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ENHANCING STUDENTS' SELF-CONCEPT IN THE CLASSROOM

PETER KHIR SING YEOU

Introduction

We all have a set of ideas or beliefs or attitudes about ourselves at any given moment in time. This image that we have of ourselves may be termed our "self-concept". It refers to the qualities and attributes we ascribe to ourselves and is therefore what we see when we look at ourselves. However, not only do we have certain ideas about who we are, we have certain feelings about these. This comes about through the evaluation that we make regarding our significance and importance. The term "self-esteem" has been used to refer to this personal judgement of our own worthiness and indicates the extent to which a person believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy. A positive self-concept then can be equated with positive self-esteem while a negative self-concept is often synonymous with a lack of feelings of personal worthiness and self-acceptance.

In the context of the classroom, research has shown that a persistent and significant relationship exists between the self-concept and academic performance. Self-concept affects learning. It has often been found that students who believe that they cannot achieve academically tend to fulfil their own predictions. On the other hand, the student who enjoys high self-esteem learns more happily and easily than one who feels inadequate about himself; he will tackle new learning tasks with confidence and enthusiasm. This performance will tend to be successful since thought and feeling precede effort, and he is already "set" with positive expectations. Successful performance then reinforces his good feelings; he will view himself as being more competent with each successful achievement.

Since research shows both that performance can influence self-concept and that self-concept manipulation can modify
performance levels, teachers should do well to attend more directly to the self-perceptions and feelings of students. Enhancing their self-concepts and self-esteem can be one vital influence in improving academic performance. Teachers can carry out activities designed to build a positive classroom atmosphere that will contribute to the positive self-esteem of students. Canfield and Wells (1976) have written a delightful practical book listing one hundred activities to aid the teacher in this respect.

The study to be reported here is one teacher's attempts at improving the self-esteem of his students using some of the activities suggested by Canfield and Wells (1976). The results are rewarding and it is hoped that others too will be encouraged to try some of these activities to enhance the self-concept of their students. At the very least, it should result in a more positive classroom environment that is supportive of learning, one in which every student is made to feel respected and worthy.

Participants

They were a class of 41 Secondary Three, Normal Course students in a government school. The class comprised 37 boys and 4 girls. The teacher conducting the study was their Form Teacher who also taught them mathematics. This gave him the opportunity to be with the class more often and a close rapport was established. On the whole the students were a rather lively and responsive group although they were particularly weak in English.

Procedure

A pre-test of the students' self-esteem was first carried out using the Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) developed by Stanley Coopersmith of the University of California. This is a very well

* Note: Acknowledgements are due to Mr Loh Leong Beng who carried out the study as an in-service course assignment.
known instrument which comprises 25 self-referrent statements worded positively or negatively. All the students had to do was to indicate whether the particular statement they were responding to was either "Like Me" or "Unlike Me". These were then scored according to a pre-determined scoring key; the higher the student's score, the better his self-esteem and vice versa. The maximum score was 25 while the lowest would be 0. In the administration of the SEI the students were reminded to read each item carefully before answering it as truthfully as possible. They were further assured that their responses and scores would be treated confidentially.

A series of 6 activities were then carried out to enhance students' self-esteem. At the conclusion of the programme, the SEI was again administered as a post-test measure to see if self-esteem scores had changed in any way. The activities carried out by the teacher are described below.

The Programme

The activities were carried out over a period of about five weeks. Each activity took 15 to 40 minutes depending on the responsiveness of the class. They were sequenced in the following manner:

Activity 1: Public Interview

A volunteer was invited to be interviewed in public. At the same time, a panel of interviewers from the rest of the class was selected. A series of questions like "What is your favourite sport? If you have three wishes what would they be? . . . ." would be posed. Each session lasted for 10 minutes after which a new panel of interviewers and interviewees were selected. The objectives of this activity were to gain a deeper understanding of the student concerned and to let him publicly receive the attention of all his classmates.
Activity 2: Public Statements

Students were allowed to make statements about something that they wanted to say to their classmates. These could be statements of criticism or of public affirmation. They could be highly emotional or extremely objective but their statements were not to be censored or countered by the teacher or the rest of the class. Since this activity was a very sensitive one, proper instructions and rules were set up by the teacher before it was carried out. The objectives were to allow students temporary control over their environment and also to indicate to the class that the teacher respected their opinions and they must learn to respect others’ opinions too.

Activity 3: Adjective Wardrobe

The students were told to write six adjectives on strips of paper which described their feelings about themselves. They were told to be as honest as possible. When they had done so, they were asked to arrange the strips from the one they were most pleased with to the one least pleased. They then had to consider how they felt about each of the words they had written down, and then to give up each adjective one at a time. During the process of giving up they were asked to imagine the type of person they would be with a few or all of the adjectives removed. The objective here was to let the students define who they really were and what it felt like to ‘lose’ part of oneself.

Activity 4: If I were . . .

The students worked in groups of five. They were told to imagine that they had special magical powers and could transform into any object that they like (eg. an animal, a car, a musical instrument etc). They were told to share with their group members what they would like to be and also the reasons for their particular choice. This activity allowed them to clarify their doubts on questions such as who they were as individuals, what they wanted to be and do in the future.

Activity 5: 1 Used To Be . . . But Now I’m . . .

The students were grouped into five each. The teacher
started off by saying "I used to be ______ (pause) but now I'm ______ (pause). Can you think of something you used to be or do or think that has changed?" The students then listed out these sentences and shared with their classmates about them. The objective of the exercise was to enable the students to realise that they were not alone in many problems and concerns and to highlight that these can be rejected and changed over a period of time.

**Activity 6: It's Great To Be Me!**

The students were instructed to write out their thoughts and feelings in a composition entitled the above. Before they undertook the assignment, some input was given in the words of a very encouraging poem entitled "Success" which reiterated the theme that a person's actions were basically influenced by the views he had of himself. In addition they were also asked to draw a portrait of themselves.

**Results**

Table 1 shows the self-esteem groupings of the class at the pre-test and post-test stages. As can be seen, at the end of the programme there were now more students with higher self-esteem scores while the number of students with low self-esteem scores had decreased.

In terms of descriptive statistics, Table 2 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of the SEI scores for the whole class at the pre- and post-test stages. Test-retest reliability was found to be 0.76. Overall, the mean self-esteem scores had increased by nearly three points at the end of the programme. A t-test showed that this difference was significant at P < 0.001 level.

Therefore, it would seem that the teacher's efforts in attempting to enhance the self-esteem of the students had been quite successful.
Table 1: Self-Esteem Groupings For Pre- And Post-Test Stages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>SEI Scores</th>
<th>No. of Students</th>
<th>No. of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High self-esteem</td>
<td>18 - 25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average self-esteem</td>
<td>11 - 17</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-esteem</td>
<td>0 - 10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
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Table 2: Pre- And Post-Test Means, Standard Deviations Of SEI Scores For The Whole Class And t-Test For Significant Difference in Mean Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEI Score</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t-Value</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Test</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>8.28&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Test</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td></td>
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*P < 0.001

Discussion

One key factor that could have contributed to the present results of the study was, undoubtedly, the teacher himself. That is, before a teacher can enhance the students' self-concepts, he must first be a significant influence in their lives. Nobody gets changed by people whom they see as insignificant or unimportant to them. There was evidence to suggest that the teacher concerned demonstrated a very caring attitude towards his class and had "found it a pleasure" to be teaching them.
inspite of the fact that they were lower ability students. Good rapport had also been established and therefore the essential human elements were present to make the programme work.

Another factor could be the students reached a deeper understanding of themselves and could accept themselves better at the end of the programme. Not many adolescents are given the opportunity to think about themselves as unique individuals or to realistically appraise themselves. The teacher’s observations and evaluation of students’ reactions in terms of each activity indicated a fair measure of genuineness and sincerity in coming to terms with themselves and others. There was no evidence to suggest that the students had treated the activities lightly or gave socially desirable responses in order to "look good". This factor of active involvement (which also resulted in drawing out the isolates and neglectees in the class) rather than aloof detachment could have contributed to the success of the programme. On all counts, the students had indicated that they found the activities meaningful and the experiences enjoyable.

Conclusion

This study has shown that a teacher can enhance the self-esteem of his students with a series of well chosen activities, given that he is supportive and holds favourable attitudes towards them. However, this study is not without its limitations, one of which is that no control group was used. It could also be that the self-esteem of the students improved because of factors other than those related to the programme. Nevertheless, taken at its face value, the students came out the better at the end of the programme and that is what really matters in the final analysis.

Reference