that 'there is no gain without pain', and while the language of suffering isn't exactly helpful, teachers would be failing in their duty if they did not prepare students for what can be a challenging journey.

The latest scientific research, for instance, suggests that knowledge only penetrates into long-term memory after something like 14 repetitions. Deep learning requires deliberate practice, however boring and inconvenient that can be. Students improve when they master the elements of the curriculum they struggle with, rather than reproduce the bits they find easy.

All of those challenges can at times be stressful for children, and we won't help them or their parents by pretending otherwise. It is our job as educators to help students to understand that if they want to work successfully they have to learn to work deeply. It is a question of teaching students how to manage and channel pressure, of learning from frustration and failure and harnessing those lessons in order to ultimately succeed.

Yet if inculcating a work ethic in students is essential, so is a recognition that one of the biggest impediments to academic performance is too much stress. Study after academic study only confirms what common sense supposes – happy students make

for better students. We will not help our students academically if we make unreasonable demands on their time, weigh them down with too much revision and homework, or narrow the curriculum to concentrate on passing exams.

The vast majority of teachers instinctively understand this. But inflated expectations, whether held by parents or increasingly by students themselves, can be cruel taskmasters. Today's youngsters have to cope with an online environment that can distract and diminish in equal measure, as well as academic pathways that have rarely been more competitive. It's not surprising if many buckle under the strain. What teachers cannot do is let them sacrifice their wellbeing in pursuit of a goal that will only become more elusive the more anxious they become.

How then can we balance our duty to teach a rigorous, challenging curriculum while at the same time ensuring that our students are stretched rather than overly stressed by its demands? I believe that there are several things schools and parents can do.

The first is teaching children to understand the power of the word 'yet'. As Carol Dweck argues, when students begin to understand that they may not be able to accomplish a task 'yet', but that they will someday, it immediately reduces the pressure to perform. If children know that they are not expected to get an answer right straight away, they instinctively feel less stressed and more confident in their ability to ponder and reflect. This is particularly effective at junior and prep school. Once the habit is embedded, children should be much better able to handle the pressures of their later school career.

Limiting exposure to social media is essential, too. I appreciate that this isn't always easy, but there is increasing scientific evidence that prolonged immersion in social media is making teenagers more anxious and depressed. Too many of the influences young people are subjected to online are negative and guaranteed to undermine their confidence and reinforce a sense of isolation. Rationing social media use can only be good for the welfare of youngsters and, ultimately, their learning.

Finally, schools should offer students as many opportunities as possible to do activities that aren't purely academic. They should be encouraged to play, dance, act, run, jump, lead, swim, sing, kick a ball and participate in all the other activities good schools pride themselves on providing. This not only has the advantage of weaning children from their phones, it builds character and aids academic performance rather than detracting from it.

We will never eliminate stress in education – pressure is intrinsic to the practice of learning. Nor can we sacrifice student wellbeing in the pursuit of academic success – stressed students make poor scholars. Instead, we have to accept that performance and wellbeing are intrinsically linked and that if we pursue one at the expense of the other we will end up with neither successful students nor fulfilled ones.

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