

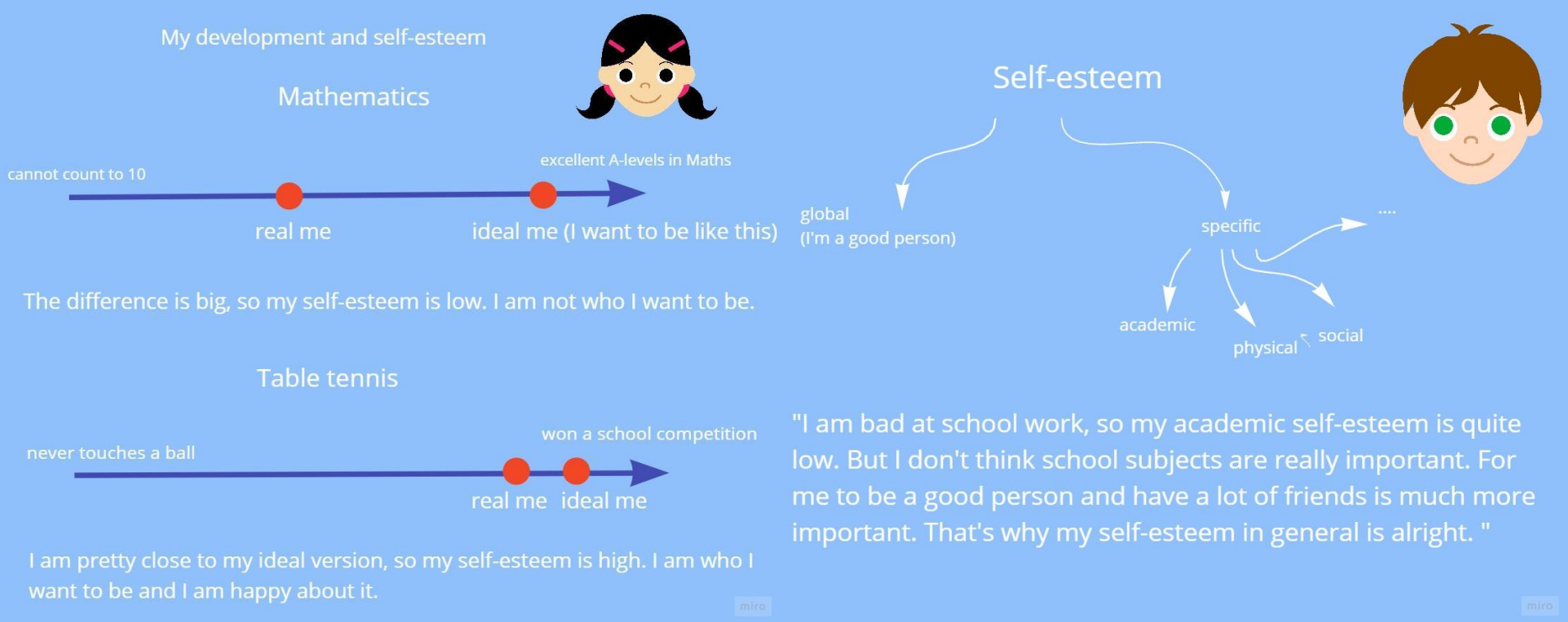
The Rise and Fall of Self-Esteem Movement in Education

What is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem is the part of the construct known as “sense of self”. The other two parts are self-concept (the awareness of who I am) and ideal self (who I want to be). Self-esteem is basically the difference between these two concepts.

Self-esteem can be global and specific, and different areas of self-esteem are of different importance for people. Social context (people around us) is extremely important in developing self-esteem. Parents, teachers and peers are important sources of self-esteem of the student.

(Humphrey, 2003)



Why is it difficult to study self-esteem?

How do we know how smart, sociable or attractive the person is?

Logically, people with the high global self-esteem usually say more positive things about themselves than people with low self-esteem. They generally think they are attractive, smart and well-liked by others. People, whose self-esteem is low, may be just as attractive, smart or popular, but they will not say so.

That is why to see if people with high self-esteem are indeed smarter, prettier or more popular, the researchers cannot rely on their words, they need some objective measures, like IQ-test or using independent observers.

How do we know if one action, event or state causes another?

If two variables appear to be correlated (linked together), it does not necessarily mean one is a cause for the other. Let us say academic attainments and self-esteem are correlated. It can mean:

- a) that high self-esteem causes good grades
- b) that good grades cause high self-esteem
- c) that something else, such as particular upbringing, causes both good grades and high self-esteem
- d) that this is a coincidence.

That is why more detailed research is usually needed to establish causation.

(Baumeister et al., 2003)

The Road to Self-Esteem

In 1986 in the USA the Assemblyman John Vasconcellos persuaded the governor of California to fund a Task Force on Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility for three years. Later on, in 1995 the National Council (later Association) on Self-Esteem was found, spreading self-esteem fever on a national level. The movement conquered not only the USA but the whole world.

Self-esteem was believed to solve nearly all the psychological problems, including delinquent behaviour, pollution and teen pregnancy. Particularly in education it was believed to drastically improve academic achievement and almost completely remove any behaviour problems at school.

The messages such as “believe in yourself” and “you are special” have overtaken the schools. Some of the teachers stopped using red pens not to harm the self-esteem of the students (Storr, 2017). A lot of money was spent on interventions dedicated to self-esteem enhancement. Moreover, the assumptions about academic rigour shifted in many schools. Some teachers were afraid to give students critical feedback, being afraid that it would hurt their feelings, and feeling bad, they will perform poorly (Singal, 2017).

Turned out it did not work. Self-esteem did not prove to be the magic cure from all social diseases of the world. Not only it had little or no impact on academic achievement, but there is little evidence on how school interventions actually affect self-esteem.

It is hard to underestimate the impact of the movement. Thousands of dollars were spent, hundreds of measures implemented and millions of decisions made, based on one false assumption. The whole generation was brought up according to the mottos such as “Everything is possible”. Some of the results, such as a wide range of self-help literature, stay with us till today.

What exactly do we do when we promote self-esteem in our students?

What results do we expect?

(Baumeister et al., 2003; Singal, 2017; Storr, 2017)



Why did they even believe it would work?

No one could trace where the original hypothesis came from. But Vasconcellos was a follower of Carl Rogers, one of the founders of the Humanistic Psychology. Amongst many other points, Humanistic Psychology focuses on self-actualization, and creating a positive self-concept is one of the key factors of this approach (Singal, 2017; Storr, 2017).

Why did not it work?

There are several reasons, and most of them are complicated. One of them is that self-esteem may be of different quality. High self-esteem may be genuine (healthy), deceptive (when people lie to themselves to feel they are good), inflated or narcissistic (involving excessively grandiose picture of oneself and perceiving one is much better than others).

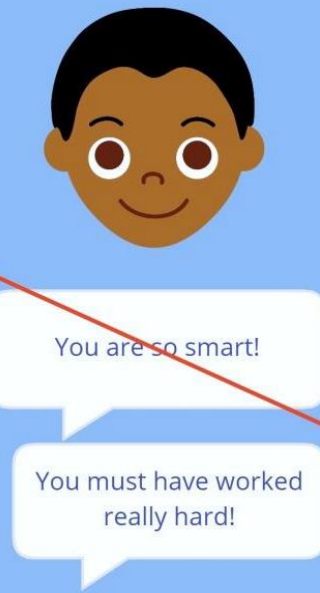


For example, as can be seen in the picture to the left, those with high self-esteem demonstrate the lowest and the highest aggression comparing to people with lower self-esteem.

(Baumeister et al., 2003)

So what, we should not praise our children?

According to a study by Dweck (2002), experiments keep showing that children who are praised for their effort keep performing better on subsequent and more difficult tasks than children who are praised for their intelligence. If the result of performance is attributed to something stable and innate, people want to keep smart and the critical feedback appears to hurt their self-esteem. They believe they do not seem smart enough if their performance is not perfect.



If the result is attributed to something they can control, it is easier to engage in task without actually worrying about how smart they are.

Another hypothesis related directly to the academic attainment says that if you praise your students for an easy task they feel they do not need to put much effort into it. Why try harder if they are already good enough?

It does not mean teachers should stop praising the children. Possibly, we should praise them the right way! However, this is subject to further research. (Dweck, 2002)

Does this mean that self-esteem is useless?

Not really! If self-esteem is not related to attainments, it still contributes to the general psychological well-being. Some studies show high self-esteem leads to more overall happiness in life, while low self-esteem is more likely to lead to depression. At the same time, high self-esteem also makes people more initiative and more willing to speak up in groups.

(Baumeister et al., 2003)

How do we foster self-esteem the right way?

As Mruk (1999) writes, “facilitation of a positive sense of self can be achieved through providing individuals with experiences of: (a) personal achievements or successes; (b) acceptance of being valued; (c) evidence of influence or power and (d) virtue or acting on beliefs (doing the ‘right thing’)”. Perhaps what we need is not interventions, fostering self-esteem, but rather the change of approach in the whole school. Teachers, more genuine and empathetic towards their students, peer support systems, democratic procedures at school, assessments which take into accounts different learning styles and needs, respect for the dignity of students – all those measures are not an easy fix, but the results might be precious. Not only all these promote high genuine self-esteem but do much more – make a step towards inclusive education, helping students to become socially and morally responsible individuals.

(Humphrey, 2003)