

Developing Self-Esteem in Adolescents with Learning Difficulties

Students with learning difficulties are often burdened additionally by low self-esteem. This is particularly so for adolescents. Schools have a special responsibility to ensure that policies and strategies are put in place that value and dignify the efforts and achievements of all students whatever their ability. In order for self-respect to be learned, an attitude of respect and affirmation must infuse all instructional and organisational practice in our schools.

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WHAT IS SELF ESTEEM?

Much has been written about self-esteem and related concepts. Aldridge (1993) claims that self-esteem is not synonymous with self-image (how we picture ourselves), self-concept (what we think we are) or self-confidence (what we believe we can do) and he describes self-esteem as "the feeling of self-worth and high self-regard" (p.20) which can be viewed in many different ways. Self-concept and self-esteem are inextricably linked (Lalkhen and Norwich, 1990; Rice, 1993) according to some, while others say it has been related to the need for attention in all of us (Podesta, 1992) and a feeling of being lovable and capable (Humphreys, 1993). Perhaps the definition which best encapsulates the concept of self-esteem is "the child's effective evaluation of the sum total of his characteristics, both mental and physical" (Lawrence, 1981,p.10).

LEVELS OF SELF-ESTEEM

Humphreys (1993) segregates people into three categories: those with low, middle and high self-esteem. The minority among us who are blessed with high self-esteem are independent, flexible, good communicators, encouraging, and wholeheartedly involved in all aspects of life. Those with low self-esteem are

dependent, fatalistic, pessimistic, fearful of new situations, isolated, indecisive and unhappy (Humphreys,1993) and show a “shifting and unstable identity” (Rice, 1993, p.248).

FACTORS INFLUENCING SELF-ESTEEM

Aldridge (1993) listed the following eight factors which affect self-esteem:

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| (1) others; | (5) history; |
| (2) institutions; | (6) environments and social class; |
| (3) personalities; | (7) our cultural heritage; and, |
| (4) experiences; | (8) our decisions. |

Podesta (1992) saw behaviour as crucial and listed five personal traits which influence the way people view themselves: looks, intelligence, athletic ability, talent and personality.

The main factor which seems to influence one’s self-esteem, however, is one’s relationship with family and the social environment. Humphreys (1993, p.96) states that “the origins of self-esteem lie primarily in the early experiences of life” while “significant others can have both positive and negative effects on a child’s self-image formation” (Borba and Borba, 1982, p.2). The teacher is, of course, a very significant person in the life of an adolescent, so the messages conveyed by the teacher to the student will have a huge bearing on that student’s view of him/herself. Humphreys (1993) is surely correct in his assertion that “the teacher with high self-esteem produces students with high self-esteem, and, sadly, the converse is also true” (p.25).

ADOLESCENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM

Adolescence means many different things to many different people, and in many different cultures. It is considered an intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood (Rice, 1993) involving both biological and social changes (Blair and Jones, 1966). Lerner (1993) attempts to expand the definition, saying that “the period of adolescence is marked by conflicting feelings about security and independence, rapid physical changes, developing sexuality, peer pressure and self-consciousness” (p.274).

While the elusive all-encompassing definition may be impossible to find, there are three distinct strands of development in adolescence worth exploring. The most apparent change is biological and physical in nature and one of the effects of this is that "the adolescent's self-image... may be temporarily threatened by marked changes in physical appearance" (Steinberg, 1993, p.7). The second fundamental change concerns cognitive transitions, and the implications are far-reaching, as the ability to think more capably affects the way adolescents think about the world around them, and, ultimately, about themselves. Social transitions constitute the third major change in adolescence, with changes in rights, privileges and responsibilities which vary across cultures. Steinberg believes that the effects of these transitions are not uniform for all adolescents, due to environmental and cultural differences, and of course cognitive differences.

THE FAMILY AND "SIGNIFICANT OTHERS"

Two characteristics which parents of adolescents require in abundance are adaptability and empathy with the adolescent's changing lifestyle. Positive parental support leads to high self-esteem, advanced moral development and close family relationships (Rice, 1993), while a democratic, rather than permissive or authoritarian parenting style will be most successful in raising self-esteem (Aldridge, 1993). Steinberg (1993) concurs with this view: "Adolescents raised in authoritative homes are more responsible, self-assured, adaptive, creative, socially skilled and successful in school"(p.143), whereas authoritarian, indulgent or indifferent parenting styles are less successful.

The peer group and teachers can become very "significant others" during adolescence, and in contemporary society the peer group has become a much more important context. The degree to which an adolescent can survive and succeed within the crowds and cliques that are peer groups will determine whether they are popular, rejected or neglected (Steinberg, 1993).

Treadwell (1988) also emphasizes the importance of the adolescent's social ability. "The ability to make friends comes so easily to some, yet for others it remains an elusive and seemingly unattainable quality. It is estimated that about one child in ten has difficulty in making friends... The girls and boys most likely to be bullied are those who are regarded as not 'fitting in'"(p.67).

Adolescence, then, is a journey of many challenges, and the self-esteem of the adolescent is critically important: - low self-esteem is related to poor emotional

development, too low vocational expectations and delinquent behaviour. Aldridge (1993) advises adolescents on how to improve their own self-esteem, and gives sound advice citing Eleanor Roosevelt's maxim: "No-one can make you feel bad without your consent."

LEARNING DIFFICULTIES: TOWARDS A DEFINITION

One of the most contentious issues in special education has been the problem of terminology and categorization. 'Learning disabilities', 'special educational needs', 'mild mental handicap', 'slow learners' and 'learning difficulties' are all terms that have been used interchangeably to describe the same basic concept and yet they have many different meanings. Officially in Ireland the term 'mild mental handicap' is still used in recommending placement to a special class or special school.

In the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993) three categories of pupils, namely those in need of remedial teaching, those with specific learning disabilities and those with specific speech and language disorders are dealt with in a chapter entitled "Pupils with Learning Difficulties and Disorders", separately from pupils who are adjudged to have a mild mental handicap. The definition of mild mental handicap in the Report of the Special Education Review Committee states, "Insofar as an Intelligence Quotient may be used as an indicator of mild mental handicap, such pupils would lie within the I.Q. range 50 to 70" (p.118).

PROBLEMS OF CATEGORISATION

In Great Britain, I.Q. still is used by some to delineate categories, as in Ireland, but the category labels reflect somewhat different levels of functioning. Montgomery (1990) categorizes those with mild learning difficulties as having an I.Q. between 70 and 85, while those with an I.Q. of 55 to 70 are deemed to have moderate learning difficulties. For the purpose of this article, the term "learning difficulties" will incorporate those pupils whose I.Q. is 85 or below, and who Montgomery (1990) considers to be "slower to learn than others of their age" and having "reading, writing and spelling problems" (p.41). This then includes all those one standard deviation or more below the norm, constituting 15.86% of the population, almost one in six people (Gage and Berliner, 1992). While this figure appears quite high, it is worth remembering that only 2.27%, or one in 40, would fall within the I.Q. range of 70 or less, thus being considered to have a mental handicap.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PUPILS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Montgomery (1990) asserts that “the group of children with learning difficulties is a heterogeneous one” (p.5), whose most commonly used concealing strategies are “withdrawal, avoidance, evasion, distraction, digression, disruption, daydreaming and clowning” (p.129). The two most obvious characteristics of students with learning difficulties, which are interlinked, are low self-esteem and behavioural or emotional problems. Those with behavioural or emotional problems can present as either disruptive or withdrawn and isolated, but those children with the most severe behavioural problems will also have the lowest self-esteem (Montgomery, 1990). A problem which he has noted is that “special schools for children with learning difficulties are becoming refuges for children with behavioural and learning difficulties” (Ibid., p.4). Over-control behaviour indicators such as being withdrawn, timid and easily upset, and under-control behaviour indicators such as being aggressive, truant and attention seeking are highlighted by Humphreys (1993) as indicative of students with low self-esteem.

In adolescence, the fact that low self-esteem can lead to delinquency (Picker and Tori, in Muuss (Ed.), 1990), is supported by the view that “successful students feel more sense of personal worth and somewhat better about themselves... delinquent youths tend to show lower self-esteem” (Rice, 1993, p.249). The differences in intellectual achievement are greater in adolescence than in childhood and it seems that “the only feature shared in common by all members of a class of adolescent slower learners is an utter lack of confidence and self-respect” (Weber, 1978, p.15). How the education system as a whole, and teachers in particular, deal with this issue is now what needs to be analyzed.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM IN FOSTERING SELF-ESTEEM

A school is a powerful unit in any community, and its role in dealing with students with learning difficulties can have wide-ranging effects. Schools should be proactive in the process of normalization by placing “emphasis on creating opportunities for people with learning difficulties which are positively valued by others in society” (Sutcliffe, 1990, p.7). Unfortunately the education system still seems to operate from the perspective of what the student cannot do instead of focusing on each student’s successes (Jones, in Jones and Charlton (Eds.), 1992), i.e. “the education of special children is still based on a deficit rather than a strength model” (Aldridge, 1993, p.127).

In a positive, student-centred approach, enhanced self-esteem is the reward: “the

more the student perceived school climate as allowing student autonomy and initiative, the higher was his or her self-esteem" (Hoge, Smit and Hanson, 1990, p.118). Regardless of whether inclusion, segregation or integration is the philosophy of the system, the most important ethos is to be positive and to make the students confident that "not only can they cope with the system, but that the system itself has something to offer them" (Weber, 1978, p.23). This is where the role of the teacher becomes highly significant as the teacher can become the primary agent of change.

THE TEACHER AND THE CLASSROOM

Good classroom management is essential in ensuring an improved self-esteem. Being positive is not incompatible with good discipline and students expect rules to be enforced (Weber, 1982, p.157). Four tips which he gives are:

Classroom Management Guidelines

- 1. Use organized seating arrangements.**
- 2. Design a positive environment.**
- 3. Organize group projects.**
- 4. Avoid the counter-productive.**

Encouraging pupil participation and co-operative learning, which allows students "opportunities to progress in aspects of personal development while at the same time achieving their academic objectives" (Ainscow and Tweedle, 1989, p.45), as long as it is carefully planned, implemented and monitored, is one successful method of improving self-esteem.

Empathy and sensitivity are two characteristics that are seen as highly desirable for teachers of adolescents with learning difficulties. Only an empathic pupil-teacher relationship which is of an "unconditional nature wherein each student is valued and affirmed for his or her unique person and being" (Humphreys, 1993, p.102) can help develop the pupil's self-esteem. Being positive in the classroom also means avoiding negative behaviours such as cynicism, ridicule, negative labelling of students and sarcasm. Positive behaviours the teacher can exhibit include genuineness and sincerity, communication in some way with each student before, during or after each class, and making requests rather than demanding (Humphreys, 1993). A more egalitarian, balanced pupil-teacher relationship is also advocated by Montgomery (1990), especially as pupils get older: "If the teacher's own social skills and classroom control strategies are

poor, they seek to dominate, subdue and police their pupils. As these pupils grow older... they become less likely to tolerate such controls, and hostilities and disaffection become entrenched. Such pupils become 'hard to reach' as well as hard to teach" (p.164).

For students with learning difficulties, teachers are so much more than just teachers; they also act as mediators, counsellors and facilitators (Weber, 1982), and need to be, above all, good listeners and seen as agents for a system that has something to offer the student with learning difficulties. The initial bridge that needs to be built is that of a secure, trusting relationship so that the student can begin to overcome his/her biggest obstacle, namely fear: "fear of the effort, the failure, the awareness, the delight and the shock that come with learning" (Weber, 1982, p.20).

PUPILS' OPINIONS OF TEACHERS

Results of an international study involving pupils with special educational needs (Wade and Moore, 1993) showed that pupils liked teachers who were kind and understanding, helpful, fair, interesting and had a sense of humour, while they did not like teachers who were miserable, unfair, strict, lacking in understanding, and most of all, those who shouted. Their conclusion was that if pupils with special educational needs were to develop positive self-esteem, they needed to experience success at tasks, but also to have good quality relationships with their teachers. Specifically referring to the adolescent population, Weber (1982, p.160) states:

Adolescents with learning and behaviour problems will respond to the reasonable demands of teachers with common sense, firmness and compassion. These students know in their hearts - and their heads - that, for them, their teachers are the key. What they want, most of all, is for the teachers to realize it too.

GIVING RESPONSIBILITY TO STUDENTS

Giving responsibility to students and believing in their ability are powerful boosts to their self-esteem (Humphreys, 1993), and if we demand responsible behaviour from our students in a relationship built on trust and mutual respect, then they will accept blame and criticism without this adversely affecting their self-esteem (Lawrence, 1988). Teachers' words must be predictable, specific and consistent, conflict should be avoided and sanctions should be used positively; in return, students should show responsibility by being punctual,

respectful, well-mannered, positive and calm (Humphreys, 1993). He urges that "a copy of these responsibilities and accompanying sanctions for irresponsibility should be posted in every classroom, also a copy should be sent to the parents of each child" (p.137). A similar idea is to ask the pupils to formulate a Class Charter which they then sign and agree to abide by for the duration of the year. Empowerment to students does not have to mean less control for the teacher.

SANCTIONS AND CONTROLS

Where sanctions need to be applied, they should be predictable and consistent, fair, just and impersonal; they should be positively and calmly applied, should be the natural result of the irresponsible behaviour, and should not be 'lines' or extra homework; the student's first name should always be used in assigning a sanction (Humphreys, 1993). Lawrence (1988) contrasts the effects a positive or a negative approach can have on students: "Class control which centres on self-esteem enhancement will use positive methods with the teacher providing a calm high self-esteem model... In contrast, a teacher who relies on punishments to control the class may indeed have a quiet, well-behaved class but the students' natural curiosity will remain inhibited. When they are confronted outside with disruptive behaviour in others they will be likely to respond in terms of the model they have learned in the classroom. They have been taught aggression" (p.55).

CONCLUSION

For all of us our self-esteem is of paramount importance. How we view ourselves impacts on everything we do. For the adolescent with learning difficulties, self-esteem is usually extremely low, due mainly to an increased awareness of the restrictions that having a learning difficulty can place on someone. Compounding this problem is the added insecurity and sense of confusion that is part and parcel of adolescence. Teachers and parents are major players in the evolution of an adolescent's self-esteem, and their attitudes and impressions can have a long-lasting effect, for better or for worse. Lerner (1993) commented that "the road is often bumpy for young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two, but it is particularly difficult for those with disabilities" (p.293) and undoubtedly those with learning difficulties seem to be on a particularly bumpy road. The aim of teachers should be to try to give the adolescent the confidence and self-respect to tackle these difficulties in a positive manner. Our task is not an easy one, but a challenge which we should make every effort to overcome. Long after our students will have forgotten what they

learned in school, they may remember how they learned. How true the expression that they (our students) need to know that we care before they care that we know. Let us try and smooth that bumpy road.

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