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A MODEL FOR THE GROWTH OF SELF-CONCEPT

ABSTRACT: Teachers must play a more consciously active role in fostering healthy self-esteem in children. To make such action more likely to occur successfully, a model is presented to conceptualize the dynamics of growth in positive self-concept, incorporating the notions of awareness, mastery, and reinforcement in a communication framework of positive feedback.

Much has been written about the importance of a strong self-concept and healthy self-esteem in the child who is to attempt learning. But few authors suggest clear-cut procedures for adults to go about building and strengthening the child's image of himself. This article presents a conceptual model of growth in self-concept and attempts to move closer to specific actions within the capacity and resources of the classroom teacher, parent, or child worker which can be used to foster healthy growth of self.

Good teachers have probably always worked consciously or unconsciously to encourage positive feelings of worth and value in their students. Many teachers, however, question the statement that their role at all includes any focus on affective components of learning. They often clearly say, "My job is to teach the three R's — that's what society pays me for. I'm not trained to be a child psychologist." Nevertheless it can no longer be disputed that teachers must move more into the mental health role (Richardson, 1967; Wilson, 1968) not as psychiatrists, but as relationship workers who can encourage expression of feelings and greater cognitive awareness of self. The teacher's mental health role is preventive rather than curative.

A positive self-concept is also a prerequisite to further academic learning. Dinkmeyer (1970) suggests that "few factors are more relevant to the child's academic success and social development than his feelings of personal adequacy and self-acceptance (p. 10)." The child's social and emotional needs take precedence over academic needs, and the former must be satisfied if the latter are to be met at all. Jones (1968) stresses that emotion and fantasy obstruct learning when they are uncontrolled, but that their expression can have cathartic benefits. But while personal self-awareness of emotion and fantasy and their controlled expression are basic to the attainment or discovery of knowledge, the formation or invention of knowledge "presumes freedom and skill in the sharing and use of controlled emotion and imagery (p. 26)." Awareness and expression of affect are thus fundamental to creative learning.

In suggesting ways to facilitate growth of a positive self-image, Bessell (1970) emphasizes three learning components: awareness, mastery, and social interaction. Awareness refers to knowing (being fully aware of) all aspects of one's senses, thoughts, and feelings. Mastery refers both to self-confidence as a capable human being and

to responsible competence — the use of personal power and capabilities to increase happiness for self and for others. Finally, social interaction is the medium by which self-learning occurs. We see ourselves in terms of the feedback we receive from those around us.

Dinkmeyer (1970) emphasizes awareness of needs and goals in developing a healthy self-concept and sound interpersonal relationships. Like Bessell, Dinkmeyer advocates providing opportunities in a group situation for the child to gain courage and a sense of personal capability and worth via positive feedback from teacher and peers.

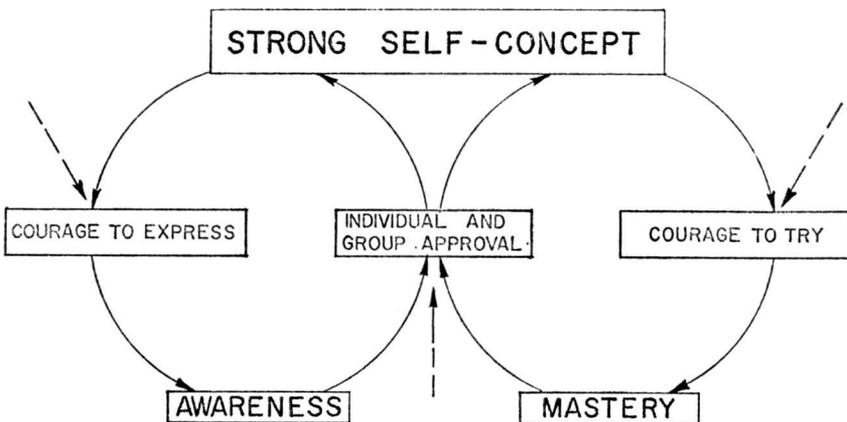
In a slightly different way, Jones (1968) defines sound human development in schools. His goal is creative learning. This, he suggests, is the outcome of instruction which takes into account the child's imagination (feeling and emotion), community (reducing feelings of aloneness), and mastery (reducing feelings of personal helplessness).

A clear similarity is apparent in the three foregoing approaches to developing strong healthy self-concepts in children. All three urge awareness—an open and authentic exposure of feeling. All stress the importance of mastery in a broad sense, at least, of the acquisition of adequate coping skills. And all recognize the social group, the community, as a source of positive feedback for self-definition.

Figure 1 represents an integrative model to conceptualize the dynamics of growth in positive self-concept.

FIGURE I

A Model for Growth of a Strong Self-Concept



---> ADULT AND/OR PEER INTERVENTION

The twin cycles illustrate how both awareness of feeling and mastery in situations can be encouraged by significant others, be they teacher, parent, or peer. As approval or praise is received for either successfully expressed awareness or successful mastery, the reinforcing effect is to generate still further courage to express and courage to try. As the individual continues in the cycles of increasing awareness and mastery, successive positive feedback strengthens the individual's image of himself.

The model has been used successfully to assist those concerned with child growth such as parents and teachers. There are three clear intervention points to which teachers and parents can direct their energy. First, they can provide opportunities and encouragement for the expression of feeling. Second, they can provide opportunities and encouragement for a child to try tasks. Since mastery is used here in the broadest sense, from solving an arithmetic problem to coping with an emotionally-laden social situation, the term *task* is equally wide in connotation. The third and final point of intervention is to provide ample praise for achievement, be it in either awareness or mastery. Teachers and parents have found an advantage in the model in that it defines simply these three intervention points rather than the often confusing and contradictory advice presented in theory manuals. Here their task is simply to encourage and to praise natural growth.

The reinforcement notion apparent in offering generous approval is necessary but not sufficient alone. Children particularly need guided experiences in developing responsible independence and healthy self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967). When a child is able to perceive adults concerned in providing opportunities and resources for his growth and knows warm acceptance by their authentic presence he receives confirmation or validation of self. Moustakas (1966) has identified these as the conditions for authentic growth which emanate from significant others in the child's environment. As this positive feedback system continues, the child receives more and more clearly statements which lead him indirectly to healthy conclusions that "I am lovable; I am capable; I am worthy."

The model and the theoretical rationale presented above have been used with teachers and school counsellors in in-service programs designed to increase human relations skills and understanding of behavioral principles applicable to the classroom and counselling interviews. The blend of humanistic and behavioral concepts found ready acceptance and teachers and counsellors reported satisfaction at seeing their students' and clients' growth in independent decision-making and increased self-confidence. The school personnel themselves felt a personal enhancement from working with this model. They too experienced the positive feedback which strengthened their own self-esteem as human beings and professionals. When adult and child build a relationship in this way, neither side usurps the power of the other, but rather serves to reinforce responsible, independent functioning and mutual respect.

Elementary-school students in group counselling aimed at elimination of stealing behavior have responded well to the application of this model. Five students in grade four met weekly for ten weeks. In the early half-hour sessions they shared their feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and guilt. Helplessness to resist the impulse to steal; anxiety because they might get caught; and guilt because of lost self-esteem even if they had successfully escaped detection.

The counsellor outlined the structure of each session to the boys, emphasizing the open sharing of feelings, particularly the positive ones that later accompanied success in self-control, and the reporting of incidents in which a member might have experienced the urge to steal, but had successfully resisted. Both expression of feeling (awareness) and reports of successful coping (mastery) were verbally reinforced by the counsellor. His modelling was soon imitated, and group members became active in praising the increasing ability of their peers to achieve self-control and a new dignity. While self-reports of marked decrease in stealing behavior cannot be accepted as evidence, the boys had quickly begun to revise their image of themselves. The positive feedback they received from their peers was genuine and not lightly given. For many of the boys, it was a new experience to hear something good said about them. This modified behavioral emphasis combined with personal awareness appears to have a strong influence in developing healthy self-esteem which in turn helps individuals to grow in the feeling that they are capable and able to control and influence their own behavior through personal choice.

The application of this integrative model obviates any need for coercion or pressure on the subject, either to express feeling and thus become more aware of himself, or to perform any act which could lead to mastery and increased coping skill. The removal of this pressure encourages a warm, accepting atmosphere which provides a fertile field for natural and individualized growth. As positive feedback encourages the growth of a strong self-concept, individual freedom and responsible independence can more readily be achieved. And those goals are surely worth striving for.

RESUME: Il faut que les professeurs jouent un rôle consciencieux et plus actif en encourageant une saine estime de soi chez les enfants. Pour qu'une telle action puisse se produire avec succès, un modèle est offert pour mieux concevoir les dynamiques du développement du concept de soi-même précis, y comprenant les idées de la conscience, de la maîtrise, en renforcement dans un cadre de communication de "rétroaction" positive.

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