

The Tyranny of Self-Oriented Self-Esteem

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In Ryann's second-grade classroom there was a poster on one wall to celebrate each individual student. For one week during the year each student was the "special child" of the class, and the space on the poster indicated unique and valued things about the child, such as a favorite color, hobbies, or family. Students put up pictures and other items to announce publicly what they thought was good about themselves. (Ryann, daughter of one of the authors, liked being a "special child" for a week, but the parent was not as enthusiastic.)

Activities of this type are common in elementary schools, all seeking to boost the self-esteem of the students. They assume that self-esteem is the key to achievement, and in fact much evidence, both anecdotal and research-based, shows that students achieve more with self-esteem. Teachers also seem to accept self-esteem as critical for intellectual development and necessary for students to excel or even achieve needed competence in academic tasks. According to Barbara Lerner, "Teachers generally seem to accept the modern dogma that self-esteem is the critical variable for intellectual development—the master key to learning. Children . . . cannot achieve excellence, or even competence, until their self-esteem is raised."¹

Linking self-esteem to success and overall well-being is so well accepted that there are many institutes, foundations, task forces, and centers dedicated to promoting self-esteem programs. For example, there is the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, the Center for Self-Esteem, the National Council for Self-Esteem, and the Foundation for Self-Esteem.² In addition, an increasing number of books, monographs, audio-cassettes, and videocassettes stress developing self-esteem, as well as "how to" programs for

teachers at all levels. The fundamental idea is that once educators focus on improving students' self-esteem, not only will behavior and achievement improve, but students also will be more satisfied, better adjusted, and happier. The assumption is that concentrating on enhancing self-esteem will produce these positive outcomes.

But is it possible, with the best of intentions, to overemphasize self-esteem with self-oriented activities?

What are we teaching our children by encouraging and reinforcing a self-focus, and what are its long-term consequences? Since the mid-'60s, psychology has transformed our way of thinking about explanations for people's behaviors, shifting from outside the self (behaviorism) to within the self. The psychologist Martin Seligman terms our current culture one of "maximal selfs," in which the individual should be gratified, fulfilled, self-actualized, and in control.³ Seligman argues that this revolutionary change has caused increased depression, hopelessness, and other personal difficulties because of the dual burden of high expectations and self-control. Since the focus is on ourselves as being responsible, and on an expectation that we will be most content and happy if we concentrate on what is best for us, coping with failure to reach our expectations becomes difficult. If Seligman is correct, many facets of current self-esteem programs may be based on fundamentally flawed and misdirected theory. In this article the theory of self-oriented self-esteem programs will be reviewed, with illustrations of suggested practices based on this theory and the results that can be expected from this approach. An alternative theory will be recommended, with suggested practices.

Self-Oriented Self-Esteem

Many self-esteem programs fundamentally encourage students to think more about themselves, to be more introspective and self-oriented.

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The idea is that the self can be enhanced by focusing on it positively. Barbara Lerner refers to this as “feel-good-now self-esteem.”⁴ Jack Canfield, a well-known advocate of self-esteem enhancement, has suggested several strategies for the classroom that emphasize introspection: 1) assume an attitude of 100 percent responsibility by getting students to think about what they are saying to themselves; 2) focus on the positive—“I spend a lot of my time having students recall, write about, draw, and share their past experiences”; 3) learn to monitor your self-talk by replacing negative thoughts with positive—“I can learn to do anything I want, I am smart, I love and accept myself the way I am”; and 4) identify your strengths and weaknesses.⁵

A popular self-esteem book for educators suggests enhancing self-esteem with one or more of the following: improving self-evaluation skills; developing a sense of personal worth; reflecting on self-esteem; thinking of oneself in positive terms; discovering reasons the individual is unhappy; or examining sources of and influences on self-esteem. Their emphasis is on enhancing students’ positive self-perceptions.⁶ Such ideas are often implemented in classroom activities that teach students introspective thinking: for example, keeping a journal about themselves and indicating “what I like best about myself”;⁷ teaching a unit entitled “I Am Great” that emphasizes their individuality through self-portraits, silhouettes of themselves, “who am I,” and “coat of arms” exercises;⁸ and programs such as Developing Understanding of Self and Others (DUSO), Toward Affective Development, and Dimensions of Personality. Some less-complex programs simply encourage student self-talk with phrases such as “I’m terrific” or “I’m great.” All these activities or programs are designed to promote self-acceptance and self-awareness, to help students become aware of their unique characteristics, and to “put children in touch with themselves”⁹

Although these are well-intentioned programs, their encouragement of self-introspection may distort a normal, healthy perspective about oneself into self-importance, self-gratification, and ultimately selfishness. If the message is that “me” is most important, will selfishness be viewed as normal and expected? Are we making a virtue of self-preoccupation? If so, such “selfism” may have negative consequences. As William Damon points out, “A young mind might too readily interpret a blanket incantation toward self-esteem as a lure toward

self-centeredness.”¹⁰ Damon believes that placing the child at the center of the universe is psychologically dangerous because “. . . it draws the child’s attention away from the social realities to which the child must adapt for proper character development.”¹¹ Children taught to place themselves first care most for their own personal experiences, and in doing so they do not learn how to develop respect for others. According to Lerner, the feel-good-now variety of self-esteem eventually leads to unhappiness, restlessness, and dissatisfaction.¹² Finally, Seligman argues that our obsession with self is responsible for an alarming increase in depression and other mental difficulties.¹³ It is well-documented that such problems result from rumination and obsessive thinking about oneself.¹⁴

There are other negative consequences of overemphasizing self-oriented self-esteem. For most students, and surely young children, the idea of self-esteem is abstract and hard to understand. Generalized statements such as “you’re valued,” or “you’re great,” or “you’re special” have no objective reality. They are simply holistic messages that, untied to something tangible and real, have little meaning.¹⁵ Teachers making such statements will lose credibility because children are adept at discerning valid feedback from such vague generalizations. Students may develop a skepticism toward and distrust of adults, or even worse may learn to tune them out entirely, as the teacher “shades the truth [with] empty rhetoric, transparent flattery, bland distortions of reality.”¹⁶ By trying to bolster self-esteem with messages that are not “entirely” true, teachers inadvertently undermine the trust of the child. For students who already have low self-esteem, such statements reinforce a noncaring attitude from adults. From the perspective of children, caring adults “tell it like it is” and don’t hide the truth—they don’t cover up or make things up that aren’t true.

In contrast, there is ample evidence that our mental health improves as we forget ourselves and focus on activities that are not self-oriented. Often we are most happy when we are so involved in outside pursuits that we don’t think about ourselves. This leads us to an alternative theoretical foundation for self-esteem: the notion that healthy self-esteem results not from self-preoccupation and analysis but just the opposite—from not being self-oriented but being occupied by interests and pursuits external to self. Indeed, many self-esteem enhancement programs appear to be based on this idea.

Accomplishment and External-to-Self-Oriented Self-Esteem

As an alternative to the self-orientation approach, we suggest that a healthy esteem results not from self-preoccupation and analysis but from activities that result in meaningful accomplishment or have an external-to-self orientation. Accomplishment means that self-esteem is enhanced as children work hard to meet externally set, reasonable standards of achievement. Lerner calls this “earned” self-esteem: “Earned self-esteem is based on success in meeting the tests of reality—measuring up to standards—at home and in school. It is necessarily hard-won, and develops slowly, but is stable and long-lasting, and provides a secure foundation for further growth and development. It is not a precondition for learning but a product of it.”¹⁷

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Achieving meaningful success in schoolwork enhances self-esteem after many years of meeting standards and demands. A foundation for self-esteem based on tangible evidence is internalized by students because it makes sense to them in their social environment. Internally meaningful performance and accomplishment can be attributed to ability and effort. Such internal attributions underlie a sense of self-efficacy so that the child becomes confident in being a capable learner. Striving for achievement also directs children’s thinking off themselves and on something external to themselves. This change in thinking orientation determines self-esteem programs that theoretically are diametrically opposed to self-oriented programs.

Recently there have been signs that psychologists may be changing their views about the emphasis on selfism to enhance self-esteem. Seligman maintains that many have lost a sense of commitment to larger entities outside themselves—country, church, community, family, God, or a purpose that transcends themselves. Without these connections people are left to find meaning and fulfillment in themselves.¹⁸ The negative consequences of de-emphasizing other people, groups, community, and the larger society include

vandalism, violence, racial tensions, high divorce rates, and drug abuse. Some psychologists attribute the growth of the “me” generation and selfish behavior to the emphasis on individuality and related themes.¹⁹ Others argue that schools should promote selflessness by emphasizing group welfare over individuals, involvement rather than isolation, and self-denial rather than self-centeredness.²⁰

These authors suggest that student well-being is best enhanced by pursuits that take attention away from self, in which one gets “lost.” Such pursuits could include a hobby; a concern for helping others; having a purpose or cause bigger than oneself; submitting to duty or to a role in community; or academic success following meaningful effort. The hypothesis is that self-esteem is a byproduct of successful external-to-self experiences. The more success a student has in such activities, the stronger his or her own self-esteem will be.

From a social-psychological perspective, participating constructively with others is necessary for positive self-esteem. As stated by Damon:

Growing up in large part means learning to participate constructively in the social world. This in turn means developing real skills, getting along with others, acquiring respect for social rules and legitimate authority, caring about those in need, and assuming social responsibility in a host of ways. All of these efforts necessarily bring children out of themselves. They require children to orient themselves toward other people and other people’s standards.²¹

By focusing outside themselves children learn respect for others and an objective reference for acquiring a stable and meaningful sense of themselves.

It is the outward focus that forms the foundation for self-esteem.

Some examples of self-esteem programs appear to be based on this external-to-self hypothesis. One is a successful program in which students are involved in an art project structured to enhance a feeling of belonging and accomplishment. Self-esteem is improved by involving students in meaningful group activity, not by self-introspection.²² Another program reports that children acquire self-esteem from successful experiences and appropriate feedback in motor skill development.²³ Several other programs also stress successful achievement in affecting self-

esteem.²⁴ In each case the program involves students in some meaningful activity, rather than focusing on themselves.

Conclusion

Clearly, educators need to concentrate their efforts on improving students' self-esteem. The important question is: how should this be done? We have suggested that approaches emphasizing meaningful achievement and external-to-self pursuits will result in more healthy self-esteem than programs that are self-oriented.

Teachers and administrators need to design programs directing student attention away from the self, not toward it. Paradoxically, positive self-esteem develops as students forget about self-esteem, focus on external pursuits, and obtain positive feedback following meaningful involvement and effort.

Notes

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