

See your pupils with a new pair of eyes

A Curriculum for Excellence has articulated for the first time ever the pupil qualities our schools should be aiming for. No one could disagree with such laudable aims. But it is essential that we get beyond the rhetoric to seek clarity and agreement on what these outcomes mean in real life. Along with the curricular details still to be filled in we need to unpack these qualities. As teachers perceive pupils in relation to their goals, these qualities will implicitly shape the prism through which teachers judge their pupils in the coming years. As Proust stated -the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

Successful learners as an outcome is hardly groundbreaking, but confident, contributing (and caring?) citizens, that's more of a challenge. Think about the opposite of these qualities and you'll see their complexity. How many children meet these criteria? Who are the children who don't, and who decides, and then what? How will we formatively assess these qualities and track progress?

We need to know where these value-laden features came from before we can work out how to achieve them. We must take a step back and establish a closer connection between the curriculum and these pupil qualities. The curriculum has been tinkered with constantly over the years yet the changes don't seem to have improved pupil behaviour and motivation. Maybe the formal curriculum is not the be all and end all. No matter how excellent the curriculum, what really matters is what's going on inside each pupil's head and their peer group. The curriculum needs to take account of what pupils bring to the classroom such as their ideas about ability, how they explain their progress, their attitudes to achievement and most importantly their personality.

The focus on these psychological qualities is compatible with schools' statutory duty to develop children's personalities as well as abilities. Indeed it can give substance and meaning to this somewhat vague and little known duty. We would do well to consider how these qualities articulate with modern personality theory. Schooling makes huge demands on children's personalities and the curriculum should no longer be personality blind.

Some aspects of the curriculum strain elements of particular pupil's personalities leading to severe distress while it resonates with others. So shy children dread social dancing at Christmas; extraverts thrive in the school show. Timed tasks are thought to motivate boys but this benefit mainly applies to extravert competitive boys. Some personalities are more reluctant than others to self disclose and this limits their creative writing. Some children are by dint of their personality concise and so struggle to understand the need to elaborate to achieve full marks.

The achievement gap between children with the personality characteristic of poor self control and the rest has been found to be roughly equivalent to one year of school. Personality must be considered because it is powerful in predicting achievement. The main deficit in low skill school leavers identified by employers is a lack of planning and focus, which is also a key barrier to

engagement in learning, but this reflects the personality factor central to achievement, namely conscientiousness.

To grasp this opportunity to take the child centred approach schools have been long advocating, teachers will need space to attune to the full spectrum of pupil temperaments, especially when in reality many of the children fare poorly on these qualities. If teachers are to help nurture their pupils' personalities the new agenda must include training for teachers to develop their understanding of pupils and peer group dynamics. It will also require an inspection process that enables teachers' views about their pupils to be heard. Otherwise a Curriculum for Excellence will only add another layer of stress that creates an even more contaminated perspective of pupils. It will just be another curriculum for excellent learners. Curricular initiatives tend to assume all children are the same and generally keen to learn. The new paradigm must take into account the fact that all children are different.

The barriers created by some children's personal qualities frustrate most conscientious teachers. Teachers are sensitive to the range of children's needs but feel criticised for having low expectations for some pupils. We need to open up the debate about realistic expectations within the constraints of comprehensive schooling. The new curriculum will make increasing demands on children's adaptive capacity. Aspirations are important but they create exasperation when pupils don't measure up. We need to create a supportive climate where this emotional drain on teachers is acknowledged.

The drive for ambitious children has the danger of backfiring by forcing teachers to pressurise pupils in a way that destroys any seeds of ambition they ever had for themselves. Placing the child at the centre means looking from the inside out rather than the outside in and attuning to each child's needs rather than being obsessed with outcome measures that reflect well on the system. The child centred perspective needs to strike the right balance between accepting children for who they want to be and what the state wants them to be. It means putting the learners at the centre, not as a passive recipient in a transmission model of learning but as an active driver of their own values and beliefs.

The current dialectic is between the attainment and whole child agenda, but hopefully a curriculum for excellence can show they are not incompatible. Two key factors underpinning achievement are teacher perceptions of pupils and pupils' own motives. The curriculum reforms will undoubtedly shape the former and must take into account the latter and acknowledge that achievement is a profoundly social psychological process. This requires sharing professional and personal values at a deeper level than most teachers have been trained for or are used to.

The bridge between pupil personality and achievement is motivation to learn. The forthcoming parliamentary report into pupil motivation needs to underline how the new curriculum must engage pupils' hearts as well as their minds.

