

## Re-Framing How We See Student Self-Concept

DEENA had repeated sixth grade and was in danger of failing ninth grade. She was tall for her age and often bullied her younger, smaller classmates. The school counselor placed her 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 her 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 her 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%.

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. 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, it is important to 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. Schools are most likely to support students' positive self-esteem by implementing strategies that promote their 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.

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. Many myths and misunderstandings about self-concept and self-esteem persist despite a wealth of empirical evidence indicating that self-esteem in itself is not the social panacea that many people once hoped it was.

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1. In your own words, describe the difference between self-concept and self-esteem.
2. As best as you can remember, describe your self-concept at:
  - a. 5 years old
  - b. 12 years old
  - c. Today
3. What were the factors that caused changes in your self-concept?
4. What are the largest factors that influence your self-concept today?
5. How does your self-concept match your parents' view of you?
6. How does your self-concept match your teachers' view of you?
7. How does your self-concept match your friends' view of you?