



VALUES-THEMED ARTICLE: August 2012

Being a role model & inspiring young people to be their true selves



Considering that any person who serves as an example and whose behaviour is emulated by others is a role model, the big ASK is: What kind of **ATTITUDES** are young people learning from us? Which **SKILLS** are they developing from us? What **KNOWLEDGE** are they gaining from us?

With a new academic year just over the horizon, the summer holidays could be a particularly good time for personal reflection and development, and consideration about how we can consciously motivate young people to make the most of their rich education opportunities and inspire them to become the best they can be, realise their full potential and live their dreams - while remaining true to themselves.

Role models - potential examples to be imitated - are constantly cropping up in the lives of young people. Many of them include parents and other adults in a family, siblings, teachers, peers and all kinds of public figures and celebrities. Since children tend to copy what they see, a chosen role model may not arise from a direct connection but rather from observation at a distance, for example, in noticing how someone treats or relates to another person, makes an impact on his or her community, makes a difference to society or has dealt with significant barriers or setbacks. Some role models are chosen because of what they have achieved, while others may be followed due to their perceived status.

Marilyn Price-Mitchell, a developmental psychologist, conducted research into how young people develop the skills, abilities and motivation to become engaged citizens.

(See www.rootsofaction.com.) The top five qualities that emerged as important to the young people in her study were:

- Passion and ability to inspire
- Clear set of values
- Commitment to community
- Selflessness and acceptance of others
- Ability to overcome obstacles.

While these attributes are positive, many children and young people select detrimental role models because of strong negative influences, such as fear, or a lack of self-esteem, a craving for acceptance or to fit in, or in the absence of a flourishing vision for themselves.

According to Albert Einstein: *"The world we have created is a product of our thinking; it cannot be changed without changing our thinking"*. Inevitably young people want to be able to think for themselves and do some things differently from their parents or carers and break away from limitations imposed by the culture surrounding them and change some of what they consider are malpractices. At times this healthy progress may require significant courage and lead to experiencing very challenging emotional turbulence.

Two key sources of real-life learning and empowerment are in the home and in the school environment. Ideally both nurture and lovingly support children as they learn to understand and manage their emotions and both should provide plenty of complementary opportunities to learn and practise essential life skills and develop internal strengths, resilience and a belief in themselves so that the individuals can relate well to others, uncover and let their talents blossom and build purpose and meaning into their lives.

As we know from many of the very costly problems facing society today, thousands of children and young people have a great need for appropriate role models because their parents' own negative experiences of education and life and their values are profoundly adversely affecting their children's attainment.

Some tips for successful role modelling in a school

- **Start with yourself** - Encourage all members of staff to reflect upon their own behaviour, both within the gaze of pupils and their parents/carers, and in their private lives. Individuals will need to consider their own values, the messages they are transmitting and whether their actions are soundly based and consistent. Development can occur by assessing the impact from the modelling currently taking place and by stimulating even more innovative role modelling.
- **Establish a vision and aims** - Have a clear vision of what explicit role modelling could achieve and by whom (for example, all members of staff, children at all levels, parents and carers) and aims that are applicable to all affected individuals and stakeholders in their particular contexts.
- **Gain consensus** - Have a dialogue with relevant personnel about how explicit role modelling could contribute to the ethos of the school, its functioning and effectiveness and come to an agreement on how best to foster a climate of wellbeing and strategies to actively promote identified, life-enhancing attitudes, skills and behaviours.
- **Encourage communication and 'walking your talk'** - The world is constantly changing and so, based on the opening lines of a poem by Rudyard Kipling:

I keep six honest serving-men

(They taught me all I knew);

*Their names are **WHAT?** and **WHY?** and **WHEN?***

*And **HOW?** and **WHERE?** and **WHO?***

invite the whole school community to use these six serving-men creatively to guide them as they consciously think about being an inspiring role model for others. Finally, at a time when so much trust has been eroded by many occupying positions that would have been associated with admirable role models, stress authenticity and the importance of genuinely 'walking your talk'.