

Have we got it wrong about self-esteem?

The Executive's national priorities have pushed confident and motivated pupils to the top of the agenda. This is therefore a good time to think about how we go about this. We usually think of boosting self-esteem as the answer. Although there has never been any evidence to prove it, low self-esteem is assumed to underlie most motivation problems.

A review of recent research has led me to think we may be barking up the wrong tree. The bad news is schools can't influence self-esteem as much as we think. This is something pupils determine for themselves and is shaped by factors sometimes unknown to and out of the control of teachers, namely whatever is really valued by pupils. While they can allocate worth to pupils, teachers (unless they are part-time hypnotists) can't give pupils self-esteem, no matter what the motivational gurus claim. The good news however is that low self-esteem isn't as big a barrier to learning as we think and even better news is schools can do a lot about the key factors that actually shape self-motivation. Esteem and motivation are like wealth and happiness; not having wealth may make you unhappy, but having it doesn't guarantee happiness. Self-esteem follows from rather than cause achievement. Trying to raise esteem ignores the fact that pupils' feelings about themselves come from what they do rather than causing them to do it.

There are a number of doubtful practices that follow from our loose thinking about self-esteem. Most teachers think that telling children they are clever builds confidence. Such praise however encourages children to concentrate on showing their ability rather than on learning and also to put failure down to ability. It may instil the belief that ability is something they can't change. Some people see intelligence as a fixed commodity, of which they only have so much and about which there is little they can do. Confidence can crumble if pupils have this fixed idea of ability, because no matter how confident, failure will mean low ability.

A more robust confidence is nurtured in classrooms that convey that ability can grow, that pupils will progress if they apply themselves and use the right approaches. Even pupils with low confidence but who think of ability as changeable cope better with setbacks than confident pupils with fixed ability ideas.

Our confusion is further reflected in the tension between giving honest feedback and protecting pupil self-esteem. When teachers offer unsolicited help or sympathy they soften the blow of failure but may suggest to the pupil he has low ability. A well chosen and carefully delivered criticism can communicate high expectations while indiscriminate praise for easy success can be meaningless and convey disinterest. Telling pupils they are good at something they are struggling with won't help their confidence. As long as children know their worth is respected they will absorb accurate feedback about what they do. Criticism of personal qualities however will always threaten pupil self-esteem.

Current theories recognise the self-determining aspects of motivation. The twin track approach to a can do mindset involves teaching pupils

firstly to think of their ability as changeable and so lead them to adopt a mastery mindset and to secondly make sense of progress in a way that builds their competence. Pupils with a mastery approach are motivated to achieve their best in contrast to those with a competitive mindset who want to be the best or others whose priority is to avoid failure. Not everyone can be the best but they can all be high in mastery.

The real "feel good" factor is self-efficacy in goal achievement - the 'SEGA' factor! Particularly useful in boosting confidence is achieving goals that help us realise aspects of our ideal self. Achievements give pupils a buzz when attained at their highest possible challenge and skill level. The more self-efficacy pupils develop the more they will choose difficult tasks, try harder, use problem-solving strategies and have less fear of failure.

Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability in particular skills while self-esteem is an affective judgement of overall worth. In a learning situation we are more likely to ask 'Will I be any good at this?' than 'How do I feel about myself?' Motivation depends on the value of the outcome and the chances of achieving it. Low self-esteem, while unfortunate may not in itself undermine motivation. Girls generally have lower self-esteem than boys yet show greater motivation. Another reason for suggesting we focus on self-efficacy is the realisation that high self-esteem while benefiting the individual might sometimes cause problems to everyone else. Hence our common dislike of arrogance and conceit (think of Mandelson, Archer.). Low self-esteem damages confidence and motivation to learn when combined with other factors such as an over competitive mindset. Disaffection is caused by repeatedly putting failure down to personal uncontrollable factors that suggest failure is inevitable, a habit that results from a lethal cocktail of fixed ability and low self-efficacy beliefs.

I am not suggesting we ignore low self-esteem or abandon esteem building approaches. Such strategies in isolation however will not nurture confident learners. This requires attention to be focused on specific aspects of personal agency that are important to the pupil rather than vague attempts to make pupils feel good about themselves. Confidence building teachers instil the beliefs that ability is not fixed and there are many ways to succeed. They treat mistakes as essential steps to efficacy by linking failure to factors that pupils can repair. Confidence depends less on actual achievement than on the relationship between achievement and aspirations. Effective teachers encourage an accurate match between pupils' aspirations and their current skills level. They praise effort and strategy use to help pupils focus on the process of their work, make them feel responsible for success and emphasise the possibility of improvement. This encourages children to concentrate on learning rather than displaying ability or avoiding failure and to put progress down to effort. Most importantly of all they stress personal rather than normative success.

