# SCHOOL AND SELF-CONCEPT

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THERE are various points of view about self-concept and how it relates to a student's performance in school. Let us look at some of these views.

## What Is Self-Concept?

One position, held by Lecky (1), is that self-consistency is so necessary as to be the prime motivator of all behavior. Thus, a child who comes to school with a preconceived notion of himself as a dumbbell, a bully or a brain, will resist any attempts to change his self-perception and tend to deny facts which contradict it.

Another position, commonly assumed by school people, is that children have varying levels of self-concept, which in turn affect their performance in school. This self-concept is seen in more general terms, and we frequently hear such a comment as "If only we can help him to achieve a better self-concept, then this or that problem will be solved."

These two positions are not entirely consistent. Both imply a view which a person holds of himself, in terms of his adequacies and inadequacies; in terms of his values; and in terms of his desires. The first position also implies that some sort of balance has been achieved which can only be upset at the cost of extreme anxiety, and therefore which tends to remain relatively constant. This resistance to change further implies that the person, looking at himself, accepts what he sees, at least well enough to be able to live with himself.

The concern with levels of self-concept, on the other hand, implies a dissatisfaction with the self-picture which does not, however, motivate an attempt to change because of fear of failure. There is evidence to support both of these positions, and it seems likely that a more comprehensive and inclusive theoretical statement is needed to account for the empirical data collected thus far. Be that as it may, what relationship do we see between a student's self-picture and his performance in school?

## Does Self-Concept Relate to School Achievement?

Several studies examined how self-concept relates to school achievement. Reeder (2) found, for example, that

children achieve lower in terms of their potential if they have a low self-concept. Coopersmith (3) found a similar result under certain circumstances. Walsh (4) reported that bright boys who are low achievers perceive themselves as defensive and limited in communication with their environment. Chickering (5), however, found no stable relationship between self discrepancy and school effort. Since this study involves actual-ideal self discrepancy, it is interesting to note that achievement appears more closely related to the actual self than to the ideal, whereas Coopersmith (3) found that low self-concept is associated with high achievement when high achievement need (ideal self) is present.

Berger (6) found support for the hypothesis that college students who are willing to accept their limitations perform better academically than those who have a lower willingness. This finding lends support to the position on self-actualization taken by Rogers (7) and by Maslow (8).

Four relatively recent (1958 to 1962) studies concerning elementary school children are those of Smock, Hamachek, Eubank, and Peppin. Three of these four deal at some point with the relationship between self-concept and school achievement. The remaining one, that of Smock (9), is more general. His findings relating to the present considerations are those concerning quality of perception. He reported that children who are anxious about themselves are more rigid and more constricted in their environmental perceptions.

Hamachek (10) identified what he calls "high status" children on the basis of measures of reading age, mental age, and education age. These children were above the mean on each of the previously mentioned measures. Using techniques devised by Rogers (7), he inferred self-concept levels for them, and found these levels to be higher in achievement and intellectual categories than those of children not so classified.

Eubank (11), however, reported a study with fourth and sixth grade children in which no significant differences were found between the means of intelligence and achievement scores for high and low self-concept groups. She used the *Bills-Lipsitt Self-Concept Scale* and nationally standardized achievement and intelligence tests. The children in this study were those whose inferred self-concept differed markedly from that predicted by their teachers. She also reported that parents tend to agree with the teacher's prediction when the child's inferred self-concept is low, and to disagree when the inferred self-concept is high.

Peppin (12) studied over- and underachievers in relation to three aspects: self-concept, parental understanding and parental acceptance. He used the *Haggerty-Olson-Wickman Behavior Rating Scale*. Each student rated himself, and was rated by his peers. Self-concept level was inferred from the direction of discrepancy between the subject's self-rating and his rating by peers. Peppin reported that overachievers tend to rate themselves more highly than under-achievers.

This variety of methods and of studies tends to support a low, direct relationship between self-concept and achievement. Conflicting evidence indicates the need for further effort.

A more recent study with elementary school children was completed by

Campbell (13) in 1965. This study was based on data from fourth, fifth and sixth grade students. He reported support for the hypothesis of a positive relationship (r=.308) between *Coopersmith Self-Esteem* and Achievement (*Iowa* Composite) scores. Support was also found for the hypothesis that the relationship decreases at progressively higher grade levels, that the relationship is higher for boys than for girls, and that the mean school-related self-concept score differs in value for boys and girls, with girls obtaining higher scores. A hypothesis of differing degrees of relationship between *Coopersmith Self-Esteem* and Achievement (*Iowa* Composite) for high, middle, and low intelligence groupings was not supported.

The function of the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* scores as contributors to prediction of Achievement (*Iowa* Composite) scores was examined. Multiple regression techniques, with intelligence quotients comprising the second independent variable, were utilized. Such use is not considered worthwhile on the basis of this analysis, because the contribution of self-concept to prediction is too small.

It was also found that the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* is consistent in the relationship of the five part scores to one another, and to the total scores, over a one year period, but that the traits measured do not appear to remain stable among individuals.

Finally, an examination of the students who departed markedly from the trend was made, and it is conjectured that true differences in types of adjustment exist for them.

A related implication of this study arises from findings relating to the differences between the boys' group and the girls' group. It is plausible that efforts to improve self-concept have a greater chance of affecting the achievement of boys than that of girls. To this end it appears that curriculum and environmental changes are suggested. For example, a group of boys who were subjects of this study were asked on another occasion whether they regarded reading as a masculine or feminine activity. The majority responded that reading was feminine.

This suggests that the heaviest curriculum emphasis of the elementary school is at variance with the concept which boys view as appropriate to themselves. Since it is hardly likely that reading can be eliminated from the curriculum in the near future, a change in boys' perception is indicated. This might well be accomplished by altering instructional methods to take into account the structure and sources of the boys' self-concept.

It also appears likely that attention to the development of a high level of self-esteem is more significant to achievement in fourth and fifth grades than in sixth. Although the findings of this study do not suggest a reason, it is possible that this situation results because the degree of dependence upon the teacher as a significant person seems to decrease as the student proceeds through school.

Another major study, undertaken by Brookover *et al.* (14), explored the relationship between school achievement and self-concept of ability for junior high school students.

Self-concept of ability is defined by Brookover as the perception a student

has of his ability to achieve generally in school, and in specific school subjects. As such, it is a specialized conceptualization of the more general term.

## What Are the Implications?

Although there is conflict, the weight of the evidence suggests that self-concept, as measured by these several independent researchers, does make a difference. It appears that, as we might reasonably expect, there are many facets of self-concept. Very probably, there are varying levels of each facet. Unless the teacher is interested in self-concept as a theoretical construct, and in a general experimental sense, he would probably be more effective in dealing with students by confining himself to the facet of self-concept which is specific to the problem at hand.

For example, the writer once knew a boy who had a great deal of trouble with reading. This boy often looked quite whipped when confronted with a book, yet when he led off the school concert band with the drum roll preceding the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," he evidenced self-satisfaction. The writer believed that if this boy could be helped in approaching reading with a measure of confidence more akin to that with which he approached the drums, success would be much more likely.

There is an assumption here that self-concept is, at least in part, causative. This is a plausible assumption in the light of Lecky's theoretical position, and in the light of Brookover's evidence supporting the effect of the "significant others." Taking this assumption then, what can we do about the student whose self-picture in some significant area is, "I can't"?

Walsh (4) suggests several considerations which are applicable to this problem. The first of these is prevention. There may not be much the teacher can do about this at the time he has the opportunity to work with the child, but it is reasonable to assume that the establishment of an atmosphere of mutual respect may both prevent future inhibition of ability and provide an avenue to approach the remediation of previous damage. One good way to do this is simply to take some time to listen to what the students have to say. Use their ideas when possible, or adapt them to fit the business at hand.

A second consideration is the necessity of establishing oneself as a "significant other" who in truth does see something worthwhile in what the student can do. To be effective, there can be nothing artificial about this role. One must recognize, for example, that there are many stages in the development of any subject matter competency as well as in the development of a particular skill, such as reading or computation. To be able to show a student that he has successfully mastered even the first steps of a developmental task is likely to be much more effective than a verbal habit of saying a vague "that's good" about everything he does.

Walsh (4) further recommends encouraging exploration, recognizing defenses, and encouraging emotional expression in socially acceptable and unharmful ways. Gowan (15) also suggests several procedures for altering an undesirable self-concept. He emphasizes especially the necessity of picking the right time and place for the counselor teacher to lay on the line his trust in the student, and thereby inspire the

student to an effort which, without this help, he would not attempt. It is particularly important, according to Gowan, that such a move be attempted only when the chance of success is very good.

Finally, there is need to continue to redefine and refine our understanding of the role of a person's self-picture in his behavior. It cannot reasonably be ignored, nor can dealing with it be left to outside "experts." Teachers and counselors must continue to use their own good judgment in dealing with students' feelings about themselves, realizing that a specific approach may possibly be harmful, but also that no approach at all, from anyone, will probably be more so.

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