Dear Colleagues

**Self-esteem and sense of self-direction needed by rifle shooters**

**The Problem:**A learner who comes out to the rifle range for the first time, or a student who enrols in a physics class at school, cannot be expected to immediately understand the steps to be followed in learning these new fields. It is also unlikely that a novice or learner will have any idea of their eventual future in the new field. On the other hand a successful exponent in either of these fields would be able to summarise the possible future that awaits a person who undertakes to learn and practise effectively. A rifle shooter who follows might be considered a candidate who could win a Queen’s Prize in Australia. A student who studies the sciences may be considered to have a good likelihood of graduating with a degree, followed by a higher degree. The likelihood of a rifle shooter or student progressing to such a level of success, will be clearly indicated throughout the learning phase while acquiring self-esteem (or self-worth) and sense of self-direction (or internal locus of control). That is, a desired outcome in a field of learning may start as wishful thinking, yet eventuate as a result of being assisted to build these developmental characteristics.

The problem confronting learners is that few teachers, leading sports people, families, sporting organisations, students and others who take up the sport, are advised that they need to be assisted to develop these characteristics if they are to rise to the top of their field.

As a result, many teachers in schools persist with behaviour patterns that directly handicap the two most important characteristics in young people: self-esteem and sense of self-direction. Lack of understanding of these developmental characteristics by teachers is in the view of many professionals, the primary reason why the vast majority of school students come to believe they were not born with the ability to learn. In particular, most are convinced they do not have a mathematical mind. Not surprisingly, more than 90 percent of students of most countries become convinced they do not have the ability to study and hence, are unable to obtain a university degree in mathematics and the sciences. This leads them to give up family hopes and their own ambition, of pursuing a professional career.

Likewise, many Target Rifle beginners at schools, show that within three months of building these characteristics, they learn to score 49 or 50 at 300m. As well, there are some very skilled TR shooters who each weekend assist the development of these characteristics in new and medium-level shooters, which will ultimately enable them to win a Queen’s Prize.

However, coaches who teach the techniques and strategies of rifle shooting, are largely unaware of the need to foster the development of self-esteem and sense of self-direction in learners. It is sometimes stated by coaches and shooting administrators, that shooting is a sport which requires characteristics to be developed which are different to those needed by students of physics, chemistry or mathematics.

The unwanted behaviours of teachers and coaches can be seen in those who display: lack of care for others, bad temper, frequent criticism, autocratic behaviour, unfair treatment, bullying behaviour and cheating for personal gain. Such behaviour may cause a student’s or learner’s progress to cease and even go backward.

**Objective:**This article describes self-esteem and sense of self-direction, key changes that need to occur as a person’s learning progresses him/her further in a field of interest.

**Discussion:**Self-esteem.A learner, whether in a classroom or sporting activity, is characterised by lack of confidence, over-cautiousness, nervousness and reluctance to try something new. Upon a student or sport beginner starting to progress then these very common signs are reversed. Clearly, these signs occur early in a learner’s behavior. However, if self-esteem is inhibited these signs can return.

Upon building self-esteem and feeling confident about one’s abilities, a learner may begin to experiment and make decisions, i.e. when learning new topics, developing friendships, forming a sense of purpose and building integrity. Successfully progressing through stages of development is a direct result of learning.

Parents are a child’s first teachers, who are followed by teachers at school. A student may through this sequence of learning, progress into a very important stage of development: formal operational thinking. This is the ability to think logically, abstractly and to undertake conceptual reasoning. An adolescent student on this path is the norm for an individual planning to undertake university studies leading to a profession.

Maternal care as an infant is critically important. It is known for example, that being ignored or mistreated as a child can have a deleterious effect upon the child’s eventual outlook on life. Hence, upon enrolling at school, a small proportion of students already have significant self-esteem, the result of thoughtful family upbringing. Such development also occurs through non-school activities, such as sport and forms of recreation, particularly where families are involved as a group.

Lack of self-esteem is an indication that an individual has not yet acquired a sense of one’s own worth. This can appear as a lack of confidence in various abilities. When attempting to perform a task, a rifle shooter will instead perform using conscious concentration, plagued by doubts about ability accompanied by a reduced level of performance. This type of performance is often accompanied by nervousness and other signs associated with anxiety. For example, the release of adrenalin may occur at the wrong moment. The person may even experience such a degree of nervousness that choking occurs. The accompanying fear can be so intense that there may occur a complete inability to perform a task. During an exam, a student may experience fear, particularly if study preparation has been poor. Perhaps the most distressing aspect of lack of self-esteem is the inability to think logically and abstractly.

Self-esteem is therefore a very important indicator of where a student or rifle shooter is on the path leading toward long-term success. Students at a school or shooters who belong to a rifle club, where there has been little if any assistance given for their development, will typically exhibit lack of self-esteem. If a school allows this situation to continue, then such students have little prospect of being accepted to study for a university degree. Self-esteem is therefore an important indicator of a student’s level of education. It is not so much an indicator of the student’s personal limitations, but reveals much about the quality of learning received at the hands of teachers or sport coaches.

Sense of self-direction.Sense of self-direction is a readily discernible characteristic, which a parent is able to observe in a student child. A parent will recogniseinternal locus of control,when the student exhibits a firm idea of what is wanted and has the internal drive to take the steps to achieve a goal.External locus of controlin a student on the other hand, describes an individual who is subject to dependence upon others for approval of their actions, i.e. sheep-like behaviour. Without it, a student is likely to feel under pressure and exhibit signs of nervousness. Sadly, many continue this behaviour until well into their 20s and beyond, without recognising it as an aspect of development that has passed them by.

This description of a student’s or shooter’s development clearly differs from self-esteem. A person who exhibits internal locus of control is in a situation where he/she is also able to understand interpersonal relationships, the purpose of one’s reason for being and perhaps, whether one is ready to commit to a sense of integrity. With internal locus of control, a student is able to leave peers out of the equation that govern one’s actions. Having a well understood purpose assists this greatly.

If a student is dependent upon the whims of equally undeveloped adolescents or shooters, before making up one’s mind on simple matters, then the school or rifle club has not been of much assistance.

**Practical:**Building self-esteem and sense of self-direction have been documented by many clinical specialists. A detailed description of research and the practical means of developing self-esteem and internal locus of control, was published in 1998 by Professor John V. Shindler, California State University at Los Angeles.

Whether studying a school subject, to study for a university degree or in rifle shooting, self-esteem and sense of self-direction can be developed in learners, through:

* learning exerciseswhich are practised to enable the person to understand the principles, practices and techniques of physics or rifle shooting. A student or shooter learns that results depend almost entirely upon one’s own effort [enhances sense of self-direction]
* routineacceptance and belongingby a school or rifle club, to enable a learner to develop a sense that the school or rifle club are where he/she belongs [enhances self-esteem and sense of self-direction]
* encouragement and congratulations by members of a school or rifle club, which confirm theself-efficacyof each other, particularly learners [enhances self-esteem].

**Conclusion:**Most members of a physics class or rifle club are aware that if learners or novices are not assisted to progress in their development, then they will exhibit poor self-esteem and self-direction. They may suffer these effects for much of their lives. In principle, all that needs to be done, is for students who attend less helpful schools and rifle clubs, to be assisted by individual teachers and highly-skilled rifle shooters. They can assist learners to work effectively through learning exercises. As well, they can offer generous expressions of acceptance and belonging. A teacher or club captain is able to encourage expressions of encouragement from members, particularly upon successes achieved by learners.

**Contact**: Individuals, schools and rifle clubs who are interested in providing assistance to students or members may contact the writer: Geoff Ayling AM MSc CChem; Forensic Scientist and Qualified (Registered) Teacher of Year 12 Physics and Chemistry (NSW and UK); Winner of the Queen’s Prize in Rifle Shooting (Australia and the UK). It is intended to encourage rifle clubs to assist their members to build self-esteem and sense of self-direction, as has already occurred successfully at a large rifle club at the top of Australia.

Best regards

Geoff