



The Pastoral School

Schools boast of being focused on academic skills, extra curricular and pastoral care. But, as James Hodgson, Headmaster of Bedford School, argues it should really all be about one thing: self-esteem.

LET'S START AT THE END. A young graduate walks out of university, and out of full time education, with the world at (for sake of argument) his feet. He sits down to write the first of what is likely to turn out to be very many job applications; he is lucky – he has a decent idea of what he wants to do, but equally he is setting his sights high and he does not want to settle for second best. And why should he, with a decent degree from a good university and a string of impressive grades from school? Three months go by, a pile of rejections, and not a single interview; then, praise be, a summons! This is it; his big opportunity to create a launch pad for his adult life – and this is it, too, from a school's perspective: this is quite possibly the most significant moment that his schooling has been tested...

Life is not all about getting a job – but having a fulfilling job is very likely to be one of the key determining factors in the leading of a happy life. What this graduate has needed to get this far, and what he will need in the coming days as he prepares for and then undertakes his first major interview, has to be a key question for all those working in schools in the 21st century. It is not an insignificant list of qualifications, experience and

attributes. On a more measurable scale, he will have needed good advice on subject choices, university and careers options, sufficient grades to progress to the next level, a sound training in the written word and some demonstration of outside interests – the sorts of things which eventually make up a written application for a job.

On a less measurable scale therefore come those softer skills, skills of interpersonal communication, empathy, resilience, persuasion, humour, feeding friendships, and displaying self-awareness. Ultimately, as one approaches that big moment of first interview, what matters is a love for learning new things, a zest for life, a glimpse of character and the ability to sell oneself in a confident, assertive, yet humble, approachable and likeable, way. And it is worth remembering that, of all these, the softer skills are more lastingly important. As Albert Einstein once said: 'Education is what remains once one has forgotten what one has learnt in school.'

One look at any school website will show how most schools see the delivery of these qualifications, experiences and attributes: they are easily pigeon-holed. Academic. Extra-curricular. Pastoral Care. Not always in

that order, but always the trifecta, proudly displayed. One can even picture these headings in one's mind, down the left-hand side of a webpage or as sub-headings of a prospectus, almost as if the three were not in fact mutually dependent. Yet if one looks at all the above 'requirements' for that graduate as he sets out in the world (and one can add any number more), they all come back to one thing: the need to foster and nurture individual self-esteem.

Self-esteem lies at the very heart of education, a quiet confidence built in every single child by everything a school does, and not just that which belongs under the relatively modern construct of 'pastoral care'. The pastoral system, the pastoral safety net, the pastoral options in a school, these are all important; but it is a pastoral school which is the most likely to provide its pupils with the qualities needed to succeed as they leave university a few years later. Everything a pastoral school will do will give its pupils the confidence to look that first interviewer in the eye.

Let us take a brief look at that 18-23 year-old bit. For a university student, perhaps with a year out somewhere too, here are a few years of amazing freedom in a young person's life, a time

for many mistakes, and for new life experiences as well as for study; but it also comes to many as a great shock that there is seemingly nobody there to look after you, to help and guide you personally, to advise, cajole, discipline and help to give some structure to your life and aspirations. Universities are mostly very good 'pastorally' in a crisis these days, but there is little that is proactive in their care – that is largely down to the students themselves. The responsibility falls to schools, therefore, to have equipped their leavers with the attributes which are going to serve them best in this environment and beyond – one where they have the confidence, know-how and where-withal to take charge of their own lives.

So what is a pastoral school? When I first became a Housemaster in a day school in Australia at the tender age of 26, I remember quite vividly a wonderful Headmaster addressing all of the housemasters together: 'I do not want you to simply know the boys, but I want you to know the names of their brothers and sisters, their pet cats, where they go on holiday, what they get up to on the weekend'. The emphasis was to provide, if you like, an extension of the family; another person to whom they can come to speak in times of difficulty and who will understand the pressures they face both at school and at home.

Upon return to England and appointment as a boarding housemaster, this perhaps seemed even more relevant – the idea of a home away from home is essential to the running of a boarding house, as this of course (at its core) is exactly what it is. And the provision of someone to whom a child can speak on a personal level, whoever that might be (tutor, housemaster, chaplain, counsellor, favourite teacher), is a vital component of every pastoral school. The 'pastoral safety net', as it is often referred to, must have no rips in it.

But it is worth noting that the building of self-esteem for the majority of children is far more complex than this; it is true that good pastoral safety nets give them the confidence to pursue avenues of experimentation, but it is also true that self-esteem for teenagers comes through the recognition of their peers as much as it does from adults. This has real significance for a school. Firstly, everyone must have a chance to find their strengths – this requires, at its best, a huge variety of choice of activity. One child's

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hockey will be another child's film making. But it is also not just choice that a good school will need to supply, but often something a bit less fashionable: a degree of coercion. The same Australian Headmaster used to say regularly that it was his 'school's duty to coerce children into experiences'. He knew that he could not decide for them whether or not they enjoyed them, but what use was a school of wide-ranging opportunities if there were some pupils who never took them up? Some teenage children will snap them up; others will need taking to water.

Secondly, all talents need to be valued equally and encouraged to be so in the eyes of peers. Good games players, academics, actors, film-makers, charitable fund raisers, networkers, musicians, readers, 'clubmen', all need to recognise and enjoy each other's strengths: this is a whole school issue and one critical to the self-esteem of all pupils as they grow, but it needs constant nurture, as not all activities are always equal in the eyes of a teenager. The culture must be steered that way.

We often hear of praise as a vital ingredient in the nurture of self-esteem, and this is indeed correctly hailed; but again a less fashionable word, discipline, is equally important in establishing a whole school atmosphere for teenagers to flourish. Good discipline encourages good manners; encourages empathy and respect; encourages team work and support; encourages, in the end, the individual to have the space and confidence to thrive. Counter to intuition, therefore, it does not restrict, but it enables. Choice of when and how to discipline pupils is not always easy: but, alongside the overall wellbeing of the community, if one also keeps an overriding vision of a child's long term self-esteem, then one can often see a way through.

Some miscreants may have done something stupid through genuine arrogance or an overbearing attitude and, combined with a lack of repentance, these may need a reality check for their own good later on. Some, on the other hand, may have misbehaved

through need for recognition or a lack of confidence: these need careful handling, as they can be crushed for ever now. For others still, it was a moment of madness and they can see it all in the light of day: embarrassed and apologetic, their discipline needs to come with compassion and care. But, at its core, discipline needs to be firm, consistent and well understood: if a school can achieve this, then every child has the best chance of growing into a successfully self-disciplined adult.

Finally, collaborative experiences need to be at the heart of all that is done at school – in the hands of skilled teachers, these experiences can give confidence to children, increase self-esteem and provide the skills needed in today's collaborative world. There are increasingly few workplaces where people work in isolation – and the notion of teamwork should not be confined to the sports field. Debating, discussion groups, Harkness tables, drama projects, group presentations, business entrepreneurialism are just a few ways in which a school encourages mutual respect, listening skills, problem solving, communication – all things which will enable that graduate to go into his first interview with confidence; and also to address any disappointments and setbacks with a calm head.

Schools should therefore not see 'pastoral care' in a sphere of its own. A pupil's pastoral needs are so many and so varied that pastoral care should course through the very veins of any successful school, in everything it does from the classroom, to the drama studio, to the sports field. And every single worker (teacher and otherwise) in the school, by their example and their interest, plays a pastoral role, by understanding that all of our actions have consequences for a child, and that we are all playing the long game and not just jumping the next short-term hurdle. A pastoral school will know this: what that child is like at the age of 25 is, at least in significant part, in our collective hands – and what an awesome responsibility that is!

James Hodgson is the Headmaster of Bedford School.



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