

Building the drive to succeed

From creating the right relationships and making the curriculum have autobiographical relevance to building positive beliefs about capability and allowing pupils a say in the curriculum – Antidote’s directors **James Park** and **Marilyn Tew** explore ways of attending to the emotional aspects of learning to ensure all students have a deep and sustainable desire to learn that will equip them to thrive in school and in their lives beyond

Young people will only achieve what their schools ask of them if they:

- see the point of whatever they are being asked to learn
- believe they can learn it
- have a strategy for doing so.

We need to ensure these motivational drivers are in place for everyone if we are serious about tackling underachievement.

But it is easier to prescribe curriculum content and pedagogic technique than it is to grapple with the complex emotional drivers that lead to underachievement.

The intractability of the ‘achievement gap’ arises from the resulting preoccupation with what students need to learn (the national curriculum), and how they need to learn it (the national strategies), rather than on how to develop a deep and sustainable desire to learn. This article focuses on the ways that schools can foster such a desire.

Why bother learning?

The existence of a national curriculum bestows a ‘taken-for-granted’ quality on the body of knowledge that schools are required to share with their students. The assumption is that because ‘experts’ have thought long and hard about what it is young people need to learn, students too will see the point of all this learning. This is not always the case.

Autobiographical interest

Reasonably, young people are most interested in themselves. Who am I? What am I going to become? Who can help me feel safe and become powerful? Who is going to get in my way? When Key Stage 3 students are asked about what makes them effective at school, they talk about the need to:

- be confident
- manage their emotional states
- engage in supportive relationships within school (Tew, 2007).

In emphasising these issues, young people show how deeply they understand what enables them to achieve in learning and in life. Addressing them is a pressing antecedent to any focus on the more formal curriculum.

This is not necessarily an argument for more personal, social, and health education (PSHE). There is a value in enabling the type of discussions about self and relationships that can happen in tutor time or PSHE lessons. But there is also a case for all staff understanding students’ need to make sense of what they are learning in relation to their emerging personal and social identities, and then helping

them to find autobiographical relevance in whatever they are studying.

At a crude level, this is about enabling students to use a story they are reading to understand better what happens in their own relationships, or to explore how the historical figure they are studying relates to their own quest for power. However, it might also be about a student recognising his or her need to harness the order and structure in mathematical constructs as a salve for an emotional state experienced as overwhelming.

Some present this type of argument as a dilution of ‘real’ learning. In reality, self-knowledge is the route to deep engagement with all the knowledge that is ‘out there’.

Identification

A powerful motivator for learning throughout the key stages comes from a student’s identification with an adult with whom they have a relationship.

Young people’s capacity to grow and develop comes from their experience of adults who enable them to feel safe, supported and valued (Bowlby, 1988). Only when such adults are available can students benefit from the intellectual stimulation and challenge they offer. A teacher’s ability to get this balance right is initially of more importance to the young person than what he or she knows about literature, maths or whatever else.

We tend to think that this relational function is of more importance for primary teachers. However, for adolescents to successfully negotiate the challenge of becoming individuals who are separate from their parents, they too need a strong connection to at least one other adult.

A student’s tendency to identify with those adults who foster feelings of safety will lead the pupil to become interested in becoming like that person. The process of learning acquires its emotional charge from being an opportunity to experience closeness to the idea of someone who is already a richer version of themselves, a pointer to what they might become. It is the warmth of the relationship, as much as the intensity of their intellectual passion, that stimulates interest in a particular topic.

Through relationships with different adults, young people have the opportunity to try out different identities and see how well they work for them. They might find that neither the father’s interest in engineering nor the teacher’s passion for literature is for them, but that a warm-hearted uncle’s interest in reptiles lights a powerful spark.

Research confirms that attention to relationships between students and teachers is key to motivating pupils who are not achieving well. As one author put it:

It is easier to prescribe curriculum content and pedagogic technique than it is to grapple with the complex emotional drivers that lead to underachievement

Research confirms that attention to relationships between students and teachers is key to motivating students who are not achieving well

8 EMOTIONAL IMPACT

Teachers described their approach as more negotiated with low attainers in which practical, interactive or fun activities were used as a reward for good behaviour and/or task completion. (Dunne et al, 2007)

Cold purpose

There are other ways of getting young people to see the point in learning.

You can, for example, fill them with the fear that, without good grades at GCSE, they will not find a decent job. However, this message will not be helpful if it contradicts the student's own observations. If, for example, they have a relative who owns a successful business but has no formal qualifications, or their family story argues in other ways that academic education is pointless, why would that young person bother putting themselves through the effort and inconvenience? For this student, fear of ruin will not cut any ice.

You can also promise them an immediate cheque if they fulfil what is asked of them. Such an approach is unlikely to inspire a deep interest in learning, or even a sustainable ability to learn. It tends, rather, to encourage a view of school life as a joyless and uninspiring experience.

Believing in capability

Another set of factors that affect achievement relate to the truism that nobody will try very hard to learn something if they believe they are not capable of achieving it. As the saying goes, 'If you think you can't, you can't'.

Personal belief

The sense of incapacity may have its roots deep in a student's upbringing. If a pupil's home is unable to provide a consistent experience of care and safety, the student will find it more difficult to experience curiosity and express creativity in the classroom: too much of their experience is linked to feeling powerless in a world that is experienced as unsettling or frightening.

Students who are made to feel powerless by their experience of adult care will look for ways to draw others into their inner experience. They will do this by stirring up conflict, causing disruption and trying to bully others. By behaving in this way, they can make others feel as they do and behave as they do, fostering despair and disengagement across the class. Those who feel powerless will react poorly to intellectual challenges, fearing that mastery is quite beyond them.

If we respond aggressively to young people who act in this way, we risk making the situation worse. We confirm to young people that the adult world does not care for them, and cause them to cling even more strongly to the behaviours that make them feel safe. This could involve antagonising adults and preventing their peers from learning.

In any class, students will have varying experiences of care, both in the past and in the present. The more they find a secure emotional environment in school, the more able they will be to experience the range of emotional states that support learning. Some will have a stronger need than others for the type of support provided by a counsellor, a mentor or a nurture group. All will benefit from an environment in which they feel safe, listened to and able to play a role that leads to their feeling valued.

The more they find a secure emotional environment in school, the more able they will be to experience the range of emotional states that support learning

If a teacher values able, motivated and attaining students more than their more challenging peers, he or she tends to communicate that some young people are of greater or lesser worth

Those who feel powerless will react poorly to intellectual challenges, fearing that mastery is quite beyond them

Home beliefs

A lot of recent research demonstrates the significant impact that parents can have on achievement through the level of support they offer to their children's learning. That this impact is independent of the parents' own level of education reflects again the importance of adults providing a warm, loving and authoritative relationship (Feinstein et al, 2007). There is increasing recognition of the need for schools to work in partnership with parents, which explains why the recently published Children's Plan proposes consulting on a new relationship between parents and schools' (DCSF, 2007).

Teachers' beliefs

The 'Learning without limits' project at the University of Cambridge (Hart et al, 2004) looked at the powerful impact on students of having teachers who reject the assumption that present levels of ability predict future levels of ability. These teachers concentrate instead on promoting pupils' capacity to learn so as to take them as far as they can go.

The report describes these teachers as having a 'transformability' mindset, described as:

a firm and unswerving conviction that there is the potential for change to current patterns of achievement and response, that things can change and be changed for the better, sometimes even dramatically as a result of what happens and what people do in the present. (Hart et al, 2004)

This transformability mindset takes into account:

- the interaction between young people's subjective states and the range and quality of learning opportunities provided

- the way in which young people operate as a group
- emotional states as well as cognitive capacities
- the need to learn the skills and understandings that promote learning
- the capacity of teachers, individually and collectively, to shape learning capacity.

These teachers recognise that they have the power to strengthen and, in time, transform learning capacity by acting systematically to lift limits on learning, to expand and enhance learning opportunities, and to create conditions that encourage and empower young people to use the opportunities available to them more fully. The climate created by such an attitude fosters respect and mutual trust. The sense of emotional safety that results – no one needs to live in fear of sarcasm, mockery and derision – helps to engender intellectual excitement (Hart et al, 2004).

Unfortunately, the transformability mindset is not encouraged by a high-stakes testing culture, which tends to communicate that some students can achieve and some cannot. The underlying assumption that someone cannot do something too easily becomes consolidated into a young person's negative belief about himself or herself. This seems to be why a large number of students remain in the same ability band throughout their school careers. One recent research project (Duckworth, 2007), for example, demonstrated that the reason pupils' performance at Key Stage 2 is so similar to that at Key Stage 1 is probably due to the public nature of the KS1 results. Being known to students and their teachers, they tend to shape expectations. Consolidated in this way, the

students' expectations are very likely to be taken forward into secondary education.

Classroom climate

Adult beliefs and values can have a negative effect not only on a student's self-image, self-esteem and motivation to achieve, but also on the emotional climate of the classroom.

If a teacher values able, motivated and attaining students more than their more challenging peers, he or she tends to communicate that some young people are of greater or lesser worth. This leads some students to feel incompetent, unsafe and doomed to a future of low achievement. Some school practices, such as streaming, can further underscore the messages that some students are 'better' than others are.

Values drive our ability to make connections, and shape the likelihood of personal chemistry evolving between particular adults and young people. Students become very 'tuned in' to a teacher's values and read whether they are likely or unlikely to be favoured in that classroom. Ability may not be the only discriminating value held by a teacher. He or she may find particular ethnic or social groups more appealing or difficult than others.

Finding either oneself, or the group to which one belongs, judged and found wanting is an extremely uncomfortable position to be in. This discomfort will manifest itself in difficult social interactions, leading to behaviour that is judged to be antisocial. Often groups of young people, denied the opportunity to achieve, will decide that the only form of success available to them involves a race to the bottom. As one Year 9 student said to us during an Antidote project:

Sometimes the class wants to be the baddest class of the whole year. So far, in Spanish and science, I think we are the bottom of the groups out of the whole year. We had one teacher who was the best teacher yet. After he went, everyone started mucking about. We made another teacher leave. That's how much we terrorised him.

The project involved a Year 9 class, which had a reputation for being exhausting and unmanageable, uninterested in listening to their teachers or each other. Their tutor had gone on long-term sick leave and they had been exposed to a succession of supply teachers. We discovered that the young people had concluded from their experience in their first weeks at the school that nobody cared about them. The group's negative sense of themselves led to discomfort, which was expressed in inappropriate ways, and led to difficulties with learning.

This finding demonstrates the importance of finding out what is really going on before developing curricular responses to the problem as it presents itself to the school. The teachers of this Year 9 class all thought that the students needed to have lessons in 'listening skills'. In reality, they knew how to listen. It was just that their history in that class made it impossible for them to use those skills in their learning.

School response

More generally, schools need to take an interest in where students are coming from before trying to improve their achievement: young people's

assumptions that they are not capable of achieving will come from many sources.

One study of the factors that enable pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed (Feinstein et al, 2007) argues that schools can find it too difficult to recognise and respond to the capabilities of pupils from low-income families. Teachers need, they say, to develop a broad understanding of social and racial attitudes, as well as cross-class interpersonal skills. They: *need support and training in how to read signals; otherwise they can be expected to fall back on their personal views, experiences and opinions – with all the consequences that can flow from that.* (Feinstein et al, 2007)

They highlight the importance of teachers:

- taking into account the complexity of the pupil's world and wider context
- escaping assumptions based on family profiles and pupil behaviours
- working in partnership with parents who are different from themselves
- practising the self-reflective skills that may help them to change practice during or following a challenging experience.

Having an effective strategy

The inter-relationship between the various elements that influence student motivation is complex. A recent review of what secondary students believe shapes their motivation emphasised that strategies designed to 'fix' pupil motivation could not work because they do not take account of the causal chains that lead to the affective decisions that young people make about whether particular subjects are for them (Smith et al, 2005).

The authors of the review say that teachers and policymakers seeking to tackle disaffection and disengagement need to:

allow for a range of influences to be identified and accounted for when trying to understand, and alter, a pupil's cognitive engagement with particular elements of school learning. (Smith et al, 2005)

That necessarily involves, the report says, looking at wider, more environmental and cultural issues, rather than just focusing on within-individual issues.

The causal chains identified in the report are listed in the box below.

Causal chains

- **Self** – does the subject being studied allow for my self-expression?
- **Utility** – are the activities useful or relevant?
- **Pedagogy** – does the teacher display enthusiasm, make lessons fun and encourage collaborative work?
- **Curriculum** – do the qualities recognised as achievement through assessment fit my own understanding of what the subject involves?
- **Peer-group influences** – does enthusiasm for the subject require me to transgress cultural norms?
- **Learning** – is it expected by both the teacher and the wider community that I will make an effort to learn?

(Smith et al, 2005)

We need to start from the assumption that everyone wants to learn, and then dig down to discover why it is that some of them do not behave as if that were the case

These teachers recognise that they have the power to strengthen and, in time, transform learning capacity by acting systematically to lift limits on learning

The sense of emotional safety that results ... helps to engender intellectual excitement in students

10 **EMOTIONAL CAUSES**

It is easier for us to write off students as being 'lazy' or 'uninterested in learning' than it is to explore all these causes of individuals or groups underachieving. Any one of these factors may lead to a student, or group of students, feeling too unsafe to apply themselves to study. It is likely that more than one of them will need to be tackled if students really are to learn and to grow. The implication is that we need to start from the assumption that everyone wants to learn, and then dig down to discover why it is that some of them do not behave as if that were the case.

Personal strategies

A student's belief in their capacity to master a topic or develop a skill cannot be separated from their discovery of a strategy for achieving the task. It is quite possible for someone to believe that they cannot do something, not because they are incapable, but because the route proposed is not one that fits with their preferred learning style.

Teachers need to use strategies that help students develop a sense of themselves as learners, so as to help them to understand their learning preferences – whether they enjoy the book-based, teacher-led approaches that are often favoured in a school classroom, or a more hands-on approach, involving experimentation and exploration. Schools can do much to encourage student reflection on the different ways people learn, helping students to identify whether they work better going step-by-step towards the solution to a problem, or prefer to work backwards, testing conclusions suggested by hunch and intuition. They can think about whether they like to plan ahead or work at the last minute to the deadline, whether they prefer to work alone or with other people, in the morning or the evening, in silence or noise and so on.

However, it is not all about the ways in which we approach learning. Varying levels of motivation may also derive from a difference in views on what a satisfactory solution to a learning challenge looks like.

Teachers need to use strategies that help the student develop a sense of themselves as learners, ones that help them to understand their learning preferences

Learning necessarily involves challenge but should never become a strain

Someone who is inspired to mastery of a subject will want to engage with its richness and complexity. For talented students, focusing on preparation for tests which, in pursuit of reliability and fairness, ask pupils to complete 'one-piece jigsaws' rather than 'jigsaws with a significant number of pieces' will be unsatisfying, and provoke boredom followed by disinterest (Gardiner, 2007).

Curriculum and pedagogy

Schools that want to ensure the conditions are in place to enable young people to achieve need to open up the conversation with their students about what is going on that may block, or could stimulate, higher levels of achievement. Students need to feel they have a voice in how they learn, and the ability to negotiate what they do in order to learn.

As Dunne et al (2007) put it:

Above all else the schools in which lower attaining pupils were more highly motivated and engaged were characterised by an ethos that reflected genuine pupil voice.

This enabled pupils to:

- choose from tasks offered at different levels
- select with whom they worked on different tasks
- observe teachers to provide evaluative feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching.

Another recent report emphasises the need for schools that want to improve performance through pupil consultation to transfer power and influence to young people, rather than engage in tokenistic activities that involve a small minority of the population (Whitty and Wisby).

Similarly, parents and carers who feel consulted and involved in their children's education are more likely to be supportive of the school.

The use of a profiling tool, such as TalkiT from Antidote, can be helpful in raising self-awareness and

Using TalkiT to raise self-awareness

TalkiT is a computer-based programme that can either sit on the school's server, or be used on standalone machines. It contains a self-report questionnaire that asks questions about the way students think and act in school, giving instant feedback in the form of graphs. Students can use the accompanying student handbook to understand the graphs and engage in interactive discussions around the emotional and social aspects of learning and getting on in school. TalkiT can be used by a tutor, a PSHE teacher, a learning mentor or anyone else who works one to one with students. As a result of the graphs, young people talk about their self-awareness, self-control, motivation, and ability to understand other people and ability to work with them (Tew, 2007). The TalkiT tool enables the student's self-perception to be seen in a graphical form, identifying:

- how self-aware the student thinks they are
- how well they manage their feelings
- their capacity to motivate themselves and work with other people.

A 360° facility is also available. This enables friends, other classmates, teachers and even family members to complete the questionnaire for an individual student. The resulting graph plots profiles one on top of the other to show how other people perceive and experience the individual. This can lead to produc-

tive conversations about strengths, weaknesses and motivations.

Discussing the social and emotional aspects of school provides insights into possible causes of underachievement. Schools have used TalkiT in different ways. Some choose to enable the students to talk together in pairs or small groups to explore their profiles and think of areas to develop. Others prefer to use the tool as the basis for one-to-one discussions with an adult in the school. Whatever the chosen format for discussing the feedback, it is a powerful way of helping the student to understand themselves and begin to take action to make school more enjoyable and productive. For instance, a young person might have a poorly developed sense of self, lack confidence or be unable to control impulses. On the other hand, they might be bored, lack appropriate intellectual stimulation, or perceive the subject matter to be irrelevant. The young person may have poor or inappropriate peer relationships. Discussion of the profile can uncover underdeveloped social skills, damaged attachment history, the need for power and control or emotional upset resulting from family circumstances, ill health or constantly changing schools. All such discussions shed light on the possible causes of underachievement, while keeping the student, not their failure to achieve in any particular subject area, firmly at the centre of the conversation.

For more details see: www.antidote.org.uk/offer/talkit.html

Principles that drive a high-achieving school

- Everyone wants to learn
- Young people learn best through exploration and experiment
- Curiosity is the most powerful motivator of learning
- Learning necessarily involves challenge but should never become a strain
- Learning is a social process conducted through relationships and these promote resilience
- Young people learn different things at different speeds in different ways
- Young people are more likely to be motivated by the discovery that they are different from others than by the message that they are better or worse
- Adults are better teachers when they also see themselves as learners
- Young people have a richer experience of learning when all their senses are engaged
- Young people who learn to move between logico-scientific and creative-intuitive modes of thinking are more likely to develop the capacity to solve the problems that confront them
- Young people are more likely to learn when their parents and carers feel involved in the school's efforts and that they can contribute to its success

identifying inconsistencies or tensions – see the box on page 10.

Learning environment

When students are encouraged to work together in collaborative and cooperative ways, they tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same content is presented in other ways. However, the impact is not just on learning and retention. It also impacts on motivation, engagement and connection with other learners. Pupils begin to value the skills and insights different individuals contribute. In fact, the more the students are encouraged to grapple with the complexity of a subject, the more they are likely to value the full range of skills and abilities that are to be found in their classmates. This, in turn, means that they have to learn more about each other, come to understand each other better and, in the process, discover more about themselves. This form of involvement has many positive effects, including building more supportive relationships and positive influences in the peer group.

The SPRinG (Social Pedagogic Research into Groupwork) project, carried out over five years by researchers at the universities of London, Cambridge and Brighton, argued for more focus on groupwork to raise levels of achievement.

Working with more than 4,000 pupils aged five to 14, the project showed that training pupils in groupwork skills could:

- raise educational achievement
- increase active engagement in learning
- foster deeper conceptual understanding
- boost high-level discussion between students
- improve classroom behaviour.

Groupwork, the research says, counters the tendency

When students are encouraged to work together in collaborative and cooperative ways, they tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer

Learning necessarily involves challenge but should never become a strain

to passivity – the downside of trying to raise attainment by making students work to a prescribed curriculum under continuous assessment pressure. At the same time, it is an ideal approach for developing the emotional literacy skills that enable learners to work effectively as a team and to make decisions together (Baines et al, 2007).

Way forward

The current sense of urgency about 'closing the achievement gap' is in conflict with aspects of education policy that keeps the gap in place. Ultimately, the only route to raising levels of achievement lies in engaging staff and students in conversations about what is happening now and what would enable it to become even better.

For tips on how to help promote achievement at a whole-school level, see the box below. The box left sets out key traits of high-achieving schools – use these to help drive your policy approach to stemming underachievement. We have to explore values, ethos and practices to ensure that education makes sense for pupils, staff and parents.

James Park, Director, and Marilyn Tew, Development Director, Antidote

Antidote works with schools to help shape an emotional environment that enables everyone to learn and grow. Find out more at: www.antidote.org.uk or contact the authors via email: emotional.literacy@antidote.org.uk or tel: 020 7247335

Top tips for promoting achievement in schools

- Have systems for asking every student what blocks they see in the way of enabling them to achieve their potential
- Ask students to come up with creative ways of enabling them to achieve even more than they are doing at the moment
- Develop a supportive ethos that creates sufficient emotional safety to allow everyone to respond well to intellectual challenge
- Provide opportunities for teachers and other staff to unpack their assumptions about particular students and groups of students
- Discourage staff and students from shaping what they learn and how they learn around the need to complete national tests
- Celebrate all types of achievement as a whole school, ensuring that individuals feel good about their success rather than feeling that their efforts are only valuable as a means of enhancing the school's reputation or position in the league tables
- Develop strategies for building strong relationships across peer groups, as well as between adults and students
- Enable students to learn about themselves through any subject they are learning or activity they are doing
- Develop strong relationships between the school and the home, so that young people receive 'all-round' support