The confident nation

Working for change within a schooling system that lacks self-belief has often felt to me like going against the grain. We Scots fail to recognise our own confidence problem in pupils who lack a 'can do' mentality, preferring to write them off as just lazy or disinterested. We also fail to realise how our own negative attitudes can damage pupils' confidence and so perpetuate this national weakness.

An important and timely book (The Crisis of Scot's Confidence) has helped me consider the paradox involved in encouraging schools to move beyond their comfort zone. This book captures the culture within which most teachers grew up and explains how it has created a Scottish identity that forms some deep seated and suffocating attitudes. The book sets out to help us move beyond such limiting beliefs and so build a more self-confident nation. A wide sweep of the country's history, literature and religion is provided with an analysis of how these influences have meshed to shape the Scottish 'accent of the mind '. In an affectionate but brutally honest account it puts the Scottish psyche under the microscope.

Positive legacies of Presbyterianism are many and include a deep interest in education, science and philosophy. Equality, public service and purpose and meaning are highly cherished. The Calvinist preference for logic and rationality however has also led to a critical attitude towards others. We tend to harshly judge others by our own principles rather than trying to understand their viewpoint. Our tendency towards black and white thinking is derived from our instinct to oversimplify things such as notions of God as all good and the devil as all bad.

Many aspects of the Scottish outlook are described as self-defeating and have created our biggest deficit in the people skills area. Ideas like 'not getting above ourselves' are corrosive national traits. The principle that everyone is of equal worth has become no one is worthy and so we have been discouraged to feel good about ourselves. As the Scots proverb says -When I did well I never heard it, when I did ill, I heard it ever.

Being told we are both worthless and must seek redemption has nurtured a competitive 'prove yourself' culture that breeds widespread jealousy of others' success and one-upmanship. This conditioning has led us to strive for perfection that only leaves us with the feeling that our efforts are never good enough. Many Scots try to cope with these contradictory forces by masking their lack of confidence with a defensive 'what's like us' arrogance.

The Scottish enlightenment contributed to a greater understanding of human beings and Presbyterianism encouraged a sense of community and social responsibility. The heavy emphasis on external regulation in our schools and society can however be traced back to the Kirk's grip over people's lives that created a smothering conformity. Our religion has made us look outwards to find God, in contrast to say Buddhism where the individual must seek God within. This helps explain our guilt-ridden penchant for punishment as well as current enthusiasm for rewards. Perhaps this dependency on outside control explains why speed cameras have had such a dramatic impact on drivers' behaviour.

Our national hang-ups include a fear of failure, public speaking, self-expression and being seen as 'too big for our boots'. This anti success mentality has not made life easy for schools. Reticence, shyness and our need to be apologetic are the result of centuries of being 'black affronted ' through paying too much attention to what other people think. Tenderness is seen as a weakness and we are not keen on physical or verbal endearments. No wonder there is disaffection in our schools – that is a lack of affection. The reformers' image of God as male left little scope for authority to be given to women and we may see distant remnants of this in some boys' reluctance to treat women teachers with respect.

Considering the humility and unquestioning compliance expected of our forefathers we can appreciate the gulf between many older teachers and today's youngsters who have been brought up on liberating ideas such as human rights and equal opportunities.

The Kirk believed the poor were responsible for their predicament and certainly wouldn't work if given money for doing nothing. Our early welfare provision was consequently mean, grudging and judgemental. We see similar attitudes today in the irrational hostility some teachers show towards rewards strategies to encourage better behaviour and in the questionable assumptions that truancy is always a self inflicted problem and disaffected pupils are to blame for their problems.

The book wisely seeks solutions not from our politicians but from attitudinal change at the grass roots involving a greater respect for individuality and diversity that will transform our limiting beliefs, improve our understanding of ourselves and others and find a better balance between our collective and personal identity. Any controversy over denominational schools is neatly ducked by suggesting we tackle the prejudice that creates sectarianism rather than enforcing conformity and suppressing diversity. The weakest parts of the argument are the Jungian interpretations that would benefit from an update from modern neuroscience and personality theory.

I would like to think the new generation of teachers who are too young to know what sugarallie-water is have moved beyond the judgemental and authoritarian dominie role and wouldn't recognise themselves in this book. The book underplays the power of those schools who believe in their own and their pupils ' agency, to nurture confidence. The 'thou shalt nots' of the Old Testament have been replaced in schools at least by golden rules.

The Executive's priority that all pupils achieve their potential through self-discipline also signals that Scotland is breaking from its past. Who would have predicted that enterprise, peer mentoring, anger management, conflict mediation, solution building, emotional literacy and meditation would be on the curriculum in our schools? Perhaps we are becoming a more life affirming culture. Aye that'll be right!