Constructing the motivated school

Teachers are working harder than ever to motivate pupils in the drive for higher achievement. There's only one problem. While teachers are doing more and more to and for pupils they can't actually motivate them in this way. Scottish Education hasn't traditionally placed much emphasis on motivation and pupil participation has been secured by the carrot and stick. But the best motivation is self-motivation and that's a door that can only be unlocked from within. Teachers have a huge role in influencing how pupils motivate themselves by creating classrooms that help shape pupils' motivation mindsets, namely how they think about ability, how they approach learning, how they make sense of their progress and how competent they feel. So the trick is not to motivate pupils to achieve but to provide optimal learning opportunities that are motivating.

Schools have changed a lot in recent years and in the move from a control to a reward culture. But rewards, like thrill rides and fireworks, have to be constantly upgraded to impact. The reward culture is only a transition phase towards an ethos of self-regulation. Teachers believe some pupils have no motivation but everyone has their own motivational mindsets, it's just that some are more learning focused than others. Some for example are driven by a fear of failure. The assumption that certain pupils have no motivation betrays the same misunderstanding in Cherie Blair's view that 'suicide bombers' have no hope, when clearly in their terms they are full of hope.

We usually think the best way to produce confident pupils is to boost self-esteem. Schools however can't influence esteem as much as we assume and low self-esteem isn't as big a barrier to learning as we think. The most important "feel good" factor is self-efficacy in goal achievement - the 'SEGA' factor! Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability in particular skills such as cooking, while self-esteem is an affective judgement of our overall worth.

The twin track approach to pupil confidence involves teaching pupils to think of their ability as changeable and so lead them to adopt a self-improvement rather than a 'prove yourself' attitude to achievement. It is also about helping them make sense of progress in a way that builds their self-efficacy beliefs. Confidence-building schools communicate how much everyone is learning and the many ways to succeed and consciously try to value all pupils equally. They treat mistakes as opportunities to learn by linking failure to factors that pupils can repair.

The motivating teacher influences pupils' mindsets through four Drivers. Engagement is how teachers show they are interested in and value pupils. Pupils need to know they count before they see any point in trying to learn. The best teachers lead through their relationships with, rather than authority over, pupils. We never talk about them but teachers' emotions are crucial here because they are infectious and are most helpful when they create resonance and positive feelings.

Structure refers to the clarity of pathways to the learning goals that lets pupils know what is expected of them. A major tension for teachers is to strike a balance between controlling pupils while releasing their potential for self-determination. This can be resolved by imposing authority then, in a geared approach, 'letting go of the reins' to provide increasing opportunities for autonomy, for example letting them go to the toilet without asking.

Stimulation comes from a curriculum that highlights the importance, usefulness and fun of activities and sets clear achievable, specific goals. Motivating activities challenge the pupil's present capacity, while permitting some control and provide a sense of competence in relevant goals. In the motivated school pupils want to learn for interest and enjoyment rather than because of rewards or punishments. Children are curious from birth and naturally inclined towards learning. They are intrinsically motivated to meet their needs for knowledge and understanding, a sense of competence, self-determination and involvement with others. A motivating curriculum creates curiosity by being surprising and elicits fantasy that permits the free use of pupils' growing abilities. Simulation and game like elements add meaning to what might otherwise be a boring activity. Pupils actively construct their knowledge via open-ended questioning, problem solving, projects, experiments and debates.

Feedback provides information that lets pupils know how they are doing. It is the motivation power-tool yet the least well used (and barely covered in HGIOS). Teachers are often reluctant to praise for fear of making pupils big headed. They misunderstand the purpose of feedback – it is about giving information about progress to increase self-efficacy not about encouraging arrogance. Motivating teachers praise pupil effort and how they tackle their work and so make pupils feel responsible for success. They help pupils become aware of ' how ' they are smart rather than how smart they are. They stress individual rather than normative progress. They avoid loading their feedback with approval or disapproval and downplay their evaluative role by letting pupils rate themselves as much as possible.

The impact of teachers is never neutral. They can transform or amplify pupil motivation. Teachers' own mindsets, e.g. 'they'll never change' are 'downloaded' to pupils through their classroom practices. The challenge is to break the common pattern whereby the motivationally rich get richer while typical experiences put disengaged pupils off even more.

In nature's most successful learning lab the mother plays the subordinate role and passes control to the baby. This relationship creates space for reciprocity and sensitivity to the emotional responses of the baby. The more pressure to produce high achievement the further schools move from this model, becoming ever more conditional and controlling, by, for example stressing academic achievement as the sole criterion of worth. Our schools' most important goals are to prepare pupils with a positive attitude to learning and encourage them to be who they want to be not who we think they ought to be. For this they need to create some motivational space. Qualifications are important but what young people do with these are much more telling in the end.