



LAWRENCE SHERIFF SCHOOL
A National Teaching School
RUGBY

HAPPY SCHOOLS

It was a familiar Sunday afternoon routine. Leafing through details of deputy head posts, I was trying to find the one that seemed right for me. The problem was that almost all of them seemed to be the same. Words like 'standards', 'monitoring' and 'evaluation' appeared to be compulsory. One school even informed me that they were looking for 'a real fizzer' to start immediately.

Then I saw it. Turning to a new set of details I read: 'We believe that a happy school is a successful school'. I can honestly say that it was the first and only time that I had seen those two ideas brought together: achievement and standards mattered, but so did the human values that make people happy. Inspired to apply, six months later I found myself starting as the school's new deputy head.

Eleven years on, happy schools seem to be the new 'big' idea. The specialist schools trust now offers courses on how to lead happy schools. A recent headline in the Daily Telegraph announced that children in Birmingham schools' were to be given 'lessons in happiness'. The initiative came in response to Ed Ball's earlier announcement that children should receive classes in emotional wellbeing in the hope that it would boost their academic performance. One can imagine the logical consequence of all this. In a few years no doubt Ofsted inspectors will be told to grade schools on how happy they are. Perhaps some institutions will be placed in special measures for being 'utterly miserable' whilst those who are merely 'grumpy' will be served with a notice to improve.

I wonder if as with many government initiatives, we may be missing the main point. The thing that convinced me that happiness mattered was working alongside a headteacher who put into practice the values that lay behind the word. He believed that the school should embody principles such as fairness, justice, concern for the individual, even, dare one say it, love. Furthermore, he did not apply these principles only to students, but also to all of the adults who made up the school community. In doing this he taught me the most important lesson of my career: that what matters most in education is not organisations or government initiatives, but people. We achieve most when we value all of the people who make up our school, not just certain groups within it.

Is valuing people a magic formula to create happy schools? Well it might be a start. I am not suggesting that this means accepting low standards or being a pushover when the behaviour of students or staff falls below expectations. However, it does mean an acceptance that everyone has an important contribution to make to the organisation. For students this may mean creating student councils that go beyond dealing with 'bogs, bins and bells' and instead make a serious contribution to what is taught and the way in which it is taught. Similarly, it is important to recognise that all schools contain aspects of powerful practice that are as effective as anything that can be found elsewhere. By valuing and sharing this practice, the school can send a strong message that everyone has an important contribution to make to its success.

In the light of this, I wonder if a government that is placing such an emphasis upon happiness is actually doing more than any other group to erode it. One of the quickest ways to frustrate any professional is take away their sense of autonomy and to make them feel that their ideas are not truly valued. The new QCA led key stage three curriculum seemed at least to be a recognition of this, with schools largely able to create a programme of study tailored to the needs of their students and their local context. However, perhaps frightened by the loosening of the reins implied by the new development, since then government have sought to impose more and more control upon schools. Compulsory cookery, compulsory culture: how long before this is taken one step further and we have compulsory happiness? How can schools be encouraged to teach emotional well-being, when the professionals who will deliver these lessons can sometimes feel disenfranchised and ignored?

Perhaps the most important impact of happy schools comes in the area of succession planning. Central government continues to be warned about a potential crisis in the recruitment of school leaders. My experience is that one of the best ways to recruit leaders of the future is to enable them to see a genuinely happy school in action. When I started as a deputy I was certain that I did not want to become a headteacher because the job appeared to involve so many negatives. I had heard about too many school leaders for whom the job had involved isolation and poor relationships with colleagues. Seeing a happy school in action convinced me that it was possible to develop a model of leadership that placed the valuing of people at its centre. The inspirational effect of this experience was beyond anything that NPQH could have achieved. Furthermore, as I move towards my tenth year as a headteacher, it is still this vision of what a school can achieve which inspires me above anything else.

It is still true to say that a happy school is a successful school? Whilst courses in emotional well-being and case studies from 'outstandingly happy' schools may have their place, they run the risk of complicating something that is relatively straight forward. A happy school is not a place where everyone walks around with a Cheshire cat grin or where the headteacher is called Mr Chuckles. It is simply a place where people matter - an idea which, happily, is both simple and profound at the same time.