

In Mind

A series of articles for those working with children with social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

2. Self-esteem

I Am Worth It I Am of Value

by Steve Russell

INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem is one of the cornerstones of wellbeing. How a student feels about themselves has a powerful influence upon their behaviour, attitudes to learning and relationships.

This article gives you an overview of some key theories related to self-worth, together with many practical strategies designed to help foster a positive sense of self, both within the classroom and through more targeted interventions such as mentoring and pastoral support.

It's important to stress from the outset that self-worth grows through relationships, not through techniques and strategies. Students are often astute at working out how authentic adults are being in their interactions with them, and will resist being 'techniqued'. All of the practical strategies suggested are offered within the framework of relationships. Indeed, for some students our sense might be that their needs are so deep that they need healing. To quote Irvin Yalom's mantra (2012), - "It's the relationship that heals." Different strategies will work for different students. Indeed there may well be times when what worked for one, does not have the same effect with the next. When all else fails, come back to relationships.

It's also important to stress the need for self-care when building the self-worth of those students with significant needs. As will be seen later they can be adept at looking for rejection when we seek to communicate a sense of value to them. Such support requires tenacity and perseverance. We need to keep our own levels of self-worth topped up in the face of the knock-backs and reactions that come our way.

Transactional Analysis

Transactional Analysis is a model of psychology that offers some helpful insights into what makes people

tick, including how their sense of self is formed. It speaks of how from the moment a baby comes into the world, it has a core hunger to be noticed and recognised. This hunger is satisfied through what are described as ‘strokes’. ‘Strokes’ are quite simply units of recognition - the ways in which a baby is noticed. ‘Strokes’ can be conditional or unconditional, positive or negative and can be communicated verbally or non-verbally.

The different types of ‘strokes’ can be encapsulated in the Stroke matrix:

So, what we have is a matrix which can also map out how a student receives approval or disapproval and acceptance or rejection.

CONDITIONAL – pupil is noticed for what they do/don’t do	UNCONDITIONAL – pupil is noticed for simply being
APPROVAL	ACCEPTANCE
DISAPPROVAL	REJECTION

Below is an example of using ‘strokes’ for a student, using the four units of recognition.

CONDITIONAL – pupil is noticed for what they do/don’t do	UNCONDITIONAL – pupil is noticed for simply being
<p>Positive:</p> <p>“Well done for remembering your full stops and capital letters.” “I like the way you’ve walked in, class. Well done.”</p> <p>Message: CONDITIONAL APPROVAL (Doing)</p>	<p>Positive:</p> <p>“It’s good to have you back in class, Maisie. Are you better now?” “I do like your haircut.” “Did you have a nice weekend? Did you get to see your dad?”</p> <p>Message: UNCONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE (Being)</p>
<p>Negative:</p> <p>“Class - is that really how you come in after playtime?” “Why is it that you are always late to school?”</p> <p>Message: DISAPPROVAL</p>	<p>Negative:</p> <p>(As a pupil returns after several days off ill, no sooner do they set foot in the classroom than they are greeted with...) “Oh you’re back in school are you? The class has been so much quieter without you”</p> <p>Message: REJECTION</p>

If we go back to the example of our little baby, the vast majority receive lots of unconditional acceptance ‘strokes’; as people coo over them, give big smiles and seek to engage with them. It can be helpful to see this supply of ‘strokes’ as being akin to a diet. The baby gets used, to a diet of unconditional acceptance strokes which essentially give the messages:

- We like and love you just as you are.
- What you need is important to us.
- We're glad you are you.

As the baby begins to develop and starts to get involved in the world she will begin to experience conditional approval strokes, with messages such as:

- You can explore the world around you, using all of your senses.
- You can do things as many times as you need to.

Clearly there will be a need for the young toddler to hear negative conditional strokes:

- Don't touch the oven.
- Stop that.
- Don't run across the road.

Just because these are negative conditional strokes doesn't mean they are bad. It's about balance, hopefully the toddler's experience of strokes will be more towards the positive than the negative. This will be even more important as the toddler becomes more independent and develops a sense of their own needs, wants and wishes.

The stroke matrix in the classroom

Here are some practical suggestions as to how the stroke matrix idea can be applied within the classroom.

Assessing the stroke culture in your classroom:

- Sketch out the matrix and consider the types of strokes you offer during a typical day or week with a particular class. These could be marked, for example, with crosses or ticks in each quadrant.
- To what extent is there an emphasis on the positives when compared with the negatives.
- Are there certain individuals or groups who tend to receive more positive, or negative, strokes than others?

An interesting adaptation of this practice is to have a colleague record, in real time, the strokes during a lesson. The resulting matrix offers a rich basis for exploring some of the relational dimensions to the classroom.

Strokes and individuals

You could also use the matrix to track the pattern of strokes an individual pupil typically receives.

The stroke diet

A helpful way to consider a student's experience is the analogy of a diet. Every student has their own personalised diet - the ways in which they've got used to being noticed, firstly at home and then at school.

A diet of strokes that has an emphasis on approval and acceptance, together with some disapproval (they will need to know when their behaviour is unacceptable), and ideally no sense of rejection, will help to optimise their self-worth.

Why is it that some pupils won't take on board positive feedback?

“I make such an effort to give Mark positive feedback and praise - but it never seems to go in.”

When seeking to build a student’s sense of value through positive feedback - or positive strokes - it can so often feel as if it’s one step forward and then two steps back.

If we go back to the diet analogy - imagine a student who has got used to a diet of fast foods, they then move to a town where there are only healthy food shops. As much as the new diet will be good for the student, at first the wholesome food will be difficult to cope with. There will also, for a while, be a craving for the unhealthy foods.

In just the same way, students whose diet has been skewed towards negative strokes (disapproval and rejection) will need time to adjust to hearing and trusting the positive strokes coming their way. As they experience more positives, they may well revert back to wanting the familiarity of the negatives, something we will return to later.

It takes time for a student to become accustomed to receiving positive feedback, and trusting that feedback.

The process has three stages:

- **Hearing** the positives - Some students are so used to negatives that they don’t even hear the positives being offered to them.
- **Receiving** the positives - Initially it can be difficult for students to understand that the positives are genuine. There can be a thought process of something along the lines of “These positives are all well and good - but they’re meant for someone else, not me.”
- **Internalising** the positives - The final challenge is to change their negative self-image to a positive one.

Supporting a change in an student’s stroke diet

It’s important to discover how best to communicate positive strokes to specific students. You need to devise a way to do this so they hear, receive and internalise.

- **Public vs private recognition:**

Some students are happy with public acclaim that is shared with the rest of the class, but you need to be aware of those who are uncomfortable with this.

- **Privately understood signals**

Different students are happy with different signals, so why not ask them which they prefer.

“Ryan, I’m wanting to find ways to let you know when I’m pleased with what you’ve done. My hunch is that if I praised you in front of the class, you would just want the earth to swallow you up? So - I’m wondering how else I could do this. What about (give some options)?”

The very act of setting aside some time with Ryan and asking him this question communicates a message of “You are important, and what you need is so important to me that I want to get it right”.

Students resistant to positive feedback

There are times you may come across a student resistant to positive feedback, or one who can turn a positive into a negative.

“I’m so frustrated. I give Mark praise - but before I know it, he kicks it back in my face, often doing something so bad that I’ve got no choice but to give him a severe consequence.”

Picture the scene: Mark has finally settled to his work and is keen to build his self-worth, his teacher, Mrs Jones, gives him some positive strokes. “That’s a good piece of work, Mark. I particularly like how you’ve shown your working out. Well done. Have a housepoint”, accompanied by a smile and a hand on his shoulder.

A minute later there’s an explosion of anger as Mark rips up the page, tells Mrs Jones her lesson is a load of rubbish, and goes storming out of the classroom. As he exits, she calls after him ‘That’s right, you keep walking out - down to the headteacher’s office. I reckon you are looking at a fixed term exclusion. I’ve had just about enough of your behaviour.’

Later that evening, Mrs Jones reflects on what happened, knowing that her words were very harsh and beating herself up for saying them as they were the very things she wanted to avoid.

It’s almost that Mark had engineered things to make a positive become a negative.

Here’s another analogy to help us make sense of what goes on - **the seesaw**.

Imagine every youngster has a seesaw within them, one end representing the positive strokes, the other end the negative strokes. In the case of Mark, his see-saw could be described as being heavily skewed to the negative.

Returning to the Mrs Jones and Mark analogy:

Mrs Jones has picked up on Mark’s low self-worth, so wants to give him positive feedback. This tips the seesaw to the positive.

Mark finds the positive, difficult to tolerate. So he behaves in a way to generate disapproval and rejection. Which results in the seesaw being tipped to the negative side.

Maddening? Yes. Unproductive? Yes. Illogical? Well - on one level yes, but there is a private logic that makes perfect sense to Mark. That logic goes something like this:

“I want to be noticed. I have always been noticed when I have been naughty, so that’s what I’ll keep doing.”

Which leads us into another concept - **life script**.

Life Script

A student’s life script is the set of beliefs they have formed about themselves, other people and the world around them. It is formed during childhood and by seven or eight they will have formulated responses to the following:

“I am

“Other people are

“Life is

It's termed a script because it provides direction about how to behave in different situations in order to have their hunger for recognition satisfied.

If we return to our example of Mark, when we observe his behaviour patterns, we pick up clues as to how his life script is forming his actions. There is a sense, in very simplistic terms, that a key part of his life script is:

“I am naughty/bad. Other people get cross/angry with me - and eventually don't want me around. Life and school - is hard and I fail at it.”

As he comes into Mrs Jones' classroom, Mark needs to have his hunger for recognition satisfied. In this sense his script acts almost like a psychological survival.

Childhood trauma and Self-Worth

A youngster who has experienced neglect and/or abuse is highly likely to be carrying a significant level of shame. Shame is a toxic emotion that has a major impact upon how a youngster sees themselves. When bad things have been done to the child by an adult, who may have actually been one of their key carers, the child has to try to make some sense as to why. Often the only conclusion for the child to reach is that it must be their fault, because of something bad in them.

Youngsters carrying such a strongly negative view of themselves will require a great deal of patience, as they are likely to be extremely mistrustful of any positive comments made about them. They are also highly likely to misinterpret disapproval of their actions (negative conditional strokes) as being indicative of rejection.

“Aaron, can you stop tapping your pencil?” Is greeted with a reaction of volcanic proportions as he shouts “I wasn't doing anything. You're always having a go at me. I hate this classroom.” With that, he pushes his book away, and goes storming off. Beneath his behaviours, one can hear his vulnerability. The simple request ‘Can you stop tapping your pencil?’ taps into his deep sense of “I'm not OK”. His actions give an insight into his life script: I'm dislikeable, unlovable. Other people are always telling me off. They don't like me or want me around. Life is a perpetual cycle of getting things wrong and being rejected.”

The key here is not to assume a position of never correcting Aaron, but rather to be mindful of which behaviours/incidents to draw attention to, how we do so and to avoid being drawn into a battle of wills.

PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING SELF-WORTH

- It takes time, patience and perseverance.
- There will be setbacks.
- We can't make a youngster develop a more positive sense of self - we INVITE them to do so.
- We need to approach a youngster's beliefs about themselves with respect.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

- **Drip, drip the positive - consistently and regularly** - little and often is going to be far more effective than sudden splurges of positives being 'thrown' to the student.
- **Use 'I' statements** - positive feedback containing an 'I' statement is harder for a student to reject than more generalised statements. A 'well done' or 'great work' can more easily 'miss' rather than 'I like the way you set out your work with the title in the centre', or 'I was pleased to see that you...'
- **Drawing round the body** - if the child is comfortable with this, they can lie on a large piece of paper and have their body outline drawn on it. The child can decorate it however they wish. This in itself is likely to offer some useful insights into how they see themselves. How do they draw their face, is it smiling, happy or sad and what comments do they make about their body?

They can be invited to offer positives they would like to have added onto the outline, perhaps on Post-it Notes. Over the coming weeks the student is offered some positive comments about themselves, they can be invited to add these onto the body. A further adaptation here would be for the positives to be collected in a container. This way the child can add those they are happy to onto their body, and any that they don't wish to do so can stay safe in the container.

- **Circle time** - initially with a select group of students, perhaps just one or two. Remember we are inviting changes to some deeply held self-beliefs, so the student will need to be able to trust others in the circle giving positive messages.
- **'Good to be me' booklet** - this is a booklet in which the student presents information about themselves, which are then shared with an adult. This might include information about their family, interests and hobbies, likes and dislikes etc. The critical thing is that the student is in control of how much they share.
- **Meet and Greet** - for those pupils who arrive at the classroom door eager to be noticed, one of the most effective things to do is to welcome them in, ensuring that they have some form of personal contact with you. It's not always practical to be at the door, but consider how else you can communicate that you've seen them.
- **Register time** - This is a really good opportunity to establish contact with every pupil, and is made all the more powerful by adding eye contact. Practically it can be tricky to combine this with recording in the register, but the difference it makes is well worth the additional effort and time.

Scaling and the solution-focused approach

Solution-focused thinking is a problem-solving approach which can be very potent in helping a student revise the perception of themselves. It's based upon several core assumptions that relate to self-worth:

- That there is always something positive happening, no matter how 'small' it might seem.
- The student has skills, qualities and attributes they can draw upon to improve situations.
- The student is the expert in solving their own problems/challenges.

Scaling is the main technique within solution-focused thinking and can be used in a variety of ways.

“On a scale of 1-10, where 10 is the best school could possibly be, and 1 is the worst, where would you place things at the moment?”

Note: the number doesn't matter. Its function is to offer a hook into having a conversation about how things are. The adult then empathises with the youngster's scaling, “I see you've put it at 2.5 eh? It sounds like school is tough for you ...”, and wait to see how they respond. This is a good way to get into the student's shoes, to demonstrate empathy.

At an appropriate time, the conversation shifts to something along the lines of “What's happening that means it's not at 1?” This helps to lead the conversation into what's going well for the student.

Whilst the scaling technique lends itself well to target setting (and indeed this is one of its primary functions - “Where do you want things to be?” and “How might you get there?”), when it comes to building a student's sense of self-worth, the particular value is in the focused conversations that facilitate empathy and the building of trusting relationships.

References:

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Berne, E. (1971) *A layman's guide to psychiatry and psychoanalysis*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Berne, E. (1972) *What do you say after you say hello?* New York: Grove Press

Yalom, I. (2013) *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy*. London: Penguin

For further information on how solution focused thinking can be used within educational settings:

Ajmal, Y. (2019) *Solution Focused Practice in Schools: 80 Ideas and Strategies*. Abingdon: Routledge