Your pupils' esteem depends on you, too

Teacher concern about children's behaviour, reflected most recently in the McCrone recommendation for a discipline review, is cyclical in nature and has been found to be linked to teacher morale generally. In fact the two are inextricably linked. Among the many and varied factors implicated in causing behaviour problems teacher esteem may not be the first factor that comes to mind. It is however crucial yet rarely considered and one in which the executive can make a huge impact.

Forty years of research has established that authoritative teaching is based on preventive skills, including setting a warm climate, high standards and expectations and consistency. It also requires assertive control that lead to compliance, albeit grudging and positive strategies producing a more willing conformity. The least effective approach has been found to rely on ineffectual power assertion techniques.

There is a reciprocal relationship between and teacher behaviour and pupil engagement, mediated by teacher perceptions of pupil motivation. Teachers naturally react to enthusiastic and responsive pupils with more involvement, autonomy and positive feedback and to unmotivated pupils with coercion, neglect and negative feedback. The motivationally rich pupils get richer while the motivationally poor get poorer.

Two contrasting teacher attitude sets appear to produce quite different responses from pupils. Teachers' attitudes will reflect and be shaped by their professional self-esteem. I would argue that the most effective teachers are those with positive self belief, who are consequently motivated to seek co-operation, share with pupils as much power as possible and communicate inclusive attitudes. At the other extreme those with low levels of esteem seem to be driven by a fear of losing what little power they have and so tend to display more confrontational attitudes. We all have off days and go through bad spells, but as a large part of teacher esteem is achieved through pupil progress, the struggling teacher may without support become trapped in a downward spiral.

Teachers who have a low sense of self-efficacy lean towards a command and control management style and adopt a pessimistic view of pupil motivation. They emphasise control over the purpose of learning and resort to restrictive and punitive modes of discipline. Such teachers may experience in discipline as a threat to their esteem and the public context makes such personal slights hard to ignore. This can create a desire for revenge to get even. Revenge is based on some form of equity – an eye for an eye, but retaliation can exceed the initial transgression. The goal of revenge can unfortunately sometimes lead to highly personalised blame throwing punishments.

Central to such confrontational attitudes is the belief that pupils considered problematic don't want to work and will do anything to avoid it. These attitudes make it unlikely that the teacher will be able to de-fuse difficult situations and instead ultimata are issued. These pupils may unknowingly be neglected in lessons and punished inconsistently, while pupils who conform are given preferential treatment. Such pupils, predominantly boys, are expected to behave badly and consequently will become entrapped in the negative labels ascribed to them. They will be referred to a higher authority as soon as they refuse to comply. Informal contact will be avoided and any signs of improvement will not be accepted as genuine. Reactions to misconduct will be focused, not on the behaviour, but on the personal characteristics of the pupil.

Some teachers with these attitudes can have high but inflated esteem that is variable or based mainly on their hard won reputation as a strict disciplinarian. This may make them particularly sensitive to threat and lead them to respond with a hostility that is out of proportion with the challenge. Thus teacher "bullying" of pupils is a way of preventing further threats to their harassed and bruised ego and may be for some a form of self-affirmation. Such self protection may also give these teachers a tendency to think they are never in the wrong.

In stark contrast, inclusive attitudes are based on the philosophy that all pupils want to work and can be trusted. If they don't, the conditions need to be changed and the teacher is responsible for changing them. These attitudes lead to quite different behaviours. For example, the teacher will be firm but fair with pupils, favouritism will be avoided and informal contact outside the classroom will be welcomed. When pupils are punished they will be allowed to 'save face' and confrontations will be avoided. They will not be derogated in class or in the staff room where the teacher will often speak up for them. These teachers see behaviour problems as a natural part of growing up and an assertion of independence. They are aware of and take into account the major social changes taking place regarding views about authority. The inclusive approach will aim to correct behaviour rather than pupils' personalities. Disruptive behaviour will be seen as out of character and any signs of improvement will be viewed as expressions of pupils' true identity and encouraged.

Linking misbehaviour with punishment without emphasising the pupil's personal qualities minimises the risk of resentment or retaliation. It teaches the pupil to face up to the consequences but does not diminish him as a person. It is better to translate blame labels such as pest into demands that hold the pupil accountable rather than culpable and require the pupil to rectify the situation.

Teachers are only human and the more dented their esteem the more likely are personalised attacks on pupils' worth. One of the best ways to prevent and reduce behaviour problems therefore will be to work to improve and nurture teacher morale rather than just trying to deal with the consequences and tinker with the symptoms. To get the best out of pupils, all teachers need to give the best of themselves. It's in everybody's interests that they feel as good about themselves as possible. Consequently management at all levels needs to start treating teachers the same way they rightly expect teachers to treat their pupils.