*12.02.2014*

**Keith Bartley**

The evidence globally is compelling – higher levels of school attendance are linked directly to a young person’s academic achievement. Governments in the Western world have adopted both statutory and voluntary measures to impress upon parents the importance of regular and frequent attendance at school. And more recently in the UK, we have seen the Secretary of State for Education focusing attention on behaviour and discipline in schools – even extolling the virtues of detention and the mindless repetition of writing lines. Ironical, then, that his own misbehaviour in the House of Commons earned him a rebuke from the Speaker and the imposition of 1000 lines!

I do not seek to trivialise these matters – positive attitudes to schooling are an essential ingredient in the well-being and achievement of children and young people. You have only to witness the high degree of enjoyment, concentration and purposeful learning that are the hallmarks of all successful Early Years settings to know that children really like to explore the boundaries of their knowledge – and are capable of high levels of self-determination in their exploration and learning. But how can we build upon the enthusiasm for learning that our youngest learners exhibit? Not by threatening to punish them when they are older!

The Children’s University (CU) embodies the virtues that, for me, are the building blocks of promoting positive attitudes and self-belief in young people as they grow and develop. In a speech at the successful ‘High Hopes’ CU conference at Shrigley Hall in the North West of England last December, I set out what I regard as the ‘Unique Selling Points’ of the Children’s University. Central to its success is its ability to engage parents, the wider community and businesses as learning partners with a focus on the children themselves. In part, the CU is so popular with youngsters because it is, intentionally, something other than school! Participation is voluntary but it holds at its core the ambition to raise aspirations, boost achievement and foster a love of learning. And the youngsters who engage with the CU quickly come to realise that it is about enabling young people to make the most of their abilities and interests, regardless of their starting point or the background into which they were born. Its universal reach and invitational stance motivate children to join in.

And more compelling still, is the evidence that participation in the CU improves the very behaviours that we know leads to higher levels of engagement, resilience and attainment. The longitudinal studies that the Sheffield CU have undertaken show that the more hours youngsters spend in CU activities, the more they attend school – and the better they do in national attainment tests. And I am sure they are better behaved as well!

So, politicians everywhere take note: the answer lies not in coercion and punishment but in motivation and stimulation. Make no mistake, I am not some weak libertine who opposes discipline. Quite the reverse, I spent most of my school-based career in leadership positions with responsibility for behaviour and discipline. Children and young people need very clear parameters set; they require consistently high expectations and demands made of them with regard to their behaviour, and they need to learn that ill-discipline and flouting rules carry consequences.

But they also need to internalise the purposes of education, to understand that rules exist to promote social interaction and high quality learning environments. And in every walk of life we know that self-motivation and voluntary participation are far more potent levers for achievement than coercion and punishment.

So, I look forward to hearing more about how all of the rich resources of our communities can be marshalled to help stimulate the interest and engagement of our children; how parents and children alike can be incentivised to foster a love of learning rather than a fear of retribution.

Maybe understanding how that works is where the school inspectorate Ofsted’s efforts could productively focus in future?


                    Profile image for Dr Keith Bartley

*Dr Keith Bartley retired in July 2013, having been the Chief Executive for the Department for Education and Child Development in South Australia. Keith is a Patron of the Children’s University.*