

“Can the use of self-esteem programs in
schools actually reduce problem behaviors and create
more positive school climates?”

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ABSTRACT

Bullying, drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, school dropouts, teenage pregnancy, crime, violence, aggressiveness and low academic achievement are problems facing schools in almost every country. Today, approximately one-third of those in school fail academically or engage in such behaviors. The consequences are a great loss in human productivity and great expense to every country as these young people enter society unable to support themselves or contribute effectively to their community. However, there has been great disagreement as to whether school self-esteem programs are beneficial or detrimental. Results of our studies indicate that such programs are beneficial, can increase positive behavior, and may serve as a valuable form of prevention for school age children.

Hypothesis

The position of this paper is that low self-esteem is an underlying reason for such problems as bullying, drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, school dropouts, teenage pregnancy, crime, violence, aggressiveness and low academic achievement.

Our hypothesis is that by creating a program that fosters high self-esteem we can reduce these problems while increasing student motivation, responsibility and personal effectiveness.

Introduction

Thousands of studies have examined the correlates and consequences of self-esteem, both touting and discrediting the significance of self-esteem. Baumeister, Smart, and Boden(1996) summarized a large number of studies on self-esteem and reported that the research did not support claims that self-esteem is a root cause of these social problems or a solution to their elimination. In this widely circulated report the authors claimed that high self-esteem is not beneficial and may actually lead to aggression and violence. The report was widely quoted in the media by several other authors as well as by Baumeister. (Leo, 1996; Colvin, 1999; Dent, 2002; Ghate, 2002; Shokraii-Rees, N., 2002; Begley, 2003; Sedikides, 2004; Baumeister, 2005)

However, new research is providing some insights as to the reasons for the negative perspective on self-esteem. In examining Baumeister's research Marsh and Craven (2005) found that his report included only studies that utilized global or unidimensional measures of self-esteem. They found that when more specific measures of self-concept were used, there was a high correlation between low self-esteem and numerous social problems. Furthermore, they found there was a reciprocal relationship between self-concept and achievement in numerous fields, including academic achievement, physical performance, overt behavior, personality functioning and response to failure, disappointment, anxiety, and impaired motivation. They found that an improved self-concept actually improved performance, which in turn enhanced the self-concept.

Other authors claim that Baumeister and other critics of self-esteem research have dismissed it prematurely due to the use of a criterion that is unrealistic. Swann, Chang-Schneider, and McClarty reported that self-concepts and self-esteem predict socially important outcomes at levels that exceed even the unrealistically high expectations of Baumeister.(Swann, 2005)

Other authors indicate that a major flaw in Baumeister's conclusions lies in a distorted, generalized definition of self-esteem which included narcissism, conceit, and egotism. Several

studies have now provided evidence that narcissism is actually a form of low self-esteem rather than high self-esteem. Expressions of positive self-regard by narcissists represent efforts to compensate for an underlying fragile sense of self-worth. (Foddis, 2004; Swann, 2005) Tracy and Robbins (2006) report that narcissists' self-esteem is more accurately characterized as fragile, rather than high, and that their "hubristic" pride makes them hostile and aggressive, whereas non-narcissists self-esteem leads to achievement oriented pride, agreeableness, and stability. Hooley (2006) states that there are several reasons that narcissists do not have high self-esteem and that narcissists purported high self-esteem is the result of imprecise definitions and inaccurate measurement. These researchers conclude that it is thus arbitrary and misleading to equate self-esteem and narcissism by suggesting, as Baumeister did, that "high self-esteem is a heterogeneous category, encompassing people who frankly accept their good qualities along with narcissistic, defensive, and conceited individuals." (Baumeister et al., 1996)

We know there are positive characteristics associated with high self-esteem. Most authorities agree that high self-esteem has been associated with a mood of cheerfulness, feelings of optimism, relatively high energy and general happiness.(Baumeister, 2005) Yes, even Baumeister admits that those with high self-esteem display a greater sense of satisfaction and happiness in life. Those with high self-esteem tend to be self-directed, decisive, and assertive. They are loving and lovable, enabling them to get along well with others, so they often have a wide circle of friends and work well with others. They are willing to admit to their mistakes, capable of handling criticism, and are willing to take calculated risks. They tend to take pride in their accomplishments and exhibit better adjustment, more independence and greater social effectiveness. (Reasoner, 2000)

Discussion

The issue is whether self-esteem programs introduced in schools can actually raise the level of self-esteem of students, reduce the incidence of anti-social behavior, and serve as a form of prevention. The advisability of implementing self-esteem programs in schools has been debated over the past several years. (Reasoner, 1992; Colvin, 1999; Dent, 2002; Shokraii-Rees, 2002; Adler, 2003; Ghate, 2004; Zims, 2004, Reasoner, 2004.

However, research has documented the relationship of self-concept and self-esteem to such problems as aggression, violence, delinquency, academic achievement, drug and alcohol abuse, physical health, mental health, depression, and unemployment, (Keegan, 1987; Branden, 1994; Frank, 1996; Candito, J.,1996; Donnellan, 2005; Marsh, 2005; Robins, 2005; Rosenthal, 2005.)

In a long term study conducted in New Zealand, Trzesniewski reported that high self-esteem promotes goals, expectancies, coping mechanisms, and behaviors that facilitate productive achievement and work experiences and impede mental and physical health problems, substance abuse, school dropouts, and antisocial behavior. (Trzesniewski et al, 2005) Trzesniewski reported that those with low self-esteem as adolescents were 20% more likely to be arrested for crime, and 28% more likely to be arrested for violent behavior by age 26. With respect to mental health, she reported that those with low self-esteem as adolescents were 17% more likely to be depressed as an adult. Her study found that there was also a major impact on productive achievement and work with a 49% decrease in those graduating from college and an 18% increase in unemployment for those with low self-esteem. (Trzesniewski, 2006)

In the workplace the qualities of self-esteem are being valued and becoming increasingly critical in today's changing world. Stress, the increased incidence of alcohol and drug use, deteriorated spousal relationships, depression, and inability to work effectively with others are symptoms of low self-esteem. The result is an increase in absenteeism and employee turnover, costly factors to

employers. Programs and management styles conducive to enhancing self-esteem can result in increased productivity. A 15% increase in morale has been found to result in a 40% increase in productivity. (Koretz, 1998) Some report that interventions designed to raise self-esteem can have beneficial consequences. (Donnellan, 2005)

It has been well established that low self-esteem is a major contributing factor in various eating disorders (Kendler et al 1991; Waller and Hartley 1994; Health Canada, 1998) Low self-esteem has been shown to be associated with increased fatness amongst 11-12 year old schoolgirls (Button 1990) Alex Yellowlees, a consultant psychiatrist at the Murray Royal Hospital in Perth, Scotland reports, "Low self-esteem may act as a general vulnerability or major risk factor for the development of psychological and eating problems." (Yellowlees, 2001)

However, there have been few studies proving that introducing self-esteem programs into the schools will make a difference. Some have reported success in changing student behaviors, though as Swann and has pointed out, this may be due to the fact that effective programs provide more than a mere focus on self-esteem and actually build skills as well as work on attitudes that in turn foster self-esteem. (Swann, 2005) Based on their research, Haney and Durlak (1998) reported, "Self-concept enhancement programs do at least as well as other types of interventions in changing other domains of functioning such as behaviors, self-reported personality functioning, and academic performance."

FIRST STUDY

A program designed to foster self-esteem in school age children was developed in 1967 in cooperation with Dr. Stanley Coopersmith, one of the pioneers in the self-esteem movement. In 1975 a grant was received to conduct a research study using three experimental elementary schools and three control schools,

using the materials developed by Coopersmith and Reasoner. The study was conducted over a three-year period.

Method

The staff members of the three experimental schools were oriented to the Building Self-Esteem program materials to be used in each classroom. Three main instruments were used to measure changes in self-esteem and behavior:

Behavioral Academic Self-Esteem (BASE)

Assessment of Staff Self-Esteem (ASSE)

Questionnaire of Staff Observations

Results

Results indicated that significantly greater gains were made in all three experimental schools over the control schools in academic self-esteem of the students as measured by Coopersmith's BASE at the .001 level. Areas where the greatest gains were made included the following:

- alertness to the learning environment
- willingness to undertake new risks
- self-direction and independence in activities
- shows initiative
- initiates new ideas relative to classroom activities
- social attention and paying attention to task in class
- company is sought by peers

Results from the Questionnaire of Staff Observations indicated the following changes in student behavior were noticeable by the staff:

- improvement in the general climate of the school

- more cooperative action in the classroom
- more cooperative play observed on the playground
- significant decline in the number of discipline problems
- less absenteeism
- more involvement in school activities
- greater student leadership

The experimental schools also reported that the program had a significant impact on the professional staff as well. The following items on the Staff Self-Esteem survey showed significant improvement in the school climate for teachers:

- Teachers felt more secure
- More trust in the administrator was expressed
- Inservice sessions were perceived more positively
- There was greater sharing of ideas and materials
- There were more feelings of cohesiveness among staff
- Greater feelings of competence were expressed
- There was greater enjoyment in teaching expressed.

As a result of this study the Building Self-Esteem program was published in California by Consulting Psychologists Press of Stanford University and used in selected schools in California.

SECOND STUDY

The Building Self-Esteem program was introduced into the eight schools in the Moreland School District, an urban school district in the San Jose area serving an average socio-economic community in 1988. The district included a large number of apartments with single parent families. It was found that 66% of the children were not living with their two original parents. Forty-three percent (43%) of the students were considered minorities, speaking thirty-two (32) different languages. The schools included six elementary schools and two middle schools. In this study the intent was to determine the impact of applying the concepts underlying the Building Self-Esteem program without using the materials themselves. These concepts included fostering the sense of security, the sense of identity, the sense of belonging, a sense of personal competence.

Method

The program was introduced to the principals first, training them in the concepts and urging them to apply these concepts with their teachers and to model the same behaviors they wished teachers to employ with their students. The teachers were then trained in the concepts and asked to foster self-esteem in their students by developing these five concepts in their students

Results

Unfortunately, this was not set up as a controlled experiment. Thus, there were no formal assessment instruments used to evaluate the impact of the program. However, after applying the concepts of the Building Self-Esteem program for five years, it was evident that implementing the Building Self-

Esteem program had made a major impact on the District. The following results and changes were noted:

1. In September, 1990 the district was designated as the highest achieving school district out of 29 in Santa Clara County.
2. All eight schools were identified by the State Department of Education as Distinguished Schools, ranking in the top 3% of the state.
3. Achievement test scores increased 10-15% to the point where all grade levels tested at or above the 94th percentile in all basic skill areas.
4. Vandalism decreased from over \$16,000 per year to less than \$2,000 per year.
5. Average daily attendance increased to 99.7%.
6. Violence decreased to the point where the district schools averaged less than 3 reported cases of violence per year against a state average of more than 20 per school per year.
7. Discipline problems declined by over 30% and suspensions declined each year while they were increasing in surrounding school districts.
8. At the high school level, the dropout rate became less than half that of surrounding high schools at 5.4%, with an average for the County of 16.8%.
9. In the last three years, not one K-8 student was reported to be using drugs, even though drug dealing was prevalent in the area.
10. The percentage of students entering college increased from 65% to 89%.

Thus, although all these changes cannot be attributed solely to the impact of the Building Self-Esteem program, it became apparent that when the program

was implemented on a broad basis significant changes were achieved.

(Reasoner, 1992)

THIRD STUDY

Another study was conducted by Borba (2005) using the same five elements of self-esteem in the Esteem Builders program over a two-year period in three public school sites representing a diversity in student populations including rural, inner city and urban areas with varied populations in needs, ability and cultures.

Results

At the conclusion of the program all three schools sites showed significant growth in academic self-concept at the 0.0001 level. Students who were identified as being “at risk” prior to the study were divided into two groups. The group using the program showed significantly greater improvement in academic self-esteem than did those students not in the program. Results were significant at the 0.0001 level and 68% of the students using the program were no longer considered to be “at risk” at the end of the study.

Of the 16 academic self-esteem behaviors measured using Coopersmith’s Behavioral Academic Self-Esteem (BASE) instrument, eleven items showed significant improvement at all three school sites:

- willing to undertake new tasks
- able to made decisions and establish goals
- shows self-direction and independence in activities
- initiates new ideas relative to classroom activities

- asks questions when not understanding deals with mistakes or failures
easily and comfortably
- takes criticism or corrections in strides without overreacting
- company is sought by peers
- acts as leader in group situations
- refers to self in genuinely positive terms, and
- readily expresses opinions.

There was a significant change in student behavior with the following results:

- a 41% reduction in incidents of verbal aggression
- a 39% reduction in incidents of physical aggression from 307 the first year
to 95 the second year
- a reduction in student detentions of 46%.

All third grade students were tested by a school psychologist to ascertain the number of words a minute they could correctly read orally on a third grade reading passage. When students' reading fluency results were correlated to total BASE scores, the following trend was noted: as the BASE total score increased, the students' reading fluency increased.

A final survey was given to all staff members at all three pilot sites participating in the program. The following changes were noted by the staff at all three sites:

- 100% noticed students speaking more positively towards one another

- 98% noticed the overall school climate as more positive
- 95% noticed students as acting more respectfully and tolerant towards
one another
- 95% noticed students as being more caring & supportive of one another
- 91% noticed students being more proficient in friendship skills
- 89% noticed students were better able to solve problems and conflicts

FOURTH STUDY

In 2000 the decision was made to implement the program on a controlled basis in the country of Slovenia. As in other parts of the world problems of modern society have been increasing also in Slovenia. A major complaint of the schools was the increase in violent behavior and anti-social behavior among the students, along with a significant increase in the amount of disrespect shown both peers and adults.

Method

A study was begun with nine pilot schools using the Building Self-Esteem program.

Teachers were initially provided three days of training in the concepts of the Building Self-Esteem program and the use of the program materials. The materials provided to the teachers included a manual with 150 activities for students designed to foster the five elements of self-esteem: a sense of security, a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose, and a

sense of competence. Teachers were instructed to use a minimum of two activities each week for approximately 20 minutes for each session.

Three forms of assessment were used:

1. Staff Self-Esteem Survey to assess staff self-esteem
2. Student Self-Esteem Inventory to assess student self-esteem
3. Staff Survey at the end of the school year

After using the program materials for a full year teachers who wished to serve as trainers for the rest of their staff were trained to serve as trainers so their entire staff could be oriented to the concepts basic to the program. Some of these trainers also began training teachers from other schools.

Results

Evaluation of the program has not yet been completed but the results are similar to the results achieved in the studies conducted above. At the end of the second year all staff members of nine pilot schools responded to the Staff Survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Responses indicate that the program was well received by staff members of all of the schools using the program. The Staff Survey produced the following results:

91% agreed the Building Self-Esteem program is a positive addition to their school

80.4% agreed the program should be implemented in every school in Slovenia

81% agreed relations among students/peers have improved

86.6% agreed student motivation for learning is now higher than before

89.3% agreed that the program has contributed to a decrease in violence in the
school

98% indicated they plan to continue to use the program

90% reported that relationships among staff and school climate improved as well.

When asked about observed changes in student behavior, these were the responses from the teachers:

65% reported improved interpersonal relationships among peers

60% observed increased willingness for cooperation among students

48% observed increased motivation for learning

42% reported there were few discipline or social problems

In general the teachers indicated that they observed students taking greater personal responsibility, more willingness to ask questions and more tolerance for each other. Preliminary results of the pre and post test of the Staff Self-Esteem Survey have indicated a significant improvement in relationships among the staff and general school climate and the overall effectiveness of the schools.

To date over 500 teachers have been trained since the year 2000. The program is now being used in over 200 institutions with over 10,000 children and adolescents in Slovenia. The responses have been consistent with those of the pilot schools and show a reduction in violence, anti-social behavior, and other undesirable behavior among young people. Staff members report that the relationships among students as well as with the adults in their lives is significantly improved. Final evaluation of the program is now under way.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From these studies it is evident that the implementation of self-esteem programs can have a significant impact on self-esteem and both student and adult attitudes and behavior. Although strict scientific methods were not employed, common outcomes have been observed in each situation where these programs have been implemented in the schools. There has been a noticeable reduction in discipline problems, improved peer relationships among both students and professional staff, more positive attitudes towards learning, more cooperation and sharing and general improvement in the school climate. Further research needs to be conducted on a more scientific basis to rule out extraneous variables and perhaps to identify which elements of these programs have the greatest impact on self-esteem or on the specific variable of academic self-concept. Nevertheless, we believe that such programs as these show great promise in addressing the problems of aggression, violence, anti-social behavior, lack of respect for teachers, dropouts, and general academic motivation that so many schools throughout the world are facing today. The next step is to seek schools in other countries and other cultures interested in using the program to determine whether this model achieves similar results in new situations.

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