

Why we can never be in neutral mode

What needs to be done to improve pupil motivation? Every teacher will have an opinion on that. Well the Scottish Parliament's Education Committee has just concluded their inquiry into this question and has given their answer in a valuable and accessible 'snapshot overview' that captures both the importance and pervasiveness of motivation. The committee wisely resist the temptation to prescribe a national policy to address issues that 'stem from the complex interactions between individual psychology, the relationship between teacher and pupil, peer group interactions and the link between school and the outside world.'

The most innovative and potentially transforming as well as most contentious recommendation is that schools should seek pupil feedback on how motivating they find their classrooms. Motivation is a two way process and pupils impact on teacher morale so the sooner they are brought into the loop the better. Pupils have much to say on this issue from their "lived in" perspective of classrooms. This means creating a climate where pupil opinion is truly valued and where leadership is distributed throughout classrooms as well as staff rooms.

The report encourages the Executive to emphasise the importance of education, including vocational and academic outcomes. Given that the commercial world spends much more on advertising than the state does on education I wonder how powerful government really is. An obsession with outcomes can also be counterproductive. There is a danger of losing sight of learning for its own sake, curiosity, fun and enjoyment. Evidence from the uptake of adult learning has indicated that interest is more important than outcome and that it was pressure over outcomes in their formative years that turned many adults off learning.

The report doesn't suggest any easy solutions and openly acknowledges that there will inevitably be tensions, for example between the need for greater academic achievement and the wish to lighten the assessment and examination load. Any teacher resistance to the current tranch of initiatives is not so much to do with workload but more probably a result of uncertainty over whether or not the new zeitgeist is for real, or will schools still be judged solely on attainment.

This Inquiry will have been worthwhile if it is used as a platform to further address the paradoxes permeating education. Firstly the plethora of initiatives designed to improve pupil motivation is in danger of doing the reverse by denting teacher morale. The open ended nature of trying to achieve children's potential in combination with the continuous quest for improvement is a recipe for stress. By constantly increasing aspirations, the system makes satisfaction almost impossible. Every new initiative becomes a potential burden particularly if it doesn't take into account the culture of schools or connect with their central mission. The current ideology, like every ideology is an apparently impartial line presented as the natural way of things. I'm perplexed at the unquestioning acceptance of the capacities in the Curriculum for Excellence, based on the questionable assumption that

all children want to be model citizens.

Secondly initiatives to raise motivation are often outsourced to private and voluntary organisations by schools abdicating territory that is fundamentally theirs. They need to re-claim this and put motivation at the heart of what they are about.

In the third paradox we have A Curriculum for Excellence pointing towards pupil responsibility while practice is encouraging dependency in children. To raise achievement the education system is hyperactively spoon-feeding children who consequently fail to assume responsibility for constructing their own learning. Pupils come to school with the mindset that the teacher must control and entertain as well as teach them, and so they will taunt probationers coming to terms with this challenge. As one head teacher suggested to me recently - schools are places where young people go to watch old people work. Motivation is not a quality of the learner but a transaction between the learner and the context. We need to think hard about when and how classrooms started nurturing this over dependency.

The Report pinpoints how the value of education has been eroded in recent times leading to the increasing polarisation between improving and 'stuck' groups. It doesn't however try to explain this. My own view is that sections of society have so little sense of personal responsibility for their lives that they don't recognise or see a way out of this culture of learned helplessness. The connected issue of pupils needing to take responsibility is mentioned but needs further developed. We really need to harness methodologies that nurture pupil responsibility including Personal Learning Planning and Assessment is for Learning.

The fourth paradox is about how society expects schools to socialize pupils to believe in their personal rights and individuality, despite the collective nature of school life where most teachers rarely have any opportunities to interact with individual pupils.

The report underlines the need for different strategies to engage different pupils. The biggest challenge to schools in motivating pupils is that they are all different. I'm not sure however if there is a full appreciation at any level in education of the range of what I call 'Learning Stances' within any one class and how big a challenge this really is for teachers. There is much work to be done on clarifying the key differences between pupils and developing the capacity of schools to tune into and respond to these differences.

The fifth paradox is that pupils want to be treated the same. But equality that doesn't recognise differences is demoralising and unfair. Teachers need to treat pupils according to their needs so we need to find ways to help pupils to understand that they have different needs.

Teaching is a privileged position that touches the lives of children. However teachers, like emotions, are never in neutral and can impact either positively or negatively. Teachers can sometimes treat pupils rigidly on their terms and then get caught up in the behavioural

