

Happiness

The importance to learning of ensuring children are happy and fulfilled was the focus of a recent NCSL in Dialogue session in talk2learn.

Led by George Otero, director of the centre for relational learning in New Mexico and Laura Chapman, disability equality trainer, *Developing Learner Responsibility* was inspired by research which makes a case for placing less emphasis on results in favour of a greater focus on life skills and relationships.

Key points to emerge included:

- linking happiness to the curriculum
- academic achievement does not of itself make children happy
- early years approaches to children's wellbeing could be used further up the school

Tina Thomas, assistant headteacher of an infant school in the South East, said her school had drastically revised its curriculum in order to engage children more and encourage them to enjoy school.

"We ensure that each unit of work has a stimulus to get the children to buy into their learning and an outcome – for example, a wizards' convention for their science work on changing materials or an interactive exhibition linked to environmental issues in the rainforest.

Looking at the children's faces when we present the stimulus and they take part in the outcome is priceless."

Jan Potter, a primary deputy headteacher in the North West, described how her own research into enriched curricula showed that pupils' self-esteem, attitude to school and enjoyment of learning were all very much linked.

"The results clearly indicated a positive response to a creative curriculum where skills learned could be applied and where there was the opportunity to develop gifts and talents in other areas. This had an impact on their academic learning and gifted pupils were challenged by the new opportunities offered."

Headteacher Susan Porteus said happiness was a top priority for her parents at her North East primary school.



She said: *"Happiness promotes learning and unhappiness inhibits it. It's also very difficult to be an angry young man if you are happy and enjoying yourself! Promoting happiness is now a significant strand of our school improvement plan."*

One leader in a secondary school queried the notion of a link between happiness and academic achievement.

"Do higher achieving pupils enjoy their success as much as they should or are they so focused on achieving top results that they miss some of the pleasure in learning?"

Julie Pinnegar, a foundation stage teacher in the East Midlands, suggested that the emphasis on the importance of children's wellbeing in early years might usefully be expanded to later stages. "Should we have a more play-based curriculum spreading through the rest of the school? Are the pressures so much that they take us further away from this?"

Finally, George Otero felt that seeking happy children in school may be a red herring.

"School seems to be one of young people's least favourite contexts in which to seek happiness at the moment. Room for improvement I would say given that is our context as professionals and Every Child Matters states that 'Enjoy and achieve' probably go together in an important way."

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