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January 1971

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### Recommended Citation

Grillo, Anna (1971) "Self-Concept and the Teaching of Reading," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol5/iss1/6>

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# SELF-CONCEPT AND THE TEACHING OF READING

“ . . . . . for the great thing is not to be this or that but to be oneself.”

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

by Anna Grillo

It has been proven in many test studies that there is a definite and positive relationship between self-concept and the improvement of reading. The object of this study is to set up a model classroom in which all aspects of it would lead to improving the self-concept of the individual students — tests, techniques, attitudes (teacher and student), and the total environmental setting in which a good self-concept is nurtured and the direct bearing this has upon reading.

The home environment is the primary learning source but the school serves as another primary environmental learning source. If a child has not been taught the basic requirements toward reading at home and he is a product of rejection, low-esteem, inattention and loneliness, then the school environment, has to reverse these tendencies and provide a warm and reassuring place in which success is constant. *Every* child needs to develop a positive self-image so that he would not be afraid to take on new challenges, and reading is definitely a new and different challenge. The exact technique would vary with the different levels, age, socio-economic, cultural and mental ability; but the goal in each case would be the same — to improve the individual's self-image.

Self-concept is not inborn, it is acquired from the interaction with one's environment and individuals and there is a definite *need* for self-esteem within this culture.<sup>1</sup>

Cohn and Kornelly took a group of low-achievers and worked on their very low reading levels. Materials were used that guaranteed success; individual tutors came in twice a week to help, a paperback book library was set up in the classroom, progress completely depended upon the individual. Actual success, reinforcement from the teacher, tutor and other classmates, gave the individual a new self-pride and a feeling of capability.<sup>2</sup>

Another approach that has had effective results is self-directive dramatization. This method can be used in any classroom situation with a regular teacher. The situation has to be unstructured and it is up to the individual to make the changes. It is up to the individual to act out different stories of his choice, in this way he is projecting and bringing out, via the story, his own feelings and attitudes. A child selects a story, choosing a character, he originally and spontaneously interprets and acts out the character. The story is cooperatively read with a group of students that is formed for the time being. There can be several groups working on different stories being acted out at the same time. The child is free to put into his production whatever feelings or attitudes he has about the character which can serve as a release for his own internal feelings.<sup>3</sup>

In order to set up a working model that will lead to success it would be worthwhile and necessary to administer various tests; both pre-tests and post-tests. Tests used by Carlton and Moore consisted of the *Revised*

*Stanford-Binet*, Form L; also the reading section of the *Gray-Votaw-Rogers Achievement Test* on vocabulary and paragraph meaning (primary grades Form R, intermediate grades Form Q).<sup>4</sup> Other sociological tests to distinguish the backgrounds, interests, and abilities of the students would be helpful. Since self-concept is formed by the interaction of individuals, then a sociogram might help distinguish the social and group structure within the classroom.

So that a clear picture of self-concept development and improvement can be seen at any time, frequent checks can be made and should be made by answering questions that pertain to the child's behavior that indicate a change in self-concept.

This model classroom at first would serve as a resource and observation center. It is where other teachers and administrators can come and learn these new techniques and approaches and apply them to their own classrooms. At the end of a school term or year the results should be posted — both the before and after profile of what the self-concepts of these children looked like, and how these results directly influenced reading and other subject areas. Of course this type of project would take outside help, money and patience.

Supposing that the model was set up correctly; teachers themselves generated a good self-concept and did everything to enhance the success of their students, and that various techniques and methods were used, then the conclusions would point to success in self-concept which will directly influence success in reading and other subjects. Also this new and improving self-image will bring about the realization of the individual's self-worth and esteem. If in teaching, success was successful, than it should be instituted as classroom procedure within the school (with individual adjustments being made so that each teacher would

have a method that fitted his approach to teaching).

It can also be concluded that with all of this self-realization, a more realistic and practical atmosphere within the school would be established. If students clearly realize their skills and individual talents and know what they can achieve within their own unique spectrum, then realistic goals can be made and hopefully reached.

After a clear picture was formulated as to how the individual child saw himself then the teacher could take individual action. One way to change self-concept is to change the behavior of the child so that he can see himself as being able and capable of achieving in areas restricted by his self-concept.<sup>5</sup> Often times behavior is taken for granted and the teacher distinguishes various personality types in her classroom and believes just coping with these types is the extent of her responsibility. By reversing the obvious behavior of some children by giving them new responsibilities, duties, obligations, or in some cases — just recognizing the individual will be enough to let the child see himself in a new role and very capable of handling it.

It is not often that a theory is tested and proven to be fact. With the varied approaches and emphases to the teaching of reading, teachers should use proven means to teach reading. It is fact that self-concept has a direct positive relationship to reading. If an average child has a high, good or positive self-concept then he will most likely have all of the attributes of an achiever and reading should come easily to him unless he has a physical or mental handicap. The aspects of self-concept have been tested with every type of child; physically handicapped, low-socioeconomic status, culturally different, average, retarded, urban and rural, and a positive self-concept helps each child, under any of these circumstances, to achieve.

Since we have a proven tool to work with then applying it to the learning of reading should help educators make this new and different task easier. With the many different needs and abilities of individual students it would be most effective to teach individually. A high self-concept can gear children to learn on their own, because they know their likes, dislikes, abilities and goals, all the teacher needs to do is direct the students to the proper materials. A child is going to learn what is relevant to him because he brings with him his experiences and takes or learns whatever has meaning to him. So with a healthy self-image the child is more willing to explore, question and examine.

Another proven theory is that the real test of the success or failure of a

method can depend upon the teacher. The teacher's actions, behaviors, attitudes and feelings create the whole setting or stage on which meaningful learning will be accomplished. If a teacher has no real effectiveness then the pupil will go through the motions of learning and will do all of the irrelevant chores and will pass on to the next grade. So it is the teacher's obligation to stop and frequently check her behavior, attitudes and methods, and ask if they are really helping the child to see himself as an achiever and a person of self-worth.

In conclusion it is the teacher's responsibility to be aware of the relatedness of self-concept to the teaching of reading and to be effective in making achievement possible for every student.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Lucille Sebeson, "Self-Concept and Reading Disabilities," *The Reading Teacher*, 23 (1970) 460-63.

2. Maxine Cohn and Donald Kornely, "For Better Reading - A More Positive Self-Image," *The Elementary School Journal*, Jan. (1970) 199-201.

3. Lessie Carlton and Robert H. Moore, *Reading, Self-Directive Dramatization and Self-Concept*. (Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1968), pp. 13-24.

4. Carlton and Moore, p. 33.

5. Arthur W. Combs and Donald Snygg, *Individual Behavior*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 145-64.

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