

UNLEASHING PRAISE and POSITIVITY in SCHOOLS

The DECISIVE ELEMENT

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Foreword

Five teachers changed my life.

Literally.

I was a child living in a home full of chaos, and their unconditional positive regard for me led to a gradual increase in self-belief that interrupted my trajectory towards a life on the streets.

Yes. That's the difference teachers make. What you do can't be measured in an observation lesson or served up as a neat little bundle of data for Ofsted – it's so much bigger than that.

It starts with a connection, which can be as simple as a smile but might not even be that.

Mrs Cook was permanently happy. Smiling, exuding love and positivity in that special way only those Everyday Heroes who spend their days surrounded by 5-year-olds can.

Mr Readman saw the funny side of everything. He was committed to fun and could flip any challenge into an opportunity for joy.

Mr Williams, Mr Simpson and Miss Archer were different. Not stern or cold but more partial to a firm handshake than a hug!

And yet each of them changed my mind about who I was by building a relationship that allowed a broken little girl to trust.

See, it's not what you say and do but what you think and feel that comes through. Especially for children like me growing up in an abusive home. I can read authenticity a mile off and that's great news! If you're not a Tigger type, it's not about faking joy but about feeling joy – in whatever form that takes. When you are authentic it shows, and it speaks volumes and makes deposits in our emotional bank accounts.

The authors of this book are gloriously weird (compared to how completely normal I am), and yet from the moment I heard them speak, I knew we shared a sense of the transformative power of who teachers are in the classroom.

It might feel like the government, Ofsted or the sword of Damocles is hanging over your capacity to impact the lives of the mini humans in front of you, but the truth is that you have more agency than you know.

And it starts with remembering that the best thing about you is that you are a human who cares.

For a road map to the rest, read on.

Jaz Ampaw-Farr

Introduction

What makes a great school? There has long been a national conversation about our education system, and of course everyone is an expert, because they all went to school! Conversations abound about types of school, school buildings, settings, uniforms, exams, league tables ... the list is endless. Usually, suggested changes are costly and schools are always limited by money. What lies behind this book is the belief that it is people who make the difference. Teachers and school leaders make the weather in every classroom and in every school, and it is their mindset which transforms lives, for ever, helped and assisted by each and every adult who works in a school. They are all educators.

All three of us have made speeches on the day of a colleague's leaving or retirement, and we have always ensured that such events were happy, positive, upbeat and fun. Equally, we have all had the honour of speaking at funerals, sharing life-affirming stories about the departed person and praising their legacy. On these occasions, it's easy to find things to be positive about, even though everyone we have eulogised will have messed up at some point. However, it seems that, increasingly, many folks are quick to pick up on negative things and resort to moaning, complaining or saying unpleasant things about others.

It's so effortless in our modern, speedy, Internet driven society to add off-the-cuff complaints and moans to social media posts – an article by Leo Kelion reveals the

“worrying” amount of hate speech’ that children are exposed to online.¹ Our mate Andy Cope reckons that ‘Most people nestle comfortably in the bottom third’ of a positivity graph, while around 2% spend most of their time in the top third.² Andy calls these folk 2%ers, and it is our view that it is these people who make the difference in any organisation because they are habitually positive and have a huge impact on everyone else.

While we understand that the world can be a challenging place and that life is full of trials and tribulations, we’d like to think there’s a way that we can all get the best out of each other and actually feel happier and more successful – to help each other be the best versions of ourselves. The 2%ers see problems just like everyone else, but instead of jumping into doom and gloom mode, they look for a positive way forward and search for solutions. This is not to say that they never have a down time; of course they do. But positive people bounce back because of the way they choose to be, and it is this way of thinking that we want to tap into.

The awesome poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou is reputed to have seen it this way:

I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

1 Leo Kelion, ‘Children see “worrying” amount of hate speech online’, *BBC News* (16 November 2016). Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-37989475>.

2 Andy Cope and Andy Whittaker, *The Art of Being Brilliant: Transform Your Life by Doing What Works for You* (Chichester: Capstone, 2012), p. 26.

This book is aimed at teachers and school staff of all kinds; from reception class to sixth form, state and fee paying, to university and further education. Whatever your context – inner city, leafy suburb or rural – we don't claim, or aim, to have the magic elixir to help you get everyone you teach into the top third of the positivity stakes. But we do have more than a few things to say about what we could all do to help the young people we lead to get the most out of life.

We refer to teachers, we refer to support staff and we refer to school leaders. However, let's clear this up now: everyone working in a school is a leader of some sort. Teachers and classroom assistants lead the learning; office staff lead in the engine room of the school and in their relationships with the pupils, staff and parents; middle leaders, coordinators and senior leaders drive the direction and dynamics of the school curriculum. In the staffroom, whoever is talking is leading while others listen. How this all happens matters hugely because everything that takes place in schools boils down to outcomes for pupils.

Some folk are a real pleasure to be with most of the time. Some bosses you'd follow anywhere. Some you might wish would read this book and apply it to their world. Some teachers have the most challenging kids³ eating out of the palm of their hand and others struggle with fairly compliant classes. So, why is it that one

3 We will use a variety of names for the young folk we teach. 'Kids' is commonly used in schools so we'll also use it here. But whatever your common terms are, our youngsters are the most important folk in this story, so please feel free to think of them in your own terms.

teacher can inspire and at the same time challenge a class of teenagers or 7-year-olds, while another teacher might struggle with the same group? We will explore these strange happenings and ask why certain teachers inspire kids, help them to make leaps in learning, engage them and pull off the Maya Angelou trick – make them feel good.

Maya Angelou's maxim is a great starting point. In the course of any one day you could easily have hundreds of different interactions with other human beings. If you add in the social media mix you could be talking thousands, even millions. Cast your mind back over yesterday. How many people do you think you communicated with in one way or another? What did you say? What did you do? How much of this was with the youngsters you teach? The exact detail may well be irrelevant, but the effect of your saying and doing is anything but. So, in saying and doing what you said and did yesterday, how many of the hundreds or thousands do you think felt good because of it?

Words and actions can be hastily assembled and subtle differences in tone, phrasing or body language can easily give the recipient the wrong message, leaving them feeling very different to how we actually want them to feel. If you live in that bottom third of positivity for most of your life, then the chances are that your communication will often have a negative effect on others. Being negative requires little effort, whereas investing in a positive way to influence the lives of others requires much more commitment and thought. As we observed earlier, everyone sees problems, but the big difference here is that it is easy to simply moan, groan, carp and

whinge about whatever the issue happens to be. However, to switch from a negative to positive attitude, takes time, effort and thought. When we do, though, we can transform the situation from a problem to an opportunity. These are the folk who become weather gods.

Let's pause at this point as we don't want to offend anyone. We are going to refer to 'weather gods' repeatedly, and when we do so we are talking about non-gender-specific, all-powerful deities in schools. We are alluding to the following quote by Haim Ginott:

I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized.⁴

Teachers, then, are the weather gods of the classroom. Brilliant teachers bring the sun in with them as they arrive, they fill their classrooms with joy and laughter and, for most of the time (notice we are not saying all of the time), their pupils want to do what they want them to do. Such teachers are boomerang teachers – the ones the kids want to come back to for more. The ones

4 Haim G. Ginott, *Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 15–16.

pupils ask when they see them at breaktime in the yard, 'Have we got you next, Miss?' or 'Are we making our volcanoes this afternoon, Sir?' These are the teachers who in thirty years' time will be shopping in Sainsbury's (other supermarkets are available) when, while perusing the incredibly wide selection of tomatoes, a voice will grab their attention: 'Hello, Miss.' They will be greeted like a long lost friend and told how much they made a difference to that person when they were young. They might even mention how much they helped them in a particular way – something the teacher didn't even know about at the time.

This is one of the great things about being a teacher. Forget data, forget Ofsted ('Oh we wish we could!' we hear you cry), forget league tables. What really matters are the little human beings who teachers help to become adults and, for most of the time, the help goes unnoticed by everyone but the child. Unless you happen to have a chance meeting next to the tomatoes, you may never know, but trust us: when you make a difference to a child, you never un-make that difference and sometimes it can be life changing. These teachers are MAD! Yes, MAD – they Make A Difference.

This is why being a weather god is so important because every difference needs to be a good one. If we could create a generation of kids who all had positive memories of every teacher they encountered, then we really would unleash the power of the weather gods.

We're guessing – no, hoping – that because you've picked up this book, and you're reading it, you don't actively spend your days thinking up ways of making others feel unhappy. We hope that you have the

ambition to make young people feel great about themselves and to help them become the best they can be. We guess that you are either an aspirational weather god or already well on your way to being one. If that's the case, this book's for you.

We hope you enjoy it.

Chapter 1

The Big R: Creating the Climate in School

It is our huge privilege now to visit a wide selection of schools across the UK. One thing we have learned is that postcode is absolutely no indicator of what we will find when we arrive. We have turned up to schools in what look like salubrious and favourable surroundings, only to find ourselves feeling uncomfortable; equally, we have been to schools in altogether more challenging contexts where we have been bowled over by the warmth of our reception and the buzz of the institution.

We ask ourselves time and time again, what is the difference? What is the indefinable quality which makes one school distinct from another? If you ask a lay person the same question, they will often cite the head as the determining factor. A school can surge up and down the fickle barometer of local opinion and reputation according to the perceived effectiveness of the head teacher. We think this is a bit restrictive because our experience tells us that being part of a successful school is a huge team effort; there is never just one superhero but a phalanx of dedicated and skilled professionals. But whether we ascribe the perceived success to one person or to a wider team, what is for sure is that great schools have great leaders who make the weather on a daily basis. It is all about that big R: *Relationships*. Of necessity this will start at the top: in creating the weather, great leaders will be the source

of the feel-good waterfall which cascades positivity, inspiration and self-belief to every stakeholder. In great schools this is true of every single member of staff because, as we shall see, we are all leaders.

School improvement is constantly on the agenda in schools, and the government of the day will make it its business to oversee this process. In a democracy where the taxpayer foots the bill this is a fact of life, but we reckon that it is in the DNA of everyone who works with kids to want to improve all the time. None of us reaches the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow where everything is sorted. Policies, procedures and protocols – many of which will be massively draining on time, money and energy – will abound to make the system ever more rigorous, robust and transparent. We contend that one of the most effective ways of transforming a school is to change the mindset of every person in the establishment. And it starts at the top with a single-minded drive to inspire everyone, employee and young person, to aspire to be the best possible at all times. Inspiration, aspiration and no small amount of perspiration will open up new frontiers of achievement across the board, and it costs nothing – a zero-cost route to school improvement. It is all down to leadership – great leaders who create the weather for everyone by building quality relationships and enabling fantastic teamwork. Put simply, leaders who are weather gods.

Chris attended the funeral of an elderly relative recently, and during the eulogy the son of the deceased described his mother's role in developing healthcare in the town in which she had lived in the mid-1960s.