

**Damning lesson in our 'flawed' school system - Australian, The/Weekend Australian/Australian Magazine, The (Australia) - July 9, 2016 - page 20**

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Beautiful Failures: How the Quest for Success is Harming Our Kids By **Lucy Clark** Ebury Australia, 300pp, \$34.99

This is how Australian journalist, author and mother **Lucy Clark** began an article that, since 2014, has been shared on Facebook 26,000 times. The widespread concern about the pressure being experienced by teenagers made her wonder whether the topic might warrant further exploration. Beautiful Failures: How the Quest for Success is Harming Our Kids is the fruit of her investigations.

This is a fascinating book that, despite its extensive research, is not a difficult read. For **Clark**, it was her daughter's struggle to navigate the pressures of the senior years at an Australian high school that provided the springboard for a general critique of the way children are taught. This is an ambitious goal and, to be honest, I approached the book with some scepticism: would it simply be a finger-pointing exercise to explain her daughter's difficulties and, in particular, would it be an excuse to give teachers and educators yet another kick?

It is to **Clark's** credit that she pre-empted a sceptic such as me. In careful, appealing and approachable language, she explains exactly why she believes the way we measure success in education is fundamentally flawed.

"Come with me," she tells her readers, "and I'll tell you all about it." And she does. She tells me all about it. And just when I feel myself rankle with a silent retort to a controversial proposition, again she pre-empts me with explanations that are clear and informed, as she combines facts and figures with anecdotes and personal asides.

It is a difficult task to produce a book that will deliver at once to readers with little knowledge of the education system apart from the fact they themselves once went to school; to the parents or supporters of a child trying to manage the final years of their education; and also to the informed educator. As with the best of teachers, **Clark's** success lies in her ability to first set down the foundation of her argument and then steadily build on it so, by the end of the book, the uninformed become well-informed and the well-informed even better informed.

For **Clark**, who describes the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy as "a blunt political tool and instrument of torture for many children, parents and teachers", the tendency of our education system to excessively measure and rank children comes in for particular criticism. This is because, in **Clark's** view, the concentration of education to a final mark encourages children to be ego-oriented rather than task-oriented. In this way, the task itself, the learning itself, becomes less important than the actual mark.

For **Clark**, money is another leading cause for the increasing pressure surrounding a child's education in Australia, which has one of the widest gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged schools of any country in the OECD, a divide that is further strengthened by a funding model that has seen increased spending on private schools of 107 per cent from 1991 to 2001 while spending on public schools has increased by 52 per cent.

Thirty-five per cent of Australian children attend private schools and, according to **Clark**, pressure mounts as many parents struggle to raise the money to pay school fees, and as the expectations on children attending private schools are often heightened by their parents' financial investment in their education.

Social media also comes under scrutiny in *Beautiful Failures*, with **Clark** describing Facebook as a place to boast and to list achievements, which then gives the impression that those who are not achieving must instead be failing.

This, combined with the infiltration of 24-hour connectivity, deprives children of what used to be a quiet place after school: a place far from the schoolyard mob mentality that now follows them home via social media, and fills their minds with so much information they may find it impossible to switch off.

Although **Clark** criticises teaching methods that have remained stagnant despite innovation elsewhere in society, her support remains with the teachers who she believes have too many expectations placed on them, too little respect and too little remuneration for the fundamental work they do:

The question of how we value our teachers is absolutely crucial to the way we think about education. In Australia, teachers are underpaid and underrated and the sooner they are treated and trusted as professionals and paid more and afforded more status by society we will be on a better track in education all round.

To this point, *Beautiful Failures* is a sobering read. Yet just as I am despairing at a system that is broken, children who are damaged and teachers who are drained, **Clark** offers hope and ideas for a viable solution.

Indeed, the final chapters in this fine work are more than simply a wish list of what education should be but, more important and more practical, also an examination of where **Clark** believes the education of children to be most successful, and why.

In a fitting conclusion to an incisive study on how we could do better, **Clark** provides examples of systems she extols and schools she admires and, in doing so, leaves the reader with the tools to properly consider how success may be better measured and how education may be better reconsidered.

**Suzanne Leal's** new novel, *The Teacher's Secret*, is published by Allen & Unwin. By all the standard markers, by all the accepted rules and regulations and assessments of secondary school, my daughter has graduated from school a failure. Over the two years of her higher school certificate,

she has truanted frequently, she has failed to hand in assignments, she has failed to turn up on time, she has failed to meet uniform requirements, she has failed to attend some of her HSC trial exams, she has exhausted the patience of teachers and pushed to the outer limits the structural sympathies of the public school system ... Expulsion has been just around the corner for six months ... It has been difficult for her teachers; it has been difficult for her parents ... It has been difficult for no one more than her.

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