

Monday, July 16, 2018



Education and the mental health epidemic

by Graham Peebles | Updated at 09:32pm on July 15, 2018



— npr.org

ACROSS the western world June is exam time; in Britain, written tests taken in halls of silence and tension have triggered a mini-epidemic of anxiety rooted conditions. Pupils have reported mental exhaustion, panic attacks, crying, nosebleeds, sleepless nights, hair loss and outbreaks of acne. Over the past 25 years, depression and anxiety amongst teenagers in the UK has increased by 70 per cent. This pattern is repeated across the developed world, and is the result of a cocktail of pressures, pressures that result in 10 per cent of under 18-year-olds in America being dependent on mental health medication.

In parts of Asia things are just as bad or worse: the pressure to achieve high marks in exams in Hong Kong is driving some students to suicide: '71 students took their lives between 2013 and 2016', reports The South China Morning Post. In Singapore, which produces children who excel in standardized tests, an 11-year-old jumped to his death from the 17th floor of an apartment building

in 2016 because he was afraid to tell his parents his exam results. The inquest heard that the boy's parents relentlessly pushed him to achieve at school: his mother would cane him for every mark he received under 70 per cent. In 2015 a record 27 suicides were reported amongst children between 10 and 19, which was double the previous year's total.

Suicide or attempted suicide is a raw scream revealing the internal agony a child is living with; pain that he/she feels suffocated by, and unable to openly acknowledge. In most cases children don't kill themselves, they just become ill, some, chronically. The World Health Organization (WHO) states that neuropsychiatric conditions are the primary cause of disability in under 25-year-olds worldwide and says that globally between 10 per cent and 20 per cent 'of children and adolescents experience mental disorders', feeding what are often long-term conditions. Research shows that 75% of all mental health issues begin before a person reaches 18, with 50% taking root before age 15.

Engines of conformity

THERE are various interconnected reasons for this mental health epidemic; the burden to conform and the relentless pressure to succeed are primary causes and are present throughout institutionalized education. For many young people education has become a bi-word for competition and anxiety, school or university a place where uniformity is demanded and individuality denied: a hostile place in which pressure and stress dominate.

Despite the best efforts of teachers, many of whom are doing wonderful work, the goal of academic institutions in many countries has been reduced to passing exams and achieving good-to-high grades. This is anathema to what education ought to be. At the heart of education should be the aim of creating happy human beings free from fear. This requires establishing environments that allow an individual to discover innate talents, to explore him/herself and slowly, perhaps clumsily, give expression to that; a stimulating, nurturing space where mistakes can be made, failure allowed, independent thinking fostered and responsibility for society and the natural environment engendered.

Like all aspects of contemporary life, education has been tainted by the values of a particular approach to life, a materialistic methodology that fosters negative tendencies instead of feeding the good and liberating the spirit. Competition is encouraged instead of cooperation, placing people in opposition to one another, cultivating division instead of unity. Individual success is championed at the expense of group well-being and life is reduced to a battleground ruled by desire and the pursuit of pleasure.

The focus within this paradigm of misery is on material success and the accumulation of status and things. Hedonism is sold as the source of all happiness, feeding perpetual discontent. It is an extremely narrow approach to life that denies mystery and wonder, pours cynicism on the miraculous and attempts to crush self-investigation and silence opposition.

Whilst the majority of humanity suffer and struggle to live healthy fulfilling lives within this mode of living, there are those who, economically at least, profit handsomely. As a result, and failing to recognize that they too are trapped, they do everything to maintain it; they are the wealthy and

powerful, the 'ruling elite'. Money begets power and political influence under the pervading paradigm; such influence is used to shape (and draft) government policies that strengthen systems, which maintain the existing unhealthy order.

To uphold the status quo, freedom of thought and true individuality is curtailed, social conformity insisted upon. The major tools of conditioning are the media, which is commonly owned by corporations or controlled by governments, organized religion, and education. The policies of schools and colleges are set by central government, and, consistent with the pervasive ideology politicians ensure that conformity and competition are built into the working methodology. Students are set in competition with one another, with established standards and with themselves, and are regularly forced to sit written examinations to evaluate how much they can remember or know, about any particular subject. Taking exams dictates the passage of a child's education and establishes the benchmark against which young people are judged, and by extension often judge themselves. Using tests as a way of assessing a person's ability and knowledge is archaic; sitting exams exerts colossal pressure, and although some may be able to cope and 'do well' the majority feel suffocated.

In Britain, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children relates that in 2016–17 Childline delivered '3,135 counselling sessions on exam stress — a rise of 11 per cent over the past 2 years.' Children aged between 12 and 18 reported that exam stress was causing 'depression and anxiety, panic attacks, low-self-esteem, self harming and suicidal thoughts.' This pattern is common in many developed and developing countries, where ideologically-driven corporate governments obsessed with trade, continue to pursue methods, that are, by design, detrimental to the well being of children.

Instead of policies rooted in competition, cooperation and sharing need to be encouraged in all aspects of education and standardized exams consigned to the past. The educational environment needs to be one in which children are encouraged to support each other, to share their own particular gifts with the group and build a sense of social responsibility. Many teachers naturally employ such inclusive methods, but working within divisive systems, which promote individual success, conformity and competition, their efforts are often frustrated.

An alternative way

A MORE enlightened approach to education is found in Finland. Here, children don't start school until they are seven, there is no streaming or selection in schools, so children of varying abilities work side by side, no homework is set, school holidays are long and there is only one standardized test, administered in the final year of high school. The result is happier children than in countries where testing, homework, selection and competition reign supreme. Not only are children happier (according to the World Happiness Report, Finland is the happiest country in the world), they achieve higher academic marks than students in many other countries; according to The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) organized annually by the OECD, Finland ranks fourth for reading and 5th for Math in the world; 93 per cent of students graduate from high school,

compared to 78 per cent in Canada and 75 per cent in America.

Teachers in Finland are well qualified — all have a master's degree — and are highly valued. They are not dictated to by misguided politicians who come and go, but are trusted to do their job independently, and the country has a long-term approach to education policy, which 'means plans remain in place for a significant amount of time, giving them a chance to work', says Russell Hobby, leader of the National Association of Head Teachers.

An education system is part of a society's overall approach to living. As well as being a happy place to live and having a relaxed attitude to education, Finland has some of the lowest levels of wealth and income inequality in the world and the highest level of community trust. In contrast, Britain, USA, Singapore and Hong Kong have some of the highest levels of inequality. The Finland education system is inseparable from the culture, which it serves. Saku Tuominen, director of the HundrEd project says that Finland has 'a "socially cohesive", equitable and efficient society, and it gets a consistently reliable school system to match.'

Systems of education built around the ideals of the market that use competition, selection and examinations are contributing to a collective atmosphere of division, injustice and anxiety. Such methodologies need to be fundamentally changed, replaced by creative environments in which children and young adults can simply be, without pressure to achieve or become anything in particular. In such an atmosphere, true intelligence, which is beyond the limitations of knowledge, can flower.

DissidentVoice.org, July 14. Graham Peebles is an independent writer and charity worker. He set up The Create Trust in 2005 and has run education projects in India, Sri Lanka, Palestine and Ethiopia where he lived for two years working with street children, under 18 commercial sex workers, and conducting teacher training programmes. He lives and works in London.



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