

Maximizing Our Efforts
Teaching Much More Than Academics

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Educators often overlook the importance of high self-esteem or attribute it less significance than academics. As a consequence, students lacking in emotional positive self-concept experience extreme difficulty in acquiring and retaining new information. This is not surprising. The aspect of “self” and learning are interrelated and interconnected, and when not properly attended to, students often start a cyclic downward spiral in thought and beliefs that produce negative behavior.

The good news is brains are malleable! Different parts of the brain are activated depending on what an individual is doing at the time. If a part of the brain that is responsible for a certain function is damaged, other brain centers, if properly challenged, will take over. In other words, if the highway is damaged, we can build side roads (synapses). Synapses that “fire together - wire together.”

Problems arise in brain processing from stress caused by extraordinary events. Although the brain is capable of multitasking, stress overloads a brain, and undermines its capabilities. Faulty memories, hampered thinking, negative self-talk, and a low self-esteem, produces a lowered ability to learn. Many of our students are over stimulated, and severely over stressed. Emotional events, past traumas, and day-to-day stressors, take up an enormous amount of the brain’s processing abilities.

Located within brain memory is self-concept. Children learn their self-

concept primarily from parents and family systems when they are young, and from socialization and community as they grow. Family and community provide the lens through which a child sees the world, and through which they see and describe themselves. David Sousa, author of *How the Brain Learns*, calls this brain process the cognitive belief system.

If a child's belief system and self-concept is negative, especially about their intelligence, their ability to learn, or their estimation of their worthiness, the emotional and self-belief part of their brain encodes and reinforces that exact same negative wiring in the brain. In all actuality, what they believe becomes true, and is true, because the brain will make it an internal reality. The brain engages a neuro-network to accept this information and creates nerve pathways to reinforce this belief.

Children who have negative self-concept manifest tell-tell signs that teachers should look for: (a) inattention (b) frequent absences, (c) causing distractions, and (d) defiance. When these signs appear, teachers often overcome them by trying to teach the subject in a different way, or by speaking louder or slower. Often teachers will use consequences, or time outs as disciplinary measures. These strategies simply do not work! It may appear to work for a short time; however, they do nothing to promote a positive self-image and belief system in the student's mind. Expecting these strategies to work is like anticipating light to penetrate a closed door.

The amygdale, the part of the brain which handles negative emotions, is where the fight or flight response begins. The frontal lobe is the decision center,

which processes information, and can override an emotional state or a belief system.

Students experience difficulty with learning when their amygdale is activated.

Negative messages and consequences activate the amygdale.

Students learn by accessing their frontal lobes, which houses the creative, expressive, decision-making processes in the brain. To activate the frontal lobe, a student must first feel safe. Feeling safe evolves a formation of a safe and positive self-concept.

As teachers we must rethink our motivating strategies in order to encourage students to think with their frontal lobe. By appealing to a student's positive emotional belief system, teachers provide an environment of safety and security that promotes the function of the frontal lobe. We can do this by creating situations in which a child experiences success, which thereby creates and reinforces a positive self-belief in their brain.

Good teaching provides opportunities to be masterful. Once teachers get students believing they can learn, learning is possible! The brain learns that it can learn. The new experience of being competent encourages students to try new learning experiences and ultimately wires the brain for success. By focusing on the promotion of self-esteem in your classroom, you could make the difference that makes a difference!

Additional information and resources:

National Association for Self Esteem: <http://www.self-esteem-nase.org/selfesteem.php>

National Center for Learning Disabilities: <http://www.nclld.org/>

Random Acts of Kindness Foundation

<http://www.randomactsofkindness.org/kindness-university>

Body Image and Self Esteem

http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/body_image/body_image.html

Self Esteem for Teen Girls

<http://www.beinggirl.com/article/teenage-girls-self-esteem/>

A Teacher's Formula to Build Self-Esteem in Kids With LD

<http://www.greatschools.org/special-education/health/795-teachers-formula.gs>

Self-Esteem in Children - National Association of School Psychologists

http://www.nasponline.org/communications/spawareness/selfesteem_ho.pdf