

SELF AND SELF-BELIEF IN PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION:
AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

by

Frank Pajares and Dale H. Schunk

In J. Aronson (Ed.) (2002), *Improving Academic Achievement:*
New York: Academic Press.

Prof. Frank Pajares
Division of Educational Studies
1784 N. Decatur Rd., Suite 240
Emory University
Atlanta, GA 30322

Voice: (404) 727-1775
Fax: (404) 727-2799

Dale H. Schunk, Professor and Head
Purdue University, School of Education
Department of Educational Studies
1446 LAEB Room 5108
West Lafayette, IN 47907-1446

Voice: (765) 494-9170
Fax: (765) 496-1228

SELF AND SELF-BELIEF IN PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION:
AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

We begin this chapter with a critical assumption that we hope all readers will find sound. The assumption is that the beliefs that children create and develop and hold to be true about themselves are vital forces in their success or failure in all endeavors and, of particular relevance to educators, to their success or failure in school. Rather obvious isn't it? After all, any parent or teacher knows well that the beliefs that young people get into their heads become the rules that govern their actions, for good or, regretfully, sometimes for ill.

The assumption that children's self-beliefs are inextricably tied to their thinking and functioning seems so sound, so obvious, and so commonsensical one might well think that research on academic motivation and achievement (research on why students do the things they do in school and why they achieve or fail to achieve) should naturally focus, at least in great part, on the things that children come to believe about themselves. In other words, one would think that, if psychologists are interested in understanding the reasons why students select some activities and avoid others, why they succeed in some academic pursuits and fail at others, or why they are filled with either anticipation or panic at the thought of doing this or that task, then researchers should quite carefully investigate the things and ways that students believe about themselves. As Jerome Bruner (1997) has argued, "if agency and esteem are central to the construction of a concept of Self, then the ordinary practices of school need to be examined with a view to what contribution they make to these two crucial ingredients of personhood."

And as we begin a new millennium this is indeed the case. So much so, in fact, that reviewing the current state of knowledge related to theories and principles of motivation for the

1996 Handbook of Educational Psychology, Sandra Graham and Bernard Weiner observed that current research in educational psychology "reflects what is probably the main new direction in the field of motivation—the study of the self." Current interest in self-constructs is so pervasive that Graham and Weiner concluded that "it is evident that the self is on the verge of dominating the field of motivation."

This focus on a child's sense of "self" seems so reasonable that one would think it has always been instrumental in framing the discussion around educational concerns. Consequently, one would think that psychologists and educators has always made the self a focus of educational research. Alas, either this has not been the case or, when it has, results have been, to say the least, problematic. During the past century, interest in the self and in self-beliefs in psychological and educational research has waxed and waned. For long periods attention to these concepts was scrupulously avoided. At other times rigor in empirical research left much to be desired. Still at other times the application of research findings and scholarly thinking produced mixed results.

So what happened? How did psychology and education lose their interest in the self and in the self-beliefs of individuals? Before we proceed further, this seems an appropriate juncture at which to remind ourselves of two aphorisms appropriate to these questions. The first is Voltaire's dictum that "common sense is not so common." The second is Wittgenstein's lament, "may God grant philosophers the wisdom to see what is before their very eyes." If Wittgenstein believed that philosophers tend to ignore the obvious, we dread to imagine what he would have thought of psychologists.

In this chapter, our primary aim is to provide a historical overview of research on the self and on self-beliefs over the past century that we hope will help explain how it is that psychology has often skirted common sense and declined the wise invitation to see what has always been

before its very eyes (and, may we add, what poets, playwrights, novelists, and children's story tellers have always known): that understanding critical issues related to our children's sense of self is crucial to understanding the manner in which they deal with all of life's tasks and challenges. We will end the chapter by reviewing two psychological concepts that are responsible for the current resurgence of interest in self-beliefs in recent years and by providing a brief discussion of some of the major educational implications that result from this renewed focus on students' self-beliefs in school.

Historical Development of Research on the Self

Drawing on caves suggest that some time during the dawn of history, human beings began to give serious thought to their nonphysical, psychological selves. With the advent of written history, writers would describe this awareness of self in terms of spirit, psyche, or soul. Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle defined self in terms of the soul, as immaterial and spiritual. Their conception of an individual's sense of self as a spiritual entity separate from the physical formed the foundation for subsequent conceptions of mind and body duality. During the Middle Ages the concept was further developed by theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, who stressed the immortality and superiority of the soul to the body in which it dwelled.

A turning point in the thinking about this nonphysical being came in 1659, when Rene Descartes wrote his Principles of Philosophy. Descartes proposed that doubt was a principal tool of disciplined inquiry, yet he could not doubt that he doubted. He reasoned that if he doubted, he was thinking, and therefore he must exist. Although the emphasis on mind and body duality that Cartesian rationalism came to represent has largely been discarded in recent times, its emphasis on inner processes of self-awareness—on metacognitive process—remains a powerful force in

philosophical and psychological thought. Other philosophers of this period, among them Spinoza and Leibnitz, added their ideas about the mystery of the nonphysical aspect of individuals. Terms such as mind, soul, psyche, and self were often used interchangeably, with scant regard for invariant vocabulary or scientific experimentation. For the most part, a general state of metaphysical disorganization regarding the concept of self existed well into the present century (and to some extent continues). As for belief, it was typically relegated to the realm of religion.

Early Interest in the Self in American Psychology

At the turn of the present century, when American psychology began to take its place among the other academic disciplines, there was a great deal of interest both in the self and in the role that self-beliefs play in human conduct. For example, when Williams James (1891a, 1891b) wrote the Principles of Psychology, his chapter on "The Consciousness of Self" was the longest in the two volumes. James suggested that "the total self of me, being as it were duplex," is composed of "partly object and partly subject." As a consequence, he differentiated between the self as knower, or the I, and the self as known, or me. He referred to the I as pure ego and suggested that this component of self is consciousness itself. The me, on the other hand, is one of the many things that the I may be conscious of, and it consists of three components, one physical or material, one social, and one spiritual.

It is not difficult to become captivated by James' seductive conception of self as knower and self as known. After all, the distinction of self in terms of I and me is in almost intuitive ("I talk to myself"; "I want people to like me"). On other levels it is also charming and amusing. However, psychologists critical of this intramind type of dualism point out that self-reflection entails shifting the perspective of the same self rather than reifying different selves regulating each other. Bandura (1997), for example, argued that people think, act, and reflect on their actions,

but it is the one and the same person who is doing the thinking and later evaluating the adequacy of one's knowledge, thinking skills, and action strategies. The shift in perspective does not transform one from an agent to an object as the dualist view of the self would lead one to believe. One is just as much an agent reflecting on one's experiences as in executing courses of action. Rather than splitting the self into object and agent, in self-reflection individuals are simultaneously agent and object. (p. 7)

James had been careful to hedge his conception, however, pointing out that the I and the me are discriminated aspects of self rather than "separate things," but the truth is that they come off rather separate in his description of them.

James (1896/1958) was also one of the first writers to use the term self-esteem, which he described as a self-feeling that "in this world depends entirely on what we back ourselves to be and do" (p. 54). James even provided a mathematical formula for self-esteem that suggests that, in essence, how we feel about ourselves depends on the success with which we accomplish those things we wish to accomplish.

$$\text{Self-esteem} = \frac{\text{Success}}{\text{Pretensions}}$$

Self-esteem may be raised, James argued, either by succeeding in our endeavors or, in the face of incessant disappointments, by lowering our sights and giving up certain pretensions, or aims.

In 1902, Charles Horton Cooley introduced the metaphor of the looking-glass self to illustrate the idea that individuals' sense of self is primarily formed as they develop self-beliefs that have been created by their perceptions of how others perceive them. That is, the appraisals of others act as mirror reflections that provide the information we use to define our own sense of

self. Hence, we are in very great part what we think other people think we are. This conception of self brought to the forefront of psychological thought an emphasis on the importance of early child rearing and schooling as well as the critical role of social comparisons with peers in the development of self. The idea of the looking-glass self underscored the great power that parents, siblings, family members, teachers, and significant others have in shaping children's identity, especially early in a child's life. After all, these are the people who provide us with the first reflections through which we can contemplate our "selves."

James (1896/1958) had viewed the process of self formation differently. He argued that, because children are conscious of what other people are before they become conscious of what they are themselves, the self is primarily developed through the process of imitation. That is, children create a sense of who they are by imitating the mental and behavioral habits of parents and other influential people in their lives. Both for James and for Cooley, however, the growth of a child's sense of self is deeply influenced—they would argue that it is in fact nearly determined—by the beliefs and actions of others. This, then, is the great blessing or tragedy of self and self-belief construction and development—that we become the kind of person we see reflected in the eyes of others.

Self, Ego, and the Psychoanalysts

A milestone in the quest for understanding internal processes came in the writings of psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud (1923), who framed the self as the regulating center of an individual's personality and shed light on self-processes under the guise of id, ego, and superego functioning. Freud's work was so influential that it would be reasonable to say that few concepts in psychology are as closely associated to the concept of self in modern parlance as that of ego.

When we say that individuals have a "big ego," we generally mean that they have an exaggerated

sense of self importance. The words that have evolved from ego, such as egotist and egomaniac, describe one who is self-absorbed and self-aggrandizing. These are not the conceptualizations of ego that Freud had in mind.

When Freud introduced the hypothetical construct of ego, he did so to help explain what he considered to be a psychic struggle all individuals must undergo—that between instinctual drives, sociocultural norms, and the world of reality. Freud offered a structural theory of mind, complete with a tripartite model, to explain this psychic conflict and account for human agency. In this model, it is the function of the ego (in German the ich, or "I") to mediate and resolve the conflict between the id (or "it"), the *superego* (in German uberich, or "greater than I"), and the external world. The id consists of the pleasure-seeking, instinctual drives with which all individuals are born; the superego consists of the conscience and ego-ideal developed as a result of sociocultural and familial influences. It is the task of the ego to delay, rechannel, or if necessary circumvent id gratification and adapt the individual to the reality of the world at large.

Freud also argued that the ego is part unconscious, and so its executive function is not always thought to reflect intentionality and conscious purpose. This feature of the ego does not distinguish it from traditional conceptions of the self, but it clearly distinguishes it from the self-beliefs such as self-esteem, which are generally considered to exist at a conscious level of awareness. Yet, Freudians and neo-Freudians hesitated to make the self a primary psychological unit or to give it central prominence in their theoretical formulations. In part, this was due to the psychodynamic emphasis of the biological processes in human development, hence the oft repeated Freudian maxim that "biology is destiny." Erik Erikson, a prominent psychoanalyst who would bring this psychological view to the forefront of American psychology, later focused on critical aspects of self and self-belief to trace adolescents' development of their ego identity.

Other Early Proponents of the Self

Other prominent theorists also wrote prominently about the self early in the century. For example, George Herbert Mead (1913, 1934) made the concept of self a major part of his theoretical writings on the philosophy of transactions with the environment. He argued that personality, rather than being anchored on biological variables, is determined by social-psychological factors. In a manner similar to that of Lev Vygotsky, a young psychologist in Russia whose writings had not yet been translated into English, Mead argued that the self results from an interaction between the social process and what Vygotsky (1935/1978) had called the psychological tools that individuals use to make sense of and share social symbols. The primary tool, language, aids individuals in making sense of their inner processes and coming to define their sense of what they are. Mead also made use of James' I and me dichotomy to help explain that "if the I speaks, the me hears." By listening and making sense of this linguistic exchange, self is realized.

Other psychologists were also instrumental in keeping alive the idea of the importance of studying individuals' conceptions of the self. Kurt Lewin (1935) viewed the self as a central and relatively permanent organization that gave consistency to the entire personality. Goldstein (1939) analyzed the processes of self-actualization, as contrasted with those of the sick organism that must constantly worry about preservation. This was a forerunner of the comprehensive work of Abraham Maslow, who would later write so powerfully about self-actualization. Lecky (1945) contributed the notion of self-consistency as a primary motivating force in human behavior.

Theorists such as Bertocci (1945), clearly influenced by James, reemphasized the two aspects of self, again distinguishing between the self as object, the "me," and the self as subject, the "I." Murphy (1947) discussed the origins and modes of self-enhancement and how the self is

related to the social group. Ramey (1948) introduced measures of self-concept in counseling interviews and argued that psychotherapy is primarily a process of changing the self-concept.

We have spent some time covering the major figures involved in self-research and outlining some of the key ideas involved in that research primarily to illustrate that, during the first half of the 20th century, discussions of what components and characteristics might constitute an individual's sense of self were prominent in the mainstream of psychological thinking. These discussions were so prominent, in fact, in the 1949 presidential address before the American Psychological Association, Ernest Hilgard defended the thesis that the self could be a unifying concept in problems of motivation.

The Insurgence of Behaviorist Theories

Notwithstanding the efforts of James, Mead, the psychoanalysts, and other powerful proponents of the self, during the first half of the 20th century psychologists rallied around various schools of thought characterized by ardent advocacy of their own theoretical viewpoints and unrestrained hostility to those of others. Most prominent among these was the school of thought espousing a behaviorist orientation. Even as James promulgated his ideas emphasizing the critical role played by the self in human functioning, the Russian school of reflexology, known today to psychology students primarily through the work of Ivan Pavlov and his discovery of the principle of conditioned reflexes, was having a profound influence on European psychologists. Theirs was an view of human functioning in which only observable experience was deemed worthy of scientific scrutiny.

This behaviorist perspective, which traveled to the United States by way of Edward Titchener, E. L. Thorndike, and others, soon began to capture the discipline of psychology. It was a movement that wanted a discipline in which self-perceptions and other internal mental states

played no meaningful role in a scientific psychology. Adherents swelled their ranks by pointing out that all theories except their own placed self and consciousness at the center of human functioning despite the fact that only a person's tangible, observable, and measurable behavior was fit for scientific inquiry. They solidified their position by conducting empirical investigations that produced convincing research results grounded on what they maintained was sound scientific inquiry.

When the smoke cleared, the behaviorism of Pavlov, Thorndike, John Watson (1925), and later B. F. Skinner (1938) carried the day. Psychology was redirected, attention was turned to observable stimuli and responses, and the inner life of the individual was labeled as beyond the scope of scientific psychology. Self, self-belief, and self-perception as psychological constructs were largely abandoned, along with such internal constructs as mind, consciousness, awareness, and will. With the advent of behaviorist thinking, the self received diminishing attention from the behavior-oriented psychologists who quickly tightened their grip on American psychology.

A critical sidelight to all this is that psychological theories have always had a strong influence on education. Through the years, teachers have followed the prescriptions of psychologists, from William James with his emphasis on the self to J. B. Watson with his stress on observable and measurable behavior. For example, James's educational ideas, particularly his call for attention to self-processes and to the needs and dispositions of the child as outlined in his Talks to Teachers, were embraced by the educational community of his day and served as the prevailing influence on most educators during the first two decades of the century. In 1903 John Dewey referred to James's Principles as the "spiritual progenitor" of the progressive education movement that Dewey was launching at the University of Chicago, and James's ideas even served as foundational for the scientific pedagogy that educational psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall

and Edward L. Thorndike would later promulgate. It was unavoidable, then, that when psychology abandoned the self in favor of behaviorist principles of pedagogy, so did education.

Although the decline of interest in the self was encouraged by behavioristic psychologists, all the fault for its neglect cannot be laid at their door. Very little of the literature on the self from early to mid-century was based on what psychologists commonly refer to as disciplined inquiry. Rather, it continued to be philosophic or conceptual in nature, with few studies attempting or reporting empirical findings. Those few who advocated the importance of the self weakened their position with a profound neglect of rigorous experimentation and scientific inquiry.

The Humanistic Revolt

Very nearly coinciding with the zenith of behavioristic influence at mid-century came what is now often referred to as the humanistic revolt in psychology. Dissatisfied with the direction that psychology was taking and apprehensive about what they considered the narrow and passive view of human functioning that behaviorism represented, a group of psychologists called for renewed attention to inner experience, internal processes, and self constructs. In concert with existential and phenomenological movements of the day, the writings of these new theorists caught the attention of scholars and researchers and, during the 1950s, the humanistic movement was born.

The most powerful voice in the new movement was that of Abraham Maslow (1954), now generally recognized as the father of modern humanistic psychology. Maslow began his academic career as a behaviorist (he worked under noted behaviorist Edward Thorndike) but came to find the theory disturbingly deterministic and limited in scope and depth. Maslow believed that all individuals have inner lives and potential for growth, creativity, and free choice. In 1943, with the publication of "A Dynamic Theory of Human Motivation," he outlined a motivational process based on the view that human beings are motivated by basic needs that must be satisfied and that

are hierarchically ordered. He argued that the goal of each individual is to achieve self-actualization, defined broadly as the motivation to develop one's full potential as a human being and to reach self-fulfillment, inner peace, and contentment. As Diggory (1966) noted, "the fact that the new self psychologists were able to argue substantive matters of learning theory and motivation with the heirs of the behaviorists made the latter pay attention and finally to agree that there might be something to the idea of self after all" (p. 57).

Another eloquent and significant voice of this new humanistic movement was that of Carl Rogers. In an influential series of articles, books, and lectures, Rogers presented a system of psychotherapy called "client-centered," which was built around the importance of the self in human adjustment. In Rogers' client-centered approach, the self is the central aspect of personality and is a phenomenological concept (a pattern of conscious perceptions experienced by the individual) that is of primary importance to that individual's behavior and adjustment. Rogers described the self as a social product, developing out of interpersonal relationships and striving for consistency. He believed that there is a need for positive regard both from others and from oneself and that in every human being there is a tendency toward self-actualization and growth so long as this is permitted and nurtured by environmental forces. Rogers' approach went far toward linking earlier notions about the self. In fact, his impact was powerful and influential enough that his general approach soon became known as "self theory."

Another notable influence in reintroducing the concept of the self into psychology and education were the writings of Arthur Combs and Donald Snygg. In their 1949 book Individual Behavior, they proposed that the basic drive of the individual is the maintenance and enhancement of the self. They also proposed that all behavior, without exception, is dependent on the individual's personal frame of reference. In other words, behavior is determined by the totality of

experience of which an individual is aware at an instant of action, the phenomenal field. Combs and Snygg's insistence on giving major importance to the ways in which people see themselves and their world was a significant contribution to both psychology and education.

Fueled by the eloquent arguments of humanist theorists, during the 1960s and 1970s there was an enthusiastic renaissance of interest in internal and intrinsic motivating forces and affective processes, particularly with reference to the dynamic importance of the self. One especially prominent voice was that of Gordon Allport who throughout his career emphasized the importance of self in contemporary psychology and argued for purposeful, rational individuals, aware of themselves and controlling their future through their aspirations. The research and writing of Wilbur Brookover and of Stanley Coopersmith, among others, provided deeper understandings of the dynamics of the self in influencing behavior.

This resurgence of interest on the self resulted in increased efforts by many educators and psychologists to promote an emphasis on the importance of a healthy self-concept and positive self-regard. Also born in schools at about this time was the self-enhancement view of academic functioning. That is, the view that, because a child's self-esteem is the critical ingredient and primary cause of academic achievement, teacher practices and academic strategies should be aimed at fostering students' self-esteem.

And yet, the surge of interest in self-processes that the humanistic movement brought to education from the 1950s to the late 1970s had profoundly uneven results. In great part, this was because research on the relationship between self-esteem and adaptive functioning either was inconclusive or provided inconsistent results. Highly respected researchers reviewed decades of self-esteem studies and reported that correlations between self-esteem and academic achievement ran the gamut from strongly positive to dismally negative (Handford & Hattie, 1982), which is to

say that in some studies low self-esteem was actually associated with higher achievement. The researchers also reported that when they actually evaluated the validity of a study, the better studies tended to show the less significant connections between self-esteem and academic achievement.

More recently, after a thorough review of self-esteem studies in various areas of psychology, and keep in mind that there have been over 10,000 such studies to date, scholars at the University of California concluded that the association between self-esteem and its expected consequences were mixed, insignificant, or absent. The non-relationship holds between self-esteem and teenage pregnancy, self-esteem and child abuse, self-esteem and most cases of alcohol and drug abuse. As regards self-esteem and social outcomes, self-esteem has been positively and negatively correlated with aggression. And some researchers have provided qualified support for the contention that delinquent behavior might actually serve to enhance self-esteem. Some studies have even shown that high self-esteem correlates positively with increased sexual activity by teens (see Beane, 1991; Kohn, 1994; McMillan, Singh, & Simonetta, 1994).

What followed, of course, was not only a reduced interest in self-research in education but a backlash against humanistic psychology and against the self-esteem movement itself. Some critics of the humanist's influence on education viewed humanistic psychology as a form of secular humanism and, therefore, an effort to undermine religion. Reduced interest in the self was also brought about by the many gimmicks introduced into the educational milieu. The gap from theory to practice proved difficult to breach, and many laudable but misguided efforts to nurture the self-esteem of children fell prey to excesses and, ultimately, ridicule. The goal of fostering positive self-perceptions became mired in controversies over the value of self-esteem education, controversies that continue unabated to this day.

The Cognitive Revolution

The humanistic movement waned during the 1980s as psychologists shifted their interest to cognitive processes and information-processing views of human functioning. This cognitive revolution, as it came to be called, was influenced by technological advances and by the advent of the computer, which became the movement's signature metaphor. Much like their humanistic predecessors, the new wave of theorists emphasized internal, mental events, but this emphasis was primarily on cognitive tasks such as encoding and decoding human thinking, information processing strategies, higher-order thinking, memory processes, and problem-solving rather than on issues related to the self.

And schools followed suit. Alarmed by what they perceived to be plummeting academic standards and fueled by international studies that erroneously made it appear as if American children graduated from high school practically illiterate (see Berliner & Biddle, 1995), parents and educators demanded a back-to-basics approach to curriculum and practice. In this back-to-basics national mood, students' emotional concerns were regarded as irrelevant to their academic achievement. Reforms were accompanied by an effort to dictate curricular practices according to their success in raising achievement test results. What was called for, critics cried, was a return to the old values of hard work and Hard Knocks. As a consequence, research on the self and self-beliefs did not merely wane, it was viewed as antithetical to sound educational understandings, as a type of "psychology-lite" undertaking.

Interest in the Self Returns

During the last two decades, prominent voices in psychology and in education have signaled a shift in direction as regards the issues critical to human functioning, and the self has again become the focus for educational psychology research and practice on academic motivation.

In important ways, the shift represents a marked departure from previous conceptions of self-referent thought. If, as Graham and Weiner (1996) contended, the construct of self is on the verge of dominating research and theory on academic motivation, this is due primarily to interest and research on two self-beliefs: self-efficacy and self-concept. To better understand the resurgence of interest in these ideas, let us take a moment to provide a brief overview of these two constructs.

Self-efficacy beliefs

One of the most prominent among recent voices calling for renewed attention to the self has been that of Albert Bandura, professor of psychology at Stanford University. Like Maslow, Bandura was initially trained as a behaviorist. Early on, however, Bandura was deeply discomfited by the "thought-less" nature of behaviorist notions. He was also aware that a key element was missing from the prevalent learning theories of the day. In 1977, with the publication of "Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change," he identified an important piece of that missing element—that individuals create and develop self-perceptions of capability that become instrumental to the goals they pursue and to the control they are able to exercise over their environments.

In 1986, Bandura proposed a social cognitive theory of human functioning that emphasized the critical role of self-beliefs in human cognition, motivation, and behavior. Rejecting the behaviorists' indifference to self-processes, Bandura argued that individuals possess a self system that enables them to exercise a measure of control over their thoughts, feelings, and actions. In doing so, he reinvigorated the nearly abandoned focus on the self in the study of human processes that William James had initiated nearly a century earlier. In Bandura's theory,

individuals are viewed as proactive and self-regulating rather than as reactive and controlled either by environmental or by biological forces.

According to Bandura, how people behave can often be better predicted by the beliefs they hold about their capabilities, which he called self-efficacy beliefs, than by what they are actually capable of accomplishing, for these self-perceptions help determine what individuals do with the knowledge and skills they have. Indeed, Bandura contended that self-efficacy is the most influential arbiter in human functioning. Recently, Bandura (1997) further situated self-efficacy within a theory of personal and collective agency that operates in concert with other sociocognitive factors in regulating human well-being and attainment.

Self-efficacy beliefs influence students' behavior in a number of ways. First, they influence the choices that students make: students engage in tasks about which they feel confident and avoid those in which they do not. At lower levels of schooling, this can be a moot issue, for students often have very little choice over the activities in which they must engage. As they get older, however, they have greater control over course and activity selection, and their confidence influences these decisions. Self-efficacy beliefs also help determine how much effort students will expend on an activity and how long they will persevere—the higher the sense of efficacy, the greater the effort expenditure and persistence. This function of self-efficacy beliefs helps create a type of self-fulfilling prophecy, for the perseverance associated with high self-efficacy leads to increased performance, which, in turn, raises sense of efficacy, whereas the giving-in associated with low self-efficacy limits the potential for raising confidence. Self-efficacy beliefs also affect behavior by influencing students' emotional reactions. Students with low self-efficacy can come to believe that things are tougher than they really are, a belief that fosters anxiety, stress, and a narrow vision of how best to solve a problem. High self-efficacy, on the other hand, creates

feelings of serenity in approaching difficult tasks, increases optimism, lowers anxiety, raises self-esteem, and fosters resilience.

A strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being. Confident students approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. They have greater intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities, set themselves challenging goals and maintain strong commitment to them, and heighten and sustain their efforts in the face of failure. Moreover, they more quickly recover their confidence after failures or setbacks, and they attribute failure to insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and skills which are acquirable. For confident students, failure is a healthy reminder that they need to work harder. Conversely, students with low self-efficacy may believe that things are tougher than they really are, a belief that fosters stress, depression, and a narrow vision of how best to solve a problem. When students lack confidence in their capabilities, they are likely to attribute their failure to low ability which they perceive as inborn, permanent, and not acquirable. For them, failure is just another reminder that they are incapable. Students who doubt their academic ability envision low grades often before they even begin an examination.

As Alexander Dumas wrote, "a man who doubts himself is like a man who would enlist in the ranks of his enemies and bear arms against himself. He makes his failure certain by himself being the first person to be convinced of it." Linus, of Peanuts fame, once quipped that "there is no burden quite as heavy as a great potential." Teachers know that academic potential seldom can be realized in the absence of the child's belief in that potential. Clearly, the Roman poet Virgil was correct: "They are able who think they are able."

In all, Bandura's social cognitive theory paints a portrait of human behavior and motivation in which the beliefs that people have about their capabilities are critical elements. The

tenets of this theory are consistent with the basic assumption with which we began this chapter: that individuals' self-beliefs are critical forces in their academic motivation and achievement.

Self-concept beliefs

Current interest in the self and in self-beliefs has also been characterized by renewed research into self-concept, a construct with a long ancestry (recall that William James wrote extensively on self-concept over 100 years ago). Recent definitions of self-concept have been informed by James's conception that the self-concept is an individual's representation of all of his or her self-knowledge. Combs (1962) argued that an individual's self-concept is, in essence, "what an individual believes he is" (p. 52). Consequently, the accuracy of the self-appraisals that one makes rests in part on how well one knows oneself. This suggests that one's self-concept is made up of the beliefs that one holds to be true about one's experience.

Researchers generally agree that children develop a self-concept primarily through their interpretations of the reflected appraisals of others. Recall that early in the century Cooley (1902) used the metaphor of the self as mirror, as a reflection of how others see us. Coopersmith (1967) later wrote that "each person's self-concept, to a considerable extent, is a mirror reflection of how he has been (and is) seen by others who are important to him" (p. 201).

Early theorists defined and used self-concept in general terms as global perceptions of self-worth, or self-esteem. But individuals perceive themselves primarily in terms of the various facets of their self-system, each facet carrying a different description and evaluation. How we may feel about ourselves in one area of our life may be unrelated to how we feel in another. For example, how we perceive our self as a teacher or student may differ markedly from how we perceive our self as a parent, spouse, son or daughter, sibling, athlete, or spouse. Even as a student, we may perceive our self quite differently in differing academic areas. We may have a positive self-concept

in mathematics but a negative one in writing. This is not to argue that self-concept beliefs do not generalize and influence each other, nor does it mean that one does not possess a general view of oneself. Rather, it is to emphasize that self-concept can differ across differing domains of functioning, and it is our self-concept in specific areas of our lives that is most likely to guide us in those areas (see Shavelson & Marsh, 1986).

It bears emphasizing that self-efficacy and self-concept beliefs represent quite different views of oneself. Recall that self-efficacy is a judgment of capability to perform a task or engage in an activity. Self-concept, on the other hand, is a self-descriptive judgment that includes an evaluation of competence and the feelings of self-worth associated with the judgment in question. In other words, self-efficacy is a judgment of one's own confidence; self-concept is a description of one's own perceived self accompanied by a judgment of self-worth.

Clearly, when individuals tap into their self-efficacy or their self-concept beliefs, they must ask themselves quite different types of questions. Self-efficacy beliefs revolve around questions of "can" (Can I write well? Can I drive a car? Can I solve this problem?), whereas self-concept beliefs reflect questions of "being" and "feeling" (Who am I? Do I like myself? How do I feel about myself as a writer?). The answers to the self-efficacy questions that individuals pose to themselves reveal whether they possess high or low confidence to accomplish the task or succeed at the activity in question; the answers to the self-concept questions that individuals pose to themselves reveal how positively or negatively they view themselves, as well as how they feel, in those areas. It is for these reasons that self-efficacy beliefs are often referred to as "confidence" and self-concept beliefs as "self-esteem." What is clear is that students' self-concept and self-efficacy beliefs each influence motivation and academic achievement. As Bandura (1986) observed, both "contribute in their own way to the quality of human life" (p. 410).

Why the Resurgent Interest in Self-Beliefs is Warranted

As we have illustrated, the historical road leading to research on the self and self-beliefs has been a rocky but ultimately productive one, resulting in focusing our attention on ideas that are of some consequence to human functioning. Moreover, there is now ample research evidence to the effect that students' academic behaviors and achievement are directly influenced by the beliefs they hold about themselves and about their academic potentialities. The import of these scholarly findings is that students' difficulties in basic academic skills are often directly related to their beliefs that they cannot read, write, handle numbers, or think well—that they cannot learn—even when such things are not objectively true. That is to say, many students have difficulty in school not because they are incapable of performing successfully but because they are incapable of believing that they can perform successfully—they have learned to see themselves as incapable of handling academic work or to see the work as irrelevant to their life.

Consequently, parents and teachers do well to take seriously their share of responsibility in nurturing the self-beliefs of their children and students, for it is clear that these self-beliefs can have beneficial or destructive influences. Bandura has argued that beliefs of personal competence constitute the key factor of human agency, the ability to act intentionally and exercise a measure of control over one's environment and social structures. As children strive to exercise control over their surroundings, their first transactions are mediated by adults who can empower them with self-assurance or diminish their fledgling self-beliefs. Because young children are not proficient at making accurate self-appraisals, they rely on the judgments of others to create their own judgments of confidence and of self-worth. As we have pointed out, it is during early childhood that the metaphor of the "looking-glass self" is at its most powerful. Parents and teachers who

provide children with challenging tasks and meaningful activities that can be mastered, and who chaperone these efforts with support and encouragement, help ensure the development of a robust sense of self-worth and of self-confidence. Early mastery experiences are predictive of children's cognitive development, and there is evidence to suggest they work independently of critical variables such as socioeconomic status.

Social comparisons with peers are critical to the development of self-beliefs. Self-concept researchers have described the Big-Fish-Little-Pond-Effect, which describes how students form their self-concept in part by comparing their academic ability with the perceived abilities of other students in their reference group (Marsh, 1993). Self-concept is increased when one views oneself as more capable than one's peers but, conversely, lowered when others are viewed as more capable. Social-comparative school practices that emphasize standardized, normative assessments involve ability grouping and lock-step instruction, use competitive grading practices, and encourage students to compare their achievement with that of their peers work to destroy the fragile self-beliefs of those who are less academically talented or prepared. These are practices that convert "instructional experiences into education in inefficacy" (Bandura, 1997, p. 175).

Educators have long known that when classroom structures are individualized and instruction is tailored to students' academic capabilities, social comparisons are minimized and students are more likely to gauge their academic progress according to their own standards rather than compare it to the progress of their classmates. To some degree, students will inevitably evaluate themselves in relation to their classmates regardless of what a school or teacher does to minimize or counter these comparisons. In cooperative and individualized learning settings, students can more easily select the peers with whom to compare themselves. Individualized

structures that lower the competitive orientation of a classroom and school are more likely than traditional, competitive structures to increase confidence and improve students' self-concept.

It may even be reasonably argued that teachers should pay as much attention to students' self-beliefs as to actual competence, for it is the belief that may more accurately predict students' motivation and future academic choices. Assessing students' self-beliefs can provide schools with important insights about their pupils' academic motivation, behavior, and future choices. For example, unrealistically low self-efficacy, not lack of capability or skill, can be responsible for maladaptive academic behaviors, avoidance of courses and careers, and diminishing school interest and achievement. Students who lack confidence in skills they possess are less likely to engage in tasks in which those skills are required, and they will more quickly give up in the face of difficulty. Given the generally lower confidence of most girls related to boys in areas such as mathematics and computer technology, it seems that young women may be especially vulnerable in these areas (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). In such cases, in addition to continued skill improvement, schools must work to identify their students' inaccurate judgments and design and implement interventions to challenge them.

There are also ways of maintaining a joint focus on the development of competence and of the self-beliefs that accompany that competence. In the area of writing, instructional programs such as the Writers' Workshop approach to writing instruction have as a key priority the building of a child's sense of confidence in writing (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1994). Writers' workshop advocates stress the idea that children must gain confidence in themselves as writers if they are to improve and grow in this skill. Attention to children's self-beliefs is made an explicit feature of teacher education in such programs, and teachers are encouraged to assess both competence and

the accompanying confidence as part of regular writing evaluations. Students' self-evaluations typically include self-reflection geared to understanding their own self-beliefs.

It seems clear that many of the difficulties that people experience throughout their lives are closely connected with the beliefs they hold about themselves and their place in the world in which they live. Similarly, students' academic failures in basic subjects, as well as the misdirected motivation and lack of commitment often characteristic of the underachiever, the dropout, the student labeled "at risk," and the socially disabled, are in good measure the consequence of, or certainly exacerbated by, the beliefs that students develop about themselves and about their ability to exercise a measure of control over their environments.

Some cautions are in order. The first deals with the care that should be taken as regards the nature of interventions designed to increase academic self-beliefs. Because mastery experience is the most influential source of self-efficacy information, social cognitive theorists focus on the important task of raising competence and confidence through authentic mastery experiences.

Decades earlier, Erik Erikson (1959/1980) put it this way:

Children cannot be fooled by empty praise and condescending encouragement. They may have to accept artificial bolstering of their self-esteem in lieu of something better, but what I call their accruing ego identity gains real strength only from wholehearted and consistent recognition of real accomplishment, that is, achievement that has meaning in their culture. (p. 95)

The second caution deals with the warnings that have quite rightly been made regarding the tyranny that can result from an unbridled self-oriented emphasis in education (see McMillan et al., 1994). It can be a short voyage from self-reflection and self-fulfillment to self-obsession, self-absorption, self-centeredness, self-importance, and selfishness. Children taught that the nurturance, maintenance, and gratification of their sense of self is the prime directive of their own

personal and social development do not easily learn to nurture others, to maintain lasting and mutually satisfying relationships, or to defer or postpone their own perceived needs (Beane, 1991; Kohn, 1994). Artificial self-esteem is naked against adversity; unwarranted confidence is cocky conceit. When what is communicated to a child from an early age is that nothing matters quite as much as how he or she feels or how confident he or she should be, one can rest assured that the world will sooner or later teach that child a lesson in humility that may not be easily learned. Some researchers have observed that an obsession with one's sense of self is responsible for an alarming increase in depression and other mental difficulties.

As is evident from the proliferation of self-esteem kits, programs, and gimmicks, complex issues related to self-esteem have been oversimplified and caricatured. We concur with the judgment of researchers who question whether self-esteem programs of the sort that have been in fashion are effective either in raising self-esteem or achievement. As we have argued, concern for the affective needs of students should not be divorced from concerns about their cognitive (and social and physical) needs. And we believe that in most cases efforts are better aimed at transforming schools, classrooms, and teaching practices than at altering students' psyches (Kohn, 1994). But institutional transformation and a focus on students' intellectual development are not incompatible with concern for students' self-beliefs.

The aim of education must transcend the development of academic competence. Schools have the added responsibility of preparing self-assured and fully-functioning individuals capable of pursuing their hopes and their ambitions. Nel Noddings (1992) observed that the ultimate aim of schools should be to nurture the "ethical self," that is "to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people" (p. 174). Schools can aid their students in these pursuits by helping them to

develop the habit of excellence in scholarship while at the same time nurturing the self-beliefs necessary to maintain that excellence throughout their adult lives. As Bandura (1986) argued,

educational practices should be gauged not only by the skills and knowledge they impart for present use but also by what they do to children's beliefs about their capabilities, which affects how they approach the future. Students who develop a strong sense of self-efficacy are well equipped to educate themselves when they have to rely on their own initiative. (p. 417)

One need only cast a casual glance at the American landscape to see that attending to the affective concerns of students is both a noble and necessary enterprise. It is our hope that psychological and educational research during the next century will provide an uninterrupted series of insights to that end.

More than one-hundred years ago, William James ended his lectures to the nation's teachers with the gentle admonition that if they could but see their pupils as young creatures composed of good intentions, and love them as well, they would be "in the best possible position for becoming perfect teachers." As this is our aim, we do well to take heed.

Suggested Readings

Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. New York: Freeman.

Hattie, J. (1992). Self-concept. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Kohn, A. (1994). The truth about self-esteem. Phi Delta Kappan, 76, 272-283.

Pajares, F. (1997). Current directions in self-efficacy research. In M. Maehr & P. R. Pintrich
(Eds.), Advances in motivation and achievement (Vol. 10, pp. 1-49). Greenwich, CT: JAI
Press.

Schunk, D. H. (1991). Self-efficacy and academic motivation. Educational Psychologist, 26,
207-231.

References

- Atwell, N. (1987). In the middle. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. Psychological Review, 84, 191-215.
- Bandura, A. (1986). Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. New York: Freeman.
- Beane, J. A. (1991). Sorting out the self-esteem controversy. Educational Leadership, 49, 25-30.
- Berliner, D. C., & Biddle, B. J. (1995). The manufactured crisis: Myths, fraud, and the attack on America's public schools. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Bertocci, P. A. (1945). The psychological self, ego and personality. Psychological Review, 52, 91-99.
- Bruner, J. (1997). The culture of education. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Calkins, L. (1994). The art of teaching writing. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Combs, A. W. (1962). Perceiving, behaving, becoming. Yearbook of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Washington, D.C.: Education Association.
- Combs, A. W., & Snygg, D. (1959). Individual behavior. Second edition. New York: Harper & Row.
- Cooley, C. H. (1902). Human nature and the social order. New York: Scribner.
- Coopersmith, S. (1967). The antecedents of self-esteem. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.
- Diggory, J. C. (1966). Self-evaluation: Concepts and studies. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Erikson, E. (1959/1980). Identity and the life cycle. New York: Norton.
- Freud, S. (1923). The ego and the id. New York: Norton.
- Goldstein, K. (1939). The organism. New York: American Book Company.
- Graham, S., & Weiner, B. (1996). Theories and principles of motivation. In D. C. Berliner & R. C. Calfee (Eds.), Handbook of educational psychology (pp. 63-84). New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan.
- Hansford, B. C., & Hattie, J. A. (1982). The relationship between self and achievement/performance measures. Review of Educational Research, 52, 123-142.

- Hilgard, E. R. (1949). Human motives and the concept of the self. American Psychologist, 4, 135-142.
- James., W. (1896/1958). Talks to teachers. New York: Norton.
- James, W. (1981a). The principles of psychology, Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- James, W. (1981b). The principles of psychology, Vol. 2. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kohn, A. (1994). The truth about self-esteem. Phi Delta Kappan, 76, 272-283.
- Lecky, P. (1945). Self-consistency: A theory of personality. New York: Island Press.
- Lewin, K. (1935). A dynamic theory of personality. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Marsh, H. W. (1993). Academic self-concept: Theory, measurement, and research. In J. Suls (Ed.), Psychological perspectives on the self. Volume 4. (pp. 59-98). Lawrence Erlbaum: Hillsdale, NJ.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A dynamic theory of human motivation. Psychological Review, 50, 370-96.
- Maslow, A. H. (1954). Motivation and personality. New York: Harper & Row.
- McMillan, J. H., Singh, J., & Simonetta, L. G. (1994). The tyranny of self-oriented self-esteem. Educational Horizons, Spring, 141-145.
- Mead, G. H. (1913). The social self. Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods 10, 374- 380.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). Mind, self and society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Murphy, G. (1947). Personality: A biosocial approach to origins and structure. New York: Harper & Row.
- Noddings, N. (1992). The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ramey, V. C. (1948). Self-reference in counseling interviews. Journal of Consulting Psychology, 12, 153-163.
- Shavelson, R. J., & Marsh, H. W. (1986). On the structure of self-concept. In R. Schwarzer (Ed.), Self-related cognition in anxiety and motivation (pp. 79-95). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Skinner, B. F. (1938). The behavior of organisms. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1935/1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Watson, J. B. (1925). Behaviorism. New York: Norton.

Zeldin, A. L. & Pajares, F. (2000). Against the odds: Self-efficacy beliefs of women with math-related careers. American Educational Research Journal, 37, 215-246..