

Positive Schools 2017

INTRODUCTION
AND
CHALLENGING EXCELLENCE IN CHILDHOOD



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Positive Schools Mental Health and Wellbeing Conferences

- This is our 29th since we started in 2008 and our 3rd in Asia
- My 20th and it's always a pleasure and tremendous learning experience
- I have been teaching since 1982 in government, private schools and university
- Health and PE, Sport Science, Religious Education, Maths, Biology, English, History, Theology, Chaplaincy and Director of Service Learning
- Positive psychology and creating environments for students (and staff) to flourish can be approached in a myriad of ways
- In the end it is simple – relationships, and adults who care and have time

Challenging excellence in childhood



There is nothing inherently wrong with excellence

Good schools encourage hard work and striving towards goals

Children need to learn resilience and grow into realistic expectations, falling short can be an effective teacher (with support)

Mediocrity can lead to the regret of unfulfilled potential

Too much choice can “water down” commitment and depth of experience

Some personalities veer towards excellence

I’m referring (from personal experience) to ‘forced excellence’ and unforgiving ‘cultures of excellence’

A few ‘case studies’



- Jelena Dokic’s (Australian tennis star) autobiography “Unbreakable”
- Dan Vickerman
- Mao’s Last Dancer, Li Cunxin who spoke at these conferences this year
- The “Hollywood” effect of childhood stardom
- The cauldrons of sport and media highlight a widespread problem, especially for child academic or musical prodigies;
- John Nunn, youngest Oxford graduate since the 16th C, chess grandmaster and author; *in my childhood we could play in the garden, there are too many conflicting claims on kid’s time now.*
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/may/15/child-geniuses-prodigies>
- Former students I have counselled and worse
- Students whom you are worried about

The Conversation

Alvin Rosenfeld, M.D., a child psychiatrist in, *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap*, writes;

"**Overscheduling** our children is not only a widespread phenomenon, it's how we parent today. Parents feel remiss that they're not being good parents if their kids aren't in all kinds of activities. **Children are under pressure to achieve**, to be competitive. I know sixth-graders who are already working on their résumés so they'll have an edge when they apply for college."



The School context

- Addiction to final exams
- School comparison tables
- Tyranny of timetables, bells, compressed days
- Funding models – results bring money
- Enough pressure just growing up in community
- Social media 24/7 comparisons
- Standardised testing and reporting dominate
- Busy/stressed teachers & admin's = busy/stressed kids
- Comments after service learning trips
- Difficulties faced by super high achievers later in life



The costs



- Increased stress levels, health of body, mind, soul
- Not enough time to play in a natural, creative way
- No relaxed enjoyable downtime with family members; come to see you perform
- Reduced self awareness, no time to fantasise or experiment with self discovery
- Friends from same “culture”, also stressed, often competitors
- Hard to take an interest in others, the world, get a perspective on life
- Driven by extrinsic rewards
- Post success issues, potential risk takers and ‘lost’, highly strung people (ABC Four Corners “After the Game” story on elite athletes in May this year)

Nicholson’s “Theory of Loose Parts”, 1972



‘In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.’

‘Children learn most readily and easily in environments where they can experiment, enjoy and find out things for themselves. It takes time and must not be pressured.’

Claire Warden and “Nature Pedagogy”; *An environment which is rich in open-ended and real materials (loose elements), invokes children to experiment, engage, construct and invent; invites them to tinker, to manipulate and to play. And it’s fun!*

<http://www.claire-warden.com/nature-pedagogy/>

What we might need to reclaim – even at school!

R – est awhile

E – asy does it

L – earn from nature

A – is for artistry rather than achievement

X – cel at doing nothing, after all we are human **beings** not human **doings**



Enjoy the rest of the conference

