Holding the line in a changing classroom

Yet another survey (Tess 12.5.00) has found that teachers think behaviour is getting worse with attitude problems cited as the main cause. What is behind this apparent attitude slide? I heard a head speak proudly at a recent meeting about developments under the Confident School Project. At the same time he despaired at children's behaviour and was bemused by their confidence to challenge teachers. This irony crystallised for me the changes currently unravelling unseen by teachers in the thick of these dynamic processes. Teacher stress is apparently at an all time high while morale by all accounts has never been lower. One of the biggest factors causing this turbulence may be a lack of synchrony between the status of young people in schools and society and the confusing messages children are receiving.

Children today are accessing an increasingly adult world as evidenced by their attitudes to music and fashion and their preference for watching adult soap operas and adverts over children's TV. Toys are being replaced by computers and mobile phones. Their 'mature' consumption of advertising means today's children get the toys they want unlike previous generations who got what their parents wanted them to have. There have been major changes in parental attitudes towards children. Most parents want their children to be assertive, to be self reliant and able to make their own decisions. Parents will now complain if a teacher shouts at or otherwise 'overpowers' their child. The lives of children are different from the upbringing of today's teachers, brought up in families where parents made all the decisions and educated in schools where teachers dominated the classroom. Assertiveness is a goal of anti bullying campaigns, as well as of PSD programmes that encourage children to say 'no' to strangers and develop refusal skills to resist drug pushing peers. Schools tell children it is not always right to do what adults tell you and adults can be wrong.

Consequently the power relations between teacher and pupil although still assymetrical are changing. The advances in communication technology also challenge the idea of the teacher as the main supplier of information. The pupil is no longer a passive object waiting to receive knowledge from the teacher.

Schools of course haven't stood still. The last twenty years has witnessed a transition from the command and control culture to a rewarding compliance climate. The mentality that assumed pupils had to be made to feel bad about themselves before they could do better has gone. Most teachers now acknowledge the need for and benefits of praise, although they don't praise as much as they think they do. Some teachers think the worsening behaviour means schools are going in the wrong direction. Society however is progressing towards greater affirmation and empowerment of young people. The equality principle undermines the old structures and leadership takes on a new form. It is easy to issue commands and enforce them with punishments. It is harder to negotiate to overcome opposition and win consent. The genie is out of the bottle and teachers are unable to stop this evolution but if they stay one step ahead they may be able to control the pace of change.

Pupils now have some expectation of participation and most are able to seek it appropriately. Teachers who remain in the past will struggle in a conflict and blame swamp. Only when teachers have accepted they cannot return to the "good old days" will they be able to move on.

The punitive to reward transition is only a preliminary stage. Schools that have introduced rewards discover their benefit but soon realise they have to repeatedly refresh their approach. This constant search for new reward strategies will not find the holy grail. Schools need to move on from the compliance culture to an emphasis on self-discipline. This is what employers are looking for in young people. Life long learning also relies upon such self-regulation.

The first challenge is to balance affirmation and punishment for unacceptable behaviour. Cultural attitudes and biological wiring attune us to the negative. And teachers are 'programmed' to be alert to problems. They need to consciously focus on good behaviour and move from conditional praise through encouragement to affirmation. Although children need the security of knowing their worth is valued this doesn't mean that teachers should lower their standards and avoid negative feedback. Rather, such feedback should build on strengths and consequences should be linked to specific behaviour without attacking the child's worth.

An affirming approach is not enough to develop self-motivated pupils. This also requires empowerment which is achieved through the classroom structure, that is the amount of information available about how pupils can achieve the desired outcomes. Empowerment requires authoritative teachers who give a sense of direction, reasonable pressure and increasing choice within limits set in non-controlling ways. The second challenge is to strike a happy medium between controlling pupils and seeking compliance while developing self-determination. This tension can be resolved by imposing authority then gradually in a staged approach providing increasing opportunities for negotiation, choice and responsibilities. Power assertion can be transformed into empowerment via power sharing. The most effective teachers are motivated to seek co-operation and give their power away in contrast to those driven by a fear of losing what power they have.

The Executive is trying to model a participative approach and local authorities are concentrating on their enabling role. Some teachers are expected to treat pupils differently from how they are managed themselves. We will make further progress when autocratic heads move on from the " there's only one bully here and it's me" outlook. Schools have not been given a lead on what kind of power relations there should be between teachers and pupils, leaving teachers to work out the balance between the imposition of control and the assertion of rights. While there are some over autonomous pseudo mature threatening pupils the transformation to an increasingly autonomous youth culture is the challenge facing teachers and the skills with which they resolve these tensions will be a key factor in their effectiveness.