

# Teachers and Self-esteem

John Moore

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## *Differentiation is about Difference*

Children's self-esteem is affected by their teachers' view of themselves. How can adults with low self-esteem hope to develop high self-esteem in young people? What can we do to improve this situation?

Over the past ten years I have been able to work with hundreds of teachers on self-development issues. Two important programmes have helped teachers to improve their own self-image and consequently to raise their self-esteem. The first was a peer support group programme for headteachers. Within a few months of the programme being launched, participants were reporting significant improvements in the way they felt about themselves, and about their work in school. The second was with groups of newly employed teachers in a small, island education authority in Scotland. This work has gone on for four years so far and a group of more experienced teachers have been trained to be mentors for the new recruits. During the past five years I have also been working with teachers in a variety of workshops, in their own schools and in more public arenas with teachers and advisers from many different places.

Although these programmes are quite

different in structure, their general purpose and the outcomes of each are closely related. There are two key elements which link them. The first is support, especially by paying attention to people when they are vulnerable. New teachers usually go through a difficult — if not terrifying — period at the start of their careers, and many headteachers tell me they themselves are in this high risk state for most of the time. The second key element is the appreciation of difference between people. Helping teachers to understand and come to terms with the differences which exist between themselves, other adults and the children they work with is not easy.

This work has been made possible by applying some simple principles developed by a remarkable mother and daughter team, Katherine Briggs and Isabel Myers. Following many years of painstaking development work by them, the resulting Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is now used by more than three million people world-wide every year. Based on Jung's Theory of Psychological Type, Briggs' and Myers' contribution was to produce a reliable, valid and user-friendly indicator of personality type. Rather than labelling people as 'of leadership quality' or 'low on assertiveness', the MBTI merely indicates our own preferences for being in the world. It provides a common language which

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people I work with seem to find easy to use. Within a few hours they are able to make use of the information they receive and apply it to their own real, practical situations.

A theme which recurs in all of my work with teachers concerns the nature of differentiation. Much of the published material on differentiation in the classroom seems to assume that ability should be the principal focus for attention. Many children (and adults) suffer from low self-esteem because they feel that they lack ability. I have asked many teachers about this over the years and my conclusion is that differentiation is more useful if it is primarily about *difference* — about the various ways people prefer for getting information, making decisions and interacting with the world at large. These differences may well be detected as ability levels; but only if that is as far as you look!

### *Different Learning Approaches*

Almost without exception, teachers have welcomed this more practical and less judgemental conclusion. If children and their teachers are seen as simply different, rather than better or worse than each other — the ability model — there is a more fertile ground in which to sow seedlings of personal appreciation. For example, some people clearly prefer to learn in a linear sequential way. They like to know the steps which are involved, to understand what has happened when each step is complete and to rely on a memory of facts. People with this preferred learning mode are often surprised to hear that other people — it seems about a third of our population — prefer a global, holistic way of getting information. When they have access to the same information they may absorb relatively little of the factual con-

tent, preferring to get a general overview of the subject. These people are often equally surprised to hear that those who prefer the linear process are not just being pedantic and difficult.

It is fairly obvious that the former learning process will be more thorough, and consequently take longer. The latter, intuitive process, is quicker and based on a principle of 'sufficient unto the day'. Some of the difficulties which children and teachers encounter in the classroom are undoubtedly the result of unresolved differences. Most teachers I have worked with have never been exposed to this way of thinking about learning, although most of them have a strong sense of its 'rightness'. Nearly all of them can immediately identify cases where this might be at the seat of a problem. Working with teachers in a practical way, it has been possible to help them devise simple strategies for changing the relationship between themselves and one or two children. I am certain that this is a process which must be approached carefully and without undue haste. If teachers are able to make a significant change in their working relationship with only one child in their class, this may make a fundamental difference to the way the whole class functions.

And it is the teacher who has to take the first steps. Almost by definition, the child is not going to do this. Time after time I see the dawning expression on teachers' faces as they realise that if they were to make a small but significant change to the way they present material, listen to a child or assess their work, they may for ever improve that child's chance of learning effectively in the future. The bonus for teachers is that they report that the satisfaction they get from seeing simple

changes achieve remarkable results lifts their own self-esteem in a new way.

A similar indicator exists which can be used with children of reading age seven and above to identify their emerging preferences. Its rather long title, the Murphy-Meisgeier Type Indicator for Children, is usually shortened to MMTIC. A 'European English' version is currently being validated for use in Britain. It seems that the personality preferences we can reliably indicate in adults begin to be determined by children as young as six or seven. Infant teachers notice that they have more difficulty identifying the type preferences of the children

they work with than teachers further up the school, which seems to bear out this belief. The use of this indicator as one part of the resource bank that teachers can call on could change the way in which achievement and learning are seen in schools, and help both teachers and children appreciate their own individual giftedness in a new light.

One teacher's comment at the end of a workshop sums up many people's discovery: 'It was interesting to learn that what I had regarded as my particular failings were probably characteristics of type — good for self-esteem.'

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### *Further Reading*

Alice M. Fairhurst, *Effective Teaching, Effective Learning*, Davies-Black Publishing, 1995

Elizabeth Murphy, *The Developing Child*, CPP Books, 1992

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and MBTI are trade marks of Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc.

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## ***A Look Back into Childhood***

*Debbie Raymont*

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I always thought that I came from a really happy family. The youngest of four, with two older brothers and an older sister, I was the baby and consequently indulged to a degree. There's nothing from my childhood I could really point to that made my life hard. I did well at school and was an extremely good little girl. Perhaps that gives a clue to where my lack of self-esteem was fostered.

I was expected to be good and always do as I was told, without regard to what I was feeling or thinking or wanting. I enjoyed the praise I received, but what did it cost me then and now, to go against my own inclinations for the sake of love, affection, appreciation from another? I did it as a child to survive, but I'm still doing it now.

When they told me to be good I was,

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