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<div align="center">Promoting Self-Esteem and Positive Self-Concept in School-Age Children</div>

1. Introduction

Children are undeniably shaped by their environments and interactions, making the role of school paramount in providing nurturance and support during their childhood years. Beyond academic achievement, school environments have the potential to instill lifelong positive attitudes in children which in turn shapes their self-perception, relationships with others, and their perspective of the world. Moreover, the interplay of these factors significantly shapes an individual's self-esteem and self-concept. In elementary school, the teacher plays a particularly crucial role in this. Uplifting interactions with caregivers at school hold the potential to not only influence children through modeling, but the capacity to instill unwavering confidence in exploration, problem-solving, creativity, and learning in all areas of life.

Research has shown that teacher-student relationship dynamics can serve as predictors for various developmental outcomes including internalizing problems and self-perceptions (Split et al. 1248-1256). Therefore, it is necessary for educators to recognize the profound impact they have over the holistic development of the child through the environment they create and the guidance they provide. By equipping themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills, educators can effectively guide children to become self-assured, resilient, and empowered individuals who positively contribute to society and are not afraid to embrace their true potential.

2. Self-esteem and Self-Concept

Self-esteem and self-concept are two interconnected areas that influence how children perceive both themselves and the world around them. While self-esteem is characterized by an individual's perception of their own value and self-worth, self-concept encapsulates how one views themselves overall (Steiger et al. 325-338). These self-perceptions are cultivated through interactions with one's environment, as well as the evaluations and reinforcements received from others (Pesu et al. 63-71). In primary school, children become increasingly independent and need proper guidance and care to become self-assured in their identity. It is the role of educators to be informed on how to best support children to nurture a positive self-concept and pave the way for long-term success.

3. Academic Achievement

Although academic success is not the most important component to the overall well-being of children, it is a significant concern for both parents and educators. While educators may attempt to drill the importance of academics into their students, children who lack positive self-perceptions and are insecure in their abilities are more likely to struggle academically. Thus, when children don't have a strong sense of worth, their academic performance tends to suffer the consequences. Educators must work to understand the unique needs of their students and to ensure that every student feels supported, valued, and appreciated. By doing so, teachers can effectively create supportive environments that increase students' overall confidence and academic achievement.

Košir and Tement conducted a cross-lagged longitudinal study on teacher acceptance and academic achievement in 45 classrooms, which included 302 fourth-grade elementary school students (409-428). The study was based on self-determination theory which emphasizes the

importance of relatedness as a fundamental psychological need of students (Košir and Tement 409-428). The concept of relatedness derives from the innate need of all human beings to feel like they belong and are accepted (Miller). The results of the study confirmed that students who felt that they were more accepted by their teacher at the beginning of the school year exhibited higher academic achievement by the end of the year (Košir and Tement 409-428). Therefore, teacher involvement and positive teacher-student interactions fulfilled student needs for relatedness, which in turn, had a positive impact on their academic engagement and achievement alike. The findings of this study highlight the importance of positive student-teacher interactions and unconditional acceptance for students' sense of belonging, importance, and positive academic outcomes in the classroom (Košir and Tement 409-428).

    4.   Social Interactions

In addition to student-teacher interactions, the interactions children have with their peers also have a profound impact on their self-concept and self-esteem. Teachers play a crucial role in creating environments that foster positive relationships between students. Humans are inherently social beings, and children thrive in atmospheres where they feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. In classrooms where demeaning, harmful, or bullying behavior is tolerated, children will develop feelings of insecurity that can impede their ability to learn, explore, and grow. Environments such as these may lead to poor self-concept and therefore, learned helplessness. Learned helplessness is the feeling that an individual does not have control over life's outcomes, and this mindset can greatly hinder socioemotional development and confidence (Miller). Contrastingly, when teachers serve as positive role models that value respect in their classroom and encourage it through the implementation of consistent ground rules, students will feel hopeful and supported.

In a longitudinal study conducted with 570 seven-year-old children, researchers sought to understand how children's social experiences with peers and teachers at school contributed to the development of their self-esteem and self-concept (Split et al. 1248-1256). In this study, it was found that peer rejection has a negative impact on children's self-concept, contributing to internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression. One key finding in this study, however, was that supportive teacher-student relationships can serve as a protective factor. Teachers have the potential to reduce the negative effects of peer rejection and internalizing problems on children's social self-concept (Split et al. 1248-1256). These findings demonstrate how teachers play a critical role in influencing self-concept and self-esteem by creating safe and encouraging environments where children feel supported and accepted. A supportive environment not only enhances academic success but also reduces feelings of isolation, allowing children to seek help and engage in positive social interactions. With this confidence, children will have the opportunity to learn valuable life lessons through their interactions with others. For example, social interactions can allow children to develop prosocial skills such as problem-solving, negotiation, consensus building, compromise, and effective communication (Miller).

5. Emotional Resilience

Children who have a sense of security in their abilities and environment, as well as a positive self-perception, are more likely to excel in both educational and social settings. Additionally, having a strong self-concept and positive self-esteem allow children to build the necessary foundation to effectively problem-solve, emotionally regulate, and cope as they are faced with challenges and adversity. The role of the teacher as an affectionate guide is crucial in providing children with the determination to overcome obstacles and have the confidence to achieve their goals.

In a study conducted by Pitzer and Skinner, self-reported data from 1,020 students in primary school and early adolescence was utilized to examine the role of social context in fostering motivational resilience in students (15-29). The findings of the study revealed that students who had teachers demonstrating high levels of warmth, structure, and autonomy in the classroom could reverse the trajectory of initially high-risk students to a low academic risk by the end of the year (Pitzer and Skinner 15-29). On the other hand, students who showed high motivational resilience at the beginning of the year, but experienced low levels of teacher support, were more likely to end the year at-risk (Pitzer and Skinner 23). Therefore, by creating environments that encourage relatedness, competence, and autonomy, educators can promote self-confidence and nurture resilience towards achievement in the learning environment (Pitzer and Skinner 15-29).

6. The Role of Teachers

It is necessary to recognize that teachers have the power not only to boost student achievement and well-being through their guidance, but also to negatively affect a student's self-concept by fostering poor learning environments. For instance, if the teacher uses poor guidance strategies then the students may feel insecure, hesitant to ask for help, or discouraged from exploring their learning environments confidently. In circumstances such as these, students may feel overwhelmed with feelings of inadequacy, stress, or discomfort, which can be detrimental to their overall personal development. Every child deserves thoughtful and attentive guidance that builds their self-esteem and self-concept, and previously noted research supports that such guidance serves children across multiple domains: academic, social, and emotional development. The impact of these factors extends beyond the classroom as children will eventually apply what they have learned in their school environment to real life contexts, such as university, the

workforce, or relationships. Therefore, educators must work hard to actively build their students up and prepare them for real world experiences.

   7. Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Childcare and education cannot follow a 'one size fits all' approach, as every child is unique and requires individualized attention and support. While it may seem complex to understand how to cater to the unique needs of every child, educators must learn how to implement effective guidance strategies within their classrooms to provide enrichment for all young minds. How can educators ensure their guidance strategies serve children from diverse cultures, family systems, socioeconomic backgrounds, abilities, and interests? This is accomplished in the classroom through the implementation of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). Developmentally Appropriate Practice is a holistic, child-centered, approach that focuses on each child's individual needs: considering their age, developmental stage, personality, and interests (Miller). This practice emphasizes warm and affectionate teacher-student relationships, while simultaneously incorporating a balanced, authoritative strategy for guidance. By implementing effective guidance strategies through developmentally appropriate practices, teachers can create enriching environments that allow children to explore and learn while evolving into self-assured individuals, who are prepared to positively impact the world around them.

   8. Supporting Theories and Application

Carl Rogers developed his theory of personality based on his belief that all human beings deserve dignity and respect (Miller). According to Rogers, the concept of self is based on interactions with others and a child's self-concept is significantly influenced by how they believe others view them (Miller). Therefore, ensuring that every child feels valued and is treated with proper dignity and respect is necessary for strong, positive self-concept development.

Conversely, disrespectful, humiliating, and dehumanizing treatment can damage a child's self-esteem (Miller). Yelling, using rude facial expressions, or shaming children is not developmentally appropriate guidance and can severely damage their self-perceptions.

Instead, educators should address challenging behavior using firm and kind guidance practices, without seeking to control a child's behavior (Miller). This allows children to develop respect for themselves and others, build their self-esteem, and gradually learn to take responsibility for their actions. As an example, imagine an elementary classroom where students are divided into groups to work on a project. One of the children notices that their group member is wandering off to look at the class plants rather than engaging with her group. He complains, "Teacher, Sally is not helping us at all. She keeps looking at the plants!" The teacher then responds by saying "Hey Sally! Get back to work. You're always distracted and never help anyone but yourself. Do it again and you'll get a zero on the activity." This response is not effective or developmentally appropriate and sends a negative message to Sally. This response makes Sally feel like a burden and demeans her character, disregarding her positive qualities and invalidating her curiosity. Not only that, but this interaction misrepresents the cause and effect of her actions. The teacher's reaction tells Sally that if she gets distracted with the plants, she is bad and will fail.

By employing developmentally appropriate practices, the teacher can allow Sally to understand the real cause and effect of her actions without any harmful consequences. In this scenario, the teacher would call Sally over to speak privately. After acknowledging Sally's interest in the plants, the teacher could explain to her the importance of working with her group on the project. The teacher could say, "Sally, it is great to see how interested you are in exploring my plants. However, we are working on our group project right now. I always see how hard you

work on your own projects, and I think your group could really use your input. Working as a team might inspire everyone to do their best". Through this approach, the teacher recognizes Sally's interests and and feelings while simultaneously encouraging her to contribute to her group project. The teacher in this scenario has guided Sally to get back on track while nurturing her self-concept, recognizing her curiosity, and providing a genuine cause-and-effect explanation that allows Sally to develop a sense of teamwork and responsibility in her learning environment. Moreover, the teacher must serve not only as a guide, but an observer. By noticing Sally's interest in plants, the teacher could choose to implement a provocation into the classroom the next day that involves nature related elements. Alternatively, the teacher could take the class on a nature walk as a break from working on their project. By doing so, the teacher can support Sally's natural curiosity, provide a break for the class that can lead to learning and exploration, and demonstrate her commitment to creating meaningful learning experiences for every student.

Another theorist, George Michael Gazda, developed classroom management systems that aimed to motivate children to change their inappropriate behavior while strengthening their self-concept and self-esteem. His work was focused on perceiving and responding, ineffective communication styles, nonverbal behaviors, confrontation, and anger (Miller). To expand on this, it is crucial for educators to consistently demonstrate warmth, genuineness, and care in their interactions with children. Masking frustration, anger, or annoyance by being outwardly nice is not effective, as children can read underlying emotions through facial expressions, body language, and tone. Instead, educators should communicate to children with unconditional affection and positive regard to build their confidence and make them feel valued. Additionally, it is necessary to separate the child and their character from their actions.

Here is an example scenario involving a teacher named Mr. Owens and a student named Roy during a history lesson. Roy is super excited to learn about the topic and keeps raising his hand to ask questions. Mr. Owens, however, just wants to get through the lesson. Every time Roy raises his hand, Mr. Owens rolls his eyes and sighs before calling on him in a seemingly friendly manner, "Yes, Roy?" Even though Mr. Owens continually acknowledges Roy's questions, Roy can see that Mr. Owens is annoyed through his body language. This unspoken communication makes Roy believe that Mr. Owens does not care about what he has to say, and he becomes withdrawn from the lesson and the class discussion that follows. Mr. Owens' cannot hide his underlying feelings of irritation and his demeanor impacts Roy's self-perception, confidence, and participation in the class.

Instead, educators must create environments where all students feel valued and motivated to actively participate. Another teacher, Ms. Kelly, is doing the same history lesson in her classroom. As she moves through the lesson, she maintains a warm and open demeanor as students eagerly raise their hands to ask questions, make comments, and share their ideas. She expresses interest in their contributions and praises their insights as they engage in the lesson. One student, named Zara, keeps interrupting other students excitedly trying to share her thoughts. Rather than getting frustrated or angered by Zara, Ms. Kelly quickly intervenes and says, "Zara, thank you for being so enthusiastic about this lesson. Remember, everyone deserves a chance to speak without being interrupted. When he is finished sharing his thoughts, I can come back to you." After class, Ms. Kelly could talk to Zara privately to show that she appreciates her involvement in the class discussion while reminding her to be respectful to her peers as they share their own ideas. By using developmentally appropriate practices and showing unconditional positive regard for her students, Ms. Kelly can ensure that every student feels

valued and respected in the classroom. In turn, the confidence and sense of belonging of each student is strengthened without having any negative impact on their overall self-worth.

At times, educators might resort to using methods that undermine developmentally appropriate practice to get quicker results. For example, yelling at a student to sit down might get them to do so immediately, but it lacks long term effectiveness and does not support behavior correction or growth. Instead, using positive, consistent, and genuine guidance strategies can build confident students who can effectively learn, explore, and interact in their environment.

9. Unconditional Acceptance

Unconditional acceptance has been consistently recognized as a powerful tool in cultivating supportive and enriching environments. To create environments built on the foundation of unconditional acceptance, educators must recognize and erase any existing biases and prejudices to provide equal experiences founded on kindness for all children. The perceptions and resulting behaviors of educators are affected greatly by these underlying biases and can have detrimental effects on the children under their care. By being mindful, educators can exemplify unconditional acceptance to foster inclusive and strong relationships with students and their families. Relationships built on trust, respect, and understanding can allow parents and teachers to work together to enhance children's self-concept and self-esteem. This collaborative partnership allows children to be better understood, explore their interests, and feel secure in themselves. By having confidence as well as a strong sense of worth and value, children are put in a position to thrive and reach their full potential.

10. Diversity and Inclusion

The goal of educators should be to make sure all students feel comfortable, valued, secure, and included, regardless of their background or abilities. Racism, sexism, negative

stereotypes, and discrimination can have harmful effects on children's physical, emotional, social, and intellectual well-being which affects their overall self-concept (Miller). To create inclusive environments for students, educators must be consistent in promoting diversity appreciation and have a zero-tolerance policy for any form of bullying or discrimination. These environments can allow teachers to help build each child's self-esteem, self-concept, and moral values.

Multicultural books, guest speakers, and lessons celebrating diversity can help all students feel seen, valued, and confident in their individual identities. For example, a teacher could incorporate books that feature demographics that are usually invisible: such as different family systems, sexual orientations, and communities. By incorporating diversity appreciation into the classroom on a regular basis, educators can teach children to resist bias and value differences, allowing them to build a healthy self-concept (Miller).

11. Family Outreach

Child development and education must be understood from a cultural perspective to foster unconditional acceptance and appreciation for communities of all backgrounds. However, it is important to understand that culture is not only defined by race or religion, as disability culture also requires special attention and care. It is necessary for educators to understand differences in body language, spoken language, parenting styles, warmth, discipline, play, and environment for every family and their respective lifestyle (Miller). These elements play a vital role in influencing a child's upbringing, personality, values, and relationships. Furthermore, educators can learn more about each child's unique background by establishing open lines of communication with families. For example, a teacher could say, "I am not familiar with your culture, but I would love to learn more about how we can effectively care for and teach your

child in a way that is respectful to it" (Miller). They could also say, "Please help us do a better job by telling us more about your child's special needs" (Miller). These statements can be conversation openers that not only show respect but demonstrate a genuine willingness to understand and support all families. With support from both teachers and families, children can flourish, develop a positive self-esteem, a strong self-concept, and identity.

12. Conclusion

Educators play a crucial role in fostering positive self-esteem and self-concept in school-age children. By demonstrating unconditional acceptance, utilizing developmentally appropriate practices, and fostering diversity appreciation, teachers can effectively support each child in their development and identity formation. These aspects have a significant impact on the academic performance, social interactions, and emotional resilience of each child. Therefore, by actively working to increase acceptance, support, and inclusivity in the classroom through careful guidance, educators can lay the foundation for children to develop a positive self-perception that allows them to thrive in various aspects of their lives.

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