



HighLight Key – Unconditional Acceptance

Effective teaching, we believe, is based on a relationship of unconditional acceptance of pupils by the teacher. This relationship involves encouragement and affirmation. The Christian values of forgiveness and grace are vital in any inclusion agenda.

What is unconditional acceptance?

It receives another person just as he or she is, without criticism or judgement. It raises no legal barriers; it says, “I accept you; you count.”¹ This acceptance on a relational level – according dignity and value to a person - is not based on what they can do; their social status or how they look, but on the basis of them being a human being intrinsically worthy of respect.

Acceptance is recognised as a basic human need for everyone. For those pupils who are insecure, or lacking in confidence or ability, acceptance is the first foundation for their learning. Without it they may never make progress no matter how much finance or technology is provided for them. Psychologists agree that tension or fear blocks learning by affecting the emotional pathways. Acceptance provides confidence. Ross Campbell, a counsellor of thousands of troubled teenagers², has discovered that the common question, whether spoken or unspoken, is: ‘Do I matter?’ They are asking if they count, not on the basis of ability, or grades or behaviour – but as a person.

Increasing the learning potential

Acceptance is the first building block of forming a relationship. Every good teacher or youth worker knows that you can get further with a young person if they know you care about them and a relational connection is established. Often children or young people know instinctively whether a person is for them or has another agenda; this includes their parents. Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist,³ believes in what he called ‘cooperative or collaborative dialogue’.⁴ He proved

¹ E. J. Carnell: The Kingdom of love and the Pride of Life p7.

² Ross Campbell: Loving Your Teen

³ Lev Vygotsky

⁴ McLeod. S. A. (2007) Simply Psychology. <http://www.simplypsychology.org/vygotsky.html>

through testing, that with relational encouragement, whether by a peer or a teacher, the amount of learning that can take place will be enhanced. He named the zone of extra learning the Zone of Proximal Development – or ‘the ZPD factor.’

Some Victorian teaching majored on the imposition of fear, criticism and public shaming, as is still the case in some cultures today. This causes lasting damage. Not only this, but such an approach disaffects the pupil from learning that subject. I have asked countless teachers about their favourite subjects and the subjects they dislike. In many, many cases the factor causing affection or disaffection for a subject, was the teacher and the type of relationship or non-relationship formed.

Case Study

Doug started at Grammar school at the age of 11, having been 2nd in the class for Maths and quite enjoying it. He encountered a different syllabus which took no account of the primary school’s curriculum and a cynical and sarcastic teacher who systematically humiliated and shamed all who could not achieve quickly. Doug’s confidence was destroyed and by the end of the 1st year he came 32nd in a class of 34!!... And he hated Maths from then on and never achieved an exam pass in the subject.

Unconditional acceptance is mainly expressed through kindness. Doug’s teacher lacked this basic component! The first act of kindness is to show each child that you accept them as a person, regardless of their ability. This meets a foundational human need. Kindness is further expressed when we show grace for pupils’ imperfections and their failures to fulfil requirements or expectations – even in mundane but important matters such as looking after their own property or that of the school.

Too many teachers have forgotten what it was like to be a child or teenager. They need to do as Atticus Finch, the lawyer father, encouraged his children to do in ‘To Kill a Mocking Bird’ – ‘to put themselves in another’s shoes’.⁵ In this way, understanding and a measure of compassion is aroused in the teacher/leader, and with it, more grace and patience.

Positive components needed in the teacher or youth-worker relationship:

The relationship forged between the personal coach and the young athlete is a good example of the powerful effect of a positive teacher-student relationship. The film ‘Chariots of Fire’ depicts this in the true story of aspiring Jewish athlete, Harold Abrahams, who submits himself to the training of

⁵ Harper Lee: To Kill a Mockingbird p. 30

coach, Sam Mussabini. This leads to the unlocking of greater potential than the young man had shown before. The coach provided a bedrock of acceptance for Abrahams and spoke out his confidence that his young pupil could achieve his dream, which he did.

Patience, kindness, humour, encouragement, praise, perseverance. reward, consideration, forgiveness; the ability to inspire hope and expressions of faith in the young person by the teacher/leader builds them up. Cutting comments, sarcasm or anger are destructive and disable the young person, rather than encouraging them. Partiality is another factor which creates a negative 'spin' in a class or group. As soon as young people discern favouritism they react against the injustice and are de-motivated.

Examples of inspiring teachers

The teacher who has vision for a student can impart it to them and lead them in to it – without a vision, leader and follower will not achieve and may drift aimlessly. The following pay tribute to their inspiring teachers:

Paddy Ashdown, (Politician)

John Eyre really changed my life. He persuaded me to join the poetry society (which all rugby playing "hearties" resolutely despised) and gave me a lifetime love of poetry, even getting me to write some for the school magazine. Eyre lit in me a fire for literature, especially Shakespeare, which has never gone out. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jan>)

Alexandra Butler age 16, grade 11, West Potomac High School in Alexandria, VA

Mr. Glaze (Maths Teacher) has inspired me both in the classroom and outside in the world. Math is normally a class many students dread. This teacher, on the other hand, taught me to enjoy math and see the real world connections in each problem. He taught problem solving skills that can be used in any situation. He also pushed me to succeed. While some teachers will give up on a struggling student, he works with each and every student in order to help them thrive and fully understand the subject... His strength inspires me in everything I do. He is truly a great teacher with the ability to inspire anyone. (Alexandra Butler age 16, grade 11)

Andrew Motion (Former Poet Laureate)

My background was very unbookish, and there was absolutely no expectation from my family of my ever reading very much or even writing anything. ...Then I was taught English by Peter Way (Mr. Way to me), and it was as though he walked into my head and turned all the lights on. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jan>)

Michael Morpurgo, (Author)

The teacher who most inspired me was Edred Wright, director of music at the King's School, Canterbury. His great gift was being able to inspire children (like me) who weren't necessarily

musically gifted – that's what we should require of teachers in all subjects. With Mr. Wright it was never about improving the reputation of the school, just his intense love of music. What that man taught me aged 14 has enriched my entire life. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jan>)

Jesus Christ is acknowledged world-wide as the most effective teacher. The fruit of his teaching means that there are estimated to be over 2 billion followers in the world today⁶. His approaches always involved relational acceptance and respect for the individual. He treated people as they would like to be treated. He taught the 'golden rule' of love: 'So in everything do to others what you would have them do to you.'⁷(Matt 7:12).

His closest pupils were taught through a variety of methods, nearly all involving a mentoring relationship. At HighLight we have explored and used many of these methods successfully.

Unconditional acceptance as the channel for teaching

This acceptance is a medium (channel) of knowledge because it opens the heart of the learner to receive. Intellectualism often refuses to accept this as a medium of knowledge. 'Philosophers may disagree about many things, but they agree that there is only one medium of knowledge, and that is a critically disciplined intellect...This assumes that intellectual detachment has access to all available information. But, in truth, the most important information, that which involves the secrets of the heart, remains inaccessible until detachment gives way to fellowship. This is a rule to which there is no exception.'⁸ The more we express loving acceptance to a person, the more they will trust us and be able to receive from us.

The harassed teacher may be saying 'This is all very well – but you don't teach my class!' The truth is that it is hard to accept and care for all pupils and, as none of us are perfect, we will not find it easy to maintain a loving approach throughout the varied experiences of the day, which sometimes includes irate parents! When he was on earth, Jesus ran out of strength just as we do and needed to renew it by time with his Father. From a Christian perspective, it *is* possible to find grace for all our students by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. If we will ask, we will receive.⁹

Unconditional acceptance as corrective discipline

However, this sort of 'love', which Jesus demonstrated, is not a soft option: it is 'loving' to correct and to discipline. The Bible makes it clear that correction is part of loving in the process of bringing

⁶ Global Christianity: A Report on the size and distribution of the world's Christian population in: www.pewforumonreligion.co.uk

⁷ The Bible; Matthew's Gospel Chapter 7:12

⁸ E. J. Carnell: The Kingdom of Love and The Pride of Life (p.49)

⁹ The Bible: Luke's Gospel Chapter 11:13

our children to maturity. It may involve loss of privilege or punishment of some kind as a consequence of wrong choices.

'No discipline is pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.'¹⁰

Whilst correction is needed it must be redemptive and motivated by a love which has vision for the pupil's potential character formation.

Of course, there will need to be rebuke, correction and a crossing of the will at times. But if the right to do this has been earned, it will be more easily accepted (although never popular at the time!). It also functions with greater success where there has grown a bond of mutual respect.

For more information, see HighLight's Key on 'Behaviour Management'.

¹⁰ The Bible; Hebrews Chapter 12: 11