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ABSTRACT

A study established whether self-esteem had a positive significant effect on reading achievement. Data were collected from 117 fourth-grade students in a middle class suburban setting. Results of a self-esteem test (the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale) were correlated to standardized reading test scores (California Achievement Test--Total Reading) and found to have a positive, but not significant, effect. The low positive correlation challenges the effectiveness of educational intervention programs that seek to raise reading achievement by improving global self-concept. (One table of data is included; 18 references and an appendix of data are attached.) (Author/RS)

THE EFFECT OF SELF-ESTEEM ON READING ACHIEVEMENT

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of the requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree
at Kean College of New Jersey

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to establish whether self-esteem has a positive significant effect on reading achievement. The data was collected from 117 fourth grade students in a middle class suburban setting. Results of a self-esteem test were correlated to standardized reading test scores and found to have a positive, but not significant effect.

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I would like to express my thanks to the students who participated in this study. I would especially like to express my gratitude to my family for all their love and support these last six years.

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For years, wise teachers have sensed the positive relationship between a students concept of himself and his performance in school. (Purkey,1970) Brookover(1967) concluded from his extensive research on self-image and achievement, that the assumption that human ability is the most important factor in achievement is questionable, and that the student's attitude limits the level of achievement in school. Learners who have confidence in their ability to achieve tend to do better in school than those who lack confidence, likewis., learners who experience success in school tend to have more confidence in their ability to succeed than those who have not had success. (Beane, Lipka, 1986)

Self-awareness is a basic human condition which emerges during the early months of life. Gradually the infant begins to recognize the presence of significant others which sets the stage for the beginning of awareness of self as an independent entity. It is evident that the children come to school with many ideas about themselves and their abilities. They have formed pictures of their value as human beings and of their ability to cope successfully with their environment. (Purkey, 1970)

Together with the home and social groups, the school classroom contributes largely to the shaping of a child's self-concept. (Hamachek, 1971) The perception of self that individuals have include their views of themselves as compared to others (self-perception); their views of how others see them (self-other perception); and their views of how they wish they could be (self-ideal). (Quandt, Selznick, 1984)

The best evidence now available suggests that the relationship between self-concept and scholastic performance is a two way street. There is a continuous interaction between the self and academic achievement, and that each directly influences the other. (Purkey, 1970) Because of this strong reciprocal relationship, we have reason to assume that enhancing self-concept is a vital influence in improving academic performance. (Purkey, 1970)

If the goal of the elementary reading instruction is that every student realize his/her potential, then the concept of self-esteem plays a vital role in the development and enhancement of the reading program. This research study will explore the correlation of students' self-esteem level and the level of reading

achievement.

HYPOTHESIS

A student's self-esteem level, as measured on a self-concept test, will have no significant effect on a student's reading achievement scores.

PROCEDURES

The sample consisted of 117 fourth grade students in a middle class suburban setting. The subjects included 54 boys and 63 girls. No classified students were included in the sample.

Level of self-esteem was measured by administering the The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. (Piers-Harris, 1969) This instrument consists of 80 statements of a declarative nature (e.g. "I am a happy person.") to which the participant responds yes or no. Items were orally administered according to instrument procedures. The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale yields a composite self-concept score that ranges from 0 to 80. A higher score indicates a higher level of self-esteem.

Participants were tested within their classrooms.

Participants were instructed not to write their names on the test cover, but to only enter their identification number to assure anonymity. This was done so that participants would feel secure in reporting their true feelings. Students were informed that no one but the researcher would see their scores.

The California Achievement Test Total Reading Score was utilized to measure level of reading achievement. Scores were obtained from the CAT given in April, 1992, while the participants were in the third grade. Test score results are given in percentiles.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviation, and correlation among the variables of interest are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlation of Self-Esteem and Total Reading Scores

Variable	Mean	STD. DEV.	Correlation
CAT READING	65.22	23.30	0.16
PIERS-HARRIS	59.31	12.21	

As shown in the table, level of self-esteem and reading ability as measured by the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale and the California Achievement Test, Total Reading Score, respectively, showed a low positive correlation of 0.16. The mean for the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Test was 59.31 out of a possible 80 raw score points, with a standard deviation of 12.21. The mean national percentile rank for the California Achievement Test, Total Reading Score was 65.22, with a standard deviation of 23.30.

CONCLUSIONS

The overall conclusion obtained from the analysis of data from this study is that although the correlation between self-esteem and reading achievement is positive, there is no significant effect of positive self-esteem on reading achievement, and, therefore, the hypothesis of this study was accepted. The low positive correlation between global self-concept and reading achievement is consistent with previous research in this area.

A high general self-concept is shown not to be a valid indicator of a high level of reading achievement. The converse was also true, in that

a low self concept was not necessarily a valid indicator of low reading achievement. The low positive correlation challenges the effectiveness of educational intervention programs that seek to raise reading achievement by improving global self-concept. This is not to say that improving the self-concept of students should not be a goal of educators for other valid reasons.

Even though the low correlation indicates the relationship of global self-concept to reading achievement is low for predictive purposes, further research that considers more specific elements of self-concept such as academic self-concept on reading achievement would be of value.

SELF-ESTEEM AND ACHIEVEMENT: RELATED RESEARCH

Overall, the research evidence clearly shows the relationship between self-concept and academic achievement. (Purkey, 1970) The reported self-concept of ability is significantly related to achievement among both boys and girls, and this relationship persists even when intelligence is factored out. The self-concept of academic ability is a better predictor of success in school than is overall self-concept. (Brookover, 1967)

Self perception seems to function at three levels: specific situational, categorical, and general. Self-perception appears to involve three dimensions: self-concept, self-esteem, and values. (Beane, Lipka, 1980) Self-concept refers to the description we hold of ourselves based on roles we play and personal attributes we believe we possess. Self-esteem refers to the level of satisfaction we attach to that description, or parts of it. Self-esteem decisions, in turn, are made on the basis of what is important to us, or more specifically, our values.

As self-perception becomes more general, the individual appears to seek stability and consistency. (Purkey, 1970) For example, if a person believes the he/she is socially inept, convincing that person

otherwise would probably be very difficult. General perceptions are quite stable, so continuing, consistent, positive feedback will have more effect than a few random compliments. In order to make a difference in the self-perceptions of children, we need to construct a consistent and continuing series of specific situations in which certain feedback is received, and in which we help children to clarify their conceptions of self, and the values upon which their personal self esteem judgments are made.

Cooley (1902) speculated that the self is actually a "looking glass self," and thus the process of knowing about oneself is actually one in which we come to view ourselves as we believe others see us. That is, we base our own self-concept on feedback from others. Sullivan(1953) concluded that individuals placed more importance on feedback from some "significant others." Individuals receiving feedback from "significant others" use it to modify their self-perceptions.

Coopersmith (1967) suggested that children who experience parental warmth, respectful treatment, and clearly defined limits, tend to have positive self esteem. If the behavior of parents or caregivers causes the child to think ill of himself, to feel inadequate,

unworthy, unloved, then the child's sense of self is crippled. (Purkey, 1970)

Children come to school with all sorts of ideas about themselves and their abilities. They have formed pictures of their value as human beings and of their ability to cope with their environment. The ways significant others evaluate the student directly affects the student's conception of their academic ability. Teachers, in their capacity as significant others, need to view students in positive ways and hold favorable expectations. Davidson and Lang (1960) found that the student's perceptions of the teacher's feelings correlated positively with his self-perception. Further, the more positive the children's perceptions of their teacher's feelings, the better their academic achievement.

The opposite also holds true that if a child perceives his teacher's feelings and expectations as negative, the student's own self-perceptions take on a negative view. A child's self-concept can be damaged by negative labeling, such as "remedial reader." Juliebo and Elliot (1985) in their case study of Matthew found that a bright, enthusiastic learner when entering school can develop negative self-concepts. These

negative self-concepts isolated him and caused him emotional and educational injury. In Matthew's case, he came to school with the ability to point out sight words and construct words using magnetic letters. He enjoyed being read to and participated in dramatic role play and puppetry. In grade one, he made satisfactory progress and showed enthusiasm for class activities. In grade two his parents were contacted by his teacher because "his reading lacked fluency, his voice was monotone, and when asked to read more expressively, he mumbled." Shortly after this, his parents were again contacted, this time to indicate that Matthew was not completing worksheets correctly. The teacher had inferred that Matthew was stupid and from that day on, Matthew adopted this label. He was placed in a remedial reading program, and soon his teacher described him as a behavior problem. Matthew was now being treated as abnormal, and he was behaving abnormally. The school's advice was that he repeat second grade.

His parents decided to change schools, and grade three was a wonderful year for Matthew. His third grade teacher was sympathetic to his story, and she began the slow process of repairing his damaged self-concept.

Matthew did recover academically, but still often lacks confidence.

Although this case study focuses on one child in one situation, it provides a backdrop for implications about many aspects of our schooling in today's world. Too often we focus on cognitive labeling and underplay the role of emotion in learning.

Unintentionally, students may be receiving negative messages from their teachers, then the students themselves learn quickly to view themselves as incapable of learning. Caught in the failure cycle, these at risk students develop their own behaviors to cope with their lack of academic success. These behaviors amount to learned helplessness in the face of repeated failure. (Licht, 1983) Coley and Hoffman (1990) developed a program to improve the comprehension performance of at risk students, and enable these students to view themselves as competent, capable learners. Three elements were selected for the program that would give students some overt structure and control over their learning. Those elements were: question response cues, double entry/response journals, and self evaluation methods.

The Waetjen Self-Concept as a Learner Scale was

administered in September and again in March. After being taught three methods for improving comprehension, and given opportunities for implementation, the six students all viewed themselves more positively. The implication is that educators need to focus on the ability of students to tackle a task, thereby giving them the opportunity to succeed and to improve their self-concept as a learner.

How well a student does in a particular area depends largely on his/her self-concept 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 actually help them experience success. Mboya (1989) designed a study to assess whether the relationship between self-concept of academic ability and academic achievement correlated more strongly than the relationship between global self-concept and academic

achievement among high school students. A non-random sample of tenth grade students was given the California Achievement Test to measure academic achievement; the Self-Concept of Academic Ability Scale to measure self-evaluation of academic ability; and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory to measure global self-esteem.

The self-concept of academic ability measure correlated highly with academic achievement, while the global self-concept measure yielded low positive correlation with academic achievement.

The overall conclusion is that the low correlation between global self-esteem and academic achievement suggests that global self-concept did not account substantially for academic achievement, and that the impact of self-concept on academic achievement may not be generalized, but rather may be a function of a specific area of self-concept. Therefore, educational intervention strategies geared to raise academic achievement would probably be more likely to succeed if they were to focus on enhancement of academic self-concept rather than global self-concept.

Sanacore (1975) also supports the theory of building academic self-concept, specifically reading self-concept. He encourages teachers to become

continuous, subtle observers of their students' behaviors. The following questions can serve as a checklist when observing students' behaviors.

1. Does the student frequently make negative comments about himself?
2. Does the student frequently avoid working with peers?
3. Do the student's peers often ridicule him?
4. Do the student's peers usually avoid working with him?
5. Does the student constantly seek attention?
6. Does the student seldom volunteer?
7. Does the student compulsively seek information concerning his progress?
8. Does the student rarely seek information concerning his progress?
9. Does the student frequently manifest negative non-verbal behavior (nail biting, facial expressions)?
10. Does the student often set goals for himself that are not in his ability to attain?

A substantial number of "Yes" responses should be a matter of concern. Additional information concerning student's self-esteem can be obtained from

conferences with parents, conferences with students' former teachers, and tests of self-concept.

The teacher can then provide the identified students with materials geared to their levels and direct them toward obtainable goals that will give them opportunities for success.

Shavelson and Bolus (1980) concluded from their study of 99 middle class junior high school students that self-concept is a multi-faceted construct, and that general self-concept can be interpreted as distinct from but correlated with academic self-concept. They also found that self-concept can be distinguished from academic achievement. The relationship between grades and subject matter self-concept is stronger than the relationship between grades and academic self-concept. The results of this study pointed to the appearance of causal predominance of self-concept over achievement. This finding was replicated in three subject areas: English, Math, and Science.

Experimental studies have shown that teaching low-achieving students to set proximal goals for themselves enhances their sense of cognitive efficacy, their academic achievement, and their intrinsic interest in the subject matter. (Zimmerman, Bandura, Martinez-

Pons, 1992) Students often do not adopt the high academic aspirations imposed on them by parents and teachers. Clearly, a determinant of students' aspirations is their belief in their academic efficacy. Efforts to foster academic achievement need to do more than simply set demanding standards for students. They need to structure academic experiences in a way that enhances students' sense of academic efficacy. (Zimmerman, et al, 1992)

Rogers, Smith, and Coleman (1978) suggest that the self-concept/academic achievement relationship can best be understood within the context of the person's immediate social environment. The importance of academic achievement for self-concept lies not in the absolute level of achievement, but in the child's perception of how his/her level of achievement compares with the achievement of those in his/her social comparison group, that is, other classmates.

A study was conducted with students in special education classes. Subjects were tested using the Metropolitan Achievement Test, and the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale. Two series of analyses were computed. First, all 159 subjects were pooled together and ranked ordered on the basis of their achievement,

one for Math and one for Reading. Second, the subjects were ranked ordered within each classroom on the basis of their Reading and Math scores. The subjects were then assigned to one of three groups: high, medium, or low in both the total group and within the classroom group.

When subjects were assigned to either a high, medium, or low achievement group within their classroom group on the basis of either Reading or Math scores, test results showed that a strong positive relationship was found between academic achievement and self-concept. In contrast, when comparisons were made irrespective of the within the classroom achievement standing, no relationship was found between Reading achievement and self-concept. Although a significant relationship was found between Math achievement and self-concept, the strength of this relationship was substantially less than when conducted within the classroom grouping.

Butkowsky and Willows (1980) devised a study based on the work of Weiner (1974) who proposed a two dimensional taxonomy of success and failure. Ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck were the four causes shown to be important to children in achievement situations. They can be viewed along the dimensions

of internality-externality and stability-instability. Ability and effort are characteristics that are internal to the person, whereas effort and luck may be variable from moment to moment.

It was thought that an analysis of the perceived causes of success and failure of children who vary in reading ability might advance our understanding of the self-perceptions and achievement behaviors of relatively poor readers. Of particular interest were the relationships between relative reading ability, causal attributions, cognitive expectancies, and motivational variables.

The research compared children who varied in relative reading ability on a number of cognitive and behavioral measures said to relate to self-concept. The data shows that relatively poor readers have low self-concept of ability in reading as demonstrated by their lower initial expectancies of success on the reading task. The research also found that poor readers displayed a greater lowering of expectancy of success after a failure on a reading task than did good or average readers, which shows a greater reaction on the part of poor readers to the failure experience.

Poor readers also displayed markedly lower

persistence levels in the face of difficulty, which is a self-defeating behavior linked to the maintenance of a low self-concept of ability.

Relatively poor readers were shown to take less responsibility for successful outcomes than average or good readers. Even when they did infer an internal cause for success, poor readers were more likely to make effort attributions in contrast to average or good readers who displayed a clear tendency to attribute success to the presence of ability. The overwhelming tendency for poor readers to infer a lack of ability as a cause of failure indicated a self-perceived lack of confidence on their part. The preference displayed by poor readers to infer external causes for success and internal causes for failure has also been shown to minimize pride for success and maximize shame for failure in achievement situations.

These findings have clear implications for interventions by teachers and may serve as valuable tools in the remediation of students with reading difficulties. By modifying what poor readers say to themselves about their performance, we may potentially effect increases in their motivation, persistence, and expectations of success in their reading. Not

only must remedial efforts be directed at providing positive reinforcing success experiences for children with reading problems, they must also be directed at teaching these children to think more adaptively about their failures.

Two aspects of self-esteem were also examined by Kugle and Clements (1981) with regard to several aspects of academic behavior. The two aspects that were explored were level and stability. Level of self-esteem was measured by administering a self-report instrument on two occasions to third, fifth, and seventh graders. Stability values were also determined using these results. Kugle and Clements (1981) concluded that the level and stability of self-esteem were not related to each other, but that both the level and the stability factors were related to students' accuracy in estimating their academic performance. Both level and stability factors were positively related to academic achievement.

There is no question that there is a persistent relationship between the student's self-esteem and academic achievement. However, a great deal of caution is needed before one assumes that either the student's self-esteem determines scholastic performance or that

scholastic performance shapes the student's self-esteem. It may be that the relationship between the two is caused by some factor yet to be determined. (Purkey, 1970) The best evidence now suggests that it is a two way street, that there is a continuous interaction between the self and the academic achievement, and that each directly influences the other. This relationship gives us reason to assume that enhancing a student's self-concept, especially academic self-concept, is a vital influence in improving academic performance.

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APPENDIX

	Self-Esteem Raw Score	Total Reading CAT
Subject 1	68	38
Subject 2	58	23
Subject 3	75	44
Subject 4	50	41
Subject 5	72	68
Subject 6	78	72
Subject 7	45	91
Subject 8	30	64
Subject 9	59	26
Subject 10	58	29
Subject 11	72	91
Subject 12	56	98
Subject 13	30	52
Subject 14	57	99
Subject 15	55	68
Subject 16	71	93
Subject 17	43	71
Subject 18	71	96
Subject 19	72	97
Subject 20	49	50
Subject 21	72	26
Subject 22	37	45
Subject 23	69	98

	Self-Esteem Raw Score	Total Reading CAT
Subject 24	69	69
Subject 25	47	12
Subject 26	66	92
Subject 27	59	88
Subject 28	51	31
Subject 29	63	88
Subject 30	66	41
Subject 31	75	85
Subject 32	62	68
Subject 33	55	55
Subject 34	78	61
Subject 35	60	93
Subject 36	70	80
Subject 37	47	47
Subject 38	74	83
Subject 39	46	62
Subject 40	37	44
Subject 41	57	55
Subject 42	68	20
Subject 43	60	92
Subject 44	66	52

	Self-Esteem Raw Score	Total Reading CAT
Subject 45	63	79
Subject 46	66	54
Subject 47	45	77
Subject 48	59	95
Subject 49	63	12
Subject 50	44	41
Subject 51	69	39
Subject 52	60	83
Subject 53	75	99
Subject 54	72	25
Subject 55	71	85
Subject 56	60	83
Subject 57	67	86
Subject 58	76	92
Subject 59	73	87
Subject 60	59	99
Subject 61	64	87
Subject 62	71	41
Subject 63	49	43
Subject 64	45	99
Subject 65	36	44

	Self-Esteem Raw Score	Total Reading CAT
Subject 66	58	52
Subject 67	61	87
Subject 68	70	66
Subject 69	64	93
Subject 70	43	31
Subject 71	57	85
Subject 72	62	93
Subject 73	45	76
Subject 74	52	36
Subject 75	61	74
Subject 76	45	63
Subject 77	63	81
Subject 78	46	76
Subject 79	73	28
Subject 80	12	49
Subject 81	66	46
Subject 82	54	77
Subject 83	55	41
Subject 84	45	64
Subject 85	24	57
Subject 86	45	68

	Self-Esteem Raw Score	Total Reading CAT
Subject 87	50	66
Subject 88	54	42
Subject 89	54	16
Subject 90	58	91
Subject 91	61	55
Subject 92	66	97
Subject 93	74	41
Subject 94	74	80
Subject 95	32	56
Subject 96	47	56
Subject 97	52	99
Subject 98	56	56
Subject 99	58	67
Subject 100	66	59
Subject 101	62	91
Subject 102	59	67
Subject 103	68	99
Subject 104	73	59
Subject 105	43	68
Subject 106	71	85
Subject 107	62	88

	Self-Esteem Raw Score	Total Reading CAT
Subject 108	68	68
Subject 109	60	47
Subject 110	74	49
Subject 111	52	67
Subject 112	65	33
Subject 113	70	71
Subject 114	61	56
Subject 115	55	70
Subject 116	63	72
Subject 117	70	69