

Outline the main ideas about self-esteem/self-concept eg where it comes from, what it means, how it affects us, how it develops and summarise the relevance to an education context

“The Self” has been described by Buckler & Castle (2014, p.169) as “a hypothetical construct or theory that we personally develop about who we are and our place in society”. That is, “self” is simply the way in which we perceive ourselves and the way we live, it is that which is believed to show who and what defines who we are through various developmental stages of one’s life. Self transcends beyond physicality and becomes that of a more spiritual concept as one grows in age and experience. Be it our belief in our own abilities or the way we view ourselves around others, the notion of self is key in one’s development and can be influenced in a number of ways.

Self-concept theory refers to the idea that all we are and all we can be is internalised into the way we perceive ourselves. Rene Descartes (1637) most famously known for the common phrase “I think therefore I am” was a key theorist in this belief of the inner self and determined that existence is entirely dependent on our own perception. This idea went further by humanists such as Rogers (1947) who believed self-concept was key in the development of one’s inner personality as it changes throughout life as they grew from experience and exposure to their environment.

Lewis (1990) suggested that when it comes to self-concept there are 2 main aspects of development: The categorical self and the existential self. The existential self refers to the ongoing process of infancy in which a child develops an understanding that their actions have consequences (if they push something it will move) and physical sensation such as pain caused by injury. However, it is not until the time of approximately 18-30 months that the child recognises and understands that they are an individual and begin to “categorise” themselves to define themselves in terms of their own abilities. In 1979 Lewis and Brooks conducted an experiment in which they would show children of different early years pictures of themselves (cited in Asendorf et al 1996). From the results they found that children up to one year of age would typically identify the picture as a “baby”, whereas by age two and beyond children were able to identify the pictures by their names and some even associate the picture to personal pronouns. This research clearly demonstrated a presence of increased awareness as children developed suggesting that self-concept is someone that is acquired over time.

Furthermore, A video looking into “self-concept a psychosocial development in early childhood” (drmpcfl 2010) explains how children of different ages would respond to the question “Who are you?”; pre-schooler would view and describe themselves through purely physical attributes such as where they live and what things they have, whereas children from middle school would focus more on their social status and deeper psychological aspects such as beliefs and values. In a sense, we (as the individual) gain better understanding of what makes us who we are the older we get as we gain a better understanding of the groups we are part of and how we fit into them as well as greater knowledge of an individual’s own emotions. This in turn allows people to develop a clearer picture of what it means to be themselves and what qualities you deem highest from within.

In comparison, self-esteem is generally thought to be determined as “the regard or respect that a person has for oneself” (Frank, 2011) making it more personal to the individuals feeling of self-value/worth rather than physicality and facts. This emotional concept comes from the definition first conceived by American psychologist and philosopher William James in 1892 as “success divided by pretensions” (cited in Osborne 2014 p. 1715). In this context, pretensions refers to someone’s own expectations of themselves meaning that self-esteem is determined by an individual’s success in comparison to this. It can be commonly observed that those with high expectations of themselves are more likely to react adversely if they do not reach/succeed their goals; with their feelings of self-worth significantly lowered, (and not taking into account the individual’s resilience) their self-esteem takes a drastic blow as they can feel inadequate for completely similar tasks.

However, a person’s self-esteem can also be influence by society as a whole and the self-concepts we create to fit into that society. It is hypothesised that the way in which we interact with our own environment can reflect upon our own self-esteem in either a positive or negative way (Huitt, 2009). When studying the ideas of both self-concept and self-esteem it is important to acknowledge the dynamics they possess in accordance to one’s own mind-set.

There is a growing body of research which indicates that it is possible to change the self-concept...Through self-reflection, people often come to view themselves in a new, more powerful way, and it is through this new, more powerful way of viewing the self that people can develop possible selves (Franken, 2002, p. 443).

In essence, as a typical subject who has had more life experience becomes more mindful of their own self-worth, they therefore able to adapt to their environment and grow in character, strengthening their concept of “self and selves”. Conversely, if the process of reflection is viewed from a purely negative perspective, it has been known to result in a “regression” of self-esteem and conceptualisation and therefore no strength is acquired due to a lack of positive thinking and self-belief. Bandura (1997) suggested and provides evidence that one’s belief (or lack of) in themselves to complete a specific task is the best predictor of how successful they will be. This implies that the more positive one is of their own abilities, the more likely they are to succeed.

It is commonly believed that a low self-esteem can hinder one’s ability to perform well in any given task. In extreme cases of low self-esteem, depression is often linked into the analysis due to the severe negative impact it is thought to have on an individual. Aaron Beck (cited in Orth et al 2016) hypothesized in his cognitive theory of depression that “negative beliefs about the self are not just a symptom of depression but play a critical causal role in its aetiology”. This theory suggests that low self-esteem can be identified as one of the main causalities of depression, making its presence within the mind a physical and mental danger due to the radical actions associated with that particular mentality.

However, models of depression such as the “Scar model” have been proposed in contest to Beck to argue that low self-esteem is in fact the consequence of depression as opposed to the cause (Shahar and Davidson, 2003). Through this it proposed that low levels of self-worth can merely be seen as symptoms of depression due to the permanent changes or “scars” that have been imprinted onto the individual’s mind, influencing their sense of self. By comparing these two separate viewpoints on the implications of low self-esteem on depression it is fair to say that consequential element is debatable, however both theories suggest that extremely low self-esteem can make it increasingly difficult for one to work at optimal performance, as feeling of depression are known to take over, resulting in poor regard for one’s well-being which can cloud the mind and prevent it from functioning.

In the context of education, it is generally believed that in order to help support a student's self-esteem and concept of self a teacher must explore ways in which they can help develop positive mind-sets amongst each individual (Miller & Moran 2012, p.109). In Pressley et al (2003), the authors claimed from their own observations that teachers who appeared to be more committed to their pupils educational need and provided them with notable care and support, generally produced pupils more likely to respond positively to a situation and with a greater drive to learn. Through positive interaction, a teacher is able to build a healthy mind-set within a pupil that encourages their self-worth and esteem and in turn their capability and want to learn more. Engagement with pupils can help build healthy positive relationships to structure their concept of self through praise and motivation.

To conclude, self-esteem and self-concept are both incredibly important when developing an idea of "self" as both help to determine a clearer picture on who we all are. Through positive engagement with the environment you live in it is possible to influence feeling of self-worth to make one feel more whole as a person, which can drive a person's motivation to learn and explore. Our concept of "self" changes as we age, learn more about our place in society and how we define ourselves. It is those who have a clear concept of self and good self-esteem that are more likely to succeed in life as their positive outlook and reflection enables them to feel confident in their own capabilities and abilities.

Word count: 1488

Bibliography

- Bandura, A. (1997) *Self-efficacy: the exercise of control*. New York: Freeman
- Buckler S. & Castle P. (2014) *Psychology for Teachers*. London: Sage
- Descartes, R. (1637) *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*. pp. 19–20.
- Drmpcfl (2010) *SelfConcept.mov*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZdsCdx04to> (Accessed: 16 November 2016)
- Frank, Monika A. (2011) *The Pillars of the Self-Concept: Self-Esteem and Self-Efficiency*, Excel at Life, Available at: <https://www.excelatlife.com/articles/selfesteem.htm> (Accessed: 17 November 2016)
- Franken, Robert E. (2002) *Human Motivation*, 2nd edn. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning
- Huitt, W. (2009) *Self-concept and self-esteem*, Educational Psychology Interactive, Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University, Available from <http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/regsys/self.html> (Accessed: 17 November 2016)
- Lewis, M. (1990). Self-knowledge and social development in early life. In L. A. Pervin (Ed.), *Handbook of personality* :277-300. New York: Guilford. Retrieved from: <http://aqabpsychology.co.uk/2010/07/the-self/> (Accessed: 18 November 2016)
- Miller, D. & Moran, T. (2012) *Self-Esteem, A Guide For Teachers*, London: Sage Available from: <https://www.dawsonera.com/readonline/9781446265635> (Accessed: 16 November 2016)
- Orth, U., Robins, R., Meier, L. & Conger, R. (2016) Refining the Vulnerability Model of Low Self-Esteem and Depression: Disentangling the Effects of Genuine Self-Esteem and Narcissism., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 110 (1): 133-149 Available at: <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.glos.ac.uk/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=aea3a714-45d6-4260-8165-c1f8d0964419%40sessionmgr4006&vid=1&hid=4105> (Accessed: 17 November 2016)
- Osborne, R. (2014) *Self-Esteem, Salem Press Encyclopaedia of Health*
- Pressley, M., Dolezal, S., Raphael, L., Mohan, L., Roehrig, A. & Bogner, K. (2003) *Motivating Primary-Grade Students*, New York: Guilford Press: 126-148 Available at: <http://llmotivation.wikispaces.com/file/view/Motivating+Primary+Grade+Students.pdf> (Accessed 18 November 2016)
- Rogers, C. R. (1947) Some Observations on the Organization of Personality. *American Psychologist*, 2: 358-368.
- Shahar, G., & Davidson, L. (2003). Depressive symptoms erode self-esteem in severe mental illness: A three-wave, cross-lagged study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 71 (5): 890–900.