



## The wellbeing of girls in high-performing single-sex schools

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American clinical psychologist, Dr Lisa Damour, recently wrote in *The New York Times* that girls are “hyper-conscientious” — that they “relentlessly grind, determined to leave no room for error”, not stopping “until they’ve polished each assignment to a high shine and rewritten their notes with color-coded precision”. On the other hand, boys do just enough work to get by and, as a consequence, develop confidence from seeing “how much they can accomplish simply by counting on their wits”. Damour’s advice to parents and teachers of girls includes to “stop praising inefficient overwork, even if it results in good grades”; encouraging girls to work out how to put in less effort but still get the same grades; and to “affirm for girls that it is normal and healthy to feel some anxiety about school”.

But what if this is not enough? What if, no matter how hard girls try not to be stressed or anxious, the system is stacked against them due to the unrelenting pressure of exams and assessments, with the assumed, indeed expected, end goal of a prestigious university course and high-paying career? What if we have designed an assessment regime where schools, parents and students are trapped by the never-ceasing and ever-escalating demands for excellence — including from the media which publishes annual league tables of high-performing schools — despite the growing body of evidence that points to a substantial decline in the mental welfare of all students, but particularly girls?

A 2017 study of Year 13 girls attending high-income, high-performing single-sex schools in New Zealand found that “the experience of these students is one of almost constant stress and pressure, with significant social, emotional, physical and mental consequences”. The study author, Nicky Whitham-Blackwell, stated that these pressures were exacerbated by over-assessment and badly-planned assessment timetables; inconsistencies in the administration and grading of New Zealand’s National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) for students in Years 11-13; and the stress of high expectations from all sides, including from school, parents, peers, and students themselves.

With five years’ experience as a Year 13 Dean in a high-performing girls’ school, Whitham-Blackwell was ideally placed to undertake a Master of Educational Leadership on this topic. Indeed, she writes, she was prompted to undertake her thesis after observing “a silent epidemic of mental health issues for some students in relation to the intense and constant pressure” of senior assessment.

Whitham-Blackwell approached nine girls’ schools to take part in this study, of which two large government high schools and one Catholic (state-integrated) school agreed to participate. In total, twenty-two students took part in five focus groups. In addition, four in-depth interviews were conducted with one student from School A, two from School B and one from School C. Whitham-Blackwell felt that this qualitative and student-centred approach was critical in moving beyond the statistics and attempting to understand the realities faced by students of high-performing girls’ schools.

All focus group participants were positive about assessment being spread out over the year so final results did not ride on one final exam. However, discussion quickly turned to negative aspects of assessment, including the pressure to take more credits or subjects than strictly needed for girls to achieve their goals, as well as the constant pressure to achieve top marks.

These responses centred around negative emotions; negative physical and mental consequences; negative social consequences; and a sense of “unmanageability”. Students described a constant feeling of stress and pressure; dreading going to school; feeling overwhelmed and frustrated; being anxious; engaging in negative self-talk; worrying about their marks; feeling vulnerable; and constantly worrying that they had “done something wrong”.

Some girls used words such as “terrifying” and “heartbreaking” to describe the stress of not receiving the grade they were aiming for. They described how this sense of failure affected their confidence, resulting in them crying in class because of disappointment or stress, which led them to feel embarrassed because they recognised that everything had fallen apart and they were unable to control their emotions. Whitham-Blackwell writes that “fear of failure” came up frequently with girls describing how the constant stress and pressure made them feel overwhelmed and powerless, like “preparing myself for an avalanche to fall down on top of me”.

Stress and pressure also impacted girls’ mental and physical health. Every student in every focus group reported the negative consequences of school on the amount and quality of sleep they were getting. Girls rarely had eight hours sleep per night, often staying up till after midnight or pulling all-nighters. Some girls relied on coffee to stay awake during the day, while others fell asleep during class. Lack of sleep also led to students getting sick, which meant missing school and, ironically, more stress and less sleep.

Some students reported being paralysed by stress or being diagnosed with anxiety and depression. One student, who said she had panic attacks and breathing problems when she was stressed and anxious, spoke about her older sister having a month off school after having a breakdown in Year 13. Students also reported panic attacks, migraines, stress headaches, nausea, stomach problems, and back problems. Eating well was also impacted with students so busy they regularly missed meals or ate unhealthily.

Unsurprisingly, writes Whitham-Blackwell, girls reported “a strong sense that what was expected of them was unmanageable”. Extra-curricular activities added to the burden of stress with students stating that they had no time for breaks or downtime where they could relax, exercise or just have free time. Girls’ relationships with their friends were dominated by talk about assessments or the pressure they were all under, and relationships with parents were virtually non-existent as they spent all their time at home in their rooms studying.

The constant pressure to be a high achiever also created feelings of inadequacy in students who felt they had failed if they did not receive top grades in every subject. These feelings were reinforced by schools’ emphasis on high achievers and past results in school assemblies and newsletters, as well as in external school communications. One student stated, “I worked my hardest but there are people who are so much better ... the threshold is always so high that it’s hard to match it, especially with the people who have come before us as well”.

Girls who took part in this study realised that the pressure to succeed resulted in a good public perception for the school but that, behind the scenes, students suffered stressful and pressured lives. Whitham-Blackwell writes that: “All focus groups talked about the contradictions they believed they experienced daily within schools, and how the school culture of success was both an aid in achieving high grades and a deterrent to wellbeing.”

Students at one school felt that their school culture emphasised results and appearances at the expense of student wellbeing, though they also reported positive relationships with deans and counsellors. Students at the other two schools were more appreciative of the support they received from counsellors, deans and teachers but “acknowledged that this support didn’t change the high-stress culture or the consequences of such a culture”.

Girls’ stated that only “some” teachers were aware of the stress they were under. Most seemed only aware of their own subject’s workload and failed to take account of other subjects having the same workload. Girls said that they wished more teachers were empathetic and supportive, rather than simply being told that they needed to “prioritise”. In fact, girls perceived that when a teacher told them to prioritise, what they really meant was that they should prioritise the teacher’s subject and that they did not like it when students prioritised another subject over their own.

Even when staff were aware of the stress girls were under, students believed that many did not do anything to help change things. Some students reported feeling unsupported in their attempts to try and “stay sane or balanced”, even when their parents supported their decisions. Rather, girls felt that although their school talked a lot about wellbeing, it was really only interested in how high-achieving students could contribute to the “school brand”.

Whitham-Blackwell’s recommendations include that:

- schools should urgently address the wellbeing of students by looking at school systems which add to student stress and anxiety, including “timetabling and quantity of assessments to avoid over-assessing and over-burdening students”,
- “school leaders reframe their expectations about what it means to be a successful school and to include wellbeing criteria in what they measure”, and
- governments should “overtly publicise their concerns about assessment overload and student wellbeing”, as well as providing more practical advice and ideas for reducing over-assessment and creating more balanced school environments.

This was a small research project based on twenty-two participants from three girls’ schools (two government and one Catholic) in New Zealand, and it is possible that students self-selected into the study based on their concern about the level of stress and pressure they perceived they were under. However, international research demonstrates that students around the world report feeling pressured by constant academic stress. Rates of anxiety and depression are worse for girls, particularly for those from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds. In addition, this study probes behind the statistics to provide a rare and valuable insight into the thoughts and feelings of girls struggling to cope with the demands of a high-pressure school environment where, at least in their perception, academic success is valued over all else, including mental wellbeing.

## References

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