

Self-Concept and Self-Esteem as Curriculum Issues

Academic achievement is related to self perception, but improving self-concept is an important goal for its own sake.

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During the past several years increasing attention has been paid to the role of self-concept and self-esteem in schools. A substantial and growing body of empirical evidence suggests that self-perceptions are related to various aspects of schooling, including achievement, social status, participation, completion, perceptions of others, and so on (Beane and others, 1981). However, most of these studies have been conducted in the field of educational psychology and do not address many issues relating to curriculum. It remains for curriculum people to carefully consider the meaning of self-concept/esteem research for curriculum planning and development.

Self-Concept and Academic Achievement

Much of the interest in self-concept and esteem seems to grow out of their reported relationship to academic achievement (Brookover and others, 1964; Purkey, 1970, 1978). While research has turned up consistently positive correlations between these factors, we must be careful to consider just how self-concept and self-esteem are interpreted in most studies.

Self-perceptions are multi-dimensional. They consist of our self-feelings regarding the many roles we play and how competent we feel in them, as well as our views of various personal attributes such as physical features. Thus when we talk about the self-concept and self-esteem, we refer to a collage of



self-views including self as peer, as son or daughter, as learner, or as self in virtually any role or attribute that is part of one's life. Where correlations between self-concept/esteem and academic achievement reach significance, the researcher most often is looking at self-concept of ability in academics generally or in the specific subject area under study; that is, how well the individual thinks he or she can do in that area.

Many studies attempt to correlate global self-perceptions to academic achievement and, as might be expected, the results are typically not significant (Rosenburg, 1979). In other words, how well one does in an area, such as mathematics, appears to have a great deal to do with self-concept of ability in that area, but probably little to do with whether one thinks of self as a generally "good" (or "bad") person. That holds true, no doubt, in affective areas of development as well; how socially confident one feels probably has little to do with how well one thinks one can do in some other area. In sum, when we think about the relationship between self-perceptions and academic achievement, we must be careful to remember that the former are multi-dimensional and spe-

cific to appropriate or pertinent situations.

The point of all this is whether one can improve academic achievement by enhancing self-perceptions. This curriculum issue requires two levels of analysis. First, the needs theories of Maslow (1970), Raths (1972), and others suggest that when young people are under psychological or physiological duress in school, they may well have academic difficulties. Where duress is defined as self-doubt or feelings of personal inadequacy due to various hidden curriculum features (such as stereotyping or punitive sanctions), we may conclude that achievement, including academic achievement, is influenced indirectly by general self-perceptions. Thus at one level academic achievement may be enhanced by helping learners feel personally comfortable and secure in school. However, how well one does in a particular area depends largely on self-concept of ability in that area.

Self-concept of ability may be influenced in one of two ways. First, hidden curriculum features in the specific situation, such as teacher expectations, class climate and the like, may help or hinder. If negative, the removal of such barriers may influence achievement by helping learners feel they have a place and are accepted. Second, self-concept of ability is largely influenced by previous achievement (Bloom, 1980). If we want learners to feel they can succeed, we must help them to actually experience success. Merely telling learners they can succeed is not enough; admonishments of that sort wear thin after a few failures. The chicken-or-egg question involved in the relationship between self-perceptions and academic achievement is a topic of some debate in the self-concept field. In the end, it appears that self-concept of ability influences achievement and achievement in-

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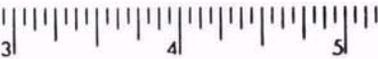
fluences self-concept of ability; understanding this interaction is essential in developing curriculum plans that capitalize on their relationship.

Self-Perceptions as Goals

The curriculum field has long recognized that schools have a responsibility for promoting growth and development in all three domains—cognitive, psychomotor, and affective. While most of the recent talk about self-perceptions in school has focused on academic achievement, the affective responsibility of schools requires that self-perceptions be thought of in a larger sense. In other words, school goals ought to include enhancement of self-perceptions in terms of human development beyond mere academic concerns.

To help learners in this area, the curriculum should lead toward clarification of self-concept, improvement of self-esteem, and clarification of the values upon which self-esteem is based. Related to these goals are several other more specific purposes of the curriculum: to develop internal locus of control, self-direction, independence, and responsibility. Unfortunately schools tend to be custodial institutions that promote dependence of the individual on externally imposed rules and regulations. Procedures for grouping, grading, regulating movement, and so on are essentially control devices by which the school encourages deference to the institution.

To reverse this unsavory situation, educators need to systematically reform the hidden curriculum that is defined by the control features of the school. The development of clear, positive, and adequate self-perceptions compels us to find ways to involve learners in governance of school life, to give learners a say in curriculum plans, to provide opportunities for learners to pursue their



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own personal agendas, and generally to develop the kind of “invitational” environment characterized by Purkey (1978) and others.

“Visible” curriculum plans need to include direct attempts to enhance self-perceptions. The typical subject-centered curriculum approach either ignores the learner as a feeling human being or leaves affective development to chance (although the hidden curriculum continues to function by more than chance alone). More emphasis needs to be placed on use of the problems-and-needs approaches that have a long-standing tradition in the curriculum field (Hopkins, 1941; Krug, 1957; Stratemeyer and others, 1957; Albery and Albery, 1962; Macdonald and others, 1965). These approaches help learners develop understanding and competence in dealing with social problems and the immediate human needs they face in their present lives.

Perhaps as the curriculum field engages in its current reconsideration of general education, it ought to look to its own history regarding theory and research and practice of these approaches. Since they deal directly with the sources and content of self-perceptions, meeting the affective responsibility for enhancing self-perception virtually requires their use.

Implementing Self-Enhancing Curriculum Plans

Planning is of questionable value unless it leads to action; in this case the implementation of self-enhancing curriculum plans. Several key points are worth noting regarding appropriate actions.

First, the content and view of objectives must transcend the present preoccupation with strict behavioral and performance-based formats. When curriculum action is concerned with self-concept and esteem, recognition of

their diverse and individual nature is critical. As objectives are pursued, learners may find many personal meanings in various activities and resources. Limiting the nature of acceptable learning through specified behavior or performance is antithetical to the diversity of self-perceptions that learners possess. A more promising approach to objectives is the "expressive" objectives form that Eisner (1969) has proposed. Expressive objectives suggest activities that leave open the range of personal meanings that may result. Furthermore, objectives should overtly aim at enhancing self-perceptions. In problems-and-needs approaches, the overall purpose is rooted in self-concept and esteem. In situations where the subject approach predominates, objectives should relate whatever content is involved to the real lives of learners.

Second, the kinds of activities used in teaching-learning situations must take on forms different from those generally practiced. Typically, activities aimed at enhancing self-perceptions are conducted in special time blocks set aside from the rest of the school program. The usual form involves small-group discussions or simulations once or twice per week over the course of a semester (or less) for roughly 20 to 45 minutes each. Lockwood (1978) has concluded that these activities are largely ineffective. This should come as no surprise since students probably recognize the situations are artificial. Again we might expect more success if the matter of self-perceptions permeated the whole curriculum through new ways of thinking about curricular approaches.

Perhaps some educators shy away from this because they fear that self-concept is a risky issue for learners or themselves. Granted, teachers are usually not sophisticated psychologists, but self-perception activities do not have to involve public self-exposure of deep feelings. Much progress may be made simply by developing activities and projects that in their normal course encourage learners to think about themselves and to develop feelings of belonging and self-worth. Further, students must always have the right to remain silent regarding the nature of their personal feelings.

Activities that might be used to enhance self-perceptions are not only "safe" but numerous (Beane and Lipka, in press). They include teacher-pupil planning, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, multi-age interaction,

self-evaluation, out-of-school activities, community service projects, and others. The implementation of these activities should be a serious concern of curriculum developers.

How to measure self-concept is the subject of some debate. While numerous commercially available instruments purport to measure self-concept or self-esteem, they involve items which may not reflect the dimensions of self that are important to learners. Also, they are developed and essentially designed for large sample research purposes and are not really appropriate for individuals and small groups in teaching-learning situations. Probably the best and most appropriate means for adults to "measure" learner self-perceptions is through clarifying discussions with students and by observing their behavior. Care must be taken, however, not to simply infer how a learner feels in a situation on the basis of how we might feel. Youngsters who are left out of a group may be happy or sad about their status depending on their values. To be certain, learners must be consulted personally. They might also record their own self-perception changes in private logs, journals, and the like. Not only may these serve as a means of developing self-evaluation skills, but also as a record for students to review as they engage in clarifying discussions with the teacher. Self-perceptions can be identified, but procedures for that purpose must recognize the personal and temporal nature of self-views. The matter of self-perceptions has no place in the traditional grading system used in most schools. In fact that grading system itself is often debilitating to students' self-esteem.

If self-perception is to be a critical curriculum issue, educators will need to devote more attention to the personal lives of students both in and out of school and use curriculum plans as a means to syncretize the many sources of self-images that learners must process: family, peers, school, media, and so on. Being young these days is a very difficult experience; young people need, and deserve, schools that will help them develop self-worth.

In order to be of real value, however, the enhancement of self-concept must be a major agenda item for the school, and a major issue in curriculum planning and development. To be serious about self-concept simply because of its relationship to academic achievement is just not enough. The curriculum field

must pursue this issue in the context of its longstanding commitment to affective education, realizing that the task will require our most sophisticated skills. This is not the "soft" side of the curriculum; it is the crucial side. ■

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