

Enhancing the Self Concept in School

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CAN education deliberately help to enhance each person's identity and feeling of self worth because of, rather than in spite of, his ethnic, cultural, or socioeconomic background? This question is posed in the light of increasing evidence as to the importance of a positive attitude toward the self and effective personality functioning.

The attitudes that one holds toward himself are significantly associated with personal satisfaction and mental health. Clinical psychologists are fully aware of the fact that many people who seek psychological help often view themselves as being unworthy, inadequate, and unable. Moreover, it is known that self acceptance precedes acceptance of others. Persons who view themselves in a negative manner are the ones who are not likely to achieve in either the academic or social sense. A positive regard for the self is seldom evidenced by the people who fill our jails and our state hospitals: a positive regard for the self is also seldom evidenced by the low achiever in our schools.

Several studies have indicated that there is a low but positive relationship between feelings of self worth and school functioning. Many school deficiencies are now thought to be due to the child's belief that he cannot read, write, or do arithmetic. Thus for a child to achieve, he must view himself as able to achieve. Grambs (1964) has stated that a child with a negative self concept will not profit much from school.

Kvaraceus (1964) believes that the school should take an active role in enhancing the self concepts of minority group children, but he goes on to point out that research on how to effect such change is lacking.

Positive Attitudes

It is generally acknowledged then that, for effective functioning, a person must have positive attitudes toward himself, and it is also assumed that school behavior is determined in part by the child's view of himself. The self concepts of black children frequently have been found to be negative. The writings of Clark (1958), Deutsch (1960), and Ausubel (1963) all point out that the Negro in America labors with the handicap of a negative self-image. Clearly, if we are to upgrade achievement in these groups of individuals, the school must provide opportunities for experiences that modify negative attitudes toward the self.

American society, including educational institutions, has acted in a manner to induce negative self-feelings on the part of large segments of our population. Schools as part of society must now act to correct this error. There is no question as to the necessity for

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such action: there is question as to what concrete things a school can do to enhance the self concept of its students.

This latter question was directly attacked by the Pontiac School District during the 1967-68 school year. Using Title III funds, a program to enhance self concept was implemented in one of the elementary schools. Citywide testing with a measure of self worth was carried out, and mean scores were obtained on the 28 elementary schools in the system.

The program was placed in the school with the lowest mean score. The selected school is a segregated school located in the lowest socioeconomic sector of the city. Traditionally the school has ranked low in terms of achievement levels of the student body. The teaching staff is an integrated one and the school is of modern design and construction. During the summer preceding the beginning of school, a team consisting of the school principal, teachers, and a school psychologist met with the purpose of designing a series of activities assumed by the team to be of value in enhancing the self concept of students. Frequent meetings with consultants knowledgeable in the area of self concept were held in order to give the team some help in the designing of specific activities.

The team began its task with the view that the self concept of a person is a learned thing evolving out of interpersonal relationships with people deemed to be significant in the child's life. Teachers were seen as being "significant" others who, through their daily interaction with students, could exert either a positive or negative effect on the child's developing self concept.

After considerable discussion and reading the team decided that positive reinforcements would be a necessary part of the program in order to give the students as much recognition as possible. The goal was to show to each student that he was important, worthy, and able to master the school curriculum. A detailed list of specific activities was drawn up and discussed with the school staff prior to the opening of school. Because of space limitations it is not possible to list all the activities that were tried during the

school year, but mention will be made of some of the activities that were found to be most effective in enhancing self concept.

A positive grading system was adopted by some of the teachers. Instead of putting the "number wrong" at the top of the student's paper, the teacher noted the "number correct" and usually added an encouraging remark. This positive approach replaced the usual negative approach used in most grading techniques. Bulletin boards pointing out accomplishments of individual children flourished in the rooms and halls of the building. Tangible rewards were given to many students and, wherever possible, individual recognition, praise, and attention were given for academic or social accomplishments. In the lower grades each child had a personal scrapbook. Polaroid pictures of the child doing something of a positive nature were taken and placed in the scrapbook.

Results of the Program

It was felt important that our students constantly be reminded of the contributions made by the black man in America. Pictures of prominent black men were posted throughout the school. The "Black is beautiful" theme pervaded many of the displays and room activities. To demonstrate to the students the importance of education, black role models were brought into the school and held discussions with groups of children. Through this procedure, students were able to meet black congressmen, doctors, lawyers, skilled technicians, merchants, and civic leaders.

The importance of teacher attitude was recognized early in the program. An in-service education program was conducted during the entire school year; teachers met weekly with consultants and attended a weekly after-school class. This program was designed to emphasize the importance of self concept and continually to reinforce a positive attitude on the part of the teaching staff.

What were the results of the pilot program? Can a school evolve a program to enhance the self concept of students? These questions were answered to some extent by

the evaluation carried out at the end of the program. Initial measures of self concept, attitudes toward school, and achievement were obtained on all students in the 4th, 5th, and 6th grades of the experimental and control schools. Initial and final measures of self concept and school relations were obtained on lower grade children only in the experimental school.

The results indicated that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups on the scale measuring the student's view of himself as a learner. The experimental group members at the end of the program viewed themselves as competent learners to a greater extent than did members of the control group.

The lower grade children showed significant gains in school attitudes but not in self concept. The fact that lower grade children did not show significant change in self attitudes may be due to the fact that relatively high scores were obtained on the pretest measure. A disappointing finding was that the upper grade children of the experimental group did not show a significantly higher level of achievement when compared to the control group. The lack of significant achievement differences may be due to the short term nature of the program: follow-up studies are being conducted to determine if achievement changes come about over a longer period of time.

In summary, the evaluation report does indicate that a school can evolve a program that serves to make students regard themselves in a positive light. It remains to be seen whether or not achievement level can be elevated by enhancing the self concept. Enhancing the self concept is a worthwhile

goal in and of itself but hopefully it can be related to higher levels of achievement. The evaluation report can be obtained upon request.

Our program then has indicated that teachers, by employing a positive approach and providing positive reinforcement, can enhance the self concepts of students. It would be a mistake to conclude that such an approach can be used only when extra funds are available. The program is being continued in the experimental school although Title III funds are no longer available. Many of the activities have been undertaken by other schools in the Pontiac system.

In his daily interactions with students, a teacher can do many things which cost only time and effort. The importance of a child's self concept cannot be ignored: the teacher must be aware of it and consider it whenever he interacts with the child.

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