

Supporting Reader and Writer Self-Concept in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract: Research suggests that academic self-concept influences academic gains. This has important implications for literacy acquisition. Facilitating the development of reader and writer self-concept has been found to support literacy gains. For this reason, it is essential that educators actively work to bolster student self-concept. Best practice recommendations for helping students develop positive reader and writer self-concept include helping students establish reader and writer identity, using the classroom environment to empower readers and writers, and developing supportive teacher-child relationships. The author acknowledges that the relationship between academic achievement and self-concept is reciprocal. As such, quality literacy instruction is needed in addition to attending to the affective factor of self-concept in order for students to be successful readers and writers.

Introduction

September: “But I can’t! I don’t know how!” Margo cries, as she buries her face in her hands, pencil and paper untouched in front of her. Mrs. Smith approaches and gently places her hand on Margo’s arm and smiles at Margo. “You can do this”, she says. “We are brave writers in room six. Let’s try writing what we hear.” Margo reluctantly emerges from her hiding place and follows Mrs. Smith’s prompting to blend the letter sounds “c-a-t” to form the word “cat.”

December: “Sheep, jeep, they both have eep!” Margo exclaims. “Yes, Margo! You found the rhyming words on this page!” Mrs. Smith replies. She finishes reading Nancy Shaw’s “Sheep in a Jeep” aloud to Margo and her peers. When Mrs. Smith is done, she challenges students to write a silly sentence using rhyming words. Margo sits pensively as she tries to come up with words to rhyme with “pig”.

As a kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Smith has worked with many students like Margo. Beginning writers often start the year feeling scared and unsure as they begin to traverse the world of literacy. In early childhood education, much attention is given to literacy instruction. This consideration is very much warranted; the ability to read and write opens many doors of opportunity in a literacy rich world.

While there is an abundant amount of research on best practice available to teachers, affective components of academic achievement have only become of interest to researchers in recent years. One such component, self-concept, has been found to be of particular importance in relation to literacy acquisition. Facilitating the development of reader and writer self-concept supports literacy gains (Guay et al., 2019; Walgermo et al., 2018). For this reason, educators should actively work to bolster student self-concept.

Best practice recommendations for helping students develop positive reader and writer self-concept include helping students establish reader and writer identity, using the classroom environment to empower readers and writers, and develop-

ing supportive teacher-child relationships. While facilitating the development of positive student self-concept is undoubtedly important, early childhood educators should keep in mind that the relationship between academic achievement and academic self-concept is reciprocal. Because of this, teachers must provide quality, research-based literacy instruction in addition to attending to the affective factor of self-concept.

Literacy Achievement and Self-Concept

To understand how self-concept plays a role in literacy development, it is first necessary to determine a working definition of the term. Pajares & Schunk (2001) explain, “Self-concept has typically been defined in terms of the cognitive appraisal one makes of the expectations, descriptions, and prescriptions that one holds about one’s self” (p. 239). In terms of literacy, children may hold positive or negative beliefs about themselves as readers and writers. Some students may even fail to see themselves as readers or writers at all.

Research suggests that academic self-concept influences academic gains (Huang, 2011). In the case of early literacy, reader and writer self-concept appears to influence the development of literacy skills (Guay et al., 2019; Walgermo et al., 2018). Even before they can read and write, children with positive self-concept in relation to literacy activities already have an advantage in the development of literacy skills. For example, preschoolers who display confidence working with wordless picture books are better able to actively engage with the characters and create rich dialogue in comparison to their more tentative peers (Lysaker et al., 2016).

This early positive self-concept in relation to literacy paves the way for future academic achievement. Research indicates a positive association between reader self-concept and reading achievement in young readers (Jensen et al., 2019). In other words, the more confident a child feels in their identity as a reader, the more likely the child is to make literacy gains.

Facilitating the Development of Positive Reader and Writer Self-Concept

Because research tells us that student self-concept and academic achievement are intimately connected, it is essential that early childhood educators know how to help develop positive reader and writer self-concept in order to facilitate positive gains in literacy development. For the purpose of this manuscript, we will explore several best practice recommendations for bolstering student self-concept in relation to literacy: helping students establish reader and writer identity, using the classroom environment to empower readers and writers, and developing supportive teacher-child relationships.

Helping Establish the Literate Identity

In order for children to develop positive self-concept in relation to literacy, they must first be able to explore their identities as readers and writers. Authors Seban & Tavşanlı (2017) cite the work of Kauffman (2006), stating, “Children’s understand-

ing of the reading and writing process and their perception of themselves as readers and writers reflects their sense of identity as literacy users” (p. 218). Because children’s literate identities are constructed based on their literacy experiences, teachers must be sure to provide sufficient opportunity to explore and discuss reading and writing opportunities. Introducing students to a variety of text and giving them the opportunity to interact with said text through literacy activities can help accomplish this. Specifically, working with children in the context of reader and writer workshops can help children build the confidence they need in order to further develop their literacy skills.

Through literacy workshops, students are given the opportunity to “try on” different genres and writing styles. They also gain the experience needed to see themselves as competent readers and writers. Snyders (2014) implemented a literacy workshop in which students studied various established children’s authors and then were given the opportunity to experiment with their own writing style. The author found that when students gained confidence in their identities as writers, they began to apply cross-curricular knowledge to their writing. This finding suggests that positive writer self-concept leads to writer growth. In one example, Snyders cites the work of a kindergarten student identified as Daniel. After participating in an author study exploring the works of Mo Williams, Daniel was given the opportunity to create his own book. Both the writing and illustrations Daniel created to tell his story were reflective of Williams’ style; he began to add thought bubbles with writing to reflect characters’ internal thoughts (p. 408). Seban & Tavşanlı (2017) similarly found that writing workshops contribute to the construction of writer identity.

Using the Classroom Environment to Empower

When carefully arranged, the classroom environment itself can serve as a third teacher (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Creating a literacy rich learning environment is one way that educators can help students begin to see themselves as readers and writers. While keeping in mind that literacy identity is in part shaped by literacy use (Kaufmann, 2006), teachers can create opportunities for children to interact with a variety of reading and writing activities.

Providing a wide variety of books that can be easily accessed and read in comfortable spaces is an important way to help children access literacy. Children should have access to books that align with their interests and skill level (O’Donnell, 2018). Teachers can also rotate and display books to maintain student interest. Upcoming holidays, changes in seasons, and new learning units are all opportunities to include books that explore relevant topics in the classroom library. Literacy rich displays, printed directions, and labels can also create opportunities for children to interact with print during daily activities. This allows for discussion about how we interact with print in our daily lives, helping students broaden their definition of what it means to be a reader. Writing can also be seamlessly incorporated into the classroom environment. A writing center stocked with paper, writing tools, journals, cards, and even scrap paper can provide children with the chance to express themselves through words.

Play is also an important entry point into literacy that teachers should carefully consider. According to Ihmeideh (2015), “When children engage in dramatic play

activities, they experience realistic settings and functional reasons for using print” (p. 252). Dramatic play centers can easily be enhanced by providing opportunities for children to read and write during play. For example, at a play kitchen center, a teacher might create menus for children to read and provide notepads for children to write down “orders”. Dramatic play opportunities such as this allow educators the chance to help students see themselves as readers and writers in the context of real-world applications.

Developing Supportive Relationships

For children to develop positive academic self-concept, they need to feel safe and supported in the classroom environment. This is where the teacher-child relationship plays an important role. Research indicates that teacher support is correlated with high-academic self-concept in young students (Leflot et al., 2010). When children feel supported in the classroom environment, they begin to see themselves as capable learners.

Literature also supports the importance of supportive teacher-child relationships specifically in relation to literacy. There appears to be a significant direct association between perceived teacher emotional support and reader self-concept (Jensen et al., 2019). Perceived emotional support from teachers has the ability to positively influence student self-concept, which in turn may result in better performance on literacy tasks.

While empirical evidence demonstrating how to best foster positive teacher-child relationships is limited at best, researchers have found common threads in narrative accounts of students describing such relationships. Former students often describe teachers they recall fondly, “...as providing love to their students and showing understanding, support, encouragement or comfort towards them, or teachers were described as acting like parents” (Uitto et al., 2018). Educators can use this knowledge in order to help students feel safe and supported while undertaking literacy tasks. Like Margo, in the vignette, many students are hesitant to undertake beginning literacy tasks because they do not yet feel confident in their abilities. Educators should respond to this push back by demonstrating support and encouragement, as shown by Mrs. Smith gently telling Margo “you can do this” and “we are brave writers in room six.” She does not allow Margo to continue in a state of distress, nor does she reprimand Margo for her hesitancy. Rather, Mrs. Smith seizes the opportunity to support Margo through her frustration, strengthening their relationship and encouraging the development of literacy skills simultaneously.

The Reciprocal Nature of Student Self-Concept and Achievement

As previously established, positive reader and writer self-concept is correlated with literacy gains. However, it should be noted that the reverse can also be true. When children struggle with literacy skills, this can lead to the development of negative self-concept. Even at the very start of a student’s educational journey, this may pose a problem. Walgermo et al. (2018) found that students with poor emergent literacy skills tend to have a weaker reader self-concept compared to their peers upon enter-

ing school. It appears, then, that students' literacy skills can also impact reader and writer self-concept.

It is important that children first “crack the code” in order to become confident in their identity as readers and writers. Teachers should provide all students with explicit and systematic instruction in phonics, reading strategies, and writing strategies in order to help students learn the building blocks that will help them gain successful entrance into literacy (Mesmer, 2005; Van Keer, H., 2004; Finlayson & McCrudden, 2019). Higgins et. al (2015) found that all students who received literacy intervention consistently rated themselves higher on the self-concept scale. The implication from this finding is that as children perform better on literacy tasks, they develop more positive self-concept as readers and writers.

Because of these findings, it would be beneficial for educators to view student self-concept and academic achievement as having a reciprocal relationship. Just as positive student self-concept may lead to literacy gains, literacy gains may bolster student self-concept. Both feed into one another, at times making causation difficult to determine. For this reason, it is essential for teachers to provide quality literacy instruction as well as attend to affective needs like student self-concept.

Conclusion

April: “Mrs. Smith!” Margo shouts. “Look what I made!” Beaming, she produces a book she created at the writing center, entitled, “Green a lish us. It’s like the ‘Pinkalicious’ book, but my favorite color”, she explains. “What a creative author and illustrator you are!” Mrs. Smith replies. “Can we sit and read it together?” Margo happily obliges, reading her work with enthusiasm.

By implementing best practice recommendations for facilitating the development of positive reader and writer self-concept, Mrs. Smith was able to help Margo overcome her initial hesitancy to participate in literacy activities. Early childhood educators are in a unique and valuable position in that they can help shape how students feel about themselves as readers and writers. When teachers use best practice recommendations for facilitating the development of positive reader and writer self-concept, they can in turn help support student literacy gains. Specifically, educators can support the development of positive reader and writer self-concept by helping students establish reader and writer identity, using the classroom environment to empower readers and writers, and developing supportive relationships with students. Because the relationship between student self-concept and academic achievement is reciprocal in nature, early childhood educators should work to bolster student self-concept in addition to providing quality literacy instruction.

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About the Author

Myranda Jenkins is currently a master's student studying early childhood education at the University of Toledo. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, also from the University of Toledo. Myranda has experience in both early childhood education and psychology and her teaching practice emphasizes meeting students' socioemotional needs.