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# INTRODUCTION

## POSITIVE SCHOOLS, POSITIVE TALK

### DR HELEN STREET

*Wellbeing is the basis of flourishing, which is the ultimate expression of being well. This is a book about helping young people to flourish – at home, at school and in life.*

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Flourishing is a term that describes someone who is confident in their identity, assertive in their social interactions, loving towards themselves and others, resilient to life's inevitable setbacks and engaged in activities that embrace their strengths and passions. Kids who flourish have the greatest potential of all because they have the potential to be happy. Kids who flourish are kids who experience wellbeing and apply that wellbeing to living their lives in a positive and healthy way.

Nearly all parents want, above all else, for their children to flourish in life, to be happy and live their lives accordingly. Still, there remains a wide difference of opinion about the role of the education system in supporting flourishing as a primary aim. Some educators embrace social and emotional learning; others suggest that while social and emotional competency may be important, education is primarily an academic pursuit. It seems to me that this debate is redundant in the light of a growing body of research telling us that academic potential is most successfully fulfilled in the presence of wellbeing. In fact, just about anything we do in life is done more successfully, more passionately and with greater love

# JOSH'S STORY

## DAN HAESLER

*To what extent does knowing what you are or are not good at shape your life? How have your life's experiences and ambitions been shaped by your abilities? For most of us, our school experiences go a long way to shaping our identity.*

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'You'll struggle getting anything out of this one,' the handwritten note said. It came at the bottom of a set of notes compiled by Josh's Year 6 teachers at a local primary school.

I was fresh out of university in my first 'real' teaching job in the UK. As is often the way with a new teacher, I was given a Year 7 class to tutor. This is a kind of home-room scenario in which the tutor remains with the group throughout their school career. Tutoring involved delivering a prescribed program that incorporated things like goal setting and organisational skills and generally being the first point of contact in the school if students got into trouble.

Most of the boys in my Year 7 group had been identified as cheeky at best, and downright troublesome at worst. Their primary schools seemed to be happy to be rid of them, although the majority of teachers indicated that the boys had the potential to do well academically, they just needed to be engaged. All the boys had shown themselves keen to learn, at least occasionally, with the exception of Josh.

I hate to admit it now, but fresh to the teaching game, I took the teachers' notes on face value and figured Josh would end up finding his own way out of school into an apprenticeship or something else suitable. School just wasn't for him, right? We all know kids like that. As a new teacher I was ill equipped to provide Josh with any

strategies to improve other than to offer an encouraging comment or sympathetic ear every now and then.

Josh meandered through Years 7 and 8 getting Ds. Teachers questioned his attitude, though he was rarely in trouble for anything more than not handing in work – until a couple of weeks before the end of Year 8, when I got a phone call asking me to come and remove Josh from class. He'd told his teacher to '*f— off!*' and was becoming aggressive towards anyone trying to calm him down.

I walked in and asked him to come with me. We'd developed a pretty good relationship to this point, so he came outside knowing I'd at least hear him out. We sat in the playground until he had calmed down, then I asked him what was wrong. It turned out Josh had attempted to answer a question in class and got it horribly wrong, at which the whole class burst into laughter.

'I'm shit at everything sir,' Josh said, then apologised for swearing. 'Everyone tells me, my teachers, my mum and now my mates!'

I asked him what he meant by *everything* and he said, 'Maths, English, Science, y'know *everything*.'

Really? *That's everything?* I asked him what he *was* good at.

'Nothing,' he replied, and then, 'at school anyway, and that's all anyone cares about, innit?'

It turned out that Josh was really interested in – if not good at – cooking, photography and street art. He had developed his cooking skills through necessity as his mum worked two jobs and he would cook for his younger siblings, but now he was starting to come up with his own recipes.

His interest in photography predated today's teen obsessions for posting 'selfies' to Facebook. Josh was using his grandad's old SLR camera to take shots of everyday life in the streets around him, as well as examples of street art that he found exciting.

I asked whether he enjoyed Home Economics or Art at school.

'Nah sir, the teachers don't like me, and anyway, they're girls' subjects, innit?'

We laughed, but it did highlight a big problem. Josh *should* have enjoyed Home Economics or Art at school, but he didn't. Throughout his time at primary school he had developed the belief he was 'dumb'

and 'no good at anything.' When he did try, he failed. So he decided it was better not to try in the first place. Better to get into trouble for not doing work than get called dumb. The less he tried, the less he progressed. And so it became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We talked about this for a while, and I urged him to think more of himself than just the grades he received on his report card.

Intelligence – being smart, clever or good at something – comes in many guises, but society tends to value the academic guises more than others. And this has a great deal to do with how we educate our kids.

Think about yourself for a minute. Are *you* good at maths? What about drawing? Or singing? How old were you when you decided whether you were any good or not? To what extent does knowing what you are or are not good at shape your life? How have your life's experiences and ambitions been shaped by your abilities? For many of us, our school experience goes a long way to help shape our identity – particularly with regard to what we can or can't do. It also impacts on how we see others.

Consider your own family. Who are the musicians? Who are the mathematicians? Who are the sport stars in your genetic pool? You can probably categorise your family members pretty easily. I'll bet you can also name those who you wouldn't bother calling if you were putting together a pub trivia team, or if your soccer team was a player short. We don't do this to be unkind or to exclude anyone, it's just that, 'Oh well, you know, she's not all that sporty,' or, 'He's better with his hands than he is with his head.' We categorise or label people because it's easy, convenient, and we tell ourselves it's a necessary thing to do.

Think of your own kids for a minute. Even allowing for the standard-issue, rose-tinted glasses that you received in the birthing suite, I'm sure your kids do things that amaze you on a daily basis. However, what we consider worthy of praise changes significantly as our children grow up. So while their ability to feed themselves at age two gets a daily Facebook update with pictures, by the time they turn five, it's a different story.

As our children develop, the variety of things we praise decreases,

but the weight of praise we attach to an achievement or talent *increases*, especially if their abilities are recognised with something tangible, like kindergarten *Student of the Week* certificates or car bumper stickers. Most schools operate a rewards-based program, from the humble certificate through to the car sticker, with some schools now bestowing iTunes vouchers or movie tickets for a job well done.

Of course the omnipresent reward in school is *The Grade*. I believe grades serve two main purposes at school: to recognise the level of ability of a child, and to predict the future level of ability of a child.

Grades can be used to sort or categorise children into classes based on academic performance, and many schools are intent on categorising our children as soon as possible. From an organisational point of view this makes sense; it helps schools determine how many art and music teachers are required as opposed to woodwork or science teachers. But what is convenient for the organisation may not be good for the individual.

The problem with categorising students according to their academic ability is that it is done very early in their development, and there is little upward movement. A child who is in Set 4 for mathematics in Year 7 will very likely be in Set 4 for mathematics in Year 10. We see ourselves as acting positively by identifying students' strengths, but at the same time we are inadvertently telling some students what they are not good at.

Kids identify themselves by what they can or can't do, and these beliefs can become ingrained, often before our kids leave primary school. Teacher and author James Nottingham says, 'If you label kids, you limit kids.' I'd add that by labelling kids so early in their development, we actually limit the adults they become.

The problem with leaving it to schools to tell you what you are good at is that even allowing for all their extracurricular offerings, their view is still typically quite narrow when it comes to the vast array of human abilities. This can have long-lasting implications. How many people believe they 'can't draw?' or 'can't sing to save myself?' How many declare to the world that maths isn't their

thing? What implications does this have on human potential? On one's desire to better oneself or seek out new challenges?

Lots of schools have a Gifted and Talented program. Indeed many schools *market* their capacity to cater for the academically gifted. But what about those with 'gifts' or 'talents' in areas other than the school curriculum? By limiting our view of gifts or talents to the realm of academia, art or music, many kids leave school thinking they are not good at anything – that they have no gift or talent.

Josh *could* have been one of those kids. I left for Australia a few weeks after my chat with Josh, but before I went I had a talk to the Home Economics and Art teachers about his interests outside of school. I have no idea whether my chats with either the teachers or Josh had a direct impact, but I was delighted when he contacted me through Facebook three years ago and told me he went to college after 'school got better in Years 9 & 10' and, 'Oh yeah, I'm working as a chef now, in one of Manchester's top hotels.'

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To find out more about Dan's work visit his website ([www.danhaesler.com](http://www.danhaesler.com)). To find out more about Dan and Ray Francis's program 'Happy Schools', visit their website ([www.happyschools.com.au](http://www.happyschools.com.au)).