

Recognising self-esteem in our pupils: how do we define and manage it?

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Abstract

This article explores issues surrounding inconsistencies in the identification and the definition of self-esteem as well as querying the very presence of self-esteem in the United Kingdom-based classroom. It seeks to examine how increased self-esteem leads to increased academic achievement and identifies whether there is a mismatch between teachers' and pupils' judgements of self-esteem. Furthermore, the way in which low self-esteem is managed within the classroom is discussed, as well as how self-esteem could be recognised and measured. Finally, the context of inclusion is considered, emphasising the practice of ability grouping and its impact on self-esteem.

Keywords: self-esteem; competence; worthiness; Special Educational Needs (SEN); inclusion; achievement.

What is self-esteem?

With varying definitions of self-esteem, clarity over meaning must be considered, especially when considering the prevalence of this concept, which Miller et al. (2010: 419) describe as coexisting 'in everyday language and academic psychology'. Together, with questions concerning just how important self-esteem is, the three major schools of thought on self-esteem, as clarified by Mruk (2013), will be evaluated. These comprise self-esteem firstly as competence, secondly as worthiness and thirdly as a twofold approach of competence *and* worthiness.

To contextualise the origins of self-esteem, it was over a century ago that William James initially defined the term, in the first American textbook on psychology in 1890 (Carr 2011). He implied that comparing what we are to how we aspire to be develops a sense of self-worth, which in turn denotes self-esteem. This

came to be described as understanding *self-esteem as competence*, whereby the relationship between success and aspirations signifies self-esteem. Development of this explanation has been achieved through Crocker & Park's (2003) work, recognising that while seeking success and avoiding failure, there could be additional issues of cost to the individual in terms of taking risks, or using aggression to achieve this success. At this point, I believe that defining self-esteem solely in terms of competence does not take into account broader factors such as the individual's overall opinion of themselves and the kind of personal values they hold such as their beliefs and principles.

With this in mind, a further approach to defining self-esteem comes through *self-esteem as worthiness*, which incorporates Rosenberg's (1965) social science perspective that relates particular feelings and experience, not behaviour, as leading to the formation of attitude. This definition is widely utilised today in research concerning self-esteem (Mruk 2013) and enabled the concept of self-esteem to be measured, reflecting the mainstream empirical evidence in this research area. The ways in which self-esteem can be measured are discussed later in this article.

In support of Rosenberg's viewpoint, and when considering the role self-esteem plays in education, Kristjansson (2007: 247), argues 'that the social science conception of self-esteem does serve a useful educational function'. He goes on to state that pupils should be able to set their own goals in their school work; be able to estimate their achievements accurately; and be familiar with satisfaction of their achievements, ie align their own self-esteem. He also suggests that low self-confidence is often wrongly seen as low self-esteem, as there are stronger links between self-confidence and school performance than self-esteem and school performance. This he explains is as a result of self-esteem being 'neither a necessary nor sufficient condition of the former, although the two may shade into one another' (Kristjansson 2007: 260).

The final definition of self-esteem can be seen to incorporate elements of Baumeister's (2003) broader evaluation as it combines competence and worthiness and their relationship to each other, often referred to as a two-factor, or multidimensional, approach (Mruk 2013). Mruk (2013: 19) points out that this approach is absent from research that criticises self-esteem as being conflicted or unrelated, and so a one-dimensional approach is a weaker approach. Covington's (2001) adoption of this definition of self-esteem incorporates the two-factor approach and translates it into an educational setting in terms of 'judgements about one's ability (or inability) to meet the academic challenges set by other students' (Covington 2001: 354).

Self-esteem and educational achievement

When considering how self-esteem and educational achievement are related, Covington (2001) recognises the controversy over self-esteem and its implications for education. He demonstrates that when measured, increased self-esteem relates directly to increased achievement, and vice versa. However, the extent of this relationship has also been found to be insignificant by critics; for example, Hansford & Hattie's review (1982, cited in Covington 2001) noted that only 4% of the variations in academic achievement were related to student self-esteem.

Similarly, Flouri (2006) also cites studies that have shown weak links between self-esteem and academic achievement (Ross & Broh 2000; Midgett et al. 2002). In addition, Flouri's (2006) research states that despite there being evident links between parental interest and children's self-esteem, there is less research on how these variables relate to educational attainment. This lack of evidence is supported by Emler (2001) in his longitudinal studies where he concluded that there are many myths around self-esteem, with no significant confirmations existing that low self-esteem is a predictor for low academic achievement.

In other research focusing on identification, Miller & Parker (2006) matched teacher and child assessments of self-esteem and found that teachers labelling a pupil as having low self-esteem were wrong twice as often as they were right. Only three out of ten pupils who self-identified low self-esteem were identified by teachers. This leads to questions around what happens to those pupils not recognised by the teacher as having low self-esteem; how can intervention be put in place? Conclusions can be drawn here that the behaviour the teachers saw on a day-to-day basis did not reflect how the pupil was actually feeling. Miller

& Parker (2006) recognise this and cite a need for there to be further investigation so that findings can be generalised more easily. However, as recognised by Kristjansson (2007), it is the teacher's responsibility to increase self-esteem whether it be feelings of worthlessness or of bravado that the pupil displays. This presents a difficulty, with on the one hand there being a disparity of measures of self-esteem from teacher to pupil yet at the same time an understanding that low self-esteem needs to be recognised in order to support an increase in self-esteem.

On further evaluation of the teacher's role in self-esteem, Helm (2007) focused on the relationship between teacher dispositions and how they affect self-esteem, with student performance being highlighted as a central aspect of achievement in these areas. She cites qualities in the teacher (such as being highly qualified, demonstrating empathy and possessing critical thinking abilities) as well as adequate funding as core to the development of positive self-esteem and positive academic achievement. Surely, then, there need to be some procedures in place within the school; a recognised set of steps and/or measures that enables the practitioner to recognise and measure self-esteem or then consider how best to meet any identified need, if low self-esteem is negatively impacting on educational attainment.

Management of self-esteem in schools

Contemplating now the reasons for self-esteem promotion in schools, from Lerner's (1996: 9) viewpoint, low self-esteem 'prevents many youngsters from learning and achieving and striving for excellence'. This is supported by Cigman (2004) who sees self-esteem as playing a central role in education; but she also warns against 'psychological fraud' whereby demonstration of high self-esteem masks low self-esteem. When considering the recognition that low self-esteem inhibits achievement, Cigman (2004: 91) recognises that self-esteem is the 'cornerstone of the self-help industry', while Miller & Parker (2006) also acknowledge that the development of self-esteem is already embedded into primary practice. Evidence can be found in materials such as Circle Time (Mosley 2005); Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) lessons; Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL); the presence of nurture bases or rooms in schools (Nurture Group Network 2014); and popular texts by psychologists such as Lawrence (2006). Smith (2006) also makes links between developments in personalised learning and what he describes as almost a regeneration of self-esteem.

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Some of the resources mentioned here suggest that low self-esteem may not require professional intervention and assessment and reflect schools' own methods of seeking to develop their social and emotional provision. Miller & Parker (2006) comment that the literature available or widely used in schools focuses on remedying rather than seeking to identify low self-esteem, reflecting a potential invisibility of this aspect of the issue in hand. Despite this, it is recognised that low self-esteem is consistent with a range of behaviours, from extrovert to introvert (Lawrence 2006). But who identifies low self-esteem, how do they do so and why is it so present in documents such as Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Statements of Special Educational Needs (SEN)? Are pupils part of this self-identification of low-esteem?

Commenting on interventions, Baumeister et al. (2003:37) summarise their review of self-esteem literature with a salient point, that 'it is far from clear that interventions aimed at boosting self-esteem will be sufficient to produce positive outcomes'. They relate any benefits of self-esteem to wider factors such as subjective bias and pupils' relationships with various individuals around them. Smith (2006: 57) does put forward some reservations around responding to self-esteem in the method of setting up interventions designed specifically to enhance self-esteem, stating that it assumes self-esteem is 'readily manageable'.

Recognising and measuring self-esteem

Smith's (2006) point about the manageability of self-esteem calls first of all for identification of low self-esteem, and it is striking to note that there are over 200 self-esteem measures, the majority of which are self-report questionnaires (Guindon 2009). One reason for this plethora of measures is reflected in Hosogi et al.'s (2012) work that relates low self-esteem to being at risk of developing psychological and social problems. This gives credence to putting in place meaningful intervention that is designed to raise low self-esteem, such as Circle Time groups, targeted PSHE lessons or individual mentoring where necessary. But first, it is necessary to identify low self-esteem, choosing which method of measurement is most appropriate.

One widely used measure is Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Rosenberg 1965), a ten-item self-report measure of explicit self-esteem, with higher results reflecting higher self-esteem. Miller & Parker (2006) adopted RSES in their study, explaining that it is a well-respected tool with proven validity and reliability. However, the style of questioning in RSES has been criticised by Hosogi et al. (2012) who state

that it may be too abstract and therefore would not be understood by children. Although originally developed for adolescents and adults, RSES has been used in studies involving children, notably by Miller et al. (2010). They point out its 'ease of administration, effective use of time and high face validity' (p. 422) as well as citing Blaskovich & Tomaka's (1991) work which cited RSES as the standard against which more recent self-esteem measures are evaluated. When considering which definition of self-esteem is consistent with RSES, Tafarodi & Swann (1995) and Tafarodi & Milne (2002) examined the scale and found that the questions were consistent with the multidimensional approach to self-esteem, despite the scale originally being designed from the one-dimensional perspective.

A further measure of self-esteem is Coopersmith's (1967) Self-Esteem Inventory, which comprises 58 evaluation criteria for children and 50 criteria for adults. Responses are as simple as 'like me' or 'unlike me'. This reflects Coopersmith's (1967) definition of self-esteem as approval or disapproval of oneself. The fact that it was designed for children makes this tool more appropriate to use in the primary classroom, but it is less clear which definition of self-esteem aligns with this tool. Similar to Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Inventory is Pope's five-scale test of self-esteem specifically designed for children (cited in Hosogi et al. 2012). It consists of 60 questions on the following five scales: global, academic, body, family and social. Here Pope believes there is a difference between actual self and ideal self, which can be evaluated. This scale can be assumed to be more in line with the multidimensional approach to self-esteem as it measures a global aspect within the five scales.

In my experience as a primary teacher and Special Educational Needs Coordinator, (SENCo), there was never any mention of the need to measure a pupil's self-esteem in this way, but there was, throughout my career, much discussion around self-esteem levels and how they impact upon educational achievement. Considering the number of measures that exist, it would be ideal for schools to consider employing one of them in order to track the development of self-esteem in those pupils deemed to have low self-esteem.

The notion of inclusion

The discussion around identification of self-esteem lends itself to a brief consideration of the notion of inclusion. Definitions of inclusion and inclusive education emerged alongside a raft of the United

Kingdom's New Labour government documents from the late 1990s onwards, leading to confusion over exactly what these terms meant (Ainscow et al. 2006).

The government described inclusion as including more pupils with SEN within mainstream schools, moving away from the preceding isolation or segregated practice. However, associated with this was the government's use of the terms *weakness* and *disability*, reflecting the language of medical deficit (Hodkinson & Vickerman, 2009). From Liasidou's (2012) perspective, inclusive education conveys provision of a quality mainstream education for *all* pupils, so surely, within this ideology, any need for support with low self-esteem would be embedded in practice as the school responds to learner diversity.

Criticisms of the ideology of inclusion are reflected in Low's perspective that it is the practical realities that are the barriers to achieving full inclusion (Low 1997). I agree with Low's (1997) critique and believe that there is a disparity between what is stated in policy and the practical reality of achieving inclusion. Similarly, Croll & Moses (2000) cite inclusion as an expectation that does not coincide with reality, this being particularly the case for pupils with complex and severe needs as well as emotional and behavioural difficulties. However, Mitchell (2014: 299) recognises that pupils with SEN 'will gain academically and socially, and this will improve their self-esteem'.

Focusing in on one aspect of these practicalities, classroom organisation, the practice of identifying pupils academically as higher, middle or lower ability, essentially grouping by ability, raises questions around inclusivity. In Hallam & Ireson's (2003: 354) research they found that, overall, teachers believed that 'mixed ability teaching was seen to benefit not only the social adjustment of the less able but of all children'. However, they also found a contradiction, as there was consensus that *teachers* found it easier to teach ability groups and that this facilitated the more able to achieve more highly. It is interesting to note here that Hallam et al. (2004) comment that this method of ability grouping has become less popular as it became associated with low self-esteem and social alienation.

Conclusion

In consideration of the key themes discussed, the one-dimensional approaches of competence and also worthiness, when taken individually, are not broad in their definition of self-esteem. Therefore, the more global notion of self-esteem as both competence and worthiness would be most relevant to the

classroom environment, particularly when considering Covington's (2001) understanding that this will enable the individual to judge their own abilities in relation to fellow peers.

When considering the presence of the research around self-esteem in education, there is contention over the very recognition of its presence and/or value (Emler 2001; Flouri 2006). However, the studies evaluated here that did examine self-esteem point to the misidentification of pupil self-esteem by teachers. Specifically Miller & Parker (2006) cite a need for there to be further investigation so that findings can be generalised more easily, an aspect currently being researched by the author. This then leads to an issue as to how low self-esteem is supported in schools, when it is recognised as inhibiting achievement (Lerner 1996; Cigman 2004). Despite the breadth of recognised resources, it is also paramount to bear in mind Baumeister (2003) and Smith's (2006) perspectives that low self-esteem cannot be presumed to be managed easily. Managed, it needs to be recognised and the wealth of self-esteem measures provides a means to do this. However, when considering management in the context of inclusion, the idea of interventions reflects a medical perspective as it seeks to remedy a deficit within the pupil: low self-esteem. Similarly, ability grouping is associated with low self-esteem, one aspect of inclusive practice that should be a priority for discussion by school leaders with a view to reducing its negative impact within classroom organisation.

Overall, the prevalence and management of low self-esteem in all schools will vary according to the importance placed on it by the professionals who are teaching and leading their staff and pupils. This article has placed emphasis on the need for recognition of low self-esteem in the classroom with the aim of raising awareness of how it can be managed for the benefit of the individual.

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Recognising self-esteem in our pupils: how do we define and manage it?

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