

Note: As part of her university experiences Hui Ting Kok worked at the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.* She was interested in the relationship of self-concept and performance at school. When she learned that some critics have suggested concern about what they label the “self-esteem movement,” she was puzzled about the controversy. This led her to review the literature on the construct; the following is an edited brief summary of her paper on the topic.

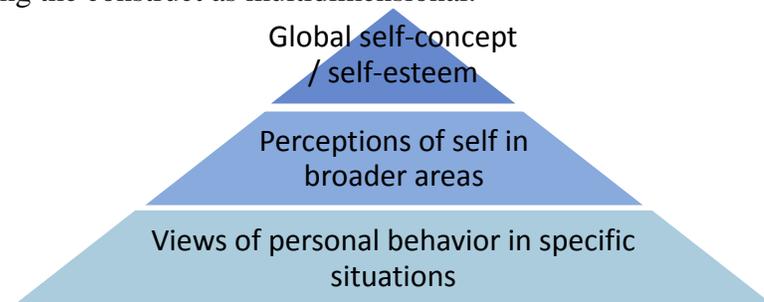
Self-concept and School Performance

Self-concept has been studied extensively over the last few decades as a major construct related to educational achievement. Popular concerns about the “self-esteem movement” reflect a lack of understanding about this complex construct and about research on positive psychology. Our focus here is on first differentiating among several self-constructs; second, we note the ways students form their self-concept; third, we highlight the associations and causal ordering of academic self-concept and school performance; then, some implications for educational practice are explored.

Are self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy the same?

One’s view of self is an indication of how the person makes sense of her/himself (Huang, 2011). The portrayal is a subjective representation and, as such, may be distorted (Frank, 2011). Critics of the emphasis on self-esteem have tended to *mischaracterize* it as promoting uncritical self-regard, often accompanied by arrogance and an air of superiority.

Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton’s (1976) multidimensional and hierarchical model of self-concept uses global self-concept and self-esteem interchangeably (see figure below). As illustrated, global self-concept and self-esteem are built on perceptions of self in various broad arenas (e.g., academic and non-academic) and can be further divided into more specific components. While the hierarchical nature of self-concept remains theoretical, educational research supports viewing the construct as multidimensional.



Global self-esteem can be high (some prefer the term “healthy”) but rather low in a specific situation or in relation to a specific activity. For example, Jane may have high overall self-esteem and have a positive view of herself as a dancer, and yet have low self-esteem about communicating in a second language.

Self-efficacy is a construct that was developed to distinguish beliefs about one’s capability to successfully achieve specific goals (Huang, 2011). Such self beliefs can vary in different contexts or activities (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). For instance, self-efficacy may change depending on whether one is dancing in front of peers, teachers or a crowd, or whether one is asked to perform in a studio, on the street, or on a stage.

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How do students form self-concept?

As a function of development, conceptions of self are expected to become more differentiated, complex and better organized over time. Earlier discussions posited that self-views developed from an individuals' experiences with and explanation of their own environment. In turn, these views were seen as determined by others' attributions of behavior and appraisals and through various reinforcement contingencies (Shavelson et al, 1976). This view has evolved into a reciprocal determinist explanation and an emphasis on principles of comparison (i.e., the concept of frames of reference). Such a multidimensional view stresses the continuous reciprocal transactions between person and environment and the different self-concepts that emerge from the frames of reference individuals use in assessing self, all of which influences subsequent decisions, attitude and performance (Marsh, Trautweine, Ludtke, & Koller, 2008).

In school, for example, rank orderings created through group comparisons can profoundly shape self-esteem and academic self-concept. Students compare themselves to their peers, generating informal rankings. Some youngsters proactively look for cues to determine their position among their peers; others tend to react to positive and negative communications peers and adults.

Applying this view, a big-fish-little-pond effect has been described (Marsh & Hau, 2003). For example, a top student in small high school may be seen as only average or even below average upon admission to a large, scholastically selective university. This can have a negative effect on the student's academic self-concept.



How is self-concept related to academic performance?

Research suggests that students who perceive their academic skills positively tend to participate in more attainment-oriented behaviors such as engaging in class activities, finishing homework, and studying for exams (Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004). And, there is a substantial body of research suggesting that low self-esteem affects motivation and is a barrier to learning (Green, Nelson, Martin, & Marsh, 2006).

Several models have been proposed in explaining such findings (Green, et al., 2006). The *self-enhancement model* suggests that self-concept is the precursor to academic achievement. The *skill-development model* proposes that academic achievement predicts self-concept so that stronger academic skills leads to higher self-concept. The *reciprocal effects model* views the self-enhancement and skill-development models as insufficient; it stresses that academic performance both influences and is influenced by academic self-concept. Given the emphasis in psychology on reciprocal determinism, it is not surprising that an increasing body of research supports the

reciprocal effects model. For example, in a longitudinal study, Guay Marsh, and Boivin (2003) examined three cohorts in grades 2 to 4 and reported consistent support for the reciprocal effects model across the age groups. In addition, Valentine, DuBois and Cooper (2004) reported that academic self-concept and school achievement have mutual influences, with preceding academic self-concept and school performance resulting in developments and advancements in later school performance and self-concept.

The literature stresses that the associations between academic self-concept and school performance do not imply that high self-concept leads to excellent achievement (e.g., Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003). Indeed, research suggests important cognitive, affective, and behavioral mediators between academic self-concept and performance. For example, studies have found relationships with these variables and

- how children perceive what adults think and do (Bouchey & Harter, 2005; Herbert & Stipek, 2005)
- motivation for learning and classroom engagement (Buhs, 2005; Green, Nelson, Martin, & Marsh, 2006)
- academic-related behaviors, such as finishing homework on time, effort expended in completing school work (Bouchey and Harter, 2005)
- various barriers to learning (Adelman & Taylor, 2012).

What are the implications for educational interventions?

Given that self-concept and school performance mutually influence each other, teachers and parents should aim to improve both academic achievement and self-concept in students and address potential mediators. Efforts to enhance self-concept or school performance alone can be expected to be transitory (Marsh & Craven, 2006).

As students form self-concept through social comparison, educators can help avoid or diminish views of low self-concept by minimizing social comparisons. More affirmatively, educators can help adjust the frames of reference students use in evaluating their competence (e.g., encouraging students to focus on the extent that they have improved over time rather than concentrating on how the other students are performing. Teachers can also minimize social comparison by avoiding competitions that acknowledge and praise only the “winners.” Increasingly, efforts to enhance student self-concepts are focusing on enhancing feelings of empowerment and confidence by creating a friendly and encouraging school environment that appreciates personal strengths and assets (Liem, McInerney & Yeung, 2015).

At the same time, it is evident that a student’s self-concept is not the only concern when it comes to helping enhance student school performance and well-being. That is why we advocate for embedding concerns about self-concept into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. Such a system involves a fundamental transformation of current student and learning supports. For details on what such a transformation entails, see the 2015 Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

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