Bishops Wood Centre

OCN accredited training for Forest School

Self Esteem

Here's an extract to kick this one off from a children's song by Roy Bailey called 'everything possible';

*Oh you can be anybody you want to be
You can love whoever you will
You can travel any country that your heart leads
And know that I will love you still.*

*You can be by yourself, you can gather friends around You can choose one special one
And the only measure of your worth in this life
Will be the love you leave behind when you're done.*

One of the biggest influences on self esteem according to a number of authors including Elmer (2002) and Coopersmith (1967) is parents and the nurturing, love and acceptance they show towards their children. Since the 1960's there has been much written about the importance of self esteem when looking at learning, and more recently it has been seen as an important aspect of Forest School. As Terri Apter (1997) has stated "…self esteem has far greater impact than intelligence or innate ability".

There has also been more recently much debate about the emphasis given to self esteem on improving pupils performance and how people 'achieve' in society, see Elmer (2002) Kohn (1994) and Craig (2009). In 2013 a multi-national research project on how praise can affect pupils self esteem and performance showed that too much praise can indeed backfire and cause a lowering of children's belief in oneself (Brummelmann, 2013). Much of this is down to how we view self esteem and see it either as a result of improved performance and competence or as a pre-requisite (Kohn, 1994). Carol Craig (2009) makes a compelling case, along with Elmer, that educators can impact on confidence but not necessarily self esteem, and questions whether this can impact on pupil performance.

It is a complicated subject, so lets explore what self esteem means.

Self-concept
Our self-concept is our own perception of our unique personal characteristics such as appearance, ability, temperament, physique, attitude and beliefs. These determine our view of our position in society and our value to and relationships with other people.
The development of our self-concept is a continuous process which begins with a baby's earliest interaction with caring adults and continues as a child develops. The significant person in the early years is the parent, but on entering school the child

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begins relationships with new "significant others."
If our self concept is our perception of ourselves based on interactions with significant others, then the children we work with must reflect on their perception of themselves in our eyes as a catalyst for their self concept. Therefore SELF-CONCEPT is an umbrella term within which we find the various aspects of our ideas about self.

At Forest School we aim to provide a long term educational programme. This is essential as young people attending a short term programme just start to build relationships then leave! Initially our aim is to become significant others to each student. Once this is established we can continue our work through observations of young people in varying situations. This relationship building process can take as little as six weeks and in other cases we may never establish a relationship. Without this significant relationship we can not begin to start our work.
Each of us carries with us two pictures; the person we are (self image) and the person we would like to be (ideal self).

Self Image
We grow up with all sorts of ideas about ourselves, our abilities, attributes and appearance. These are acquired and influenced by our perceptions of how we are accepted and valued by other adults who are significant to us.
This self image goes with us at all times and influences what we do and how we behave. There can be lots of aspects to our self image, social, physical, intellectual, emotional and they are all influenced by the significant other s in our lives.

In relation to the children we work with, their perception of their own abilities, attributes and appearance are taken from the significant people in their lives. Significant people such as parents, carers, relatives, siblings, other educators and us! As significant others we can observe behaviour and identify negative self-image. We as significant others must recognise this handicap and try to alleviate it. The environment we create for a child must not reinforce feelings of failure, rejection and reminders of personal inadequacies.
The self image created from this feedback provides us and the young people with which we work with a picture of the person we/they are.
Ideal Self
From our interactions with "significant others" we form an impression of the abilities and personal qualities which are admired and valued i.e. morals, trust, respect, acceptable behaviour etc

From these interactions we can compose a picture of the ideal attributes, abilities, appearance and qualities we would aspire to have. This feedback forms a picture of a desirable person, an "ideal self', the person we would like to be. Young people also interpret these interactions from parents, carers, relatives, siblings etc and ourselves to compose a picture of an "ideal self"

Self-Esteem
Self-esteem might be imagined as the distance between these two pictures.
If self image is good and ideal self feels comfortably close then self-esteem is high and goals are seen as attainable and worth striving for.
If self image is poor and our ideal self is out of reach then our self-esteem will be low and efforts to improve will be regarded as futile.

At Forest School we use this model to aid us by recognising that the development of Self-concept can be aided in two ways.

- Firstly we can help children to develop a better self image
- Secondly we can help them create a realistic and attainable ideal self

To achieve this we can initially set them easily achievable tasks and then offer to help them complete those tasks. Eventually young people should be able to recognise the difference between attainable and unattainable targets and understand the process of small achievable steps to reach attainable targets. Therefore setting themselves up to achieve, not fail. A lesson I believe we would all do well to learn.
Children who have warm, affectionate relationships with parents have higher self-esteem even when they are relatively inadequate at specific skills. High self-esteem provides a child with the confidence to attempt difficult things without an incapacitating fear of failure. (Robinson & Maines 1999)

A young person who joins us at Forest School with low self-esteem may find it difficult to join in with even low level activities. Their fear of failing in front of us and their peers inhibits their taking part. They will not want to try new strategies until they feel accepted, valued and at ease. They will protect what they have and continue to behave in a manner consistent with their poor view of themselves.
If young people feel rejected and view themselves as unacceptable and valueless then they don't regard disapproval as a reaction to their behaviour but to themselves. We work with young people encouraging and enabling them to improve their self-esteem. Therefore we must offer feedback which counteracts this negative interpretation of themselves under conditions which are accepting and non-judgmental.

The whole process is a BEHAVIOURAL DIALOGUE between the developing self and the significant other. The child's developing self is engaged in a process of internalising and organising. The significant other is undertaking a process of reflecting and interpreting the young person's reaction to new strategies and stimulus.
We as significant others must be in control of this dialogue, ensuring that the

messages, both verbal and non-verbal, help young people to feel respected and valued.

Biased Scanning
Whatever we intend young people to think about our motives for an activity or action, the receiver will have their own perceptions, and young people who feel badly about themselves may distort or misinterpret our intentions.

Biased Scanning is the process by which information which is consistent with the self-concept is eagerly accepted; information inconsistent with self-concept is either ignored, misinterpreted or rejected. Children with low self-concept will look for information to confirm their poor view of themselves. Significant others must constantly offer unambiguous messages of acceptance

Breaking Away
For young people who have developed self esteem through working with significant others there needs to be a definite plan for them to maintain this self esteem independently. This is achieved at Forest School by:

- Empowering young people to use skills independently
- Empowering young people by helping them to understand about how they learn and act and to introduce strategies to cope with difficult situations
- Offering young people tasks with more responsibility
- Withdrawing slowly and sensitively as a significant other

Research on Self-esteem

LAWRENCE (1973)

Several pieces of work have looked for an improvement in self-concept after an intervention intended to raise attainment, i.e. "Will he feel better about himself if we teach him to read?" We like Lawrence's approach better; he asks the question "Will he read better if we help him to feel better about himself?" Lawrence offered some brief training to volunteers and they then "counseled" groups of primary school children identified as backward readers. The results showed that the counseling had more effect on reading progress than extra teaching. Our own experience with disturbed children who often also have learning difficulties is that "extra help" can sometimes confirm a child's feelings of failure and this might work against progress.

Subsequent research has confirmed that any remedial intervention is more likely to be successful if the teacher systematically pays attention to the pupil's self-concept. Lawrence's own recent work carried out in Australia. (Lawrence 1988) examines further and re-confirms the increased effectiveness of teaching interventions when they are combined with programmes or activities which increase the self-concept of the pupils involved.

The popular emphasis on parental involvement in children's reading probably owes its success to the sharing of the positive experience by the parent, the child and the school.

GIBBY AND GIBBY (1976)

They arranged for some high achieving students to take some attainment tests and a self-esteem inventory. A week later the students were called back to re-sit the tests but this time half of them were given a slip of paper telling them that they had done badly last time. The effect on results was predictable, but one is left with the feeling that to have told some of the students that they had done really well instead would have been so much kinder!

HARTLEY (1986)

Robert Hartley starts his piece of work by describing his own situation as a student facing the awful prospect of preparing to re-sit his G.C.E. O-Level examination. Faced with a blank sheet of paper and an equally blank mind he produces an especially good piece of work by imagining that he is a BBC newsreader. When the piece of work comes back with praise from the teacher, Hartley can remember thinking, "Why hadn't they told me they wanted me to be someone else?" In his own research work he then demonstrates that children can significantly improve their performance when they attempt tasks in role as the cleverest pupil in the class. However, when the children go on to discuss their success they disown it as someone else's work...."Somebody else was doing them. I bet when I do them I will get them all wrong!

CLARK & WALBERG (1968)

Although most people regard praise as something which should be offered generously but not excessively this piece of research showed that "over the top" can work well under certain conditions. Six classes of 10-13 year old children with reading difficulties were offered very frequent praise for a period of three weeks. Each positive comment was recorded by the pupil on a special tally card so that the child retained lasting evidence of the praise. After three weeks three of the teachers were asked to increase the frequency of the praise by a factor of two to three. The other three were just told to keep up the good work. After a further three weeks the most frequently praised group showed a significantly greater improvement in reading attainment than the control group. This may be attributed to:-

- Very frequent praise.
- Recording of each positive statement.
- Intervention only lasting for a few weeks.

BEVAN AND SHORTALL (1986)

In this experiment four primary teachers were instructed to touch their children only when praising good academic or social behaviour. No deliberate increase in praise was attempted. The combined use of touch and praise was found to have a dramatic effect. Children spent 40% more time on task, the number of disruptive incidents decreased and teachers spent less time telling children off.

Elmer (2001)

Elmer's research into longditudinal studies on self esteem had some very challenging conclusions in contrast with the research cited so far. Low self-esteem in an absolute sense is rare.

The cases looked at included crime/delinquency (including violent crime), racial prejudice, teenage smoking, and child maltreatment. What make some of these cases particularly clear is that high, not low self-esteem, is the more plausible risk factor

A second category of cases covered, in which the influence of low self-esteem is not proven (these may merit further attention) or very slight. These include educational under-achievement, alcohol abuse and drug abuse.

The key qualities contributing to positive self-esteem appear to be approval and acceptance. Among the most damaging things parents can do is to abuse their children, physically or sexually. Family conflict and breakdown are likewise sources of damage.   Finally, close and loving relationships with others later in life do contribute positively to self esteem. But the likelihood of forming and sustaining successful relationships of these kinds is itself higher when self-esteem is higher in the first place.   As to what can be done to raise or protect self esteem, measures to improve parenting skills and remove risks of child abuse would appear to offer the best prospects.

Self-esteem can be raised through planned interventions. But the case for doing so, and more particularly for diverting public resources into such efforts, has yet to be made.

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