



Editorial

Schools are not just places where students acquire academic skills; they also help students become more resilient in the face of adversity, feel more connected with the people around them, and aim higher in their aspirations for their future. Not least, schools are the first place where children experience society in all its facets, and those experiences can have a profound influence on students' attitudes and behaviour in life.

PISA is best known for its data on learning outcomes, but it also studies students' satisfaction with life, their relationships with peers, teachers and parents, and how they spend their time outside of school. PISA results show that students differ greatly, both between and within countries, in how satisfied they are with their life, their motivation to achieve, how anxious they feel about their schoolwork, their expectations for the future, and their perceptions of being bullied at school or treated unfairly by their teachers. Students in some of the countries that top the PISA league tables in science and mathematics reported comparatively low satisfaction with life; but Finland, the Netherlands and Switzerland seem able to combine good learning outcomes with highly satisfied students.

It is tempting to equate low levels of life satisfaction among students in East Asia or elsewhere to long study hours, but the data show no relationship between the time students spend studying, whether in or outside of school, and their satisfaction with life. And while educators often argue that anxiety is the natural consequence of testing overload, the frequency of tests is also unrelated to students' level of schoolwork-related anxiety.

There are other factors that make a difference to student well-being, and much comes down to teachers, parents and schools.

For a start, PISA finds that one major threat to students' sense of belonging at school is their perception of negative relationships with their teachers. Happier students tended to report positive relations with their teachers. Students in "happy" schools (schools where students' life satisfaction is above the average in the country) reported much greater support from their teachers than did students in "unhappy" schools.

This is important. Teenagers look for strong social ties and value acceptance, care and support from others. Adolescents who feel that they are part of a school community are more likely to perform better academically and be more motivated in school.

Of course, most teachers care about having positive relationships with their students; but some teachers may be insufficiently prepared to deal with difficult students and classroom environments. A stronger focus on classroom and relationship management in professional development may give teachers better means to connect with their students. Teachers should also be better supported to collaborate and exchange information about students' difficulties, character and strengths with their colleagues.

On average across OECD countries, 59% of students reported that they often worry that taking a test will be difficult, and 66% reported that they worry about poor grades. Some 55% of students say they are very anxious for a test even if they are well prepared. In all countries, girls reported greater schoolwork-related anxiety than boys; and anxiety about schoolwork, homework and tests is negatively related to performance.



PISA suggests that there is much teachers can do about this too. Students were less likely to report anxiety if the science teacher provides individual help when they are struggling. Teachers need to know how to help students develop a good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, and an awareness of what they can do to mitigate those weaknesses. The design of assessments matters too. More frequent assessments that start with easier goals and gradually increase in difficulty can also help build students' sense of control, as can opportunities for students to demonstrate their skills in low-stakes tests before taking an assessment that counts.

Parents can make a big difference too. Students whose parents reported "spending time just talking to my child", "eating the main meal with my child around a table" or "discussing how well my child is doing at school" regularly were between 22% and 39% more likely to report high levels of life satisfaction. "Spending time just talking" is the parental activity most frequently and most strongly associated with students' life satisfaction. And it seems to matter for performance too: students whose parents reported "spending time just talking" were two-thirds of a school year ahead in science learning; and even after accounting for socio-economic status, the advantage remains at one-third of a school year.

Students' perceptions of how interested their parents are in them and in their school life is also related to their own attitudes towards education and their motivation to study. Those relationships are particularly strong among low-performing students – and stronger than the impact of most school resources and other factors measured by PISA.

Parents can help children manage test anxiety by encouraging them to trust in their ability to accomplish various academic tasks. PISA results show that girls who perceive that their parents encourage them to be confident in their abilities were less likely to report that they feel tense when they study.

Most parents also want their children to be motivated at school, and motivated students tend to do better at school. On average, students who are among the most motivated score the equivalent of more than one school year higher in PISA than the least-motivated students. Achievement motivation is also related to life satisfaction in a mutually reinforcing way.

But there can also be downsides to achievement motivation, particularly when it is a response to external pressure. PISA results show that countries where students are highly motivated to achieve also tend to be the countries where many students feel anxious about a test, even if they are well prepared for it. Both teachers and parents need to find ways to encourage students' motivation to learn and achieve without generating an excessive fear of failure.

All in all, a clear way to promote students' well-being is for schools to encourage all parents to be more involved with their child's school life. If parents and teachers establish relationships based on trust, schools can rely on parents as valuable partners in the cognitive and socio-emotional education of their students. Schools can also do a lot to help parents overcome barriers to participation in school activities related to inflexible work schedules, lack of childcare services or language. They can open flexible channels of communication, such as scheduled phone or video calls. Governments can also take action by promoting work-life balance policies.

PISA 2015 asked students how much time they spend on line and how they feel when they are engaged in online activities. Across OECD countries, most students agreed that "the Internet is a great resource for obtaining information" (88%) and that "it is very useful to have social networks on the Internet" (84%). The data also show that most students enjoy using various digital devices and the Internet, but some students are at risk of excessive Internet use. On average, 26% of students reported that they spend more than six hours per day on line during weekends, and 16% spend a similar amount of time on line during weekdays. In most participating countries, extreme Internet use – more than six hours per day – has a negative relationship with students' life satisfaction and engagement at school. And with cyberbullying on the rise, the Internet can be as much a source of harassment as a tool for learning.

There are no quick fixes for the risks of the digital era, but schools can create opportunities for students to use the Internet more responsibly, and develop clear prevention and response plans to counter cyberbullying.

Perhaps the most distressing threat to students' well-being is bullying, and it can have serious consequences for the victim, the bully and bystanders. PISA highlights a significant prevalence of all forms of bullying. On average across OECD countries, around 11% of students reported that they are frequently (at least a few times per month) made fun of, 7% reported that they are frequently left out of things, and 8% reported that they are frequently the object of nasty rumours in school. Around 4% of students – roughly one per class – reported that they are hit or pushed at least a few times per month, a percentage that varies from 1% to 9.5% across countries. Another 8% of students reported they are physically bullied a few times per year.

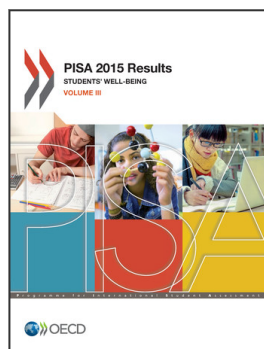


There is no one-size-fits-all approach to preventing bullying. What emerges clearly from the PISA data, however, is that schools must do more to foster an environment of safety, tolerance and respect for children. A co-ordinated, international analysis of existing strategies and support mechanisms can shed light on what schools can do in the difficult struggle to assure students' safety at school, and what national and local authorities and services can do to support schools in this effort. Anti-bullying programmes must include training for teachers on how to handle bullying and strategies to engage with parents. Teachers need to communicate to students that they will not tolerate any form of bullying; and parents need to be involved in responses to bullying. In fact, being a victim of bullying is less frequently reported among students who said that their parents support them when they face difficulties at school. And yet, only 44% of the parents of frequently bullied students reported that they had exchanged ideas about the child's development with teachers over the previous academic year.

The challenges to students' well-being are many, and there are no simple solutions. But the findings from PISA show how teachers, schools and parents can make a real difference. Together they can attend to students' psychological and social needs and help them develop a sense of control over their future and the resilience they need to be successful in life.

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