



Fostering self-esteem in order to encourage leadership and success

Thoughts on Social justice - by Angela Jurgensen

Self-esteem is connected to how an individual recognizes his own definition of self. Considering that a healthy dose of self-esteem can help a person overcome social injustice, this was a very interesting topic to research. When I started looking at ways to encourage self-esteem in general, regardless of physical attributes (colour, gender, etc), background or situation, I believed that encouraging self-esteem was necessary in order for a child to succeed. As it turns out, increasing self-esteem is not as simple as saying “you can do it”; the brain simply does not recognize this as truth, and so, self-esteem does not develop.

True self-esteem is based on something real. It is not something you are born with, but the outcome of positive experiences and interactions. So, you don't need self-esteem to be successful; rather, you need a few successes to develop a healthy self-esteem. As educators, we are in a particular position that allows us to boost teens' self-esteem with respect, recognition and real facts. We can set up situations that guarantee their success based on their own strengths, thus boosting real, lasting self-esteem.

This kind of self-esteem is naturally resilient, unlike false self-esteem caused by some form of narcissism, which is inherently fragile; narcissistic people tend to be aggressive when their beliefs are questioned, and be very poor in making arguments, as their beliefs justify their existence. Later in life, when it becomes clear that they are not as perfect as they thought they were, they may slip into depression and unhealthy behaviour. On the other hand, if these people don't have their inflated egos checked during their youth, they often grow old believing they are superior. These people can become bullies, abusers or criminals.

So, how to ensure someone has the right kind of self-esteem, and an understanding that everyone is valuable in their own way? By ensuring that encouragement is true, and given based on the child's actions; by

encouraging not only one child, but finding something truly positive to say to other children around the room, the child will understand that everyone has talents, and everyone has a reason to feel good about themselves.

This premise of creating a positive loop of “success – higher self-esteem – more confidence – success” reminded me of something I read on the 7 Habits; the book states that children start from a point of dependency, and only after a private victory they achieve self-confidence enough to move them towards independence. After independence they can then focus on others, and using their talents to benefit others around them, creating interdependency. But the flaw in this graph is, it comes from the premise that everyone is equal and that moving through these levels requires only personal will.

In reality, the children we often have in our classrooms do not have support at home, do not feel good about themselves, often are hungry, and often are disenfranchised of their most basic needs. Some have learned to shut us off, thinking it is better to not allow themselves to care, as caring only brings more hurt. These are the children who really need our help in order to break the cycle and become more positive people. Because self-esteem and a positive outlook in life are closely interconnected. A higher self-esteem helps kids gain the ability to keep their positivity despite of outcome. Positive, resilient self-esteem does not ensure accomplishment; it simply makes it possible for someone to pick themselves up and keep trying, despite their failures.

Everyone in the group agreed how crucial it is to be sensitive about what we say to the teenagers in our care. As it turns out, many had memories of something bad someone said once, in jest; these became permanent scars that still bother us today. Sarcasm and joking at the expense of someone else have no place in our classroom, and we should pay attention and help break the behaviour when we see it happening.

This subject is closely connected to my interest in encouraging children to develop their sparks, as I believe this to be one of the positive ways we can ensure a child develops resilient self-esteem and makes healthy life choices. The more sparks they have and are able to acknowledge, the better suited they will be to live a healthy life. Knowing what their strengths are, we can then set the circumstances (through a project or assignment) so the child experiences success. We can turn a child's life around in a short period of time and really make a difference.

I'm currently working on a mural with my previous sponsor teacher; we could not finish it because of the strike, but we are continuing it this semester because we believe the project is valuable, as it has different layers of meaning. It helps children not only think about their talents, but embrace them and commit to them by painting a tile based on the spark. Finally, by placing their tile – their piece of themselves -- in a much larger mural, they understand that while their individual talent is powerful and important, by sharing it and allowing it to be a part of

the whole, by mixing it with others' talents and strengths, they can help form a much fuller, more impactful picture. I am developing the website about the construction of this mural, so that other schools in the area can repeat the process with ease; it can be found at www.sparksmural.com.

I picked this subject because it is really dear to my heart. I believe that developing self-esteem can change someone's life. Everyone is deserving of love, and the first person we have to learn to love is ourselves. Teaching our students to cherish their attributes and celebrate their differences, and love and understand each other for who they are – the leader, the artist, the player, the writer – is one of my goals as a teacher.

