

EXPLORING CONCEPTS OF SELF

Laura Purser asks, are we focusing on self-esteem when self-efficacy is the key to developing emotional literacy?

The concept of self is complex, with varying strands to consider when applying potential ways to utilise development of self in children. According to Carl Rogers, self-concept is an overarching construct with self-esteem featuring as one of the components (McLeod, 2008). The education sector tends to lean toward increasing self-esteem as there is a correlation with improved academic achievement and, in addition, we are all aware of the need to support mental health and emotional well-being. Teachers and SENCOs gravitate towards it as a potential fix for children presenting with a low sense of well-being. However, the spotlight on self-esteem could be distracting us from the more subtle and nuanced aspects of sense of self that may be the key to opening the door to a better developed emotional literacy, vocabulary and understanding of self-concept.

Self-esteem and self-efficacy

Self-esteem and self-efficacy are similar concepts that influence and correlate with each other. For example, a child who has low levels in one is likely to have low levels in the other. However, it is possible to have low self-esteem and still have high self-efficacy. This is often seen in perfectionists who are highly critical of themselves but are capable in specific situations. This may lead us to question which area would be the most effective to develop for the best outcomes.

A variety of factors influence your self-esteem and are based on how much you value yourself. Those with low self-esteem often have a more negative view of themselves and their abilities. William James, the pioneer of the self-esteem movement, designed a formula for defining self-esteem: self-esteem = success divided by our pretensions (goals, values and beliefs about our potential) (Hewitt, 2005). If our level of success exceeds our expectations, then we might view ourselves as successful and feel good about ourselves, which raises our self-esteem. On the other hand, if our achievements are low but our expectations are high, then we may see ourselves as a failure. We often attribute these expectations of self to the child's decision to like themselves and therefore increase our praise and provide opportunities within school to raise their perception of their abilities. However, this can often backfire, unintentionally reinforcing the beliefs of who they are; it has been theorised that the framework of self is often solidified by the age of seven.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behaviour, and social environment. Self-efficacy is often attributed to similar constructs such as self-worth, self-identify, self-confidence, self-awareness and most commonly self-esteem and self-concept. We form and regulate our self-concept as we grow, based on the knowledge we have about ourselves. However, we may think that it is only when the child enters the world of education and school that the need to draw on efficacy and therefore esteem, comes to the forefront. Children begin to consider themselves and the perception of how others view them, in a place where social currency comes into full force and institutional expectations become higher.

Practice to support development of self-esteem

Self-esteem is a popular and easy theme and is arguably less abstract than efficacy. Pre-constructed schemes, along with extensive research over time, have pointed towards using self-esteem as a tool. Self-

efficacy may be harder for teachers to get to grips with regarding implementation of strategies and as an intervention. There is often confusion and ambiguity surrounding the self-concept constructs. Teachers often feel more comfortable generalising its application across all areas of emotional literacy, with the intention of facilitating positive outcomes in children's well-being. However, if we can be more specific and bespoke in our choice of self-concept construct then we may better meet the needs of the child and therefore touch on more effective outcomes.

If we focus on increasing self-esteem to combat child mental health issues, we may be missing fundamental and important pieces of the puzzle. Going beyond the usual rhetoric around self-esteem can be challenging but also exciting as it provides glimpses into areas of psychology that we may not venture into when sticking to the tried and tested approaches that do work but can be self-limiting.

How can we practically implement changes to support self-concept?

Research into this area of self has led me conclude that you can't have a sense of self-esteem without a sense of self. Therefore, it stands to reason that a sense of self is the outcome we are looking for.

Practically, we can look into implementing a variety of activities that embed and complement our topic-based teaching. We can look at adjusting, or in many cases increasing the provision of circle time and PSHE lessons on self-esteem and broaden them to include self-efficacy, concept, identity and emotional regulation in relation to children knowing themselves. Specialist interventions can include small group work or 1:1 session that guide mapping out and visualising future goals and collaboratively working backwards on the steps to achieving those targets; this is often visualised as the stepping stones toward the belief that they can achieve a long term goal. These interactions ensure that the ownership of language comes from the child themselves and although adults provide structures and suggestions, the goals come from an internalised motivation rather than an imposed assumption.

Different age groups can access understanding at different levels, using metacognition skills to support thinking about who they are and how they can effectively change and grow as an individual. Utilising Dweck's (2008) growth mindset approach, may help to support understanding and accessing Kuypers (2011) Zones of Regulation, an evidence-based framework, can help support independent regulation as it looks at underlying deficits in emotional and sensory regulation, executive functioning, and social cognition (which are beneficial for children attempting to articulate their feelings and understanding of who they are). Visual emojis can expand emotional vocabulary to support identifying emotional states and ways to accept ourselves, even the sides we are eager to reject because of discomfort or perceived unacceptability. It is recommended that aspiring and existing SENCOs are trained to recognise the differences between the constructs and how they can effectively implement provision to affect positive outcomes for social and emotional difficulties.

What are potential future applications?

No one construct of self is more important than another; they are complementary and unlocking one can facilitate others, like the domino effect. If you focus on one at the exclusion of another or choose to forgo an area, we should be sure that we are clear about the outcome we are striving to achieve. As the SEN Code of Practice (2015) frequently highlights, we should promote positive outcomes for children and young people with SEND; we need to know what these outcomes are when targeting development of self.

Research illustrates the importance of allowing strengths and capacities to shine through weaknesses or vulnerabilities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Therefore, it seems that high self-esteem is an aspect of self we can utilise to promote the conditions of optimal human functioning and achievement rather than seeing it as the most important factor to highlight. Developing a sense of self-concept could be the

application of how teachers and SENCOs support children's understanding of their own strengths and uniqueness, to allow their well-being to thrive, to value themselves as citizens within society and to achieve lifelong learning goals, firmly developing their sense of self-worth and giving them a sense of place in the world.

BIO

Laura is the Head of Primary, Prep and EYFS, Teacher Training & also leads on SEN & Inclusion, Mental Health & Well-Being at The University of Buckingham. She has designed and leads the master's level NASENCO course, training SENCOs for accreditation. (<https://bit.ly/33CPo09>). Laura aspires to ensure that all Teacher and SENCO training develops quality inclusive practitioners who are person-centred to ensure positive outcomes for both learning and positive mental-health and well-being <https://bit.ly/2Wlhxl8>.