



The Poker Chip Theory

by Scott Jennens

I love this theory about positive attitude, self-esteem and learning engagement that I first heard from Rick Lavoie many years ago. After working with some very vulnerable and disengaged students for over 30 years, this theory resonates deeply with me.

We all carry around with us a collection of 'poker chips' or, if you like, self-esteem tickets.

Every interaction we have with others requires us to gamble some of our own personal poker chips. If the outcome is positive we gain more poker chips, but if the interaction doesn't go the way we expect, we lose some of our poker chips.

For example, if I was to invite you to my party and you accepted then my supply of poker chips would increase. On the other hand, if your response was something along the lines of "Not a chance! I wouldn't be seen dead at a loser's party!" then I would lose the poker chips that I had offered up.

The lovely thing about these poker chips is that they are transferable. You can lose some poker chips by getting a few answers wrong in Maths, if you know that when you play football next you will score a bag of goals and restock your supply.

Here is the thing... I think that most kids finish the school day with less poker chips than they started the day with. If they didn't lose them in the classroom then they lost them in the yard.

But it's OK as most kids have a supportive family and a safe house to live in. They are involved in sport or drama or dance or some other hobby where they can restock their poker chips. They feel connected, protected and respected!

Unfortunately, the reality is that some kids don't – their personal poker chip supply become smaller and smaller and therefore the gamble gets larger and larger. For these students it is safer to refuse to chance their dwindling supply than lose more precious poker chips.

As educators we are in a privileged position. We can show these students (and all students) what they are good at and where their strengths lie. We can be agents for positivity and poker chips.

On a personal level, I don't particularly care about your Naplan results, but I do believe that you have done a mighty job if your students know where to get their poker chips for life.

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Rick Lavoie holds three degrees in Special Education and has served as an adjunct professor or visiting lecturer at numerous universities including Syracuse, Harvard, Gallaudet, Manhattanville College, University of Alabama and Georgetown.

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