Self-Concept and Self-Esteem in Adolescents

Instead of purchasing programs to enhance self-esteem, principals should focus on helping students develop their strengths in a supportive environment.

By Maureen A. Manning

Deena had repeated 6th grade and was in danger of failing 9th grade. She was tall for her age and often bullied her younger, smaller classmates. The school counselor placed Deena in a self-esteem group and taught lessons from a popular self-esteem curriculum.

When the counselor noticed Deena's behavior becoming progressively worse, she consulted with the school psychologist, who suggested that the school support team review Deena's academic and social needs to determine what skill deficits might be contributing to her behavior, rather than assuming that her self-esteem was the primary problem.

Although Deena did not have a learning disability, she did struggle with reading. The team determined that Deena's self-esteem was adequate but that her reading difficulties contributed to a low academic self-concept. They recommended that the reading specialist provide corrective reading strategies. Two months later, Deena was passing two of her four core classes and her discipline referrals had decreased by 40%.

Self-Concept and Self-Esteem

Teachers, administrators, and parents commonly voice concerns about students' self-esteem. Its significance is often exaggerated to the extent that low self-esteem is viewed as the cause of all evil and high self-esteem as the cause of all good (Manning, Bear, & Minke, 2006). Promoting high self-concept is important because it relates to academic and life success, but before investing significant time, money, and effort on packaged programs, principals should understand why such endeavors have failed and what schools can do to effectively foster students' self-esteem and self-concept.

Although the terms *self-concept* and *self-esteem* are often used interchangeably, they represent different but related constructs. *Self-concept* refers to a student's perceptions of competence or adequacy in academic and nonacademic (e.g., social, behavioral, and athletic) domains and is best represented by a profile of self-perceptions across domains. *Self-esteem* is a student's overall evaluation of him- or herself, including feelings of general happiness and satisfaction (Harter, 1999). Schools are most likely to support students' positive self-esteem by implementing strategies that promote their self-concept.

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Development of Self-Concept

Students frequently display a decline in self-concept during elementary school and the transition to middle level. This decrease represents an adaptive reaction to the overly positive self-perceptions that are characteristic of childhood. Young children tend to overestimate their competence because they lack the cognitive maturity to critically evaluate their abilities and to integrate information from multiple sources. As students develop, they better understand how others view their skills and better distinguish between their efforts and abilities. As a result, their self-perceptions become increasingly accurate (Harter, 1999).

As students transition from middle level to high school, their self-concept gradually grows. Increasing freedom allows adolescents greater opportunities to participate in activities in which they are competent, and increased perspective-taking abilities enable them to garner more support from others by behaving in more socially acceptable ways (Harter, 1999).

Myths and Misunderstandings

Many myths and misunderstandings about self-concept and self-esteem

persist despite a wealth of empirical evidence that "self-esteem per se is not the social panacea that many people once hoped it was" (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003, p. 38).

Self-concept and academic achievement. Self-concept is frequently positively correlated with academic performance, but it appears to be a *consequence* rather than a *cause* of high achievement (Baumeister et al., 2003). This suggests that increasing students' academic skills is a more effective means to boost their self-concept than vice versa.

Self-concept and aggression. Another popular assumption is that aggressive students have low self-concept and use aggression as a means of raising it. Substantial research contradicts this assumption, showing that many aggressive students express adequate, if not inflated, self-concept (Baumeister et al., 2003).

Self-concept, depression, and use of illegal substances. Low self-concept is often considered a defining characteristic of depression, but the evidence for this is weak. Similarly, although some evidence suggests that low self-concept may be a weak risk factor for smoking in girls, the relationship between self-concept and the use of alcohol and illegal drugs has little support (Baumeister et al., 2003).

Baumeister et al. (2003) suggest that self-concept is "not a major predictor or cause of almost anything" (p. 37). Principals are advised not to focus on self-concept in hopes of preventing or remediating children's academic or interpersonal problems but rather to focus on building students' competencies and self-perceptions, which in turn will promote their self-concept and, ultimately, self-esteem.

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Preventing Low Self-Concept

Effective prevention targets the primary antecedents of self-worth, namely perceived success in areas in which students desire success and approval from significant others. Although these two factors are highly related, excesses in one area cannot compensate for deficits in the other because the effects are additive rather than compensatory (Harter, 1999).

Promoting competence in domains of importance. To view themselves positively, students must feel competent in domains that they deem important. Two domains that educators greatly influence are academics and behavior. For students who highly value these two domains—most adolescents—steady messages of academic and behavioral incompetence (e.g., poor grades, retention, public reprimands, and suspension) are likely to result in low self-concept.

Self-perceived physical appearance has the strongest relationship to overall self-esteem, whereas self-perceived athletic competence has the weakest relationship. Given adolescents' tendency to base their perceptions of attractiveness on media figures, schools should help students understand that it is unrealistic and unhealthy to adopt such standards and should reinforce healthier values (Harter, 1999).

Perceptions of competence in domains that are valued by significant others also contribute to overall self-esteem. Parents often value scholastic competence and behavioral conduct, whereas peers often value physical appearance, social competence, and athletic competence. Students may feel incompetent in domains valued by others without necessarily feeling bad about themselves: self-esteem may be protected if students feel competent in areas that they value and discount the importance of the domains

others value (Harter, 1999). Principals should consider the extent to which non-academic areas of competence—technical, artistic/creative, and practical—receive recognition in their schools.

Enhancing support from significant others. Support from parents and peers is particularly important to students' self-concept. When students are young, parental approval is more predictive of self-concept than approval from peers. The influence of peers increases over the course of development, but the influence of parents does not decline. Students' perception of the support they receive is even more important to self-concept than the actual support given.

School staff members can help parents and peers be more effective "supporters" by providing suggestions and opportunities for appropriate positive reinforcement, and they can help students learn to be more aware of the support they receive (Harter, 1999). Although the direct effects of teacher support on student self-concept remain unstudied, close relationships with teachers increase students' academic and social skills (Hamre & Pianta, 2006) and may therefore indirectly enhance self-concept.

Interventions

The interventions for a student who is considered to have low self-concept should be based on an accurate assessment of the student's deficits and targeted to the student's individual needs.

Packaged programs. Avoid packaged programs that promise to boost self-concept. They do not work.

Assumptions. Do not assume that students with deficits or difficulties in academics, behavior, or other domains have low self-esteem, even if they are bullying others, receiving low grades, or showing symptoms of depression.

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Figure 1

Reducing the Availability of Social Comparison Cues

Area of Practice	Method to Reduce Social Comparisons
Grading and evaluation	Make grades private, not public (e.g., do not post grades or "best work"). Allow students to improve grades by redoing work. Avoid grading that allows only a few students to achieve high grades (e.g., use of normal curve).
Grouping	Avoid use of ability groups for instruction. Make group membership flexible; allow for movement from one group to another.
Tasks	Provide individualized tasks at which all students can be successful. Reduce emphasis on competition against other students; emphasize improvement over the student's prior performance.

Assessments. Assess students' self-concept using theoretically sound, empirically validated instruments before investing time, money, and effort trying to correct deficits that may not exist. Use the results of the assessment to determine whether intervention is warranted and, if so, whether it should be directed toward the classroom, the student, the home, or a combination thereof. Trained school mental health professionals should conduct and interpret these assessments and work with the student support team to implement and evaluate interventions.

Placement decisions. Ensure that special education teams do not make placement decisions on the basis of the *presumed* effects of a particular setting on self-concept. Although inclusive settings are often assumed to protect self-concept by reducing the stigmatization associated with placement in a separate special education classroom, two recent meta-analyses fail to support this, at least for students with learning disabilities (Bear, Minke, & Manning, 2002; Elbaum, 2002).

The two reviews also failed to support the opposite assumption, that inclusive settings may be more damaging to students' self-concept because of negative comparisons with higher-achieving peers (Bear et al., 2002; Elbaum, 2002). Students are most likely to experience enhanced self-concept when they are placed in an academic setting where they find the greatest success.

Interventions. Interventions should be individualized but generally should involve building students' skills in areas in which they have deficits. For example, students who express low academic self-concept and experience reading difficulties may benefit from interventions designed to build their literacy skills. Students do not have to experience success in every possible domain to develop adequate or high self-concept (Harter, 1999). They simply must experience success in a few domains that they value.

Students may benefit from learning skills that not only increase their competence in areas of importance but also help them gain more support from others. Interventions that promote academic competence and better behavior will not only further core education objectives and school success but also can engender higher levels of parent support and consequently student self-concept. It is important that schools also address domains that are valued by peers. Students who lack attributes in these domains may benefit from interventions that address these areas (Harter, 1999), such as social skills training or nutrition and exercise programs. In some cases, it may be most effective to help students reevaluate the importance they attach to particular sources of support. For example, students may need to discount the importance of the support they lack from the popular crowd and focus on the support they receive from others.

Sometimes students lack accurate perceptions of the skills or support they have. In such cases, students may benefit from therapeutic techniques that help them see that they are more competent or more supported than they believe. Research supports the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral techniques for modifying children's self-perceptions when used by properly trained individuals (Hattie, 1992). Principals should consult school psychologists and counselors trained in cognitive-behavioral interventions regarding the use of such techniques.

Classroom interventions. Classroom interventions, such as peer tutoring and cooperative learning, may promote self-concept by increasing stu-

dents' academic skills and perceptions of social support (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001). Teachers can use appropriate positive feedback to maintain positive self-concept (Manning et al., 2006). Praise, recognition, and encouragement are strong determinants of positive self-perceptions.

Teachers can prevent or reduce feelings of low self-concept by reducing social comparison cues in the classroom. Helping students change the point of reference they use when judging their abilities may help them change their self-perceptions. Encouraging students to focus on how much they have improved over time instead of focusing on how their peers are doing is a simple way of avoiding negative self-perceptions and low motivation. (See figure 1.)

Teachers also can promote self-concept by fostering supportive relationships among students. Students' perceptions of their classroom as a caring community are positively related to their academic, social, and global self-concepts (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995). The relationship between sense of community and academic self-concept is particularly pronounced in high-poverty schools (Battistich et al.). Schoolwide interventions that develop students' sense of belonging, eliminate bullying, and promote prosocial values and self-discipline can be effective.

Conclusion

Self-concept and self-esteem are among the most widely discussed but misunderstood constructs in education. The good news is that principals do not need to invest already-stretched resources in another program. In fact, most schools already address positive self-concept and self-esteem through their efforts to build students' academic and social competencies and create environments in which students feel supported. The challenge is to reframe the understanding of self-concept so that adults are focusing on the right strategies to foster students' sense of competence and self-worth. PL

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