



The Educator's Role in the Fragile Spectrum of Student Self-Esteem

by Benjamin Barter-Colcord

About a decade ago, I was in a math class that I've never been able to forget, though not for the right reasons. In this class I received consistent Cs throughout the first month, despite my work being correct and deserving better. My teacher was a rural-living conservative who hunted his own food, while I was a 13-year-old, city-living vegetarian who read the works of Edward Abbey in homeroom; we were cut from different cloth. In my eyes, it seemed as though he simply didn't like me and didn't want me to do well. I'm a very introverted individual and had little trust in my self-advocating ability, so I likely would have sat in silence, continuing to be graded unfairly. This class greatly harmed my self-esteem, the confidence that I had in myself, causing me to frequently question most answers I came to and pieces of work that I did.

Fortunately for me, my parents became involved, and this teacher realized that I wasn't on my own but had a loving support system looking out for me. My grade quickly rose up to its usual A. The teacher would, however, continue to do things like lower the score on my math test from a 91 to an 89 because I used more than one staple.

I begin with a personal anecdote not as an act of self-centered narcissism, but to highlight the significance of the widespread issue that is low self-esteem among students and to show that even something as small as unfair grading can have a lasting adverse effect on a student. Self-esteem refers to how an individual views him- or herself, being made up of self-evaluative attitudes that are susceptible to a variety of external influences (Scott, 1999; Srikanth, Petrie, Greenleaf, & Martin, 2014). When many of us think about self-esteem or reflect on our own

personal experiences with low self-esteem, we might consider this to be an adolescent issue that improves with age as we grow and become less concerned with the drama of youth. This belief is untrue, however. While 89 percent of kindergarteners reportedly have high self-esteem, this figure drops quickly to 20 percent by 5th grade, 5 percent by the end of high school, and 2 percent by the end of college (Scott, 1999, p. 368). There could be several reasons for this, such as the changes that occur as children age, but the reason that is of most concern to educators is the oft-unspoken perception in our society that individuals are only as good as their accomplishments. Children become acutely aware of this as they progress through their education and begin to attempt success not to better themselves but to avoid failure and the stigma attached to it (Scott, 1999). Given this, as well as the sheer amount of time children spend in school as they grow, it is clear that the teacher is in a great position to have a monumental effect on students' self-esteem.

There are many reasons why improving student self-esteem should be among the most important elements of each classroom, such as the fact that positive academic self-beliefs—school-related self-esteem—have shown a strong correlation to better performance on schoolwork and overall course grade, as well as motivation to study, engagement in various core subjects, and a likelihood to set challenging yet achievable academic goals (Srikanth et al., 2014). With these, higher self-esteem has been related to less anxiety and depression, as well as better-developed mechanisms that aid with the processing of factors that could damage self-esteem. This in turn may help students focus in class, stay motivated, and handle the occasional bad grade (Srikanth et al., 2014, p. 358).

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In addition to these positives of high self-esteem, we must also look at the negatives of low self-esteem, such as bullying. In our society, there is a common belief that low self-esteem is a contributing (perhaps, *the* contributing) factor to bullying in schools. Studies have shown that bullies often have low self-esteem, but their self-esteem is likely to be equal to or higher than their victims' self-esteem (Fanti & Henrich, 2014, p. 6). This might indicate that while bullies may be characterized by a general lack of self-esteem, their victims are likely in a worse position due not only to the potentially dangerous physical results of bullying, but also because of the psychological and emotional damage that is being caused (Fanti & Henrich, 2014). By cultivating positive self-esteem in students, educators may witness long-term beneficial effects on academic performance, overall student health, and a decrease in the frequency of bullying in schools.

In order to understand how to foster high self-esteem in students, we must first analyze the actual causes of lowered or less favorable self-esteem. As I discussed above, one of the most prevalent contributors to low self-esteem in students is bullying. Victimization caused by bullying is associated with a number of issues, such as self-blame, loneliness, and anxiety, the presence of

which, unfortunately, places an individual at a higher risk of being bullied again in the future. The low self-esteem of victims is often considered a

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potential reason of how bullies choose who they target, driving the victim's already-low self-esteem to dangerously low levels (Fanti & Henrich, 2014). Further factors adding to the low self-esteem of students include the societal pressure of success, as well as the role of the teacher. In schools, individuals with low self-esteem—and, in particular, students who were the victims of bullying—are often less popular among not only their peers but their teachers as well (Sarkova et al., 2014, p. 369). This multilayered isolation can result in a decrease of self-esteem for these students, as they may feel they have nobody supporting them (Sarkova et al., 2014). An effect almost opposite to a teacher's dislike of their students but potentially as detrimental to student self-esteem occurs when a teacher places an atypical amount of faith in a student's abilities. This takes place when a student who appears to be very bright and academically successful secretly hides his or her low self-esteem, frequently made worse by the teacher's confidence in the student's abilities, which likely surpasses the student's own belief in him- or herself (Johnson, Eva, Johnson, & Walker, 2011). This can happen at any stage of a student's academic career, whenever a teacher believes the student is bright enough to surpass any challenge on his or her own and will likely never need additional help. For students with low-self esteem and poor self-advocacy skills, facing a teacher they like but from whom they feel pressured not to ask for help can be worse than having to struggle under a teacher they dislike. It is for these reasons that the influence of the teacher on student self-esteem is so crucial. Whether intentional or not, a teacher is going to have an impact on the self-esteem of at least some of his or her students, so making sure this impact is positive is of the utmost importance.

Knowing the importance of high self-esteem and the causes of low self-esteem in students, we can now turn our focus to the methods that can be used to raise a student's self-confidence. An increase of self-esteem leads to immediate emotional implications, such as less depression, anxiety, and social dysfunction (Sarkova et al., 2014). One of the largest contributors to improved self-esteem in students is the perception of support the students have, particularly from their teachers (Johnson et al., 2011; Poteat et al., 2015; Scott, 1999; Srikanth et al., 2014). This support can be direct between individuals, such as teacher support of student choices and respect for their opinions, or as part of a general atmosphere that an educator creates within their classroom. With this impression of support come a variety of positive factors, such as “better attendance, higher levels of engagement in classes, and higher levels of satisfaction with their school experience” (Srikanth et al., 2014, p. 359). According to Sarkova et al. (2014), the quality of the perceived relationship with and assistance from the teacher has a significant impact on the influence of this perception on the student; the greater they believe the support to be, the greater the effect it will have on their self-esteem. In addition to student-teacher relationships and the recognized benefits from them, the way a teacher manages the classroom can significantly alter

student self-esteem. Teachers should indicate clear expectations of their students and be consistent with these expectations. They should also personalize their curriculum by including student interests, thereby increasing motivation and engagement and conveying that they respect these aspects of their students (Johnson et al., 2011). In doing this, educators will create a positive environment in their classroom communities and promote high self-esteem in their students.

When attempting to create constructive relationships with older and adolescent students that will facilitate an increase in self-esteem, educators should be flexible, allowing students to have choice in assignments and a voice when making the classroom rules. But they also should hold students accountable to high standards by not permitting misbehavior and by allowing students to provide only their best work. With younger students, they can meet this goal by “responding to transgressions gently and with explanations rather than sharply and with punishment, and showing positive emotions (smiling, being playful)” (Stipek, 2006, p. 46). With students of all ages, teachers can further solidify these bonds by listening to and addressing student concerns, taking the time to learn about their interests, and by providing a fair learning environment that is free of personal prejudices, biases, and favoritism (Stipek, 2006). These minor modifications, although likely to have little direct impact on teaching style, can significantly improve the results teachers receive while teaching by benefiting the self-esteem of their students as well as addressing multiple aspects of classroom management.

An additional, specific method of improving student self-esteem is with the creation or reformation of Gay-Straight Alliances in schools where they either don't exist or function poorly. Students in schools that have these programs report greater well-being and self-esteem than young people in schools without them, and the programs can often create a sense of purpose in students. Organizations like these are fundamentally student led, but the role of the educator or other school personnel, acting as advisor to these groups, is of the utmost significance. The advisor often creates the overall tone of the group, helps advocate for the students, and facilitates student leadership (Poteat et al., 2015). These groups, while potentially raising self-esteem directly by providing an outlet for student voice and giving individuals a sense of purpose, also help by enabling students to develop resilience against many of the social factors that might lower self-esteem, like bullying. Although these groups rely on an understanding of human sexuality and the differences therein, which younger students may not be aware of, they are nevertheless an asset when it comes to improving student self-esteem (Poteat et al., 2015). While an educator's job is often occupied with the actual act of teaching, consideration of student self-esteem is nevertheless necessary and can be integrated into a teacher's daily routine.

Conclusion

Schools are critical in youth development, placing teachers in a crucial position to benefit their students, academically and otherwise. One of these supplementary ways is in the improvement of student self-esteem, a fragile spectrum of self-evaluative attitudes and opinions that can be damaged by any number of environmental influences, such as peers, parents, or the teachers themselves. While self-esteem is so vulnerable, especially during the formative years of youth and adolescence, having high self-esteem can greatly benefit students by providing them with

better mechanisms to deal with stress, set goals for themselves, and achieve these goals (Srikanth et al., 2014). Given this importance, teachers should not only attempt to aid the self-esteem of their students, but strive to do so. This can be done both directly and indirectly, such as by being flexible while holding students to high standards, demonstrating respect for students by noticing and discussing their needs and interests, or through the formation of organizations such as Gay-Straight Alliances (Johnson et al., 2011; Poteat et al., 2015; Stipek, 2006). Regardless of the method chosen, the educator is in a unique position to greatly assist in the development of their students' self-esteem.

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