The Relationship Between Self-esteem and Academic Achievement

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Faculty of the Adler Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

By:

Jennell Karen Ulrich

April 2010
Abstract

This master’s project contains information about the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement and/or performance along with suggestions for student interventions and treatments. Included are the definitions of both self-esteem and academic achievement along with the importance of studying their relationship, what constitutes the relationship, the methodology used in the studies, the clinical/school implications and future research regarding these two variables. About half of the research observed that academic achievement has an effect on self-esteem. Other research found that self-esteem has an effect on academic achievement. Still other studies found that its relationship has no direction. When the studies observed students of different cultures, ages, and races, many theories on self-esteem and academic achievement were found to be questionable due to outside factors and the ambivalence of the definitions of the variables. School counseling interventions in improving both self-esteem and academic achievement are also noted as conditions in building an effective comprehensive guidance curriculum for students. Future research between these two variables is necessary especially for school counselors to help identify whether providing self-esteem building services will improve academic achievement.
The Relationship Between Self-esteem and Academic Achievement

As a school counselor, it is important to know what motivates and reinforces students. School counselors must lead, advocate and collaborate in order to cause systemic change and encourage the success of all students (VanVelsor, 2009). It is the counselor’s responsibility to work with students on the academic, career and personal/social domains in their lives.

Unfortunately, all students are not the same or equal considering their differing abilities, experiences and performances. School counselors must take this into account in studying and working with students (Crether & Nolan, 2009). In the process of working with students on these different areas of their lives, it is also effective to be able to identify what characteristics or values students who are successful share in common. Two factors significant to study in working with students are self-esteem and academic achievement.

This paper discusses the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement, two variables that have been shown to influence and/or predict all students’ academic successes and failures. The purpose of delving into the relationship between these is to be able to identify and develop interventions to enhance both, while assisting students in developing their academic, career and personal/social selves. In order to work with students, school counselors must first know what students need or want in order to reach their highest potential. Following is a description of self-esteem and academic achievement, the relationship between the two, Adlerian concepts worthy of mention, the implications/applications for professional school counselors and future research necessary between the two variables.
Self-esteem

Definition

Self-esteem is a difficult concept to grasp because it has many definitions, terms of measurement and influencing factors. Self-esteem is important because of its power in protecting and enhancing a person’s feelings of self-worth and value. It is also important because it is a fundamental human motive that measures one’s experience and quality of life (Knightley & Whitelock, 2007; Lane, Lane, & Kyprianu, 2004; Pepi, Faria, & Alesi, 2006; Rosenberg, Schoenbach, Schooler, & Rosenberg, 1995; Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989; Ross & Broh, 2000). In a school setting, self-esteem is especially vital because its development is an underlying factor in promoting student motivation, persistence and academic success (Tremblay, Inman, & Willms, 2000). Rosenberg et al. (1989) viewed self-esteem as a product of social interaction dependent on reflected appraisals, social comparison, and self-attribution. Similarly, one study (Knightly & Whitelock) concluded that self-esteem is both individually and socially constructed. However, as important as self-esteem has become as a measurement of self-worth, it still does not predict the choice of personal goals, nor performance accomplishments (Lane et al.).

Because the definition of self-esteem is difficult to fully encapsulate, its measurement is also problematic, especially because many students have a tendency to mark higher or lower scores depending on what they feel they are expected to record when answering their self-esteem inventories (Legum & Hoare, 2004). It is a highly subjective rating system that can be easily manipulated by students if they so choose. Unfortunately for the researchers, they have little to no control over whether the responses are valid, reliable and/or honest.

Definition of Global Self-Esteem
Another reason why measuring self-esteem is a difficult task is because the type of self-esteem also plays a role in the outcome of the ratings. Accordingly, there are two types of self-esteem: global and specific, both of which can be divided into more specific waves (Rosenberg et al., 1995). While both forms may be immensely interrelated they are not interchangeable and show relatively low levels of correlation. Global self-esteem measures an individual’s positive or negative attitude toward the self as a totality looking mostly at the individual’s psychological well-being, sometimes referred to as collective self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989). When investigating the relationship between global self-esteem and various social and psychological problems, the cause or effect remains unknown, but cultural factors have been proven to play a role (Rosenberg et al., 1989). Global self-esteem is often the discrepancy between specific self-esteem and an ideal self-esteem (Alves-Martin, Peixoto, Gouveia-Pereira, Amaral, & Pedro, 2002).

Definition of Specific Self-Esteem

Specific self-esteem measures a behavior, particularly the behavior that is being measured at any particular time (Rosenberg et al., 1995). For example, it has been argued by Van Laar (2000) that ratings of specific self-esteem are more strongly related to academic performance than global measurements. For these reasons, Rosenberg et al. (1995) notes that specific self-esteem is a better predictor of specific behaviors than global self-esteem because global self-esteem is much less likely to produce a direct effect on any behaviors or performances (such as in academia). Findings from this study suggested that while specific self-esteem was a significant predictor of actual performance, global self-esteem was not.

Social Comparison Theory

There are many tools of measurement which may be used to determine one’s own self-
Self-esteem and Achievement

As described in Social Comparison Theory (Morvitz & Motta, 1992), people will use others in their environment to form a level of their own self-worth. Students are more likely to associate themselves with students who are placed at the same academic level, thereby more likely to see themselves as equal to those peers from an academic standpoint as well as a self-esteem or self-worth standpoint. Students who are given a special class placement are associated with an increase in academic self-concept. To the latter, students who are placed or labeled in the lower developing classes are faced with negative self-evaluations, which leads to lower achieving goals (Crocker & Major, 1989).

*Seeds of discouragement.* Also effective in building self-esteem, specifically in working with misbehaving children is preventing the “seeds” of discouragement, caused by family, school, peers and work (Brendtro et al., 1990). The first seed to be aware of is a child involved in a destructive relationship observed mostly in mistreated, abandoned and rejected youth. Next, a climate of futility, illustrated by such qualities as low expectations, boredom and irresponsibility in the school, can take a toll on a child’s self-esteem. The third seed to watch for is learned irresponsibility seen in the child who is feeling powerless and controlled. Finally, the loss of purpose, which affects those children who have lost hope can influence a child’s self-esteem and academic achievement (Brendtro, et al.). These “seeds” also lead back to the concept of the four mistaken goals mentioned later (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1992) and play a major influence in how school counselors can intervene, treat and encourage these students.

*Building Blocks of Self-Esteem*

Others (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & VanBockern, 1990) defined self-esteem as a component of four building blocks including: significance, competence, power and virtue. Belonging, mastery, independence and generosity were proposed as the central values underlying these
components. Using the building blocks to encourage the values can be useful in the study of fostering self-esteem and encouraging higher academic achievement in children.

Significance. To be significant, one needs to feel like he/she belongs in some part of society (Brendtro, et al., 1990). Significance can best be obtained by getting attention or commiseration, thus gaining power (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Children feel this sense of belonging through academic, athletic or social reputations. Being labeled as being part of a particular group often makes a student feel that greater sense of belonging. Elementary students who do not feel they are part of any particular group or who are not well liked, more commonly referred to as outcasts or members of a stigmatized group tend to not perform as well in class in comparison to more popular children (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Acceptance has been shown to be correlated with successful academic performance while rejection has been shown to be associated with academic difficulties (Wentzel & Caldwell).

Being rejected, ignored or neglected are the signs leading to a lack of significance (Brendtro, et al., 1990). These students who are not accepted by their peers often have a negative sense or perception of their self-worth and self-esteem (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Children who feel rejected tend to have lower academic scores (Guay, Bolvin, & Hodges, 1999). The behavior of these students, more aggressive and volatile, often leads to the rejection by peers and can lead to the label of a deviant (Wentzel & Caldwell). This peer rejection can lead to social dissatisfaction and loneliness further contributing to even lower feelings of self-worth (Guay, et al.) Student members of outcast or underprivileged groups are more likely to have feelings of worthlessness and self-hatred (Crocker & Major, 1989).

Competence. To be competent, one may desire the guarantee of mastery or to be able to fully succeed in a specific area of life. Chronic failure can deter the motivation to become
competent (Brendtro et al., 1990). Setting small, easily achieved goals or plans can help in working with students who are at risk for losing their competence. Another helpful strategy in working with students towards mastery is providing them with a common purpose or responsibility to engage them further (Green, 2009). One needs to be able to live and thrive based on this success, not question its rewards or dwell on its criticism in order to advocate success in other people (Heider, 1985). This success has the potential to enhance satisfaction in life as well as a sense of self-efficacy (Brendtro et al.).

**Power.** Power is fostered by the desire for independence and freedom from authority figures. It comes with the ability to control one’s own behavior while gaining the respect of his/her peers (Brendtro et al., 1990). Also, power comes through being a team player. It can be gained by cooperation, independence and acting in a selfless manner (Heider, 1985). Helpful, cooperative, abiding children tend to be more well-liked by peers and earn higher grades (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). People who are without power tend to feel helpless and without influence and are; thus, more likely to give up on life (Brendtro et al.).

**Virtue.** Finally, virtue and worthiness are the reflection of one’s generosity. It is what makes life more spiritually fulfilling (Brendtro et al., 1990). The wisest of people are neither greedy nor selfish in order to gain and keep trust (Heider, 1985), but would rather bask in the giving and providing for other people making them more centered overall.

**Self-esteem maximization.** It was proposed that to experience self-esteem maximization along with the full development of self-worth, students need to feel these four components (significance, competence, power and virtue) equally. With these components, the outcome of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity together can provide a unifying theme in promoting positive cultures for education and youth programs (Brendtro et al., 1990). By
building a student’s self-esteem, school counselors, teachers and other staff members promote a more caring and socially aware environment.

**Characteristics of Self-Esteem**

Crocker and Luhtanen (2003) gave self-esteem an ambiguous definition. For some, it could be dependent on being attractive, loved, or good at school, while for others it could be based on being virtuous, powerful, or self-reliant. These beliefs may determine how much time is spent on certain behaviors based on the importance these behaviors may hold. For example, students in their freshmen year at college who value academics most spend more time studying, while students who base their self-esteem on appearance spend more time exercising and grooming (Crocker & Luhtanen).

**Exercise.** Related to this concept, while physical activity or exercising may be directly related to self-esteem, it has a very weak relationship with academic achievement (Tremblay et al., 2000). However, it was also proposed (Tremblay et al.) that physical activity may possibly be indirectly related to academic performance by improving health and self-esteem. Student participation in athletics promotes student development and social ties among students, parents, schools and communities. This contributes to a positive effect of athletic participation on academic achievement. Athletes have been found to out-perform non-athletes in academics (Broh, 2002).

**Controls.** Many other factors contribute to the level of self-esteem for students. Among them are the usual controls including but not limited to: race (described in-depth between African-American and White students by Van Laar, 2000), culture (as described by Pepi et al., 2006), age, sex (factors noted in all of the research), parent’s socioeconomic/educational levels, and number of siblings (as noted by Rosenberg et al., 1995). In addition, there are several other
factors that are involved in the formation of a person’s self-esteem.

*Environment.* First, a child’s self-esteem is often affected by who they are surrounded by (family, peers, educators, community members, etc.). Children who are placed in classes surrounded by higher functioning peers often have significantly lower self-esteem due to the comparison factor. Struggling students who were self-contained (and had less interaction with regular education children) were found to have fewer threats to their self-esteem (Morvitz & Motta, 1992). To avoid this, a study by Rosenberg et al. (1995) mentioned that members of stigmatized groups avoid threats to self-esteem by comparing themselves primarily with members of their own group.

*Discrepancy.* Another contributor in self-esteem formation related to this concept is the possibility of a discrepancy between high standards and substandard performance, with the outcome being lower self-esteem and a poor evaluation of self (Accordino, Accordino, & Slaney, 2000). Finally, as noted by Hewitt (Ross & Broh, 2000; Van Laar, 2000), having high self-esteem may negatively have an effect on itself by allowing someone to feel good enough about themselves to lose all incentive to strive to meet higher standards. In argument to this theory, Shi, Li, & Zhang (2008) actually found that self-concept scores for non-gifted children increased during ages 11 through 13, but decreased for gifted children during this same age range.

**Academic Achievement**

*Factors*

There are certain factors that contribute greatly to academic achievement. First, social acceptance may interrupt the process of the willingness to strive academically. For example, one study (Bridgeman & Shipman, 1978) noted that a student motivated to impress a teacher or the other students has to be distinguished from a child who is motivated to achieve better grades or
to graduate higher in his/her class. Acceptance by a larger peer group might promote a sense of group belongingness and cohesion that motivates interest in classroom activities (not necessarily in receiving better grades (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997).

Feelings of classroom belongingness, peer/teacher support are associated with school motivation and expectations for academic success (Guay et al., 1999). In a similar notion, research (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Freih, 2005; Suh & Suh, 2006) notes that academic competence and ability also play critical roles in predicting academic achievement and success. On a similar note, perceived academic competence can also predict academic achievement (Guay, et al.).

Definition

The definition of academic achievement, while not as difficult to define as that of self-esteem, also requires attention. In 1968, Erickson (as cited by Osborne, 1995) identified that academic achievement played a crucial role in forming a positive, healthy view of the self. At its highest potential, academic achievement involves a student’s psychological investment in learning, comprehending, and mastering knowledge (Suh & Suh, 2006). However, the most overt, public, visible indicators of academic achievement are school marks or grades. These are greatly valued as a determinant of one’s success in academics (Rosenberg et al., 1989). The ultimate lowest measure of academic achievement is that of a “drop-out” (Suh & Suh, 2006).

Methodology of the Studies Reviewed

Sample Populations

The populations used throughout the research used a wide selection of students. The studies found ranged between 1978 and 2007. With the exception of four studies (Freih, 2005; Lane et al., 2004; Pepi et al., 2006; Tremblay et al., 2000), all of the sample populations were
taken from the United States. Several studies (Bridgeman & Shipman, 1978; Morvitz & Motta, 1992; Shi et al., 2008; Tremblay et al.) used children in preschool through elementary school. Other studies (Alves-Martins et al., 2002; Legum & Hoare, 2004; Osborne, 1995; Ross & Broh, 2000; Rubin, 1978; Suh & Suh, 2006; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997) looked at students in grades six through eight. Four studies (Accordino et al., 2000; Pepi et al., 2006; Rosenberg et al., 1995; Rosenberg et al., 1989) measured students at the high school level, while the remainder of the research (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Freih, 2005; Knightley & Whitelock, 2007; Lane et al., 2004; Van Laar, 2000) looked at students at the university or postgraduate level. Of all the studies, a majority of them used both males and females, except for Rosenberg et al. (1995) and Rosenberg et al. (1989), which both only used males, and Knightley & Whitelock, which only used females. Interestingly, two of the studies (Osborne, 1995; Ross & Broh; Suh & Suh) used the National Educational Longitudinal Study for their sample populations. The populations ranged from as small as 31 students (Knightly & Whitelock) to as large as 2,213 students (Rosenberg et al., 1995; Rosenberg et al., 1989).

Tools of Measurements

While the majority of the research used Rosenberg’s Self-esteem Inventory to measure global self-esteem, a few of the articles (Bridgeman & Shipman, 1978; Legum & Hoare, 2004; Morvitz & Motta, 1992; Rubin, 1978) used the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory. One other study (Alves-Martins et al., 2002) used Harter’s self-perceptions profiles for adolescents. Going against the previous research, Knightly & Whitelock (2007) used the Battle’s Self-esteem Inventory in addition to an open interview. This study as well as the one by Tremblay et al. (2000) were the only studies that used both quantitative and qualitative data to measure the variables.
Academic achievement was mostly measured by grade point average (GPA) or grades, but some studies used alternate forms of measurement. In all, two of the articles (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Rubin, 1978) used the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) or American College Test (ACT), Bridgeman & Shipman (1978) used Gumpcookies (pictures of children acting, behaving or thinking in one of two ways, used to determine academic achievement motivation), one study (Morvitz & Motta, 1992) used the California Achievement Test, and three (Osborne, 1995; Ross & Broh, 2000; Tremblay et al., 2000) used a combination of four academic achievement tests measuring math, reading, science, and history. The final one, used the status of high school degree attainment as a measurement device (Suh & Suh, 2006). Other measurement devices were used, but due to their irrelevance to these two variables, will go unmentioned in this paper.

Methods

All of the studies used self-report as a form of obtaining results. About half of the studies used longitudinal investigations, with the exception being (Accordino et al., 2000; Freih, 2005; Knightly & Whitelock, 2007; Lane et al., 2004; Legum & Hoare, 2004; Morvitz & Motta, 1992; Pepi et al., 2006; Rosenberg et al., 1989). These other studies rated the students at one time. As previously noted, all of the studies used quantitative measures with the exception of Knightley and Whitelock and Tremblay et al. (2000), which both used the mixed-method technique.

Relationship between Self-esteem and Academic Achievement

History

Over the course of their history, studies involving self-esteem and academic achievement have evolved a great deal. As early as the late seventies, research (Rubin, 1978) noted that there was little evidence regarding self-esteem ratings (especially in looking at children at earlier
In addition, a study by Bridgeman and Shipman (1978) suggested that research on achievement had been very limited and scarce due to a lack of measuring instruments geared specifically for elementary school children.

Over the years, self-esteem and academic achievement have both been given a more considerable degree of attention. Self-esteem evolved as an important indicator in how students develop and value themselves while academic achievement has become a powerful predictor in a student’s future aspirations. They both have become tools by which people measure who they have become. Overall, studies over the years suggest that academic achievement and self-esteem are positively correlated (Freih, 2005), even though a cause-effect relationship has not been proven (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003).

Importance of Studying the Relationship

Studying and measuring the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement is important for several reasons. In looking at young children, it has the possibility of predicting later school achievement (Bridgeman & Shipman, 1978) as well as identifying discouraged children with lower self-esteem who can be steered away from delinquency at an early age (Rosenberg et al., 1989). Sometimes children are motivated to maintain the level of performance in school that is consistent with the positive or negative judgment of their ability. Knowing what level students are currently functioning at could be an effective way to prevent them from having lower expectations which can lead to lower achievement levels.

According to the self-esteem model of Ross and Broh, (2000), adolescents who feel good about themselves do better in school than do those who have low self-worth (a term commonly interrelated with self-esteem). If poor performance in academics can lead to a more negative view of oneself (Osborne, 1995), then knowing this serves as an important motivator in
measuring the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement.

Self-esteem has been determined to play a major role in learning outcomes (Knightly & Whitelock, 2007) and school influences the process of developing self-esteem (Pepi et al., 2006). Overall, more successful academic accomplishments are coupled with higher self-esteem (Knightly & Whitelock). Because there is such a strong, positive relationship and a continuous interaction between these two factors (Freih, 2005; Van Laar, 2000), studying them together can serve students, teachers, counselors and anyone working in the school environment in a beneficial manner.

**Strength of the Relationship**

*Academic achievement affects self-esteem.* Although, the research has many differing viewpoints on the relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem, many studies agree that self-esteem can indicate a reaction to school performance (Alves-Martins et al., 2002; Bridgeman & Shipman, 1978; Morvitz & Motta, 1992; Osborne, 1995; Rosenberg et al., 1995). When students receive good grades, they may automatically feel better about themselves, thereby increasing their self-worth and automatically increasing their self-esteem. Logically, when a student is being told he or she is smart and he/she will succeed because he/she is getting good grades now, the student is more likely to think that in the future.

*Self-esteem affects academic achievement.* Other studies note (Knightly & Whitelock, 2007; Pepi et al., 2006; Rosenberg et al., 1989; Ross & Broh, 2000) that self-esteem can have an influence on academic performance. This implies that students who already think highly of themselves and their worth will automatically get better grades and strive for higher academic achievement. The belief is that if the student expects the best, the student is more likely to obtain the best.
No cause or effect. Still other studies (Freih, 2005; Rosenberg et al., 1989) are not able to measure which is the cause and which is the effect. One study (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003) could not make a determination on the relationship because it noted that the relationship can not be measured without knowing what the basis of self-esteem is. This presents us with the age old question of “what came first, the chicken or the egg?” It proposes that we may never be able control the variables enough to measure which comes first, self-esteem or the level of academic achievement.

As noted earlier in the description of self-esteem, whether global self-esteem or specific self-esteem is being measured also has to be taken into account with each study, even though the two variables are intertwined and, in general, effect each other (Rosenberg et al., 1995). Because global self-esteem is dependent on specific self-esteem, global self-esteem affects specific self-esteem, which then affects academic performance. While this can be inferred, the direct relationship has not been proven.

Outside Factors

When looking at the cause-effect relationship, it is also crucial to take note of outside factors that may influence the strength and direction of the relationship. First, as noted once again by Bridgeman and Shipman (1978), developing positive attitudes and endorsing high standards such as good work habits, striving and high achievement goals may interfere with results in this relationship because they are both necessary for school success (Accordino et al., 2000). However, these alone cannot determine academic achievement, either.

The age of the student should be taken into account when looking at the strength of the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement. According to Rubin (1978), this relationship is a function of age and tends to strengthen over time. As young people mature, self-
esteem ratings become more stable. Academic measures become more important to children around the third grade and the relationship between self-esteem and academics becomes stronger with age (Bridgeman & Shipman, 1978).

Another factor that interferes in research findings is juvenile delinquency (Rosenberg et al., 1989). Low self-esteem theory proposes that low self-esteem is a precursor for juvenile delinquency. Juvenile delinquency, in turn, is a mechanism that influences one’s self-esteem and often interferes with the relationship between academics and self-esteem. On the contrary, Legum and Hoare (2004) noted that some at-risk students take an alternate route in perceiving the reality of the obstacles they need to confront in order to enhance academic achievement, leaving them feeling discouraged and eventually leading to lower self-esteem. (Explain further).

Other factors confounding the relationships between academic achievement and self-esteem are intellectual ability (Rosenberg et al., 1995) as well as the assessment of being a good student as determined by receiving good grades, doing well in school, and receiving appreciation from others (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Pepi et al., 2006; Ross & Broh, 2000). Finally, it should be noted that the concept of perceived control and self-esteem holds a very strong, positive correlation (Ross & Broh, 2000). Because of the presence of this strong relationship, it has to be questioned whether any causes or reactions to self-esteem are actually due to personal control. In order to avoid errors, it is necessary to control for both variables when measuring self-esteem in relation to any other factors.

Exceptions

Protection. As with any relationship between two variables, there are exceptions to the common findings. To start, Rosenberg et al. (1989) states that at times young children may seek poor marks to actually protect their self-esteem, which could be used as a lack of effort or in
pursuit of negative attention seeking behaviors (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1992) rather than being a sign of academic achievement. These children, who are often discouraged, are seeking an alternative way of increasing their self-esteem.

*Four mistaken goals.* In other theories, students may be working towards one of the four mistaken goals, noted later as attention, power, revenge and inadequacy (Nelson, Lott, & Glenn, 2000). In this instance, students may purposely seek lower marks or grades leading to lower academic success, leading to lower self-esteem. As an educator or student counselor, it is crucial to deal with the belief behind the behaviors instead of jumping to the conclusion that the student is deviant or delinquent. An effective way to check-in with the students to assess their behavior and identify what their goals are is by having class meetings. These, in turn, also have the potential to improve their self-esteem and their school marks (Nelson et al.). Another option is to assign a mentor to the students to help them cope and to encourage healthy development (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

*Consistency.* Another exception to the common findings is of consistency. According to Ross and Broh (2000), people act in a way that is consistent with their self-concept and how they should act, meaning children who are thought to have high self-esteem should continue to act in that manner. Because others view these children in a certain way, they begin to view themselves in that same light via the “looking-glass self” (Crocker & Major, 1989). Students may feel pre-programmed to think or act in a certain way because that is what they have always been told. For example, if a student has been told his/her entire life that he/she is stupid, the student may perceive him/herself as stupid. Also, students might be listening and responding to their subconscious about who they are. For instance, the student can see that he/she is receiving high grades and lots of positive feedback, but is still feeling or thinking in his/her head that he/she is
not good enough compared to a more high-achieving peer. On the other side, students may be placed into lower level classes because their teacher doesn’t want or know how to deal with them leading them to believe they belong in the lower developing classes (Crocker & Major, 1989). At times, this could be detrimental in measuring a variable as subjective and ambivalent as self-esteem.

*Cultural factors.* Last and most interesting, cultural factors must be taken into consideration. For instance, African-American students seem to be an exception to the findings about the strength of the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement. African-American students, while showing weaker academic performance, actually have higher global self-esteem than white students (Osborne, 1995). As noted previously, disengagement and inattention by the students are possible explanations as to why this occurs between their self-esteem and how well or poorly they do in academics. African-American students are noted to separate their self-esteem and academics entirely. They measure it more around their positive characteristics or their reputation and place within society or role among peers.

Several studies (Osborne, 1995; Ross & Broh, 2000; Van Laar, 2000) also mentioned that “disidentification” or disengagement both contribute to academic achievement, especially when looking at African-American students. These studies all note that African-American students are more likely to detach themselves from academic outcomes. This accounts for discrepancies in research when looking at these students in comparison to students of other races, which explains the paradox of why many African-American students (regardless of age) have lower academic achievement, but high self-esteem (Van Laar). Because of their ability to dissociate from other aspects of life, their academic expectations are presumably higher than other races, which negatively affects them when they go on to higher education (college or universities). These
students are able to view possible threats to their self-esteem and then choose to invest more time in the areas of their lives that are more rewarding and less threatening (Alves-Martins et al., 2002). Having noted this, race and culture seem to play especially important roles in determining academic performance.

In another group, LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Queer) youth often suffer in school due to bullying and threats of violence (Ratts, Ayers, & Bright, 2009). This often leads to an overall lack of desire in attending or excelling in education. These students, aside from how they feel about themselves or rate their self-esteem struggle in school because they are avoiding being in school. Because LGBTQ students have lower ratings of their school competence or the behaviors and attitudes of their peers at their entrusted school, the emphasis they place on academic achievement also tends to lessen (Alves-Martins et al., 2002). The stigmatism and treatment by their peers is contributing to their lower academic achievement and progress. Prejudice and discrimination has been correlated with lowered self-esteem and diminished self-concept (Crocker & Major, 1989).

Adlerian Concepts

Alfred Adler, one of the fathers of psychology who brought about many developments in working with children, proposed many ideas that promote higher self-esteem and influence academic achievement. His theory on the Four Mistaken Goals illustrate a means to understanding student behavior. The emphasis he places on encouragement teaches school counselors how they can most productively work with students on improving their behavior. Finally, his social interest concept shows school counselors how to teach students life lessons.

Four Mistaken Goals

Beneficial in studying how to increase self-esteem and promote higher standards of
academic achievement, is the study of student behavior. In order to understand a student’s behavior and how to improve it, one must first look at the student’s goals. Because children are social beings, it is assumed their greatest desire is to belong. Because every behavior is goal-directed, it is assumed that this is every student’s underlying goal. In order to find this, we must first identify what their immediate goal is through the study of the Four Mistaken Goals (undue attention, power, revenge and inadequacy), especially in the case of the child who misbehaves (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1992).

**Undue attention.** The first mistaken goal is that of undue attention, used by discouraged students who are aiming to belong. This goal causes a reaction of annoyance on the part of the adult (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1992). Using a school scenario, this may be the student who is making loud, obnoxious noises or is hassling other students while the teacher is speaking. The teacher generally responds by acknowledging the behavior (usually in a negative manner by scolding or yelling at the student), which is giving the student exactly what he or she wants in the first place: attention. Instead the teacher should withdraw or do something unexpected to avoid giving the student his desired undue attention because this will only increase his unwanted behavior (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

**Power struggle.** The next mistaken goal is the struggle for power, which results in anger on the part of the adult (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1992). A common example of this would be the student refusing to do something requested by an adult (i.e. reading a passage out of the textbook the class is looking at). This makes the adult feel challenged and leaves him/her desiring to impose his/her power over the student. A better way to handle the situation is by continuing to be gentle and friendly and avoiding punishment. Instead, the adult can attempt to use natural or logical consequences to enforce a more effective behavior changing technique. An example of
what the teacher could do in this situation would be to ask the student to assign someone else in
the class to read the passage allowing him/her a choice. This should divert the student’s negative
impulse into a more useful and productive means of activity (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

Retaliation and revenge. The third mistaken goal, retaliation and revenge may lead to
hurt feelings (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1992). This is the goal that usually involves some form of
physical violence such as hitting someone else or damaging someone else’s property (i.e. placing
glue on the teacher’s phone or punching another student). While the first impulse on the part of
the victim is to feel sad or hurt and to direct discontent toward the student, a more effective way
to handle the situation is by providing encouragement. Punishing the student, at this point, could
lead to the behavior worsening or elevating beyond revenge (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

Inadequacy. The fourth and final goal is that of complete inadequacy at which point the
student has given up, thus the student advocator also becomes helpless and hopeless (Dreikurs &
Soltz, 1992). This is the student who appears to fail at or does not attempt the simplest of tasks
that may challenge his/her self-esteem (i.e. homework assignment of speaking to a loved
one/relative about their history). Even though the adult’s instinct is to abandon or ignore this
student, a more effective means of helping is by once again providing constant encouragement
and applying extreme patience by setting smaller goals and more achievable assignments with
unconditional acceptance (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). By working on improving the students’
behaviors, school counselors can then improve their self-esteem and promote higher goals of
academic achievement.

Encouragement

Avoid discouraging. These goals, as well as authority figures’ reactions to the students’
behaviors, play an equally important role in working on improving the self-esteem and the
academic valor of these students. Because these goals are a result of a student becoming increasingly discouraged, one must focus on the act of encouragement. A misbehaving child is, after all a discouraged one (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1992). The child should not be labeled or considered bad or sick, just mistaken and discouraged (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). The overall purpose of encouragement is to give every child a sense of self-respect and a sense of accomplishment, not to bring them down or give them a false sense of privilege. Encouragement involves patience, active listening and compassion in working with students (Green, 2009).

*Stress improvement.* Most important in using encouragement techniques is distinguishing between the student and his or her behavior (or the doer and the deed). It is important for school counselors to remember that improvement, not perfection, is the desired goal changing human behavior (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1992). After all, striving for perfection is simply an attempt at raising oneself from an inferior position to one of superiority or mastery (Oberst & Stewart, 2003), which is not the goal nor a desirable result. Perfection is not an attainable goal and will thus discourage students further. Instead offer students shorter-term goals that are conceivably within their reach.

*Avoid pampering and controlling.* It is very important in this process to avoid humiliation and/or overprotection. Because home influences correlate with academic achievement, it is important for parents and/or guardians along with school staff members to use these skills as well (VanVelsor, 2009). Both over and under controlling parents can lead to lower academic performance. Over controlling a child can lead to frustration and feelings of helplessness for the child. Under controlling a child leaves him/her with little to strive for.

Even the quality of the students’ interactions with adults can play a role in the students’ scholastic achievement (Guay et al., 1999). Often, parents and/or school counselors mistakenly
shelter or pamper children, thereby deterring the child’s ability to develop social interest or community feeling. Also, it is crucial to be willing to accept and sometimes even embrace failure, which only indicates a lack of skill and does not and should not affect the value, self-worth or self-esteem of an individual (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1992).

**Social Interest**

As defined by Adlerian theorists, social interest means to participate, contribute, share, feel accepted, appreciated and loved and to do to others the same. It is “to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another and to feel with the heart of another” (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, pg. 18). We need to leave it in the hands of the child to find their way into social interest by allowing them to overcome their own misfortunes and allowing them to fail and succeed on their own in order to encourage their development as a useful member to society (Oberst & Stewart). Students with a high sense of social interest are more accountable for themselves and show more empathy for others.

**School Implications**

**Application**

While some studies (Accordino et al., 2000; Bridgeman & Shipman, 1978; Legum & Hoare, 2004) encourage interventions or programs involved in enhancing self-esteem as a device to increase academic achievement and prevent academic failure, others seek alternate methods. Although these studies note that research on the relation of self-esteem and academic achievement should help guide educators in promoting healthier school environments, some studies use the results to seek other types of programs. For example, Bridgeman and Shipman suggest that it would be beneficial to implement Head Start or preschool programs under which teachers are trained to pay closer attention to certain behaviors that may potentially decrease a
child’s otherwise high level of self-esteem. Based on the diversity and inconclusiveness from some of the research, the ways in which the research can be applied somewhat differs.

ASCA. American School Counselor’s Association (ASCA) has offered many suggestions improving students’ self-esteem and academic achievement. Overall, school counselors must emphasize the delivery system of a school counseling program to enhance student development. The four components are the guidance curriculum, individual planning, responsive services and system support. Guidance curriculum items include goals and an outline for preventive activities and lessons to use with students along with parent workshops and instruction. Individual planning is another preventive procedure by which counselors advise students in their personal/social, academic and career goals. Responsive services include the interventions focusing on improving behaviors and/or attitudes of struggling and/or difficult students. System support is used to establish, maintain and enhance the total guidance program using other staff members and resources. Following are examples in each of these four categories (Whiston & Sexton, 1998).

Focus on learning. Some examples of programs to include in a guidance curriculum are as follows (ASCA, 2005). Crocker and Luhtanen (2003) proposed placing the focus on learning rather than performance, even if that is the more difficult teaching technique. Because learning is influenced by social interactions, an emotional process, feelings and expressions can facilitate or deter academic achievement (VanVelsor, 2009). Other ideas for maximizing academic achievement include programs dealing with creating positive multi-ethnic climates and working with discrimination issues (Van Laar, 2000), career developmental programs that integrate the world of work (Legum & Hoare, 2004) to encourage achievement in other aspects of life, or even using a tactic as simple as class placement, in which the child is placed in an environment where
he/she is surrounded by peers at an equal level of achievement (Morvitz & Motta, 1992).

**Social emotional learning (SEL).** Another example of an item to be used in the guidance curriculum component is Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has also been proposed as an effective means of promoting higher academic achievement levels and increasing self-esteem. SEL is the process through which individuals become socially and emotionally intelligent. It emphasizes five areas of competency including: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making skills. Through SEL, students are given the opportunity to enhance their thoughts, feelings and behaviors in greater depth. They can learn to identify and control their reactions to experiences with peers and adults. The purpose of SEL is to promote pro-social behaviors contributing to the psychological health of the students, the school and the society comprehensively (VanVelsor, 2009).

This program would be beneficial because social and emotional functioning are both predictors of current or later academic achievement. In addition, a socially and emotionally competent student is less likely to develop aggressiveness, depression and/or participate in violent behaviors. Social-Emotional Learning encourages students to become productive members of the workforce and the self-awareness portion of the program enhances career development (VanVelsor, 2009). A student who goes through SEL will not only increase their self-esteem and academic accomplishments, but also has the opportunity to increase his or her social interest.

**Self-regulated learning.** Yet another item to be added to the guidance curriculum would be self-regulated learning (ASCA, 2005). Encouraging students to become masters of pursuing their own education is another suggestion for improving students’ self-esteem and academic achievement. A technique associated with this is self-regulated learning. In using this, students
learn to use their own strengths to improve their own learning. When faced with difficult situations (loud classmates, unclear teachers or uninteresting textbooks), self-regulated learners find a way to succeed. They become active in their own educational experience, becoming accountable for the good and the bad outcomes of it (Zimmerman, 1990).

The process of teaching self-regulated learning includes assisting students in planning, setting goals, organization skills, self-monitoring and self-evaluation. These new skills are intended to improve many of the personality characteristics that are emphasized in social-emotional learning specifically self-awareness and decision-making. Teaching them to self-instruct and self-reinforce is key in using self-regulated learning. These students seek out activities and experiences to promote self-observation, self-evaluation and self-improvement (Zimmerman, 1990).

Studies have shown that students who respond with self-regulated learning answers are more likely to achieve academically. For example, the student who is having difficulty in a class who says they will work harder or change their study settings to improve their grades would most likely be a self-regulated learner. The student who is struggling who responds that he/she will just do as the teacher says is not a self-regulated learner and less likely to excel. Teaching this skill of self-regulated learning can help students improve their self-esteem, academic achievement and increase their own accountability (Zimmerman, 1990).

“Catch ‘em Being Good.” There are many other ways suggested to improve self-esteem and school morale as well. As an example of the ASCA notion of individual planning (ASCA, 2005), a “Catch ‘em Being Good” program has been used throughout many schools to recognize students for good deeds, like picking up trash in the hallway or sticking up for another student who is being teased. This sort of program focuses more on positive behaviors, rewarding
students instead of punishing them encouraging students instead of discouraging them.

Appreciations. Another way to build a positive school environment is by holding meetings complete with appreciations for each other. This could be conducted between staff members recognizing the positive attributes of others to promote system support (ASCA, 2005). It could be used by students recognizing their peers, too. This is best dealt with by forming a circle and assigning a facilitator who can keep the process moving along. One suggestion for this is having teachers partner students with classmates to trace each other’s hands. Then write compliments about their partners on each finger of the tracing. This is noted to help build a sense of community and trust within the classroom (Ratts, et al., 2009).

“Wall of kindness. “ Another way to use this concept and build school morale and again promote system support (ASCA, 2005) would be building a “wall of kindness” (Ratts, et al., 2009). This involves having students write down on bricks what they can do to make their school a safer environment. Once everyone has completed a brick, the bricks can then be displayed on a wall in the school. This activity can help build the social interest within the school.

Cooperative learning. Yet another approach that can be used among students in an effort to increase self-esteem and academic achievement using responsive services and guidance curriculum (ASCA, 2005) is cooperative learning. This is a technique where all students work together to reach one mutual goal by each being held accountable and by encouraging the participation of all (Brendtro, et al., 1990). Students can have a direct impact on each other’s academic performance by providing mutual assistance. Group membership can be a predictor of grade point average - GPA (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Group counseling is more effective than individual interventions (Whiston & Sexton, 1998) because all students can benefit from inclusion. When they start to feel like they are part of the school, that their input and opinions are
being heard, valued and respected, they feel they belong in the school and are then more likely to contribute (Crether & Nolan, 2009).

*Peer models.* One last idea also in the responsive services category (ASCA, 2005) that has been observed as a way to build a student’s self-esteem and academic development is the use of peer role models or tutors to help students who are at risk or in trouble. Students are more likely to listen and want to improve their behaviors when faced with peers who at one point went through the same struggles or who they may look up to. Related to this concept, advocacy counseling has been proposed as another means of empowering and encouraging students. Advocacy counseling is teaching students how to advocate and support their own ideas through growing involvement within the school. The technique includes: peer counseling groups, speaking out for students’ rights and consulting with community resources. The goal of it is to increase self-empowerment and belonging (Green, 2009).

*Mentors.* Assigning a mentor or role model to students would be an example of using responsive services (ASCA, 2005). In attempting to work with students who are struggling or having difficulty in improving their academic ambitions and increase their self-esteem, the idea of an older role model or mentor has also been proposed. This person would give the students someone to look up to, to approach for questions, advice, recommendations or just to discuss personal concerns. The person should be a trusted adult in the school system who is able to promote a more comfortable atmosphere for the student, giving them a person to report to with their successes and with their failures (Scheirer & Kraut, 1979).

Overall, school counselors and anyone in the school environment need to place the focus on the students and what seems to be most effective for them. This is why this research is so important. The school environment, in a perfect world, would reinforce and sustain positive
attitudes and motivation to achieve the highest potential performance (Bridgeman & Shipman, 1978). This is made more possible by the use of studies and by raising awareness about what needs to be done to accomplish this.

**Future Research**

Past, current and future research on measuring the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement is necessary for many reasons. Especially in the case of young children who are developing, it is important to know if high self-esteem results in higher academic achievement, and if low self-esteem results in lower academic achievement. Knowing whether or not self-esteem enhancing programs are necessary is important in the process of building future academic curriculum.

Bridgeman and Shipman (1978) predicted early measures of self-esteem may be influential on academic achievement, which could be reinforcing for increased efforts to raise self-esteem and could contribute to a child’s later success (Rubin, 1978). According to Morvitz and Motta (1992), children are more likely to benefit when their psychological adjustment and educational needs are in collaboration with educators. Also, practices geared toward helping young students develop emotional and inspirational engagement promote healthy self-esteem and increase the odds of degree attainment (Suh & Suh, 2006). For these reasons, it may also be critical to know at what age efforts to enhance self-esteem may be of the greatest impact, more likely when they are younger and their personalities and attitudes are not yet completely established (Rubin).

**Limitations**

Having noted why self-esteem enforcers may be beneficial, it should also be illustrated why they may not be necessary. Not only should research be based on reasons to change
practices, it should also look for reasons why change may be a waste of time, money, and resources. As noted by Crocker and Luhtanen (2003), students may actually benefit from disengaging their self-worth from their academic performance, showing educators perhaps implementing self-esteem programs may be detrimental. Ross and Broh (2000) also noted that high self-esteem is not necessarily related to subsequent academic achievement showing another argument against enforcing self-esteem boosters. Other studies (Rosenberg et al., 1995; Rosenberg et al., 1989), in agreement assert that techniques/strategies for self-esteem enhancement would have little or no effect on academic achievement.

Gaps

While all of the studies contain certain gaps in the research, some are more noticeable than others. For instance, Bridgeman and Shipman (1978) determined that the results would have been more precise if they had looked more closely at differences in the home and school environments. Morvitz and Motta (1992) noted its results would be more effective had it checked the child’s perception of the teacher’s acceptance. Meanwhile, Osborne (1995) inferred that for results to be more valid, both global and academic self-esteem need to be measured, and also that disidentification should be measured in every account of the measurement. Overall, all of the studies, with the exception of Knightley and Whitelock (2007) and Tremblay et al. (2000) suffered by not measuring qualitative measures in addition to the quantitative methods and tools.

Possibilities

As a general rule, all of the studies could have increased the sample size, broadened their diversity (in terms of sex, race, ethnicity, geographic location, etc.), used more measuring techniques, and controlled for more extraneous, interrelated variables or factors. Two of the studies (Bridgeman & Shipman, 1978; Osborne, 1995) propose that there needs to be more
observation of children during their earlier levels of development (between the ages of two and five). These studies assessed that more techniques focused on measuring self-esteem, specifically looking at preschool children need to be developed. Knowing more about students at an early age could be beneficial by making a causal connection less difficult to determine just by catching the children before self-esteem or academic achievement have begun to evolve and, from a research standpoint, been compromised (Rosenberg et al., 1989).

Other ideas include looking at personality (Freih, 2005), motivation (Suh & Suh, 2006), effort and availability (Lane et al., 2004), or even just using better cross-cultural representation and making the populations more diverse (Pepi et al., 2006). Some of the more difficult possibilities listed were extended isolation from peers, making sure the subjects’ answers were not effected by peers or guardians (Lane et al.), including tester ratings like how the researchers predicted or assumed the children would be (Bridgeman & Shipman, 1978), and including subjective and interpersonal aspects such as the researchers and the subjects thoughts, feelings and actions throughout the testing and research (Knightley & Whitelock, 2007).

Another possible longitudinal study could place focus on students placed in advanced courses at an early age versus those placed in basic courses at an early age. The students’ progress and development (e.g., future advanced courses, secondary education, their eventual career career/job placement and the salaries, etc) would then be compared with their self-esteem levels from the beginning of the study to the end as an adult. While this would be immensely time-consuming, as well as difficult to follow all of the students, the results could strongly support the existence of a relationship and the direction of the correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement.

It would also be interesting to narrow the academic achievement down to one level. For
example, choose a class of students who are all at approximately the same skill level in math and measure their global self-esteem and academic achievement. Then, compare those same children to students the same age who are at a different skill level in math. Continue to follow both samples of children and see what might be an outcome or causal connection. Then, repeat the same study in a different subject. Because this isolates the achievement to just one educational skill at a time, it allows the measurement of self-esteem to be less specific and more global. The purpose of doing this is to create better control over the sample of students.

In summary, these ideas will provide a better understanding of the relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem and perhaps even give a better outlook on determining the causal relationship. Any future studies on self-esteem and academic achievement would be beneficial in building future educational curriculum. Overall, a great deal more research is necessary before concrete conclusions can be made.

Conclusion

Self-esteem and academic achievement are two topics of great importance because of their constant presence in everyday life, especially for people like schools counselors who work in school environments. The relationships people have, the attitudes people portray, and the experiences people share are all effected by these two variables. Students’ cognitive and behavioral engagements in the school influence school outcomes, such as grades, skills, adjustment, attitudes and beliefs about themselves are all powerful determinants of school success (Guay, et al., 1999).

Research on self-esteem and academic achievement is performed and practiced so that school counselors can learn how to improve their performance and the students’ performance. It is important to continue studying variables that effect students’ learning and achievement to
increase accountability and to keep schools more informed. The research benefits the students, their parents, school counselors, teachers and all other school staff members. Activities performed by school counselors have a positive influence on students giving further purpose behind creating effective guidance curriculums and following through on them (Whiston & Sexton, 1998).

Not every study reviewed indicated agreements on the causal connection between academic achievement and self-esteem. Some even proposed that there is no relationship. However, the research consistently indicates the relationship needs to be dissected to a greater degree to begin to fully understand it. Despite the outcome of the research, the results are important for providing direction in the school systems amongst school counselors.

Self-esteem is imperative to study because it shows what people hold in high regard and how they feel about themselves. Academic achievement is essential to study because people spend approximately 14 to 20 years of their life in school, a number which seems to be rising because of the emphasis now placed on the importance of higher education, especially in the United States. Education determines success and wealth for a great deal of people, two very important virtues for almost every American student.

Because it is also important for students to belong and to fit in, encouragement is a fundamental building block necessary to improve self-esteem. It also remains unquestionably important to be able to identify and assess which mistaken goal a student desires as well as what area in their life may be at risk for discouragement in order to avoid harming their self-esteem, possibly contributing to the detriment of their academic ambitions/achievements. Keeping track of the major changes in every student’s behavior and/or lack or slowing of developmental progress also plays an ample role in educating and socializing students in preparation for them in
their future education, careers and lives.

Together, self-esteem and academic achievement are useful predictors of a person’s future. Whether self-esteem effects academic achievement or academic achievement affects self-esteem, the relationship is still worthy of measuring and understanding. The results are especially useful to those people working in an academic or educational environment, as well as to the students they serve. More research is necessary to create a more vivid picture of this relationship and what can be gathered from identifying and articulating the strength and direction of it.
References


