

Help pupils to choose their own path

Curriculum for Excellence asks – ‘what kind of child do we want’ as opposed to – ‘what do we want to teach?’ The most exciting thing to come out of CfE is the powerful and unifying focus on responsible confidence, otherwise known as autonomy. This outcome, a dynamic fusion of the four capacities, organises everything we need to know about the curriculum, teaching and learning and children. Responsible confidence enables us to want to contribute, as opposed to want our own way, avoid responsibilities or just give up.

Confidence can mean different things to different people but at its core it is our personal negotiating power that drives all of our interactions. Responsibility is the capacity to balance and hold in check our two big motives, namely to get along and to get ahead. The latter motivates us to make the most of our talents while the former encourages us to take an interest in and cooperate with others. Responsibility allows us to do both. The three elements of responsible confidence are self-esteem that emerges through getting along with others, self-belief that comes from getting ahead and self-determination, our capacity to exercise responsibility. Responsible confidence is the key to effective participation and successful learning. When we are in a situation where our needs for a sense of belonging, self belief and trust are met we become responsibly confident.

Teachers nurture responsible confidence through four Classroom Energisers; Engagement, Stimulation, Structure and Feedback. Engagement is the energiser through which teachers show they want to get to know and value pupils. Structure refers to the boundaries that let pupils know how much responsibility they have. Stimulation comes from approaches that highlight the relevance of activities and stretch the pupils’ confidence, while permitting some control. Feedback gives pupils information about their potential and progress. Teachers focus mainly on Engagement and Stimulation by caring for pupils and modeling enthusiasm for learning. They also use increasingly effective feedback. They may however miss opportunities to impact on their pupils’ Responsible Confidence through a more empowering structure that supports pupil autonomy. Most teachers see pupils as needing to be cared for and enthused, but not all teachers see pupils as responsibly confident learners who need to be allowed to take control of their learning. The area where there may be most scope for transformational change is through an autonomy supportive Teaching Style.

Teachers cultivate Responsible Confidence through their classroom climate that is in turn fashioned by their Teaching Style. A teacher’s style communicates in particular how much pupil responsibility they will allow. Teachers need to be aware of how their style impacts on pupils. It is important to remember that Responsible Confidence is not so much a personal capacity as an acquired state that is more likely

when certain conditions prevail in the classroom. Autonomy supportive teachers negotiate rules as a starting point in affirming pupils’ capacity for self direction and capitalise on pupil interests to promote learning as an intrinsic goal. They nurture reciprocity via banter and seek feedback from pupils about their class experiences. They tune into and acknowledge negative feelings and publicly apologise when in the wrong.

Teachers own capacity for responsible confidence shapes their Teaching Styles. Any discussion about pupil confidence must start with the conditions that affect teacher confidence. The capacity to build Responsible Confidence in pupils can only flourish in a culture of teacher autonomy. The less pressurised teachers feel, the more attuning their style will be. An over-pushy style in contrast is taken when teachers rigidly focus on the attainment agenda and consequently become less tuned into their pupils’ needs. This might not appear harmful but pupils’ perceptions of such approaches trigger defensive reactions. The more participative ethos of CfE requires a new contract between teachers and pupils. For some teachers, the change from a relationship based on compliance to a more reciprocal contract is a significant transformation. Many pupil-teacher transactions remain one way.

The major tension for teachers is to strike a balance between controlling pupils while releasing their potential for responsible confidence. This can be resolved by establishing their authority then ‘loosening the reins’ to provide increasing opportunities for real responsibility. Teachers need to adapt how they hold the reins, according to each pupil’s capacity to exercise responsibility. Pupils communicate this by the Learning Stances they adopt in the classroom, shaped by the beliefs and feelings they hold about themselves as learners. Styles and stances can dance in or out of step. The most successful teachers work hard to develop a good working relationship with the whole class and when necessary personalise their approach by adapting their style to better match a particular pupil’s Learning Stance. This is one way teachers fulfil their obligation to promote their pupils’ wellbeing. We have moved rapidly in the last 30 years from a punishing non-conformity culture through a rewarding compliance culture to one that encourages responsible confidence and collaboration between teachers and learners. The breakthrough that led to CfE was the Education Act 2000 that defined the purpose of education as the development of the personality and talents of pupils to their fullest potential. We now have a clearer idea of what this means. The more autonomy supportive the climate, the more pupils will express their personality and fulfil their potential. The goal of CfE is to encourage pupils to be who they want to be, not who we think they ought to be.

