

How do the experience of young people at school affect how healthy a lifestyle they adopt?

It is becoming more and more apparent that one of the biggest problems facing young people in the UK today in terms of health is not physical but mental. While there are countless factors in the development of existing conditions, social environment - particularly the academic environment and teenagers surroundings are crucial variables and one of the reasons so many struggle with problems such as anxiety, depression and stress.

To put the problem into perspective, currently, 75% of mental illnesses begin before a child reaches 18 years old and 50% begin in school before the age of 15. 10% of school children have a diagnosable mental illness and suicide is the biggest killer of young people in multiple countries. It's no surprise when you consider that anxiety levels in teens have been recorded higher than 1950's mental asylum patients.

I believe, and will explore- that education systems in countries like England, America and similar models are partly to blame for the huge increase in mental health issues. To truly understand how education systems affect mental health among adolescents it's important to compare varying countries and how the culture they create for teenagers benefits or disadvantages the demographic most affected by schooling.

Two countries with the highest teen suicide rates and worst mental health records are Japan and South Korea- both with incredibly similar education methods. While both countries schools receive excellent results on paper, recent investigation has revealed that there is certainly a price to impressive numbers.

In Japan, free time is limited and restricted within schools. Class hours are long- some cram schools finish as late as 10:00. This restriction of break time leaves students with no time to practise the things they genuinely enjoy and become individuals with passions of their own. Regarding this, the system also focuses primarily on an academic subject such as maths and science with little provision for creativity. Culture and government are closely linked in the education system and as a result, schools require 'modesty' among students in the form of self-criticism sessions. Similarly, in South Korea, the system encourages competition and criticises student that comes in second place to others. In my view, this attitude largely contributes to self- esteem is at record lows in both countries, a large number of students struggling with self-worth and mental health issues that come hand in hand with low self- esteem.

Both governments pressurize students to perform excellently in numerous standardized tests requiring hours of revision and contributing to merciless league tables of both individuals and schools. Parents often pay thousands for tuition in the later stages of education which adds another burden to students shoulders. While the hard, stressful systems I have researched may produce high results on paper- the reality of first-hand accounts reveal that the students trapped within them are depressed, anxious and overworked.

In a huge contrast- I also examined the education systems of Norway and Finland; the two countries with some of the best mental health records (particularly in youths,) in the world and currently rated the 'happiest' countries in Europe.

Contrary to Japan's methods, Finland stresses cooperation over competition and even different schools collaborate- creating a true sense of community rather than rivalry. In addition, private schools are banned and higher education is paid for by the government- further reducing pressure on students that would otherwise be restricted in their choice of schools or worried about student debt.

Furthermore, students have regular breaks and extended the free time in both countries after studies proved that regular recess helped performance and wellbeing. In Norway, homework is reduced and there are no official grades or standardized tests until the age of 13- only verbal, personal feedback is received from teachers.

This is another method that reduces much of the stress and anxiety surrounding ability that students in Japan, South Korea and Britain face. Creative subjects are held in high regard and valued as much as more academic activities. I believe this allows pupils to be more individual and truly practise what they excel at and enjoy. England is the only country within the European Union that has league tables for schools and still pits private and state schools against each other- extending the competition to class and resources.

Despite the advantages to the Norwegian and Finnish systems that I've outlined above, the British government consciously tries to replicate aspects of the Japanese system and ignores the evidence suggesting reform. In this country, we strive for the same academic results as countries like South Korea without considering the consequences for our youth. There seems to be more reason for reform than continuing trying to assimilate ourselves with academically excellent countries when places like Norway and Finland receive just as impressive results.

Individuality and self-expression rely on an environment that discourages peer pressure and conformity. Children feeling comfortable in themselves and their surroundings need a society that doesn't emphasise competition and promotes collaboration. However, in this country teenagers are nearly always under academic or social pressure.

It seems as though young people are trying to please too many people at once; too rebellious and parents with teachers punish, not rebellious enough and peers will mock. It is a cultural and societal issue that teenagers see themselves as not quite enough of anything or too much of everything.

Where these emotions come into play and expression is limited, mental health begins to decline. The result of the double standards adolescents face and the constant pressure to perform well within our education system is an alienation, isolation of individuals and a rise in depression, anxiety and stress. The fact I reiterate is that over 75% of mental health issues begin before 18 and that is all the correlation I need to conclude that the education system is one of the main factors in so many children struggling. The differences between education systems across Europe and other countries compared to the standards of the British model highlights the relevance and links between a child's education and their general wellbeing.

Having concluded my thoughts on the difference in education systems and issues with the society our schooling creates the fact remains that mental health in schools is a double-edged sword for several reasons.

Schools across the country are the only places where adolescents receive any education or aid involving mental health and the only environment that has accessible means for children to seek help when they need it.

Nurse drop-ins and counsellors within school staff often talk through and help students with their issues during school time. Sometimes these people are the only provision available for pupils struggling and the provision for a problem school likely creates is within itself. Teachers are also the ablest to give direction and make suggestions for students experiencing things like anxiety and stress because they are with the child for a large portion of the day.

Schools are also one of the places where children can learn about mental health and become equipped to deal with experiences later in their lives. Activity and intervention days along with PSHE lessons are of the few vessels available for learning about mental health and removing some stigma within the youth community.

However, for educational wellbeing to truly improve I think more lessons, interventions and provision is needed. PSHE lessons usually only happen weekly and for mental health to be covered fully and children to learn about coping techniques, what to do if they experience mental health problems and the massive range of issues so many people face, more curriculum time has to be dedicated to it.

Students should learn about concerning issues they will come into contact with; eating disorders, depression, stress and others adolescents will almost definitely come into contact with should be more widely and commonly talked about as part of a curriculum to prepare adolescents for life.

Reform in our system, to model places like Norway and Finland, is, in my view, the best route to take for the benefit of our youth population. Ultimately, changes to our education system would result in better performance and wellbeing for students across the country.

Meanwhile- educational environments and curriculums need to incorporate further education on mental illness and the reality of so many existing conditions. In short, schools, with the government as a whole, need to address rather than paper over a problem they are creating.

With curriculum and system reform concerning the mental wellbeing of young people everywhere, I hope mental health problems brought on by our current environment will be reduced- for the good of the generation that is our future.