

Resource 15: Suggestions for high challenge, low stress

When being mindful of high challenge and low stress in your classroom, remember the following analogy: climbing Everest is a high challenge activity that for most of us would be prohibitively stressful if we did not have the following in place:

- confidence in our existing climbing abilities, as well as in our ability to learn the necessary techniques to get us through
- confidence in our guides
- the ability to adapt to unpredicted conditions on the mountain and
- the ability to control emotions and feelings that may arise during the ascent

When pupils feel safe in your classroom environment, you can push the challenges you give them ever higher. This list is by no means exhaustive, but does contain useful ideas for how to develop and maintain the high challenge, low stress state in your pupils. The aim is for high challenge, low stress to be a way of life in your classroom.

- Do not attempt to teach a child who is clearly emotionally distressed, whatever the cause of that distress may be. Even if you have to abandon your lesson plan for a period, this will be worth it in order to recreate an atmosphere conducive to learning. Persevering will only lead to an increase in stress felt by the child.
- Be consistent in your encouragement of pupils across the range of abilities in your classroom. Have the highest expectations of each child.
- Pay close attention to the beginnings and endings of lessons. Create signals that indicate to pupils that learning will begin and end, such as clapping, standing in a particular spot in the room, ringing a bell and so on.
- Change the format of lessons so that pupils aren't able to predict with certainty exactly what they'll be doing each time they see you.
- After learning has been achieved (for example, the completion of a difficult aspect of the work), allow time for marking the occasion, even if this is just a round of applause, a two-minute break, or any other way in which emotion might be safely expressed.
- Use techniques to engage the emotions, for example, through drama, role-playing, empathy exercises and so on. This is possible in every subject area.
- Teach difficult topics in small chunks that you repeat and then expand, repeat and then expand. In effect, you are pushing and easing off, pushing and easing off.
- Offer the opportunity for your pupils to talk to each other about what they have learned and about how they feel about it. Encourage the development of a sense of awe and wonder at what they are learning.
- Encourage your pupils to teach each other. Peer teaching can often be at least as effective, if not more so, as adult on child teaching, especially for children who may be intimidated by adults, or who may not have been able to grasp a concept in the ways in which you have explained it. Let your pupils know that teaching each other is as important as you teaching them.
- Encourage your pupils to be aware of their emotions even when they are not in your classroom.