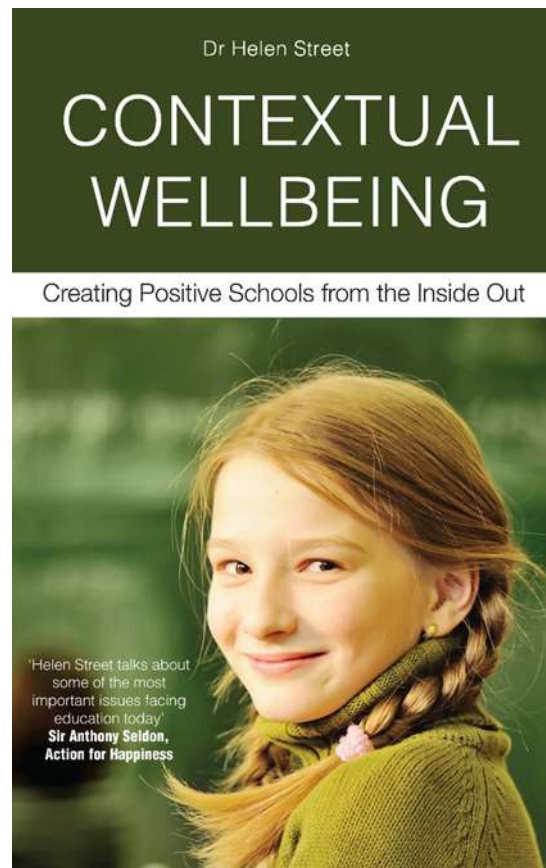


# Contextual Wellbeing

*Creating Positive Schools from the Inside Out*

Helen Street PhD



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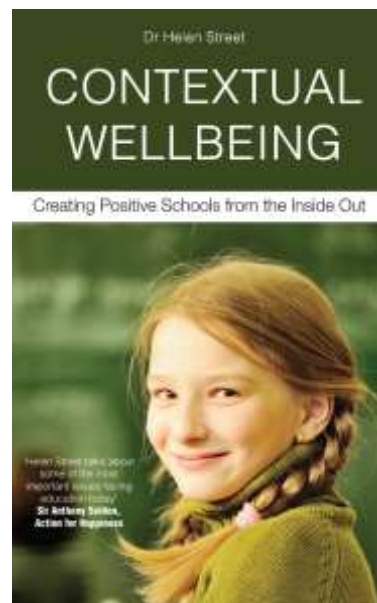
WISE SOLUTIONS BOOKS

Published by Wise Solutions Pty Ltd

PO Box 634, Subiaco, WA 6904, Australia

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First published by Wise Solutions 2018

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## Chapter Four: Creative Learning – when less is more

CURRENT EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE  
STEMS FROM AN OUTCOME FOCUS,  
WHERE THE PURSUIT OF  
EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS IS VIEWED  
AS A RACE TO GET THE HIGHEST  
GRADES YOU CAN. THIS OUTCOME  
FOCUS OPERATES ON MISGUIDED  
PRINCIPLES SUGGESTING THAT WE  
LEARN MORE IF WE START EARLIER,  
WORK HARDER, AND WORK  
FASTER. TRUE WELLBEING OCCURS  
WHEN PLAY AND CREATIVITY ARE  
ALSO PRIORITISED IN LEARNING.



The pursuit of educational success is often viewed as a race to get the highest grades, as fast as possible. We have come to believe that our kids will achieve the most academically if they get started on numeracy and literacy as early as possible, work as hard as they can throughout their school years, and take repeated tests to gain ‘practice’ at achieving desirable outcomes.

Most western education systems are based on this outcome focus and suffer badly because of it. In fact, it is a poor road to academic success, which makes it all the more tragic that its continued existence is proving so detrimental to the healthy social and emotional development of young people.

Effective education can far more usefully be viewed as an ongoing process built on a foundation of self-discovery and a connection with learning that is both broad and deep. Schools need to allow young people the time and energy to develop the foundation they need to engage with learning effectively. True education begins with the opportunity to develop self-direction, curiosity, symbolism and passion for learning. In short, *schools need to step back from structured outcome driven teaching and take free time, play and creativity more seriously.*

Free time is not ‘time out from education’ – it is a vital path to adult happiness and life success. Wellbeing and self-determination begin within a context that values play in and of itself.

For many people, to embrace the importance of play is a challenge to entrenched thinking. For example, a friend of mine recently invited one of her son’s friends for an afterschool play date. Both children are in grade five at their local state primary school. But the friend was unable to accept, for the reason that he was booked in for structured afterschool activities from Monday to Friday, followed by homework, dinner and bed. Another of my friends invited a seven-year-old girl to play with her daughter, also seven. This child too was unable to accept as she was attending a ‘high achievers’ program that day, a program that offers tutoring in literacy and numeracy out of school time. This seven year old was not experiencing any academic difficulties at school, quite the opposite in fact, she was a very capable girl.

I would hazard a guess that the parents of these busy children believe it is better to be an ‘A’ grade student than a ‘B’ grade, and that if their children can be ‘A’ grade students from the word go, they will be ahead of the game in school, and in life.

Certainly, we can see these parents’ reasoning. We reward and honour ‘A’ grade students in so many different ways, it is understandable if well-intentioned parents have learnt that school is an educational race and consequently want their children to be ‘winners’ rather than ‘losers’. I find it more than a little depressing when schools perpetuate these inequitable, unsupported ideas about life success.

Even more depressing is the fact that children brought up in this ethos are likely to reach the end of high school with no sense of connection to the process of learning. They are more likely to choose a career based on others’ notions of status or success, not on any particular passion of their own. A life full of outcome-focused learning leaves scant opportunity to find or develop passions of your own.

These hard-working children are also more likely to reach the end of high school needing the approval of others to feel all right about themselves, feeling driven but despondent and disconnected from their own lives. And when these children fail to get that desirable ‘A’ grade, they may well experience a sense of failure far beyond that of their less driven peers. A race for success that focuses so single-mindedly on academic pursuits is a ‘one horse’ race. It can result in social approval but leaves little room for autonomy or self-discovery.

Kids too busy to play appear to be rapidly becoming the norm among the middle-class masses. But even when kids do have free time, they are more likely now to spend it interacting with a screen in a passive, reactive way rather than spending time creatively alone or with friends.

On top of this has come a flurry of books extolling the benefits of introducing academic skills from an early age, a message which is avidly read by parents fearful for their kids’ survival in the competitive world around them – fears that are exacerbated by news reports of Australia’s ‘struggling’ academic record. This fear is exemplified in those areas of the UK that still stream kids for entry into high school, where many parents believe that their child cannot gain that golden ticket to the more academic grammar schools without extra tuition. As one

parent said to me, ‘The only way for them to learn the right stuff to pass the entry exam is to see a specialised tutor out of school hours.’

And in the southern hemisphere, it appears that Asia is rapidly cornering the market in academic achievement. This all too easily leads to the belief that the only chance of success comes with extra tuition. Who will extol the benefits of play?

Parents get all too easily caught up in this race for elusive achievement, and are left feeling inadequate if they bring up their children without extra tutoring and structured activities. It is almost considered neglectful to encourage children to entertain themselves at the weekend or let them simply hang out with their friends.

Yet parents the world over want their children to be happy. The desire of some parents to turn their children into grade-driven workers is typically based on the assumption that happiness comes from academic accomplishment, which itself is the result of hard work, competition and practice.

It sounds logical, doesn't it? But in reality, this all-encompassing emphasis on structured and organised activity is far from a recipe for happiness and wellbeing. In fact, it is being found to have detrimental effects on young people's happiness and on their acquisition of life skills.

In an article entitled ‘The Test Chinese Schools Still Fail’ in the *Wall Street Journal* in December 2010,<sup>1</sup> Chinese education expert Jiang Xueqin observed that, ‘the failings of a rote-memorisation system are well known: lack of social and practical skills, absence of self-discipline and imagination, loss of curiosity and passion for learning.’ The more we try to adopt China's belief in working so hard to learn academic content, the more we mirror these issues in our children and young adults.

Increasing numbers of studies are identifying significant links between the amount of free time a society allows its children, and the mental health of its young people (e.g. Gray, 2011).<sup>2</sup> Extra schooling and extracurricular activities take away important free time for self-directed behaviour, play and creativity. This equates to greater rates of depression and anxiety in our kids, along with an increasing inability to self-regulate emotions, think creatively, and make self-determined decisions in later life.

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## Playing to Win

University of Cambridge researcher David Whitebread has written frequently about the detrimental effect of starting formal education too soon. In his 2012 report on the importance of play,<sup>3</sup> he describes the vital role of free play in the development of learning and problem solving, citing studies which show that superior learning and motivation arise from free play as opposed to instructional approaches to learning. He also cites longitudinal studies showing that children obtain better academic, motivational and wellbeing outcomes if they engage in pre-school play-based programs. Similarly, Amita Gupta's 2009 research stresses the centrality of play to healthy child development.<sup>4</sup>

Research is telling us that creativity appears to be declining in children as a result of being exposed to earlier structured approaches to education. This decline in creativity is occurring along with a rise in mental health issues and loss of self-directed engagement in learning. For example, in the UK, educator and author Sir Ken Robinson has reported that creative elaboration (the ability to take an idea and expand on it in an interesting and novel way) is declining significantly.<sup>5 6</sup> This is especially worrying, because creative elaboration is a better predictor of real world achievements than IQ scores or high school grades.

David Whitebread reports research showing that children who start formal literacy studies at age seven (year two) as opposed to age four or five (pre-primary) are more likely to read for pleasure at age eleven and more likely to comprehend the text they are reading.<sup>7 8</sup> There is, in fact, no positive association between reading achievement and school starting age; moreover, those who start formal learning later appear to end up happier, more motivated and more in tune with what they are doing and where they are heading.

It seems that our fears of failure in our developed society have led us into a frenzy of trying to give our kids a head start that is no start at all.

David Whitebread, along with many other play experts, have found that kids learn many of the vital ingredients of a successful social, emotional and academic life by simply being left to play and be creative. They learn how to get along with each other – they do not tolerate tantrums in other kids. They learn how to self-regulate and deal with their own emotions and

how to engage in their passions. They learn skills for modern day survival and how to foster their creativity.

It should be of little surprise that there is an inverse relationship between time spent playing with others and bullying behaviours. In *Free to Learn*,<sup>9</sup> Peter Gray describes how traditional hunter-gatherer societies – which encourage endless free play, all the way to late adolescence – experience an almost complete lack of bullying among their children and among their adults. Their kids have learnt how to get along with each other and how to empathise and understand each other.

I am not advocating that we forget formal education and let our kids simply play until adulthood. Rather I do believe that it is vital that we pull in the reins on our expectations of formal structured teaching. Kids, especially young kids, need time for free unstructured social play and unstructured creativity. They need time to be bored and to beat boredom. Time to find a way to engage in life and learn skills for themselves.

### The Benefits of Putting Less Time into Structured Teaching

Free time can be found for young children simply by delaying the start of structured education until age seven, as is the case in many educationally successful countries. This doesn't mean that kids don't start school until age seven, but that early school should be about genuine opportunities for play and creativity. We have to stop thinking of the early years of school as an opportunity to enter kids into the race for academic outcomes.

In 2004, Till Roenneberg and colleagues found that teenagers experience a different 24-hour cycle to younger children and adults, which determines that they naturally benefit from waking later in the day.<sup>10</sup> This means that when children reach adolescence, they find it hard to get up for an early school start – not because they are lazy, but because they are wired to start their day later.<sup>11</sup> They are unable to adjust their inner clock to an early start and continually struggle with being overtired. Early rises can be experienced like relentless jet lag to your average teenager. Thus, they benefit enormously from a later start to the day.

Children and young people of all ages benefit from regular 'brain breaks' during class time. Brain breaks are brief physical activities involving collaboration and fun that provide a five-minute break from sitting down and formal learning. The idea was pioneered by Eric Jensen



in 2000,<sup>12</sup> and is based on the positive relationship between moving regularly and learning effectively. Jensen found that brain breaks boost circulation and brain activity. Other researchers have found that regular brain breaks increase cognitive functioning, motivation and engagement, and overall academic performance.

In fact, there are so many benefits to taking regular short breaks it seems nonsensical that they are not already a part of everyday practice in every school.

Teachers may protest that they do not have time to ‘disrupt the class’ with a clapping game or a round of Chinese whispers, but any teacher who has embraced brain breaks will tell you how they have been struck by the positive change in the energy in the classroom. Brain breaks reduce disruptive behaviour and improve the focus and social behaviour of the students. These short and simple opportunities to have fun not only create more time for effective teaching and learning, they improve class engagement and class outcomes. In this way, they also contribute to class cohesion.

Even during more structured class time, an understanding of the dynamics of play and creativity can improve both teaching and learning experiences. An interesting study by Karen McInnes and colleagues in Scotland explored the ingredients of play as perceived by children playing in classroom settings.<sup>13</sup> They found that for an activity to be classified as playful, it required elements of choice and control. This suggests that teachers of children of all ages could make their classes more playful simply by increasing the amount of choice and control the students have over their learning. This could be done as easily as letting primary school students choose the order of morning activities or high school students choose the order of topics covered over the term. It could mean letting students of all ages have choice and control over seating, or project decisions, or ways of collaborative learning.

Creative teaching involves including students in decisions about how best to find the answers to questions in any given subject area. Taken a step further, creative education encourages students to identify the best questions to ask on any given topic. The more choice and control students have over their learning, the more ownership they will feel and therefore the more motivated and engaged they will be. Their learning will be a positive and creative experience.

Creativity, collaboration, choice and control are vital components of successful academic education, perhaps the most vital components of all.

### The Truth about Homework

One of the biggest drains on young people's opportunity for self-determined creativity, choice and control, is homework. Yet, nearly all mainstream schools across the developed world insist on some amount of homework, especially for older kids and teens. Indeed, while primary school children in Australia may receive minimal homework, the majority of high school students receive between one and three hours of homework four or five days a week, every week of the term.

Anyone could be forgiven for thinking that such a mainstream and prevalent practice must be based on a foundation of solid research but, in the case of traditional forms of homework at least, this is simply not so.

There are several great literature reviews on homework, including the 2014 Victorian Department of Education report which provides a great overview of current empirical research.<sup>14</sup> The 130 plus studies reviewed in the report explore the impact of homework on learning outcomes, on parental involvement in children's learning and on nurturing independence in students.

Findings vary, but some definite trends emerge from the data. Overall, there is minimal support for the belief that setting traditional forms of homework for primary school children will improve long-term learning outcomes. It seems that primary school kids are far better off spending any spare time out of school enjoying exercise; after all kids are very much made to move. It is also essential for young people to have time for self-directed activities and creative projects. After all, kids of all ages learn and develop autonomy through self-directed pursuits, drawing on and developing choice and control as they go.

Results concerning the benefits of homework for high school students are more diverse. For a start there are more factors to consider, such as the range of subjects studied, the variation in homework approach and content, and the time and effort put into doing the work. Even so, there is a strong tendency across the research indicating the ineffectiveness of homework in improving learning outcomes, particularly project-based homework. There is better support

for homework that involves practising skills and strategies learned in class, for instance in maths homework, which has been found to be more effective than homework for other subjects.

Overall, even with the limited support for some high school homework that has been identified in some studies (extremely sketchy compared to the lack of support evinced by so many other studies), it appears that young people spend a lot of time and emotional energy for very questionable benefit.

Certainly, the homework debate is not a new one, with some medical doctors as far back as the 1920s arguing that children were not getting enough fresh air and sunshine due to the demands of homework. For more than a hundred years, there have been many researchers arguing that homework should be banned from schools, or at least reduced.<sup>15</sup>

Many reviews of the literature emphasise the lack of any educational value of homework in primary schools (e.g. Victorian Department of Education report, 2014).<sup>16</sup> Some published research considers the stress and distress created as parents and children battle each other over tasks and time (e.g. Idit Katz and colleagues, 2012).<sup>17</sup> While many concerned parents clash with their children over neglected assignments, some give in and complete the homework for their resistant loved ones themselves. I am fairly sure that the long-term benefit of repeatedly handing in homework that has been completed by your parents is minimal.

Other studies talk about the lack of equity due to variations in home environments (e.g., Marte Rønning, 2011).<sup>18</sup> The experience of homework is certainly significantly impacted by the social and economic status of families. Some children will take their homework back to educated parents and homes that are filled with learning spaces. Others go home to care for unwell parents or younger siblings or may have parents who are largely absent due to work demands or constraining social issues.

In 2012, the significant impact of social and financial inequality evident in homework outcomes fuelled a major educational debate in France,<sup>19</sup> and President Francois Hollande proposed that homework cease for all primary and middle school students. It appears that a universal homework ban in France did not eventuate at that time. However, the topic was

revisited again in 2017 when the new minister for education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, announced a plan to stop homework being done at home to ensure less inequity and reduce stress put on family time.<sup>20</sup> Blanquer put this plan into action with the insistence that all state schools organise after-hours clubs for additional classwork, run by retired or practising teachers or university students.

In 2011 the Los Angeles Unified School District attempted to reduce the contribution of homework to a maximum of 10% of a student's grade.<sup>21</sup> Sadly, at least for the future of Californian school children, public support for homework resulted in this figure being set at 20%.<sup>22</sup>

Some Californian schools have bucked the trend and banned homework altogether, mainly in primary schools, whereas others have increased it and even cancelled morning breaks. Ron Schachter reported in his article 'The End of Recess'<sup>23</sup> that up to 40% of school districts in California had reduced or eliminated recess in order to free more time for academic learning. There is still a very long way to go before educational practice comes into line with current knowledge and understanding.

Of greatest note is Finland's universal educational reform.<sup>24 25 26</sup> Free time now constitutes a significant element of individual growth and learning in all Finnish schools. Homework is generally practice based, rather than project based, and frequently completed at school rather than taken home. In addition, every class must be followed by a 15-minute break, so children can spend time outside on their own activities. School days are also shorter in Finland than in most other developed countries. This means that students have more time for family, creativity, sport and socialising with friends.

The Finnish approach to education has contributed to great academic, social and emotional outcomes for its students,<sup>27</sup> who consistently score near the top in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) for reading, mathematics and science. The 2015 PISA results ranked Finland number five in these three areas combined, out of 70 participating countries. Singapore came in at first place, Australia at 14, the UK at 15, and the US trailed behind at 21.

It has been suggested that Finland's impressive results are due to the fact that the language is largely phonically based, so that words are pronounced as they are spelled. This is

undoubtedly an advantage when it comes to reading and writing, but a glance at PISA math results alone finds Finland at a healthy 13th place compared to Australia at 25 and the UK at 27, while the US lies at the bottom half of the table at 40th place.<sup>28</sup>

Finland's competitive results have also been attributed to its low rate of child poverty compared with the UK and the US: Finland faces fewer poverty related issues in schools compared to its peers. Still, having a user-friendly language and financial resources can only get you so far in the pursuit of academic excellence. In fact, Finland lagged behind other countries before the country embraced its radical educational reform, suggesting strongly that it is increased *equity* along with increased creativity and relinquishing competition that have contributed to such positive outcomes.

While its PISA rankings are evidence of academic success, Finland's comprehensive approach to education has led to increased equity for all students. In fact, Finnish educational reform was driven by a desire for equity, not a desire to raise academic outcomes. Unlike other top academic performers, Finland is also reporting high levels of school satisfaction and low levels of student anxiety. In fact, the latest OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) results show that Finnish people report greater levels of satisfaction than the majority of other countries surveyed, coming in at tenth place in a survey of OECD countries in 2016.<sup>29</sup>

There is no denying Finland's phenomenal and highly successful education turnaround. They have become exemplary educational leaders advocating for equity, holistic education and greater freedom for all young people.

I believe that when we think about the value of homework or other forms of structured education, we need to determine not just what is gained from the homework itself, but how it impacts on family and school life. What might the student be doing with their time otherwise?

The opportunity to spend quality family time over shared meals and shared activities is invaluable, as is the time to read a great story to a primary school child, enjoy a family barbecue, or share a coffee with a teenager. More free time also means that children are free to be independently doing other things, without the background stress of looming school

tasks. If they are passionate readers, into sport or art, or busy creating any project of worth, reducing homework can only enhance their overall educational experience.

Of course, if your teenage daughter or son would be spending that extra five hours a week on social media or watching reality dating shows, then the idea of time spent on homework suddenly seems a better one. This makes me think that the real issue is not so much whether homework is a good idea or a bad one, but rather, what we consider a good use of a young person's time to be. Homework could be turned to supporting home life, for example asking children to spend time 'helping a parent with chores' or coming up with a 'new topic to be discussed over dinner'. 'Homework' then rightfully becomes about improving life 'at home'.

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### CHAPTER FOUR

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