Synthesis of Research on Self-Concept

Theories about self-understanding have ranged from romantic, holistic ideas expressed through the fine arts, to highly analytic statements emerging from psychological research on specific aspects of personality. Theorists disagree about whether the environment or the individual is more influential in their formulation. At present comprehensive statements about the self must remain somewhat speculative, but an examination of theory and research does offer some important information about how people perceive themselves (James, 1890; Mead, 1934; Rogers, 1962; Jourard, 1971; Hamacheck, 1965; Gergen, 1971; Rosenberg, 1979).

Self-perception seems to function at three levels: specific situation, categorical, and general. First, in our daily lives each of us is involved in many specific situations in which we exercise and develop ideas about our knowledge, skills, beliefs, attitudes, and the like. Second, as a function of experience and desire, each of us has perceptions about ourselves based on various roles we play (learner, family member) and attributes which we believe we possess. Third, each of us seems to have a general sense of self, perhaps based on decisions about our situation experiences and categorical perceptions.

Self-perception appears to involve three dimensions: self-concept, self-esteem, and values (Beane and Lipka, 1980). Self-concept refers to the description we hold of ourselves based on the roles we play and personal attributes we believe we possess. Self-esteem refers to the level of satisfaction we attach to that description or part of it. Self-esteem decisions, in turn, are made on the basis of what is important to us or, more specifically, our values. This distinction is important for educators concerned about learner self-perceptions for two reasons. First, our values may not be the same as those of students, so we cannot infer that they have positive self-esteem regarding particular aspects of their own lives just because we would. Second, when trying to enhance self-perceptions we must be sure which aspect of the self we are dealing with. For example, because of peer pressure, high achieving students may be unhappy with that aspect of themselves and public reinforcement may be a misguided technique.

As self-perception becomes more general, the individual appears to seek stability and consistency (Purkey, 1970). For example, if a person believes that he/she is generally socially inept, convincing that person otherwise would probably be very difficult. One or two specific social situations where positive feedback is received would make little difference as would generally supportive statements like, “You shouldn't feel that way; you're a good person.” In order to make a difference in the self-perceptions of young persons, we apparently need to construct a consistent and continuing series of specific situations in which certain feedback is received and in which we help young persons to clarify their concepts of self and the values upon which their personal self-esteem judgments are made (Raths, 1972).

Finally, it appears that self-perceptions are to some extent age-related. Self-perceptions are largely influenced by our environment and particularly by persons whom we perceive as “significant others.” In childhood, parents serve as the most significant others and thus have the most influence on self-perceptions. Further, children tend to view themselves in criterion-referenced ways; that is, they judge their competence in situations on the basis of how well they do on tasks. Adolescents, on the other hand, tend to view peers as the most significant others; their self-judgments seem to be norm-referenced. Questions of self take on major importance in adolescence as that age group confronts the classic identity crisis (Erikson, 1968). Furthermore, as people get older their roles become more numerous, their awareness of the environment becomes more acute, and their self-perceptions become more complex. Apparently, then, the longer we delay efforts to enhance self-perceptions or perhaps continue to hinder them, the more difficult our supportive role becomes (Morse, 1964; Yamamoto, Thomas, and Karnes, 1969).

The Self and the School

It is generally accepted that schools ought to and do develop learning in a variety of areas, including personal and social development. In fact, intrinsic to the notion of the “hidden” curriculum is the idea that the self and social outcomes of schooling are at least as, if not more powerful than, academic outcomes (Overly, 1970). Typically, lists of school goals include
statements of intent to help students develop a positive sense of self-worth, independence, self-confidence in learning, and internal locus of control (that is, self rather than external direction).

In the hundreds of studies that have been done, a persistent relationship has been found between various aspects of self-perception and a wide variety of school-related variables (Wylie, 1979). Among the variables which have been found to be related to self-concept are school achievement, perceived social status among peers, participation in class discussions, completion of school, perceptions of peers and teachers of the individual, pro-social behavior, and self-direction in learning.

Students carry images of the self in several areas as well as the potential for developing many more. These might include the self as person, as learner, as academic achiever, as peer, and others. Each experience in school can affect self-concept, personally held values, and/or the subsequent self-esteem of the learner. For this reason, an understanding of self-concept and esteem in general, how they function in youth, and how they must be a major concern of education (Purkey, 1970), particularly in relation to cooperative behavior and self-direction in learning.

From Custodial Climate to Humanistic Climate. Discussions of school climate generally distinguish between two types, custodial and humanistic. Deibert and Hoy (1977) found that students in humanistic schools demonstrated higher degrees of self-actualization than those in schools with a custodial orientation. This correlational research has obvious implications for schools when one examines the qualities associated with each type of climate. The custodial climate is characterized by democratic procedures, student participation in decision making, personal growth, respect, fairness, self-discipline, interaction, and flexibility. In other words, it appears that the custodial climate may be a debilitating factor in the concept of self while the humanistic climate might be considered facilitating (Licata and Wildes, 1980; Estep, Willower, and Licata, 1980).

From Accepting Failure to Expecting and Ensuring Success. In some schools, it is expected that many learners will fail. Further, it is expected that some will do so consistently. Thus failure has a kind of cumulative effect for the learner (Purkey, 1970) and also becomes embedded in teacher expectations (Rosenthal, 1970; Kash and Borich, 1978). Within this framework, one may find interaction effects (Bloom, 1980; Purkey, 1970) between self-concept as learner and school achievement (for example, correlations for academic achievement appear to range up to .76).

The general idea that "one success may lead to another" is supported experimentally by the work of Ballif (1978) who suggests the use of teacher-guided tutoring sessions, in which the successful outcome is ensured, followed by discussion of how it feels to succeed. Another useful technique is that of team learning, particularly in relation to cooperative reward structures (Slavin and De Vries, 1979).

At a more general level, teachers as significant others must consistently signal learners that they can successfully pursue the academic, social, and personal goals of school experience. It should be noted that self-concept and esteem appear to be necessary—but not sufficient—for success (Purkey, 1970), particularly if the task at hand is completely beyond the grasp of the learner. Thus, planned activities should not be beyond the grasp of the learner if feared or actual failure is to be avoided. In any event, self-concept and esteem as learner may account to a large degree for school success and may be enhanced by teacher action.

From Attribute Grouping to Variable Grouping. Teachers often label groups, and then attach to individuals the general characteristics of the group, even though the individual may vary from the group (Purkey, 1978). In other words, homogeneous grouping based on an attribute such as ability may lead not only to academic disadvantage (Esposito, 1973) but to labeling of students. In this way the school may introduce to the learner confusing self-descriptors and negative self-esteem suggestions. The emphasis on ability is unfortunate considering the wide array of options available for grouping. Self-concept would probably be facilitated by use of a variety of grouping patterns depending upon the task to be accomplished.

From Age-isolation to Multi-age Interactions. Schools isolate one age group from another and youth from adults as well as from other youth. Efforts need to be made to help young people understand the age levels from which they have emerged, as well as those toward which they are headed. In the case of the former, multi-age tutorial and discussion sessions with younger persons appear to be particularly useful in facilitating the sense of self (Lippitt and Lippitt, 1968, 1970). With regard to later life, clear and constructive views may be facilitated when students are encouraged to interact with adults of all ages. One particularly interesting variation concerns interaction with elderly people for the purpose of encouraging positive views of that group as well as life at that age (Tice, 1979). In this case, schools that involve elderly people in daily activities within the schools and which provide opportunities for young people to do community service projects for and with this age group are probably enhancing one dimension of self-perception, the self as potential adult.

From Avoiding Parents to Working With Parents. To enhance self-perceptions, the school must make attempts to influence parent/child interaction since parents continue even through adolescence as significant others. Three strategies seem promising. Through parenting workshops, parents may learn the interaction patterns necessary to develop self-concept and self-esteem (Brookover, 1965; Bilby, 1973). A second strategy is the use of conferences in which, under the guidance of the teacher, the parent, teacher, and student discuss the learner's life in school and define ways in which all
three might work cooperatively toward improvement. A third strategy involves attempts to promote the "teaching home" (Tacco and Bridges, 1971). Academic achievement and thus self-concept as learner appear to be enhanced when parents teach their youngsters (Bloom, 1977; Hess and Shipman, 1965, 1968). For example, cooperative planning sessions or parenting workshops can initiate instances of "homework" which call for parents and learners to work together to solve problems, find information, or discuss issues. These and similar strategies have great potential for overcoming home-school separation.

**HIGHLIGHTS FROM RESEARCH ON SELF-CONCEPT**

**Self-concept** is the way people describe themselves based on the roles they play and the personal attributes they think they possess. **Self-esteem** is the level of satisfaction they attach to those descriptions, based on their values.

Educators need to be aware that:

- Students may not see themselves the way others see them because their values may be different.
- General perceptions of self are quite stable, so continuing, consistent, positive feedback will have more effect than a few random compliments.
- It may be easier for adults to influence self-perceptions of younger children than older ones because children are more apt to consider adults "significant others," while adolescents are more concerned with opinions of their peers.

Schools can contribute to student self-esteem by:

- Creating a climate characterized by democratic procedures, student participation in decision making, personalness, respect, fairness, self-discipline, interaction, and flexibility.
- Minimizing failure and emphasizing success experiences through such practices as team learning.
- Using a variety of grouping patterns rather than always grouping students by ability.

**Providing for interaction with younger and older people by arranging for cross-age tutoring and involving elderly people in school activities.**

**Assisting parents to enhance their children's self-perceptions by conducting workshops for them, holding parent/student/teacher conferences, and encouraging parents to take an active role in their children's learning.**

**Permitting students some control over their own lives by having them participate in formulating school rules and in teacher-student planning.**

**Including curriculum that gives direct attention to personal and social development.**

**Teaching students to evaluate their own progress.**

**Reference**


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Research Information Service
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
225 N. Washington St.
Alexandria, VA 22314

**From Institutionally Imposed Rules to Cooperatively Made Rules.**

One of the key issues in developing a positive sense of self-worth is the degree to which the individual perceives control over his/her life. As an institution, schools typically have a set of rules that govern student life. Further, these regulations are traditional and mostly non-negotiable. This feature of custodial climate undoubtedly contributes to a sense of external rather than internal locus of control (Lefcourt, 1976) as well as the related possibility of learned helplessness (Ames, 1978). In other words, the school's impositions can debilitate self-perception and must be revised to enhance a sense of self-control.

This might be accomplished by the use of town meeting-type activities or committees on a classroom and/or schoolwide basis. Teachers can use teacher-student planning. Such efforts must, however, be open and honest (Combs, 1962), not simply a means to make students think they have a decision-making role in the school. In both learning and behavior, schools ought to provide continually expanding opportunities for self-responsibility (Della-Dora and Blanchard, 1979).

**From Subject Approaches to Life-Centered Approaches.** Educators have long recognized the lack of connection between the completely subject-centered curriculum and the personal needs of youth (Hopkins, 1941; Aiken, 1941; Alberty and Alberty, 1953; Krug, 1957; Hanna and others, 1963). Proponents of the subject-centered organization would certainly support the idea that if one wants students to learn subject matter, the school must teach it. For some reason, however, it is presumed that personal and social development do not need direct attention.

One way, then, of enhancing self-concept and esteem in the school is to provide a curriculum specifically designed for that purpose. Through such units as "Developing My Personal Values," "Getting Along With Others," "Living in Our School," or other interest/need-centered topics, learners have the opportunity to explore directly the personal issues and environmental forces involved in thinking about and making decisions related to self-perceptions. Learning would then move away from textbooks and tests toward problems and projects. The passive learner whose school activities consist of studying someone else's concerns, by their method, is hardly developing a personal sense of self as learner. On the other hand, studying personally important problems and creating or constructing related projects offers a tremendous opportunity to develop a sense of self as an ongoing and capable learner.

**From Adult-Exclusive Evaluation to More Self-Evaluation.** It has been said that "in our society we grade meat, eggs, and kids." In most cases the kids have about as much say in
that procedure as do the others. A clear and accurate self-concept depends upon the learned skill of self-evaluating (Barrett, 1968). Each day, week, and so on, learners ought to be encouraged to evaluate themselves. Through the use of logs, journals, and diaries young people may keep a personal record of how they do in various activities in and out of school and look back at their developing skills and growing insights in all domains of learning and development. Further, each report on school progress ought to have a written statement by the student as to what he/she has learned, what problems have been encountered, how they have been overcome, and what is planned next. These procedures aim directly at self-perceptions of learners and their use is imperative for enhancing the sense of self through the school (Coons and McEachern, 1967; Marston and Smith, 1968).

Beyond the Status Quo

The correlational studies reviewed to this point are interesting, perhaps enlightening, possibly helpful, but also probably suspect. By "suspect" we do not mean to question the competence of individual researchers; the work is suspect because of growing pains in the field. Until very recently two issues loomed large in the field of self-perception research: the imprecision of definitions in the field and the related concern of inappropriate instrumentation.

For almost 20 years, reviews have noted that the imprecision and variation in definitions and constraints have hindered the interpretation and generalizability of self-perception research (Wylie, 1961; Shavelson and others, 1976; McGuire and others, 1979; Beane and Lipka, 1980). Most noteworthy was the lack of distinction between self-description and self-evaluation, a condition which has led to the interchangeable use of the terms self-concept and self-esteem. As noted earlier, while these terms are conceptually related within the framework of self-perceptions, they are distinctly different dimensions. The problem which arises if they are not differentiated is illustrated with an example from Cooper-smith's Self-Esteem Inventory (1967).

When a child says, "I would rather play with children younger than me," the response is interpreted as indicative of negative self-esteem since conventional thinking suggests that such a child feels rejected by age-mates. While this may be the case with the child who is consistently rejected by age-mates, what of the oldest child in a several-sibling, closely-knit family who feels positive playing with younger siblings, or the child who has equal success with children of the same age and with older children, so does not regard age as important? Research that infers self-esteem from self-concept data must be considered questionable.

A second issue is that the field has historically relied on instrumentation which is of a reactive nature (Cooper-smith, 1967; Fitts, 1964; Piers and Harris, 1964). Such instruments require individuals to indicate how they feel about themselves with regard to various attributes or situations imposed by the instrument. However, this methodology leaves two questions unanswered. First, apart from the research setting, do the respondents even think of themselves in terms of the attributes or situations presented? Second, which dimensions do they think in terms of?

To date one of the clearest attempts to resolve these issues can be found in McGuire's (1976, 1978, 1979) work on spontaneous self-concept of children. By asking children a question like "tell me about yourself," the child is allowed to generate his/her own list of self-concept descriptors based on personal salience. In McGuire's (1979) research—which involved use of the spontaneous technique in interviews with 560 children from grades one, three, seven, and eleven—school topics occupied 11 percent of their self-concept content. This placed the school fifth, behind family (17 percent), recreation (14 percent), daily life and demography (13 percent), and friends and social relations (11 percent). There were clear age trends in the data, with mentions of school constituting about 5 percent of first graders' self-concepts compared to 15 percent of those of eleventh graders. In fact, by the eleventh grade school is the largest single category while the family was mentioned less than 5 percent of the time. Analyzing the mentions of school led McGuire to conclude that a student's sense of self is tied to academic performance and the quality of the relationships he/she has with fellow students and teachers.

Our recent research (Lipka, Beane, and Ludewig, 1980) employed the spontaneous self-concept method but added the dimensions of self-esteem and value indicators by asking students whether they wanted to keep or change each item in their self-concept description and why they would want to keep or change items referring to school (at no time were prompting questions like "tell me about yourself in school" or "how about friends?" asked). In interviews with 1,102 kindergarten through twelfth-grade students the subjects generated a total of 8,955 self-concept mentions of which 1,524 or 17 percent were related to school. As was the case with McGuire's work, age trends were noted with .58 school mentions per kindergarten student as compared to 2.31 per twelfth grader.

The analysis of school mentions in terms of self-concept content, self-concept qualifiers, self-esteem, and value indicators has revealed some interesting and useful results. First, it is safe to say that about a fifth of a child's sense of self is derived from the school experience and that "self within the institution" and "self as engaged learner" are the most salient categories within that experience. As students move upward through the institution, they describe themselves within the institution in increasingly harsh terms. Finally, elementary and secondary students have different value bases for their self-esteem. Elementary students value positive instructional activities, with an eye to learning as fun, under the guidance of teachers with positive personality characteristics. Secondary students value a concern for life plans within a structure that encourages positive interactions with peers.

The work reviewed herein demonstrates that school looms large in the self-perceptions of children and youth. It follows that schools have the opportunity and responsibility to enhance the development of individuals beyond the acquisition of facts.

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