

# Self-Esteem: Defining, Measuring and Promoting an Elusive Concept

Self-esteem has been a much debated construct in the educational sphere and interest in the area continues to flourish in classroom and research contexts. While the merits of targeting self-esteem have long been accentuated (Emler, 2001; MacIntyre, 2005; Cooper and Jacobs, 2011), the validity of the construct has also been questioned in light of modest empirical support. Recently, clearer definitions of the concepts involved and more reliable means of assessing these variables have helped allay doubts about its validity. However, a number of challenges persist in this regard, most notably in the context of learners with special educational needs (SEN). In light of recent calls for schools to explicitly plan for, monitor and measure the self-esteem of pupils with SEN alongside cognitive-academic outcomes (National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2014), a review of research and practices in this area is timely. It is hoped that this review will provide some guidance for teachers in terms of defining, measuring and promoting self-esteem outcomes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem, defined broadly as the manner in which individuals perceive or evaluate themselves, is considered to be an important variable in contributing to emotional and behavioural adjustment, academic attainment and other educationally significant outcomes (MacIntyre, 2005; Miller and Moran, 2012). Indeed, the NCSE, the National Educational Psychological Service in Ireland (NEPS) and the Department for Education and Skills in Britain all identify the raising of self-esteem as a key goal of education, in particular for pupils with special educational needs (NEPS, 2010).

There is much empirical evidence to support the merits of self-esteem promotion in schools. A series of systematic reviews by Emler (2001) and more recently,

Trzesniewski et al. (2006), concludes that low self-esteem in childhood and adolescence predicts anti-social behaviour, poor academic outcomes and negative effects on physical and mental health in later life. Moreover, the consistent finding of a link between pupils' level of self-esteem and their academic achievements further affirms its importance in the educational context (Marsh and Craven, 2006; Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, Ben and Gravesteyn, 2012).

## CONCEPTUALISING AND DEFINING SELF-ESTEEM

While there is a broad acceptance of the validity of self-esteem as a general construct, there has been relatively little consensus on how self-esteem should be conceptualised and defined in research and practice. Butler and Gasson (2005, p.191) highlight that literature on 'the self' references multiple vague and poorly defined terms including: 'self-belief'; 'self-awareness' and 'self-regard' which are often used inter-changeably with the term 'self-esteem' itself. In looking at the empirical literature thematically, they highlight the existence of four key notions, namely (1) the global over-arching view of self, known as 'self-concept' (2) the evaluative aspect relating to an individual's worth known as 'self-esteem' (3) the descriptive facets which characterise an individual known as 'self-image' and (4) the level of competence an individual is perceived to hold in undertaking a future task, which is referred to as 'self-efficacy'. The picture, therefore, is a conceptually complex one, with little explicit guidance from educational policy documents as to which construct, if not all, should be assessed by teachers. However, in recent years educational theorists have become more prescriptive in highlighting those areas of the self deemed most salient in school contexts.

Gutman and Schoon (2013), in a recent review of non-cognitive learning attributes, differentiate between three discrete variables as follows: *self-efficacy*, which they define as beliefs about the ability to succeed in specific tasks in the future (Bandura, 2001); *global self-concept* which reflects an individual's perceptions of their past achievements relative to others and *domain specific self-concept*, which reflects perceptions of achievements in particular areas such as academic performance.

Conversely, Miller and Moran (2012), as outlined by Moore (2014), advocate the use of a distinct two-dimensional model of self-esteem in schools comprising two interrelated sets of beliefs which could in turn be collated in determining an individual's overall self-esteem. The first, *competence beliefs*, refers to how an individual feels about their ability in a given task and appears to conceptually subsume the constructs of self-efficacy and domain specific self-concept advanced by Gutman and Schoon (2013). The second, *self-worth beliefs*, reflects

the intrinsic value an individual holds for his or her character, as distinct from the broader achievement based aspect of global self-concept emphasised by Gutman and Schoon (2013). This two-dimensional model is gaining prominence in school-based research and practice in light of its intuitive appeal and ability to account for both skills based and affective outcomes, as evidenced in recent studies: (Miller, Topping and Thurstone, 2010; Topping, Miller, Thurston, McGavock and Conlin, 2011; Lohan, 2015).

## **SELF-ESTEEM MEASUREMENT**

The variance evident at the level of conceptualising self-esteem is also reflected at the level of assessment. At present, the research literature points to the predominance of quantitative means of assessment with a range of standardised and norm-referenced scales currently in use. The most frequently used measures are subsequently explored in brief.

Perhaps the simplest measure to administer is the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Rosenberg, 1965). This is a brief 10 item instrument employing a four-point Likert scale response format. It was originally intended as a uni-dimensional measure of global self-worth for adolescent samples but more recent factor analysis of its constituent items suggests that it measures both competence beliefs as well as beliefs about worth (Miller et al., 2010). While designed for use with adolescent populations, the scale has also been employed with younger pupils from 11 years upwards with a shortened six-item scale (Butler and Gasson, 2005). Moreover, in spite of the considerable time period since its development, the continued use of this measure in research studies reflects the high degree of confidence in the validity of its constituent scale items (Miller et al., 2010).

A second widely employed scale is the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI) (Coopersmith, 1967, 2002). This includes both an adult and child form (Butler and Gasson, 2005). The scale comprises 50 self-descriptive statements such as ‘kids pick on me very often’ to which respondents indicate a ‘like me’ or ‘unlike me’ rating. A short form comprising 25 items is also used.

The Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale (PHSCS), (Piers and Herzberg, 2002) is designed for pupils from 7 to 18 years of age. The instrument comprises 60 items from six discrete domains, again using self-descriptive statements such as ‘I have nice hair’ to which children respond with a ‘yes or a no’. It is noted that the term ‘self-concept’ is regarded as theoretically synonymous with self-esteem in the scale’s title (Butler and Gasson, 2005).

The Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children (HSPPC), (Harter, 2012), is a recently revised multi-dimensional scale. This 36-item measure accords with the two dimensional model of self-esteem advocated by Miller and Moran (2012) in terms of its inclusion of discrete measures of competence and self-worth beliefs. Specifically, the HSPPC requires respondents to evaluate their performance or adequacy in five discrete domains including academic competence; social competence; behavioural conduct; athletic competence and physical appearance. In addition, respondents complete a separate rating of their perceived value as an individual on the global self-worth subscale. In doing so, this scale appears to hold a distinct advantage over the RSES, CSEI, and PHSCS respectively in measuring the multidimensional assessment of competence beliefs alongside a discrete self-worth measure. Indeed, such advantages appeared to hold in a recent study by Lohan (2015) which explored the impact of a cross-age peer tutoring programme on the self-esteem and literacy experiences of pupils with social and emotional behavioural difficulties (SEBD). The use of the HSPPC alongside the Diagnostic Reading Analysis assessment (Crumpler and McCarty, 2008) provided not only a more comprehensive baseline of the participants' self-esteem in terms of both competence and worth, but also more nuanced data in relation to how the discrete areas of competence beliefs were differentially impacted upon by participation in a paired reading programme. This in turn afforded greater confidence in the internal validity of the study and its outcomes, a key consideration in determining the efficacy of interventions which aim to enhance self-esteem (Mertens, 2015; Newton and Shaw, 2014).

Significantly, the finding of positive outcomes in both self-worth and self-competence beliefs substantiates the validity of the two-dimensional model of self-esteem purported by Miller and Moran (2012). However, on a conceptual level, it should be noted that the finding of enhanced outcomes in multiple areas of competence beliefs calls into question the psychometric adequacy of unidimensional self-competence scales such as the RSES (Rosenberg, 1965), which though widely used, fail to differentiate between discrete domains of competence beliefs in assessing the outcomes of interventions. It is therefore recommended that both future school-based learning programmes, as well as future research studies, employ a two-dimensional scale with the ability to assess multiple domains of competence beliefs, rather than scales with a single generalised measure so that the nature of pupil outcomes can be validly and meaningfully discerned. Such considerations are particularly pertinent in light of the current requirement for schools to assess the self-esteem outcomes of pupils with SEN in the Irish context (NCSE, 2014), as previously highlighted.

## **CHALLENGES IN THE MEASUREMENT OF SELF-ESTEEM**

Notably, quantitative scales have a number of strengths in the assessment of pupils' self-esteem. As standardised measures, they offer a degree of objectivity in interpreting scores, both on an individual and on a class-wide basis (Robson, 2011), and can also permit reliable pre- and post- scores where the efficacy of a specific programme or intervention is being investigated (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). This is likely to be a key consideration for teachers.

However, reliance on these measures may also have limitations. As Guindon (2009) attests, scales which employ self-report Likert ratings can tend to promote socially desirable response sets, thus confounding the validity of results. Harter (2012) substantiates this concern regarding Likert scale ratings and notes that the recently revised HSPPC employs a structured alternative response format in place of a traditional Likert rating scale, whereby pupils choose which of two neutrally worded statements better describes them on a particular construct. It is purported that as the pupils do not perceive a socially desirable response option, they are therefore more likely to accurately report their self-perceptions. This premise appears to be empirically validated by Lohan (2015) in light of the absence of a socially desirable response trend in participants' self-report data.

Nonetheless, for pupils with SEN, particularly those with limited cognitive and self-awareness, such self-report scales may be inherently problematic in light of their written language assessment formats and the conceptual skills needed to access their item content. Moreover, the scale items typically reflect the life experiences of pupils from the general education cohort, for instance often drawing on subjects such as social peer relations and sporting ability which may not necessarily reflect the typical experiences of some pupils with SEN.

An alternative to the self-report measures is available in the form of observation checklists which typically are completed by teachers. One such example, the Behavioural Indicators of Self Esteem (BIOS), (Burnett, 1999), features 13 descriptive statements on which pupils' behaviour is rated on a five point Likert scale. These include ratings of pupils' level of social interaction/withdrawal, as well as self-satisfaction/need for reassurance, and may provide more meaningful data and insights than those afforded by self-report measures. The BIOS has been used in previous studies (Binnie and Allen 2008; Reynolds, MacKay and Kearney 2009) with reports of adequate validity and reliability (Hughes and Schlösser, 2014). However, it should be noted that such observational measures are not without their own draw-backs, with the potential for bias and subjectivity

in ratings being acknowledged (Robson, 2011). One possible means of reducing this bias and improving reliability involves having multiple observers rate a pupil's self-esteem and assessing the degree of inter-observer agreement on scale items (Cohen et al., 2011), which should inform a key consideration for teachers employing this measurement.

Finally, as noted by Miller et al. (2010), qualitative analysis of observational and interview data may afford additional insights into understanding the self-esteem of learners. Indeed, triangulation of data from multiple assessment measures is likely to afford greater trustworthiness in interpreting outcomes (Robson, 2011; Lohan, 2015).

## **PROMOTING SELF-ESTEEM**

A number of strategies have been identified in the literature which aim to promote self-esteem gains for pupils. In writing on this topic, Miller and Moran (2012) affirm that in general, teachers and educationalists should be conscious of pupils' perceptions of both their competence and worth in all aspects of teaching and learning. They summarise a number of important principles in this regard, including:

- Affirming pupils' pro-social acts towards peers and adults, in the classroom and on the playground
- Creating learning opportunities in which pupils can help one another and be positively recognised for these roles
- Supporting positive behaviour, and ensuring that in instances of misconduct, it is the behaviour rather than the child as a person which is labelled
- Looking at the broad range of curriculum areas and reinforcing positive messages about competence and worth within them (p.162-163).

The need for accurate teacher knowledge and the informed use of evidence-based strategies are also key to enhancing pupils' positive self perceptions. As stated by Emler (2001, p.60)

a well-founded understanding of the phenomenon one is trying to change will produce more effective efforts than facile intuitions of the 'positive feedback – good, negative feedback – bad' variety that permeate the self-esteem industry.

In this regard, the merits of two widely used approaches which aim to enhance self-esteem outcomes will be reviewed, namely circle time and peer tutoring approaches.

## **Circle Time**

Circle time is a widely used classroom-based programme which aims to enhance social-emotional competence and skills, most notably self-esteem, through a series of games and social activity routines (Mosley, 1993). A key principle of the programme centres on the pupils experiencing unconditional positive regard in expressing their views to their peers and teachers. However, though intuitively appealing as a means of self-esteem promotion, a number of potential drawbacks to the approach have been cited. Firstly, it is reported that there are persistent shortcomings in its implementation and that teachers frequently ignore the principles of non-judgemental positive regard which serves to promote adverse outcomes (Taylor, 2003). Furthermore, Cooper and Jacobs (2011) have cautioned that in spite of its strong theoretical rationale, firm empirical support for gains in self-esteem is lacking and it should be subjected to a more rigorous evaluation before its utility can be affirmed. However, Miller and Moran (2012), in evaluating outcomes using the two-dimensional model, report that while evidence of enhanced competence beliefs is lacking, the circle-time methodology does in fact enhance pupils' sense of self-worth. Such discrepant findings, therefore, accentuate the importance of both appropriate conceptual understanding of self-esteem on the part of teachers and researchers and appropriate comprehensive means of assessment in evaluating programme outcomes.

## **Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS)**

Peer assisted learning strategies (PALS) is an umbrella term incorporating small group co-operative learning programmes and dyadic peer tutoring interventions (Slavin, 2012). A substantial bank of empirical evidence attests to the efficacy of this approach in targeting not only academic gains but also socio-emotional competencies including self-esteem gains (Ginsburg-Block, Rohrbeck and Fantuzzo, 2006; Spencer, Simpson and Oatis, 2009). Notably, peer tutoring programmes in paired reading are becoming increasingly researched in terms of self-esteem outcomes. King (2004), for instance, employed a qualitative approach using multiple assessment measures in exploring the self-esteem outcomes of learners with dyslexia, and general education learners following a same-age peer tutoring programme in paired reading. This included teacher observations and interviews, pupil questionnaires, and use of the self-report B/G-Steem Primary Scale (Maines and Robinson, 1998). Triangulation of data derived from across these measures evidenced not only improvements in pupils' perceived academic competence, but also an enhancement of social peer relations. These findings are further substantiated in the Irish context by an exploration of same-age tutoring outcomes in five designated disadvantaged schools, where pupils' perceptions of academic competence were similarly enhanced, with such gains

seen to generalise beyond the tutoring context to other curricular areas (King and Gilliland, 2009).

The merits of peer tutoring approaches in targeting self-esteem promotion are also corroborated by more recent studies which have explored the use of cross-age frameworks. Miller et al. (2010) and Topping et al. (2011) measured changes in the self-esteem and reading skills of both tutors and tutees participating in a randomised paired reading trial over a fifteen week period. Both same-age and cross-age configurations were investigated experimentally. Importantly, the researchers explicitly differentiated between self-competence and self-worth as discrete indices of self-esteem in employing the two-dimensional Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), (Rosenberg, 1965), thus according with the two-dimensional model of self-esteem outlined earlier in this review. Significantly, whilst gains in self-competence beliefs were identified in the cross-age tutor, same-age tutor, and cross-age tutee roles, it emerged that additional gains in self-worth beliefs were uniquely demonstrated by cross-age tutors. Notably, Lohan (2015) attests that such enhanced perceptions of both competence and worth arising from taking on the role of reading tutor to younger pupils may also be experienced by pupils with SEN, including learners with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and pupils with low levels of literacy achievements. Such multi-faceted outcomes highlight the unique potential and merits of cross-age tutoring programmes in targeting self-esteem enhancement. Moreover, the differential effect of role on self-esteem outcomes is likely to be of particular significance to resource and learning support teachers in planning to meet the learning needs of pupils for whom self-esteem is a key concern (Miller et al., 2010; Topping et al., 2011; Lohan, 2015).

## **CONCLUSION**

The goal of enhancing pupils' self-esteem is now accepted as a legitimate learning aim by educators and one which has the potential to positively impact on important life outcomes for learners. However, despite progress in conceptualising the construct at an empirical level, little consensus appears to exist regarding those specific aspects of self-esteem which should be targeted in classrooms, and even less guidance at policy level is offered to teachers on how self-esteem should be assessed. This is a particularly salient concern for those who support the learning needs of pupils with SEN in light of the additional challenges posed by assessment for this cohort of learners. Considering the future requirement for Irish schools to explicitly target and assess self-esteem outcomes (NCSE, 2014), the authors call for a greater focus on exploring the self-esteem construct at both



pre-service and in-service teacher education, as well as more explicit direction at policy level regarding the means by which self-esteem outcomes should be assessed. It is hoped that this article may itself provide some clarity for teachers in terms of defining, measuring and promoting positive self-esteem outcomes for pupils in Irish schools.

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