

Forget everything and run

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Chris Watkins analyses some new aspects of the culture affecting our schools and offers some strategies for professionals.

No, this is not an invitation to exit the profession – more of an analysis as to why some might currently be considering that. The title of this article reminds us that the word FEAR is not a noun, but an acronym. The acronym reminds how quickly fear can empty our minds. The effect of fear on human thinking has been voiced for centuries. As Edmund Burke (1729-1797) put it: ‘No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear’.

In the 21st century education system of England, it has reached the stage where fear has become an important topic for focussed attention and research. We need to not only understand the effects of fear on learners and on teachers, but also examine its central role in many education discourses, and how such discourses are constructed. Then we might be empowered to reduce its negative effects, and focus on a more appropriate acronym for educators: HOPE – Helping Other Possibilities Emerge.

And currently, in the public education system of England, an increasing culture of fear is part of what has led most schools to forget their professional knowledge of classroom practice and revert to the form of 5,000 years ago – teacher-directed, teacher as judge, pupils as passive. These dynamics of pupil-teacher relationships are ones which classrooms revert to when put under pressure, and they were in evidence in the first classrooms on the face of the planet – Sumeria 3000BC.

Pupils spot it. Some name it. Here are some comments from Devon students attending ‘good’ secondary schools, in conversation with adults on an out-of-school learning project:

“All through my education, teachers have just been telling me, drumming it into me, that if I don’t get my grades, ... we get told every day that if we don’t get the grades, we’re going down the drain and not worth anything. The message is too loud, too much.”

“The teachers want the grades. They need the results.”

“Stop there being so much fear in the system. All the teachers are scared of students getting bad grades.”

The first of these comments highlights an important way of understanding fear, which I learned from another researcher, Eleanore Hargreaves. ‘Stories of negative consequence’ are constructed, communicated and embodied in action in our schools’ various practices. This understanding also helps us see that we are talking about a constructed culture of fear, not a matter of individual anxiety.

So what can we as professionals do to cope with such a culture and its negative effects? I have encountered (and used) two main strategies, which can be successfully enacted together at their respective levels.

Naming and Taming

One of the great understandings from narrative therapy is that by naming the processes which affect us we can start to regain our agency in the face of them, and then start to reduce their negative effects on our lives. So instead of silently experiencing fear, if we can get to spot the voice of fear, and name it, we can then start to regain our thinking contribution.

One example comes from a Tuesday night discussion by a group of London teachers talking about change in their classrooms. The early part of the discussion made much of teachers having “confidence”. Until the group was challenged to clarify what makes a confident teacher (and to know that trying to spot one from the outside generates a mass of stereotypes). Some while later they came up with this definition:

“Confidence: The ability to continue acting according to your principles, while in the presence of the voice of fear”.

This example also highlights the benefit of professionals talking together about this issue and the way it could affect their practice. Another example is when schools are preparing for Ofsted inspections. By explicit collegial discussion on what is currently going well, how we contribute to it, what we consider the best to achieve during





inspection and (after the event) what elements we are proud of in the way we handled ourselves, schools can avoid the worst of the fear and compliance trap, and retain the best of their professional practice rather than enacting the current myths about what they are looking for.

Further value can be gained from spotting (and talking about) the way that the voice of fear operates, the way it does its dirty work. For example, one key element is that it exaggerates the negative consequence. If these test scores don't get better this year we could be witnessing the end of civilization! If I give these students any autonomy, the whole classroom will fall apart! This exaggeration is captured in the Swedish proverb - 'Worrying often gives a small thing a big shadow'. Another element in the voice of fear is the way it exaggerates the likelihood of getting caught!

'Now-ing' and Knowing

Fear hinges on a story of negative consequence – a story of the future, something that might happen, not something that is happening now. Engagement with this perspective is what we call worry, but studies suggest that '90 per cent of what we worry about never eventuates. This means that our negative worries have about ten per cent chance of being correct'. That's where fear also begets another acronym: False Expectations Appearing Real.

In contrast, one of the important principles about human beings at their best is their focus on the now. As Tolleiv puts it, 'nothing ever happened in the past - it happened in the now. Nothing will ever happen in the future - it will happen in the now'. And as the much-quoted statement puts it, 'Today is a gift. That's why it is called the present.'

Helping oneself to focus on the now, instead of the future or past, can be helped by a focus on two things - one's immediate context, and one's presence. The first of these can be practiced to enhance one's experience of the world around us – including the classroom world. This brings us into the present and channels our intellectual potential into noticing and understanding our immediate context. The second can be practiced by paying attention to such things as our breathing, body awareness, and so on – a good route to reducing the mind's negative voices and thus regaining perspective. In so doing we can help our professional lives avoid replicating the experience of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533-1592): 'My life has been filled with terrible misfortune, most of which never happened'.

Once we have helped ourselves return to the now rather than fearing some constructed future, we can remember and re-engage our professional knowledge of classrooms and what's important in education at its best. For example, an appreciative inquiry I raise with schools and other groups of teachers (beginner teachers, head teachers) asks them to think in detail about a classroom experience they had where the learning was really exceptional. Asking people to think this way is really against the grain in current times. I then introduce a summary of decades of research on effective

learning in classrooms and invite participants to indicate the extent to which their classroom experience accords with these headings, anywhere from low to high. My recurring experience is that at least 85 per cent of teachers indicate a high accord with the research. This affirms for me teachers' professional knowledge and understanding, even in a climate of pressure and reductionist practice.

Why should we bother?

Teachers currently grapple with a climate of low trust – they are not trusted to operate as professionals, and perform the job they have trained to do. The source of this climate is politicians, and the annoying irony with this state of affairs is that surveys of the general public for the last 25 years show that they trust teachers highly ... and distrust politicians.

Recent governments have used a discourse of fear to justify policies and back up their claims for potency. Sometimes cabinet ministers even make their view of fear explicit: "You can't have room for innovation and the pressure for excellence without having some real discipline and some fear on the part of the providers that things may go wrong".

But government mechanisms of publishing test scores, hostile inspection, and so on generate or increase institutional fear, above and beyond professional evaluation of risk.

And what are the overall effects of such forms of control? A conclusion from another sphere of human behaviour may be useful: 'Fear is manipulated in hierarchical settings to ensure the preservation of existing power arrangements.' Is that what is happening in education?

British schools are developing an increasingly divided pattern of performance. '77 per cent of the between schools differences in student performance in the United Kingdom is explained by differences in socio-economic background' (OECD 2009 – 15-year-olds in reading, maths and science). Only one other OECD country has a higher figure (OECD average 55 per cent). The risk is that teachers might contribute to this divisiveness by passing on the culture of fear. Some teachers try to use fear as a motivating force but the effects are divisive. One sub-group of pupils end up with increased anxiety and a fear of failure, others end up with a mastery-approach goal. So the effect is to highlight and accentuate motivational matters, which also often associate with socio-economic factors and underlying stances on learning.

I have never met teachers who want to have divisive effects - I regularly meet teachers who strive for something better, a picture of greater equity. And I am privileged to witness the schools who do this through a focus on learning. They rise above the dynamics which create defensive teaching and compliance.

Current times need us to remember the old phrase: 'The biggest risk in education is not to take one'. Notice how the voice of fear might capture your reading of that statement, 'you can't take any old risk with the lives of children' or other such exaggerations. Of course not, but what we might perceive as risk, professionally handled, is a necessary part of achieving our best, and doing more of what we know is best rather than doing more of what we are told.

I recently photographed this poster in a public setting:



It may be appropriate on a station platform, but I think it would also be appropriate in the foyer and staffroom of every school.

Chris Watkins is the Key Note speaker at the Standing Out Conference on July 5th. See Page 31 for details.



Standing Out: be something different

Friday 5 July 2013 09.00—16.00
@ West Bromwich Albion Football Club

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- **Steve McDermott**
Author, Broadcaster and European Business Speaker of the Year
- **Chris Watkins**
Developer of Learner Led Learning work

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- 'Innovative use of E-Learning' by Microsoft
- 'What is Good Teaching?' by Heather Clements
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