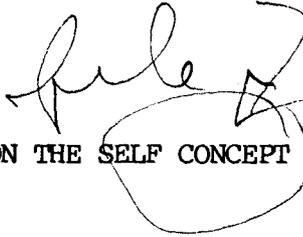


Peter Renshaw

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Peter Renshaw', with a large circular flourish underneath the name.

OPINIONS ON THE SELF CONCEPT MOVEMENT

Address Given to the PSP Consultants, York, July 16, 1987

(Taped/Edited by Don Pugh)

I work at Murdoch University in the educational psychology area and have a general interest in children's social development and peer relationships. I haven't actually done any research on self esteem but I teach in that area and read the literature.

I think I am a bit of a trojan horse, referring to the trojan horse that was taken in and destroyed the greek citadel. I suppose the message I am bringing today is that I think you should beware of this concept.

I've been writing a paper for a schools commission working party on girls and self esteem. Why am I saying beware of the self esteem concept? It is because of the reading and thinking I have been doing in that area as well as looking back over the history of educational reforms for the last 25 years.

I think self esteem has been an important reformers' concept. However, I think it is basically being misused and that it has potential pitfalls.

In preparing for the paper on girls and self esteem I began to think about when self esteem actually became part of educational discussions.

Back to the 1950s one can see the beginnings of people getting interested in the self concept, self esteem area. The thing that really brought it into debate was the open education movement.

This movement began in the mid 60s. One of the reforms that people started to push at that time was open environments for learning. One began to see people talking about the self, the holistic child, and not educating for a narrow purpose but educating instead for a very broad purpose.

One of the outcomes of the open education movement was supposed to be an improved self concept and a strong sense of self. It included a sense of where you were going as a self directed learner, making your own decisions, and being intrinsically motivated.

The movement was not seen necessarily as lifting academic achievement. It was posed as an alternative outcome for education. They were saying, "If you have a high self concept, if you are intrinsically motivated, if you feel good about yourself, and you're confident, you will go on and do whatever you want to do. There will be no barriers in your life. If you set yourself a goal you will go for it."

I think it's interesting that the open education movement as a reform movement fizzled out very quickly. It never really gained wide spread acceptance. It was always seen as a kind of fringe alternative.

Why didn't it ever gain acceptance as a wide spread reformist

movement in education? I have my own answer. For me it was always seen as a fringe alternative.

The elitist schools and the more powerful people in society weren't really interested in open education. That might have been good for so called disadvantaged kids. It was never seen as something that the mainstream or the privileged people within the society would actually go for. It was always seen as something for those others, not for us in the mainstream.

The second door it came in through was through the disadvantaged programmes that began perhaps in America in the early 60s with Head Start. The Priority Schools Programme is seen as an extension of that sort of reformist movement.

The way that they conceptualise the so called disadvantaged child is very interesting. Before the 1960s most people thought of the disadvantaged child as unintelligent kids. Your success at school was really just a reflection of your intelligence. What you did with those kids was to devise different sorts of schools for them, or different streams within the schooling scene.

The reformist movement in the early 60s said, "No, that's not the way it is. What is happening here is that we have a whole group of people whom we call culturally deprived. It's not anything to do with their intelligence, It's the fact that they are culturally deprived."

I think that cultural deprivation meant that they came to school without the necessary kind of background knowledge. Disadvantaged children possessed almost every single deficit that people had measurement instruments for and the culturally deprived child always scored lowly. I'd say that if you did hearing tests they didn't hear very well. They didn't see very well. They didn't speak very well.

Berstein in Britain came up with the notion of restricted code. Culturally disadvantaged children couldn't express themselves very clearly. What else were they deficient in? They were certainly deficient in self esteem.

Indeed these kids were deficient in every sort of cognitive processing abilities. When people began to look at the way the mind works and to distinguish between impulsive children and reflective children, they found that the culturally deprived kids were impulsive rather than reflective. They were not easy to motivate and so on.

So we had this vision then of the culturally deprived child who had all these deficits. What you had to do was provide a culture for these people. You had to pour into them all sorts of things.

Now this was clearly an affront or insult to anybody who was being described like that. The people who began to revolt against this description were the blacks in America, who said,

"This is an insult to our whole community. You're telling us that we are culturally deprived. Your crazy. What's happening here is that there is a mismatch between the school and the competency that our kids are bringing to the school."

So you had people like Le Bogg in America going out and getting language of these so called culturally deprived kids in their homes and in their neighbourhoods. He concludes that this language is rich. It's varied. It's creative, and has all sorts of qualities to it. The deficits have nothing to do with cultural deprivation. They relate to the way that schools operate to prevent these kids using their competencies within the school.

One of the responses to this was to drop the word culturally deprived. People could no longer legitimately use that term within discourse and within education meetings.

Then sociologists called the children the culturally disadvantaged. They were disadvantaged by their culture. They weren't culturally deprived as such. They were disadvantaged by it. It still leaves open what you do about that.

Do you change the schooling system so they are not disadvantaged by their culture or do you still say, "You've still got to change the child. You've still got to give them access to the other culture."

Let me read this paragraph from the philosophy of the Priority Schools Programme.

"The objective of the programme is to discriminate positively in favour of these children by assisting the schools which they attend to change educational programmes in order to remove those practices which have acted as barriers to the achievement of confidence and the development of a positive self concept by the children."

Now what's interesting here is that we can still describe these children as lacking self confidence, self esteem or self concept. One can't go out there now and start to say to these kids, "You lack all these other things including language, cognitive abilities, intelligence, etc." I mean, you would get howled down.

You can go out there and quite legitimately say to them, "You lack self esteem." If you go out there and tell kids that, or preach this sort of thing, nobodys going to howl you down. Nobodys going to say, "That's not true."

What I am trying to get at is, why is self esteem such a politically acceptable deficit to have. Why are you allowed to lack self esteem whereas you are not allowed to lack language ability, cognitive abilities, or these other things that we now have to skip around by saying, 'those real or imagined social deficiencies.' But we can go out directly and say, "You lack

self esteem."

I think that self esteem is a reformist concept in education. It is picked up by reformists. All of us are interested in educational reform. It has been a major concept of educational reform within this context.

✓ The idea behind self esteem is to improve the communication skills, to empower kids, to give them a sense of direction and to make them more assertive.

The word empower is interesting. If we empower kids, this means often that you challenge certain structures. How would you run a social development course, the aim of which was to give kids a sense of where they were. One thing would be to make them angry about the fact they were going to be going out to be unemployed.

One could in fact design a treatment to make them very angry. Lets say to them, "You are the fodder of this political system. 30% of you are going to be unemployed. Why is that? What particular historical circumstances have occurred to put you in this situation? What are the likely outcomes of that for you? And what can you do about it?"

Now that to me is an empowering kind of curriculum. Compare this with the curriculum now drafted which focuses on building up self awareness skills, and building up all the other terminology that's used in the self esteem area.

Now that curriculum to me is a deflection from what they should be doing. If you really wanted the kids to understand where they are at, then you get into the history and economics as well of the sort of government programmes that are available.

What do you mean 'to be aware of themselves?' People are affected mainly because of things out there. Their aspirations are affected mainly because of the social environment in which they are being brought up, the aspirations of their parents, the particular social structures that are provided for them.

What I was thinking should be the centre of the curriculum is studies of social location, exactly where they are. You don't understand the self by doing meditation on inward feelings. You understand the self by getting the sense of the social structures that are forming you.

Reformists say that reform has to be at the level of the individual to improve a person's self esteem before anything else can happen.

Now I think that's slightly misdirected. I am concerned about individuals too, and a lot of my own emphasis has been on programmes to help individuals. But I don't think that approach is going to work over all.

I think we have to look at a much broader reform. This is a very long term thing. I think there is nothing within the current educational reformists movements which gives me any sense that any of this is going to work.

It's what's possible. We know for example, that the way the secondary schools operate is intrinsically wrong.

One of my students came to talk to me the other day, and is teaching a group of year 10 kids maths. The first thing they said was, "This is the dummies class, sir." It really was a dummies class but he had to convince them that it wasn't. But the kids were wandering around, from class to class aware that they were a slow class.

We know that the system is imposing on those kids a self concept, that they are dummies. Now what I am saying is that it is those sort of practices within schools that need to be got rid of.

Self esteem programmes that we're trying to run aren't going to work in that circumstance. As soon as you define children within a society as losers by whatever means, you can't go around and convince them through rhetoric that they are not losers. They know they are.

I do believe in the idea of self esteem. I do think there is such a concept and that it is important within a number of models of learning.

The evidence about self esteem and achievement suggest they are positively correlated but only at a moderate level, round about that it is quite low. It is nothing you would really pin your hopes on, in terms of dramatically changing achievement in children.

Your main problem is also that you don't know the direction of the relationship. In other words even though there is a relationship between self esteem and achievement, is it achievement that is influencing self esteem, or self esteem that is influencing achievement?

If I had my way I would put all the eggs into the basket of achievement and I would build the most fantastic academic programme within a priority school that I could. I would convince the teachers that these kids are bright.

A student of mine from Papua New Guinea was sent out to the Highlands. The school in Port Moresby where he had been teaching had the top academics in the whole country and he was the top teacher of these top academics. When he was sent out to the Highlands, he went out there and these kids were the lowest in the whole state in terms of their exams. He said, "I am going to get you kids to the top of the examinations or I am going to kill you." At the end of the year he got some of those kids to be at the top of the state. Not all of them but some of them. He went

out there with the belief that he could actually do it.

This is my vision of reform. I would convince one school that they were going to build these kids up academically and they were going to make them perform. Then we'd make that a lighthouse school and it would become a way of other priority schools actually believing in the fact that they could get these kids, not to have high self esteem but to achieve within the academic system.

Self-esteem is one of those totally global concepts. If you look at self esteem or self concept it is who you are. It's your total sense of self. Now if we reflect on where that comes from for us, I suppose it comes first of all from our relationship with others, and from the sorts of jobs and activities that we are involved in. To that extent it is the whole of life. It's hard to disassociate self concept from the total situation in life.

There is problems with competitive schooling. Any time you have competitions between kids there are losers, and those losers almost by definition have to have low self esteem. That's a real problem for teachers because once you've got that low self esteem you have got low motivation. They don't want to be involved or learn. You get this vicious cycle of low performance followed by low motivation, followed by not wanting to participate, followed by low performance and the vicious cycle goes on.

I suppose it's a matter of judgement about where you come in. My judgement is that you can come in with strong academic programmes for these kids. It may mean spending more money. Maybe smaller classes. It may mean breaking down within those schools the streaming system that currently operates.

We should go back to schools and say, "We have got to have a more concerted academic approach." You'll find some fairly horrific pressures put onto kids using fairly inappropriate methods and a lot more competition coming into it. So there is a big hurdle there. I think it is something we are working on at our schools. We are looking for approaches that will help the kids academically.

There was an older lady who was teaching a very tiny school. She said something that I have never forgotten about. She said 'Self esteem with these kids is low. The reason is that their parents live on welfare and they feel absolutely powerless.'

What she did was to get the parents in. She didn't worry about the kids in a sense. She got the parents, mainly mothers, single mothers or deserted wives. She got them involved and politically active.

She got them to write to the minister about various things to do with the school. She got them to write to the minister for mainroads. As the parents esteem went up she reckoned the kids began to be more interested in school. That sort of empowerment

was the empowerment of the community.

She could do that. She saw it as not located in the child. It's not his or her problem. It's the problem of that community which felt left out.

I read in the expectancy literature about self expectations and teacher expectations.

A child from a low socioeconomic area comes to you and you have views of this child's ability. You form certain expectations of the child and as a result of those expectations you begin to interact with the child in a certain way. If you expect less of children, when you ask them a question you don't wait very long for an answer. You certainly don't give them a hint because you think 'they won't know.' So you go on to somebody else. You believe something about a pupil, you make predictions, you change your behaviour according to that prediction.

I think, the pupils' behaviour and self perception change also, and then, later on the prediction is fulfilled. What's happening here is that social expectations are being translated into self expectations.

I was reading a book recently on this sort of model, and at least half of the book was devoted to the self concept area. The title of the chapter was 'Self Concept, The Mediating Variable.' It is the mediating variable. Read that book and you'll think, 'Oh self esteem, that seems to be the most important thing. That's where I have got to put all my eggs.'

But the problem is the low expectations and beliefs that led to the formation of that view. Self esteem is mediating at that level. But it is being formed by these general social attitudes.

Kids are making decisions. They are in control of their lives. I suppose that's why the self esteem concept is interesting to me. Besides that's what I want too. I suppose it fits within our democratic system, doesn't it. Our democratic system is based on the individual. You have to have an individual who is informed, who has an opinion, who makes that opinion known, and so on. I think self esteem has an important point, saying, "I stand for something and I can put my point of view across." Self esteem as a process towards achievement, I see, is simply getting kids to feel confident that they can do this with help.