



Pressure, Pressure, Pressure...

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From the Schoolwork Page

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▶ Thoughts and biblical reflections from a schools worker for exam time

Even though I sat my GCSE exams nearly 10 years ago, I still remember it like it was yesterday. Lining up in alphabetical order of surnames, the walk to the hall, and the clean sheets of lined paper which I knew had to be full in a couple of hours. We are in a season where thousands of teenagers, ones you work with, have been and will be sitting exams, with the intention of giving them greater opportunities for a fuller life. For youth and schools workers, there are several things to consider during this time, including the attendance of youth clubs and projects dropping fairly significantly.

Since leaving school and becoming a youth worker, I have witnessed the education system from an entirely different perspective. From consoling high-achievers who buckle under the pressure of gaining 10 A*'s, to those who will struggle to even find short term employment leaving school with no grades to their name, I've found it is a significant learning journey for young people who experience pressure in schools today. Regardless of the individual, teachers or school, the pressure for young people to achieve today is greater than ever.

This shift in pressure does not start with the student, but very often from the pressure put upon schools themselves. League tables – lists of schools published annually, illustrate the "quality" of schools by their examination results, giving one perspective of where schools sit in comparison to others. Teacher's roles have undergone a major shift as a result of the league table competition, which Mark Greene recognises in his book *Supporting Christians in Education* (LICC 2007). He acknowledges that it is not only pupils who are under pressure to perform. Teachers are under more pressure than ever; with more preparation and paper work to complete, higher targets are set to maintain standards of schools, in order for them to remain in competition with one another.

The fact that teachers are under such pressure will automatically increase that put upon students. Volumes of homework and the expectations of every student to achieve the best results, perhaps challenges the phrase "school days are the best of your lives". Significant changes the education system has faced (the abolishment of the tripartite system, the introduction of the national curriculum in 1988, and development of comprehensive schools) have shifted emphasis from simple transference of knowledge, the "didactic" model where education was un-complicated and formulaic, to the "critical" model, where students are required to explore, question, and formulate truths for themselves. The critical model has certainly proved to complicate learning, making it far more time consuming and pressurising for students. Education authorities should be challenged by the little time they encourage to rest and play, as research carried out by the NSPCC in 2007 showed that a third (34%) of children and young people questioned were always worried about something, with the highest of their worries being school work. A significant minority, more than 1 in 10 (11%), were extremely worried.

This statistic is an accurate reflection of young people I work with; I regularly find myself consoling teenagers under pressure with school work, often in fear that their best will never be good enough.

I am frequently challenged by the tension of supporting young people during this busy time. On one hand, exams matter: they can be a passport to accessing a fuller life. But equally, with a changing society and from a broader perspective, they aren't the "be all and end all". In the Bible there is little mention of education or exams, with most aspects of learning being directed towards lifestyle principles. However one model that is mentioned is Jehoshaphat's reign in Judah (2 Chronicles 17), and the national program of religious education that he instigated. At the time, the people of Judah were biblically illiterate, had little understanding about God's law, and how it could change them. Jehoshaphat became aware that knowing God's commands is the first step for getting people to live as they should (which during his father Asa's reign they hadn't been – he was a man of many mistakes), and therefore established the religious education program. After sending out his officials to teach in Judah, he started to see the fruit of his teaching. The religious decline was reversed by putting God first in the people's minds, and encouraging them to be missional and committed people. Because of this notion of education, the nation changed and began to follow God.

This passage in Chronicles is one that doesn't appear too often in teaching within church. It is however a useful tool to reflect on education, particularly with regard to enabling young people to understand the benefits of education. In spite of this, because education is not a common theme that runs through the Bible, there is very little that is mentioned in dealing with the pressures that may be experienced within exams. Youth and schools workers don't have the authority to stop or change the pressures faced within education, certainly imminently, but do have the capacity to help young people change attitudes towards their work, and have the responsibility to interpret Biblical themes to their young people to support them through their learning. Ephesians 6 v 5 explores the relationship between slaves and their masters, and attitude towards work. Paul's instructions encourage responsibility and integrity in all we do, "as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people" (v 7). Taking these verses apart to translate them for young people in their working context at school hopefully encourages them to persevere. This doesn't mean applying pressure to achieve the highest grades or work towards the most high profile career, but simply doing their best in what they do.

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