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Author(s)	Ian Smith & Vilma D'Rozario
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ENHANCING PUPIL SELF-ESTEEM: AFFECTIVE EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

Review by Ian Smith & Vilma D'Rozario

INTRODUCTION

Most teachers would agree that enhancing a pupil's self-esteem is an important educational goal. Psychologists believe its importance stems from two sources: it is both an **intrinsic** goal, as well as an **extrinsic** or **instrumental** educational goal. It is important for teachers to enhance their pupils' self-esteem intrinsically because self-esteem is central to children's emerging identity as persons. It becomes the core of their personality, and a positive self-concept is essential for their mental health. Before children enter school, they are valued by their families for **who** they are, members of that family. After they begin school, they must establish their value in the teacher's eyes for **what** they are, pupils capable of reaching their potential and achieving in class. Helping each child achieve his or her potential – both affective and cognitive – is one of the teacher's main professional aims. Enhancing pupils' self-esteem is also an instrumental educational goal because it has been found (e.g., Wylie, 1979; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985) that pupils who possess high self-esteem generally persist in their schoolwork after temporary setbacks or failures. Low self-esteem pupils, on the other hand, typically give up easily and often become "learned helpless".

In this article, we shall review the literature on the teacher's role in enhancing pupils' self-esteem, and then draw several important implications for specific strategies that are designed to encourage pupils to re-evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and to help them reach their

personal goals. Self-esteem will be defined as an individual's perceptions and evaluations of his personal qualities and abilities. No distinction is made between self-esteem and self-concept, which will be used interchangeably. While some authorities in this field refer to self-esteem as the individual's **evaluations** of his personal qualities and abilities, with self-concept denoting his **descriptions** of these qualities and abilities, in practice the two features are inextricably linked. If a 16 year old boy, for example, says he is 180 centimetres tall, he is not just telling you his height, he may also be implying that he is pleased he is tall for his age.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

One of the continuing issues in the self-esteem field is whether self-esteem is a single dimension of the personality or whether it is multidimensional. Carl Rogers (1977) believed that the self is an integrated whole. He maintained that the whole self is more than the sum of its parts. Any attempt to divide and isolate a pupil's self-esteem into multiple dimensions, such as mathematical self-concept, mother tongue language self-concept and physical abilities self-concept, is futile because they are integrated into the person's sense of who he or she is. Research, however, has shown that general self-concept is a poor predictor of educational achievement. Hansford and Hattie (1982), for example, found a correlation of only 0.21 between general self-concept and educational achievement in a meta-analysis of over a hundred studies. This means that general

self-concept is better than no predictor at all, but predicts only 4% of the individual differences in educational achievement. If general self-concept is so important to the way people adapt to their environment, then one would expect it to be a much better predictor of educational achievement than the level that has been obtained in many studies.

The more common view of authorities in this field is that the self-concept is a multidimensional construct (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). Just as a diamond has many facets when it is cut, reflecting light when it is rotated, so too do complex human beings reflect many facets of themselves in many different situations. Each of us develops a profile of perceived strengths and weaknesses in our attempt to adapt to an increasingly complex world. We come to value some of these facets or dimensions more than others. An athlete, for example, values his running or jumping ability and is not upset if his ability to speak on public occasions is not outstanding. If public speaking becomes important to his life opportunities, then he can always pick up this skill by undertaking a public speaking course. More recent attempts to measure self-esteem have concentrated on measuring multiple dimensions of self-esteem in order to achieve a more complete profile of an individual's perceptions of his personal qualities and abilities (Harter, 1990; Lui, 1999). This profile enables teachers and counsellors to examine the pupil's perceived strengths and weaknesses in order to concentrate on those dimensions they need to enhance.

William James recognised as long ago as 1890 that there are two ways that a person may increase his self-esteem. By defining self-esteem as our personal goals divided

by our successes (i.e., $\text{Self-esteem} = \frac{\text{Goals}}{\text{Successes}}$), James (1890) inferred that individuals who wish to raise their self-esteem can either lower their goals or raise their level of success. Counsellors constantly advise clients to set realistic goals in order for their goals to have a reasonable chance to be achieved. Pupils with low self-esteem often set for themselves goals which are either too high or too low. If their goals are too high, they rationalise that their chances of success are low. So if they fail to reach them, they blame the task's difficulty level. If their goals are too low, then they are more likely to succeed, but the level of challenge is low. High self-esteem pupils set realistic goals for themselves, involving learning tasks which have an intermediate level of difficulty. They relish the challenge to achieve success in their studies.

The other way of increasing pupils' level of self-esteem is to increase their success rate. The problem for many pupils is that no matter how hard they try, they just cannot please the teacher because the 'bar' of expectancy is set at the same height for all pupils. If teachers, however, set easier tasks for some pupils in order to encourage them to try harder, then an increase in their success rate will lead these pupils to re-evaluate their self-esteem in that subject. They consequently begin to believe that their earlier judgement of being a failure at, say, mathematics, is not true. By believing that they are more competent in that subject than they had previously thought, these pupils will put in more effort to confirm their higher level of self-esteem and to maintain their success rate.

Counsellors generally recommend either a **direct** or an **indirect** method of enhancing pupil self-esteem. The direct approach

involves encouraging pupils to believe in themselves, to make greater efforts to achieve their goals. The counsellor may spend time with each pupil, exploring his goals so that the pupil has a clearer picture of what his goals are in school, or even in life. The direct approach to enhancing pupils' self-esteem concentrates on helping pupils clarify their personal goals in order to realise where they are headed and how they can achieve their goals. Carl Rogers (1977), for example, advocated this approach. He believed that the counsellor's role is that of **facilitator**. Only the person himself can reach the decision of what are reasonable educational or life goals. The counsellor cannot tell the client what he should do, only help him clarify what he aspires to. When the client is committed to his personal goals he will make the effort to strive towards reaching them. Pupils generally do not respond positively to goals that are imposed on them. Rather, they respond enthusiastically when they "own" their goals and realise how they may achieve them.

The indirect approach to enhancing pupil self-esteem is favoured by some counsellors who prefer a cognitive behavioural technique (e.g., Glasser, 1969; 1986). This technique is based on the assumption that pupil attitudes are determined by their behaviour, rather than vice versa. For instance, a pupil adjusts his level of self-esteem on the basis of the relative success and failure he receives in a particular subject. If he is constantly rewarded by the teacher for getting all his mathematics homework correct, sooner or later he infers that he is good at mathematics. If he has trouble with his mother tongue homework, taking longer to complete it and getting an average score, then he concludes that his mother tongue language ability is

considerably lower than his mathematics ability. Teachers can change this conclusion by giving him more structured mother tongue homework and monitoring his performance more closely, in order to correct mistakes before they become entrenched in his memory. This indirect approach has been applied in computer-assisted instruction in many subjects (Smith, 1973), as well as in industry for more than thirty years. The level of difficulty of the task is engineered to ensuring a 70% success rate. If the pupil falls below this rate, then the level of task difficulty is lowered, whereas a higher success rate leads to the presentation of more difficult problem-solving tasks. Computers are ideal tools for this technique because they can be programmed to maintain a certain success rate. Sooner or later the pupil begins to realise that he is capable of being successful, even in his mother tongue. Counsellors who advocate the indirect approach to enhancing pupil self-esteem support the idiom, "success breeds success".



COUNSELLING PUPILS TO ENHANCE SELF-ESTEEM

In Singapore, counselling pupils to enhance their self-esteem may occur on a one-to-one basis or in group guidance settings. Pupils

with serious self-esteem problems may require individual counselling in order to gain insight into their problems. Some pupils become learned helpless in the sense that they believe they are failures and there is nothing they can do to overcome this problem. They may require a skilled counsellor to unpack what they mean by failure and to show them that failure is a relative term. Then the counsellor may adopt either the direct or the indirect approach to enhancing their self-esteem. Or he may adopt an eclectic method by using both direct and indirect approaches to convince a pupil that he is not a failure and that there are specific strategies for him to overcome his learning problems.

A second counselling method is group guidance. This method involves a single teacher or counsellor working with a group of up to 10 pupils at a time. This method may be more cost-effective for certain types of pupil learning difficulties and self-esteem problems. If the problems are not serious, in the sense that the pupils express some positive attitudes, or express no symptoms of serious emotional problems, then the teacher need not refer the pupils to a professional counsellor. Instead, the teacher may act as a group facilitator by dividing the class into small groups and addressing common problems, such as how to improve their study skills, how to be more reflective in their problem-solving, or how to manage time and stress more effectively. All these issues may lead to a discussion of how to enhance self-esteem, which may bring up some specific strategies designed to achieve that purpose (e.g., Canfield & Siccone, 1993). Group guidance may occur in the context of regular classroom lessons or in civics and moral education classes, affective and career education classes, or in some other setting, such as a school camp.

CONCLUSION

Enhancing pupils' self-esteem is an important educational goal. Its importance has long been recognised by teachers, for it is central to the pupils' mental health and spurs them to try harder to achieve their goals. Counselling pupils to reappraise their strengths and weaknesses may take a direct approach or an indirect approach: the direct approach focuses on the pupils' self-esteem directly by praising the pupils and making them realise that they can achieve their goals by setting realistic goals and striving to reach them. Indirect approaches to enhancing self-esteem generally concentrate on ensuring that pupils achieve success by adapting the difficulty level of the task to the ability level of the pupils. By engineering the learning task so that pupils experience success on a regular basis, the teacher encourages pupils to reflect on past self-evaluations which were based on failure. Continual success forces them to think about their past reinforcement history and challenges their belief that this subject is not one of their strengths. As we mature, we become resilient to these failures and can withstand criticism from significant others. Nevertheless, teachers realise that they need to encourage and support pupils in their attempts to increase their self-esteem which, in turn, builds the confidence pupils need to take risks in an uncertain world.

Counselling pupils to enhance their self-esteem may be on an individual basis or in a group guidance format. Individual counselling may be necessary for serious emotional and adjustment problems, common to pupils who have become learned helpless as a result of years of criticism or failure. But many problems involving pupil self esteem may be treated

by group guidance in a pastoral care and career guidance lesson, or during subject teaching by a teacher who recognises the importance of enhancing self-esteem to pupils' achievement and happiness in the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

- 1. A teacher who enhances a pupil's self-esteem is helping to improve his mental health, as well as his ability to persist at school tasks in the face of temporary setbacks or even failure.***

Enhancing a pupil's self-esteem is an important intrinsic aim because a realistic level of self-esteem is important for a person's sense of well-being, as well as being an important instrumental aim because pupils with high self-esteem generally resist the temptation to give up when they receive negative feedback about their schoolwork. Woolfolk (1998) suggests that to encourage self-esteem among pupils, teachers must show they value all pupils. One way of doing this is to highlight the value of individual differences. Another way is to create a psychologically safe classroom environment where to make a mistake is seen as a learning opportunity, and where there is an absence of harsh criticism. To ensure a positive self-esteem among students, teachers too need to model a positive disposition, modeling appropriate methods of self-criticism, perseverance, and self-reward, if they would like their pupils to do likewise for themselves.

- 2. Self-esteem is a multidimensional personal construct, so that any intervention by a teacher or counsellor should focus on the main problem perceived by the pupil, rather than attempting to improve general self-esteem.***

Working with specific problems which are interfering with the pupil's achievement of his personal goals is more effective than attempting to change general self-esteem. Research evidence suggests that general self-esteem is a very poor predictor of educational achievement, so any gains in this unfocussed personal characteristic will have little benefit for the pupil. On the other hand, specific gains in, say, mathematical self-concept are likely to improve the pupil's performance in this school subject. Therefore, teachers need to work on building their pupils' confidence in their subject area. Teachers can do this by ensuring that every pupil, no matter how weak in their subject area,

experiences success. For pupils weak in the subject area, a good idea would be to return to the basics, and then slowly move on to more challenging learning tasks, ensuring that small successes are experienced all along the way.

3. *Self-esteem may be enhanced directly by counselling the pupil that he is capable of higher achievement if he puts more effort into his studies and by providing specific strategies to solve problems and to facilitate higher achievement.*

Pupils are often inspired by teachers who are enthusiastic and encourage them to try harder, because they wish to confirm the teacher's faith in them. A teacher or counsellor may help pupils clarify their goals and suggest specific strategies to attain them.

4. *Self-esteem may be enhanced indirectly by ensuring that the pupil experiences success frequently.*

When the teacher individualises the questions, tasks or problems for the pupils, they perform better, reassess their perceived competence in a given subject and raise their level of self-esteem in that subject to match their new level of achievement.

5. *Counselling may take either an individual or a group format, depending upon the seriousness of the pupils' problems and the counselling resources available to the school.*

Individual counselling may be necessary for serious problems which are long-standing and have led to a feeling of "learned helplessness". Group guidance is more appropriate for less serious problems which are shared by several members of the same class. It is also more cost-efficient than individual counselling because more pupils may be helped to resolve their problems by the one teacher or counsellor over a shorter time period.

For any counselling to be helpful, teachers need to listen actively to their pupils. Listening actively includes not just listening to what is being said, but also listening to what is not being said—that is, listening to the feelings the pupils may be having about their predicament at that point in time. Help pupils tell their story, and give them time to do this. Avoid interrupting pupils by simply telling the pupils what they should or should not do in their situation. Help pupils identify what they want to see happen and

together, try to explore some alternative ways of meeting simple, do-able short-term goals. It is always helpful to check back with the pupils to find out how their plans have transpired. This gives the teacher a chance to check on the mental health of the pupil as well as to jointly re-assess the situation to see if any further action needs to be taken.

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