

Improving Student's Academic Performance from the Inside Out: The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Academic Performance

A RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

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Introduction

A healthy self-esteem is an important factor for educational success (Ferkany, 2008). Based upon there being some connection between a students' self-esteem and their academic performance, school officials should not underestimate the potential impact self-esteem can have on a student's academic success. The purpose of this research snapshot is three-fold: (1) examine the research literature regarding the relationship between self-esteem and academic performance; (2) compare characteristics of students with low self-esteem and students with high self-esteem; and (3) share recommendations school officials can use to build self-esteem. This snapshot seeks evidence examining the proposition that how a student feels about himself or herself matters both in and outside the classroom. Obtaining such evidence could help school officials develop better strategies and interventions that help improve a student's self-esteem, and ultimately, a student's academic performance.

Review of Research Literature

In the research literature, there are various definitions describing self-esteem. One definition of self-esteem is the set of positive or negative evaluations of individuals about their own selves (Erzen, 2017). Another describes self-esteem as an evaluation one makes about oneself, based on one's self-worth (D'Mello, Meena, & Pinto, 2018). Still another definition describes self-esteem as more about perception rather than reality (Zeigler-Hill, 2013). For example, it can refer to a person's belief about whether or not he or she is intelligent and attractive, but it does not necessarily identifies whether the person actually possesses those traits (Baumeister, Campbell, Kreuger, & Vohs, 2003). As related to this research snapshot, self-esteem refers to the overall sense of confidence a person has in their worth and abilities.

Throughout the research literature, some researchers have argued whether there is a direct relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem. For example, some researchers found self-esteem and academic performance to be interrelated factors (D'Mello, Meena, & Pinto, 2018). While other researchers argue, there is a linear relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement (Erzen, 2017). That is, as self-esteem increases, academic achievement also increases, and vice versa. Other research studies find the relationship between self-esteem and academic performance to be inconsistent and varying across population groups (Booth & Gerard, 2011). For example, one study of 838 students in the United States found a significant relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement for seventh grade students, but not ninth grade students included in the same study (Booth & Gerard, 2011).

While there are mixed research findings regarding possible connections between self-esteem and academic performance, there are also mixed research findings regarding the nature and strength of the relationship between the two variables. Some researchers assert there is a weak-to-moderate correlation between self-esteem and academic performance (Baumeister, Campbell, Kreuger, & Vohs, 2003) (Booth & Gerard, 2011). That is, there is not strong evidence indicating that high self-esteem leads to good academic performance. However, other researchers assert there is a linear connection between students' self-esteem and academic performance (Erzen, 2017). In reviewing the research literature from an overall perspective, the consensus seems to be there is some relationship between self-esteem and academic performance; however, that relationship is inconsistent depending upon what factors are involved.

Self-esteem is an important human fundamental concept that plays an important role in a person's growth, development, and quality of life. A person's self-esteem shapes that person's beliefs which in turn shape their actions, and these actions in turn shape their social reality and the social realities of the people around them (Baumeister, Campbell, Kreuger, & Vohs, 2003). It is within those social realities that a person tends to view himself or herself as having low or high self-esteem. The next section discusses the concept of low and high self-esteem and their potential link to academic performance.

Comparison of Students with Low Self-Esteem and High Self-Esteem

High self-esteem refers to a favorable definition of the self, whereas low self-esteem, refers to an unfavorable definition of the self (Baumeister, Campbell, Kreuger, & Vohs, 2003). Children with high self-esteem usually feel good about themselves and are better able to resolve their conflicts with other children (D'Mello, Meena, & Pinto, 2018). Children with high self-esteem generally think good things about themselves, feel liked and accepted, confident, proud of what they can do, believe in themselves, and have the confidence to try new things (Lyness, 2018). Furthermore, children with high self-esteem are more likely to have a growth mindset. That is, they are able to motivate themselves to take on new challenges and cope with, and learn from, their mistakes (Cunningham, 2017).

Conversely, children with low self-esteem lack confidence, are self-critical, hard on themselves, feel inferior to other children, and doubt they can do things well (Lyness, 2018). They may give up easily or not try at all. They find it hard to cope when they make a mistake, lose, or fail, and as a result, they may not do as well as they could (Lyness, 2018). Children with low self-esteem may also lose interest in learning and develop self-defeating ways to deal with challenges such as quitting, avoidance, silliness, and denial (Cunningham, 2017).

Low self-esteem can lessen a student's desire to learn, ability to focus, and willingness to take risks (Shore, 2016). Experiencing failure in school is one reason children may have trouble building and/or maintaining positive self-esteem. When students experience failure in school, they usually receive negative feedback and hear about the things they did not do well. As a result, they feel less sure of themselves and their abilities and may not feel motivated to try things that are hard for them (Cunningham, 2017).

Some researchers have found empirical support that school failure contributes to low self-esteem (Bankston & Zhou, 2002). Because self-esteem relates to one's belief about one's self

and capabilities, it is easy to see how self-esteem can potentially impact school performance. In fact, numerous researchers have demonstrated that the best way to improve student achievement is to increase their self-esteem (Aryana, 2010) (Rubie, Townsend, & Moore, 2004). However, there is also research disputing a connection between academic achievement and one’s self-concept (Bankston & Zhou, 2002). Thus, the exact connection between the two variables is somewhat inconsistent depending upon the research cited.

Nurturing Student Self-Esteem

Although you cannot force students to feel good about themselves, you can nurture their self-esteem through a continuous process of encouragement and support. For example, by showing appreciation for the things students’ do well; by expressing confidence that they will improve in the areas in which they are not doing well; and by adapting instruction so students can experience success (Shore, 2016). The following table outlines six key actions teachers can perform to nurture self-esteem in students.

Table 1- Recommended Actions for Teachers to Foster Self-Esteem

Recommended Actions	Things to Remember
1.) Give specific and genuine positive feedback on effort rather than outcome, when warranted.	Don’t praise excessively or vaguely or provide generic praise like, “Good job.” Give specific examples such as “You made a lot of progress on that project in just an hour” or “The topic sentence of that paragraph is really strong.”
2.) Point out concrete signs of progress, even if they are small.	Don’t give repeated, general pep talks such as “You can do it!”
3.) Showcase accomplishments by displaying students’ work in class or calling parents to tell them how proud you are of the students’ efforts.	Don’t focus solely on suboptimal behaviors or performance.
4.) Engage students in a conversation about their interests, and point out students’ skills privately.	Don’t address the behavior publicly or assume a student is just like other students.
5.) Engage the students’ interests by setting them up for success: give them specific tasks at which they will excel, such as caring for the class pet or running things to the front office.	Don’t ignore or avoid the students or the issues they are facing or assume they are not up to a task.
6.) Review your school policy for seeking student supports. Contact your school counselor, psychologist, social worker, or other mental health or relevant personnel for specific information.	Design the information to help teachers respond to students who may need support. It should not be used as a diagnostic tool or to replace the use of formal assessments employed by mental health professionals.

Source: (American Psychological Association, 2020)

Conclusions

The purpose of this snapshot is to inform school officials of the potential impact self-esteem can have on a student's academic performance. An examination of the research literature provided a basis for (1) examining the overall relationship between self-esteem and academic performance; (2) comparing the characteristics of students with high and low self-esteem; and (3) presenting recommended actions school officials can take to nurture a student's self-esteem. Although a review of the research literature revealed mixed findings regarding the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement, there does appear to be a consensus regarding the potential impact self-esteem can have on a student's development.

Self-esteem is a basic foundational concept that impacts many areas of a person's life including academic success. Self-esteem is how we evaluate our capabilities and ourselves. Although self-esteem may be viewed as perceptual in nature, it is still quite valuable for people overall, and students in particular. The famous Henry Ford quote states, "Whether you think you can or think you can't, 'you are right.'" This points to the idea that our perceptions ultimately shape our behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. If school officials can help students in developing a healthy self-esteem, and increasing the student's belief in themselves and their capabilities, then it is possible students will live up to that belief and display improvements in their academic performance.

A major finding from this snapshot is that how one feels about himself or herself matters both in and outside the classroom. While the information in this snapshot can provide insights regarding possible connections between a student's self-esteem and academic performance, this snapshot alone cannot provide definitive answers on those connections. Additional research investigating the direct relationship between student self-esteem and student academic performance can help provide those answers. Such research could help school officials develop better strategies and interventions that help improve a student's self-esteem, and ultimately, a student's academic performance.

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