

Resource 13: 'Letting young people discover how clever they really are'

(This is an article by Calum Campbell, which appeared in *The Antidote*, Issue 11, April 2002)

"I can't f***n' write because I'm stupid!"

This was definitely not the response I had hoped for when outlining the first activity for the group of students I would be working with over the coming year.

At the time, I was working as a self-employed teacher and educational consultant. I had taken on a contract in an East London school where I would be teaching maths and English to a group of 18 year six [ten to eleven year old] students. They had all been identified as very low achievers and were expected to achieve the same results as five to seven year olds by the time they left school at eleven.

These students had been grouped together to create an extra 'set', because it was felt by the school that this was the most effective way of meeting their needs. My brief was to provide them with the support and experiences that would allow them to develop as confident, considerate and critically thinking independent learners.

The students were performing well below what could be expected of people their age. It did not take long to realise that, although there were some learning difficulties to be taken into account, the major factor in their underperformance was overwhelming lack of self-esteem.

Tackling negativity

Initially, I was astounded by the negativity shown by the students regarding their academic abilities and other aspects of life in general. For example, I told them about my father. He served in the army and had the motto 'when you're on your knees, you're only half way down'. I asked them what he might mean by this. The reply from one student was, 'When everything is going really bad, and you think things are terrible, it can even get worse'. This answer left me speechless. I had never before considered such a negative perspective.

My first action was to ensure that the classroom provided the most positive working environment possible. To achieve this, I started by organising the tables into a conference U shape. This allowed for ease of communication, and the set-up could be changed very easily if we did want to work in groups for a particular activity. I put up inspiring quotes on the walls and made sure that there were high-quality numeracy and literacy-based teaching displays to hand.

Reluctance to be challenged

Initially, the students were very reluctant to attempt anything they considered challenging, new or requiring sustained concentration. Issues such as having the longest pencil, being looked at by someone, sitting with friends and the sharing of resources proved to be constant and major distractions to learning. Even though such issues may be considered rather petty, they held great importance for the students in the group. I felt that, to create the best possible conditions for learning, we would first have to tackle the emotions that were proving to be barriers to moving forward.

Cont...

Discussing feeling

With this in mind, we spent time as a class, and on an individual basis, discussing our feelings and how these can influence our behaviour and performance in both positive and negative ways. We focussed on specific negative situations that we were experiencing, and explored the emotions that were influencing and being influenced at these times. This included strategies to deal with emotionally charged situations and recognised and prioritised issues involved in a situation. A very clear and fair behaviour policy, which encouraged personal responsibility and awareness, supported this.

In contrast to what I took to be the trend in education at the time, I decided to slow the pace of teaching and aim for deep involvement, understanding and enjoyment. We discussed the philosophy behind education, and how this relates to individuals. We used the Philosophy for Children approach and asked 'big' academic questions such as 'What is mathematics?', spending our first week together discussing and exploring this. Everything we did was related to real life situations, and learning in general, to ensure that we all understood the value and relevance of what we were undertaking. The Mathematics and English strategies were used as a base for teaching (see www.dfes.gov.uk), and a range of stimulating resources and activities were chosen to support them. We also focussed a great deal upon problem-solving strategies, and discussed how this related to challenges in everyday life and also school tests, including the SATs.

Results

Everybody was encouraged to push themselves as much as possible to improve their performance, and in some cases this required intervention and support to allow individuals to understand the value, importance and consequences of taking risks in learning. We were all encouraged to examine our own learning, to realise our strengths and be honest about our weaknesses, whilst recognising the personal strength required when carrying out such reflection.

Feedback regarding work was given sensitively, openly and honestly, although this initially proved to be quite hard to face up to at times. No stickers were ever awarded in the class and praise was only given where it was deserved. This meant that students were not misled about their efforts and were therefore aware of the challenges facing them. Praise had more value when it was presented in such a mature and honest manner as it linked in with the aims of improving our learning. Also, this focus, and the fact that the students' life experiences resulted in their being very street wise, meant that they would soon be able to see through any empty praise.

This resulted in students being able to evaluate their own work in a very honest and effective manner. They knew better than anyone else if they were really putting their best efforts into what they were doing. A great deal of support was required for this to become a feature of our learning, as many of the students held such negative views about their capabilities. Recognising just how big a step to take with each individual was a constant issue, as it would have been very easy to damage any gains in confidence by extending people beyond their academic or emotional limits.

Cont...

Learning to co-operate

Over time, students also shared their work with the class and helped each other evaluate what they had produced. Feedback always included ways to improve work, which gave everybody the chance to use their new skills to help others. This was generally carried out as a class at the end of a session or module and also by myself through written comments in books. All students were given time before starting any new tasks to read comments relating to their previous work. Combining this with the self-evaluative approach meant that testing was kept to a minimum. Students who had finished their tasks were encouraged to look back through their own books to see how their work was developing, and then help others if this was appropriate. We discussed ways in which we could really help others to understand concepts or processes whilst taking their feelings into account.

Emotional Rollercoaster

The entire year was an emotional rollercoaster, and challenged us all. For the first eight weeks or so, I had to be very aware of how my emotions were being influenced by the daily challenges. During this period it was very easy to become disillusioned and begin to doubt the worth in what I was doing with the students. I am very glad to say that, by the end of our first time together, all of the students significantly exceeded the expectations previously held by teachers or themselves. When they undertook the SATs tests, some outperformed students in the highest ability class. One student actually stated that her good marks were the best thing that had ever happened to her.

The massive gains in confidence were undoubtedly the most important influence in improving academic performance. Even though I had always been honest if asked about my personal beliefs regarding the irrelevance and unimportance of the SAT results to their lives and real learning, it was very encouraging to see how pleased the students were with their results.

Conclusion

This experience once again proved what a crucial role emotions play in education and in life more generally. If state educational provision is to truly meet the immediate and longer-term needs of citizens, then we need to allocate financial and practical support to improving young people's emotional literacy.

Note: you can find out more about philosophy for children from Sapere, the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education – www.sapere.net.