

THE ORIGINS OF SELF-ESTEEM AND ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL CHILDREN

By

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Abstract

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The origins of self-esteem in elementary school are not well known. Teachers and parents frequently attempt to enhance children's self-esteem by praising intelligence, achievement, and effort. This research project concerns a review of literature on how best to praise, what specifically to praise, and how to encourage students to persist efforts to master difficult new challenges. The results of some recent research indicates that whether children are praised for intelligence or effort can make important

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differences in future efforts. An ultimate purpose of this research is to provide a set of guidelines that school psychologists could use in providing teachers and parents on how to enhance the self-esteem and motivation of children with learning difficulties,

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Chapter One: Introduction

The focus of this paper is children's self-esteem. More specifically, this paper will focus on whether or not a child's self-esteem should be internally or externally oriented. When viewing different perspectives regarding self-esteem two major themes arise. One major theme is the external orientation of self-esteem. External orientation refers to the belief that teachers should enhance a child's self-esteem in the classroom. The second major theme is the internal orientation of self-esteem. This aspect looks at a child earning self-esteem through the progress they make in the classroom.

To be more specific, when talking about the external orientation of self-esteem, I am referring to teachers and parents making positive statements about achievement and effort with the hope that such statements become incorporated as part of the student's own position on self-esteem. This approach also stresses the creation of a learning environment in which even those students with the least academic

success can still find the environment to be esteem enhancing.

When talking about the internal orientation of self-esteem I am referring to being more cautious and selective about exactly what is being praised in order to encourage continued effort in the face of frustration and to avoid situations in which students choose to avoid new challenges where failure might contradict a positive self-image.

Self-esteem is the pride a persons has in him or herself (Nuttall, 1999). The way a child feels about him/herself affects the way he/she acts, which changes on a daily basis. Most of the time children with high self-esteem will be happy, talk to others without much encouragement, be full of energy, play by themselves or with other children, control their behavior, be cooperative and follow age-appropriate rules. They will also show enthusiasm for new activities and make new friends easier than children with low self-esteem (Nuttall, 1999).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The review of literature will cover the two areas of self-esteem, which include enhancing children's self-esteem, which is the internal method, or having children earn self-esteem modeling the external method. The literature shows many different points that will be discussed below.

Enhancing a child's self-esteem

"Parent and educational tactics were two of the most important factors influencing the development of self-esteem in children and adolescents," is the conclusion of Morris Rosenberg's book titled "Society and the Adolescent Self-Image" (Ward, 1999). Stanley Coopersmith wrote a book in 1967 titled "The Antecedents of Self-Esteem," and in that book, Coopersmith established a link between the level of self-esteem and parenting style in children and adolescents. There was said to be an important connection between the level of self-esteem and the ability of a person to lead a productive and successful life (Ward, 1999).

By enhancing self-esteem parents, and teachers praise children's successes, praise children who try hard, give affection and let children know that they are loved and wanted. People also seem to show an interest in the child's activities, problems, or projects, and tell children what to do instead of what not to do (Nuttall, 1999). Parents, and teachers can do a great deal to increase self-esteem (Branden, 1998).

Andrew Margerison states that many children in today's society bring low self-esteem with them into the classroom due to outside factors such as broken homes, poverty, and racial or class prejudice. He feels that "we must educate the whole child" and "the emotional side of learning is important too" (Margerison, 1996). Margerison feels that a self-esteem-enhancing curriculum should include a few of the following strategies:

1. "Teachers should praise all products by students. In other words, teachers should reward effort, regardless of the quality of the work.
2. Teachers should encourage students to value any contributions to the discussion that

their classmates make because "there are no bad ideas."

3. Students should be allowed choices about what to study and how to display the knowledge they have acquired because such choices allow them to tailor the tasks to their strengths and, most important, to avoid failure. In fact, all classroom activities should be engineered to ensure success for all students.
4. Students. Who are least successful academically are most at risk for low self-esteem and thus most in need of praise, which is the primary tool for boosting self-esteem" (Margerison, 1996).

Margerison appears to be saying that self-esteem is more important than achievement.

Self-esteem is one of the key factors in determining a child's behavior. Traumatic and exciting events can contribute towards the attitudes and affect the child's views of him or herself. Children are more vulnerable to experiences than adults. Collier (1995) describes the affects of childhood trauma: 'rejection, humiliation, being terrorized, verbal assaults, isolation, and being ignored.' Collier states that these are things that happen to children and things that curves a child's self-esteem. These are also things that will "damage

a child's potential to contribute fully in this world" (Collier, 1995).

Margerison states that since curriculum subjects are not left to chance, self-esteem in the classroom should not be either. "The whole classroom experience should be designed to encourage a positive self-image within each child" (Margerison, 1996). Many of the self-esteem enhancing activities require more than common sense and are a part of the normal teaching repertoire of many teachers.

The first step in integrating self-esteem in the classroom, according to Margerison, is to create a positive classroom environment and atmosphere. This will make all of the children feel included in the group. It is important that this classroom is stimulating and exciting to work in to make each child feel that he/she is contributing and is valued. To make this happen in your brightly colored and decorated classroom the teacher should be displaying examples of work from all of the students.

Since being isolated, rejected or ignored does not help to develop a feeling of belonging it is

important that the teacher makes all of the children feel as though they are equal to their peers even though each child has different abilities. An example that Margerison gives for each child to feel important is an end of the day activity. At the end of each day one child is asked to say one thing that they enjoyed during that day, or one thing that the child feels they did particularly well during that day. The teacher then makes a statement about the child's comment. One rule to this is that the comments that each child gives are not open for discussion.

Another way for a teacher to enhance a child's self-esteem is for the teacher to talk to each child every day about them as individuals. An important note about the activities suggested above is that the teacher should be in control of the activity.

One-to-one strategies are another way to help children see themselves in a more positive way. The person enhancing a child's self-esteem should be an adult, not necessarily a teacher, but someone who the child sees as significant in their lives. When this adult comes into the classroom or school especially

for that child the focus child will feel important and needed. This will help the focus children see themselves in a more positive manner. This will also increase the child's ability to set more realistic learning goals, and more feasible expectations for themselves (Margerison, 1996).

Another set of self-esteem enhancement strategies involves the child in a group situation with his/her peers. This will help the child increase his/her social skill. In this non-threatening situation the child who has feelings of inadequacy will develop the confidence to contribute their ideas to the group. The composition of each group needs to be considered for the enhancement of self-esteem to work. If a group is created where the focus child is with a few dominant and confident peers the focus child's self-esteem may be damaged. It is important that the other children are able to listen and encourage the focus child's participation (Margerison, 1996).

A child's level of self-esteem is a controlling factor of their behavior, their ability to learn, and their ability to work with other people. Low self-

esteem may contribute to other learning difficulties. It is also important to note that the enhancement of self-esteem in a classroom should not be confused with behavior modification. The aim of self-esteem enhancement is to improve behavior or performance through altering the self-image. Behavior modification is related to specific behaviors by relating specific behaviors to good things and other behaviors to uncomfortable consequences. It is also important to remember that the strategies used to enhance an individual's self-esteem will benefit the rest of the classroom. "Everyone benefits when an individual child feels good" (Margerison, 1996). "We help people to grow by holding rational expectations up to them, not by expecting nothing of them" (Branden, 1998). If a teacher avoids ridicule and other belittling remarks, treats students with respect, deals with everyone fairly, and is confident in every student's potential, the teacher is promoting self-esteem and the process of learning (Branden, 1998).

Earning Self-Esteem

Children are often commended for good grades and high test scores, but research indicates "that complimenting children for their intelligence and academic performance may lead them to believe that good test scores and high grades are more important than learning or mastering something new" (Mueller, Dweck, 1999). This will leave children unprepared for coping with setbacks. "Every time teachers give feedback to students, they convey messages that affect students' opinion of themselves, their motivation, and their achievement" (Dweck, 1999).

Dweck feels that "giving student's easy tasks and praising their successes tells students that you think they are dumb" (Dweck, 1999). Teachers and parents feel that they should praise their children's self-esteem in order for the child to feel smart. In effect, with Dweck's 30 years of research, she has found that children who have been praised were obsessed with their intelligence, and proving it to others. These children were always worried about how smart they looked and feared failure. These children

also feel that if they have to work harder to succeed showed that they were dumb.

More adaptive students were focused on the process of learning. These children were not worried about their intelligence, but more concerned with the effort and strategies they needed to complete a task. The fear is that praising children on all of their hard work will hook them on praise.

Claudia Mueller and Carol Dweck conducted six studies on 300 fifth-grade students to examine the effects of praising children for being intelligent. During this study some students were praised on their intelligence, some were praised on their effort, and others were praised for their performance. Each student started with a task that was challenging but easy enough for all of the students to do quite well. After they finished the task one-third of the students were praised for their intelligence and were told "Wow, you got x number correct. That's a really good score. You must be smart at this." One-third were praised for their effort and were told 'you must have worked really hard.' The final third were praised for

their performance, with no comment on why they were successful. The students were then given a choice of two different tasks to work on next. One set was described as "new, important and difficult." The second set was described as "something they were sure to do well on." The majority of the students who had been praised for their intelligence stayed with a task that would allow them to keep on looking smart. The majority of the students who had been praised on their effort moved onto a more challenging task, and the students who were praised for their performance either stayed with the task they were currently working on or went onto a more challenging task (Dweck, 1999). After failure, children who had been told they were intelligent displayed less motivation, worse performance, and less enjoyment than the other group (Radford, 1998). The children who had been told they were intelligent and then failed at a task believed that intelligence was a fixed trait, where the other children believed that the ability could be improved by working hard (Radford, 1998). "The findings suggested that praising children for their

intelligence makes them look smart and they are less likely to take a risk in fear of making a mistake" (Dweck, 1999). They also found that when praising children for their effort and hard work led to achievement, and the children wanted to continue engaging in more difficult activities. The children who were praised for their effort were not concerned with how smart they looked (Dweck, 1999). When students see their performance as a measure of their intelligence they feel stigmatized when they perform poorly.

The findings after 30 years of studying was that students who received praise for being intelligent thought of intelligence as something you were born with. The students who had been praised for their effort thought of intelligence in terms of their motivation, knowledge, and skills over which they had control (Dweck, 1999). "The kinds of praise (and criticism) students receive from their teachers and parents tell them how to think about what they do-and what they are" (Dweck, 1999).

Dweck states that just the facts should be taught because no matter how objective parents and teachers try to be, the feedback that is given to a student conveys a message. This message has powerful effects on children, including performance. The feedback tells the children how we think they should think of themselves, and what we think of them. It is important for children to become their own individuals, not what we create them to be.

Children who are praised for their intelligence might get the idea that high test scores are more important than learning itself. Intelligence praised children are more likely to give up on a challenging task due to a feeling of inadequacy. Self-esteem is so fragile that it can be elevated and decreased in one afternoon (Radford, 1998).

Students who put effort into their work feel as though they are dumb. The students who feel that they are dumb state that school achievement is important to them, but one of their goals in school is to exert as little effort as possible (Dweck, 1999). There are also students who feel the opposite, and they feel as

though poor performance is due to a lack of effort, which calls for more studying. These students see effort as worthwhile and important. Effort is also something necessary for students to realize their potential (Dweck, 1999).

Dweck states that children should not be encouraged by telling them that they are gifted. Children will tend to work harder to keep the label than actually learning the facts. Giving praise can make students more passive and dependent on something that they feel they cannot control. This will set them into a system in "which setbacks signify incompetence and their effort will be recognized as a weakness rather than a key to success" (Dweck, 1999).

Dweck is not saying that we should not praise students, but that we should praise them in different ways than we have been. It is important to rave about their concentration, their efforts, the effectiveness of their study strategies, the interesting ways they came up with strategies to solve problems, and the ways they have followed through to complete the task. It is also important to ask them questions that show

intelligence and appreciation of their work and what they put into it. By doing this it shows children that we are appreciative of their work. This is a much more constructive tactic and does not carry negative side effects (Dweck, 1999).

When a student impresses a teacher by working on a less challenging project, and gets it done quickly we should not praise them for their ability. We should not be giving students the "impression that we place a high value on their doing perfect work on tasks that are easy for them" (Dweck, 1999). Dweck feels that a better approach would be apologizing to the student for wasting their time with something that was too simple, and move them to a more challenging task.

When a student masters a more challenging task we should be showing our admiration for their effort.

When children are taught the value of strategizing, concentrating, and working hard when dealing with academic challenges they are encouraging themselves to sustain their performance, motivation, and self-esteem

(Mueller, Dweck, 1999). "Children should be praised for how they do their work rather than for the final product of their ability" (Mueller, Dweck, 1999).

Aronson and Fried conducted a study to minority students at a university. They taught the students to view their intelligence as a potentiality that could be developed through hard work. In this study the students who were taught the relationship between intelligence and effort earned significantly higher grades than those who were not taught the difference. This study is similar to Dweck's praise studies in that "students' ideas about their intelligence can be influenced by the messages they receive and when ideas change, changes in performance can follow" (Dweck, 1999).

By going back to the approach of enforcing rigorous standards, which some students are going to meet and others will not, is not going to eliminate any pitfalls. This may actually convey the idea that intelligence is a gift that only certain students possess. This will not teach students to value learning and focus on the process of achievement or

how to deal with obstacles. These students may fear failure more than ever because to them it is taking away a measure of their intelligence (Dweck, 1999).

Dweck's research suggests a different approach than trying to convince students that they re smart. Instead teachers should take the following steps:

1. get students to focus on their potential to learn
2. teach them to value challenge and learning over looking smart
3. teach students to concentrate on effort and learning processes in the face of obstacles. (Dweck, 1999).

These steps can be done while instilling rigorous standards. With this approach tasks are challenging and effort is highly valued, required, and rewarded. During this approach students will receive evaluations of their current level of performance and skill, but it must be clear to the students that the evaluations are not an assessment of their intelligence or innate ability (Dweck, 1999). With this framework giving easy work is not given in order to arrange constant success. That would be like telling students who are performing poorly that they are doing well in order to make them feel smart. With this approach we also do

not want to give students work that is too challenging for them, in essence setting them up for failure (Dweck, 1999).

Giving students work that is too challenging for them may make them stay up until all hours of the evening working hard in fear of displeasing their parents and teachers. Pushing students is not teaching them the value of learning and will not orient them towards developing their potential. By giving students a pile of homework we are not teaching them about the importance of effort. Student should be "taught to seek challenging tasks and to engage in an active learning process" (Dweck, 1999).

To make this approach successful educators must do their part. They must help students acquire the skills they need for learning and be available as resources of learning. Educators can keep praising effort, but the students will soon be tired of hearing the same lines. The students need to know how to apply their effort appropriately. "It is necessary that we as educators understand and teach students how to

engage in processes that foster learning, things like task analysis and study skills" (Dweck, 1999).

When students are focused on their potential to learn and educators give them the message that effort is the key to learning the student have their responsibility and control over their achievement and self-esteem. Students need to know that learning is not something that is given to them, and that they cannot feel good about themselves because their teacher tells them they are smart. "Both learning and self-esteem are things that students achieve as they tackle new challenges and work to master new material" (Dweck, 1999). Students who value learning have no problem making a commitment to their valued goals. These students are not afraid to work hard, they know that setbacks may be involved, and they are able to bounce back from failure. "These are lessons that cannot help but serve them well in life as well as in school" (Dweck, 1999).

The article "You're O.K., I'm terrific: 'Self-Esteem' Backfires" in Newsweek magazine shows evidence that inflating self-esteem, by having teachers and

parents tell children how wonderful they are, can be dangerous. Research also shows that by doing this it can trigger hostility and aggression, and stir up underlying violence. "If kids develop unrealistic opinions about themselves and those views are rejected by others the kids are potentially dangerous" (Bengle and Rogers, 1998).

It is not arguable that children thrive from respect, and being cared for by others. Educators are eager to encourage people who are lacking in their studies, but a myth has developed that raising a child's self-esteem is a measure of improving their levels of achievement and solving many of the nations problems (Stevenson, 1996). There is no doubt that high self-esteem is a precondition for learning, but the same emphasis has been so heavy that some call it the self-esteem movement, which is the practice of supplying positive feedback regardless of the quality of performance (Stevenson, 1996).

Research has found that children with an inflated self-esteem have powerful effects on aggression as does being male, drinking, and watching violence on

television. It is unjustified self-esteem that needs constant reassurance (Begley and Rogers, 1998). The President of the American Psychological Association states that "schools often contribute to the problem by viewing self-esteem as a cause of success, rather than the result of achievement" (Mueller, Dweck, 1999). James Gilligan, a leading violence researcher from Harvard Medical School, says that schools and parents may be building up the wrong kind of self-esteem, he feels it is the kind likely to deflate.

Teaching children to be sensitive to feelings is great, but providing them with phrases such as "you're a great buddy," or "I'm a good student" are not teaching anything according to the article "The Myth of Feeling Good About Oneself" (Stevenson, 1996).

Positive self-esteem and meaningful self-evaluation are usually the results, not the proceeding events of accomplishments. It is stated that praise is one source of feedback and that self-esteem comes from awareness that the requirements have been mastered.

According to Dr. Ghatge a child who makes bad decisions, who does not put forth effort, and shuts down will not acquire self-esteem. This in turn will make the child feel helpless and experience self-doubt (Ghatge, 1999). Psychologists have believed that low self-esteem can cause aggression and other pathologies, but high self-esteem people can act violent (Begley and Rogers, 1998).

Chapter Three: Research Proposal and Critical Analysis
Purpose, Significance, and Rationale of the Proposed
Study

The purpose of this proposed research study is to describe teacher's perceptions of self-esteem in the classroom as measured by a questionnaire from a randomly selected sample of elementary teachers in Wisconsin.

The study is significant to research because there is currently a lack of research on the topic area. Studies should more closely examine praise for effort and its effects on motivation. It is important to determine whether praise is beneficial to children. Once that is determined the most effective way to raise a child's self-esteem can be determined.

In particular, this study is important because of the impact self-esteem has on children, teachers, and parents in society. It will provide beneficial information towards directing teachers in the right direction when it comes to self-esteem in the classroom. Society today puts subdued amounts of

pressure on individuals to succeed. After failure has occurred in an individual's life society disregards past success and focuses on the present. With this in mind it is necessary to determine whether or not self-esteem should be enhanced by the individual or by the teacher.

Subjects

Subjects for this research will be obtained on a volunteer basis. The subjects will be randomly selected, for all school districts in Wisconsin, and will include elementary school teachers that teach kindergarten through fifth grade.

Instrument

A questionnaire, developed by the researcher, will be mailed to the randomly selected group of elementary school teachers in Wisconsin. They will be asked a series of demographic information such as, age, race, gender, what city they teach in, is the city rural or urban, what grade they teach, how many students they have in their class, and how many years they have been teaching. I intend to get a sixty six percent return rate from a variety of rural and urban,

male and female teachers, teachers that are new to the field and those who have been in the field for a number of years. On the questionnaire teachers will be given two scenarios that include information about a child, such as age, gender, grade, and the present level of the child's performance. One scenario will be focusing on an emotionally disturbed child who has not turned homework in for the past few days, and has been in trouble in the classroom all year long. The child will have turned his homework in and will have received an 100% on the assignment. Following the scenario there will be a list of statements that the teacher will choose from. One statement will praise intelligence, one will praise effort and one will praise achievement.

The second scenario will focus on a gifted and talented student who always receives A's on her homework, but this time has failed the next two assignments. The following assignment she completed she will have received an A on. Following this scenario the statements will also be praising intelligence, effort and achievement. By doing this I

will be looking for a consistency between the two scenarios.

The last task for the teacher will be for them to provide me with a success story about a time when they were working with a child who had self-esteem issues that they felt they helped. I will ask them to include examples of what approaches they used that they thought helped the child's self-esteem. I will also ask them what they saw change. By having the teachers answer the two scenarios and write an example that they have experienced I am hoping that I will get an idea if that teacher is using a more internal or external model of self-esteem.

Procedures

A questionnaire packet will be mailed from the University of Wisconsin-Stout to the randomly selected group of elementary school teachers. Each packet will include a cover letter, the questionnaire, and a postage paid return envelope. A second mailing will occur three weeks after the first mailing has occurred to increase the return rate.

Research Question

Based upon the preceding discussion, the following research questions have been proposed:

1. To determine teachers perceptions of self-esteem.
2. To determine whether teachers are more likely to attempt to enhance self-esteem through statements of praise of a child's ability, achievement, or effort.
3. To determine if there is consistency between what teachers say they do and what they really do.

Data Analysis

The demographic information of the questionnaire will be analyzed by obtaining frequency counts, percentages, mean, median, and standard deviation when applicable for each of the variables. The scenarios and personal success stories will be analyzed to through content analysis. It will be determined if teachers are clearly internal, clearly external, or a mix of both. A classification of praise will also

take place to see if the teachers praise for intelligence, effort, or achievement.

Limitations of the Design

This study will only be sent to a randomly selected group of elementary teachers in the state of Wisconsin. Results cannot be generalized beyond elementary teachers in the state of Wisconsin. The participants completing the questionnaires will be volunteers.

This study should be completed in a larger setting to be able to generalize the results to all elementary teachers.

Critical Analysis

The topic of self-esteem is something that affects society as a whole. However, there is currently a lack of research available to determine the most appropriate way for a child to go gain self-esteem.

To date, there has been some research done that looks at the pitfalls of a teacher enhancing a child's self-esteem (Mueller & Dweck, 1999). Now that schools are becoming more aware of the problems that could

stem from enhancing a child's self-esteem something needs to be done to prevent it from happening. This is where there is currently a lack of research available. In the field of school psychology children with deficits are the main population worked with. These children have already encountered issues with motivation and self-esteem. It can be very detrimental to children if they are praised in a way that may be detrimental to them later in life. Many of these children have experienced frustration and failure many times in their lives and are looking for a way to succeed. With success comes a feeling of motivation and persistence. Research indicates that there may be better ways to state a response that will increase motivation, in turn, increasing success in a child who has not previously encountered many successes.

School Psychologists work not only with children but also with parents and teachers as well. In educating parents and teachers about the most beneficial way to help a particular child succeed the level of anxiety felt by the parents and teachers when

a child fails will decrease. It is important to work with everyone as a team.

As a result of the controversies over self-esteem, another concern arises. Since this is recent there has not been much opportunity to do research on it. Due to a lack of much needed research, there is no evidence of support leading either towards teachers and parents enhancing a child's self-esteem or a child earning self-esteem.

Contributions of Current Research Proposal

As previously stated, due to the recent introduction of self-esteem in the classroom, there is currently a lack of research available determining the effectiveness of either procedure. It is for this reason that this research study is important. Any research done in relation to helping children succeed is valuable research. The intent of this study is to describe the perceived effectiveness and appropriateness of teachers enhancing a child's self-esteem or a child earning self-esteem.

To date, there has been few studies done in relation to self-esteem in the classroom. Over the

years, a more internal model of self-esteem has been used in the classroom, and with a changing society the schools should also progress. With this progression children will learn how to cope with failure, and proceed with success.

With a lack of knowledge in self-esteem in the schools it is important for research to be carried out. It has so much to offer. It will provide teachers the opportunity to learn about the most effective way to motivate their students and help their students succeed further in life. Also, the data will be most useful because it will come from people who are not only responsible for carrying out the procedure, but will see the effects if the procedure is not carried out effectively. It is for this reason that the data obtained will be most beneficial in determining whether enhancing self-esteem, or children earning self-esteem will be most beneficial in the purpose of helping children succeed further in life.

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