

Not Soft and Not an Option: Building Self-esteem in Our Schools

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Over the last few years some excellent self-esteem building programmes have been devised and are being introduced into many schools. This article does not describe these schemes; it argues that, excellent though they are, they do not go far enough. What we need is a fundamental reappraisal of how people learn and, in the light of this, what makes for good teachers and effective schools. This is essential not only if our young people are to lead happy lives in the 21st century, but also if we are to have an effective society and a competitive economy.

Dead Certainties

Perhaps nothing illustrates the sterility of the current simplistic and polarised education debate more starkly than the reported remark of Chris Woodhead, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in England and Wales, that teachers have been too concerned with their pupils' happiness and too little with their achievement. Other prominent figures south of the border have also remarked that there has been too much emphasis on self-esteem in our schools and too much soft 'touchy-feely' woolly thinking in the teaching profession. A head-

teacher was reported in the press recently as saying that programmes to build self-esteem will 'invite ridicule' if they are seen as a response to pupil violence.

Chris Woodhead's assertion makes an effective political sound-bite. It plays on the perceptions that many people have about what is going on in schools, based mainly on what they read in the press, but also on firsthand experiences. Although the research evidence in Scotland suggests that comprehensive education has led to higher achievement overall, rather than a drop in standards, some schools have implemented self-esteem programmes inappropriately and some teachers have undervalued the importance of achievement.

The suggestion that teachers should focus on achievement rather than happiness, however, is based on the completely false premise that the two can be separated from each other and are even in some way incompatible. It also begs the question of what we mean by 'achievement' and, indeed, by 'happiness'.

There is too much talk of turning the clock back in education, back to the basics, back to the old dead certainties, when we

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desperately need to look to the future. The assumption seems to be that there is no 'gain without pain', that emotions and feelings get in the way of learning, that teaching, at least in secondary schools, should not be a caring profession, and that personal and social development should be separated from, and subordinate to, the serious business of academic achievement. Schools, particularly secondary schools, still tend to reflect the old certainties, where happiness is rated below achievement, caring below performance, emotions and feelings below knowledge and understanding, supporting below challenging, personal and social development below academic learning. Such schools are hierarchical, and emphasise obedience; bureaucratic, and change slowly; compartmentalised, and focus on the individual; and continue to put too much emphasis on knowledge for its own sake.

New Realities

The modern world outside school, on the other hand, is a place where the volume, scope and pace of change is great, and very little is predictable. To be effective, individuals and organisations need to learn to deal with uncertainty and chaos, to be flexible and responsive, to 'make friends with the future'. As boundaries and roles become increasingly blurred, collaboration and team-working are essential. So too is the need for people and organisations to be clear about who they are, what they stand for, and how they want to live on a day-to-day basis.

The new reality is that everyone needs to become a lifelong learner, and to do so people must not only be able to learn; they must want to. We need to turn our schools around so that they no longer turn young

people off.

It is in these circumstances that building self-esteem is not soft and not an option. To be effective learners, effective parents, teachers, colleagues, or simply effective people, we need to be able to deal with change and not react to it. We need to learn to develop an inner certainty, a changeless core inside ourselves. This means developing a set of beliefs — a vision, a purpose and a set of values — which will help each of us to work out the kind of future we want to create and the kind of person we want to be. It also means being able to face up to current reality, being realistic about the kind of person we are and what we have actually achieved. It means having the self-confidence and determination to work on the gap between where we are and where we want to be, and the courage to do something about it.

Defining the Challenge

All of the above requires a great deal more than what was once called academic learning. It means going forward to the basics rather than back to them. We need a fundamental reappraisal of what we consider 'the basics' to be, so that they include feeling and acting as well as thinking.

For educationists there are two main challenges. The first is to be much clearer about what we mean by concepts such as self-esteem and personal happiness; and the second is to give these ideas a much more important role in secondary schools. This means relating them to what already goes on in schools and redefining what we mean by 'achievement'. There is a growing body of literature which can help. Daniel Goleman has recently popularised the term 'emotional intelligence', first used by John Mayer in 1990. Mayer defined it as 'unde-

rstanding one's own feelings, empathy for the feelings of others and the regulation of emotion in a way that enhances living'. Murray White describes self-esteem as having two components: self-efficacy, or confidence in our ability to think choose and make wise decisions; and self-respect, or confidence in our right to be happy, coupled with a belief that success, friendship, respect, love and fulfilment can be ours.

Educators also need to take into account the work of writers who discuss the meanings of happiness and love, such as Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Eric Fromm. These help us to clarify the extent of the challenge we face by pointing out that many people no longer know what happiness or love are, seeing happiness as simply the absence of anxiety or boredom, not something which you actively need to strive to make happen, and love as a pleasant sensation which you experience as a matter of chance, or 'fall into', rather than something which requires knowledge and effort.

The task is not to choose between happiness and achievement, or even to strike a balance between them, but to see them as one; to educate the whole person, not just the parts that the academic curriculum cannot reach. We need an education system that will inspire lifelong learners, as well as turning out young people who can lead

happy lives and be effective workers and responsible citizens in the 21st century.

Towards an Agenda for Action

There is another sense in which building the self-esteem of both teachers and pupils is not a soft option: it is not going to be easy to do. Schools need support to become genuine learning organisations, where working and learning are synonymous for everyone and teachers and pupils help each other to learn. Teachers need support to become reflective practitioners who think deeply about what teaching is about and why they *are* teachers, as well as how they can do the job more effectively.

Changes like these cannot be forced. They involve empowering people at all levels, giving them the chance to shape organisational goals and to share in organisational decisions in school-specific situations that really matter. They also involve developing collaborative cultures in our schools where people genuinely want to work together, where there is trust and mutual respect and where sharing emotions and feelings is normal. It is a daunting agenda, but one that is already beginning to be tackled in schools and classrooms across the country. Those who are tackling it deserve all the support they can get, from educationists and politicians alike.

Further Reading

Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, Bloomsbury, 1996

Murray White, *Self Esteem*, Daniels, 1991

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Human Happiness*, Rider, 1992

Eric Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, HarperCollins, 1995 (reprint)

Teaching for Effective Learning, Scottish CCC, Gardyne Road, Broughty Ferry, Dundee DD5 1NY, £6