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The Relationship between Children's Self-Concepts and the Expectations of Teachers

Since the early 1960's there has been a growing emphasis on the significance of the pupil's subjective and personal self-evaluation as a factor in his degree of success or failure in school. The literature on what has come to be known as the 'self-concept', with few notable exceptions, is American in origin. The self-concept is usually defined as the person's attitudes, feelings, and knowledge about his abilities, skills, appearance, competencies and social acceptability. The relative paucity of theoretical and empirical application of the construct of the self in his country, particularly in the educational context, is surprising on two counts.

Firstly, because it would seem to provide educational researchers with a set of unifying principles which would enable them to integrate the seemingly endless sets of variables which have been shown to affect the performance of pupils. From a 'theoretical' standpoint the self-concept can be seen as a central intervening variable mediating between events (stimuli) and behaviour (e.g. attainment), and hence can serve as a useful explanatory tool if one accepts that behaviour is very largely determined by a person's self-conception. This position is upheld in the seminal work of Combs and Snygg in the field of perceptual psychology (1); for them, and similarly for Carl Rogers (2), the overriding motive for all behaviour is the maintenance and enhancement of the phenomenal self (i.e. the self as perceived).

Secondly, if one accepts that events are interpreted by a person in terms of the relationship of those events to the person's self, then this particular 'perspective' would seem to provide teachers with a consistent framework from which to seek to understand, and perhaps 'influence' the attitudes and behaviour of pupils. Such a perspective is almost unavoidably 'humanistic', since it focuses on the individual and the events of his personal world. (3)

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Self-concept theorists generally recognise that self-perceptions arise experientially. That is, the child formulates self-perceptions as he interacts with his environment. As others accept or reject the child or the child's actions the child develops self-concepts of sociopersonal acceptability. One of the most thorough expositions of self-concept theory is to be found in George Herbert Mead's social psychology. Mead (4) suggests that self-attitudes develop through the process of social interaction. As the child gradually recognises that other people react to him in certain ways, e.g. as someone 'who has no interest in learning', 'who cannot be relied upon to behave himself', 'who has to be kept under constant surveillance', then he gradually begins to accept these appraisals as being reflections of the person he really is. As a consequence he comes to regard himself as having a particular unifying set of characteristics that are perceived by others, and develops the capacity to see himself through the eyes of other people. In other words, he sees himself as an object. Mead describes in detail how a person's self-concept is developed through transactions with the environment rather than being anchored on biological variables.

Our current educational structures are such that by virtue of the emphasis placed on competition in our culture and the value placed on the 'narrow' range of skills subsumed under the concept of 'intelligence', children are inevitably and continually being made aware of the relative esteem in which they are held by various authority figures. Our systems of selection for one 'type' of education as opposed to another, and within any given school, the procedures of grouping, streaming, setting etc. serve as unequivocal indices of personal worth in a domain on which our society places great value. That children are able to accurately perceive their teachers attitudes towards them has been convincingly demonstrated by research. If we accept this assertion and that of the late Stephen Wiseman that ' . . . the single most significant outcome of educational research in the last decade is this power of teacher attitude and teacher expectation', (5) then it becomes very clear that the attitudes of teachers towards individual children are very significant in shaping children's self-concepts. Contemporary research into educational achievement increasingly emphasises the significance of negative perceptions of the self in relation to such 'problems' as underachievement, truancy, 'cultural disadvantage', and general disruption in the classroom. Many pupils are considered to have difficulty in school not because of low ability but because they have *learned to consider themselves to be unable to succeed in school work.* Much research has been conducted in the U.S. on the influence of a teacher's expectations on pupil achievement. Although the presentation of the findings of the classic study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (6) need to be regarded with caution they do at the very least highlight the importance of *the teachers* classroom behaviour as a factor in the pupil's performance in school.

Using children in five grades of an elementary school in America, Rosenthal selected *randomly* one in five of them to be designated as 'Spurters' who would show unusual intellectual gain and gave the names of these spurters to their respective grade teachers in a purposefully casual manner. Several months later the control and 'experimental children' were retested for IQ and it was found that among the young groups the mean gains of spurters were greater than those of the control children. Also at the end of the session the teachers were asked to describe the classroom behaviour of all the children and the investigators found that the 'spurters' were described as being happier, more

curious and more interesting than the other children. The teachers also tended to perceive them as more appealing, more affectionate, less in need of social approval and as having a better chance of success in later life.

Rosenthal and Jacobson say that they do not know *how* this happens but do suggest the possibility that subtle modifications of interpersonal behaviour may have an influence. Expectations of particular behaviours may be communicated by certain visual and auditory reactions which may in turn influence the child's behaviour, in that he fulfills the expectations he perceives and interprets from his teacher's reactions to his behaviour.

Elsewhere, MacKinnon has shown for example that the probability of a child responding creatively to a particular task can be reduced when the child knows that his teacher does not expect him to so respond (7). And Brophy and Good's (8) empirical study suggests that teachers can demand better performances from those children for whom they have higher expectations and that they are more likely to praise such performance when it is elicited. The same teachers are more likely to accept poor performances from students for whom they hold low expectations and are less likely to praise good performances from those children. The evidence of the diverging performances of children in streamed primary schools may also be interpreted in this light. Douglas (9) for example has found that when allocated to different streams, the differences in performance on formal attainment tests between those in the 'bright' streams and those in the slow streams actually diverge, and when 'brighter' children are placed in the lower streams their formal achievement scores can deteriorate. It is worth nothing that the most striking findings reported in Barker-Lunn's (10) extensive study of streaming and its consequences were that whilst comparisons between streamed and non-streamed schools revealed no difference in the average *academic* performance of boys and girls of comparable ability and social class, the *emotional* and *social* development of children of average and below average ability was strongly affected by streaming or non-streaming and by teachers' attitudes.

It is possible that teachers have different expectations of pupils in different streams and that these expectations influence their classroom behaviour. Studies by Hargreaves (11) and Lacy (12) indicate that teachers can and do typify pupils according to the stream they are in, and that they learn to expect particular forms of behaviour from children in different streams. In so doing, the teachen can unintentionally contribute to the *creation* of failure and success in the classroom, as children in different streams or indeed in hierarchically arranged classroom groupings, adjust and construct their behaviour in accordance with the situation as they perceive it.

Insofar as one of the means of maintaining social order in schools is by the differential sanctions which accompany 'success' or 'failure' to learn, it can be argued that many children are preconditioned to avoid failure, and hence a depression of their self esteem, by *avoiding* the commitment to 'learning' given tasks which the teacher expects of them. Less damage is done to their self-esteem if they can convince themselves that learning is not particularly important to them. Thus if we accept that the self-concept is acquired through accumulated social contacts and experiences with other people, and that what a person believes about himself is partly a function of his

interpretation of how *others* see him, then the full significance of the behaviour of teachers toward their pupils becomes apparent. Since pupils have no way of knowing precisely how their teachers view them, they can only infer this from the behaviour of their teachers towards them. Therefore, the pupil's concept of self rests, in part, on what he thinks his teacher thinks of him.

It is clear that for generations many sensitive teachers have sensed the significant and positive relationship between a student's concept of himself and his performance in school. They believed that those pupils who felt good about themselves and their abilities were the ones most likely to succeed. More recently a number of empirical studies have provided ample evidence to support the assertion that academic success or failure appears to be as deeply rooted in concepts of the self as it is in measured ability. Indeed, Brookover (13) after extensive research into self-image concluded that the assumption that human ability is the most important factor in achievement is questionable, and that the student's attitudes towards his own ability serve to *limit* the level of achievement.

Studies into the personality characteristics of under achievers confirm that they generally see themselves as less adequate and less accepted by others. Durr and Schmatz found that underachievers were more withdrawing, and tended to lack self-reliance, a sense of personal worth, and a feeling of belonging. Furthermore, they manifested clear symptoms of behavioural immaturity and feelings of inadequacy. In a wide ranging study of the self-images of over 5,000 New York adolescents, Rosenberg (14) discovered that those with 'low' self-esteem were more likely to

      (a) display a number of psychosomatic symptoms,

      (b) feel it necessary to present a false front to the external world,

      (c) be sensitive to criticism or attack,

      (d) feel isolated and lonely,

      (e) have difficulty in making friends,

      (f) have little faith in people,

      (g) be shy and unwilling to initiate conversations.

What happens to children as their school careers unfold must certainly rank as some of the most important formative experiences in their lives. The experiences a child encounters help to shape his perceptions of himself as being able or unable, adequate or inadequate. *Insofar as the self is learned, what is learned can be taught.* Only recently are educators in sufficient numbers addressing themselves to such basic questions as 'what is the significance of teacher behaviour in the classroom for the self-attitudes of pupils?' For young children particularly, schools are not merely 'vestibules to society', they *are* society. What we do in schools has far reaching

consequences. A major criticism of modern education posed by Silberman (15) in his book *'Crisis in the Classroom'* is the utter 'mindlessness' which he feels pervades all aspects of the system. So many things are done with no clear understanding of the purposes behind them.

In a more optimistic vein, it can be argued that since children's self-concepts are very clearly related to their level of academic attainment and more importantly to affective states such as anxiety, adjustment, happiness and degree of interpersonal attraction, then one very significant contribution which individual teachers can make to their children's school careers and future lives is to facilitate as far as possible *the development of positive self-concepts*. Staines (16). has adequately emphasised that perceptions of the self can be modified and strengthened in the classroom to the ultimate advantage of the child.

The type of classroom 'atmosphere' which prevails is particularly important to the effective learning of those children who have what we conventionally call 'learning difficulties'. Emphasis needs to be placed on providing an environment which facilitates to the full their emotional development by providing support in meeting their everyday problems and experiences. School experience needs to be structured in such a fashion as to enable feelings of success, achievement, adequacy, and self-approval to be frequent outcomes of everyday events, both inside and outside the classroom. Insofar as the importance of *the teacher's own attitudes to each child* have been demonstrated to crucially affect a child's feelings about himself they should be appropriately emphasised. It is suggested that perhaps the most effective situation in which to sensitize teachers to the importance of their personal philosophies of education and the significance of their interactions with individual children is in our institutions of teacher education. Programmes can be provided which emphasise the importance of adopting teaching 'styles' which assist in the development of positive self-concepts in children. It is to be hoped that one of the added bonuses of what ought to be considered a fundamental aim of education—*the nurture of individual self-regard*—will be a narrowing of the gap between potential and performance in children. This gap at present remains far too wide for far too many.

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