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## Self-Esteem: The Key To Student Success

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### Introduction

*American Education is at a crossroad. The structure of national and international relationships is changing daily. The events occurring in Eastern Europe, South Africa, Central America and the Middle East are reshaping the world economy which will, in turn, necessitate changes in the education system of the United States. The competition to be an efficient producer of goods and services is fierce and will continue to grow. Unsuccessful students are ill-prepared to compete in the new order. It is imperative, therefore, that every classroom in America become a place in which each student's chance for success is optimized.*

Success in school and in life is sometimes thought to depend on innate intelligence, as measured by a standard IQ score (Canfield, 1976). This, however, is not the case. Student self-esteem is more highly correlated with student success than is IQ (Canfield, 1976). This is the good news since teachers can do little to change IQ. However, there is much teachers can do to raise student self-esteem, significantly increasing the probability that the student will be successful in school.

Self-esteem is defined as "belief in oneself" or "undue pride in oneself" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1986). It is also a student's awareness that he or she is a

person of worth or value simply because he or she is a human being. Self-esteem is recognizing that because one is treated with respect by others, one is worthy of respect. Finally, it is a sense of self-confidence resulting from successful completion of attempted tasks.

### Controversial Reform and Restructure

Already there are those who are laying the groundwork for reform and restructure in the nation's schools. Reform and restructure that will ensure every student the opportunity to succeed during school and after graduation as they grow in self-worth. This revolution is not without controversy. A recent commentary in *US News & World Report* suggests that self-esteem enhancement is just so much fun and games, and valuable time expended in the classroom detracts from the real business of teaching and learning (US News & World Report, April 1990).

This is a common misunderstanding of the relationship between learning and self-esteem. If, in fact, "self-esteem lessons" are a separate curriculum taught in isolation from the

rest of the curriculum, then this objection is well founded. If, on the other hand, the whole classroom experience is used as a vehicle in which student self-esteem is strengthened, then this conclusion is erroneous. During a recent conference held by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, several key speakers pointed out that because of the variety of problems students face at home and in their communities, instruction should help foster self-esteem, not undermine it (Update, September 1990).

In January, 1990, The California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility released the results of its two-year study on ways that healthy self-regard positively impacts social issues and problems. Two of its key findings: *people who esteem themselves are less likely to engage in destructive and self-destructive behaviors and the school environment plays a major role in the development of self-esteem; schools that feature self-esteem as a clearly stated component of their goals, policies and practices are more successful academically as well as developing healthy self-esteem* (Robert, June 1990).

Each California county has now established its own local task force to promote self-esteem. Schools have adopted innovative programs to bolster self-confidence. According to a US Department of Education survey, self-esteem programs are in 86 percent of California's elementary schools and 83 percent of high school districts (The Patriot News, May 1990). Similar task forces have been formed in Virginia and Maryland. Studies are presently underway in these states to discover ways in which self-esteem can be utilized to increase student success.

One such school that has incorporated self-esteem enhancement as a primary objective is Maine's M.S.A.D. #52 River Valley School. Established in 1986, the school consists of three teachers and 60 students. It operates from 7:30 a.m. until 9:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday, and from 7:30 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. on Friday. The computer learning center is open on Saturdays. Students are scheduled around family obligations and job responsibilities so that no more than 12-15 students are at the school at any time.

This type of scheduling accomplishes two purposes. First, it validates students' roles outside of school, thereby enhancing self-esteem. Secondly, it ensures individualized attention for students when they are in school. Students are given individualized, self-paced learning plans that allow for short- and long-term gains. Ninety-five percent of the local high school dropouts are recruited for River Valley. More than 70 percent of River Valley graduates enrolled in postsecondary education or training programs. At two percent, the school district's dropout rate is among the lowest in Maine (Bechtel & Nave, 1990).

## Why Self-Esteem?

A thorough search of the literature relating to self-esteem indicates there are many educational practices that are highly correlated with student self-esteem. However, the results from the search can be grouped into three main categories: (1) teacher attributes and attitudes, (2) classroom methods and techniques and (3) school environment.

## Attitudes and Attributes of Teachers

We come to esteem ourselves as others esteem us (Beane & Lipka, 1984; Patterson, 1973). Therefore it is not surprising that teachers under whose tutelage student self-esteem increases accept students as individuals, as persons of infinite worth and value, as persons with absolute dignity as human beings and therefore worthy of the utmost respect. These teachers do not make judgments based on the student's race, socioeconomic status, family origin, hairstyle or dress. Every student is accepted, respected and cared for. Teachers demonstrate this in two ways: (1) by making the time to reinforce the importance of a student's needs and (2) by actively listening to each student, acknowledging his or her needs, dreams and problems. Teachers must also place high expectations on each student. They must believe that every student can learn and that every student will learn. They must believe in their own ability to find the key to unlock each student's intrinsic motivation. Ultimately, these teachers assume what the literature calls "the extended role of the teacher" (Lockwood, 1989). This means that the teacher is sensitive to any of the developmental needs of the student, becoming, as the student's needs might dictate: advocate, advisor, counselor, friend, mentor or social worker (Weber, 1988).

Students report that their experiences at River Valley are markedly different from previous schools. Many report that though they were not mistreated, they did feel as if they were invisible. They were not among those students who received continuous teacher attention: the academically gifted, the athletically inclined, the physically attractive or those from wealthy and influential families. Since students did not get such attention they felt unimportant, as if they did not exist.

Students at River Valley School were asked to design a positive reward system for a middle school in Maine School Administrative District 52. Consensus among the students was that such a system was unnecessary. All that was needed was for each teacher to greet each student by name in class. The students asserted that just the simple recognition of one's existence in this manner would counteract the feelings of invisibility and worthlessness that are so common to disenfranchised youth.

How can teachers ensure that no student ever feels invisible or unimportant? Not only teachers but every staff member in a school setting must recognize that every single interaction affects student self-esteem—there are no neutral human interactions. Opportunities for this type of education must exist as well as consistent reinforcement of this attitude.

## Classroom Methods and Techniques

### Teaching Methods

Classroom techniques and teaching methods that raise student self-esteem do so because they simultaneously raise student achievement (Schmid, 1988). Skeptics may argue that these methods may enhance achievement when used by any teacher, not just the type previously described. The research, however, suggests that this is not so. Student learning is strongly correlated with a positive personal relationship between student and teacher, just the kind of relationship that results from the attitudes and attributes discussed earlier (Wasserman, n.d.). Therefore, it seems that student success depends upon a caring teacher as well as the use of proven methods.

Several of the techniques that raise self-esteem are described in the mastery learning literature (Graham, 1988; Grant, 1988; Hamby, 1989; Slavin, 1989; Vickery, 1988). These include individualized, self-paced instruction, identification and utilization of individual learning styles and small, discrete learning increments that produce success at every step and limit failure. Students are also totally involved in goal-setting, as well as major life and career goals. With guidance from the teacher, these goals should be realistic (based on the student's aptitudes and past performance). Some goals should be immediately obtainable to provide immediate success and positive feedback; and some should include those lifelong dreams to which the students aspire.

*One such example is Mary. She arrived at River Valley one chilly December evening with one of her friends who was a student. She was immediately greeted by a staff member and made welcome. During the ensuing conversation she related how she had dropped out of school five years earlier at the age of 14. She had traveled extensively across the United States and worked at many odd jobs. When asked what her life's dream was, her face lit up as she talked about her desire to become a police officer. The remainder of the evening was spent helping her outline and plan the necessary actions to achieve her dream. She was hopeful for the first time in many years and enthusiastically began work on her diploma. Assessments revealed that her academic abilities were 12.9+. The GED exam was one option, but her response was unequivocal. She wanted a "real diploma." That same night Mary took comprehensive final exams in consumer math and algebra. Two hours later she had her first two high school credits.*

*Mary simultaneously enrolled in the law enforcement program at one of the local community colleges. She earned the grades of A, C and B, respectively in composition, algebra and an introductory law enforcement course. (She also received high school credit for these courses.) Her life goals have shifted somewhat following a class trip to Washington, DC. After seeing the nation's government in action, she now wants to hold public office. She is expected to enter law school shortly after her college graduation, and it will be no surprise to find her representing the citizens of Maine in some manner.*

### Mistakes Are Acceptable

There must be a special understanding in the classroom about mistakes and failures. That is, mistakes are positive! They are positive because they inform the teacher what needs to be taught or retaught. Gradual success rather than continual success must become the yardstick by which learning is judged (Clifford, 1990). Mistakes are positive because they show the student where additional study is needed. There is no stigma or negative consequence following a mistake because no grades are given until the unit is mastered. Furthermore, mistakes are used to teach an important life skill—that of acceptance. The teacher demonstrates acceptance in helping students to accept themselves for not being perfect.

## Grading

Grades and their use is another classroom component. Competitive grading as used in the typical school strongly affects student self-esteem (Beane, 1984). Students who consistently earn “A’s” and “B’s” demonstrate higher levels of self-esteem while those students with lower grades demonstrate decreased levels of self-esteem. For students involved in mastery learning, all receive “good” grades because no grades are given until the unit is mastered.

At River Valley each student receives a numerical grade (from 0-100) for each unit of the curriculum. This grade is based on a combination of written and oral work. If the grade is 80 percent or higher, the student may move ahead to the next unit if satisfied with the grade. A student **always** has the option to study the unmastered portion of the unit in order to raise the grade beyond the requisite 80%. In fact, very few students accept a grade below 90. Most choose to study the unmastered material until they have earned at least a grade of 90. This seems to indicate a strong correlation between student motivation, initiative and self-esteem. Generally students who accept grades from 80 to 85 with no desire to raise them are those whose goals are unclear and whose self-esteem (through personal observation) is not well developed.

## Tracking

Grouping and tracking systems also affect self-esteem. As with competitive grading, students at the top of a class feel good about themselves as learners while others feel negative. Heterogeneous grouping is correlated with improved self-esteem for all students, especially when coupled with students cooperatively and collaboratively working on class projects and assignments. Effective teacher use of the group process in counseling or career exploration also increases self-esteem among students.

*One example of effective group counseling and exploration occurred at River Valley when one student became the target of jibes and jeers because his accent was different. A class meeting was convened to discuss the situation, and, after much interaction and input regarding personal values surrounding conformity and individuality, the class concluded that being different was OK. Not only did they accept their classmate and stop teasing him, they also actively defended him from the teasing of outsiders. All the students demonstrated an increase in self-esteem and a sense of cohesiveness as a group.*

## School Environment

Another factor which enhances student self-esteem is the school environment (Beane & Lipka, 1984). Self-esteem flourishes in schools that feel small, in which students feel that they belong to an important group, in which individual membership is recognized and acknowledged and in which they feel a sense of ownership (of the school itself and its program). Often this can be achieved in larger schools by creating “schools within schools” (Fine, 1988). A recent study by researchers at the University of Chicago found that schools in which there exists a “sense of community”—common purpose, shared values and an understanding of rights and obligations—are more effective than their counterparts (Ladestro, September 1990). Students in these schools demonstrated fewer discipline problems, were significantly more interested in school and dropped out less often.

Schools with a positive environment allow and even encourage democratic processes, permitting students genuine and significant input into decisions which directly affect them. Power is fully shared. Problems are solved collaboratively through open discussion and negotiation, not by autocratic fiat and administration of punishment. Students in this type of school not only increase their self-esteem, but also learn the value of democratic citizenship by putting it into practice within the school.

*At River Valley this concept is underscored during the admission of new students. Class meetings are called to discuss the applicant and his/her desire to enroll.*

*Discussion is spirited and brutally honest among students with regard to the applicant’s commitment to learning, legal problems, drug use or abuse and the likelihood whether River Valley can positively influence the applicant’s life and future. Some are accepted by acclamation; others are accepted on a two-week trial basis to see how they adjust and whether they can make a commitment to themselves and to the school. Very few are rejected simply because most of the students realize that the arguments they use against an applicant could have been used against them. River Valley students frequently reiterate how good it makes them feel to be an integral part in the administration and management of the school.*

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Two conclusions can be drawn about self-esteem. First, that as human beings there are no neutral interactions with other human beings. Every interaction with another individual affects self-esteem either positively or negatively. Therefore educators must be fully conscious of the power they have to positively or negatively impact upon students' self-esteem. Inadvertent or thoughtless actions may lower a student's perception of himself. And this is an area over which those in education have immediate and total control.

Secondly, it appears that there must be significant restructuring of the educational system in order to allow and encourage the kind of school environment and personal interactions previously described. Anything else will leave far too many students far short of achieving their full potential.

The reality exists that many times practices and policies are not determined by those on the front lines. However, to the extent possible in individual classrooms the following recommendations can have a positive effect on student self-esteem.

- Make every effort to raise student self-esteem each day.
- Listen to students. It is often what they don't say that is important.
- Set standards of respect and dignity in the classroom by acknowledging each student's individuality. Encourage other students to do the same and reinforce demonstrations of this behavior.
- Greet each student by name and use names frequently. Don't let a student feel as if he or she is invisible.
- Individualize, as much as possible, lesson plans on the basis of student goals, aptitudes, interests, abilities, learning styles and speeds.
- Use mistakes and failures as positive learning experiences.
- Use grades as demonstrations of mastery, not to separate or categorize students.
- Assign final grades only upon mastery of material.
- Group students heterogenously. Use cooperative and collaborative learning.
- Create a sense of cohesiveness and belonging for each group of students.
- Encourage democracy in the classroom and in the school. Encourage student participation. In this way they learn the system works.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Nave is a teacher at Maine's River Valley Alternative School and was chosen as one of the four national finalists for 1990 Teacher of the Year. He is committed to helping teachers build student self-esteem and is currently writing a book on this topic.

*The purpose of this series is to target issues which affect at-risk youth. Your comments and suggestions on this and other publications are welcome.*

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