

Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement

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Meaning of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem can be defined as one's overall sense of self-competence and self-worth. Self-competence, as defined by Romin W. Tafarodi and William B. Swann, is "a generalized sense of one's own efficacy or power".¹ Simply put, self-competence is having self-confidence or the conviction that one is generally capable of producing desired results. Cognitively, self-competence is characterized by the presence of a generalized expectancy for success (Fibel & Hale, 1978).²

Self-worth or self-respect is essentially accepting oneself unconditionally and having the feeling that one is worthy of living and attaining happiness; you feel like you matter. As stated by Nathaniel Branden, if either self-competence or self-worth is absent, self-esteem is impaired.³

Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement

Numerous studies show a positive correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement (Barker, 1979; Brookover, Thomas and Patterson, 1964; Burns, 1979; Campbell, 1967; Caplin, 1966; Irwin, 1967; Lawrence, 1981; Mortimore, et al., 1988; Piers & Harris, 1964; Purkey, 1970; Williams, 1973).⁴ However, correlation does not imply causation. There is considerable disagreement among experts as to which comes first – high self-esteem or academic achievement. It does appear that the relationship between self-esteem and academic performance is bidirectional i. e. self-esteem and academic achievement influence each other.

Several studies show that self-esteem influences academic performance (Haarer, 1964; Jones and Grieneekz, 1970; Lamy, 1965; Morse, 1963; Smith, 1969; Wattenberg and Clifford, 1964). Research has shown that self-esteem is a better predictor of academic success than measured intelligence (Morse, 1963; Smith, 1969; Wattenberg and Clifford,



1964).⁵ Research aside, common sense dictates that our thoughts influence our feelings and behaviour. Our behaviour, consequently, influences our performance. Life is essentially a self-fulfilling prophecy. Common sense also dictates that a student who has self-doubt and lacks self-acceptance is unlikely to attain academic excellence. How can a student establish challenging goals if he or she lacks a sense of self-competence or self-efficacy? How can a student concentrate fully on studies if he or she lacks self-approval? Indeed, research does show that underachievers are generally less confident and less ambitious, (Goldberg, 1960), less self-accepting (Shaw and Alves, 1963), and lack a sense of personal worth (Durr and Schmatz, 1964).⁶ Research also shows that feeling worthless can be depressing (Battle, 1990; Bhatti, 1992; Hokanson, Rubert, Welker, Hollander, & Hedeem, 1989) and depression generally inhibits performance.⁷ As stated by Mark R. Leary and Deborah L. Downs, "People who feel worthy, able, and competent are more likely to achieve their goals than those who feel worthless, impotent, and incompetent."⁸

Research shows that academic achievement influences the level of self-esteem. Successful academic performance enhances self-esteem (Bills, 1959; Carlton and Moore, 1966; Diller, 1954; Robinson, Kehle, & Jenson, 1986).⁹ Similarly, poor academic performance tends to

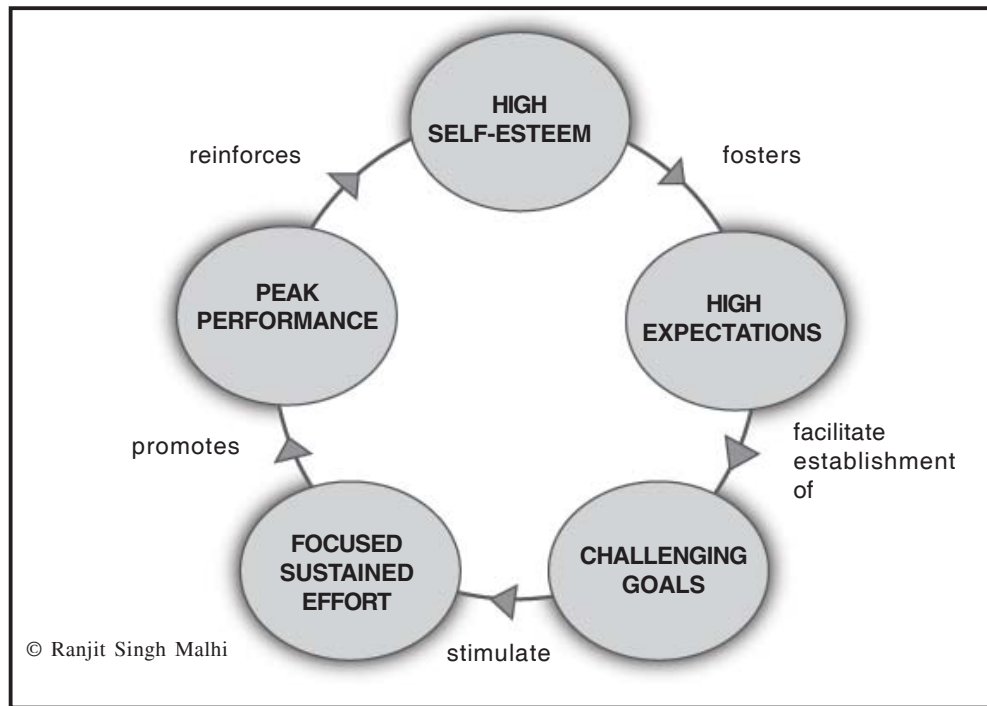


FIGURE 1: *Empowering Cycle of High Self-Esteem*

erode students' level of self-esteem (Centi, 1965; Gibby & Gibby, 1967).¹⁰

Empowering Cycle of High Self-Esteem

The reciprocal relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement is best exemplified in the *Empowering Cycle of High Self-Esteem* and the *Vicious Cycle of Low Self-Esteem* which I have recently developed based on literature research. As shown in Figure 1, high self-esteem fosters high expectations. Research shows that individuals with high self-esteem are more confident than those with low self-esteem that their efforts will lead to success (Baumgardner, 1990; McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981).¹¹ Research also generally shows that feelings of self-competence are conducive to higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Bandura & Cervone, 1983; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Harackiewicz & Larson, 1986; Harter & Jackson, 1992; Vallerand, 1983).¹² In short, students with high self-esteem tend to be more ambitious than those with low self-esteem.

High expectations facilitate the establishment of challenging goals. Individuals with high self-esteem generally undertake more challenging goals than do individuals with low self-esteem (Bandura, 1989; Waschull & Kernis, 1996).¹³

Challenging goals help to stimulate focused and sustained effort. Students who have a strong sense of efficacy or self-competence tend to focus their attention and effort on the demands of tasks and to minimize potential difficulties (Bandura, 1986; Cauley, Linder and McMillan, 1989). Persons with high self-esteem perform better after an initial failure than persons with low self-esteem and are more likely to persevere in the face of obstacles (Brockner, 1979; Perez, 1973; Schalton, 1968; Shrauger & Sorman, 1977).¹⁴ Indeed, self-esteem is a key variable in determining resilience (Rutter, 1985; Werner, 1993).¹⁵

Focused and sustained effort promotes attainment of peak performance (consistent and outstanding scholastic performance) which consequently reinforces feelings of high self-esteem. As stated by Nathaniel Branden, reaching demanding and worthwhile goals nurtures good self-esteem.¹⁶

Vicious Cycle of Low Self-Esteem

As shown in Figure 2, low self-esteem generally results in low expectations. Research shows that, relative to high self-esteem people, low self-esteem people set lower expectations for their performance in a variety of situations (Coopersmith, 1967; Kiesler & Baral, 1970).¹⁷

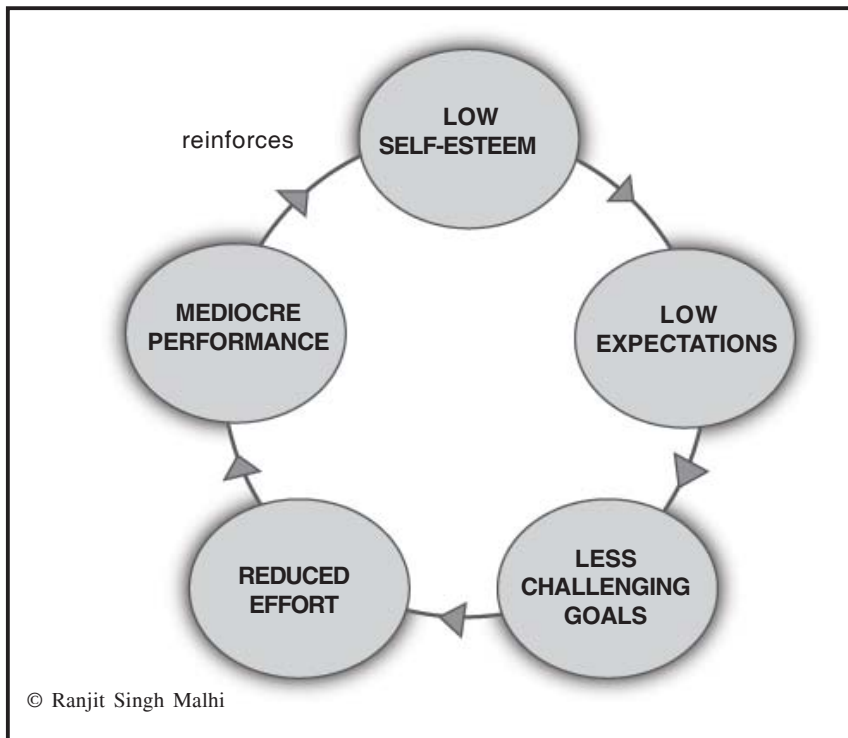


FIGURE 2: *Vicious Cycle of Low Self-Esteem*

People with low self-esteem generally underestimate their capabilities primarily because they lack a realistic knowledge of their own abilities, they lack self-confidence or because they are threatened by failure.¹⁸

Low expectations naturally result in the establishment of less challenging or mediocre goals. Research shows that the lower the children's self-esteem, the lower their preference for challenge.¹⁹

Less challenging goals consequently lead to reduced effort and mediocre performance (Campbell & Fairey, 1985; Diggory, Klein, & Cohen, 1964; Wattenberg and Clifford, 1964).²⁰

Mediocre performance ultimately reinforces one's feeling of low self-esteem. Research shows that students who underachieve academically or who fail to live up to their own academic expectations, suffer significant losses in self-esteem (Centi, 1965; Gibby and Gibby, 1967).²¹

Conclusion

The relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement is bidirectional; causation flows in both directions. Self-esteem and academic achievement directly influence each other. Hence, it is vital for teachers to create a nurturing or positive classroom environment which helps to enhance the self-esteem of students.

End Notes

1. See Romin W. Tafarodi and William B. Swann “Two-Dimensional Self-Esteem and Reactions to Success and Failure”, *Journal of Personality Assessment* 65, no. 2 (June 1995): 324-325.
2. Ibid, 325.
3. Nathaniel Branden, “What Is Self-Esteem?” in *Student Self-Esteem: A Vital Element of School Success*, Vol. 1, ed. Garry R. Walz and Jeanne C. Bleur (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Counseling and Personnel Services, Inc., 1992), 18.
4. See W. W. Purkey, *Self-Concept and School Achievement* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), 15-18; and James Battle, *Promoting Self-Esteem, Achievement and Well Being: An Effective Instructional Curriculum for All Levels* (Edmonton, Alberta: James Battle and Associates, 1994), 13.
5. See James Battle, 13.
6. See Purkey, *Self-Concept and School Achievement*, 20-21.
7. See William J. Holly, “Students’ Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement” in *Student Self-Esteem: A Vital Element of School Success*, Vol. 1, ed. Garry R. Walz and Jeanne C. Bleur, 49.
8. Mark R. Leary and Deborah L. Downs, “Interpersonal Functions of the Self-Esteem Motive: The Self-Esteem System as a Sociometer” in *Efficacy, Agency, and Self-Esteem*, ed. Michael H. Kernis (New York: Plenum Press, 1995), 127.
9. See Purkey, *Self-Concept and School Achievement*, 26.
10. Ibid.
11. Cited in Paul Yelsma and Julie Yelsma, “Self-Esteem and Social Respect Within the High School”, *The Journal of Social Psychology* 138, no. 4 (1998): 432. See also Roy F. Baumeister and Dianne M. Tice, “Self-esteem and responses to success and failure: Subsequent performance and intrinsic motivation”, *Journal of Personality* 53, no. 3 (September 1985): 451.
12. Cited in Gaetan F. Losier and Robert J. Valleyrand, “The Temporal Relationship Between Perceived Competence and Self-Determined Motivation”, *The Journal of Social Psychology* 134, no. 6: 793; and Baumeister and Tice, “Self-esteem and responses to success and failure:451
13. See Heatherton and Ambady, “Self-Esteem, Self-Prediction, and Living Up to Commitments”: 134; and Paul Yelsma and Julie Yelsma, “Self-Esteem and Social Respect Within the High School”: 432.
14. See Leary and Downs, “Interpersonal Functions of the Self-Esteem Motive: 127.
15. See Robert B. Brooks, “Creating a Positive School Climate: Strategies for Fostering Self-Esteem, Motivation, and Resilience” in *Educating Minds and Hearts: Social Emotional Learning and the Passage into Adolescence*, ed. Jonathan Cohen (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 63.
16. Nathaniel Branden, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* (New York: Bantam, 1994), 6.
17. Cited in Joel Brockner and A. J. Blethyn Hulton, “How to Reverse the Vicious Cycle of Low Self-Esteem: The Importance of Attentional Focus”, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 14 (1978): 565.
18. Heatherton and Ambady, “Self-Esteem, Self-Prediction, and Living Up to Commitments”: 134.
19. See Stefanie B. Washull & Michael H. Kernis, “Level and Stability of Self-Esteem as Predictors of Children’s Intrinsic Motivation and Reasons for Anger”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 22, no. 1 (January 1996): 4.
20. See Brockner and Hulton, “How to Reverse the Vicious Cycle of Low Self-Esteem: 565; and Heatherton and Ambady, “Self-Esteem, Self-Prediction, and Living Up to Commitments”: 133.
21. See Purkey, *Self-Concept and School Achievement*, 25-26.