

# Teachers are young people's leaders

Educational consultant **Susannah Temple** writes about how teachers can further develop the leadership role that they play with young people

People learn by example and from experience, especially when young. In the classroom, it is inevitable that teachers, whatever they do or don't do, are setting examples and influencing the experiences of their students. Therefore there are some important questions for teachers to ask themselves:

- When I'm being a teacher, what are the students learning from me?
- What sort of an example am I setting?
- What sort of experiences am I offering?
- How am I leading the students into becoming the people and learners they need to be?

These questions are about leadership, about how teachers are being educators as well as 'deliverers of the curriculum'. They are about the essence of teaching and learning and the relationships between all the learners in the classroom, including the teacher. These questions require that we think about teachers as leaders and about the qualities and characteristics that will support them in offering the sort of positive leadership from which all will benefit.

## The teacher as a person

The most important aspect of leadership development for teachers is their personal development. Teachers need to exert authority so that everyone benefits. To do this, they need to feel confident about their own identity and ability to relate positively to others. They need to feel secure in their understanding of how to create trust and rapport and to be sincere and congruent in what they do and say. They need to understand why this matters and why they need to model that which they wish to promote.

As Veronica Lim (2005) puts it in describing the essence of a 'natural' leader: *'In nurturing a generosity of spirit with themselves they extend the same generosity toward others. They fully realise their worth and they lead just by being the person they are, while always inspiring and allowing others to do the same.'*

## Teachers' emotional literacy

Teachers can develop and work best in establishments that have an emotionally literate culture led by emotionally literate school leaders. This can be measured using Antidote's School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey (SEELS). For more information on this, go to [www.antidote.org.uk](http://www.antidote.org.uk).

Sometimes, however, support is low and demands are impossibly high. This makes the benefits of personal development even more important for teachers in helping them cope with stress and find ways to deal with the complex pressures of the classroom. Lim (2005) also describes what happens

in a culture of pressure for high standards that fails to value human needs for positive relationships and a sense of safety from put-downs and rejection. 'People often operate in a mode of unconscious fear – fear of making mistakes and getting things wrong, or the fear of blame.' This sort of fear makes learning very hard and unpleasant. Small wonder that people try to 'escape' from classrooms where this fear is the norm. There are many ways to 'escape'! These range from the passivity of daydreaming, arriving late or not turning up to the disruptions of diversionary tactics and 'bad behaviour'.

## Classroom relationship

Research has identified the ways in which student-centred practice promotes student motivation and achievement (McCombs and Whisler 1997). The most important factor is the quality of classroom relationships. When these are experienced as positive, understanding and enabling, students' learning is enhanced.

To be leaders for learning, promoting motivation and achievement, teachers need attitudes and beliefs that will help them relate positively to their students. For instance they need to believe in students' potential for success and that the teacher can make a positive difference. Having the know-how for engendering a classroom climate of hope and encouragement is vital, both for their own sakes as well as for their students. When teachers promote the 'learning power' of their students, the satisfaction of doing this helps in turn to support the teacher's morale. Learning becomes a mutual activity and empowerment a two-way phenomenon. (Deakin-Crick, Broadfoot and Claxton 2002)

## Communication levels

Communication happens simultaneously on two levels, a social, more obvious level and a psychological, more obscure level. In order to be clear and helpful, the two levels need to be congruent. Congruence is when a message is the same from the open, social level as well as the hidden, psychological level so that the verbal and non-verbal aspects of the communication match up. Congruent communication is helpful, whether it is positive or negative, because the speaker is saying what he or she means (and means what he or she says) and both parties know where they stand. Mutual respect is easier.

Incongruent communication is when the two levels of the message, social and psychological, do not match and the person is not clearly expressing what he or she actually means. This is often experienced as insincere or manipulative in some way, though the speaker may

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not consciously intend this. The most important factor to be aware of is that the power of any communication is fuelled from the hidden, psychological level, rather than the open social level. This doesn't show up in congruent communication of course.

When communication is incongruent, the psychological level of the message, having greater potency, will have the greater effect. Imagine being greeted at the door with the words 'Oh how lovely to see you!' said by someone in a dull voice, who just sighs and stands there with no smile at all. It would be hard to feel welcomed and accepted. This is how incongruence often results in uncertainty and confusion and may cause misunderstanding or suspicion. It is also why so many arguments start out with the words, 'But I only said...!' It is important to note that incongruence is usually a part of humiliation and sarcasm, those enemies of classroom trust and harmony.

The daily dynamic of classroom relationships carries messages that can affirm and inspire or undermine and demean. The dynamic works in both directions between students and teachers and is the main ingredient of classroom climate. The nature of this climate makes a huge difference to how people feel about themselves as learners, whether they feel understood or misunderstood, whether they think they are treated fairly or unfairly, whether they engage with the subject and whether they are motivated to succeed.

### Positive leaders

Interpersonal effectiveness is a vital aspect of leadership. It is a manifestation of respect and congruence. To be effective leaders in the classroom, able to affirm and inspire students in their journey of becoming effective learners, teachers need to be aware of how they communicate; aware of their habits and patterns of behaviour and the likely effects of these in the classroom. Reflective practice promotes the building of this self-awareness, and reinforces positive ways of relating, so that patterns and habits that are counterproductive can be transformed.

### Functional fluency in the classroom

Teachers find that it helps to have a model and framework to support their reflective practice. The functional fluency model (see *ELU4* and below) is based on concepts from transactional analysis, a practical approach to psychology in the classroom (Barrow, Bradshaw and Newton 2001). Functional fluency is the art and skill of interpersonal effectiveness. The model puts emphasis on positive ways of being in charge and using authority, helping teachers to learn more ways to empower and care for their students so that they become more self-confident and more self-disciplined. It is vital to get away from the argument over whether it is better to be 'harder' or 'softer' on students, and realise that the key issue is how to exert authority that is both strict and kind, and always respectful. The ITV drama film *Ahead of the Class*, starring Julie Walters (World Production 2004) in the true story of how a headmistress saved a notorious London school from

closure, vividly portrays this transformative dynamic of positive leadership.

Teachers need to be themselves as people in the classroom, at the same time as being authority figures, using their creativity and ingenuity to solve problems and finding ways to encourage a spirit of cooperation and responsibility rather than aiming simply for obedience. Minimising stress is important too, so teachers need to stay aware and connected to the moment by moment reality in order to choose how they will respond and communicate with their students. Each teacher will balance his or her energy between these three main areas of social functioning in a unique way. Ideally this balance should be flexible and free in its flow to help teachers to flourish. The functional fluency model (see box) gives a whole new take on 'F' words!

The model also identifies modes of behaviour common to us all that we may slip into without realising it or just because it is a bad day! However, learning to recognise what it is that triggers us into these negative modes and how to get out of them means that more energy is available for using a blend of positive modes of behaviour.

Functional fluency is relevant for social effectiveness in any context. In the classroom, however, it is vital. In order to model positive ways of relating and to help the students learn how to do this as well, teachers need to be aware of the example they are setting and the experiences they are offering. Teachers hold a special leadership role that calls for a professional interpersonal effectiveness. Positive leadership in the classroom helps everyone's wellbeing.

**Susannah Temple will be contributing to the Emotional Literacy conference in London on Thursday 6 October. See p12 for more details.**

#### Key messages

- Ask yourself what sort of leader you are.
- Aim to exert authority so that everyone benefits.
- Develop confidence in your identity.
- Cultivate your ability to relate to others.
- Try to be yourself as well as an authority figure.
- Aim for congruence between what you say and what you mean.
- Believe in students' potential for success.
- Believe that you can make a difference.

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### Temple Index of Functional Fluency (TIFF)

TIFF is a validated psychometric tool designed to stimulate the insights and understanding that support and encourage self-awareness as a basis for positive behavioural change. The results provide a profile of a person's behavioural tendencies and habits, both negative and positive, in a variety of situations and relationships. Expert feedback offers explanations of the model along with support and guidance for making use of the results. The insights gained from these discussions stimulate self-awareness and understanding and encourage positive changes for increasing interpersonal effectiveness.

[www.functionalfuency.com](http://www.functionalfuency.com)

### References

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- \* McCombs, B, and Whisler, J S (1997) *The Learner-Centered Classroom and School*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco CA, USA.
- \* Temple, S (2004) 'Building Self-awareness'. *Emotional Literacy Update*, Feb 2004 Issue 4.
- \* World Production (2004) *Ahead of the Class*. ITV drama film.