

Book Review

Lee, P. and Bishop, L. (2008). Positive images – positive effect: activities for young people and positive results. Russell House Publishing Ltd. 167pp, ISBN 978-1-905541-21-8.

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While the publication date of Positive Images – Positive Effect, by Paul Lee and Louise Bishop, is not particularly recent, the editors of the SJRCC asked me to review it because they have only just become aware that it is available free, in pdf format (more on that at the end of this review). As the title suggests, this book is packed with activities and games for engagement with groups of young people and adults. The activities offer a tool kit to use to encourage and develop positive relationship and teambuilding skills and self-confidence. In the introductory pages the authors clearly state their goal to empower both the facilitator and the participants with affirming experiences of group work. I was hooked from early on in the narrative by the obvious passion to include young people whose life and educational experiences would be most typically ones of exclusion and failure. The book celebrates the right of children and young people to be recognised for who they are and for what they can achieve, enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. There was a deep understanding of the struggles of such young people to feel enabled to 'join in' and feel good about themselves and their contributions.

The book is aimed at adults working in a voluntary or professional capacity with young people either indoors or outdoors. In the writer's view it also offers an excellent handbook of ideas for foster carers, adoptive parents and all those leading teams. As a youth group leader for over twenty years and a social worker involved with young people and groups for another twenty, this book offers new ideas as well as old favourites with a contemporary make-over.

I have to honestly admit that on perusing the five pages of contents, I was somewhat daunted by the task of reviewing. As the editor will confirm, it has taken me a while to read and review this book! I will hopefully be forgiven for the time elapsed by the sheer volume of the material it offers.

Whilst comprehensive, this book is clearly presented in two parts: Part One: Activities and Part Two: Facilitation. The Activities section expands into a kaleidoscope of seven different types of activity: seated, standing circle, line, rectangle, chip or block, small group and bits and pieces. Headlines such as 'Ghost hunter', 'Group pirouette 1 & 2', 'Typing', 'Colours splash down', 'Amazing escape' and 'Silkworm zigzag' left me intrigued as I mused whether I would have the stamina to make it through the 112 different activities revealed in the 103 pages of Part One. Activities are aimed at groups from eight to 12 members but can accommodate up to 30 participants. An optimum size is suggested as 12 to 15.

While the mental gymnastics undertaken to imagine and visualise each activity sometimes took me outside my learning style comfort zone, it was a challenge well worth completing. I now know that I am definitely more of a 'group pirouette' person than a 'rope sketch star' or domino/cards participant. Activities such as the '4 way coloured lily pad sinking crossing' may seem complex for the facilitator to prepare (alphabets of carpet tiles and miles of rope and masking tape) and to coordinate. However, this aspect is balanced by the real ingenuity and fun involved in the challenge, and after the initial rounds of facilitator preparation and rehearsal, this compilation offers a thoughtful, vibrant and original tool box of activities. The potential for relationship and confidence building through the activities is clear throughout.

Each activity is accompanied by tips for the facilitator that address suggested pace alongside consistent reminders on the best style of enabling the group. Areas of potential sensitivity for individuals such as literacy, numeracy or anxiety are highlighted. There are frequent notes on how to maximise inclusion for participants with physical difference and coaching around enabling the group to come to their own decisions around group value setting and completion of tasks. Surprisingly, the poignant and gentle illustrations seem to represent only white and able bodied characters with no visuals of wheelchair users or physical difference which the narrative works hard to include – maybe something to consider for a second edition.

The theme of 360 degree positive self-image monitoring is one of the central tenets of the book. Group members plan what they are going to do, do it collaboratively, study how well they did it, and then perhaps change it before trying it out again. Lee and Bishop have transformed this parallel with improvement methodology into a fun and reflective group activity which builds confidence and self-esteem.

Part Two contrasts with the tone and style of Part One but matches it in terms of intense and packed content. It offers the theory base for experiential learning and personal learning styles which embrace doing, reflecting, theorising and experimenting (Kolb 1984;1985; Honey and Mumford 1986). John Adair's Three

Circle Model is considered as the basis for facilitating positive group image activities and group needs. There is emphasis at all times on the crucial role of the facilitator in offering balance to enable maximum creativity, voluntary participation and learning for each member of the group.

I particularly liked the reference to visualisation techniques for individual positive image (Wienberg & Gould, 1995) with the group thinking through how to achieve their tasks and the impact of this positive reinforcement on self-esteem. A reminder that this book speaks to anyone leading teams is echoed in reference to the work of David Pardey (cited on p. 114) and the observation that being 'an effective team leader requires someone also to be an effective team member'.

John Heron's model of facilitation is adapted and well covered with a facilitator's continuum and summary mentioned on almost every page in Part Two. I found this to be an extremely helpful tool for reflection on personal leadership style. The authors are consistently mindful of the implicit authority of the adult leader in a group and how power is managed by placing trust in the group as members grow through the four 'seasons' of development. The emphasis on keeping the group safe emotionally and physically, thus allowing group trust to develop through a culture of value and respect, is the central ethos of the writing.

The effect of use of language is considered as well as the impact of a choice of word in affirming or discouraging a young person (or adult). A strong positive image, positive effect theme runs through the core of the narrative with insights for facilitator reflection ranging from the Pygmalion Effect to Douglas McGregor's Theory 'X' and Theory 'Y' to a horse called Hans! (p. 131).

The theme of inclusion and accessibility is emphasised in the narrative but I wondered at points if this could be more difficult than intended for some young people in some of the activities due to the levels of literacy and numeracy needed to perhaps complete some tasks. The emphasis on thoughtful facilitation throughout seeks to safeguard this aspect.

Predominant in the book is the emphasis on the positive effects of fun, laughter, encouragement and celebration of participation. The authors' passion to include and affirm children and young people who are often excluded and stigmatised and whose needs and capacities can be misunderstood resonates throughout this comprehensive and compassionate book. While reading, I reflected on my own personal style of facilitation and leadership and the impact of different ways of working with young people, adults and groups, particularly with participants who struggle to join in. On reflection I would have liked to have read Part Two before Part One, but that further evidences my experiential learning experience of reviewing this thoughtful and empowering book. I recommend it to all who lead groups of young people and adults. You will find much to affirm and celebrate in

individuals, learn more about yourself and have great fun doing both. What's not to like?

As stated above, this book is available free in pdf format, and you can acquire it by contacting info@positiveimages-positiveeffect.com

About the author

Aileen Nicol leads the Permanence Team at CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland, based at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. She has worked as a social worker and manager in a range of public and voluntary settings with adults and children including mental health, forensic advocacy, children and families and fostering. Aileen's passion for permanence derives from her recent role with a social enterprise fostering charity. She worked in partnership with Scottish local authorities to provide, match and support permanent foster placements for looked after children.

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