Reclaiming Pastoral Care

Introduction: What Is This Broadsheet About?

Pastoral Care promotes relationships for learning. Through good communication and listening to the learner's perspective, it offers support to achievement for all. By promoting good relations and feedback between all parties, it is a key element of successful schools and schools that learn. Yet recent trends in UK schools ignore such principles and practice of pastoral care. This broadsheet reviews recent evidence and is produced in association with the NAPCE Annual Conference, *Voicing the Vision: Forget the Factory*.

What's Wrong With Some Recent Trends?

The last fifteen years, with successive governments, has seen:

- an emphasis on pupil performance in one-off tests;
- learners who do not perform well in tests thinking less well of themselves;
- pupils from disadvantaged groups becoming more disadvantaged in tests;
- more teacher-centred classrooms;
- a narrowing of the curriculum;
- a mechanistic view of teaching and of schools as organizations.

Such trends could lead pastoral care in UK schools to be de-emphasized, marginalized, or distorted. This would be regrettable, especially as these trends do not lead to high performance, so fail even to achieve the limited performance agenda of government.

Testing. Current tests encourage performances of display and fail to assess the skills and dispositions that matter most: they are inadequate as indicators of student learning or school quality.[1] Schools that manage to improve test results may well do so at the expense of meaningful learning, in the process driving good educators out of the profession.[2]

Performance. The dominant emphasis on performance supposes that learning automatically follows, more so if pressure is applied. For example:

How does one learn as a human being, except through pressure and threat?
  Chief Inspector of Schools, writing in the *Spectator*, 1995

We're putting the teaching profession under a lot of pressure and we're doing it for a simple reason: there are a lot of people putting us under pressure.
  Prime Minister, on *Independent Radio News*, February 2001

The message is 'if you're under pressure, pass it on'. But pressure often leads to strategic responses, and to 'looking good', rather than to learning behaviour. With pupils the evidence is that pressure does not lead to better results. A study of 174,075 15-year-olds in thirty-two countries found that:

'Achievement press' which was measured by students' perceptions of the extent to which teachers emphasise academic performance and place high demands on students, is only moderately related to performance, and *the effect on performance, on average across OECD countries, on the mathematical and scientific literacy scales is not statistically significant.*[3]

Under pressure, targets are set without developing the process for achieving them: this is unethical. Pupils who understand and feel in charge of their learning may be able to translate targets into personal action, whereas others will not. Rather than spend time on targets, time should be spent on each pupil gaining a richer understanding of her/his learning – this leads to higher performance.[4]

Pupil Self-esteem. Before National Curriculum Tests were introduced there was no correlation between self-esteem and achievement as measured by standardized tests. With National Curriculum Testing, however, there is a significant correlation between measured self-esteem and achievement.[5] Failure is now more destructive.

Disadvantage. High stakes testing programmes have been shown to increase high school drop-out rates, particularly among minority populations.[6]

Teacher centredness. When teachers are deemed responsible for pupil performance they become more controlling in classrooms, and even more so in a context of pressure. Government interventions such as the National Literacy Strategy may officially endorse 'interactive whole class teaching' but the evidence is that such strategies encourage teachers to use more directive forms of teaching with few opportunities for pupils to explore and elaborate on their ideas.[7] Government interventions of a standardized form, designed at and promulgated from the centre, serve to replicate the schooling patterns of old. The classroom scenario is maintained where:

> teachers regard students the way their superiors regard them – that is, as incapable of dealing responsibly with issues of power, even on the level of discussion.[8]

Narrow curriculum. Recent surveys of successful primary schools repeat the earlier finding:

> there is no evidence in the survey to suggest that a narrower curriculum enabled children to do better in the basic skills or led to the work being more aptly chosen to suit the capacities of the children.[9]

Mechanistic view of teaching and schooling

> A public discourse has been established which accounts for successful teaching in mechanistic and superficial terms as a set of external behaviours which are not linked to an understanding of learning. It is based on teacher performance, not interaction between teachers and learners.[10]

This mechanistic discourse has its effects on teachers too, turning them into functionaries for the organization, rather than professional learners and members of a school community. As one teacher put it: 'we are led to believe that the only reason we may want to speak to each other about our learning is how it will directly affect the school and the way it is run.' When teachers are treated as functionaries and schools as a machine, teacher recruitment difficulties are addressed by distributing functions to an increasing number of roles added to the school. This runs the risk of further fragmenting important functions and leaving teachers as anonymous 'deliverers'.

Improving Performance Comes from Improving Learning and Relationships

High-level learning does not come from teachers teaching their socks off. A crucial ingredient in high performance is to help learners become more active, to plan more and become more reflective. As a result, engagement in learning develops. Pupils who plan get 30 per cent better GCSE grades.[11] The GCSE scores of pupils who reflect least are just one third of the scores of those who reflect most.[12]

Such improvement is not achieved through instrumental means: it is an essentially social process, most successful when relating to learners' felt purpose, experiences of success, supportive interpersonal relationships and a sense of becoming the person we want to become. And no amount of clever delivery of subject matter will capture the imaginations and energies of students who feel that their opportunities for social development lie elsewhere than school.

Caring must not be separated from achieving – in tutoring relations, classroom relations and the whole school. When classrooms are characterized by collaboration, helping and enquiry, they become learning communities and well-researched programmes demonstrate that the range of benefits is great: 'higher educational expectations and academic performance, stronger motivation to learn, greater liking for school, less absenteeism, greater social acceptance, fewer conduct problems, reduced drug use and delinquency, and greater commitment to democratic values'.[13]

Beyond the Factory Mentality

Successful schools focus on learning and relationships. But dominant ideas of successful schools currently embody a mechanical 'sausage machine' view, and continue teacher-centred practices. Improvement becomes 'What can teachers do to pump out improved results for the school?'. This again risks ignoring both social relations and learning.

It is social relations that build the connection to school and to achievement. Pupils are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school when they experience acceptance, and a sense of belonging. Engagement and commitment are closely linked to student performance, and, more importantly, to the quality of student learning.[14]

It is a focus on learning which improves performance. UK secondary schools in which pupils have improved their performance above the rate of national improvement in the last decade have taken various approaches, some tactical (to look good in the performance tables) and others strategic. But the evidence shows that the

highest improving schools have gone beyond these two approaches and into an area which builds its capacity to improve, through an overarching focus on learning.[15]

There are implications for the style of leadership. A study of 96 secondary schools concluded that the key elements in student outcomes are participation and engagement.[16] Successful leadership in these schools stressed support, care, trust and participation: this contrasts with current government rhetoric of leaders having 'drive', acting decisively, giving clear direction and having impact by persuasion.

Viewing school as a community rather than a factory is essential for the connection between high pupil performance and teachers' views of themselves. If teachers feel they are workers in someone else's factory, pupil results suffer, whereas if they experience efficacy – the sense of being able to make a difference in the world – results improve: 'collective teacher efficacy is a significant predictor of student achievement'.[17]

What is the Contribution of Pastoral Care?

Going beyond the factory metaphor involves focusing on the experience of learners, supporting them in making sense of the otherwise fragmented experience of secondary school. In the curriculum of successful primary schools good use is made of links across subjects sometimes using themes for their planning; a strong emphasis placed on the humanities, physical education and, especially the arts, and the curriculum is enriched through a wide variety of carefully planned activities. This encourages pupils to value learning for its own sake. One key to success is that 'The pupils understand the nature and purpose of their learning, in some cases contributing to the planning and evaluation of the curriculum, and they know what they have to do in order to make progress'.[18]

❖ Pastoral care attends to the voice of the learner.
The key person who has an overview of each student, the tutor, can learn what affects their learning. And by reviewing with them the experience of school, ways can be generated for all contributors to make that a better experience of learning.

❖ Tutoring supports engagement in school.
There is strong evidence to suggest that positive leadership from the tutor focuses pupils on learning and achievement, encourages them to participate in a wide range of school and community activities, and develops their sense of self worth.[19]

❖ Pastoral care enhances the skills that matter.
The tutor group is a place for taking a perspective on the different elements of school life. It is also a group where crucial skills can be developed – skills of respecting others, helping others and of collaboration.

❖ Pastoral care supports the connected school.
The picture which pastoral teams gain of students' experience of learning is of great value to the rest of the school and can be shared through good year coordination.

To achieve this contribution, pastoral care in secondary schools needs to resist the distortions which occur when mechanical or divided views of education hold sway. Some years ago we identified the following:[20]
- the pastoral/curricular 'split';
- the discipline fixation – 'fire fighting';
- watered-down welfare;
- administrative overload.

Today we are at risk of adding another to that list:

- telling them their targets.

To reclaim pastoral care from the worst of recent trends requires a re-statement of the teachers' professional voice and the wider goals of school. The largest survey of teachers' views in England, with over 70,000 responses recently gave evidence that the factor which most motivated the majority to become teachers was the wish to work with young people, and that this remained the largest factor motivating them to continue (whereas the factors which most demotivated them were workload, initiative overload, and the target-driven culture). The ways in which they would like to see the role of the teacher develop in the twenty-first century emphasized concentrating on teaching and learning, adapting the curriculum to meet learner needs, and the freedom to use autonomous and creative teaching and learning approaches.[21]

If our schools of the twenty-first century are to really support the development of life-long learners, rather than a life-long addiction to teachers, then the focus on learning and the importance of relationships needs to be emphasized.[22] This significance and the key contribution of pastoral care is at risk of being lost.

It is a contribution to be reclaimed.

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